Absolute Negation, Albert Camus

Historically speaking, the first coherent offensive is that of Sade, who musters into one vast war machine the arguments of the freethinkers up to Father Meslier and Voltaire. His negation is also, of course, the most extreme. From rebellion Sade can only deduce an absolute negative. Twenty-seven years in prison do not, in fact, produce a very conciliatory form of intelligence. Such a long period of confinement produces either weaklings or killers and sometimes a combination of both. If the mind is strong enough to construct in a prison cell a moral philosophy that is not one of submission, it will generally be one of domination.

Every ethic based on solitude implies the exercise of power. In this respect Sade is the archetype, for in so far as society treated him atrociously, he responded in an atrocious manner. The writer, despite a few happy phrases and the thoughtless praises of our contemporaries, is secondary. He is admired today, with so much ingenuity, for reasons which have nothing to do with literature.

He is exalted as the philosopher in chains and the first theoretician of absolute rebellion. He might well have been. In prison, dreams have no limits and reality is no curb. Intelligence in chains loses in lucidity what it gains in intensity. The only logic known to Sade was the logic of his feelings. He did not create a philosophy, but pursued a monstrous dream of revenge. Only the dream turned out to be prophetic.

His desperate demand for freedom led Sade into the kingdom of servitude; his inordinate thirst for a form of life he could never attain was assuaged in the successive frenzies of a dream of universal destruction. In this way, at least, Sade is our contemporary. Let us follow his successive negations.

A Man of Letters

Is Sade an atheist? He says so, and we believe him, before going to prison, in his Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man; and from then on we are dumbfounded by his passion for sacrilege. One of his cruelest characters, Saint-Fond, does not in any sense deny God. He is content to develop a gnostic theory of a wicked demiurge and to draw the proper conclusions from it. Saint-Fond, it is said, is not Sade.

No, of course not. A character is never the author who created him. It is quite likely, however, that an author may be all his characters simultaneously. Now, all Sade's atheists suppose, in principle, the nonexistence of God for the obvious reason that His existence would imply that He was indifferent, wicked, or cruel. Sade's greatest work ends with a demonstration of the stupidity and spite of the divinity.

The innocent Justine runs through the storm and the wicked Noirceuil swears that he will be converted if divine retribution consents to spare her life. Justine is struck by lightning, Noirceuil triumphs, and human crime continues to be man's answer to divine crime. Thus there is a freethinker wager that is the answer to the Pascalian wager.

The idea of God which Sade conceives for himself is, therefore, of a criminal divinity who oppresses and denies mankind. That murder is an attribute of the divinity is quite evident, according to Sade, from the history of religions. Why, then, should man be virtuous? Sade's first step as a prisoner is to jump to the most extreme conclusions. If God kills and repudiates mankind, there is nothing to stop one from killing and repudiating one's fellow men.

This irritable challenge in no way resembles the tranquil negation that is still to be found in the Dialogue of 1782. The man who exclaims: "I have nothing, I give nothing," and who concludes: "Virtue and vice are indistinguishable in the tomb," is neither happy nor tranquil. The concept of God is the only thing,

according to him, "which he cannot forgive man." The word forgive is already rather strange in the mouth of this expert in torture.

But it is himself whom he cannot forgive for an idea that his desperate view of the world, and his condition as a prisoner, completely refute. A double rebellion— against the order of the universe and against himself—is henceforth going to be the guiding principle of Sade's reasoning. In that these two forms of rebellion are contradictory except in the disturbed mind of a victim of persecution, his reasoning is always either ambiguous or legitimate according to whether it is considered in the light of logic or in an attempt at compassion.

He therefore denies man and his morality because God denies them. But he denies God even though He has served as his accomplice and guarantor up to now. For what reason? Because of the strongest instinct to be found in one who is condemned by the hatred of mankind to live behind prison walls: the sexual instinct.

What is this instinct? On the one hand, it is the ultimate expression of nature,1 and, on the other, the blind force that demands the total subjection of human beings, even at the price of their destruction. Sade denies God in the name of nature the ideological concepts of his time presented it in mechanistic form and he makes nature a power bent on destruction.

1 Sade's great criminals excuse their crimes on the ground that they were born with uncontrollable sexual appetites about which they could do nothing.

For him, nature is sex; his logic leads him to a lawless universe where the only master is the inordinate energy of desire. This is his delirious kingdom, in which he finds his finest means of expression: "What are all the creatures of the earth in comparison with a single one of our desires!"

The long arguments by which Sade's heroes demonstrate that nature has need of crime, that it must destroy in order to create, and that we help nature create from the moment we destroy it ourselves, are only aimed at establishing absolute freedom for the prisoner, Sade, who is too unjustly punished not to long for the explosion that will blow everything to pieces. In this respect he goes against his times: the freedom he demands is not one of principles, but of instincts.

Sade dreamed, no doubt, of a universal republic, whose scheme he reveals through his wise reformer, Zame. He shows us, by this means, that one of the purposes of rebellion is to liberate the whole world, in that, as the movement accelerates, rebellion is less and less willing to accept limitations. But everything about him contradicts this pious dream. He is no friend of humanity, he hates philanthropists.

The equality of which he sometimes speaks is a mathematical concept: the equivalence of the objects that comprise the human race, the abject equality of the victims. Real fulfillment, for the man who allows absolutely free rein to his desires and who must dominate everything, lies in hatred. Sade's republic is not founded on liberty but on libertinism. "Justice," this peculiar democrat writes, "has no real existence. It is the divinity of all the passions."

Nothing is more revealing in this respect than the famous lampoon, read by Dolmance in the Philosophie du Boudoir, which has the curious title: People of France, one more effort if you want to be republicans. Pierre Klossowski2 is right in attaching so much importance to it, for this lampoon demonstrates to the revolutionaries that their republic is founded on the murder of the King who was King by divine right and that by guillotining God on January 21, 1793 they deprived themselves forever of the right to outlaw crime or to censure malevolent instincts.

The monarchy supported the concept of a God who, in conjunction with itself, created all laws. As for the Republic, it stands alone, and morality was supposed to exist without benefit of the Commandments. It is doubtful, however,

that Sade, as Klossowski maintains, had a profound sense of sacrilege and that an almost religious horror led him to the conclusions that he expresses.

It is much more likely that he came to these conclusions first and afterwards perceived the correct arguments to justify the absolute moral license that he wanted the government of his time to sanction. Logic founded on passions reverses the traditional sequence of reasoning and places the conclusions before the premises. To be convinced of this we only have to appraise the admirable sequence of sophisms by which Sade, in this passage, justifies calumny, theft, and murder and demands that they be tolerated under the new dispensation.

2 Sade, mon prochain.

It is then, however, that his thoughts are most profound. He rejects, with exceptional perspicacity for his times, the presumptuous alliance of freedom with virtue. Freedom, particularly when it is a prisoner's dream, cannot endure limitations. It must sanction crime or it is no longer freedom. On this essential point Sade never varies. This man who never preached anything but contradictions only achieves coherence and of a most complete kind when he talks of capital punishment.

An addict of refined ways of execution, a theoretician of sexual crime, he was never able to tolerate legal crime. "My imprisonment by the State, with the guillotine under my very eyes, was far more horrible to me than all the Bastilles imaginable."

From this feeling of horror he drew the strength to be moderate, publicly, during the Terror, and to intervene generously on behalf of his mother-in-law, despite the fact that she had had him imprisoned.

A few years later Nodier summed up, perhaps without knowing it, the position obstinately defended by Sade: "To kill a man in a paroxysm of passion is understandable. To have him killed by someone else after calm and serious meditation and on the pretext of duty honorably discharged is incomprehensible." Here we find the germ of an idea which again will be developed by Sade: he who kills must pay with his own life. Sade is more moral, we see, than our contemporaries.

But his hatred for the death penalty is at first no more than a hatred for men who are sufficiently convinced of their own virtue to dare to inflict capital punishment, when they themselves are criminals. You cannot simultaneously choose crime for yourself and punishment for others.

You must open the prison gates or give an impossible proof of your own innocence. From the moment you accept murder, even if only once, you must allow it universally. The criminal who acts according to nature cannot, without betraying his office, range himself on the side of the law. "One more effort if you want to be republicans" means: "Accept the freedom of crime, the only reasonable attitude, and enter forever into a state of insurrection as you enter into a state of grace."

Thus total submission to evil leads to an appalling penitence, which cannot fail to horrify the Republic of enlightenment and of natural goodness. By a significant coincidence, the manuscript of One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom was burned during the first riot of the Republic, which could hardly fail to denounce Sade's heretical theories of freedom and to throw so compromising a supporter into prison once more. By so doing, it gave him the regrettable opportunity of developing his rebellious logic still further. The universal republic could be a dream for Sade, but never a temptation. In politics his real position is cynicism.

In his Society of the Friends of Crime he declares himself ostensibly in favor of the government and its laws, which he meanwhile has every intention of violating. It is the same impulse that makes the lowest form of criminal vote

for conservative candidates. The plan that Sade had in mind assures the benevolent neutrality of the authorities. The republic of crime cannot, for the moment at least, be universal. It must pretend to obey the law.

In a world that knows no other rule than murder, beneath a criminal heaven, and in the name of a criminal nature, however, Sade, in reality, obeys no other law than that of inexhaustible desire. But to desire without limit is the equivalent of being desired without limit. License to destroy supposes that you yourself can be destroyed. Therefore you must struggle and dominate. The law of this world is nothing but the law of force; its driving force, the will to power.

The advocate of crime really only respects two kinds of power: one, which he finds among his own class, founded on the accident of birth, and the other by which, through sheer villainy, an underdog raises himself to the level of the libertines of noble birth whom Sade makes his heroes. This powerful little group of initiates knows that it has all the rights.

Anyone who doubts, even for a second, these formidable privileges is immediately driven from the flock, and once more becomes a victim. Thus a sort of aristocratic morality is created through which a little group of men and women manage to entrench themselves above a caste of slaves because they possess the secret of a strange knowledge. The only problem for them consists in organizing themselves so as to be able to exercise fully their rights which have the terrifying scope of desire.

They cannot hope to dominate the entire universe

until the law of crime has been accepted by the universe. Sade never believed that his fellow countrymen would be capable of the additional effort needed to make it "republican." But if crime and desire are not the law of the entire universe, if they do not reign at least over a specified territory, they are no longer unifying principles, but ferments of conflict. They are no longer the law, and man returns to chaos and confusion.

Thus it is necessary to create from all these fragments a world that exactly coincides with the new law. The need for unity, which Creation leaves unsatisfied, is fulfilled, at all costs, in a microcosm. The law of power never has the patience to await complete control of the world. It must fix the boundaries, without delay, of the territory where it holds sway, even if it means surrounding it with barbed wire and observation towers.

For Sade, the law of power implies barred gates, castles with seven circumvallations from which it is impossible to escape, and where a society founded on desire and crime functions unimpeded, according to the rules of an implacable system.

The most unbridled rebellion, insistence on complete freedom, lead to the total subjection of the majority. For Sade, man's emancipation is consummated in these strongholds of debauchery where a kind of bureaucracy of vice rules over the life and death of the men and women who have committed themselves forever to the hell of their desires.

His works abound with descriptions of these privileged places where feudal libertines, to demonstrate to their assembled victims their absolute impotence and servitude, always repeat the Duc de Blangis's speech to the common people of the One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom: "You are already dead to the world."

Sade himself also inhabited the tower of Freedom, but in the Bastille. Absolute rebellion took refuge with him in a sordid fortress from which no one, either persecuted or persecutors, could ever escape. To establish his freedom, he had to create absolute necessity. Unlimited freedom of desire implies the negation of others and the suppression of pity. The heart, that "weak spot of the intellect," must be exterminated; the locked room and the system will see to that.

The system, which plays a role of capital importance in Sade's fabulous castles, perpetuates a universe of mistrust. It helps to anticipate everything so that no unexpected tenderness or pity occur to upset the plans for complete enjoyment.

It is a curious kind of pleasure, no doubt, which obeys the commandment: "We shall rise every morning at ten o'clock"! But enjoyment must be prevented from degenerating into attachment, it must be put in parentheses and toughened. Objects of enjoyment must also never be allowed to appear as persons. If man is "an absolutely material species of plant," he can only be treated as an object, and as an object for experiment.

In Sade's fortress republic, there are only machines and mechanics. The system, which dictates the method of employing the machines, puts everything in its right place. His infamous convents have their rule—significantly copied from that of religious communities. Thus the libertine indulges in public confession. But the process is changed: "If his conduct is pure, he is censured."

Sade, as was the custom of his period, constructed ideal societies. But, contrary to the custom of his period, he codifies the natural wickedness of mankind. He meticulously constructs a citadel of force and hatred, pioneer that he is, even to the point of calculating mathematically the amount of the freedom he succeeded in destroying. He sums up his philosophy with an unemotional accounting of crimes: "Massacred before the first of March: 10. After the first of March: 20. To come: 16. Total: 46." A pioneer, no doubt, but a limited one, as we can see.

If that were all, Sade would be worthy only of the interest that attaches to all misunderstood pioneers. But once the drawbridge is up, life in the castle must go on. No matter how meticulous the system, it cannot foresee every eventuality. It can destroy, but it cannot create. The masters of these tortured communities do not find the satisfaction they so desperately desire. Sade often evokes the "pleasant habit of crime." Nothing here, however, seems very pleasant more like the fury of a man in chains.

The point, in fact, is to enjoy oneself, and the maximum of enjoyment coincides with the maximum of destruction. To possess what one is going to kill, to copulate with suffering—those are the moments of freedom toward which the entire organization of Sade's castles is directed.

But from the moment when sexual crime destroys the object of desire, it also destroys desire, which exists only at the precise moment of destruction. Then another object must be brought under subjection and killed again, and then another, and so on to an infinity of all possible objects. This leads to that dreary accumulation of erotic and criminal scenes in Sade's novels, which, paradoxically, leaves the reader with the impression of a hideous chastity.

What part, in this universe, could pleasure play or the exquisite joy of acquiescent and accomplice bodies? In it we find an impossible quest for escape from despair—a quest that finishes, nevertheless, in a desperate race from servitude to servitude and from prison to prison. If only nature is real and if, in nature, only desire and destruction are legitimate, then, in that all humanity does not suffice to assuage the thirst for blood, the path of destruction must lead to universal annihilation. We must become, according to Sade's formula, nature's executioner.

But even that position is not achieved too easily. When the accounts are closed, when all the victims are massacred, the executioners are left face to face in the deserted castle. Something is still missing. The tortured bodies return, in their elements, to nature and will be born again. Even murder cannot be fully consummated: "Murder only deprives the victim of his first life; a means must be found of depriving him of his second. . . ."

Sade contemplates an attack on creation: "I abhor nature. ... I should like to

upset its plans, to thwart its progress, to halt the stars in their courses, to overturn the floating spheres of space, to destroy what serves nature and to succor all that harms it; in a word, to insult it in all its works, and I cannot succeed in doing so."

It is in vain that he dreams of a technician who can pulverize the universe: he knows that, in the dust of the spheres, life will continue. The attack against creation is doomed to failure. It is impossible to destroy everything, there is always a remainder. "I cannot succeed in doing so . . ." the icy and implacable universe suddenly relents at the appalling melancholy by which Sade, in the end and quite unwillingly, always moves us.

"We could perhaps attack the sun, deprive the universe of it, or use it to set fire to the world— those would be real crimes. . . ." Crimes, yes, but not the definitive crime. It is necessary to go farther. The executioners eye each other with suspicion.

They are alone, and one law alone governs them: the law of power. As they accepted it when they were masters, they cannot reject it if it turns against them. All power tends to be unique and solitary. Murder must be repeated: in their turn the masters will tear one another to pieces. Sade accepts this consequence and does not flinch. A curious kind of stoicism, derived from vice, sheds a little light in the dark places of his rebellious soul.

He will not try to live again in the world of affection and compromise. The drawbridge will not be lowered; he will accept personal annihilation. The unbridled force of his refusal achieves, at its climax, an unconditional acceptance that is not without nobility. The master consents to be the slave in his turn and even, perhaps, wishes to be. "The scaffold would be for me the throne of voluptuousness."

Thus the greatest degree of destruction coincides with the greatest degree of affirmation. The masters throw themselves on one another, and Sade's work, dedicated to the glory of libertinism, ends by being "strewn with corpses of libertines struck down at the height of their powers." 3 The most powerful, the one who will survive, is the solitary, the Unique, whose glorification Sade has undertaken—in other words, himself. At last he reigns supreme, master and God. But at the moment of his greatest victory the dream vanishes.

3 Maurice Blanchot: Lautreamont et Sade.

The Unique turns back toward the prisoner whose unbounded imagination gave birth to him, and they become one. He is in fact alone, imprisoned in a bloodstained Bastille, entirely constructed around a still unsatisfied, and henceforth undirected, desire for pleasure. He has only triumphed in a dream and those ten volumes crammed with philosophy and atrocities recapitulate an unhappy form of asceticism, an illusory advance from the total no to the absolute yes, an acquiescence in death at last, which transfigures the assassination of everything and everyone into a collective suicide.

Sade was executed in effigy; he, too, only killed in his imagination. Prometheus ends in Onan. Sade is still a prisoner when he dies, but this time in a lunatic asylum, acting plays on an improvised stage with other lunatics. A derisory equivalent of the satisfaction that the order of the world failed to give him was provided for him by dreams and by creative activity.

The writer, of course, has no need to refuse himself anything. For him, at least, boundaries disappear and desire can be allowed free rein. In this respect Sade is the perfect man of letters. He created a fable in order to give himself the illusion of existing.

He put "the moral crime that one commits by writing" above everything else. His merit, which is incontestable, lies in having immediately demonstrated, with the unhappy perspicacity of accumulated rage, the extreme consequences of rebellious

logic—at least when it forgets the truth to be found in its origins. These consequences are a complete totalitarianism, universal crime, an aristocracy of cynicism, and the desire for an apocalypse. They will be found again many years after his death.

But having tasted them, he was caught, it seems, on the horns of his own dilemma and could only escape the dilemma in literature. Strangely enough, it is Sade who sets rebellion on the path of literature down which it will be led still farther by the romantics.

He himself is one of those writers of whom he says: "their corruption is so dangerous, so active, that they have no other aim in printing their monstrous works than to extend beyond their own lives the sum total of their crimes; they can commit no more, but their accursed writings will lead others to do so, and this comforting thought which they carry with them to the tomb consoles them for the obligation that death imposes on them of renouncing this life."

Thus his rebellious writings bear witness to his desire for survival. Even if the immortality he longs for is the immortality of Cain, at least he longs for it, and despite himself bears witness to what is most true in metaphysical rebellion.

Moreover, even his followers compel us to do him homage. His heirs are not all writers. Of course, there is justification for saying that he suffered and died to stimulate the imagination of the intelligentsia in literary cafes. But that is not all.

Sade's success in our day is explained by the dream that he had in common with contemporary thought: the demand for total freedom, and dehumaniza-tion coldly planned by the intelligence. The reduction of man to an object of experiment, the rule that speciSes the relation between the will to power and man as an object, the sealed laboratory that is the scene of this monstrous experiment, are lessons which the theoreticians of power will discover again when they come to organizing the age of slavery.

Two centuries ahead of time and on a reduced scale, Sade extolled totalitarian societies in the name of unbridled freedom—which, in reality, rebellion does not demand. The history and the tragedy of our times really begin with him. He only believed that a society founded on freedom of crime must coincide with freedom of morals, as though servitude had its limits. Our times have limited themselves to blending, in a curious manner, his dream of a universal republic and his technique of degradation.

Finally, what he hated most, legal murder, has availed itself of the discoveries that he wanted to put to the service of instinctive murder. Crime, which he wanted to be the exotic and delicious fruit of unbridled vice, is no more today than the dismal habit of a police-controlled morality. Such are the surprises of literature.

The Dandies' Rebellion

Even after Sade's time, men of letters still continue to dominate the scene. Romanticism, Lucifer-like in its rebellion, is really only useful for adventures of the imagination. Like Sade, romanticism is separated from earlier forms of rebellion by its preference for evil and the individual. By putting emphasis on its powers of defiance and refusal, rebellion, at this stage, forgets its positive content. Since God claims all that is good in man, it is necessary to deride what is good and choose what is evil. Hatred of death and of injustice will lead, therefore, if not to the exercise, at least to the vindication, of evil and murder.

The struggle between Satan and death in Paradise Lost, the favorite poem of the romantics, symbolizes this drama; all the more profoundly in that death (with, of course, sin) is the child of Satan. In order to combat evil, the rebel

renounces good, because he considers himself innocent, and once again gives birth to evil. The romantic

hero first of all brings about the profound and, so to speak, religious blending of good and evil.4 This type of hero is "fatal" because fate confounds good and evil without man being able to prevent it. Fate does not allow judgments of value. It replaces them by the statement that "It is so"— which excuses everything, with the exception of the Creator, who alone is responsible for this scandalous state of affairs. The romantic hero is also "fatal" because, to the extent that he increases in power and genius, the power of evil increases in him.

Every manifestation of power, every excess, is thus covered by this "It is so." That the artist, particularly the poet, should be demoniac is a very ancient idea, which is formulated provocatively in the work of the romantics. At this period there is even an imperialism of evil, whose aim is to annex everything, even the most orthodox geniuses.

"What made Milton write with constraint," Blake observes, "when he spoke of angels and of God, and with audacity when he spoke of demons and of hell, is that he was a real poet and on the side of the demons, without knowing it." The poet, the genius, man himself in his most exalted image, therefore cry out simultaneously with Satan: "So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear, farewell remorse. . . . Evil, be thou my good." It is the cry of outraged innocence.

4 A dominant theme in William Blake, for example.

The romantic hero, therefore, considers himself compelled to do evil by his nostalgia for an unrealizable good. Satan rises against his Creator because the latter employed force to subjugate him. "Whom reason hath equal'd," says Milton's Satan, "force hath made supreme above his equals." Divine violence is thus explicitly condemned. The rebel flees from this aggressive and unworthy God, "Farthest from him is best," and reigns over all the forces hostile to the divine order. The Prince of Darkness has only chosen this path because good is a notion defined and utilized by God for unjust purposes. Even innocence irritates the Rebel in so far as it implies being duped.

This "dark spirit of evil who is enraged by innocence" creates a human injustice parallel to divine injustice. Since violence is at the root of all creation, deliberate violence shall be its answer. The fact that there is an excess of despair adds to the causes of despair and brings rebellion to that state of indignant frustration which follows the long experience of injustice and where the distinction between good and evil finally disappears. Vigny's Satan can ... no longer find in good or evil any pleasure nor of the sorrow that he causes take the measure.

This defines nihilism and authorizes murder.

Murder, in fact, is on the way to becoming acceptable. It is enough to compare the Lucifer of the painters of the Middle Ages with the Satan of the romantics. An adolescent "young, sad, charming" (Vigny) replaces the horned beast. "Beautiful, with a beauty unknown on this earth" (Lermontov), solitary and powerful, unhappy and scornful, he is offhand even in oppression. But his excuse is sorrow. "Who here," says Milton's Satan, "will envy whom the highest place . . . condemns to greatest share of endless pain."

So many injustices suffered, a sorrow so unrelieved, justify every excess. The rebel therefore allows himself certain advantages. Murder, of course, is not recommended for its own sake. But it is implicit in the value— supreme for the romantic—attached to frenzy. Frenzy is the reverse of boredom: Lorenzaccio dreams of Han of Iceland. Exquisite sensibilities evoke the elementary furies of the beast. The Byronic hero, incapable of love, or capable only of an impossible love, suffers endlessly. He is solitary, languid, his condition exhausts him.

If he wants to feel alive, it must be in the terrible exaltation of a brief and destructive action. To love someone whom one will never see again is to give a cry of exultation as one perishes in the flames of passion. One lives only in and for the moment, in order to achieve "the brief and vivid union of a tempestuous heart united to the tempest" (lermontov).

The threat of mortality which hangs over us makes everything abortive. Only the cry of anguish can bring us to life; exaltation takes the place of truth. To this extent the apocalypse becomes an absolute value in which everything is confounded—love and death, conscience and culpability.

In a chaotic universe no other life exists but that of the abyss where, according to Alfred Le Poittevin, human beings come "trembling with rage and exulting in their crimes" to curse the Creator. The intoxication of frenzy and, ultimately, some suitable crime reveal in a moment the whole meaning of a life. Without exactly advocating crime, the romantics insist on paying homage to a basic system of privileges which they illustrate with the conventional images of the outlaw, the criminal with the heart of gold, and the kind brigand. Their works are bathed in blood and shrouded in mystery.

The soul is delivered, at a minimum expenditure, of its most hideous desires—desires that a later generation will assuage in extermination camps. Of course these works are also a challenge to the society of the times. But romanticism, at the source of its inspiration, is chiefly concerned with defying moral and divine law. That is why its most original creation is not, primarily, the revolutionary, but, logically enough, the dandy.

Logically, because this obstinate persistence in Satanism can only be justified by the endless affirmation of injustice and, to a certain extent, by its consolidation. Pain, at this stage, is acceptable only on condition that it is incurable. The rebel chooses the metaphysic of inevitable evil, which is expressed in the literature of damnation from which we have not yet escaped. "I was conscious of my power and I was conscious of my chains" (Petrus Borel).

But these chains are valuable objects. Without them it would be necessary to prove, or to exercise, this power which, after all, one is not very sure of having. It is only too easy to end up by becoming a government employee in Algiers, and Prometheus, like the above-mentioned Borel, will devote the rest of his days to closing the cabarets and reforming morals in the colonies. All the same, every poet to be received into the fold must be damned.5

5 French literature still feels the effects of this. "Poets are no longer damned," says Malraux. There are fewer. But the others all suffer from bad consciences.

Charles Lassailly, the same who planned a philosophic novel, Robespierre and Jesus Christ, never went to bed without uttering several fervent blasphemies to give himself courage. Rebellion puts on mourning and exhibits itself for public admiration.

Much more than the cult of the individual, romanticism inaugurates the cult of the "character." It is at this point that it is logical. No longer hoping for the rule or the unity of God, determined to take up arms against an antagonistic destiny, anxious to preserve everything of which the living are still capable in a world dedicated to death, romantic rebellion looked for a solution in the attitude that it itself assumed.

The attitude assembled, in aesthetic unity, all mankind who were in the hands of fate and about to be destroyed by divine violence. The human being who is condemned to death is, at least, magnificent before he disappears, and his magnificence is his justification. It is an established fact, the only one that can be thrown in the petrified face of the God of hate. The impassive rebel does not flinch before the eyes of God. "Nothing," says Milton, "will change this

determined mind, this high disdain born of an offended conscience."

Everything is drawn or rushes toward the void, but even though man is humiliated, he is obstinate and at least preserves his pride. A baroque romantic, discovered by Raymond Queneau, claims that the aim of all intellectual life is to become God. This romantic is really a little ahead of his time. The aim, at that time, was only to equal God and remain on His level. He is not destroyed, but by incessant effort He is refused any act of submission. Dandyism is a degraded form of asceticism.

The dandy creates his own unity by aesthetic means. But it is an aesthetic of singularity and of negation. "To live and die before a mirror": that, according to Baudelaire, was the dandy's slogan. It is indeed a coherent slogan. The dandy is, by occupation, always in opposition. He can only exist by defiance. Up to now man derived his coherence from his Creator. But from the moment that he consecrates his rupture with Him, he finds himself delivered over to the fleeting moment, to the passing days, and to wasted sensibility.

Therefore he must take himself in hand. The dandy rallies his forces and creates a unity for himself by the very violence of his refusal. Profligate, like all people without a rule of life, he is coherent as an actor. But an actor implies a public; the dandy can only play a part by setting himself up in opposition. He can only be sure of his own existence by finding it in the expression of others' faces. Other people are his mirror.

A mirror that quickly becomes clouded, it is true, since human capacity for attention is limited. It must be ceaselessly stimulated, spurred on by provocation. The dandy, therefore, is always compelled to astonish. Singularity is his vocation, excess his way to perfection. Perpetually incomplete, always on the fringe of things, he compels others to create him, while denying their values. He plays at life because he is unable to live it. He plays at it until he dies, except for the moments when he is alone and without a mirror.

For the dandy, to be alone is not to exist. The romantics talked so grandly about solitude only because it was their real horror, the one thing they could not bear. Their rebellion thrusts its roots deep, but from the Abbe Prevost's Cleveland up to the time of the Dadaists—including the frenetics of 1830 and Baudelaire and the decadents of 1880—more than a century of rebellion was completely glutted by the audacities of "eccentricity." If they were all able to talk of unhappiness, it is because they despaired of ever being able to conquer it, except in futile parodies, and because they instinctively felt that it remained their sole excuse and their real claim to nobility.

That is why the heritage of romanticism was not claimed by Victor Hugo, the epitome of France, but by Baudelaire and Lacenaire, the poets of crime. "Everything in this world exudes crime," says Baudelaire, "the newspaper, the walls, and the face of man." Nevertheless crime, which is the law of nature, singularly fails to appear distinguished. Lacenaire, the first of the gentleman criminals, exploits it effectively; Baudelaire displays less tenacity, but is a genius. He creates the garden of evil where crime figures only as one of the rarer species.

Terror itself becomes an exquisite sensation and a collector's item. "Not only would I be happy to be a victim, but I would not even hate being an executioner in order to feel the revolution from both sides." Even Baudelaire's conformity has the odor of crime.

If he chose Maistre as his master, it is to the extent that this conservative goes to extremes and centers his doctrine on death and on the executioner. "The real saint," Baudelaire pretends to think, "is he who flogs and kills people for their own good."

His argument will be heard. A race of real saints is beginning to spread over the earth for the purpose of confirming these curious conelusions about

rebellion. But Baudelaire, despite his satanic arsenal, his taste for Sade, his blasphemies, remains too much of a theologian to be a proper rebel. His real drama, which made him the greatest poet of his time, was something else. Baudelaire can be mentioned here only to the extent that he was the most profound theoretician of dandyism and gave definite form to one of the conclusions of romantic revolt.

Romanticism demonstrates, in fact, that rebellion is part and parcel of dandyism: one of its objectives is appearances. In its conventional forms, dandyism admits a nostalgia for ethics. It is only honor degraded as a point of honor.

But at the same time it inaugurates an aesthetic which is still valid in our world, an aesthetic of solitary creators, who are obstinate rivals of a God they condemn. From romanticism onward, the artist's task will not only be to create a world, or to exalt beauty for its own sake, but also to define an attitude. Thus the artist becomes a model and offers himself as an example: art is his ethic.

With him begins the age of the directors of conscience. When the dandies fail to commit suicide or do not go mad, they make a career and pursue prosperity. Even when, like Vigny, they exclaim that they are going to retire into silence, their silence is piercing.

But at the very heart of romanticism, the sterility of this attitude becomes apparent to a few rebels who provide a transitional type between the eccentrics (or the Incredible) and our revolutionary adventurers. Between the times of the eighteenth-century eccentric and the "conquerors" of the twentieth century, Byron and Shelley are already fighting, though only ostensibly, for freedom. They also expose themselves, but in another way.

Rebellion gradually leaves the world of appearances for the world of action, where it will completely commit itself. The French students in 1830 and the Russian Decembrists will then appear as the purest incarnations of a rebellion which is at first solitary and which then tries, through sacrifice, to find the path to solidarity. But, inversely, the taste for the apocalypse and a life of frenzy will reappear among present-day revolutionaries.

The endless series of treason trials, the terrible game played out between the judge and the accused, the elaborate staging of cross-examinations, sometimes lead us to believe that there is a tragic resemblance to the old subterfuge by which the romantic rebel, in refusing to be what he was, provisionally condemned himself to a make-believe world in the desperate hope of achieving a more profound existence.

The end