

Creation and Revolution, Albert Camus

In art, rebellion is consummated and perpetuated in the act of real creation, not in criticism or commentary. Revolution, in its turn, can only affirm itself in a civilization and not in terror or tyranny. The two questions that are posed by our times to a society caught in a dilemma—Is creation possible? Is the revolution possible?—are in reality only one question, which concerns the renaissance of civilization.

The revolution and art of the twentieth century are tributaries of the same nihilism and live in the same contradiction. They deny, however, all that they affirm even in their very actions, and both try to find an impossible solution through terror. The contemporary revolution believes that it is inaugurating a new world when it is really only the contradictory climax of the old one.

Finally capitalist society and revolutionary society are one and the same thing to the extent that they submit themselves to the same means—industrial production and to the same promise. But one makes its promise in the name of formal principles that it is quite incapable of incarnating and that are denied by the methods it employs. The other justifies its prophecy in the name of the only reality it recognizes, and ends by mutilating reality. The society based on production is only productive, not creative.

Contemporary art, because it is nihilistic, also flounders between formalism and realism. Realism, moreover, is just as much bourgeois, when it is "tough," as socialist when it becomes edifying. Formalism belongs just as much to the society of the past, when it takes the form of gratuitous abstraction, as to the society that claims to be the society of the future—when it becomes propaganda. Language destroyed by irrational negation becomes lost in verbal delirium; subject to determinist ideology, it is summed up in the slogan. Halfway between the two lies art.

If the rebel must simultaneously reject the frenzy of annihilation and the acceptance of totality, the artist must simultaneously escape from the passion for formality and the totalitarian aesthetic of reality. The world today is one, in fact, but its unity is the unity of nihilism. Civilization is only possible if, by renouncing the nihilism of formal principles and nihilism without principles, the world rediscovers the road to a creative synthesis. In the same way, in art the time of perpetual commentary and factual reporting is at the point of death; it announces the advent of creative artists.

But art and society, creation and revolution, to prepare for this event, must rediscover the source of rebellion where refusal and acceptance, the unique and the universal, the individual and history balance each other in a condition of acute tension. Rebellion in itself is not an element of civilization. But it is a preliminary to all civilization. Rebellion alone, in the blind alley in which we live, allows us to hope for the future of which Nietzsche dreamed: "Instead of the judge and the oppressor, the creator."

This formula certainly does not authorize the ridiculous illusion of a civilization controlled by artists. It only illuminates the drama of our times in which work, entirely subordinated to production, has ceased to be creative. Industrial society will open the way to a new civilization only by restoring to the worker the dignity of a creator; in other words, by making him apply his interest and his intelligence as much to the work itself as to what it produces.

The type of civilization that is inevitable will not be able to separate, among classes as well as among individuals, the worker from the creator; any more than artistic creation dreams of separating form and substance, history and the mind. In

this way it will bestow on everyone the dignity that rebellion affirms. It would be unjust, and moreover Utopian, for Shakespeare to direct the shoemakers' union. But it would be equally disastrous for the shoemakers' union to ignore Shakespeare. Shakespeare without the shoemaker serves as an excuse for tyranny. The shoemaker without Shakespeare is absorbed by tyranny when he does not contribute to its propagation. Every act of creation, by its mere existence, denies the world of master and slave. The appalling society of tyrants and slaves in which we survive will find its death and transfiguration only on the level of creation.

But the fact that creation is necessary does not perforce imply that it is possible. A creative period in art is determined by the order of a particular style applied to the disorder of a particular time. It gives form and formulas to contemporary passions. Thus it no longer suffices, for a creative artist, to imitate Mme de La Fayette in a period when our morose rulers have no more time for love. Today, when collective passions have stolen a march on individual passions, the ecstasy of love can always be controlled by art.

But the ineluctable problem is also to control collective passions and the historical struggle. The scope of art, despite the regrets of the plagiarists, has been extended from psychology to the human condition. When the passions of the times put the fate of the whole world at stake, creation wishes to dominate the whole of destiny. But, at the same time, it maintains, in the face of totality, the affirmation of unity. In simple words, creation is then imperilled, first by itself, and then by the spirit of totality. To create, today, is to create dangerously.

In order to dominate collective passions they must, in fact, be lived through and experienced, at least relatively. At the same time that he experiences them, the artist is devoured by them. The result is that our period is rather the period of journalism than of the work of art. The exercise of these passions, finally, entails far greater chances of death than in the period of love and ambition, in that the only way of living collective passions is to be willing to die for them and by their hand. The greatest opportunity for authenticity is, today, the greatest defeat of art. If creation is impossible during wars and revolutions, then we shall have no creative artists, for war and revolution are our lot. The myth of unlimited production brings war in its train as inevitably as clouds announce a storm.

Wars lay waste to the West and kill the flower of a generation. Hardly has it arisen from the ruins when the bourgeois system sees the revolutionary system advancing upon it. Genius has not even had time to be reborn; the war that threatens us will kill all those who perhaps might have been geniuses. If a creative classicism is, nevertheless, proved possible, we must recognize that, even though it is rendered illustrious by one name alone, it will be the work of an entire generation.

The chances of defeat, in the century of destruction, can only be compensated for by the hazard of numbers; in other words, the chance that of ten authentic artists one, at least, will survive, take charge of the first utterances of his brother artists, and succeed in finding in his life both the time for passion and the time for creation. The artist, whether he likes it or not, can no longer be a solitary, except in the melancholy triumph he owes to all his fellow artists. Rebellious art also ends by revealing the "We are," and with it the way to a burning humility.

Meanwhile, the triumphant revolution, in the aberrations of its nihilism, menaces those who, in defiance of it, claim to maintain the existence of unity in totality. One of the implications of history today, and still more of the history of tomorrow, is the struggle between the artists and the new conquerors, between the witnesses to the creative revolution and the founders of the nihilist revolution.

As to the outcome of the struggle, it is only possible to make inspired guesses. At least we know that it must henceforth be carried on to the bitter end. Modern conquerors can kill, but do not seem to be able to create. Artists know how to create but cannot really kill. Murderers are only very exceptionally found among artists. In the long run, therefore, art in our revolutionary societies must die.

But then the revolution will have lived its allotted span. Each time that the revolution kills in a man the artist that he might have been, it attenuates itself a little more. If, finally, the conquerors succeed in molding the world according to their laws, it will not prove that quantity is king, but that this world is hell. In this hell, the place of art will coincide with that of vanquished rebellion, a blind and empty hope in the pit of despair.

Ernst Dwynger in his Siberian Diary mentions a German lieutenant—for years a prisoner in a camp where cold and hunger were almost unbearable—who constructed himself a silent piano with wooden keys. In the most abject misery, perpetually surrounded by a ragged mob, he composed a strange music which was audible to him alone. And for us who have been thrown into hell, mysterious melodies and the torturing images of a vanished beauty will always bring us, in the midst of crime and folly, the echo of that harmonious insurrection which bears witness, throughout the centuries, to the greatness of humanity.

But hell can endure for only a limited period, and life will begin again one day. History may perhaps have an end; but our task is not to terminate it but to create it, in the image of what we henceforth know to be true. Art, at least, teaches us that man cannot be explained by history alone and that he also finds a reason for his existence in the order of nature. For him, the great god Pan is not dead. His most instinctive act of rebellion, while it affirms the value and the dignity common to all men, obstinately claims, so as to satisfy its hunger for unity, an integral part of the reality whose name is beauty. One can reject all history and yet accept the world of the sea and the stars. The rebels who wish to ignore nature and beauty are condemned to banish from history everything with which they want to construct the dignity of existence and of labor.

Every great reformer tries to create in history what Shakespeare, Cervantes, Moliere, and Tolstoy knew how to create: a world always ready to satisfy the hunger for freedom and dignity which every man carries in his heart. Beauty, no doubt, does not make revolutions. But a day will come when revolutions will have need of beauty. The procedure of beauty, which is to contest reality while endowing it with unity, is also the procedure of rebellion.

Is it possible eternally to reject injustice without ceasing to acclaim the nature of man and the beauty of the world? Our answer is yes. This ethic, at once unsubmitive and loyal, is in any event the only one that lights the way to a truly realistic revolution. In upholding beauty, we prepare the way for the day of regeneration when civilization will give first place—far ahead of the formal principles and degraded values of history—to this living virtue on which is founded the common dignity of man and the world he lives in, and which we must now define in the face of a world that insults it.

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