

Nihilism and History, Albert Camus

One hundred and fifty years of metaphysical rebellion and of nihilism have witnessed the persistent reappearance, under different guises, of the same ravaged countenance: the face of human protest. All of them, decrying the human condition and its creator, have affirmed the solitude of man and the nonexistence of any kind of morality. But at the same time they have all tried to construct a purely terrestrial kingdom where their chosen principles will hold sway. As rivals of the Creator, they have inescapably been led to the point of reconstructing creation according to their own concepts.

Those who rejected, for the sake of the world they had just created, all other principles but desire and power, have rushed to suicide or madness and have proclaimed the apocalypse. As for the rest, who wanted to create their own principles, they have chosen pomp and ceremony, the world of appearances, or banality, or again murder and destruction. But Sade and the romantics, Karamazov or Nietzsche only entered the world of death because they wanted to discover the true life.

So that by a process of inversion, it is the desperate appeal for order that rings through this insane universe. Their conclusions have only proved disastrous or destructive to freedom from the moment they laid aside the burden of rebellion, fled the tension that it implies, and chose the comfort of tyranny or of servitude.

Human insurrection, in its exalted and tragic forms, is only, and can only be, a prolonged protest against death, a violent accusation against the universal death penalty. In every case that we have come across, the protest is always directed at everything in creation which is dissonant, opaque, or promises the solution of continuity. Essentially, then, we are dealing with a perpetual demand for unity.

The rejection of death, the desire for immortality and for clarity, are the mainsprings of all these extravagances, whether sublime or puerile. Is it only a cowardly and personal refusal to die? No, for many of these rebels have paid the ultimate price in order to live up to their own demands. The rebel does not ask for life, but for reasons for living. He rejects the consequences implied by death. If nothing lasts, then nothing is justified; everything that dies is deprived of meaning. To fight against death amounts to claiming that life has a meaning, to fighting for order and for unity.

The protest against evil which is at the very core of metaphysical revolt is significant in this regard. It is not the suffering of a child, which is repugnant in itself, but the fact that the suffering is not justified. After all, pain, exile, or confinement are sometimes accepted when dictated by good sense or by the doctor. In the eyes of the rebel, what is missing from the misery of the world, as well as from its moments of happiness, is some principle by which they can be explained.

The insurrection against evil is, above all, a demand for unity. The rebel obstinately confronts a world condemned to death and the impenetrable obscurity of the human condition with his demand for life and absolute clarity. He is seeking, without knowing it, a moral philosophy or a religion.

Rebellion, even though it is blind, is a form of asceticism. Therefore, if the rebel blasphemes, it is in the hope of finding a new god. He staggers under the shock of the first and most profound of all religious experiences, but it is a disenchanting religious experience. It is not rebellion itself that is noble, but its aims, even though its achievements are at times ignoble.

At least we must know how to recognize the ignoble ends it achieves. Each time that it deifies the total rejection, the absolute negation, of what exists, it destroys. Each time that it blindly accepts what exists and gives voice to absolute assent, it destroys again. Hatred of the ; creator can turn to hatred

of creation or to exclusive and defiant love of what exists. But in both cases it ends in murder and loses the right to be called rebellion.

One can be nihilist in two ways, in both by having an intemperate recourse to absolutes. Apparently there are rebels who want to die and those who want to cause death. But they are identical, consumed with desire for the true life, frustrated by their desire for existence and therefore preferring generalized injustice to mutilated justice. At this pitch of indignation, reason becomes madness.

If it is true that the instinctive rebellion of the human heart advances gradually through the centuries toward its most complete realization, it has also grown, as we have seen, in blind audacity, to the inordinate extent of deciding to answer universal murder by metaphysical assassination.

The even if, which we have already recognized as marking the most important moment of metaphysical rebellion, is in any case only fulfilled in absolute destruction. It is not the nobility of rebellion that illuminates the world today, but nihilism. And it is the consequences of nihilism that we must retrace, without losing sight of the truth innate in its origins. Even if God existed, Ivan would never surrender to Him in the face of the injustice done to man.

But a longer contemplation of this injustice, a more bitter approach, transformed the "even if you exist" into "you do not deserve to exist," therefore "you do not exist." The victims have found in their own innocence the justification for the final crime. Convinced of their condemnation and without hope of immortality, they decided to murder God.

If it is false to say that from that day began the tragedy of contemporary man, neither is it true to say that there was where it ended. On the contrary, this attempt indicates the highest point in a drama that began with the end of the ancient world and of which the final words have not yet been spoken. From this moment, man decides to exclude himself from grace and to live by his own means. Progress, from the time of Sade up to the present day, has consisted in gradually enlarging the stronghold where, according to his own rules, man without God brutally wields power. In defiance of the divinity, the frontiers of this stronghold have been gradually extended, to the point of making the entire universe into a fortress erected against the fallen and exiled deity.

Man, at the culmination of his rebellion, incarcerated himself; from Sade's lurid castle to the concentration camps, man's greatest liberty consisted only in building the prison of his crimes. But the state of siege gradually spreads, the demand for freedom wants to embrace all mankind. Then the only kingdom that is opposed to the kingdom of grace must be founded â "namely, the kingdom of justice and the human community must be reunited among the debris of the fallen City of God. To kill God and to build a Church are the constant and contradictory purpose of rebellion.

Absolute freedom finally becomes a prison of absolute duties, a collective asceticism, a story to be brought to an end. The nineteenth century, which is the century of rebellion, thus merges into the twentieth, the century of justice and ethics, in which everyone indulges in self-recrimination. Chamfort, the moralist of rebellion, had already provided the formula: "One must be just before being generous, as one must have bread before having cake." Thus the ethic of luxury will be renounced in favor of the bitter morality of the empire builders.

We must now embark on the subject of this convulsive effort to control the world and to introduce a universal rule. We have arrived at the moment when rebellion, rejecting every aspect of servitude, attempts to annex all creation. Every time it experiences a setback, we have already seen that the political solution, the solution of conquest, is formulated. Henceforth, with the introduction of moral nihilism, it will retain, of all its acquisitions, only the will to power. In

principle, the rebel only wanted to conquer his own existence and to maintain it in the face of God.

But he forgets his origins and, by the law of spiritual imperialism, he sets out in search of world conquest by way of an infinitely multiplied series of murders. He drove God from His heaven, but now that the spirit of metaphysical rebellion openly joins forces with revolutionary movements, the irrational claim for freedom paradoxically adopts reason as a weapon, and as the only means of conquest which appears entirely human.

With the death of God, mankind remains; and by this we mean the history that we must understand and shape. Nihilism, which, in the very midst of rebellion, smothers the force of creation, only adds that one is justified in using every means at one's disposal.

Man, on an earth that he knows is henceforth solitary, is going to add, to irrational crimes, the crimes of reason that are bent on the triumph of man. To the "I rebel, therefore we exist," he adds, with prodigious plans in mind which even include the death of rebellion: "And we are alone."

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