

Rebellion and Art, Albert Camus

Art is the activity that exalts and denies simultaneously. "No artist tolerates reality," says Nietzsche. That is true, but no artist can get along without reality. Artistic creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world. But it rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is. Rebellion can be observed here in its pure state and in its original complexities. Thus art should give us a final perspective on the content of rebellion.

The hostility to art shown by all revolutionary reformers must, however, be pointed out. Plato is moderately reasonable. He only calls in question the deceptive function of language and exiles only poets from his republic. Apart from that, he considers beauty more important than the world. But the revolutionary movement of modern times coincides with an artistic process that is not yet completed. The Reformation chooses morality and exiles beauty. Rousseau denounces in art a corruption of nature by society.

Saint-Just inveighs against the theater, and in the elaborate program he composes for the "Feast of Reason" he states that he would like Reason to be impersonated by someone "virtuous rather than beautiful." The French Revolution gave birth to no artists, but only to a great journalist, Desmoulins, and to a clandestine writer, Sade. It guillotines the only poet of the times.¹ The only great prose-writer² took refuge in London and pleaded the cause of Christianity and legitimacy. A little later the followers of Saint-Simon demanded a "socially useful form of art." "Art for progress" was a commonplace of the whole period, and one that Hugo revived, without succeeding in making it sound convincing. Valles alone brings to his malediction of art a tone of imprecation that gives it authenticity.

1 Andre Chenier. (ed.)

2 Francois Rene Chateaubriand, (ed.)

This tone is also employed by the Russian nihilists. Pisarev proclaims the deposition of aesthetic values, in favor of pragmatic values. "I would rather be a Russian shoemaker than a Russian Raphael." A pair of shoes, in his eyes, is more useful than Shakespeare. The nihilist Nekrassov, a great and moving poet, nevertheless affirms that he prefers a piece of cheese to all of Pushkin. Finally, we are familiar with the excommunication of art pronounced by Tolstoy. Revolutionary Russia finally even turned its back on the marble statues of Venus and Apollo, still gilded by the Italian sun, that Peter the Great had had brought to his summer garden in St. Petersburg. Suffering, sometimes, turns away from too painful expressions of happiness.

German ideology is no less severe in its accusations. According to the revolutionary interpreters of Hegel's Phenomenology, there will be no art in reconciled society. Beauty will be lived and no longer only imagined. Reality, become entirely rational, will satisfy, completely by itself, every appetite. The criticism of formal conscience and of escapist values naturally extends itself to embrace art.

Art does not belong to all times; it is determined, on the contrary, by its period, and expresses, says Marx, the privileged values of the ruling classes. Thus there is only one revolutionary form of art, which is, precisely, art dedicated to the service of the revolution. Moreover, by creating beauty outside the course of history, art impedes the only rational activity: the transformation of history itself into absolute beauty. The Russian shoemaker, once he is aware of his revolutionary role, is the real creator of definitive beauty. As for Raphael, he created only a transitory beauty, which will be quite incomprehensible to the new man.

Marx asks himself, it is true, how the beauty created by the Greeks can still be

beautiful for us. His answer is that this beauty is the expression of the naive childhood of this world and that we have, in the midst of our adult struggles, a nostalgia for this childhood. But how can the masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance, how can Rembrandt, how can Chinese art still be beautiful in our eyes? What does it matter!

The trial of art has been opened definitively and is continuing today with the embarrassed complicity of artists and intellectuals dedicated to calumniating both their art and their intelligence. We notice, in fact, that in the contest between Shakespeare and the shoemaker, it is not the shoemaker who maligns Shakespeare or beauty but, on the contrary, the man who continues to read Shakespeare and who does not choose to make shoesâ which he could never make, if it comes to that.

The artists of our time resemble the repentant noblemen of nineteenth-century Russia; their bad conscience is their excuse. But the last emotion that an artist can experience, confronted with his art, is repentance. It is going far beyond simple and necessary humility to pretend to dismiss beauty, too, until the end of time, and meanwhile, to deprive all the world, including the shoemaker, of this additional bread of which one has taken advantage oneself.

This form of ascetic insanity, nevertheless, has its reasons, which at least are of interest to us. They express on the aesthetic level the struggle, already described, of revolution and rebellion. In every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it, and the construction of a substitute universe. Rebellion, from this point of view, is a fabricator of universes. This also defines art.

The demands of rebellion are really, in part, aesthetic demands. All rebel thought, as we have seen, is expressed either in rhetoric or in a closed universe. The rhetoric of ramparts in Lucretius, the convents and isolated castles of Sade, the island or the lonely rock of the romantics, the solitary heights of Nietzsche, the primeval seas of Lautreamont, the parapets of Rimbaud, the terrifying castles of the surrealists, which spring up in a storm of flowers, the prison, the nation behind barbed wire, the concentration camps, the empire of free slaves, all illustrate, after their own fashion, the same need for coherence and unity. In these sealed worlds, man can reign and have knowledge at last.

This tendency is common to all the arts. The artist reconstructs the world to his plan. The symphonies of nature know no rests. The world is never quiet; even its silence eternally resounds with the same notes, in vibrations that escape our ears. As for those that we perceive, they carry sounds to us, occasionally a chord, never a melody. Music exists, however, in which symphonies are completed, where melody gives its form to sounds that by themselves have none, and where, finally, a particular arrangement of notes extracts from natural disorder a unity that is satisfying to the mind and the heart.

"I believe more and more," writes Van Gogh, "that God must not be judged on this earth. It is one of His sketches that has turned out badly." Every artist tries to reconstruct this sketch and to give it the style it lacks. The greatest and most ambitious of all the arts, sculpture, is bent on capturing, in three dimensions, the fugitive figure of man, and on restoring the unity of great style to the general disorder of gestures. Sculpture does not reject resemblance, of which, indeed, it has need.

But resemblance is not its first aim. What it is looking for, in its periods of greatness, is the gesture, the expression, or the empty stare which will sum up all the gestures and all the stares in the world. Its purpose is not to imitate, but to stylize and to imprison in one significant expression the fleeting ecstasy of the body or the infinite variety of human attitudes.

Then, and only then, does it erect, on the pediments of teeming cities, the model, the type, the motionless perfection that will cool, for one moment, the

fevered brow of man. The frustrated lover of love can finally gaze at the Greek caryatides and grasp what it is that triumphs, in the body and face of the woman, over every degradation.

The principle of painting is also to make a choice. "Even genius," writes Delacroix, ruminating on his art, "is only the gift of generalizing and choosing." The painter isolates his subject, which is the first way of unifying it. Landscapes flee, vanish from the memory, or destroy one another. That is why the landscape painter or the painter of still life isolates in space and time things that normally change with the light, get lost in an infinite perspective, or disappear under the impact of other values. The first thing that a landscape painter does is to square off his canvas. He eliminates as much as he includes.

Similarly, subject-painting isolates, in both time and space, an action that normally would become lost in another action. Thus the painter arrives at a point of stabilization. The really great creative artists are those who, like Piero della Francesca, give the impression that the stabilization has only just taken place, that the projection machine has suddenly stopped dead. All their subjects give the impression that, by some miracle of art, they continue to live, while ceasing to be mortal. Long after his death, Rembrandt's philosopher still meditates, between light and shade, on the same problem.

"How vain a thing is painting that beguiles us by the resemblance to objects that do not please us at all." Delacroix, who quotes Pascal's celebrated remark, is correct in writing "strange" instead of "vain." These objects do not please us at all because we do not see them; they are obscured and negated by a perpetual process of change. Who looked at the hands of the executioner during the Flagellation, and the olive trees on the way to the Cross? But here we see them represented, transfigured by the incessant movement of the Passion; and the agony of Christ, imprisoned in images of violence and beauty, cries out again each day in the cold rooms of museums.

A painter's style lies in this blending of nature and history, in this stability imposed on incessant change. Art realizes, without apparent effort, the reconciliation of the unique with the universal of which Hegel dreamed. Perhaps that is why periods, such as ours, which are bent on unity to the point of madness, turn to primitive arts, in which stylization is the most intense and unity the most provocative.

The most extreme stylization is always found at the beginning and end of artistic movements; it demonstrates the intensity of negation and transposition which has given modern painting its disorderly impetus toward interpreting unity and existence. Van Gogh's admirable complaint is the arrogant and desperate cry of all artists. "I can very well, in life and in painting, too, do without God. But I cannot, suffering as I do, do without something that is greater than I am, that is my life the power to create."

But the artist's rebellion against reality, which is automatically suspect to the totalitarian revolution, contains the same affirmation as the spontaneous rebellion of the oppressed. The revolutionary spirit, born of total negation, instinctively felt that, as well as refusal, there was also consent to be found in art; that there was a risk of contemplation counterbalancing action, beauty, and injustice, and that in certain cases beauty itself was a form of injustice from which there was no appeal. Equally well, no form of art can survive on total denial alone. Just as all thought, and primarily that of non-signification, signifies something, so there is no art that has no signification.

Man can allow himself to denounce the total injustice of the world and then demand a total justice that he alone will create. But he cannot affirm the total hideousness of the world. To create beauty, he must simultaneously reject reality and exalt certain of its aspects. Art disputes reality, but does not hide from it.

Nietzsche could deny any form of transcendence, whether moral or divine, by saying that transcendence drove one to slander this world and this life. But perhaps there is a living transcendence, of which beauty carries the promise, which can make this mortal and limited world preferable to and more appealing than any other.

Art thus leads us back to the origins of rebellion, to the extent that it tries to give its form to an elusive value which the future perpetually promises, but of which the artist has a presentiment and wishes to snatch from the grasp of history. We shall understand this better in considering the art form whose precise aim is to become part of the process of evolution in order to give it the style that it lacks; in other words, the novel.

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