

Rebellion and the Novel, Albert Camus

It is possible to separate the literature of consent, which coincides, by and large, with ancient history and the classical period, from the literature of rebellion, which begins in modern times. We note the scarcity of fiction in the former. When it exists, with very few exceptions, it is not concerned with a story but with fantasy (Thea-genes and Charicleia or Astrcea). These are fairy tales, not novels. In the latter period, on the contrary, the novel form is really developed—a form that has not ceased to thrive and extend its field of activity up to the present day, simultaneously with the critical and revolutionary movement. The novel is born at the same time as the spirit of rebellion and expresses, on the aesthetic plane, the same ambition.

"A make-believe story, written in prose," says Littré about the novel. Is it only that? In any case, a Catholic critic, Stanislas Fumet, has written: "Art, whatever its aims, is always in sinful competition with God." Actually, it is more correct to talk about competition with God, in connection with the novel, than of competition with man's civil status. Thibaudet expresses a similar idea when he says of Balzac: "The Comédie humaine is the Imitation of God the Father."

The aim of great literature seems to be to create a closed universe or a perfect type. The West, in its great creative works, does not limit itself to retracing the steps of its daily life. It consistently presents magnificent images which inflame its imagination and sets off, hotfoot, in pursuit of them.

After all, writing or even reading a novel is an unusual activity. To construct a story by a new arrangement of actual facts has nothing inevitable or even necessary about it. Even if the ordinary explanation of the mutual pleasure of reader and writer were true, it would still be necessary to ask why it was incumbent on a large part of humanity to take pleasure and an interest in make-believe stories. Revolutionary criticism condemns the novel in its pure form as being simply a means of escape for an idle imagination.

In everyday speech we find the term romance used to describe an exaggerated description or lying account of some event. Not so very long ago it was a commonplace that young girls, despite all appearance to the contrary, were "romantic," by which was meant that these idealized creatures took no account of everyday realities. In general, it has always been considered that the romantic was quite separate from life and that it enhanced it while, at the same time, betraying it. The simplest and most common way of envisaging romantic expression is to see it as an escapist exercise. Common sense joins hands with revolutionary criticism.

But from what are we escaping by means of the novel? From a reality we consider too overwhelming? Happy people read novels, too, and it is an established fact that extreme suffering takes away the taste for reading. From another angle, the romantic universe of the novel certainly has less substance than the other universe where people of flesh and blood harass us without respite. However, by what magic does Adolphe, for instance, seem so much more familiar to us than Benjamin Constant, and Count Mosca than our professional moralists?

Balzac once terminated a long conversation about politics and the fate of the world by saying: "And now let us get back to serious matters," meaning that he wanted to talk about his novels. The incontestable importance of the world of the novel, our insistence, in fact, on taking seriously the innumerable myths with which we have been provided for the last two centuries by the genius of writers, is not fully explained by the desire to escape. Romantic activities undoubtedly imply a rejection of reality.

But this rejection is not a mere escapist flight, and might be interpreted as the retreat of the soul which, according to Hegel, creates for itself, in its disappointment, a fictitious world in which ethics reigns alone. The edifying novel, however, is far from being great literature; and the best of all romantic

novels, Paul et Virginie, a really heartbreaking book, makes no concessions to consolation.

The contradiction is this: man rejects the world as it is, without accepting the necessity of escaping it. In fact, men cling to the world and by far the majority do not want to abandon it. Far from always wanting to forget it, they suffer, on the contrary, from not being able to possess it completely enough, estranged citizens of the world, exiled from their own country. Except for vivid moments of fulfillment, all reality for them is incomplete. Their actions escape them in the form of other actions, return in unexpected guises to judge them, and disappear like the water Tantalus longed to drink, into some still undiscovered orifice.

To know the whereabouts of the orifice, to control the course of the river, to understand life, at last, as destiny these are their true aspirations. But this vision which, in the realm of consciousness at least, will reconcile them with themselves, can only appear, if it ever does appear, at the fugitive moment that is death, in which everything is consummated. In order to exist just once in the world, it is necessary never again to exist.

At this point is born the fatal envy which so many men feel of the lives of others. Seen from a distance, these existences seem to possess a coherence and a unity which they cannot have in reality, but which seem evident to the spectator. He sees only the salient points of these lives without taking into account the details of corrosion. Thus we make these lives into works of art. In an elementary fashion we turn them into novels. In this sense, everyone tries to make his life a work of art. We want love to last and we know that it does not last; even if, by some miracle, it were to last a whole lifetime, it would still be incomplete.

Perhaps, in this insatiable need for perpetuation, we should better understand human suffering if we knew that it was eternal. It appears that great minds are sometimes less horrified by suffering than by the fact that it does not endure. In default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering would at least give us a destiny. But we do not even have that consolation, and our worst agonies come to an end one day. One morning, after many dark nights of despair, an irrepressible longing to live will announce to us the fact that all is finished and that suffering has no more meaning than happiness.

The desire for possession is only another form of the desire to endure; it is this that comprises the impotent delirium of love. No human being, even the most passionately loved and passionately loving, is ever in our possession. On the pitiless earth where lovers are often separated in death and are always born divided, the total possession of another human being and absolute communion throughout an entire lifetime are impossible dreams.

The desire for possession is insatiable, to such a point that it can survive even love itself. To love, therefore, is to sterilize the person one loves. The shamefaced suffering of the abandoned lover is not so much due to being no longer loved as to knowing that the other partner can and must love again. In the final analysis, every man devoured by the overpowering desire to endure and possess wishes that those whom he has loved were either sterile or dead. This is real rebellion.

Those who have not insisted, at least once, on the absolute virginity of human beings and of the world, who have not trembled with longing and impotence at the fact that it is impossible, and have then not been destroyed by trying to love halfheartedly, perpetually forced back upon their longing for the absolute, cannot understand the realities of rebellion and its ravening desire for destruction. But the lives of others always escape us, and we escape them too; they have no firm outline. Life from this point of view is without style. It is only an impulse that endlessly pursues its form without ever finding it. Man, tortured by this, tries in vain to find the form that will impose certain limits between which he can be king. If only one single living thing had definite form,

he would be reconciled!

There is not one human being who, above a certain elementary level of consciousness, does not exhaust himself in trying to find formulas or attitudes that will give his existence the unity it lacks. Appearance and action, the dandy and the revolutionary, all demand unity in order to exist, and in order to exist on this earth. As in those moving and unhappy relationships which sometimes survive for a very long time because one of the partners is waiting to find the right word, action, gesture, or situation which will bring his adventure to an end on exactly the right note, so everyone proposes and creates for himself the final word.

It is not sufficient to live, there must be a destiny that does not have to wait for death. It is therefore justifiable to say that man has an idea of a better world than this. But better does not mean different, it means unified. This passion which lifts the mind above the commonplaces of a dispersed world, from which it nevertheless cannot free itself, is the passion for unity. It does not result in mediocre efforts to escape, however, but in the most obstinate demands. Religion or crime, every human endeavor in fact, finally obeys this unreasonable desire and claims to give life a form it does not have. The same impulse, which can lead to the adoration of the heavens or the destruction of man, also leads to creative literature, which derives its serious content from this source.

What, in fact, is a novel but a universe in which action is endowed with form, where final words are pronounced, where people possess one another completely,

and where life assumes the aspect of destiny?³ The world of the novel is only a rectification of the world we live in, in pursuance of man's deepest wishes. For the world is undoubtedly the same one we know. The suffering, the illusion, the love are the same. The heroes speak our language, have our weaknesses and our strength. Their universe is neither more beautiful nor more enlightening than ours. But they, at least, pursue their destinies to the bitter end and there are no more fascinating heroes than those who indulge their passions to the fullest, Kirilov and Stavrogin, Mme Graslin, Julien Sorel, or the Prince de Cleves. It is here that we can no longer keep pace with them, for they complete things that we can never consummate.

³ Even if the novel describes only nostalgia, despair, frustration, it still creates a form of salvation. To talk of despair is to conquer it. Despairing literature is a contradiction in terms.

Mme de La Fayette derived the *Princesse de Cleves* from the most harrowing experiences. Undoubtedly she is Mme de Cleves and yet she is not. Where lies the difference? The difference is that Mme de La Fayette did not go into a convent and that no one around her died of despair. No doubt she knew moments, at least, of agony in her extraordinary passion. But there was no culminating-point; she survived her love and prolonged it by ceasing to live it, and finally no one, not even herself, would have known its pattern if she had not given it the perfect delineation of faultless prose.

Nor is there any story more romantic and beautiful than that of Sophie Tonska and Casimir in Gobineau's *Pleiades*. Sophie, a sensitive and beautiful woman, who makes one understand Stendahl's confession that "only women of great character can make me happy," forces Casimir to confess his love for her. Accustomed to being loved, she becomes impatient with Casimir, who sees her every day and yet never departs from an attitude of irritating detachment.

Casimir confesses his love, but in the tone of one stating a legal case. He has studied it, knows it as well as he knows himself, and is convinced that this love, without which he cannot live, has no future. He has therefore decided to tell her of his love and at the same time to acknowledge that it is vain and to make over his fortune to her—she is rich, and this gesture is of no importance—on condition that she give him a very modest pension which will allow him to

install himself in the suburb of a town chosen at random (it will be Vilna) and there await death in poverty. Casimir recognizes, moreover, that the idea of receiving from Sophie the necessary money on which to live represents a concession to human weakness, the only one he will permit himself, with, at long intervals, the dispatch of a blank sheet of paper in an envelope on which he will write Sophie's name.

After being first indignant, then perturbed, and then melancholy, Sophie accepts; and everything happens as Casimir foresaw. He dies, in Vilna, of a broken heart. Romanticism thus has its logic. A story is never really moving and successful without the imperturbable continuity which is never part of real life, but which is to be found on the borderland between reality and reverie. If Gohineau himself had gone to Vilna he would have got bored and come back, or would have settled down comfortably. But Casimir never experienced any desire to change nor did he ever wake cured of his love. He went to the bitter end, like Heathcliff, who wanted to go beyond death in order to reach the very depths of hell.

Here we have an imaginary world, therefore, which is created by the rectification of the actual world—a world where suffering can, if it wishes, continue until death, where passions are never distracted, where people are prey to obsessions and are always present to one another. Man is finally able to give himself the alleviating form and limits which he pursues in vain in his own life. The novel creates destiny to suit any eventuality. In this way it competes with creation and, provisionally, conquers death.

A detailed analysis of the most famous novels would show, in different perspectives each time, that the essence of the novel lies in this perpetual alteration, always directed toward the same ends, that the artist makes in his own experience. Far from being moral or even purely formal, this alteration aims, primarily, at unity and thereby expresses a metaphysical need. The novel, on this level, is primarily an exercise of the intelligence in the service of nostalgic or rebellious sensibilities.

It would be possible to study this quest for unity in the French analytical novel and in Melville, Balzac, Dostoevsky, or Tolstoy. But a brief comparison between two attempts that stand at different poles of the world of the novel the works of Proust and American fiction of the last few years—will suffice for our purpose.

The American novel⁴ claims to find its unity in reducing man either to elementals or to his external reactions and to his behavior. It does not choose feelings or passions to give a detailed description of, such as we find in classic French novels. It rejects analysis and the search for a fundamental psychological motive that could explain and recapitulate the behavior of a character. This is why the unity of this novel form is only the unity of the flash of recognition. Its technique consists in describing men by their outside appearances, in their most casual actions, of reproducing, without comment, everything they say down to their repetitions,⁵ and finally by acting as if men were entirely defined by their daily automatisms.

⁴ I am referring, of course, to the "tough" novel of the thirties and forties and not to the admirable American efflorescence of the nineteenth century.

⁵ Even in Faulkner, a great writer of this generation, the interior monologue only reproduces the outer husk of thought.

On this mechanical level men, in fact, seem exactly alike, which explains this peculiar universe in which all the characters appear interchangeable, even down to their physical peculiarities. This technique is called realistic only owing to a misapprehension. In addition to the fact that realism in art is, as we shall see, an incomprehensible idea, it is perfectly obvious that this fictitious world is not attempting a reproduction, pure and simple, of reality, but the most arbitrary form of stylization. It is born of a mutilation, and of a

voluntary mutilation, performed on reality.

The unity thus obtained is a degraded unity, a leveling off of human beings and of the world. It would seem that for these writers it is the inner life that deprives human actions of unity and that tears people away from one another. This is a partially legitimate suspicion. But rebellion, which is one of the sources of the art of fiction, can find satisfaction only in constructing unity on the basis of affirming this interior reality and not of denying it.

To deny it totally is to refer oneself to an imaginary man. Novels of violence are also love stories, of which they have the formal conceits—in their own way, they edify.⁶ The life of the body, reduced to its essentials, paradoxically produces an abstract and gratuitous universe, continuously denied, in its turn, by reality. This type of novel, purged of interior life, in which men seem to be observed behind a pane of glass, logically ends, with its emphasis on the pathological, by giving itself as its unique subject the supposedly average man.

⁶ Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and the Marquis de Sade, with different indications of it, are the creators of the propagandist novel.

In this way it is possible to explain the extraordinary number of "innocents" who appear in this universe. The simpleton is the ideal subject for such an enterprise since he can only be defined and completely defined—by his behavior. He is the symbol of the despairing world in which wretched automatons live in a machine-ridden universe, which American novelists have presented as a heart-rending but sterile protest.

As for Proust, his contribution has been to create, from an obstinate contemplation of reality, a closed world that belonged only to him and that indicated his victory over the transitoriness of things and over death. But he uses absolutely the opposite means. He upholds, above everything, by a deliberate choice, a careful selection of unique experience, which the writer chooses from the most secret recesses of his past. Immense empty spaces are thus discarded from life because they have left no trace in the memory. If the American novel is the novel of men without memory, the world of Proust is nothing but memory.

It is concerned only with the most difficult and most exacting of memories, the memory that rejects the dispersion of the actual world and derives, from the trace of a lingering perfume, the secret of a new and ancient universe. Proust chooses the interior life and, of the interior life, that which is more interior than life itself in preference to what is forgotten in the world of reality in other words, the purely mechanical and blind aspects of the world. But by his rejection of reality he does not deny reality. He does not commit the error, which would counterbalance the error of American fiction, of suppressing the mechanical. He unites, on the contrary, into a superior form of unity, the memory of the past and the immediate sensation, the twisted foot and the happy days of times past.

It is difficult to return to the places of one's early happiness. The young girls in the flower of their youth still laugh and chatter on the seashore, but he who watches them gradually loses his right to love them, just as those he has loved lose the power to be loved. This melancholy is the melancholy of Proust. It was powerful enough in him to cause a violent rejection of all existence. But his passion for faces and for the light attached him at the same time to life. He never admitted that the happy days of his youth were lost forever. He undertook the task of re-creating them and of demonstrating, in the face of death, that the past could be regained at the end of time in the form of an imperishable present, both truer and richer than it was at the beginning.

The psychological analysis of Remembrance of Things Past is nothing but a potent means to an end. The real greatness of Proust lies in having written Time Regained, which resembles the world of dispersion and which gives it a meaning on the very level of integration. His difficult victory, on the eve of his

death, is to have been able to extract from the incessant flight of forms, by means of memory and intelligence alone, the tentative trembling symbols of human unity. The most definite challenge that a work of this kind can give to creation is to present itself as an entirety, as a closed and unified world. This defines an unrepentant work of art.

It has been said that the world of Proust was a world without a god. If that is true, it is not because God is never spoken of, but because the ambition of this world is to be absolute perfection and to give to eternity the aspect of man. *Time Regained*, at least in its aspirations, is eternity without God. Proust's work, in this regard, appears to be one of the most ambitious and most significant of man's enterprises against his mortal condition.

He has demonstrated that the art of the novel can reconstruct creation itself, in the form that it is imposed on us and in the form in which we reject it. In one of its aspects, at least, this art consists in choosing the creature in preference to his creator. But still more profoundly, it is allied to the beauty of the world or of its inhabitants against the powers of death and oblivion. It is in this way that his rebellion is creative.

The end