

The Poets' Rebellion, Albert Camus

If metaphysical rebellion refuses to assent and restricts itself to absolute negation, it condemns itself to passive acceptance. If it prostrates itself in adoration of what exists and renounces its right to dispute any part of reality, it is sooner or later compelled to act. Ivan Kara-mazov— who represents non-interference, but in a dolorous aspect—stands halfway between the two positions.

Rebel poetry, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, constantly oscillated between these two extremes: between literature and the will to power, between the irrational and the rational, the desperate dream and ruthless action. The rebel poets—above all, the surrealists—light the way that leads from passive acceptance to action, along a spectacular shortcut.

Hawthorne was able to say of Melville that, as an unbeliever, he was extremely uneasy in his unbelief. It can equally well be said of the poets who rushed to assault the heavens, with the intent of turning everything upside down, that by so doing they affirmed their desperate nostalgia for order. As an ultimate contradiction, they wanted to extract reason from unreason and to systematize the irrational. These heirs of romanticism claimed to make poetry exemplary and to find, in its most harrowing aspects, the real way of life.

They defied blasphemy and transformed poetry into experience and into a means of action. Until their time those who claimed to influence men and events, at least in the Occident, did so in the name of rational rules. On the contrary, surrealism, after Rimbaud, wanted to find constructive rules in insanity and destruction. Rimbaud, through his work and only through his work, pointed out the path, but with the blinding, momentary illumination of a flash of lightning.

Surrealism excavated this path and codified its discoveries. By its excesses as well as by its retreats, it gave the last and most magnificent expression to a practical theory of irrational rebellion at the very same time when, on another path, rebellious thought was founding the cult of absolute reason. Lautreamont and Rimbaud—its sources of inspiration—demonstrate by what stages the irrational desire to accept appearances can lead the rebel to adopt courses of action completely destructive to freedom.

Lautreamont and Banality

Lautreamont demonstrates that the rebel dissimulates the desire to accept appearance behind the desire for banality. In either case, whether he abases or vaunts himself, the rebel wants to be other than he is, even when he is prepared to be recognized for what he really is. The blasphemies and the conformity of Lautreamont illustrate this unfortunate contradiction, which is resolved in his case in the desire to be nothing at all. Far from being a recantation, as is generally supposed, the same passion for annihilation explains Maldoror's invocation of the primeval night and the laborious banalities of the Poesies.

Lautreamont makes us understand that rebellion is adolescent. Our most effective terrorists, whether they are armed with bombs or with poetry, hardly escape from infancy. The Songs of Maldoror are the works of a highly talented schoolboy; their pathos lies precisely in the contradictions of a child's mind ranged against creation and against itself. Like the Rimbaud of the Illuminations, beating against the confines of the world, the poet chooses the apocalypse and destruction rather than accept the impossible principles that make him what he is in a world such as it is.

"I offer myself to defend mankind," says Lautreamont, without wishing to be ingenuous. Is Maldoror, then, the angel of pity? In a certain sense he is, in that he pities himself. Why? That remains to be seen. But pity deceived, outraged, inadmissible, and unadmitted will lead him to strange extremities. Maldoror, in his own words, received life like a wound and forbade suicide to heal the scar (sic). Like Rimbaud he is the one who suffers and who rebelled;

each, being strangely reluctant to say that he is rebelling against what he is, gives the rebel's eternal alibi: love of mankind.

The man who offers himself to defend mankind at the same time writes: "Show me one man who is good." This perpetual vacillation is part of nihilist rebellion. We rebel against the injustice done to ourselves and to mankind. But in the moment of lucidity, when we simultaneously perceive the legitimacy of this rebellion and its futility, the frenzy of negation is extended to the very thing that we claimed to be defending.

Not being able to atone for injustice by the elevation of justice, we choose to submerge it in an even greater injustice, which is finally confounded with annihilation. "The evil you have done me is too great, too great the evil I have done you, for it to be involuntary." In order not to be overcome with self-hatred, one's innocence must be proclaimed, an impossibly bold step for one man alone, for self-knowledge will prevent him. But at least one can declare that everyone is innocent, though they may be treated as guilty. God is then the criminal.

From the romantics to Lautreamont, there is, therefore, no real progress, except in style. Lautreamont resuscitates, once again, with a few improvements, the figure of the God of Abraham and the image of the Luciferian rebel. He places God "on a throne built of excrement, human and golden," on which sits, "with imbecile pride, his body covered with a shroud made of unwashed sheets, he who styles himself the Creator."

"The horrible Eternal One with the features of a viper," "the crafty bandit" who can be seen "stoking the fires in which young and old perish," rolls drunkenly in the gutter, or seeks base pleasures in the brothel. God is not dead, he has fallen. Face to face with the fallen deity, Maldoror appears as a conventional cavalier in a black cloak. He is the Accursed. "Eyes must not witness the hideous aspect which the Supreme Being, with a smile of intense hatred, has granted me."

He has forsworn everything— "father, mother, Providence, love, ideals—so as to think no longer of anything else but himself." Racked with pride, this hero has all the illusions of the metaphysical dandy: "A face that is more than human, sad with the sadness of the universe, beautiful as an act of suicide." Like the romantic rebel, Maldoror, despairing of divine justice, will take the side of evil. To cause suffering and, in causing it, to suffer, that is his lot. The Songs are veritable litanies of evil.

At this point mankind is no longer even defended. On the contrary, "to attack that wild beast, man, with every possible weapon, and to attack the creator . . ." that is the intention announced by the Songs. Overwhelmed at the thought of having God as an enemy, intoxicated with the solitude experienced by great criminals ("I alone against humanity"), Maldoror goes to war against creation and its author. The Songs exalt "the sanctity of crime," announce an increasing series of "glorious crimes," and stanza 20 of Song II even inaugurates a veritable pedagogy of crime and violence.

Such a burning ardor is, at this period, merely conventional. It costs nothing. Lautreamont's real originality lies elsewhere.¹ The romantics maintained with the greatest care the fatal opposition between human solitude and divine indifference the literary expressions of this solitude being the isolated castle and the dandy. But Lautreamont's work deals with a more profound drama. It is quite apparent that he found this solitude insupportable and that, ranged against creation, he wished to destroy its limits.

¹ It accounts for the difference between Song I, published separately, which is Byronic in a rather banal way, and the other Songs, which resound with a monstrous rhetoric.

Far from wanting to fortify the reign of humanity with crenelated towers, he

wishes to merge it with all other reigns. He brought back creation to the shores of the primeval seas where morality, as well as every other problem, loses all meaning—including the problem, which he considers so terrifying, of the immortality of the soul.

He had no desire to create a spectacular image of the rebel, or of the dandy, opposed to creation, but to mingle mankind and the world together in the same general destruction. He attacked the very frontier that separates mankind from the universe.

Total freedom, the freedom of crime in particular, supposes the destruction of human frontiers. It is not enough to condemn oneself and all mankind to execration. The reign of mankind must still be brought back to the level of the reign of the instinct. We find in Lautreamont this refusal to recognize rational consciousness, this return to the elementary which is one of the marks of a civilization in revolt against itself. It is no longer a question of recognizing appearances, by making a determined and conscious effort, but of no longer existing at all on the conscious level.

All the creatures that appear in the Songs are amphibious, because Maldoror rejects the earth and its limitations. The flora is composed of algae and seaweed. Maldoror's castle is built on the waters. His native land is the timeless sea. The sea—a double symbol—is simultaneously the place of annihilation and of reconciliation.

It quenches, in its own way, the thirst of souls condemned to scorn themselves and others, and the thirst for oblivion. Thus the Songs replace the Metamorphoses, and the timeless smile is replaced by the laughter of a mouth slashed with a razor, by the image of a gnashing, frantic, travesty of humor.

This bestiary cannot contain all the meanings that have been given to it, but undoubtedly it discloses a desire for annihilation which has its origins in the very darkest places of rebellion. The "stultify yourselves" of Pascal takes on a literal sense with Lautreamont. Apparently he could not bear the cold and implacable clarity one must endure in order to live. "My subjectivity and one creator that is too much for one brain."

And so he chose to reduce life, and his work, to the flash of a cuttlefish's fin in the midst of its cloud of ink. The beautiful passage where Maldoror couples with a female shark on the high seas "in a long, chaste, and frightful copulation" above all, the significant passage in which Maldoror, transformed into an octopus, attacks the Creator—are clear expressions of an escape beyond the frontiers of existence and of a convulsive attack on the laws of nature.

Those who see themselves banished from the harmonious fatherland where justice and passion finally strike an even balance still prefer, to solitude, the barren kingdoms where words have no more meaning and where force and the instincts of blind creatures reign. This challenge is, at the same time, a mortification. The battle with the angel, in Song II, ends in the defeat and putrefaction of the angel. Heaven and earth are then brought back and intermingled in the liquid chasms of primordial life.

Thus the man-shark of the Songs "only acquired the new change in the extremities of his arms and legs as an expiatory punishment for some unknown crime." There is, in fact, a crime, or the illusion of a crime (is it homosexuality?) in Maldoror's virtually unknown life. No reader of the Songs can avoid the idea that this book is in need of a Stavrogin's Confession.

But there is no confession and we find in the Poesies a redoubling of that mysterious desire for expiation. The spirit appropriate to certain forms of rebellion which consists, as we shall see, in re-establishing reason at the end of the irrational adventure, of rediscovering order by means of disorder and of voluntarily loading oneself down with chains still heavier than those from which release was sought, is described in this book with such a desire for

simplification and with such cynicism that this change of attitude must definitely have a meaning.

The Songs, which exalted absolute negation, are followed by a theory of absolute assent, and uncompromising rebellion is succeeded by complete conformity all this with total lucidity. The Poesies, in fact, give us the best explanation of the Songs. "Despair, fed by the prejudices of hallucination, imper-turbably leads literature to the mass abrogation of laws both social and divine, and to theoretical and practical wickedness."

The Poesies also denounce "the culpability of a writer who rolls on the slopes of the void and pours scorn on himself with cries of joy." But they prescribe no other remedy for this evil than metaphysical conformity: "Since the poetry of doubt arrives, in this way, at such a point of theoretical wickedness and mournful despair, it is poetry that is radically false; for the simple reason that it discusses principles, and principles should not be discussed" (letter to Darasse).

In short, his reasoning recapitulates the morality of a choirboy or of an infantry manual. But conformity can be passionate, and thereby out of the ordinary. When the victory of the malevolent eagle over the dragon hope has been proclaimed, Maldoror can still obstinately repeat that the burden of his song is nothing but hope, and can write: "With my voice and with the solemnity of the days of my glory, I recall you, O blessed Hope, to my deserted dwelling" he must still try to convince.

To console humanity, to treat it as a brother, to return to Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, Jesus Christ, "moralists who wandered through villages, dying of hunger" (which is of doubtful historical accuracy), are still the projects of despair. Thus virtue and an ordered life have a nostalgic appeal in the midst of vice. For Lautreamont refuses to pray, and Christ for him is only a moralist.

What he proposes, or rather what he proposes to himself, is agnosticism and the fulfillment of duty. Such a sound program, unhappily, supposes surrender, the calm of evening, a heart untouched by bitterness, and untroubled contemplation. Lautreamont rebels when he suddenly writes: "I know no other grace but that of being born."

But one can sense his clenched teeth when he adds: "An impartial mind finds that enough." But no mind is impartial when confronted with life and death. With Lautreamont, the rebel flees to the desert. But this desert of conformity is as dreary as Rimbaud's Harrar. The taste for the absolute and the frenzy of annihilation sterilize him again. Just as Maldoror wanted total rebellion, Lautreamont, for the same reasons, demands absolute banality.

The exclamation of awareness which he tried to drown in the primeval seas, to confuse with the howl of the beast, which at another moment he tried to smother in the adoration of mathematics, he now wants to stifle by applying a dismal conformity.

The rebel now tries to turn a deaf ear to the call that urges him toward the being who lies at the heart of his rebellion. The important thing is to exist no longer—either by refusing to be anything at all or by accepting to be no matter what. In either case it is a purely artificial convention. Banality, too, is an attitude.

Conformity is one of the nihilistic temptations of rebellion which dominate a large part of our intellectual history. It demonstrates how the rebel who takes to action is tempted to succumb, if he forgets his origins, to the most absolute conformity. And so it explains the twentieth century. Lautreamont, who is usually hailed as the bard of pure rebellion, on the contrary proclaims the advent of the taste for intellectual servitude which flourishes in the contemporary world.

The Poesies are only a preface to a "future work" of which we can only surmise the contents and which was to have been the ideal end-result of literary rebellion. But this book is being written today, despite Lautreamont, in millions of copies, by bureaucratic order. Of course, genius cannot be separated from banality.

But it is not a question of the banality of others the banality that we vainly try to capture and which itself captures the creative writer, where necessary, with the help of the censors. For the creative writer it is a question of his own form of banality, which must be completely created. Every genius is at once extraordinary and banal. He is nothing if he is only one or the other. We must remember this when thinking of rebellion. It has its dandies and its menials, but it does not recognize its legitimate sons.

Surrealism and Revolution

This is not the place to deal at length with Rimbaud. Everything that can be said about him and even more, unfortunately—has already been said. It is worth pointing out, however, for it concerns our subject, that only in his work was Rimbaud the poet of rebellion. His life, far from justifying the myth it created, only illustrates (an objective perusal of the letters from Harrar suffices to prove this) the fact that he surrendered to the worst form of nihilism imaginable.

Rimbaud has been deified for renouncing his genius, as if his renunciation implied superhuman virtue. It must be pointed out, however, despite the fact that by doing so we disqualify the alibis of our contemporaries, that genius alone and not the renunciation of genius implies virtue. Rimbaud's greatness does not lie in the first poems from Charleville nor in his trading at Harrar.

It shines forth at the moment when, in giving the most peculiarly appropriate expression to rebellion that it has ever received, he simultaneously proclaims his triumph and his agony, his conception of a life beyond the confines of this world and the inescapability of the world, the yearning for the unattainable and reality brutally determined on restraint, the rejection of morality and the irresistible compulsion to duty.

At the moment when he carries in his breast both illumination and the darkness of hell, when he hails and insults beauty, and creates, from an insoluble conflict, the intricate counterpoint of an exquisite song, he is the poet of rebellion the greatest of all. The order in which he wrote his two great works is of no importance.

In any case there was very little time between the conception of the two books, and any artist knows, with the certainty born of experience, that Rimbaud simultaneously carried the seeds of the Season in Hell (*Une Saison en Enfer*) and the Illuminations within him. Though he wrote them one after the other, there is no doubt that he experienced the suffering of both of them at the same time. This contradiction, which killed him, was the real source of his genius.

But where, then, is the virtue of someone who refuses to face the contradiction and betrays his own genius before having drunk it to the last bitter drop? Rimbaud's silence is not a new method of rebelling; at least, we can no longer say so after the publication of the Harrar letters. His metamorphosis is undoubtedly mysterious. But there is also a mystery attached to the banality achieved by brilliant young girls whom marriage transforms into adding or knitting machines.

The myth woven around Rimbaud supposes and affirms that nothing was possible after the Season in Hell. But what is impossible for the supremely gifted poet or for the inexhaustibly creative writer? How can we imagine anything to follow *Moby Dick*, *The Trial*, *Zarathustra*, *The Possessed*? Nevertheless, they were followed by great works, which instruct, implement, and bear witness to what is finest in the writer, and which only come to an end at his death. Who can fail

to regret the work that would have been greater than the Season in Hell and of which we have been deprived by Rimbaud's abdication?

Can Abyssinia be considered as a monastery; is it Christ who shut Rimbaud's mouth? Such a Christ would be the kind of man who nowadays lords it over the cashier's desk in a bank, to judge by the letters in which the unhappy poet talks only about his money which he wants to see "wisely invested" and "bringing in regular dividends." 2 The man who exulted under torture, who hurled curses at God and at beauty, who hardened himself in the harsh atmosphere of crime, now only wants to marry someone "with a future."

The mage, the seer, the convict who lived perpetually in the shadow of the penal colony, the man-king on a godless earth, always carried seventeen pounds of gold in a belt worn uncomfortably round his stomach, which he complained gave him dysentery. Is this the mythical hero, worshipped by so many young men who, though they do not spit in the face of the world, would die of shame at the mere idea of such a belt? To maintain the myth, those decisive letters must be ignored.

2 It is only fair to note that the tone of these letters might be explained by the people to whom they are written. But they do not suggest that Rimbaud is making a great effort to lie. Not one word betrays the Rimbaud of former times.

It is easy to see why they have been so little commented upon. They are a sacrilege, as truth sometimes is. A great and praiseworthy poet, the greatest of his time, a dazzling oracle—Rimbaud is all of these things. But he is not the man-god, the burning inspiration, the monk of poetry as he is often presented. The man only recaptured his greatness in the hospital bed in which, at the hour of his painful end, even his mediocrity becomes moving: "How unlucky I am, how very unlucky I am . . . and I've money on me that I can't even keep an eye on!" The defiant cry of those last wretched moments: "No, no, now I rebel against death!" happily restores Rimbaud to that part of common human experience which involuntarily coincides with greatness.

The young Rimbaud comes to life again on the brink of the abyss and with him revives the rebellion of the times when his imprecations against life were only expressions of despair at the thought of death. It is at this point that the bourgeois trader once more rejoins the tortured adolescent whom we so much admired. He recaptures his youth in the terror and bitter pain finally experienced by those who do not know how to attain happiness. Only at this point does his passion, and with it his truth, begin.

Moreover, Harrar was actually foretold in his work, but in the form of his final abdication. "And best of all, a drunken sleep on the beach." The fury of annihilation, appropriate to every rebel, then assumes its most common form. The apocalypse of crime—as conceived by Rimbaud in the person of the prince who insatiably slaughters his subjects and endless licentiousness are rebellious themes that will be taken up again by the surrealists.

But finally, even with Rimbaud, nihilist dejection prevailed; the struggle, the crime itself, proved too exacting for his exhausted mind. The seer who drank, if we may venture to say so, in order not to forget ended by finding in drunkenness the heavy sleep so well known to our contemporaries. One can sleep on the beach, or at Aden.

And one consents, no longer actively, but passively, to accept the order of the world, even if the order is degrading. Rimbaud's silence is also a preparation for the silence of authority, which hovers over minds resigned to everything save to the necessity of putting up a fight.

Rimbaud's great intellect, suddenly subordinated to money, proclaims the advent of other demands, which are at first excessive and which will later be put to use by the police. To be nothing—that is the cry of the mind exhausted by its own rebellion. This leads to the problem of suicide of the mind, which, after

all, is less respectable than the surrealists' suicide, and more fraught with consequences. Surrealism itself, coming at the end of this great act of rebellion, is only significant because it attempted to perpetuate that aspect of Rimbaud which alone evokes our sympathy.

Deriving the rules for a rebellious asceticism from the letter about the seer and the system it implies, he illustrates the struggle between the will to be and the desire for annihilation, between the yes and the no, which we have discovered again and again at every stage of rebellion. For all these reasons, rather than repeat the, endless commentaries that surround Rimbaud's work, it seemed preferable to rediscover him and to follow him among his successors.

Absolute rebellion, total insubordination, sabotage on principle, the humor and cult of the absurd—such is the nature of surrealism, which defines itself, in its primary intent, as the incessant examination of all values. The refusal to draw any conclusions is flat, decisive, and provocative. "We are specialists in rebellion." Surrealism, which, according to Aragon, is a machine for capsizing the mind, was first conjured up by the Dadaist movement, whose romantic origins and anemic dandyism must be noted.³ Non-signification and contradiction are therefore cultivated for their own sakes. "The real Dadaists are against Dada.

³ Jarry, one of the masters of Dadaism, is the last incarnation, peculiar rather than brilliant, of the metaphysical dandy.

Everyone is a director of Dada." Or again: "What is good? What is ugly? What is great, strong, weak . . . ? Don't know! Don't know!" These parlor nihilists were obviously threatened with having to act as slaves to the strictest orthodoxies. But there is something more in surrealism than standard nonconformism, the legacy left by Rimbaud, which, in fact, Breton recapitulates as follows: "Must we abandon all hope at that particular point?"

An urgent appeal to absent life is reinforced by a total rejection of the present world, as Breton's arrogant statement indicates: "Incapable of accepting the fate assigned to me, my highest perceptions outraged by this denial of justice, I refrain from adapting my existence to the ridiculous conditions of existence here below." The mind, according to Breton, can find no point of rest either in this life or beyond it.

Surrealism wants to find a solution to this endless anxiety. It is "a cry of the mind which turns against itself and finally takes the desperate decision to throw off its bonds." It protests against death and "the laughable duration" of a precarious condition. Thus surrealism places itself at the mercy of impatience.

It exists in a condition of wounded frenzy: at once inflexible and self-righteous, with the consequent implication of a moral philosophy. Surrealism, the gospel of chaos, found itself compelled, from its very inception, to create an order. But at first it only dreamed of destruction—by poetry, to begin with—on the plane of imprecation, and later by the use of actual weapons. The trial of the real world has become, by logical development, the trial of creation.

Surrealist irreligion is methodical and rational. At first it established itself on the idea of the absolute nonculpability of man, to whom one should render "all the power that he has been capable of putting into the word God."

As in every history of rebellion, this idea of absolute non-culpability, springing from despair, was little by little transformed into a mania for punishment. The surrealists, while simultaneously exalting human innocence, believed that they could exalt murder and suicide. They spoke of suicide as a solution and Crevel, who considered this solution "the most probable, just, and definitive," killed himself, as did Rigaut and Vache.

Later Aragon was to condemn the "babblers about suicide." Nevertheless the fact remains that to extol annihilation, without personal involvement, is not a very

honorable course. On this point surrealism has retained, from the "litterature" it despised, the most facile excuses and has justified Ri-gaud's staggering remark: "You are all poets, and I myself am on the side of death."

Surrealism did not rest there. It chose as its hero Violette Noziere or the anonymous common-law criminal, affirming in this way, in the face of crime, the innocence of man. But it also was rash enough to say and this is the statement that Andre Breton must have regretted ever since 1933—that the simplest surrealist act consisted in going out into the street, revolver in hand, and shooting at random into the crowd.

Whoever refuses to recognize any other determining factor apart from the individual and his desires, any priority other than that of the unconscious, actually succeeds in rebelling simultaneously against society and against reason. The theory of the gratuitous act is the culmination of the demand for absolute freedom.

What does it matter if this freedom ends by being embodied in the solitude defined by Jarry: "When I'll have collected all the ready cash, in the world, I'll kill everybody and go away." The essential thing is that every obstacle should be denied and that the irrational should be triumphant.

What, in fact, does this apology for murder signify if not that, in a world without meaning and without honor, only the desire for existence, in all its forms, is legitimate? The instinctive joy of being alive, the stimulus of the unconscious, the cry of the irrational, are the only pure truths that must be professed. Everything that stands in the way of desire—principally society must therefore be mercilessly destroyed.

Now we can understand Andre Breton's remark about Sade: "Certainly man no longer consents to unite with nature except in crime; it remains to be seen if this is not one of the wildest, the most incontestable, ways of loving." It is easy to see that he is talking of love without an object, which is love as experienced by people who are torn asunder.

But this empty, avid love, this insane desire for possession, is precisely the love that society inevitably thwarts. That is why Breton, who still bears the stigma of his declarations, was able to sing the praises of treason and declare (as the surrealists have tried to prove) that violence is the only adequate mode of expression.

But society is not only composed of individuals. It is also an institution. Too well-mannered to kill everybody, the surrealists, by the very logic of their attitude, came to consider that, in order to liberate desire, society must first be overthrown. They chose to serve the revolutionary movement of their times.

From Walpole and Sade—with an inevitability that comprises the subject of this book—surrealists passed on to Helvetius and Marx. But it is obvious that it is not the study of Marxism that led them to revolution.⁴ Quite the contrary: surrealism is involved in an incessant effort to reconcile, with Marxism, the inevitable conclusions that led it to revolution. We can say, without being paradoxical, that the surrealists arrived at Marxism on account of what, today, they most detest in Marx.

⁴ The Communists who joined the party as a result of having studied Marx can be counted on the fingers of one hand. They are first converted and then they read the Scriptures.

Knowing the basis and the nobility of the motives that compelled him, particularly when one has shared the same lacerating experiences, one hesitates to remind Andre Breton that his movement implied the establishment of "ruthless authority" and of dictatorship, of political fanaticism, the refusal of free discussion, and the necessity of the death penalty.

The peculiar vocabulary of that period is also astonishing ("sabotage," "informer," etc.) in that it is the vocabulary of a police-dominated revolution. But these frenetics wanted "any sort of revolution," no matter what as long as it rescued them from the world of shopkeepers and compromise in which they were forced to live.

In that they could not have the best, they still preferred the worst. In that respect they were nihilists. They were not aware of the fact that those among them who were, in the future, to remain faithful to Marxism were faithful at the same time to their initial nihilism. The real destruction of language, which the surrealists so obstinately wanted, does not lie in incoherence or automatism. It lies in the word order. It was pointless for Aragon to begin with a denunciation of the "shameful pragmatic attitude," for in that attitude he finally found total liberation from morality, even if that liberation coincided with another form of servitude.

The surrealist who meditated most profoundly about this problem, Pierre Naville, in trying to find the denominator common to revolutionary action and surrealist action, localized it, with considerable penetration, in pessimism, meaning in "the intention of accompanying man to his downfall and of overlooking nothing that could ensure that his perdition might be useful." This mixture of Machiavellianism and Augustinism in fact explains twentieth-century rebellion; no more audacious expression can be given to the nihilism of the times.

The renegades of surrealism were faithful to most of the principles of nihilism. In a certain way, they wanted to die. If Andre Breton and a few others finally broke with Marxism, it was because there was something in them beyond nihilism, a second loyalty to what is purest in the origins of rebellion: they did not want to die.

Certainly, the surrealists wanted to profess materialism. "We are pleased to recognize as one of the prime causes of the mutiny on board the battleship Potemkin that terrible piece of meat." But there is not with them, as with the Marxists, a feeling of friendship, even intellectual, for that piece of meat. Putrid meat typifies only the real world, which in fact gives birth to revolt, but against itself. It explains nothing, even though it justifies everything.

Revolution, for the surrealists, was not an end to be realized day by day, in action, but an absolute and consolatory myth. It was "the real life, like love," of which Eluard spoke, who at that time had no idea that his friend Kalandra would die of that sort of life. They wanted the "communism of genius," not the other form of Communism. These peculiar Marxists declared themselves in rebellion against history and extolled the heroic individual. "History is governed by laws, which are conditioned by the cowardice of individuals." Andre Breton wanted revolution and love together and they are incompatible.

Revolution consists in loving a man who does not yet exist. But he who loves a living being, if he really loves, can only consent to die for the sake of the being he loves. In reality, revolution for Andre Breton was only a particular aspect of rebellion, while for Marxists and, in general, for all political persuasions, only the contrary is true. Breton was not trying to create, by action, the promised land that was supposed to crown history. One of the fundamental theses of surrealism is, in fact, that there is no salvation.

The advantage of revolution was not that it gives mankind happiness, "abominable material comfort." On the contrary, according to Breton, it should purify and illuminate man's tragic condition. World revolution and the terrible sacrifices it implies would only bring one advantage: "preventing the completely artificial precariousness of the social condition from screening the real precariousness of the human condition." Quite simply, for Breton, this form of progress was excessive. One might as well say that revolution should be enrolled in the service of the inner asceticism by which individual men can transfigure reality into the supernatural, "the brilliant revenge of man's imagination."

With Andre Breton, the supernatural holds the same place as the rational does with Hegel. Thus it would be impossible to imagine a more complete antithesis to the political philosophy of Marxism. The lengthy hesitations of those whom Artaud called the Amiels of revolution are easily explained. The surrealists were more different from Marx than were reactionaries like Joseph de Maistre, for example.

The reactionaries made use of the tragedy of existence to reject revolution—in other words, to preserve a historical situation. The Marxists made use of it to justify revolution—in other words, to create another historical situation. Both make use of the human tragedy to further their pragmatic ends. But Breton made use of revolution to consummate the tragedy and, in spite of the title of his magazine, made use of revolution to further the surrealist adventure.

Finally, the definitive rupture is explained if one considers that Marxism insisted on the submission of the irrational, while the surrealists rose to defend irrationality to the death. Marxism tended toward the conquest of totality, and surrealism, like all spiritual experiences, tended toward unity. Totality can demand the submission of the irrational, if rationalism suffices to conquer the world. But the desire for unity is more demanding. It does not suffice that everything should be rational. It wants, above all, the rational and the irrational to be reconciled on the same level. There is no unity that supposes any form of mutilation.

For Andre Breton, totality could be only a stage, a necessary stage perhaps, but certainly inadequate, on the way that leads to unity. Here we find once again the theme of All or Nothing. Surrealism tends toward universality, and the curious but profound reproach that Breton makes to Marx consists in saying quite justifiably that the latter is not universal.

The surrealists wanted to reconcile Marx's "let us transform the world" with Rimbaud's "let us change life." But the first leads to the conquest of the totality of the world and the second to the conquest of the unity of life. Paradoxically, every form of totality is restrictive. In the end, the two formulas succeeded in splitting the surrealist group.

By choosing Rimbaud, Breton demonstrated that surrealism was not concerned with action, but with asceticism and spiritual experience. He again gave first place to what composed the profound originality of his movement: the restoration of the sacred and the conquest of unity, which make surrealism so invaluable for a consideration of the problem of rebellion. The more he elaborated on this original concept, the more irreparably he separated himself from his political companions, and at the same time from some of his first manifestoes.

Andre Breton never, actually, wavered in his support of surrealism the fusion of a dream and of reality, the sublimation of the old contradiction between the ideal and the real. We know the surrealist solution: concrete irrationality, objective risk. Poetry is the conquest, the only possible conquest, of the "supreme position." "A certain position of the mind from where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future . . . cease to be perceived in a contradictory sense." What is this supreme position that should mark the "colossal abortion of the Hegelian system"? It is the search for the summit-abys, familiar to the mystics.

Actually, it is the mysticism without God which demonstrates and quenches the rebel's thirst for the absolute. The essential enemy of surrealism is rationalism. Breton's method, moreover, presents the peculiar spectacle of a form of Occidental thought in which the principle of analogy is continually favored to the detriment of the principles of identity and contradiction. More precisely, it is a question of dissolving contradictions in the fires of love and desire and of demolishing the walls of death.

Magic rites, primitive or naive civilizations, alchemy, the language of flowers, fire, or sleepless nights, are so many miraculous stages on the way to unity and

the philosophers' stone. If surrealism did not change the world, it furnished it with a few strange myths which partly justified Nietzsche's announcement of the return of the Greeks. Only partly, because he was referring to unenlightened Greece, the Greece of mysteries and dark gods.

Finally, just as Nietzsche's experience culminated in the acceptance of the light of day, surrealist experience culminates in the exaltation of the darkness of night, the agonized and obstinate cult of the tempest. Breton, according to his own statements, understood that, despite everything, life was a gift. But his compliance could never shed the full light of day, the light that all of us need. "There is too much of the north in me," he said, "for me to be a man who complies entirely."

He nevertheless often diminished, to his own detriment, the importance of negation and advanced the positive claims of rebellion. He chose severity rather than silence and retained only the "demand for morality," which, according to Bataille, first gave life to surrealism: "To substitute a new morality for current morality, which is the cause of all our evils." Of course he did not succeed (nor has anybody in our time) in the attempt to found a new morality.

But he never despaired of being able to do so. Confronted with the horror of a period in which man, whom he wanted to magnify, has been persistently degraded in the name of certain principles that surrealism adopted, Breton felt constrained to propose, provisionally, a return to traditional morality. That represents a hesitation perhaps. But it is the hesitation of nihilism and the real progress of rebellion.

After all, when he could not give himself the morality and the values of whose necessity he was clearly aware, we know very well that Breton chose love. In the general meanness of his times— and this cannot be forgotten—he is the only person who wrote profoundly above love. Love is the entranced morality that served this exile as a native land.

Of course, a dimension is still missing here. Surrealism, in that it is neither politics nor religion, is perhaps only an unbearable form of wisdom. But it is also the absolute proof that there is no comfortable form of wisdom: "We want, we shall have, the hereafter in our lifetime," Breton has admirably exclaimed. While reason embarks on action and sets its armies marching on the world, the splendid night in which Breton delights announces dawns that have not yet broken, and, as well, the advent of the poet of our renaissance: Rene Char.

The end