

The Sons of Cain, Albert Camus

Metaphysical rebellion, in the real sense of the term, does not appear, in coherent form, in the history of ideas until the end of the eighteenth century—when modern times begin to the accompaniment of the crash of falling ramparts.

But from then on, its consequences develop uninterruptedly and it is no exaggeration to say that they have shaped the history of our times. Does this mean that metaphysical rebellion had no significance previous to this date? In any event, its origins must belong to the remote past, in that we like to believe that we live in Promethean times. But is this really a Promethean age?

The first mythologies describe Prometheus as an eternal martyr, chained to a pillar, at the ends of the earth, condemned forever because he refuses to ask forgiveness. Aeschylus adds still further to his stature, endows him with lucidity ("no misfortune can fall upon me that I have not myself already foreseen"), makes him cry out his hatred of all the gods, and, plunging him into "a stormy sea of mortal despair," finally abandons him to thunder and lightning: "Ah! see the injustice I endure!"

It cannot be said, therefore, that the ancients were unaware of metaphysical rebellion. Long before Satan, they created a touching and noble image of the Rebel and gave us the most perfect myth of the intelligence in revolt.

The inexhaustible genius of the Greeks, which gave such a prominent place to myths of unity and simplicity, was still able to formulate the concept of insurrection. Beyond a doubt, certain characteristics of the Promethean myth still survive in the history of rebellion as we are living it: the fight against death ("I have delivered men from being obsessed by death"), Messianism ("I have instilled blind hopes into men's minds"), philanthropy ("Enemy of Zeus ... for having loved mankind too much").

But we must not forget that Prometheus the Fire-bringer, the last drama of Aeschylus' trilogy, proclaimed the reign of the pardoned rebel. The Greeks are never vindictive. In their most audacious flights they always remain faithful to the idea of moderation, a concept they deified. Their rebel does not range himself against all creation, but against Zeus, who is never anything more than one god among many and who himself was mortal. Prometheus himself is a demigod. It is a question of settling a particular account, of a dispute about what is good, and not of a universal struggle between good and evil.

The ancients, even though they believed in destiny, believed primarily in nature, in which they participated wholeheartedly. To rebel against nature amounted to rebelling against oneself. It was butting one's head against a wall. Therefore the only coherent act of rebellion was to commit suicide.

Destiny, for the Greeks, was a blind force to which one submitted, just as one submitted to the forces of nature. The acme of excess to the Greek mind was to beat the sea with rodsan act of insanity worthy only of barbarians. Of course, the Greeks described excess, since it exists, but they gave it its proper place and, by doing so, also defined its limits.

Achilles' defiance after the death of Patroclus, the imprecations of the Greek tragic heroes cursing their fate, do not imply complete condemnation. Oedipus knows that he is not innocent. He is guilty in spite of himself; he is also part of destiny. He complains, but he says nothing irreparable. Antigone rebels, but she does so in the name of tradition, in order that her brothers may find rest in the tomb and that the appropriate rites may be observed. In her case, rebellion is, in one sense, reactionary.

The Greek mind has two aspects and in its meditations almost always re echoes, as counterpoint to its most tragic melodies, the eternal words of Oedipus, who, blind and desperate, recognizes that all is for the best.

Affirmation counterbalances negation. Even when Plato anticipates, with Callicles, the most common type of Nietzschean, even when the latter exclaims: "But when a man appears who has the necessary character . . . he will escape, he will trample on our formulas, our magic spells, our incantations, and the laws, which are all, without exception, contrary to nature. Our slave has rebelled and has shown himself to be the master"—even then, though he rejects law, he speaks in the name of nature.

Metaphysical rebellion presupposes a simplified view of creation—which was inconceivable to the Greeks. In their minds, there were not gods on one side and men on the other, but a series of stages leading from one to the other.

The idea of innocence opposed to guilt, the concept of all of history summed up in the struggle between good and evil, was foreign to them. In their universe there were more mistakes than crimes, and the only definitive crime was excess.

In a world entirely dominated by history, which ours threatens to become, there are no longer any mistakes, but only crimes, of which the greatest is moderation. This explains the curious mixture of ferocity and forbearance which we find in Greek mythology.

The Greeks never made the human mind into an armed camp, and in this respect we are inferior to them. Rebellion, after all, can only be imagined in terms of opposition to someone. The only thing that gives meaning to human protest is the idea of a personal god who has created, and is therefore responsible for, everything. And so we can say, without being paradoxical, that in the Western World the history of rebellion is inseparable from the history of Christianity.

We have to wait, in fact, until the very last moments of Greek thought to see rebellion begin to find expression among transitional thinkers—nowhere more profoundly than in the works of Epicurus and Lucretius.

The appalling sadness of Epicurus already strikes a new note. It has its roots, no doubt, in the fear of death, with which the Greek mind was not unfamiliar. But the pathos with which this fear is expressed is very revealing. "We can take precautions against all sorts of things; but so far as death is concerned, we all of us live like the inhabitants of a defenseless citadel." Lucretius is more explicit: "The substance of this vast world is condemned to death and ruin."

Therefore why postpone enjoyment? "We spend our lives," writes Epicurus, "in waiting, and we are all condemned to die." Therefore we must all enjoy ourselves. But what a strange form of enjoyment! It consists in sealing up the walls of the citadel, of making sure of a supply of bread and water and of living in darkness and silence.

Death hovers over us, therefore we must prove that death is of no importance. Like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, Epicurus banishes death from human existence. "Death has no meaning for us, for what is indefinable is incapable of feeling, and what is incapable of feeling has no meaning for us." Is this the equivalent of nothingness?

No, for everything in this particular universe is matter, and death only means a return to one's element. Existence is epitomized in a stone. The strange sensual pleasure of which Epicurus speaks consists, above all, in an absence of pain; it is the pleasure of a stone. By an admirable maneuver—which we shall find again in the great French classicists—Epicurus, in order to escape from destiny, destroys sensibility, having first destroyed its primary manifestation: hope. What this Greek philosopher says about the gods cannot be interpreted otherwise.

All the unhappiness of human beings springs from the hope that tempts them from the silence of the citadel and exposes them on the ramparts in expectation of salvation. Unreasonable aspirations have no other effect than to reopen carefully bandaged wounds. That is why Epicurus does not deny the gods; he banishes them, and so precipitately that man has no alternative but to retreat

once more into the citadel. "The happy and immortal being has no preoccupations of his own and no concern with the affairs of others."

Lucretius goes even farther: "It is incontestable that the gods, by their very nature, enjoy their immortality in perfect peace, completely unaware of our affairs, from which they are utterly detached." Therefore let us forget the gods, let us never even think about them, and "neither your thoughts during the day nor your dreams at night will ever be troubled."

Later we shall rediscover this eternal theme of rebellion, but with important modifications. A god who does not reward or punish, a god who turns a deaf ear, is the rebel's only religious conception. But while Vigny will curse the silence of his divinity, Epicurus considers that, as death is inevitable, silence on the part of man is a better preparation for this fate than divine words. This strange mind wears itself out in a sustained attempt to build ramparts around mankind, to fortify the citadel and to stifle the irrepressible cry of human hope.

Only when this strategic retreat has been accomplished does Epicurus, like a god among men, celebrate his victory with a song that clearly denotes the defensive aspect of his rebellion. "I have escaped your ambush, O destiny, I have closed all paths by which you might assail me. We shall not be conquered either by you or by any other evil power. And when the inevitable hour of departure strikes, our scorn for those who vainly cling to existence will burst forth in this proud song: 'Ah, with what dignity we have lived.' " Alone among his contemporaries Lucretius carries this logic much farther and finally brings it to the central problem of modern philosophy.

He adds nothing fundamental to Epicurus. He, too, refuses to accept any explanatory principle that cannot be tested by the senses. The atom is only a last refuge where man, reduced to his primary elements, pursues a kind of blind and deaf immortality—an immortal death—which for Lucretius represents, as it does for Epicurus, the only possible form of happiness.

He has to admit, however, that atoms do not aggregate of their own accord, and rather than believe in a superior law and, finally, in the destiny he wishes to deny, he accepts the concept of a purely fortuitous mutation, the *clinamen*, in which the atoms meet and group themselves together. Already, as we can see, the great problem of modern times arises: the discovery that to rescue man from destiny is to deliver him to chance.

That is why the contemporary mind is trying so desperately hard to restore destiny to man a historical destiny this time. Lucretius has not reached this point. His hatred of destiny and death is assuaged by this blind universe where atoms accidentally form human beings and where human beings accidentally return to atoms. But his vocabulary bears witness to a new kind of sensibility. The walled citadel becomes an armed camp. *Maenia mundi*, the ramparts of the world, is one of the key expressions of Lucretius' rhetoric. The main preoccupation in this armed camp is, of course, to silence hope.

But Epicurus' methodical renunciation is transformed into a quivering asceticism, which is sometimes crowned with execrations. Piety, for Lucretius, undoubtedly consists in "being able to contemplate everything with an untroubled mind." But, nevertheless, his mind reels at the injustices done to man. Spurred on by indignation, he weaves new concepts of crime, innocence, culpability, and punishment into his great poem on the nature of things.

In it he speaks of "religion's first crime," Iphigenia's martyred innocence, and of the tendency of the divinity to "often ignore the guilty and to mete out undeserved punishment by slaughtering the innocent." If Lucretius scoffs at the fear of punishment in the next world, it is not as a gesture of defensive rebellion in the manner of Epicurus, but as a process of aggressive reasoning: why should evil be punished when we can easily see, here on earth, that goodness is not rewarded?

In Lucretius' epic poem, Epicurus himself becomes the proud rebel he never actually was. "When in the eyes of all mankind humanity was leading an abject existence on earth, crushed beneath the weight of a religion whose hideous aspect peered down from the heights of the celestial regions, the first to dare, a Greek, a man, raised his mortal eyes and challenged the gods. ... In this way religion, in its turn, was overthrown and trampled underfoot, and this victory elevates us to the heavens." Here we can sense the difference between this new type of blasphemy and the ancient malediction. The Greek heroes could aspire to become gods, but simultaneously with the gods who already existed.

At that time it was simply a matter of promotion. Lucretius' hero, on the other hand, embarks on a revolution. By repudiating the unworthy and criminal gods, he takes their place himself. He sallies forth from the armed camp and opens the first attack on divinity in the name of human suffering. In the ancient world, murder is both inexplicable and inexpiable. Already with Lucretius, murder by man is only an answer to murder by the gods. It is not pure coincidence that Lucretius' poem ends with a prodigious image of the sanctuaries of the gods swollen with the accusing corpses of plague victims.

This new language is incomprehensible without the concept of a personal god, which is slowly beginning to form in the minds of Lucretius' and Epicurus' contemporaries. Only a personal god can be asked by the rebel for a personal accounting. When the personal god begins his reign, rebellion assumes its most resolutely ferocious aspect and pronounces a definitive no. With Cain, the first act of rebellion coincides with the first crime.

The history of rebellion, as we are experiencing it today, has far more to do with the children of Cain than with the disciples of Prometheus. In this sense it is the God of the Old Testament who is primarily responsible for mobilizing the forces of rebellion. Inversely, one must submit to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when, like Pascal, one has run the full course of intellectual rebellion. The mind most prone to doubt always aspires to the greatest degree of Jansenism.

From this point of view, the New Testament can be considered as an attempt to answer, in advance, every Cain in the world, by painting the figure of God in softer colors and by creating an intercessor between God and man. Christ came to solve two major problems, evil and death, which are precisely the problems that preoccupy the rebel. His solution consisted, first, in experiencing them. The man-god suffers, too with patience.

Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to Him since He suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadow, the divinity abandoned its traditional privileges and drank to the last drop, despair included, the agony of death. This is the explanation of the Lama sabactani and the heartrending doubt of Christ in agony. The agony would have been mild if it had been alleviated by hopes of eternity. For God to be a man, he must despair.

Gnosticism, which is the fruit of Greco-Christian collaboration, has tried for two centuries, in reaction against Judaic thought, to promote this concept. We know, for example, the vast number of intercessors invented by Valentinus. But the aeons of this particular metaphysical skirmish are the equivalent of the intermediary truths to be found in Hellenism.

Their aim is to diminish the absurdity of an intimate relationship between suffering humanity and an implacable god. This is the special role of Marcion's cruel and bellicose second god. This demiurge is responsible for the creation of a finite world and of death. Our duty is to hate him and at the same time to deny everything that he has created, by means of asceticism, to the point of destroying, by sexual abstinence, all creation.

This form of asceticism is therefore both proud and rebellious. Marcion simply

alters the course of rebellion and directs it toward an inferior god so as to be better able to exalt the superior god. Gnosis, owing to its Greek origins, remains conciliatory and tends to destroy the Judaic heritage in Christianity. It also wanted to avoid Augustinism, by anticipating it, in that Augustinism provides arguments for every form of rebellion. To Basilides, for example, the martyrs were sinners, and so was Christ, because they suffered.

A strange conception, but whose aim is to remove the element of injustice from suffering. The Gnostics only wanted to substitute the Greek idea of initiation, which allows mankind every possible chance, for the concept of an all-powerful and arbitrary forgiveness.

The enormous number of sects among the second-generation Gnostics indicates how desperate and diversified was the attempt on the part of Greek thought to make the Christian universe more accessible and to remove the motives for a rebellion that Hellenism considered the worst of all evils. But the Church condemned this attempt and, by condemning it, swelled the ranks of the rebels.

In that the children of Cain have triumphed, increasingly, throughout the centuries, the God of the Old Testament can be said to have been incredibly successful. Paradoxically, the blasphemers have injected new life into the jealous God whom Christianity wished to banish from history. One of their most profoundly audacious acts was to recruit Christ into their camp by making His story end on the Cross and on the bitter note of the cry that precedes His agony. By this means it was possible to preserve the implacable face of a God of hate—which coincided far better with creation as the rebels conceived it.

Until Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, rebellion is directed only against a cruel and capricious divinity—a divinity who prefers, without any convincing motive, Abel's sacrifice to Cain's and, by so doing, provokes the first murder. Dostoevsky, in the realm of imagination, and Nietzsche, in the realm of fact, enormously increase the field of rebellious thought and demand an accounting from the God of love Himself.

Nietzsche believes that God is dead in the souls of his contemporaries. Therefore he attacks, like his predecessor Stirner, the illusion of God that lingers, under the guise of morality, in the thought of his times. But until they appear upon the scene, the freethinkers, for example, were content to deny the truth of the history of Christ ("that dull story," in Sade's words) and to maintain, by their denials, the tradition of an avenging god.

On the other hand, for as long as the Western World has been Christian, the Gospels have been the interpreter between heaven and earth. Each time a solitary cry of rebellion was uttered, the answer came in the form of an even more terrible suffering. In that Christ had suffered, and had suffered voluntarily, suffering was no longer unjust and all pain was necessary.

In one sense, Christianity's bitter intuition and legitimate pessimism concerning human behavior is based on the assumption that over all injustice is as satisfying to man as total justice. Only the sacrifice of an innocent god could justify the endless and universal torture of innocence. Only the most abject suffering by God could assuage man's agony. If everything, without exception, in heaven and earth is doomed to pain and suffering, then a strange form of happiness is possible.

But from the moment when Christianity, emerging from its period of triumph, found itself submitted to the critical eye of reason—to the point where the divinity of Christ was denied—suffering once more became the lot of man. Jesus profaned is no more than just one more innocent man whom the representatives of the God of Abraham tortured in a spectacular manner. The abyss that separates the master from the slaves opens again and the cry of revolt falls on the deaf ears of a jealous God.

The freethinkers have prepared the way for this new dichotomy by attacking, with

all the usual precautions, the morality and divinity of Christ. Callot's universe sums up quite satisfactorily this world of hallucination and wretchedness whose inhabitants begin by sniggering up their sleeves and end—with Moliere's Don Juan by laughing to high heaven. During the two centuries which prepare the way for the upheavals, both revolutionary and sacrilegious, of the eighteenth century, all the efforts of the freethinkers are bent on making Christ an innocent, or a simpleton, so as to annex Him to the world of man, endowed with all the noble or derisory qualities of man. Thus the ground will be prepared for the great offensive against a hostile heaven.

The end