

Create Dangerously

A Lecture by Albert Camus

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An Oriental wise man always used to ask the divinity in his prayers to be so kind as to spare him from living in an interesting era. As we are not wise, the divinity has not spared us and we are living in an interesting era. In any case, our era forces us to take an interest in it. The writers of today know this. If they speak up, they are criticized and attacked. If they become modest and keep silent, they are vociferously blamed for their silence.

In the midst of such din the writer cannot hope to remain aloof in order to pursue the reflections and images that are dear to him. Until the present moment, remaining aloof has always been possible in history. When someone did not approve, he could always keep silent or talk of something else. Today everything is changed and even silence has dangerous implications. The moment that abstaining from choice is itself looked upon as a choice and punished or praised as such, the artist is willy-nilly impressed into service. "Impressed" seems to me a more accurate term in this connection than "committed." Instead of signing up, indeed, for voluntary service, the artist does his compulsory service. Every artist today is embarked on the contemporary slave galley.

He has to resign himself to this even if he considers that the galley reeks of its past, that the slave-drivers are really too numerous, and, in addition, that the steering is badly handled. We are on the high seas. The artist, like everyone else, must bend to his oar, without dying if possible—in other words, go on living and creating. To tell the truth, it is not easy, and I can understand why artists regret their former comfort. The change is somewhat cruel. Indeed, history's amphitheater has always contained the martyr and the lion. The former relied on eternal consolations and the latter on raw historical meat. But until now the artist was on the sidelines. He used to sing purposely, for his own sake, or at best to encourage the martyr and make the lion forget his appetite. But now the artist is in the amphitheater. Of necessity, his voice is not quite the same; it is not nearly so firm.

It is easy to see all that art can lose from such a constant obligation. Ease, to begin with, and that divine liberty so apparent in the work of Mozart. It is easier to understand why our works of art have a drawn, set look and why they collapse so suddenly. It is obvious why we have more journalists than creative writers, more boy scouts of painting than Cézannes, and why sentimental tales or detective novels have taken the place of War and Peace or The Charterhouse of Parma. Of course, one can always meet that state of things with a humanistic lamentation and become what Stepan Trofimovich in *The Possessed* insists upon being; a living reproach. One can also have, like him, attacks of patriotic melancholy. But such melancholy in no way changes reality. It is better, in my opinion, to give the era its due, since it demands this so vigorously, and calmly admit that the period of the revered master, of the artist with a camellia in his buttonhole, of the armchair genius is over.

To create today is to create dangerously. Any publication is an act, and that act exposes one to the passions of an age that forgives nothing. Hence the question is not to find out if this is or is

not prejudicial to art. The question, for all those who cannot live without art and what it signifies, is merely to find out how, among the police forces of so many ideologies (how many churches, what solitude!), the strange liberty of creation is possible. It is not enough to say in this regard that art is threatened by the powers of the State. If that were true, the problem would be simple: the artist fights or capitulates. The problem is more complex, more serious too, as soon as it becomes apparent that the battle is waged within the artist himself. The hatred for art, of which our society provides such fine examples, is so effective today only because it is kept alive by artists themselves.

The doubt felt by the artists who preceded us concerned their own talent. The doubt felt by artists of today concerns the necessity of their art, hence their very existence. Racine in 1657 would make excuses for writing *Berenice* when he might have been fighting to defend the Edict of Nantes. That questioning of art by the artist has many reasons, and the loftiest need be considered. Among the best explanations is the feeling the contemporary artist has of lying or of indulging in useless words if he pays no attention to history's woes. What characterizes our time, indeed, is the way the masses and their wretched condition have burst upon contemporary sensibilities. We now know that they exist, whereas we once had a tendency to forget them. And if we are more aware, it is not because our aristocracy, artistic or otherwise, has become better—no, have no fear—it is because the masses have become stronger and keep people from forgetting them.

There are still other reasons, and some of them less noble, for this surrender of the artist. But, whatever those reasons may be, they all work toward the same end: to discourage free creation by undermining its basic principle, the creator's faith in himself. "A man's obedience to his own genius," Emerson says magnificently, "is faith in its purest form." And another American writer of the nineteenth century added: "So long as a man is faithful to himself, everything is in his favor, government, society, the very sun, moon, and stars." Such amazing optimism seems dead today. In most cases the artist is ashamed of himself and his privileges, if he has any. He must first of all answer the question he has put to himself: is art a deceptive luxury?

1

The first straightforward reply that can be made is this: on occasion art may be a deceptive luxury. On the poop deck of slave galleys it is possible, at any time and place, as we know, to sing of the constellations while the convicts bend over the oars and exhaust themselves in the hold; it is always possible to record the social conversation that takes place on the benches of the amphitheater while the lion is crunching the victim. And it is very hard to make any objections to the art that has known such success in the past. But things have changed somewhat, and the number of convicts and martyrs has increased amazingly over the surface of the globe. In the face of so much suffering, if art insists on being a luxury, it will also be a lie.

Of what could art speak, indeed? If it adapts itself to what the majority of our society wants, art will be a meaningless recreation. If it blindly rejects that society, if the artist makes up his mind to take refuge in his dream, art will express nothing but a negation. In this way we shall have the production of entertainers or of formal grammarians, and in both cases this leads to an art

cut off from living reality. For about a century we have been living in a society that is not even the society of money (gold can arouse carnal passions) but that of the abstract symbols of money. The society of merchants can be defined as a society in which things disappear in favor of signs. When a ruling class measures its fortunes, not by the acre of land or the ingot of gold, but by the number of figures corresponding ideally to a certain number of exchange operations, it thereby condemns itself to setting a certain kind of humbug at the center of its experience and its universe.

A society founded on signs is, in its essence, an artificial society in which man's carnal truth is handled as something artificial. There is no reason for being surprised that such a society chose as its religion a moral code of formal principles and that it inscribes the words "liberty" and "equality" on its prisons as well as on its temples of finance. However, words cannot be prostituted with impunity. The most misrepresented value today is certainly the value of liberty. Good minds (I have always thought there were two kinds of intelligence—intelligent intelligence and stupid intelligence) teach that it is but an obstacle on the path of true progress. But such solemn stupidities were uttered because for a hundred years a society of merchants made an exclusive and unilateral use of liberty, looking upon it as a right rather than as a duty, and did not fear to use an ideal liberty, as often as it could, to justify a very real oppression.

As a result, is there anything surprising in the fact that such a society asked art to be, not an instrument of liberation, but an inconsequential exercise and a mere entertainment? Consequently, a fashionable society in which all troubles were money troubles and all worries were sentimental worries was satisfied for decades with its society novelists and with the most futile art in the world, the one about which Oscar Wilde, thinking of himself before he knew prison, said that the greatest of all vices was superficiality. In this way the manufacturers of art (I did not say the artists) of middle-class Europe, before and after 1900, accepted irresponsibility because responsibility presupposed a painful break with their society (those who really broke with it are named Rimbaud, Nietzsche, Strindberg, and we know the price they paid).

From that period we get the theory of art for art's sake, which is verily a voicing of that irresponsibility. Art for art's sake, the entertainment of a solitary artist, is indeed the artificial art of a factitious and self-absorbed society. The logical result of such a theory is the art of little cliques or the purely formal art fed on affectations and abstractions and ending in the destruction of all reality. In this way a few works charm a few individuals while many coarse inventions corrupt many others. Finally art takes shape outside of society and cuts itself off from its living roots. Gradually the artist, even if he is celebrated, is alone or at least is known to his nation only through the intermediary of the popular press or the radio, which will provide a convenient and simplified idea of him.

The more art specializes, in fact, the more necessary popularization becomes. In this way millions of people will have the feeling of knowing this or that great artist of our time because they have learned from the newspapers that he raises canaries or that he never stays married more than six months. The greatest renown today consists in being admired or hated without having been read. Any artist who goes in for being famous in our society must know that it is not he who will become famous, but someone else under his name, someone who will eventually

escape him and perhaps someday will kill the true artist in him.

Consequently, there is nothing surprising in the fact that almost everything worth while created in the mercantile Europe of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—in literature, for instance—was raised up against the society of its time. It may be said that until almost the time of the French Revolution current literature was, in the main, a literature of consent. From the moment when middle-class society, a result of the revolution, became stabilized, a literature of revolt developed instead. Official values were negated, in France, for example, either by the bearers of revolutionary values, from the Romantics to Rimbaud, or by the maintainers of aristocratic values, of whom Vigny and Balzac are good examples. In both cases the masses and the aristocracy—the two sources of all civilization—took their stand against the artificial society of their time.

But this negation, maintained so long that it is now rigid, has become artificial too and leads to another sort of sterility. The theme of the exceptional poet born into a mercantile society (Vigny's Chatterton is the finest example) has hardened into a presumption that one can be a great artist only against the society of one's time, whatever it may be. Legitimate in the beginning when asserting that a true artist could not compromise with the world of money, the principle became false with the subsidiary belief that an artist could assert himself only by being against everything in general. Consequently, many of our artists long to be exceptional, feel guilty if they are not, and wish for simultaneous applause and hisses. Naturally, society, tired or indifferent at present, applauds and hisses only at random. Consequently, the intellectual of today is always bracing himself stiffly to add to his height.

But as a result of rejecting everything, even the tradition of his art, the contemporary artist gets the illusion that he is creating his own rule and eventually takes himself for God. At the same time he thinks he can create his reality himself. But, cut off from his society, he will create nothing but formal or abstract works, thrilling as experiences but devoid of the fecundity we associate with true art, which is called upon to unite. In short, there will be as much difference between the contemporary subtleties or abstractions and the works of a Tolstoy or a Moliere as between an anticipatory draft on invisible wheat and the rich soil of the furrow itself.

2

In this way art may be a deceptive luxury. It is not surprising, then, that men or artists wanted to call a halt and go back to truth. As soon as they did, they denied that the artist had a right to solitude and offered him as a subject, not his dreams, but reality as it is lived and endured by all. Convinced that art for art's sake, through its subjects and through its style, is not understandable to the masses or else in no way expresses their truth, these men wanted the artist instead to speak intentionally about and for the majority. He has only to translate the sufferings and happiness of all into the language of all and he will be universally understood. As a reward for being absolutely faithful to reality, he will achieve complete communication among men. This ideal of universal communication is indeed the ideal of any great artist.

Contrary to the current presumption, if there is any man who has no right to solitude, it is the artist. Art cannot be a monologue. When the most solitary and least famous artist appeals to posterity, he is merely reaffirming his fundamental vocation. Considering a dialogue with deaf or inattentive contemporaries to be impossible, he appeals to a more far-reaching dialogue with the generations to come. But in order to speak about all and to all, one has to speak of what all know and of the reality common to us all. The sea, rains, necessity, desire, the struggle against death—these are the things that unite us all. We resemble one another in what we see together, in what we suffer together. Dreams change from individual to individual, but the reality of the world is common to us all. Striving toward realism is therefore legitimate, for it is basically related to the artistic adventure.

So let's be realistic. Or, rather, let's try to be so, if this is possible. For it is not certain that the word has a meaning; it is not certain that realism, even if it is desirable, is possible. Let us stop and inquire first of all if pure realism is possible in art. If we believe the declarations of the nineteenth-century naturalists, it is the exact reproduction of reality. Therefore it is to art what photography is to painting: the former reproduces and the latter selects. But what does it reproduce and what is reality? Even the best of photographs, after all, is not a sufficiently faithful reproduction, is not yet sufficiently realistic. What is there more real, for instance, in our universe than a man's life, and how can we hope to preserve it better than in a realistic film?

But under what conditions is such a film possible? Under purely imaginary conditions. We should have to presuppose, in fact, an ideal camera focused on the man day and night and constantly registering his every move. The very projection of such a film would last a lifetime and could be seen only by an audience of people willing to waste their lives in watching someone else's life in great detail. Even under such conditions, such an unimaginable film would not be realistic for the simple reason that the reality of a man's life is not limited to the spot in which he happens to be. It lies also in other lives that give shape to his—lives of people he loves, to begin with, which would have to be filmed too, and also lives of unknown people, influential and insignificant, fellow citizens, policemen, professors, invisible comrades from the mines and foundries, diplomats and dictators, religious reformers, artists who create myths that are decisive for our conduct—humble representatives, in short, of the sovereign chance that dominates the most routine existences.

Consequently, there is but one possible realistic film: the one that is constantly shown us by an invisible camera on the world's screen. The only realistic artist, then, is God, if he exists. All other artists are, ipso facto, unfaithful to reality. As a result, the artists who reject bourgeois society and its formal art, who insist on speaking of reality, and reality alone, are caught in a painful dilemma. They must be realistic and yet cannot be. They want to make their art subservient to reality, and reality cannot be described without effecting a choice that makes it subservient to the originality of an art. The beautiful and tragic production of the early years of the Russian Revolution clearly illustrates this torment. What Russia gave us then with Blok and the great Pasternak, Maiakovski and Essenine, Eisenstein and the first novelists of cement and steel, was a splendid laboratory of forms and themes, a fecund unrest, a wild enthusiasm for research.

Yet it was necessary to conclude and to tell how it was possible to be realistic even though complete realism was impossible. Dictatorship, in this case as in others, went straight to the point: in its opinion realism was first necessary and then possible so long as it was deliberately socialistic. What is the meaning of this decree? As a matter of fact, such a decree frankly admits that reality cannot be reproduced without exercising a selection, and it rejects the theory of realism as it was formulated in the nineteenth century. The only thing needed, then, is to find a principle of choice that will give shape to the world. And such a principle is found, not in the reality we know, but in the reality that will be—in short, the future. In order to reproduce properly what is, one must depict also what will be. In other words, the true object of socialistic realism is precisely what has no reality yet.

The contradiction is rather beautiful. But, after all, the very expression socialistic realism was contradictory. How, indeed, is a socialistic realism possible when reality is not altogether socialistic? It is not socialistic, for example, either in the past or altogether in the present. The answer is easy: we shall choose in the reality of today or of yesterday what announces and serves the perfect city of the future. So we shall devote ourselves, on the one hand, to negating and condemning whatever aspects of reality are not socialistic, and, on the other hand, to glorifying what is or will become so. We shall inevitably get a propaganda art with its heroes and its villains—an edifying literature, in other words, just as remote as formalistic art is from complex and living reality. Finally, that art will be socialistic insofar as it is not realistic.

This aesthetic that intended to be realistic therefore becomes a new idealism, just as sterile for the true artist as bourgeois idealism. Reality is ostensibly granted a sovereign position only to be more readily thrown out. Art is reduced to nothing. It serves and, by serving, becomes a slave. Only those who keep from describing reality will be praised as realists. The others will be censured, with the approval of the former. Renown, which in bourgeois society consisted in not being read or in being misunderstood, will in a totalitarian society consist in keeping others from being read. Once more, true art will be distorted or gagged and universal communication will be made impossible by the very people who most passionately wanted it.

The easiest thing, when faced with such a defeat, would be to admit that so-called socialistic realism has little connection with great art and that the revolutionaries, in the very interest of the revolution, ought to look for another aesthetic. But it is well known that the defenders of the theory described shout that no art is possible outside it. They spend their time shouting this. But my deep-rooted conviction is that they do not believe it and that they have decided, in their hearts, that artistic values must be subordinated to the values of revolutionary action. If this were clearly stated, the discussion would be easier. One can respect such great renunciation on the part of men who suffer too much from the contrast between the unhappiness of all and the privileges sometimes associated with an artist's lot, who reject the unbearable distance separating those whom poverty gags and those whose vocation is rather to express themselves constantly. One might then understand such men, try to carry on a dialogue with them, attempt to tell them, for instance, that suppressing creative liberty is perhaps not the right way to overcome slavery and that until they can speak for all it is stupid to give up the ability to speak for a few at least.

Yes, socialistic realism ought to own up to the fact that it is the twin brother of political realism. It sacrifices art for an end that is alien to art but that, in the scale of values, may seem to rank higher. In short, it suppresses art temporarily in order to establish justice first. When justice exists, in a still indeterminate future, art will resuscitate. In this way the golden rule of contemporary intelligence is applied to matters of art—the rule that insists on the impossibility of making an omelet without breaking eggs. But such overwhelming common sense must not mislead us. To make a good omelet it is not enough to break thousands of eggs, and the value of a cook is not judged, I believe by the number of broken eggshells. If the artistic cooks of our time upset more baskets of eggs than they intended, the omelet of civilization may never again come out right, and art may never resuscitate. Barbarism is never temporary.

Sufficient allowance is never made for it, and, quite naturally, from art barbarism extends to morals. Then the suffering and blood of men give birth to insignificant literatures, and ever-indulgent press, photographed portraits, and sodality plays in which hatred takes the place of religion. Art culminates thus in forced optimism, the worst of luxuries, it so happens, and the most ridiculous of lies. How could we be surprised? The suffering of mankind is such a vast subject that it seems no one could touch it unless he was like Keats so sensitive, it is said, that he could have touched pain itself with his hands. This is clearly seen when a controlled literature tries to alleviate that suffering with official consolations. The lie of art for art's sake pretended to know nothing of evil and consequently assumed responsibility for it.

But the realistic lie, even though managing to admit mankind's present unhappiness, betrays that unhappiness just as seriously by making use of it to glorify a future state of happiness, about which no one knows anything, so that the future authorizes every kind of humbug. The two aesthetics that have long stood opposed to each other, the one that recommends a complete rejection of real life and the one that claims to reject anything that is not real life, end up, however, by coming to agreement, far from reality, in a single lie and in the suppression of art. The academicism of the Right does not even acknowledge a misery that the academicism of the Left utilizes for ulterior reasons. But in both cases the misery is only strengthened at the same time that art is negated.

3

Must we conclude that this lie is the very essence of art? I shall say instead that the attitudes I have been describing are lies only insofar as they have but little relation to art. What, then, is art? Nothing simple, that is certain. And it is even harder to find out amid the shouts of so many people bent on simplifying everything. On the one hand, genius is expected to be splendid and solitary; on the other hand, it is called upon to resemble all. Alas, reality is more complex. And Balzac suggested this in a sentence: "The genius resembles everyone and no one resembles him." So it is with art, which is nothing without reality and without which reality is insignificant. How, indeed, could art get along without the real and how could art be subservient to it? The artist chooses his object as much as he is chosen by it. Art, in a sense, is a revolt against everything fleeting and unfinished in the world.

Consequently, its only aim is to give another form to a reality that it is nevertheless forced to preserve as the source of its emotion. In this regard, we are all realistic and no one is. Art is neither complete rejection nor complete acceptance of what is. It is simultaneously rejection and acceptance, and this is why it must be a perpetually renewed wrenching apart. The artist constantly lives in such a state of ambiguity, incapable of negating the real and yet eternally bound to question it in its eternally unfinished aspects. In order to paint a still life, there must be confrontation and mutual adjustment between a painter and an apple. And if forms are nothing without the world's lighting, they in turn add to that lighting. The real universe, which, by its radiance, calls forth bodies and statues receives from them at the same time a second light that determines the light from the sky.

Consequently, great style lies midway between the artist and his object. There is no need of determining whether art must flee reality or defer to it, but rather what precise dose of reality the work must take on as ballast to keep from floating up among the clouds or from dragging along the ground with weighted boots. Each artist solves this problem according to his lights and abilities. The greater an artist's revolt against the world's reality, the greater can be the weight of reality to balance that revolt. But the weight can never stifle the artist's solitary exigency. The loftiest work will always be, as in the Greek tragedians, Melville, Tolstoy, or Moliere, the work that maintains an equilibrium between reality and man's rejection of that reality, each forcing the other upward in a ceaseless overflowing, characteristic of life itself at its most joyous and heart-rending extremes.

Then, every once in a while, a new world appears, different from the everyday world and yet the same, particular but universal, full of innocent insecurity—called forth for a few hours by the power and longing of genius. That's just it and yet that's not it; the world is nothing and the world is everything—this is the contradictory and tireless cry of every true artist, the cry that keeps him on his feet with eyes ever open and that, every once in a while, awakens for all in this world asleep the fleeting and insistent image of a reality we recognize without ever having known it. Likewise, the artist can neither turn away from his time nor lose himself in it. If he turns away from it, he speaks in a void. But, conversely, insofar as he takes his time as his object, he asserts his own existence as subject and cannot give in to it altogether.

In other words, at the very moment when the artist chooses to share the fate of all, he asserts the individual he is. And he cannot escape from this ambiguity. The artist takes from history what he can see of it himself or undergo himself, directly or indirectly—the immediate event, in other words, and men who are alive today, not the relationship of that immediate event to a future that is invisible to the living artist. Judging contemporary man in the name of a man who does not yet exist is the function of prophecy. But the artist can value the myths that are offered him only in relation to their repercussion on living people. The prophet, whether religious or political, can judge absolutely and, as is known, is not chary of doing so. But the artist cannot. If he judged absolutely, he would arbitrarily divide reality into good and evil and thus indulge in melodrama. The aim of art, on the contrary, is not to legislate or to reign supreme, but rather to understand first of all.

Sometimes it does reign supreme, as a result of understanding. But no work of genius has ever

been based on hatred and contempt. This is why the artist, at the end of his slow advance, absolves instead of condemning. Instead of being a judge, he is a justifier. He is the perpetual advocate of the living creature, because it is alive. He truly argues for love of one's neighbor and not for that love of the remote stranger which debases contemporary humanism until it becomes the catechism of the law court. Instead, the great work eventually confounds all judges. With it the artist simultaneously pays homage to the loftiest figure of mankind and bows down before the worst of criminals. "There is not," Wilde wrote in prison, "a single wretched man in this wretched place along with me who does not stand in symbolic relation to the very secret of life." Yes, and that secret of life coincides with the secret of art.

For a hundred and fifty years the writers belonging to a mercantile society, with but few exceptions, thought they could live in happy irresponsibility. They lived, indeed, and then died alone, as they had lived. But we writers of the twentieth century shall never again be alone. Rather, we must know that we can never escape the common misery and that our only justification, if indeed there is a justification, is to speak up, insofar as we can, for those who cannot do so. But we must do so for all those who are suffering at this moment, whatever may be the glories, past or future, of the States and parties oppressing them: for the artist there are no privileged torturers. This is why beauty, even today, especially today, cannot serve any party; it cannot serve, in the long or short run, anything but men's suffering or their liberty. The only really committed artist is he who, without refusing to take part in the combat, at least refuses to join the regular armies and remains a free-lance.

The lesson he then finds in beauty, if he draws it fairly, is a lesson not of selfishness but rather of hard brotherhood. Looked upon thus, beauty has never enslaved anyone. And for thousands of years, every day, at every second, it has instead assuaged the servitude of millions of men and, occasionally, liberated some of them once and for all. After all, perhaps the greatness of art lies in the perpetual tension between beauty and pain, the love of men and the madness of creation, unbearable solitude and the exhausting crowd, rejection and consent. Art advances between two chasms, which are frivolity and propaganda. On the ridge where the great artist moves forward, every step is an adventure, an extreme risk. In that risk, however, and only there, lies the freedom of art.

A difficult freedom that is more like an ascetic discipline? What artist would deny this? What artist would dare to claim that he was equal to such a ceaseless task? Such freedom presupposes health of body and mind, a style that reflects strength of soul, and a patient defiance. Like all freedom, it is a perpetual risk, an exhausting adventure, and this is why people avoid the risk today, as they avoid liberty with its exacting demands, in order to accept any kind of bondage and achieve at least comfort of soul. But if art is not an adventure, what is it and where is its justification? No, the free artist is no more a man of comfort than is the free man. The free artist is the one who, with great effort, creates his own order. The more undisciplined what he must put in order, the stricter will be his rule and the more he will assert his freedom. There is a remark of Gide that I have always approved although it may be easily misunderstood: "Art lives on constraint and dies of freedom." That is true.

But it must not be interpreted as meaning that art can be controlled. Art lives only on the

constraints it imposes on itself; it dies of all others. Conversely, if it does not constrain itself, it indulges in ravings and becomes a slave to mere shadows. The freest art and the most rebellious will therefore be the most classical; it will reward the greatest effort. So long as a society and its artists do not accept this long and free effort, so long as they relax in the comfort of amusements or the comfort of conformism, in the games of art for art's sake or the preachings of realistic art, its artists are lost in nihilism and sterility. Saying this amounts to saying that today the rebirth depends on our courage and our will to be lucid. Yes, the rebirth is in the hands of all of us. It is up to us if the West is to bring forth any anti-Alexanders to tie together the Gordian Knot of civilization cut by the sword. For this purpose, we must assume all the risks and labors of freedom.

There is no need of knowing whether, by pursuing justice, we shall manage to preserve liberty. It is essential to know that, without liberty, we shall achieve nothing and that we shall lose both future justice and ancient beauty. Liberty alone draws men from their isolation; but slavery dominates a crowd of solitudes. And art, by virtue of that free essence I have tried to define, unites whereas tyranny separates. It is not surprising, therefore, that art should be the enemy marked out by every form of oppression. It is not surprising that artists and intellectuals should have been the first victims of modern tyrannies, whether of the Right or of the Left. Tyrants know there is in the work of art an emancipatory force, which is mysterious only to those who do not revere it. Every great work makes the human face more admirable and richer, and this is its whole secret. And thousands of concentration camps and barred cells are not enough to hide this staggering testimony of dignity.

This is why it is not true that culture can be, even temporarily, suspended in order to make way for a new culture. Man's unbroken testimony as to his suffering and his nobility cannot be suspended; the act of breathing cannot be suspended. There is no culture without legacy, and we cannot and must not reject anything of ours, the legacy of the West. Whatever the works of the future may be, they will bear the same secret, made up of courage and freedom, nourished by the daring of thousands of artists of all times and all nations. Yes, when modern tyranny shows us that, even when confined to his calling, the artist is a public enemy, it is right. But in this way tyranny pays its respects, through the artist, to an image of man that nothing has ever been able to crush. My conclusion will be simple. It will consist of saying, in the very midst of the sound and the fury of our history: "Let us rejoice."

Let us rejoice, indeed, at having witnessed the death of a lying and comfort-loving Europe and at being faced with cruel truths. Let us rejoice as men because a prolonged hoax has collapsed and we see clearly what threatens us. And let us rejoice as artists, torn from our sleep and our deafness, forced to keep our eyes on destitution, prisons, and bloodshed. If, faced with such a vision, we can preserve the memory of days and of faces, and if, conversely, faced with the world's beauty, we manage not to forget the humiliated, then Western art will gradually recover its strength and its sovereignty. To be sure, there are few examples in history of artists confronted with such hard problems. But when even the simplest words and phrases cost their weight in freedom and blood, the artist must learn to handle them with restraint. Danger makes men classical, and all greatness, after all, is rooted in risk.

The time of irresponsible artists is over. We shall regret it for our little moments of bliss. But we shall be able to admit that this ordeal contributes meanwhile to our chances of authenticity, and we shall accept the challenge. The freedom of art is not worth much when the only purpose is to assure the artist's comfort. For a value or a virtue to take root in a society, there must be no lying about it; in other words, we must pay for it every time we can. If liberty has become dangerous, then it may cease to be prostituted. And I cannot agree, for example, with those who complain today of the decline of wisdom. Apparently they are right. Yet, to tell the truth, wisdom has never declined so much as when it involved no risks and belonged exclusively to a few humanists buried in libraries. But today, when at last it has to face real dangers, there is a chance that it may again stand up and be respected.

It is said that Nietzsche after the break with Lou Salome, in a period of complete solitude, crushed and uplifted at the same time by the perspective of the huge work he had to carry on without any help, used to walk at night on the mountains overlooking the gulf of Genoa and light great bonfires of leaves and branches which he would watch as they burned. I have often dreamed of those fires and have occasionally imagined certain men and certain works in front of those fires, as a way of testing men and works. Well, our era is one of those fires whose unbearable heat will doubtless reduce many a work to ashes! But as for those which remain, their metal will be intact, and, looking at them, we shall be able to indulge without restraint in the supreme joy of the intelligence which we call "admiration."

One may long, as I do, for a gentler flame, a respite, a pause for musing. But perhaps there is no other peace for the artist than what he finds in the heat of combat. "Every wall is a door," Emerson correctly said. Let us not look for the door, and the way out, anywhere but in the wall against which we are living. Instead, let us seek the respite where it is—in the very thick of the battle. For in my opinion, and this is where I shall close, it is there. Great ideas, it has been said, come into the world as gently as doves. Perhaps then, if we listen attentively, we shall hear, amid the uproar of empires and nations, a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope. Some will say that this hope lies in a nation; others, in a man. I believe rather that it is awakened, revived, nourished by millions of solitary individuals whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history. As a result, there shines forth fleetingly the ever-threatened truth that each and every man, on the foundation of his own sufferings and joys, builds for all.

(Camus: 1988: 249-272).