THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF REVOLT,
THE DOMESTICATION OF DISSENT

KENNETH REXROTH
About six or seven years ago I was sitting in a bosky cocktail lounge off Mad Alley with an account executive or whatever they call them from MCA, who was trying to sign me up with the firm as a package—entertainer, lecturer, writer, TV personality, maybe actor. I was being kindly but positively negativistic. He said, "Rexroth, you don't know what you've got. You're riding the crest of the wave. Do you realize that within a year dissent is going to be the hottest commodity along The Street?"

I realized it. But as time passed and it realized itself, I realized I hadn't really realized it at all. I doubt if anybody was prepared for what happened. No one was expecting a new kind of meretriciousness, the kitsch of pseudo-alienation, to become the popular mass culture of the next decade. I thought I was. I gave talks and wrote articles mentioning such a possibility. But I always spoke in terms of precedents—comic tricksters like Dali, nihilists of the good thing like Hemingway, country house weekend revolutionaries and later disillusioned revolutionaries like Auden and Spender, Kierkegaard at PR-Time cocktail parties, all the factitiousness of the compromised.

There is a difference. Hemingway was certainly a thoroughly conventional personality—anyone who could sit for five minutes in Harry's Bar or spend a weekend in that hotel on Torcello is indisputably a square. His tough guy code was bluster and bullying, he was the model and idol of a generation of junior executives, especially the type Yale Man or Time editor, but he had talent and a certain tragic feeling. Dali, of course, was master of the false technical polish of the old-fashioned commercial artist and a master clown. Most of the other professional révoltées who became part of the Establishment in the interbellum period were not nihilists at all but disappointed socialists. Furthermore, they were most apparently members of the clerkly caste—gentlemen of a sort, with well-bred education, well-bred nerves, and a gentleman's modicum of taste.

In fact, the whole course of alienation, up through the Second War, was a secession of the clerks from the middle class. One note that runs through all the literature of revolt, from Baudelaire to W. H. Auden is de-provincialization. In Emma Bovary and the Ibsen girls it is obvious. When Sinclair Lewis came to set Emma or Norah in a Minnesota village, as far as he could see that is all his models were about.

Whenever the great rich gave the artist his head, accepted his values, he was perfectly content. The Countesses de Naoilles, the Princess de Polignac, Peggy Guggenheim, the Crosbys, Lady Cunard and her odd daughter—the list, as they say, could be extended indefinitely. These were not only the great patronesses of the period between two wars; they were themselves very much a part of High Bohemia. This was by no manner of means the old aristocrat-courty clerk relationship. Although some of these ladies had titles they were all simply Grandes Bourgeoises, most of them of American birth.

As Wyndham Lewis pointed out long ago, this was Erewhon, Utopia, the Land of Cockaigne, where the Revolution was over and it was from each according to his ability, and unto each according to his needs. It had its nastinesses, but once he
was accepted, the artist ignored them. He had been inducted into the ranks of the civilized. What spleen he had left could be vented on the vulgar—those outside.

The Romantic Credo may have presented the artist, and especially the poet, as prophet, as the permanent, irreconcilable critic of society. There is almost no evidence to support this claim. Prophets, like madmen or albinos, arise in all walks of life. Actually a personality like Blake is much more likely to be found among self-educated skilled mechanics than among intellectuals, and of course this is what Blake really was, a professional engraver who lived by the sweat of his brow, almost the only self-supporting artist or poet of the entire Romantic tradition.

The battle with the nineteenth-century middle class was a battle over questions of taste, technical questions. To an Eskimo, let alone a Martian, there is singularly little to choose between Bourguereau and Gauguin or Béranger and Rimbaud. This is really what Oscar Wilde was saying over and over to the ruling class: “I am one of you; my morals and life values differ in no wise from yours. If you will just accept the judgment of myself and my friends in your interior decoration we will be glad to stop annoying you.” This, too, is exactly what the new generation is saying to Chairman Khrushchev. They will win, because despot need the arts, and need them kept up to date, and artists, as all history teaches us, flourish under despotisms.

It is curious that the artist seldom appears in the ranks of the civilized. Henry Adams as a personality was not unique but typical. There are thousands of families like the Adameses in America, but they do not produce writers very often. It was his articulation that was special in Adams’ case. Articulation in America, but in England and France as well, appears at the hot spot of a pressure point. It appears in that area of intense conflict and constant tension set up around the lower middle class Protestant family.

I grew up in the Jazz Age. I went to the dances at Merry Gardens and played spin the bottle at children’s parties. Coming home one night to my Near North Side studio, I met my first wife, a young anarchist abstract artist. What happened to all these people? They did not replenish themselves, not in the arts. Today, just as in my day or my parents’, the artists and their parasites, the Bohemians, come from small Middle Western towns and were spanked if they spent their Sunday School nickels for ice cream. What ever happened to the children of the people who drank bathtub gin, danced the Charleston, read H. D. and slept around?

The answer is simple. They grew up and went off and lived. They didn’t have to write or paint. It had already been done for them.

The point I am making is that the artist of the long Romantic Agony was not rejecting society by any manner of means. He was simply demanding that it let him in, demanding that caste privilege decide certain technical questions which had been his by immemorial tradition. Today, by and large, and for better or worse, he has that caste position, that right, that technical expertise and competence.

Nothing is sillier than the benighted amateur sociologists of the literary quarters who think this struggle is still going on. “Kitsch, Masscult, Midcult.” What on earth is the man talking about? What decade is he living in? He is terribly upset
that Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster are not read in the station wagon and cooperative apartment set. Oh, but they are. Not much, but still, some. What upsets the Partisan Review people, really, is that their own middletaste, still clung to in spite of Hell and hydrogen bombs, never made it from the days when they were young. There is nothing more out of date than an out-of-date middletaste. I know, it's terribly sad that people don't feel about Rachmaninoff and Edith Wharton and Derain the way they did when Dwight MacDonald was young, but they don't.

On the other hand, I can remember when the only Bach you could get without ordering the records from His Master's Voice in Canada was the "Air for the G-String." Today there is more Buxtehude and Machaut and Gesualdo coming out every season that I can keep track of. I used to lug home from the library the immense volumes of Tudor Church Music and pore over the scores. Today I am up to my ears in polyphony. Hot sellers on Marboro's mail order list are Klee and Mondrian. The day when the classics have the wide circulation in America that Ezra Pound longed for in his poems has long since come. True, although Homer is a best seller with every paperback publisher that prints him, people don't read Dwight MacDonald's friends like they'd ought to. I mean, like they dig Thelonius Monk—they got Saul Bellow in school.

American culture by now has become omnivorously eclectic and at the same time immensely creative. It is Kitsch, it is Mass, it is Mid, but a great deal of it, consumed by all economic levels, is quite High indeed. What is happening is that the population is sorting itself out, sensibility wise. There is something for everybody. You like sadistic movies with Eisenstein angles? You like baroque flute? You like proletarian novels? You like found sculpture? You like metaphysical verse? We got it. It isn't as meretricious as it is so easy to make it sound. In fact, it is not meretricious at all, but it is certainly part of an immense, inexhaustible market, the child of the New Leisure and the GI Bill. This illimitable market can absorb anything, and does. It took about one year to absorb its professed irreconcilable enemies.

It is true, of course, that the role of enemy of society is a difficult one to play. Society cannot be escaped all that easily. It is not just that St. Simon Stylites is fed by hysterical rich women—society produces the social critic as a regulatory mechanism. As it also in fact so produces the revolutionary and the militant trade unionist. I once at a literary luncheon upset Mr. Vance Packard by asking him if he ever thought of himself as a hygienic functionary of the market he criticizes. Partly, of course, people like Packard and Galbraith are just narrow-minded Puritans. It annoys them that in a Keynesian economy considerable sums should be frittered away on hula hoops. They are outraged that women spend more time and money painting their faces than they do educating their children. Alas, life since at least the Neolithic revolution was always thus.

So the socialist and trade union movements in the West have functioned in reality—not just as governors to insure that steam is let off when the pressure gets too high, not just as what are now called "fail safe" devices, though they certainly are that—but as essential parts of the motive organization of capitalism, more, in other
words, like carburetors that insure there will be just the right mixture of fuel and air for each new demand on the engine.

Most of the literature of alienation and revolt, as well as obviously that of social criticism properly so called—for instance Sinclair’s The Jungle—has served the same purposes all through the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. We forget that Baudelaire or Rimbaud or Jarry not only wrote, they were read, and by large numbers. Who modeled themselves on the dandy and immoralist created by Baudelaire? The jeunesse dorée of the Second Empire. Who laughed uproariously at the antics of that petty bourgeois upstart Père Ubu? Other bourgeois who had learned to tell a Chateau Haut Brion from a Pommard, a Corot from a Poussin. Society can absorb almost anything that purports to attack it. Usually its organ of digestion is what is called “Society” in caps in the newspapers. Its masticatory apparatus is that caste Riesmann has ironically called “engineers of taste.” These people can chew up anything into a fashionable cud. The most fashionable vulgarizer of philosophy in contemporary France wrote a book of insufferable priggery about Baudelaire, not because he really objected morally to Baudelaire, but because Baudelaire was going out of date. In his place he put the world’s dullest psychotic windbag, Sade. Sade was frightfully fashionable for a while and his works could be found in very bourgeois homes, unread like the family Bible. You object to the word bourgeois? What do you think the bourgeoisie are like? George Babbitt? Tommy Manville was certainly neither an aristocrat nor a proletarian, nor is Dave Rockefeller, nor, for that matter were the first Medicis.

It is this nihilistic total rejection of modern society which is relatively new—new at least in its intensity, pervasiveness and almost immediate acceptance as a fad by the very people against whom it was directed. Dope, Dadaism, and destruction are domesticated today and part of all well-appointed middle class decor, like the antimacassar, the platform rocker and the Idylls of the King, were among the same class a century ago.

Movements like Cubism and Post-Impressionism were special revaluations of the humanist tradition. Today we realize that they were only aspects of the long classical movement in Western art which reflects one pole of the personality of European man. The veriest school child today knows today that Picasso’s “Red Tablecloth” is solidly based on Poussin and Raphael. Does he indeed? Only if he minded his lessons. Actually the constant reorganization of historic values that has characterized the evolution of art since 1860 has been totally misinterpreted by most laymen, especially by lecture-trotting and gallery-haunting laywomen with their heads full of art dealers’ nonsense and their purses full of money. To them it has all been like crazy, man, or isn’t it simply adorable—an onslaught on all civilized values as such. Today these are the people who buy the pictures, subscribe to the art magazines, and appoint the directors of art museums and art schools. If you tell them that there is no important difference in purely painterly means and intent between Jackson Pollock and Tintoretto or Mondrian and Vermeer, they think you are being funny. They think they are like Charley Parker and Duke Ellington. That, of course, is quite possible too, but first one must know what these two musicians are like.
After the first World War a tremendous revulsion swept over the world. In the arts as in politics, those who were felt to be morally or ideologically responsible for the catastrophe were turned on by the young with violence and loathing. The whole structure of liberal humanitarianism was not only called into question; organized groups and disorganized individuals everywhere attacked it with dynamite.

The average man in Russia, whether worker or peasant or intellectual, was convinced he had been betrayed and was sick with disgust. The Bolsheviks were able to organize this revulsion into an antiliberal, antihumane political regime, and it was precisely the rejection of the humanistic values of German Social Democracy that attracted the young to the nationalist and proto-Nazi movements.

In the arts, Dadaism was the popular and sensational expression of this rejection and alienation. The artist who exhibited a log of wood with an axe attached, and the legend, “If you don’t like this piece of sculpture, you dirty bourgeois, make one of your own,” or the other who wanted to mount a loaded pistol pointing out from a frame, with a card attached to the trigger, “Tirez s’il vous plaît!”—these people did not believe the academy was reactionary; they believed it was lethal, and organized society along with it. And it should be remembered that they included in the academy the “modernists” who were their slightly older contemporaries, although they were to convert some of them (for instance, Picabia) for a while and influence others permanently.

Years later, Allen Ginsberg was to write one of his funniest lines, “who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism,” with no foreknowledge that he would himself shortly be part of the pseudo-Dada academy. But that is what happened. The nihilism and disorder (the technical term is anti-nomianism) which arose from the broken heart of Europe in 1918 has become a gimmick, peddled in all the academies of the world, a do-it-yourself kit complete with instruction book in thirty languages and pictographs for the boys with rising expectations who haven’t mastered any alphabet as yet.

In 1918 the price was a broken heart. Today it doesn’t cost a thing; it is one of the perquisites—or is it prerequisites?—of the Welfare State. Drop a card to UNESCO.

A couple of years back, my friend Léon-Gabriel Gros, editor of Cahiers du Sud and feature writer for the Marseille daily, Le Provençal, came up to see me in Aix, all agog. He was going to what was still French Equatorial Africa, on a story. He’d never been that far south and was very excited about the new culture being created by the lads with rising expectations, due to be liberated in a month or so. “Look,” he said, “here in the Conakry paper it says they are having an exhibition of the local art students. I wonder what it will be like? I’m curious to see how the new generation is transmuting their heritage from the great tradition of African sculpture.”

“Oh-hunh,” I said, “Gaby, you’re very naive. I bet you 2000 francs it will be indistinguishable from the Rue de Seine, 10th Street, or the California School of Fine Arts.”
Two weeks later he showed up for lunch with a large portfolio. Out of it, he took with a grin, six watercolors, done by a boy at lycée in Conakry, a boy whose father had been sentenced for cannibalism. They were mules, an infertile cross between Deborah Remington and Sam Francis. "Spengler was right!" said he.

In America after the Second War, there was a period of unbridled nihilism in official life, symbolized by the late Senator McCarthy, and objectified in the dragging futility of the Korean War. Nihilism in the power structure is immediately reflected in nihilism in the intellectuals, as in nineteenth-century Russia. The mirror image of Senator McCarthy is Jack Kerouac. The significant thing about this phenomenon is precisely that it is not rejection, alienation; it is specifically reflection. The Beat evaluation of American life is exactly that of the most extreme reactionaries; it's just that the plus and minus signs have changed places.

Read the Beat novelists on most any subject: their opinions differ in no wise from those of the squares with whom they are engaged in a tug of war. The two parties are pulling on opposite ends of a rope which even the most moderately sophisticated are aware does not exist. This is especially clear in the immense Beat and Hipster literature of the Negro. This is, in every detail, the Negro as believed in by Senator Eastland; it's just that the hippies like them that way. There is a well-known novel laid in San Francisco, but which in fact took place in New York. It is about a Negro dancer and drug addict, a Bohemian avatar of an Africa cannibal priestess with a bone through her nose and a coiffure of blood, cow dung and clay, shaking her primary and secondary sexual characteristics to the savage and inchoate rhythms of jungle drums while the missionary soup comes to a boil. I happen to know this girl. She is a modest little social worker who met the novelist when he was in the last stages of alcoholic collapse and took pity on him for a few days. True, she takes dancing at the New School For Social Research, but so does every other social worker under sixty within commuting distance of New York City. The jungle drums were in fact Charles Mingus' band, a group of disciples of unboiled missionaries like Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Boulez and Bartok.

Jazz, Negroes—the same story is repeated in the hippy's craze for Zen Buddhism. This is the fatuous and flatulent Inscrutable Wisdom of the Ancient East which has been peddled for a century by what are known in show business as Ragheads, on what is known in Variety as the Menopause Circuit. This is simply the craze for dime store orientalism of the club women immortalized by the late Helen Hokinson mixed up with a little pornography. But, in fact, go to one of these swami-led gatherings advertised in the newspapers on Saturday, held in a deteriorated office building or a sample room in a third-rate hotel. Mix with the effeminate men and middle-aged women who make up the congregation. I guarantee you will get more, and more attractive, invitations to commit the sin of impurity for mystical reasons than you will in a Greenwich Village coffee bar, even in one on the East Side in the New Village.

Again, the same story: the immoralism of the new aliénettes is the immoralism of any country club; it flourishes among the badminton courts, the swimming pools, and the ranch wagons. And there it is more fun; the women are washed, the liquor
is better, and there is much, much, less guilt to spoil the pleasure. Note that the appurtenances are the same—leotards and tights, carefully bleached and torn blue jeans, olive drab sneakers with holes in just the right places, “flower arrangements,” hi-fi as loud and expensive as can be managed, “found sculpture” in the tokonoma, or maybe a bit of spontaneous calligraphy painted by the hostess under the influence of peyote. The Beat pad reaches its total realization among the $75-an-hour Bohemians of the canyons back of Beverly Hills or in the apartments of the top personalities of Madison Avenue.

This is true even of dope. The leading magazine of the Beatniks is difficult to distinguish from a house organ for a pharmaceutical house, financed by Chicago money; it is hard to believe it isn’t a giveaway put out by the Mafia. There is only one trouble with this: the dope fiends of Beat literature are a square’s idea of dope fiends. There is, of course, no such thing as a dope fiend; drugs don’t have that effect at all. The drug addict is in fact nothing like this at all. He isn’t like anything in particular, and this is his distinguishing characteristic—that the nonuser cannot distinguish him. As an old friend of mine, one of the original hop musicians and one of the most creative, once said to me, apropos of this matter, “Back in the days when I was a dope fiend, we were under the impression the fewer people knew about it the better. Now these boys show up for their television dates equipped with hypodermic and opium pipes.” Jack Kerouac’s Negro is Senator Eastland’s Negro, and William Burroughs’ drug addict is Commissioner Anslinger’s drug addict.

What has produced this ridiculous charade of revolt amongst the most compromised members of our society? The same thing that has produced similar phenomena on an international political scale—idleness and rising expectations. Society has always produced a lumpen-proletariat. Today the ill-housed, ill-fed, ill-clothed, and illiterate live in glass houses, take lysergic acid, wear leotards, and send their children to progressive schools that specialize in Free Love for infants. We now have a lumpen-intelligentsia and a new kind of lumpen-bourgeoisie.

Norman Mailer wrote a perceptive essay on the hippy as the White Negro, and then proceeded to go and do likewise. I will never forget visiting a Beat bar near Thirty-Fifth and Michigan Avenue, patronized by young Negroes imitating White fools imitating them. So, likewise, the Bohemian is the under or unemployed member of the technical and professional class who imitates the privileges of the ruling class without sharing in their responsibilities, who demands their luxuries and foregoes the ordinary necessities. Now the newly rich imitate their imitators and the lumpen-intelligentsia dutifully play out the roles assigned to them by reactionary and illiterate upstarts.

Did the London Daily Express once say of a nude by Matisse, “It looks like he’d painted his model and rolled her on the canvas,” the time comes when Yves Klein does just that and sells the result to rich illiterate women for pots of money.

We complain today about the quality of our higher education. The fact is that the colleges swarm with youngsters from homes in which there has never been a book. An appreciable number of them are educable, but a large number are not and
would be happier far if they had never been taught to read and write. In the vast conspiracy of organized mediocrity that has been called, mistakenly, the Power Elite, they can go far. They can gain money, leisure; they can even be taught to go through the motions of having taste, as apes can be taught to ride bicycles. They can assume unlimited authority as long as it does not entail responsibility. However awe inspiring their titles and office furniture, they are the technological and professional fellahin of an epoch of lazers and mazers and transistors. Often, when they are young and fresh they give a reasonable imitation of their betters, but as their tissues age and their neurons lose resilience, the patterns of their progenitors reassert themselves. The critical situations that brought forth new responses pass and the past returns. Solomon Reinach once said that the style of barbaric Iron Age Europe lay just below the surface of all Western Art since the fall of Rome; anything that breaks the neoclassic veneer reveals La Tene and Hallstadt. Always there, ready to reproduce the familiar patterns, the Celt and Gaul wait on the Greco-Roman humanist. Pareto called it "the congelation of the aggregates," a conglomeration of polysyllables sufficiently barbarous in itself to reveal something about Pareto.

Marx long ago in controversy with Bakunin pointed out that the lumpen-proletariat—which Bakunin, with what again Marx called his furor aristocraticus—idealized, were just impotent and impoverished bourgeois. So it is only natural that when this class rises to affluence and finds itself with a leisure on its hands for which it has no preparation, it should immediately start to behave as its parents thought the leisure class behaved, out of sheer idleness. *Sex and the Single Women* is a splendid example of what happens when a Mandarin ethic falls into the hands of a person who has no birthright in the caste of Mandarins. This is upper-class morality as seen through the eyes of the scandal sheets and the shop girls' magazines. It's just that the working girl wants some too, and now is in a position to get it. So we get revolutionaries carefully acting out the roles attributed to the revolutionaries by *Time Magazine* or the Chicago Tribune, poets who behave the way chiropractors and Baptist preachers in small isolated Iowa villages believe poets behave. Sugar Hill and Greenwich Village Negroes who suddenly start acting just the way the White Citizens' League says Negroes act. Madison Avenue long since discovered that all you have to do is create an Image; somebody will show up immediately to exemplify it.

There is only one trouble with this: these people breed. They fill suburbs and exurbs and cooperative apartments; they fill colleges and schools and PTA's; they pay taxes and vote. This means that they have the power to force themselves into strategic positions and to exert mass pressures. So today a college professor brings out a cramming syllabus on the Beat Generation. "Compare Allen Ginsberg with Antonin Artaud. Compare Denise Levertow with Christina Rossetti. Gregory Corso is: (A) a street in Rome; (B) a Beat poet; (C) a part played by the late George Raft. Marihuana is: (A) poison; (B) a fun thing; (C) a stimulus to creativity... and so on." All well-appointed art schools give courses in found sculpture with weekly visits to the City Dump. Ph.D.'s at Juilliard join the Black Muslims. Jazz singers with one-sixteenth Negro blood throw away their hair straightener and found Back to Africa movements and lecture before suburban white women's clubs. Perhaps
worst of all is music. Here the omnipotence of stereotyped modernism from serialism to John Cage is so absolute that never a peep or a squeak, not even an electronic one, breaks the overpowering total roar of the dullest sounds ever emitted on the earth by man, beast, or machine. The academic sterility of a contemporary music contest must be experienced to be believed, as anyone who has ever judged such will tell you.

What can be done about it? Nothing. For a long period the Prince Consort and the Empress Eugenie were arbiters of Europe's most cultivated taste. As they used to say in Anglo-Saxon, "That passed away; this will too."