To Feel Alive

Émile Armand

1910

I. As I write these lines, election season is in full swing. The walls are plastered with posters of every color where people claim to be of every flag, every "color" of opinion. Who doesn't have his party, his program, his profession of faith? Who is not either a socialist, a radical, a progressive, a liberal, or a "proportionalist" — the newest fad? This abnegation of the self is the great malady of the century. One belongs to an association, a union, a party; one shares the opinions, the convictions, the rule of conduct of another. One is led, a follower, a disciple, a slave, never oneself.

It's true that this is less taxing. To belong to a party, adopting someone else's program, adjusting to a collective line of conduct, is to avoid thinking, reflecting, creating one's own ideas. It is to dispense with acting by oneself. It is the triumph of the famous theory of the "least effort," for the love of which so many stupid things have been said and done.

Some call this living. It's true: the mollusk lives, the invertebrate lives; the plagiarist, the copycat, the babbler all live; the lemming, the traitor, the slanderer and the gossip all live. Let us leave them and dream not only of living, but something more: "to feel alive."

II. To feel alive is not only to be aware that we are regularly performing the functions that maintain the individual (and, if you like, the species). Nor is feeling alive to perform the acts of one's life within a narrow design, in line with some wise book written by some author who knows nothing of life but its hallucinations, crucibles, and equations. To feel alive is certainly not to keep to neatly graveled paths in a public garden when the capricious trails of wild undergrowth are calling out to you. To feel alive is to vibrate, thrill, shudder with the perfume of flowers, the songs of birds, the crashing of the waves, the howling of the wind, the silence of solitude, the feverish voice of crowds. To feel alive is to be as sensible to the plaintive chant of the shepherd as to the harmonies of great operas, to the radiant influence of a poem as to the pleasures of love.

To feel alive is to render exciting those details of one's life that are worth the trouble: to make of the latter a fleeting experiment, and of the first an experiment that succeeds. All of this with no constraints, with no program imposed in advance; according to one's temperament, then, to one's state of being in the moment, one's conception of life.

III. One can think oneself an anarchist and vegetate. One can mirror the anarchism of one's newspaper, one's favorite writer, one's group. One can call oneself original and deep down be nothing more than a second- or third-degree add-on or outsider.

Being bound by the yoke of a so-called "anarchist" morality is to be always tied down. All a priori moralities are the same: theocratic, bourgeois, collectivist or anarchist. Doubled over under a rule of conduct contrary to your judgment, reason, and experience, to what you feel and desire, on the pretext that it is the rule chosen by all the members of your group, is the act of a monk, not of an anarchist. It is not the act of a negator of authority to fear a loss of esteem or incurring the disapproval of your circle. All that your comrade can ask of you is not to encroach on the practice of his life; he cannot go farther.

IV. An essential condition for "feeling alive" is to know how to appreciate one's life. Morals, sensations, rules of behavior, emotions, knowledges, faculties, opinions, passions, meaning, the brain, etc. — so many means that can allow us to approach our life. So many servants at the command of the "self" for it to develop and expand. Mastering them all, the conscious "negator of authority" does not allow himself to be mastered by any of them. When he succumbs, it is from lack of education of the will. This is not irreparable. The studied "one-beyond-domination" is not fearful; he enjoys everything, bites into everything, within the limits of individual appreciation. He tastes everything and nothing is repugnant to him, so long as he maintains his moral equilibrium.

Only the anarchist can feel himself living, for he is the unique one among men, the only one whose appreciation of life has its source in himself, without the impure intermixing of an authority imposed from without.

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Retrieved on September 15, 2011 from fr.wikisource.org. Proofread online source RevoltLib.com, retrieved on July 14, 2020.
Originally published as “Se sentir vivre” in *L’Ère nouvelle* 46, mid-April 1910. Translated by Alejandro de Acosta.

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