

Arnold Zweig on Art and Politics (1921)

Abstract

In this excerpt, German-Jewish writer Arnold Zweig (1887-1968) describes the stimulating effect that political upheaval, change, and even violence could have on the creative mind. Zweig, whose wartime experience had turned him into a confirmed pacifist, was very much influenced by the political events of his time. He had to flee Germany in 1933 after Hitler's rise to power and went first to Czechoslovakia, then to Switzerland, France, and finally Palestine. He had to leave Palestine after some years, however, since he clashed with Jewish nationalists there. He eventually returned to Germany and settled in East Berlin in 1948. By then he was a committed Communist and would go on to become an intellectual figurehead of the GDR.

Source

But is there anyone, then, who seriously doubts that this epoch, which is now beginning and whose destructive force has already more than proven itself against empires and classes, and which will surely wreak further destruction, opens up one thing for sure: as many possibilities for art as any epoch could offer. Possibilities for poetry, to be precise. The art of poetry lives not from itself – nourished by the violent impulses of the agitated soul, stirred by life in its wildest forms, widened by the horizons that surround people, and spanned by the heroic sky of impending catastrophes, she has always seen the ages of her birth, the birth of great works of art and powerful forms. These works, by force of necessity, might not come to light until some time after the thunderbolt of their conception, yet their rhythm, format, heat, and stimulating force betray the nature of their conception: namely (not in mild and leisurely circumstances), not in well-to-do cultures that play with intellect, also not in a generation that experiences sensations and raptures through form for form's sake: but rather in the shock that grips all life forms and reverberates all the way back to the roots of the people, rather in the face of the [Greek goddess] Ananke, of all-ruling fate, to which the gods succumb as well, rather in those epochs that throw into question all of the possibilities and facts of the past and that, in a most terrifying fashion, erect uncertainty as the symbol of man. Eras of impending decline and of last resorts, eras of colossal efforts and agitation that even the most lethargic cannot ignore are not merely the precursors of but rather the precondition for the work of poets, for great poetic epochs – Athens' struggle for existence was the precondition for the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides; the comedies of Aristophanes had, as their precondition, the feverish fights of the Agora; English drama had the civil war and the war with France; the German *Sturm* and *Drang*, and the Classicism to which it gave birth, had the stirrings of the revolution, which affected all classes, values, and (class-related) burdens of the people; the novels of Balzac and Stendhal, like the novellas and dramas of Kleist, had the heroic horizons of the age of Napoleon as their precondition; the great Russian novel and the dramas of Hauptmann had the first incursions of the far-reaching revolution of the fourth estate into the soul of the people.

[...]

We know this: and sometimes we observe the creator at work again with wanton rejoicing. This present state (of war) of revolution sows the seeds of poetry, which finds open furrows everywhere. For talented people are everywhere today, and in those places where they are agile, affectable, and prolific enough: the era is a stallion of power. She has ripped bourgeois safety and lameness out of the life of the individual: she has placed adventure in the middle of everyday life again and, in doing so, has made the great novel and the great novella possible again, for their axis is adventure: the adventure of the whole

person, not only his soul and his reason. This same power (street), on which one, accounting for [the possibility of] dumb accidents, used to move forward with a (very) measurable but still unproductive safety is today the scene of abrupt catastrophes. A person leaves his house in order to repair to some civilian destination: and suddenly he is taken into custody by the white guard, interrogated, beaten, incarcerated; he will be released a fully different person: activated, his soul filled by a sense of injustice; driven by the need for some sort of redress, he returns to his home, he has become partisan, passionate – a poetical being.

Source: Arnold Zweig, "Theater, Drama, Politik" *Der Spiegel. Beiträge zur sittlichen und künstlerischen Kultur*, edited by Robert Preczthl. Berlin, volume 2, issue 16/17, January 10, 1921, pp. 4–9; reprinted in *Arnold Zweig 1887–1968: Werk und Leben in Dokumenten und Bildern: mit unveröffentlichten Manuskripten und Briefen aus dem Nachlass*, edited by Georg Wenzel. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1978, pp. 115–17.

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