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June 20, 2010

The Anvil Review

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On Isabelle Eberhardt's "Criminal" and Renzo Novatore's "Toward the Creative Nothing"

Quotes refer to the Eberhardt Press edition and the Venomous Butterfly Publications edition, respectively.

Crime

In "Criminal," Isabelle Eberhardt's memoir of land colonization in Algeria written around the turn of the last century, the farmer Mohammed Achouri cuts an interesting figure. A "tall thin old man with the face of an ascetic, his hard features set in an expression of constant preoccupation", a quiet character who stands "a bit apart from the others", he is not a likely hero. Though he stands out, and in fact his inability to fit in singles him out for downfall, his unheroic resistance fits well within the unheroic reality of the story; the French have colonized Algeria, and they force the people of Bou Achour to give their prime land to colonists, a double theft because in the collective society of that region they had never even had to buy and

sell land among themselves or "resort to the system of inheritance." They get mere pennies for their land, their complaints are rebuffed, and they have no choice but to work under the new landlords. At harvest time they watch the riches of their toil and their earth taken from them, but that night, the new barn burns down, and the harvest with it. Nonetheless, a suspect is arrested, nothing changes, and the power of colonialism continues its cruel exercises, unfazed.

It was not until I read the story the second time that I noticed it was Mohammed Achouri who played the instigating role in getting the other Arabs of Bou Achour to protest the low prices they were given for their land by the French colonizers. The author mentions no rousing speech on his part, or natural charisma. He simply cannot stomach the indignity, and suggests they protest. The gesture is unsuccessful, the colonial administrator is powerless to change the decision that has come down from Algiers, and many of them, including Achouri, must go to work for their new landlord. Achouri alone is described as "openly sullen."

At the outset Mohammed Achouri had placed a great distance between himself and the Frenchman, to whose good-natured sallies he remained wholly impervious. When the barn was burned down, *suspicion pointed to Mohammed Achouri[…] They found him guilty. He was a simple, unyielding man who had been robbed and betrayed in the name of laws he did not understand. And he had directed all his hatred and rancor against the usurping colonist.*

"Crime, particularly among the poor and downtrodden," concludes Eberhardt, "is often a last gesture of liberty."

The Human Frogs

In his poetic rant "Toward the Creative Nothing," Renzo Novatore, an Italian individualist anarchist active from 1908 to his death in 1922, addresses another social tragedy, World War I, with much more heroic terms. He glorifies those who resisted,

Because dying, they have drunk the sun.
The sun of life, the sun of struggle, the sun of an Idea.

Dedicated to Mauricio Morales, a year after his death.

those "who died with stars in their eyes," with a Nietzschean exuberance, while saving extreme contempt for his fellow proletarians who heeded the lies and marched off to war. "The human frogs knew neither how to distinguish their own enemy nor how to fight for their own ideas [...] They fought against each other for their enemy."

In Novatore's writing, one finds a clear contempt for the masses, not out of any aristocratic notions of inherent worth, but because they have behaved despicably and idiotically, going even against their own interests to participate in their own meaningless slaughter. Novatore will not excuse anyone who is less than great, and he certainly will not romanticize them simply for belonging to a mass. His judgments are harsh, and he could be accused of insensitivity to the many complex reasons members of that mass had for going off to war, but also in the interests of sensitivity one must imagine the horror of his generation and understand that at bottom there was no good excuse for obedience to that degree. Populism only becomes a form of justification. Yet some people cite this antisocial contempt, this Nietzschean adulation of those few who do not follow the herd, to argue that the individualist anarchists were counterrevolutionary elitists, or even fascists.

Eberhardt, very much a kindred spirit, evinces a similarly antisocial attitude. She writes of the need "To be alone, to be poor in needs, to be ignored, to be an outsider who is at home everywhere, and to walk, great and by oneself, toward the conquest of the world." She tersely dismisses "the slavery that comes of contact with others," and it is precisely in such phrases that she can be written off as dangerously impractical. *Useless.* How could solitude possibly be applied as a social program? The conclusion is that there is *nothing revolutionary* in hers or similar writings.

It is precisely the hidden totalitarianism of this line of reasoning that I want to unmask.

Against What Does the Antisocial Direct Its Attack?

I'll start with the disingenuous claim of a connection between individualist anarchism and fascism. Novatore, one of Italian fascism's most zealous enemies and earliest victims (he was shot down by police in 1922), had some bold thoughts on the matter. In talking about how socialism functioned to control the revolt of the proletariat by promising a base material equality while stifling talk of true freedom, he writes:

Because, if when the nation, if when the state, if when democratic Italy, if when bourgeois society trembled in pain and agony in the knotty and powerful hands of the "proletariat" in revolt, socialism had not basely hindered the tragic deadly hold—losing the lamps of reason in front of its wide-opened eyes—certainly fascism would never even have been born[…] Because fascism is the stunted and deformed creature born of the impotent love of socialism for the bourgeoisie. One of them is the father, and the other the mother.

In fact, we see in fascism not the heroic ideal of Novatore but the very populism he attacks. In order to save the bourgeoisie, fascism makes them indistinguishable from the masses by replacing Nietzsche's superior individual with a superior race, integrating labor unions and industry, combining socialism with nationalism, creating the perfect herd.

The other arguments against individualism are rigid and insensitive precisely because they do not understand these thoughts as a process, a movement, rather than a fixed position or *staked territory*, as ideas are taken to be by many other thinkers. When Isabelle Eberhardt talks about nomadism and denounces the sedentary life, attacks in multiple forms the very staking of territory, how could one not guess that her thoughts would be equally nomadic? In the writings collected in "Criminal," one finds not a static view of society but a tension, a need to depart in order to arrive, to lose in order to find.

The reason that the politicians of the mass cannot understand this antagonism between the nomadic and the sedentary is because they try to ascribe it a fixed position. And if there must be a right and a wrong, the right has to lie with the sedentary, because their programmatic existence makes possible the infrastructure and the production on which the nomads depend. So if there can only be one, it must be the ordinary folk. The nomads are marginalized, the villages with their stable families multiply and spread, the future is theirs, but they are plagued by inexplicable rebellion. Each time the rebels are cast out, to protect the social whole, which must be. That stability is scientifically proven as the base for all material existence, so what threatens it must be controlled. *The administrator, a pleasant man, raised his hands in a gesture of powerlessness. "I can't do anything. I told them in Algiers it meant the ruin of the tribe. They wouldn't listen."*

In fact, the antagonism between the sedentary and the nomadic, between "the human frogs" and those who inhabit at once the heights and the depths, cannot be understood with fixed positions. Nomadism is relative. It defines itself in opposition to an other. Unlike ordinary folk, the nomads do not seek to erase that which does not have right on its side. The nomads trade with the villagers, just as Novatore's "Free Man" may fight alongside others to communlize material wealth, at the same time as they turn away from society, to seek, to explore, to plumb the depths and climb the heights, because life, like rebellion, is unending. Its contradictions outnumber any dialectical process and to be crazy is simply to feel those contradictions and act on them, without permission from society. And this maligned adventurism, and nothing else, is the moment of hope.

We will avenge them.

We will avenge them because they are our brothers!

We will avenge them because they have fallen with stars in their eyes.

The Control of Madness

Eberhardt: *Many times on the paths of my errant life, I asked myself where I was going, and I've come to understand, among ordinary folk and with the nomads, that I was climbing back to the sources of life; that I was accomplishing a voyage into the depths of my humanity.*

Unsurprisingly, Novatore gives us a similar image: "In the bottom, we want to live the reality of sorrow; in the heights, the sorrow of the dream."

The heights and depths that these two simultaneously inhabit are a guerrilla's mountain hideout which the armies of sedentary morality arrayed on the plains can never penetrate. The antisocial, individualistic thoughts of these writers are not useful, not practical, not static, not reproducible, not programmatic. They are real, and they are threatening.

They say: because I am mad, no stable state of being will hold me. Because I cannot hide my sullenness, no barn will be safe from me. Because I am shifting and crazy, no treaty or written law will pacify me. For this reason, they are a threat to the politicians of the mass movements as much as they are to the gatekeepers of the present order. Because as much as they will participate wholeheartedly in the revolution against the state and against capitalism, they will not be content with the commune. They will continue to rebel because they understand freedom as a process, as a constant renegotiation of itself and an unending attack on any definitional boundaries.

In *Chiusi a Chiavi* Bonanno writes how, with the triumph of the reformers, the prisons may well be replaced by mental institutions. Those who break laws may be forgiven, but those who can never follow them cannot be trusted. After all, what better definition of craziness than the absence of self-preservation, the imperviousness to both the carrot and the stick? So conditions will improve for those who can be programmed, while those who are wholly insubmissive must be increasingly isolated.

I do not know anymore[…] But the inner voice that drives and disturbs me, that will tomorrow push me again along the paths of life; that voice is not the wisest one in my soul, it is the spirit of agitation for which the earth is too narrow and which has not known how to find its own universe. Eberhardt recognizes a multiplicity of voices in her own thinking, and acknowledges that the force that sets her life in motion is also impractical. Unprogrammatic.

The parallel misogyny of both writers reflects the untenable nature of their relationship with society, with femininity standing in for passivity, nurturing, the reproduction of culture. But even more it reflects that their writings represent a spiritual quest in process, a search for peace in turmoil. The fact that Isabelle Eberhardt was socialized as a woman, but passed much of her life as a man can add credibility to the hypothesis that what they hated was femininity as a social value. Are we to read Eberhardt, for her misogynistic writings, as a self-hating woman, or to consider that she hated those women who resigned themselves to their socially assigned roles rather than taking on the dress and customs of men and venturing to the far corners of the earth? The language of the time could not adequately express gender identities, so we cannot know if Eberhardt's passing was a strategy to be able to travel alone or whether he was actually a trans man, but the question is an interesting one.

The Social Assumptions of Individualism

Beneath all the antisocial venom and harsh criticism in Renzo Novatore's "Toward the Creative Nothing," a sensitive reader will notice certain social assumptions that mirror Eberhardt's sojourn being in some ways an ultimate search for community. Deep in a passage that begins by calling for "the liberation of the individual", Novatore has buried a pithy couplet.

To communalize material wealth.

To individualize spiritual wealth.

Novatore devotes no time to elaborate this process of communalization; he merely takes it as a given. In other words, what for social and mass anarchists is the end goal, and what they accuse is lacking in individualist anarchism, is for Novatore just a starting point.

Other indications of the communal or collective assumptions of this idea of struggle further clarify that as much as these writers posit a conflict between the individual and society, it is not a dichotomy or a choice between one and the other, and certainly not a call for annihilation and unification. Early in the text we find the following admonition: "our individual 'crimes' must be the fatal announcement of a great social storm." And towards the end: "We have killed 'duty' so that our ardent desire for free brotherhood acquires heroic valor in life." Far from hating any notion of community or solidarity, Novatore expresses an "ardent desire for free brotherhood". The distinction is that for society to exist free of all the lies, conventions, and hypocrisies that imprison it (and it is these corruptions that Novatore spends the most of his time addressing in this text), individuals must embark on an unending process of personal or spiritual liberation simultaneous to the material struggle for collective liberation that will destroy the state and the bourgeoisie.

Eberhardt, for her part, shows an obvious sensitivity and compassion for the tribulations of the community in her writings about the tragedy of colonization in Bou Achour, in her clear sympathy for their custom of sharing land without inheritance or title.

The Winged Monster

Around the same time Renzo was penning "Toward the Creative Nothing," Franz Kafka wrote in his diary:

Anyone who cannot cope with life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate… but with his other hand he can jot down what he sees among the ruins, for he sees different and more things than the others; after all, he is dead in his own lifetime and the real survivor.

It is worth mentioning that I'm drawing this quote from Hannah Arendt's essay on Walter Benjamin, another person whose life was fraught with the antisocial tension.

In my mind the most beautiful image anarchists have given to the world is that of the fecundity of these ruins, whether that be in Durruti's "new world" or in Bakunin's "creative passion." In one missive, Isabelle Eberhardt talks about a "winged monster, come to destroy us all" and the most striking thing about the image she paints is how beautiful it is, the fantasy of destruction. And it is immediately followed by the sound of rain in the desert. On a literary level, this is a cathartic release from the tension she has built up between creation and destruction. Symbolically, it is rebirth.

A similar monster appears in Novatore's passages on the carnage of the War, but this is "a Death without wings". With both of these writers, values are shifting, creation and destruction are inseparable, neither death nor life are inherently good or bad. The reason Novatore's monster is an obscene thing is not because it is Death but because it has no wings, because the manner in which it dances, the manner in which it mows down its victims, is vulgar, and because its victims themselves are unworthy of a heroic death, not having lived heroic lives.

"I'm quite aware that this way of life is dangerous," writes Isabelle, "but the moment of danger is also the moment of hope[…] When my heart has suffered, then it has begun to live." Renzo echoes her: "And if our ideas are dangerous, it is because we are those who love to live dangerously."

Again and again, Eberhardt and Novatore use similar language to tease out this contradiction, this inversion of conventional moralities. Politicians of all stripes have coined another term for that winged monster, that dangerous life. They call it "adventurism." But it goes much deeper than that.