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Anarchy and Literature

Bernard Lazare

February 1894

We had the audacity to believe that not everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds, and we stated and state still that modern society is despicable, founded upon theft, dishonesty, hypocrisy and turpitude. One of us attacked the voracious ogre of militarism, one that other bloody idol that goes under the name of fatherland, another committed the abomination of rejecting war, butchery, ceaseless looting, hatred of peoples and races and issued a call to universal brotherhood, and somebody else again spoke ill of the oppressive State, the heartless rule of law, the narrowness and wrong-headed basis of justice, vanity and property, villainy and conventional morality.

And so their beefs with us are plain: we are anarchists-nothing wrong with that-but anarchist dilettantes ..If! have things right, the meaning is that our ideas, our theories or our doctrines are pantomime doctrines, theories and ideas that we embrace for effect, that they are our equivalent of the romantics' red waistcoat, in short, that we espouse them so as to shock the bourgeois and, in the last analysis, are play-actors bereft of all conviction.

This notion is a great credit to the brains that hatched it and I do not find it unpleasant. Anything else coming from its authors

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would have come as a surprise to me. It is self-evident that only after one has judged oneself does one pass judgment on others. Now, most of our accusers who are coming to the end of a glittering career or who are entering the lists in the hope of following in the footsteps of their elders, have always earned a living from their opinions, or indeed have formed opinions in order to make a living from them. They have marketed and priced them, and, having only ever had ideas that were commodities. they have a hard time understanding the notion that a man might be disinterested or a true believer. While there may be a few sincere souls among those taking exception to our writings, they then woke up to the excellence of the privileges in which they share, and cannot comprehend how they could be assailed other than as a pastime or out of jealousy, or indeed. to conjure up new personal stipends. The world being founded upon falsehood. the only virtue grudgingly acknowledged is sincerity. especially as those who aspire to this ideological loyalists can only prove it through what they write and this is the very thing that is being called into question. We have no evidence to present, besides that contained in our writings. other than the insincerity of our adversaries, whose abjurations are legendary. and we must wonder whether in fighting us they are not indirectly pleading their own cause, for it would be acknowledging a shameful vileness, would it not. to concede that there are some persons capable of letting themselves be prompted by motives other than monetary?

However, this dilettantism of ours is not, they say, solely characterized by lack of bona fides and by affectation. Our speech. our writing and our failure to act bear witness to our dilettante status. Which really is an abominable feature of ours, and if Vaillant is an odious criminal for throwing that bomb, we, on the other hand. are odious sycophants because we first of all were beaten to it and then because we primed him just as we did Ravachol and Leauthier, and will go on to prime others. unless somebody stops us first.

These two arguments are contradictory, and the contradiction derives from the construction placed upon the word "act" and action itself. Act does not just mean physical action: the picking up of rifle, dagger or dynamite; there is intellectual action and we know that only too well because we stand accused of targeting those around us for it. So the charge of inactivity is unfounded and at best it might be argued that we understand action more as Diderot, Rousseau or the Encyclopaedists did, than in the manner of an Orsini, Fieschi or Saint-Rejaut (to borrow examples from right across the spectrum). There is no denying that, and by my reckoning in so doing we fulfill our role as intellectuals-I am deliberately using that word which the brainless gentlemen of the press throw in our faces by way of insult. Yes, as they would have us confess, we are the cause, or one of the causes, driving men to revolt, so there is no denying that we are activists. We could not be dilettantes unless we were to shrug off responsibility for our words and our writings. Now, who ever told you that we refused to accept that responsibility? For my own part, I accept it fully and blatantly, minimal though it may be, in that it makes only an infinitesimal addition to the responsibility accepted by poets, philosophers, novelists, dramatists, thinkers and all independent authors in every age, down through the ages. Since you condemn us, condemn our elders too: condemn Rabelais, condemn Montaigne, condemn La Bruyere, condemn Voltaire, condemn Heine, Hugo, Byron, Shelley, all the rebels, all the libertarians. We will certainly find ourselves in a company every bit as good as yours and, between them and you, we long ago made our choice.

It may well be that simpletons, primitives, reckless types already soured by poverty and by despair have drunk from some page of ours the craving for something better and, in their naivete, thought that they might hasten the arrival of that something better by lashing out. But did we create these embittered, desperate wretches, or was that you?

Are we the source of the distress and destitution that still beset millions? Is it thanks to us and to our libertarianism. to our protestations that poor wretches perishing from hunger and cold are picked up off the streets, boulevards and squares? Was it not you who made them ready to give us a hearing. you, the stalwarts and pillars of society and of order? You prattle about responsibilities: so claim your own share, just as we claim ours!

Make something of a confession, therefore, and appoint one of your representatives to take on this task some day and we will be reconciled with some splendid, rabid mentors. honourable champions of forcefulness. What can you say? You will say: "We believed in one thing only-money: we have spent our lives championing it and in its pursuit, we have idolized the mighty and the rich, we have run after the thieving financiers and shady politicians and scooped up the coins spilling from their pockets. we have thrown our support behind all rapine, every abomination, and if we have ever shown any sign of pity, that pity was lucrative and we knew how to turn a profit from it. We sold ourselves to all who made us an offer, everybody who could pay our price." Deep down, good fellows, if you do not come over to the Revolution, it is no doubt because you think that it has no immediate profit to offer you.

So what can we tell you and what matter to us are your carping, your insults and your nonsense? We believe in everything that you deny, love everything that you detest, we hate everything that you hold dear; we have faith in our ideas and you have no ideas, only appetites; we are minds and you bellies, and every fibre of our being opposes you and we despise you every bit as much as you abominate us.

Which of us is right? Time will tell. Perhaps you reckon that tomorrow will be yours, that the hue and cry you have started is not going to end and that, worn out by your yapping, tied down by the ropes you are trying to throw over us, we will fall silent. Stop deluding yourselves. No law can halt free thought, no penalty can stop us from uttering truth and justice according to our lights, and

the Idea, gagged, bound and beaten, will emerge all the more lively, splendid and mighty.