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Anonymous: That Most Prolific of Anarchist Writers

Alex Gorrion

2011

Without a doubt, Anonymous has written more than any other anarchist over the last 150 years. Sometimes she uses a pseudonym and sometimes she simply leaves the byline blank; we know it's her. But because of the perplexing diversity of pieces she has authored, it becomes impossible to offer a coherent critique of this important writer's canon. Instead, perhaps a look at her canonicity will be of use.

While I don't wish to discount her significance, after all I share much in common with her, I feel compelled to publicize her stylistic dishonesties. What are her signature styles?

Security: Anonymous is said to be untraceable, a bit like JD Salinger.

Modesty: Anonymous rejects any personality cult and focuses all attention on the ideas and not the messenger.

Sameness: Anonymous is the Everyman, the black mask. She could be any one of us.

Theft: Anonymous opposes intellectual property. She plagiarizes and shares freely.

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Unfortunately, Anonymous is not as secure as she clearly likes to believe; she leaves her fingerprints all over nearly everything she writes. Just as Canada's Direct Action were tracked down on the basis of language used in their communiqués, just as *The Coming Insurrection* was traced to the Tarnac 9, Anonymous's potent name does not protect her from State surveillance. Authors who use characteristic language, authors who communicate in any way with the publisher, can be connected to their work. They are only hiding themselves from the public.

On those few occasions Anonymous takes all the necessary precautions, above and beyond what she signs to the byline, she is truly untraceable. But the rest of the time what she actually accomplishes is to create a false image of security. Those who don't fit this image, who write under their own names, are painted as unsafe and unhip. In fact, the strategy of hiding in plain sight deserves to be considered on its merits and accepted as a legitimate choice. This strategy entails, rather than hiding from State surveillance, being so public that the State would be afraid to target you, because the repression, which is meant to isolate, would instead create even more links of solidarity. But in the meantime, Anonymous is so cool, in her shroud of secrecy, that anyone opting for a different strategy to avoid repression just seems like a sell-out.

This coolness reveals Anonymous's lack of modesty. While on many occasions, she does effectively stay out of the spotlight, just as often her invisibility makes her even more an object of attention. Take the Invisible Committee, as an example. In my opinion, they've written some intelligent things, but many of their adepts don't even seem to notice. They're too busy grooving on how damn stylish those rogues are. Or, we could compare someone like Derrick Jensen with a faceless group like CrimethInc. Sure, there are plenty of people who go gaga for Jensen, but he could never acquire the brand status of CrimethInc, cause he's just one dude, but CrimethInc, by deper-

sonalizing themselves, have become a phenomenon. And then there's the Zapatistas. Their idea of wearing a mask in order to become visible is admirable, but a side effect of the inherent sexiness of masks has been the creation of the antiglobalization movement's greatest superstar (yes, even greater than Bono) in the person of el Subcomandante.

Named anarchist writers are more likely to be careerists, but Anonymous and her ilk are by no means immune to fame. A mask, in this case, is much like a gun. You can use it when the situation calls for it, or you can pose with it. The mask in itself is no guarantee to modesty.

When Anonymous writes without a persona, leaving the byline blank rather than signing multiple pieces with the same pseudonym, she does indeed accomplish the sameness she strives for, and this can be empowering because it erodes the idea the separation between professional anarchist writers and rank and file anarchists. However, I would attach the caveat that there is something to gain from the consistency lent by a persona, whether it's a pseudonym or not. Not only is it personally satisfying to see a specific writer develop over time, or to see how someone's works communicate with one another—to see patterns in a coherent body of works, but it can be politically useful to trace how people influence one another and develop over time.

Finally, there is the matter of theft, which I wholly support. But I want to drop a little word that will make our more illegalist brethren shudder: accountability. While it is true that ideas are collectively created, the individuals who do the actual creating should not disappear within this collectivity. If we renounce the separation between beliefs and actions, we acknowledge that people bear responsibility for the arguments they send out into the world—both the good ones and the bad ones. It's less a question of taking credit, and turning this credit into some kind of ideological capital, and more a question of providing a sort of traceability to ideas: allowing a reader to

reference the influential writings where a theme was elaborated in more depth, or in another historical and cultural context. There's also the issue of taking responsibility for what you write so you can face the consequences if your research is sloppy or if you're making unfair criticisms and false assertions.

I don't wish to establish a new norm, or to discourage the intentional mixing of ideas with total disregard for their origins, just to suggest that Anonymous's much lauded style has disadvantages as well as advantages.

I sincerely hope Anonymous keeps her pen in motion, scribbling her sometimes brilliant, sometimes half-baked thoughts across the pages of our times. But even such a multifaceted writer as this one cannot express all the thoughts and necessities of anarchy. My favorite writings have always been her communiqués, writ large with shattered glass and hasty spray-paint. But Howard Zinn and Emma Goldman are pretty good reads too. We could use more of all of them.