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# Anarchism in Literature

Voltairine de Cleyre

In the long sweep of seventeen hundred years which witnessed the engulfment of a moribund Roman civilization, together with its borrowed Greek ideals, under the red tide of a passionate barbarism that leaped to embrace the idea of Triumph over Death, and spat upon the Grecian Joys of Life with the superb contempt of the Norse savage, there was, for Europe and America, but one great animating Word in Art and Literature—Christianity. It boots not here to inquire how close or how remote the Christian ideal as it developed was in comparison with the teachings of the Nazarene. Distorted, blackened, almost effaced, it was yet some faint echo from the hillsides of Olivet, some indistinct vision of the Cross, some dull perception of the white glory of renunciation, that shaped the dreams of the evolving barbarian, and molded all his work, whether of stone or clay, upon canvas or parchment. Wherever we turn we find a general fixup or caste, an immovable solidity of orders built upon orders, an unquestioning subordination of the individual, ruling every effort of genius. Ascetic shadow upon all; nowhere does a sun-ray of self-expression creep, save as through water, thin and perturbed. The theologic pessimism which appealed to the fighting man as a proper extension of his own superstition—perhaps

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hardly that, for Heaven was but a change of name for Valhalla,—fell heavily upon the man of dreams, whose creations must come forth, lifeless, after the uniform model, who must bless and ban not as he saw before his eyes but as the one eternal purpose demanded.

At last the barbarian is civilized; he has accomplished his own refinement—and his own rottenness. Still he preaches (and practices) contempt of death—when others do the dying! Still he preaches submission to the will of God—but that others may submit to him! Still he proclaims the Cross—but that others may bear it. Where Rome was in the glut of her vanity and her blood-drunkenness—limbs wound in cloth of gold suppurating with crime, head boastfully nodding as Jove and feet rocking upon slipping slime—there stand the Empires and Republics of those whose forefathers slew Rome.

And now for these three hundred years the Men of Dreams have been watching the Christian Ideal go bankrupt. One by one as they have dared, and each according to his mood, they have spoken their minds; some have reasoned, and some have laughed, and some have appealed, logician, satirist, and exhorter all feeling in their several ways that humanity stood in need of a new moral ideal. Consciously or unconsciously, within the pale of the Church or without, this has been “the spirit moving upon the face of the waters” within them, and at last the creation is come forth, the dream that is to touch the heart-strings of the World anew, and make it sing a stronger song than any it has sung of old. Mark you, it must be stronger, wider, deeper, or it cannot be at all. It must sing all that has been sung, and something more. Its mission is not to deny the past but to reaffirm it and explain it, all of it; and to-day too, and to-morrow too.

And this Ideal, the only one that has power to stir the moral pulses of the world, the only Word that can quicken “Dead Souls” who wait this moral resurrection, the only Word which can animate the dreamer, poet, sculptor, painter, musician, artist of chisel or pen, with power to fashion forth his dream, is Anarchism. For

Anarchism means fullness of being. It means the return of Greek radiance of life, Greek love of beauty, without Greek indifference to the common man; it means Christian earnestness and Christian Communism, without Christian fanaticism and Christian gloom and tyranny. It means this because it means perfect freedom, material and spiritual freedom.

The light of Greek idealism failed because with all its love of life and the infinite diversity of beauty, and all the glory of its free intellect, it never conceived of material freedom; to it the Helot was as eternal as the Gods. Therefore the Gods passed away, and their eternity was as a little wave of time.

The Christian ideal has failed because with all its sublime Communism, its doctrine of universal equality, it was bound up with a spiritual tyranny seeking to mold into one pattern the thoughts of all humanity, stamping all men with the stamp of submission, throwing upon all the dark umber of *life lived for the purpose of death*, and fruitful of all other tyrannies.

Anarchism will succeed because its message of freedom comes down the rising wind of social revolt first of all to the common man, the material slave, and bids him know that he, too, should have an independent will, and the free exercise thereof; that no philosophy, and no achievement, and no civilization is worth considering or achieving, if it does not mean that he shall be free to labor at what he likes and when he likes, and freely share all that free men choose to produce; that he, the drudge of all the ages, is the cornerstone of the building without whose sure and safe position no structure can nor should endure. And likewise it comes to him who sits in fear of himself, and says: "Fear no more, neither what is without or within. Search fully and freely your Self; hearken to all the voices that rise from that abyss from which you have been commanded to shrink. Learn for yourself what these things are. Belike what they have told you is good, is bad; and this cast mold of goodness, a vile prison-house. Learn to decide your own measure of restraint. Value for yourself the merits of selfishness and unselfishness; and strike

you the balance between these two: for if the first be all accredited you make slaves of others, and if the second, your own abasement raises tyrants over you; and none can decide the matter for you so well as you for yourself; for even if you err you learn by it, while if he errs the blame is his, and if he advises well the credit is his, and you are nothing. *Be yourself*; and by self-expression learn self-restraint. The wisdom of the ages lies in the reassertion of all past positivisms, and the denial of all negations, that is, all that has been claimed by the individual for himself is good, but every denial of the freedom of another is bad; whereby it will be seen that many things supposed to be claimed for oneself involve the freedom of others and must be surrendered because they do not come within the sovereign limit, while many things supposed to be evil, since they in nowise infringe upon the liberty of others are wholly good, bringing to dwarfed bodies and narrow souls the vigor and full growth of healthy exercise, and giving a rich glow to life that had else paled out like a lamp in a grave-vault.”

To the sybarite it says, Learn to do your own share of hard work; you will gain by it; to the “Man with the Hoe,” Think for yourself and boldly take your time for it. The division of labor which makes of one man a Brain and of another a Hand is evil. Away with it.

This is the ethical gospel of Anarchism to which these three hundred years of intellectual ferment have been leading. He who will trace the course of literature for three hundred years will find innumerable bits of drift here and there, indicative of the moral and intellectual revolt. Protestantism itself, in asserting the supremacy of the individual conscience, fired the long train of thought which inevitably leads to the explosion of all forms of authority. The great political writers of the eighteenth century, in asserting the right of self-government, carried the line of advance one step further. America had her Jefferson declaring:

“Societies exist under three forms: 1. Without government as among the Indians. 2. Under governments

who would have the individual acknowledge nothing, neither science, nor logic, nor any other creation of his thought, as having authority over him, its creator. The last, Whitman, the great sympathetic, all-inclusive Quaker, whose love knew no limits, who said to Society's most utterly despised outcast,

“Not until the sun excludes you, will I exclude you,”

and who, whether he be called poet, philosopher, or peasant was supremely Anarchist, and in a moment of weariness with human slavery, cried:

“I think I could turn and live with animals, they seem so placid and self-contained, I stand and look at them long and long. They do not sweat and whine about their conditions, They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins, They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God; Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things; Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago, Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.”

wherein every one has a just influence. 3. Under governments of force. It is a problem not clear in my mind that the first condition is not the best.”

She had, or she and England together had, her Paine, more mildly asserting:

“Governments are, at best, a necessary evil.”

And England had also Godwin, who, though still milder in manner and consequently less effective during the troublous period in which he lived, was nevertheless more deeply radical than either, presaging that application of the political ideal to economic concerns so distinctive of modern Anarchism.

“My neighbor,” says he, “has just as much right to put an end to my existence with dagger or poison as to deny me that pecuniary assistance without which I must starve.”

Nor did he stop here: he carried the logic of individual sovereignty into the chiefest of social institutions, and declared that the sex relation was a matter concerning the individuals sharing it only. Thus he says:

“The institution of marriage is a system of fraud... Marriage is law and the worst of all laws... Marriage is an affair of property and the worst of all properties. So long as two human beings are forbidden by positive institution to follow the dictates of their own mind prejudice is alive and vigorous... The abolition of marriage will be attended with no evils. We are apt to consider it to ourselves as the harbinger of brutal lust and depravity; but it really happens in this, as in other cases, that the positive laws which are made to restrain our vices, irritate and multiply them.”

The grave and judicial style of "Political Justice" prevented its attaining the great popularity of "The Rights of Man," but the indirect influence of its author bloomed in the rich profusion of Shelleyan fancy, and in all that coterie of young litterateurs who gathered about Godwin as their revered teacher.

Nor was the principle of no-government without its vindication from one who moved actively in official centers, and whose name has been alternately quoted by conservatives and radicals, now with veneration, now with execration. In his essay "On Government," Edmund Burke, the great political weathercock, aligned himself with the germinating movement towards Anarchism when he exclaimed: "They talk of the abuse of government; the thing, the thing itself is the abuse!" This aphoristic utterance will go down in history on its own merits, as the sayings of great men often do, stripped of its accompanying explanations. Men have already forgotten to inquire how and why he said it; the words stand, and will continue a living message, long after the thousands of sheets of rhetoric which won him the epithet of "the Dinner-bell of the House" have been relegated to the dust of museums.

In later days an essayist whose brilliancy of style and capacity for getting on all sides of a question connect him with Burke in some manner as his spiritual offspring, has furnished the Anarchists with one of their most frequent quotations. In his essay on "John Milton," Macaulay declares, "The only cure for the evils of newly acquired liberty is—more liberty." That he nevertheless possessed a strong vein of conservatism, sat in parliament, and took part in legal measures, simply proves that he had his tether and could not go the length of his own logic; that is no reason others should not. The Anarchists accept this fundamental declaration and proceed to its consequence.

But the world-thought was making way, not only in England, where, indeed, constitutional phlegmatism, though stirred beyond its wont by the events of the close of the last century, acted frigidly upon it, but throughout Europe. In France, Rabelais drew the idyllic

uncleanliness"—Zola was more than an unconscious Anarchist, he is a conscious one, did so proclaim himself. And close beside him, Maxim Gorki, Spokesman of the Tramp, Visionary of the Despised, who whatever his personal political views may be, and notwithstanding the condemnations he has visited upon the Anarchist, is still an Anarchistic voice in literature. And over against these, austere, simple, but oh! so loving, the critic who shows the world its faults but does not condemn, the man who first took the way of renunciation and then *preached* it, the Christian whom the Church casts out, the Anarchist whom the worst government in the world dares not slay, the author of "Resurrection" and "The Slavery of Our Times."

They come together, from the side of passionate hate and limitless love—the volcano and the sea—they come together in one demand, freedom from this wicked and debasing tyranny called Government, which makes indescribable brutes of all who feel its touch, but worse still of all who touch it.

As for contemporaneous light literature, there are magazine articles and papers innumerable displaying here and there the grasp of the idea. Have we not the *Philistine* and its witty editor, boldly proclaiming in Anarchistic spelling, "I am an Anarkist?" By the way, he may now expect a visitation of the Criminal Anarchy law. And a few years since, Julian Hawthorne, writing in the *Denver Post*, inquired, "Did you ever notice that all the interesting people you meet are Anarchists?" Reason why: there is no other living dream to him who has character enough to be interesting. It is the uninteresting, the dull, the ready-made minds who go on accepting "Dead limbs of gibbeted gods," as they accept their dinner and their bed, which someone else prepares. Let two names, standing for strangely opposing appeals yet standing upon common ground, close this sketch—two strong flashes of the prismatic fires which blent together in the white ray of our Ideal. The first, Nietzsche, he who proclaims "the Overman," the receiver of the mantle of Max Stirner, the scintillant rhetorician, the pride of Young Germany,

the freedom it is already won, and all the formalists from Besant to the end of days will never tempt the litterateurs into chains again. But the essay is well worth reading as a specimen of right reasoning on art. As in other modes of literary expression this tendency in the novel dates back; and it is strange enough that out of the mouth of a toady like Walter Scott should have spoken the free, devil-may-care, outlaw spirit (read notably "Quentin Durward"), which is, perhaps, the first phase of self-assertion that has the initial strength to declare itself against the tyranny of Custom; this is why it happens that the fore-runners of social change are often shocking in their rudeness and contempt of manners, and, in fact, more or less uncomfortable persons to have to do with. But they have their irresistible charm all the same, and Scott, who was a true genius despite his toadyism, felt it and responded to it, by always making us love his outlaws best no matter how gently he dealt with kings. Another phase of the free man appears in George Borrow's rollicking, full-blooded, out-of-door gypsies who do not take the trouble to despise law, but simply ignore it, live unconscious of it altogether. George Meredith, in another vein, develops the strong soul over-riding social barriers. Our own Hawthorne in his preface to the "Scarlet Letter," and still more in the "Marble Faun," depicts the vacuity of a life sucking a parasitic existence through government organization, and asserts over and over that the only strength is in him or her—and it is noteworthy that the strongest is in "her"—who resolutely chooses and treads an unbeaten path.

From far away Africa, there speaks again the note of soul rebellion in the exquisite "Dreams" of Olive Schreiner, wherethrough "*The Hunter walks alone.*" Grant Allen, too, in numerous works, especially "The Woman Who Did," voices the demand for self-hood. Morris gives us his idyllic "News from Nowhere." Zola, the fertile creator of dungheaps crowned with lilies, whose pages reek with the stench of bodies, laboring, debauching, rotting, until the words of Christ cry loud in the ears of him who would put the vision away, "Whited sepulchers, full of dead men's bones and all

picture of the Abbey of Thelemes, a community of persons agreeing to practice complete individual freedom among themselves.

Rousseau, however erroneous his basis for the "Social Contract," moved all he touched with his belief that humanity was innately good, and capable of so manifesting itself in the absence of restrictions. Furthermore, his "Confessions" appears the most famous fore-runner of the tendency now shaping itself in Literature—that of the free expression of a whole man—not in his stage-character only, but in his dressing-room, not in his decent, scrubbed and polished moral clothes alone, but in his vileness and his meanness and his folly, too, these being indisputable factors in his moral life, and no solution but a false one to be obtained by hiding them and playing they are not there. This truth, acknowledged in America, in our own times, by two powerful writers of very different cast, is being approached by all the manifold paths of the soul's travel. "I have in me the capacity for every crime," says Emerson the transcendentalist. And Whitman, the stanch proclaimer of blood and sinew, and the gospel of the holiness of the body, makes himself one with drunken revelers and the creatures of debauchery as well as with the anchorite and the Christ-soul, that fullness of being may be declared. In the genesis of these declarations we shall find the "Confessions."

It is not the "Social Contract" alone that is open to the criticism of having reasoned from false premises; all the early political writers we have named were equally mistaken, all suffering from a like insufficiency of facts. Partly this was the result of the habit of thought fostered by the Church for seventeen hundred years,—which habit was to accept by faith a sweeping generalization and fit all future discoveries of fact into it; but partly also it is in the nature of all idealism to offer itself, however vaguely in the mist of mind-struggle, and allow time to correct and sharpen the detail. Probably initial steps will always be taken with blunders, while those who are not imaginative enough to perceive the half-shapen figure will nevertheless accept it later and set it upon a firm foundation.

This has been the task of the modern historian, who, no less than the political writer, consciously or unconsciously, is swayed by the Anarchistic ideal and bends his services towards it. It is understood that when we speak of history we do not allude to the unspeakable trash contained in public school text-books (which in general resemble a cellar junk-shop of chronologies, epaulets, bad drawings, and silly tales, and are a striking instance of the corrupting influence of State management of education, by which the mediocre, nay the absolutely empty, is made to survive), history which is undertaken with the purpose of discovering the real course of the development of human society. Among such efforts, the broken but splendid fragment of his stupendous project, is Buckle's "History of Civilization,"—a work in which the author breaks away utterly from the old method of history writing, viz. that of recording court intrigues, the doings of individuals in power as a matter of personal interest, the processions of military pageant, to inquire into the real lives and conditions of the people, to trace their great upheavals, and in what consisted their progress. Gervinus in Germany, who, within only recent years, drew upon himself a prosecution for treason, took a like method, and declared that progress consists in a steady decline of centralized power and the development of local autonomy and the free federation.

Supplementing the work of the historian proper, there has arisen a new class of literature, itself the creation of the spirit of free inquiry, since, up till that had asserted itself, such writings were impossible; it embraces a wide range of studies into the conditions and psychology of prehistoric Man, of which Sir John Lubbock's works will serve as the type. From these, dark as the subject yet is, we are learning the true sources of all authority, and the agencies which are rendering it obsolete; moreover, a curious cycle of development reveals itself; namely, that starting from the point of no authority unconsciously accepted, Man, in the several manifestations of his activity, evolves through stages of belief in many authorities to one

lives of the plain people, holds ever before us the supreme duty of truth to one's inner being in defiance of Custom and Law; it is so in Nora, who renounces all notions of family duty to "find herself"; it is so in Dr. Stockman, who maintains the rectitude of his own soul against the authorities and against the mob; it should have been so in Mrs. Alving, who learns too late that her yielding to social custom has brought a fore-ruined life into the world besides wrecking her own; the Master Builder, John Gabriel Borkman, all his characters are created to vindicate the separate soul supreme within its sphere; those that are miserable and in evil condition are so because they have not lived true to themselves but in obedience to some social hypocrisy. Gerhart Hauptmann likewise feels the new pulsation: he has no hero, no heroine, no intrigue; his picture is the image of the headless and tailless body of struggle,—the struggle of the common man. It begins in the middle, it ends in nothing—as yet. To end in defeat would be to premise surrender—a surrender humanity does not intend; to triumph would be to anticipate the future, and paint life other than it is. Hence it ends where it began, in murmurs. Thus his "Weavers." Octave Mirbeau, likewise, offers his criticism on a world of sheep in "The Bad Shepherds," and Sara Bernhardt plays it. In England and America we have another phase of the rebel drama—the drama of the bad woman, as a distinct figure in social creation with a right to be herself. Have we not the "Second Mrs. Tanqueray" who comes to grief through an endeavor to conform to a moral standard that does not fit? And have we not Zaza, who is worth a thousand of her respectable lover and his respectable wife? And does not all the audience go home in love with her? And begin to quest the libraries for literary justifications of their preference?

And these are not hard to find, for it is in the novel particularly, the novel which is the special creation of the last century, that the new ideal is freest. In a recent essay in reply to Walter Besant, Henry James pleads most Anarchistically for his freedom in the novel. All such pleas will always come as justifications, for as to



until the end “of kingdoms and of kings,” though their authors “take refuge in the kingdom” and quaver palsied hymns to royalty with their cracked voices and broken lutes. For this is the glory of the living ideal, that all that is in accord with it lives, whether the mouthpiece through which it spoke would recall it or not. The manifold voice which is one speaks out through all the tongues of genius in its greatest moments, whether it be a Heine writing, in supreme contempt,

“For the Law has got long arms, Priests and Parsons  
have long tongues And the People have long ears,”

a Nekrassoff cursing the railroad built of men, a Hugo painting the battle of the individual man “with Nature, with the Law, with Society,” a Lowell crying:

“Law is holy aye, but what law? Is there nothing more  
divine Than the patched up broils of Congress,—venal,  
full of meat and wine? Is there, say you, nothing  
higher—naught, God save us, that transcends Laws of  
cotton texture wove by vulgar men for vulgar ends?  
Law is holy: but not your law, ye who keep the tablets  
whole While ye dash the Law in pieces, shatter it in  
life and soul.”

and again,

“One faith against a whole world’s unbelief, One soul  
against the flesh of all mankind.”

Nor do the master dramatists lag behind the lyric writers; they, too, feel the intense pressure within, which is, quoting the death-word of a man of far other stamp, “germinal.” Ibsen’s drama, intensely real, common, accepting none of the received rules as to the conventional plot, but having to do with serious questions of the

authority, and finally to *no authority* again, but this time conscious and reasoned.

Crowning the work of historian and prehistorian, comes the labor of the sociologist. Herbert Spencer, with infinite patience for detail and marvelous power of classification and generalization, takes up the facts of the others, and deduces from them the great Law of Equal Freedom: “A man should have the freedom to do whatsoever he wills, provided that in the doing thereof he infringes not the equal freedom of every other man.” The early edition of “Social Statics” is a logical, scientific, and bold statement of the great fundamental freedoms which Anarchists demand.

From the rather taxing study of authors like these, it is a relief to turn to those intermediate writers who dwell between them and the pure fictionists, whose writings are occupied with the facts of life as related to the affections and aspirations of humanity, among whom, “representative men,” we immediately select Emerson, Thoreau, Edward Carpenter. Now, indeed, we cease to reason upon the past evolution of liberty, and begin to feel it; begin to reach out after what it *shall* mean. None who are familiar with the thought of Emerson can fail to recognize that it is spiritual Anarchism; from the serene heights of self-possession, the Ego looks out upon its possibilities, unawed by aught without. And he who has dwelt in dream by Walden, charmed by that pure life he has not himself led but wished that, like Thoreau, he might lead, has felt that call of the Anarchistic Ideal which pleads with men to renounce the worthless luxuries which enthralled them and those who work for them, that the buried soul which is doomed to mummy cloths by the rush and jangle of the chase for wealth, may answer the still small voice of the Resurrection, there, in the silence, the solitude, the simplicity of the free life.

A similar note is sounded in Carpenter’s “Civilization: Its Cause and Cure,” a work which is likely to make the “Civilizer” see himself in a very different light than that in which he usually beholds himself. And again the same vibration shudders through “The City

of Dreadful Night,” the masterpiece of an obscure genius who was at once essayist and poet of too high and rare a quality to catch the ear stunned by strident commonplaces, but loved by all who seek the violets of the soul, one Thomson, known to literature as “B. V.” Similarly obscure, and similarly sympathetic is the “English Peasant,” by Richard Heath, a collection of essays so redolent of abounding love, so overflowing with understanding for characters utterly contradictory, painted so tenderly and yet so strongly, that none can read them without realizing that here is a man, who, whatever he *believes* he believes, in reality desires freedom of expression for the whole human spirit, which implies for every separate unit of it.

Something of the Emersonian striving after individual attainment plus the passionate sympathy of Heath is found in a remarkable book, which is too good to have obtained a popular hearing, entitled “The Story of My Heart.” No more daring utterance was ever given voice than this: “I pray to find the Highest Soul,—greater than deity, better than God.” In the concluding pages of the tenth chapter of this wonderful little book occur the following lines:

“That any human being should dare to apply to another the epithet of ‘pauper’ is to me the greatest, the vilest, the most unpardonable crime that could be committed. Each human being, by mere birth, has a birthright in this earth and all its productions; and if they do not receive it, then it is they who are injured; and it is not the ‘pauper’—oh! inexpressibly wicked world!—it is the well-to-do who are the criminals. It matters not in the least if the poor be improvident, drunken, or evil in any way. Food and drink, roof and clothes, are the inalienable right of every child born into the light. If the world does not provide it freely—not as a grudging gift, but as a right, as the son

of the house sits down to breakfast,—then is the world mad. But the world is not mad, only in ignorance.”

In catholic sympathy like this, in heart-hunger after a wider righteousness, a higher idea than God, does the Anarchistic ideal come to those who have lived through old phases of religious and social beliefs and “found them wanting.” It is the Shelleyan outburst:

“More life and fuller life we want.”

*He* was the Prometheus of the movement, he, the wild bird of song, who flew down into the heart of storm and night, singing unutterably sweet the song of the free man and woman as he passed. Poor Shelley! Happy Shelley! He died not knowing the triumph of his genius; but also he died while the white glow within was yet shining higher, higher! In the light of it, he smiled above the world; had he lived, he might have died alive, as Swinburne and as Tennyson whose old days belie their early strength. Yet men will remember

“Slowly comes a hungry people as a lion drawing nigher. Glares at one who nods and winks beside a slowly dying fire.”

and

“Let the great World swing forever down the ringing grooves of Change.”

and

“Glory to Man in the highest for Man is the Master of Things”

and

“While three men hold together, The kingdoms are less by three”