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Max Nettlau

Biographical Notice of Ernest Coeurderoy

(1825–1862)

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In June 1852, two events, quickly covered with the veil of silence, would deeply effect the exile community in London. Ledru-Rollin, Louis Blanc, Pierre Leroux, Cabet, Félix Pyat and their friends, some Blanquists, Proudhonians and independent socialists, some refugees from May 15 and June of 1848, as well as June 13, 1849, and the great majority of the outcasts from the coup d'état, rubbed elbows then in a common exile. It was the time of the "Unions Socialistes" and other efforts, destined to fail, to create a fictive solidarity between people who, as the history of September 1870 to May 1871 has demonstrated, would fight again, to death, as soon as one of their groups came to power.

Three men saw clearly from that moment and protested. The "Verse Recited June 24, 1852 at the Grave of an Exile," by Joseph Déjacque, was one of these acts; recalling June 1848, said to the exiles and former men of state gathered there:

... Today as then, assassins and victims
Find themselves present... Sublime teachings!
Those who banished us are banished in their turn.

.....

Crime is always a call to crime.
The coup d'État of June, that nameless vampire,
In you, Tribunes, in you, Bourgeois, is incarnated;

And December is only its legitimate child!...

.....

There is only one talisman for all: Liberty...

The other act was the publication of the little booklet *The Barrier of the Combat*, by Ernest Cœurderoy and Octave Vauthier (Brussels, 1852). “The political comedy that plays out around us has wrung the same cry from our heart, and we have published *The Barrier of the Combat*; this was like kicking an anthill,” wrote Cœurderoy a little later; “Like me, you curse all authority,” he said to his collaborator, the brother of Louis-Léger Vauthier, the Fourierist engineer, representative in 1849 and prisoner of June 1849. Octave Vauthier appeared to be limited to this single public protest; Joseph Déjacque, the worker, was driven by poverty to America; he did not stop, and *la Question révolutionnaire*, the libertarian utopia *l'Humanisphère*, and the journal *le Libertaire* which he wrote by himself, from 1858 to 1861, in New York, show him as an isolated, but tireless propagandist of the most advanced ideas of his time. Cœurderoy, a refugee from June 13, 1849, was limited, in his articles published from 1849 to 1851, to an impersonal propaganda of socialist and revolutionary ideas without a distinct school; by *The Barrier of the Combat* he finally regained his complete independence, and from 1852 to 1855 he gave us four books and two booklets, among which the two parts of the *Jours d'Exil* constitute his principal work.

The fate of these publications, the most majestic expressions of liberty and revolt of their times, is a little unknown chapter full of intrigues and adventures. The irreverence with which the authors of *The Barrier of the Combat* had yanked the beards of the pontiffs of the proscription was a welcome pretext to dispense with seriously discussing the ideas of Cœurderoy; only Alfred Talandier discussed them courteously, in 1854. For the rest, “the conspiracy of silence, the most odious conspiracies, then, to every extreme, calumny, choler and hate, exhausting their rage on this collection of heresies and on its unfortunate author” (words of Cœurderoy on the subject of his first book.) He was made “an exile in exile.” This explains how his writings, banned equally by the governments and the exiles, have been lost, to the extent that, of the six volumes and booklets, we know of perhaps fifty copies, the majority of which are in the hands of three or four collectors. The years from 1856 to 1862 in the life of Cœurderoy are so little known that we do not know if he had suddenly ceased all publication after 1856, for reasons which are a separate problem, or if some publications have been completely suppressed, destroyed, or if instead, despite long years of research, they remain still elusive? Although his memory has received a belated satisfaction in the well-done article dedicated to him, in 1869, in the Dictionary of his compatriot from Yonne, Pierre Larousse, the oblivion into which the work of the writer had fallen was so great that between 1880 et 1883, his mother, octogenarian, isolated and perhaps discouraged by her long sufferings, made a resolution — which she executed with her own hand — to burn the writings of her son, of which she had gathered a very great quantity; and probably she also destroyed what she possessed of the manuscripts, letters, etc., of the neglected thinker.

Thus only rare copies of the six publications from 1852 to 1855 and the articles published from 1849 to 1851 have survived all these vicissitudes; and all those who have read one of the writings from 1852 to 1855 have been struck by the originality

and literary power of Cœurderoy, of his absolute sincerity, of his love of liberty and beauty, of his wide-ranging conceptions of a free and happy future, of his hatred of oppression in all its forms, — in sum, thinking they were opening a good book of propaganda, of which there are so many, they have been astonished to find themselves face to face with a work of art which, from the point of view of the intimate union of art and ideas, is probably unique. That is especially true of the *Jours d'Exil*, of which the second part, the last work of Cœurderoy, also marks the apogee of his talent.