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Mallarmé: Anarchist

Poetry & Anarchy in Belle Epoque France

Peter Lamborn Wilson

2014

“...all poets are outlaws.”

–Stephane Mallarmé, *The Evolution of Literature* (1891)

Art historians, literary historians and theorists seldom bother to learn anything about their subjects outside their own little bailiwicks, especially when it comes to anarchism.

A painter or poet might have been an anarchist, but entire biographies and studies of him or her can be (and are) written without mentioning the fact. If any academic bothers to notice the matter, it will be done perfunctorily and with embarrassment.

I’ve read recent biographies of Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp in which their involvement with anarchism was treated briefly as youthful folly, with the implication that a real artist could never have taken such notions seriously.

For instance, Duchamp’s enthusiasm for individualist anarchist Max Stirner (which he acquired from French painter, poet, and typographer, Francis Picabia) was dismissed with a single paragraph—although for me it shed great light on Duchamp’s work. Clearly, the biographer hadn’t even bothered to read Stirner.

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Like the interest many artists and poets have taken in occultism, their involvement in anarchism can safely be ignored—in fact, to show concern with it could prove dangerous for academic critics or historians, who might thus be tarred with the brush of crackpottery and thereby lose their tenure track! The ideas which might have inspired a creative mind are considered mere dreck.

Unfortunately, many anarchists suffer from a similar self-blindfolding. The Cause for them is too often limited to its political and/or philosophical aspects at the expense of its cultural efflorescences. Certain artists and poets may have been anarchists, but other anarchists will remain dismissive of this fact, especially if the art in question is “difficult”—i.e., supposedly elitist.

Anarchism has always been for some, the preserve of a self-chosen elite or radical aristocracy (as Nietzsche might have defined it), but the residual influence of workerism and social realism often inculcate an anti-intellectual or anti-aesthetic attitude in many of us. Anarchists are often ignorant of our own cultural heritage, and this seems sad to me.

Recently I picked up a book by Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (N.Y.: Verso, 1988/2008) hoping to find an exception to the dreary rule of separation between poetry and politique. Rimbaud is often treated as a radical stylist, but rarely as a radical thinker or activist, and I eagerly anticipated a study of his involvement in the Paris Commune of 1871. Unfortunately, Ross pays no attention (and even dismisses as irrelevant) the interesting question of Rimbaud’s presence in Paris during the days of the Commune and what he might have done there. She does devote a few interesting pages to Rimbaud’s revolutionary and even anarchist ideas, but the largest portion of her book is devoted to LitCrit-type expositions of Form.

In order to boost Rimbaud as a down and dirty proletarian leftist, Ross uses Stéphane Mallarmé as a whipping boy and never ceases to slag him at every opportunity as a bourgeois aesthete. Mallarmé

was a lifelong and enthusiastic anarchist, so her ignorance (or willful ignoring) of this fact began to annoy me.

Of course, most studies of Mallarmé never ever breathe a word about his politics, but the facts can be learned if you try. She didn't.

Ross makes a big fuss about how Baudelaire and Mallarmé have been elevated to the academic canon of accepted greatness while Rimbaud has been slighted. This might be true in France, but hardly in Anglo-America, where Rimbaud is quite literally sanctified—as he well deserves.

But Mallarmé is merely a “bourgeois intellectual,” a “fetishizer of the poetic text,” she writes. Oddly enough, Ross turns to Mallarmé for a quotation defending Rimbaud's work as “a unique adventure in the history of art,” but fails to wonder why such a bourgeois elitist so admired her hero. Perhaps the two were, in some sense, on the same wave-length? Comrades in arms, so to speak? Never mind, don't ask.

After reading Ross, I fortunately turned up (in a used bookstore) a copy of Richard D. Sonn's *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siecle France* (Univ. of Nebraska, 1989), a rare example of an academic study linking politique and poetique.

Sonn plants Mallarmé firmly in the anarchist milieu during the period of the attentat bombings of the 1890s. Mallarmé was especially close to the anarchist art critic Felix Feneon, who published Mallarmé in his *La Revue Indépendante*, and was a regular guest at Mallarmé's famous Tuesday at-homes.

Mallarmé subscribed faithfully to Jean Grave's *Le Révolté*, the bible of French anarchism. He contributed to the cause, including ten francs to an anarchist “soup-lecture” series that had been busted by the flics—“a gift from a man who is not rich...From the heart for your work, Mallarmé.”

Sonn writes of Mallarmé's literary work: “[He] recognized the anarchistic implications of signifying freedom through poetic discourse, and he clearly believed that poetry should...embody anarchist ideals. A poem that shocked bourgeois sensibilities was akin

to revolution; one that achieved freedom from prior constraints was a metaphor for utopia.”

When Felix Feneon was arrested for possession of explosive devices (which we know, from later research, he actually used at least once, in the unsolved 1894 bombing of the Restaurant Foyot in Paris where the wealthy and politicians dined), Mallarmé commented, “I know of no other bomb, but a book. Certainly, there were not any better detonators for Feneon than his articles. And I do not think that one can use a more effective weapon than literature.”

When Feneon stood trial along with 29 other anarchists for conspiracy in the famous Case of the Thirty, Mallarmé appeared as a character witness for him. All were acquitted.

The great value of Sonn’s book lies in his understanding that the movement known as Symbolism was inspired not just by hermeticism and occultism (Baudelaire and Rimbaud learned about the “correspondences” and symbols of alchemy from the protosurrealist “utopian socialist” Charles Fourier), but also from the works of Proudhon, Stirner, Kropotkin, Bakunin, Reclus, and even Nietzsche.

Mallarmé’s poetry, which is certainly among the most “difficult” ever written, nevertheless, reveals these influences both in form and content. He deserves much better than to be written off as a “bourgeois intellectual.”

He was a comrade.