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My Debt to Anarchism

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March 1915

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I owe a singular and supreme debt to Anarchism. It was the active agent in introducing me to my Friend, my own Soul. We had been strangers up to that time. There had been periods when I was not aware I had a soul, or, having one, I believed it had been given to me to shatter into bits and to deal out the pieces in continuous self sacrifice.

This idea was the result of Christian teaching. “Ye are not your own,” Christianity had said to me. Back to this black lie Anarchism shouted “You are first and foremost and forever your own.”

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me” the man-made God of the Christian Religion had said. Anarchism answered: “Thou shalt have no other god before Self.” To the commandment “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” Anarchism replied, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor by loving thyself.”

In attempting to “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and unto God the things which are God’s” there had been nothing left of Life’s gift for self-development Anarchism tore the veil of this sanctified hypocrisy and said: “Render unto Self that which is its own—your soul.”

He who calls such deification of individuality ugly and destructive, selfishness, denies that Nature's method of differentiation has been of benefit to growth. Society has need of differentiation of human beings, as Nature has of differentiation of species. The greatest gift a man or woman gives to the world is his peculiar selfhood in all its variation from his neighbor's.

We should be ill-pleased with the rose in our garden if it so spent its color, fragrance and form upon a bed of violets that it lost the very semblance of its own being and became itself a violet. We would raise an angry protest if it were suggested that the bandit Villon, the conjugally unfaithful Shakespeare, and the love-roaming Burns had foregone the expression of their natures in those experiences which to-day are enriching the world of poetry, and had remained at home respectable, orthodox citizens and irreproachable family men.

We should breathe anathema on the memory of Ibsen had he refused to leave his country and family because of their claims of obligation, and never have unfolded his soul in the dramas which have "moved man's search to vaster issues."

Is the world poorer for the "selfishness" of the rose? Of Villon and Shakespeare and Burns and Ibsen? Has their self expression been ugly and destructive to the ideals of Right and Beauty? No, the world is only poorer when men deny to it the infinite variety which individuality can give. Anarchism has found this out. It can introduce you to yourself. Then you can introduce yourself to the world. For not until you find your right relation to yourself can you find your right relation to Society.