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(An American Anarchist. The Life of Voltairine de Cleyre. By Paul Avrich. Princeton University Press. 1978. $16.50)

Voltairine de Cleyre is one of the most unjustly neglected figures of American radicalism. Essayist, poet, translator, and orator she played a prominent part in the libertarian movement between 1887 and her death in 1912 at the age of 45.

It is for this reason that I welcome Paul Avrich's well-written and serious biographical study. In it he vividly depicts her struggles to assert herself as a free individual, her relations with her comrades and the evolution of her thought. He also gives us fascinating sketches of some of her close friends and corrects the errors made by Emma Goldman and Hippolyte Havel in their biographical essays about her.

Voltairine de Cleyre began her public life as a lecturer in the freethought movement. She became interested in anarchism as a result of the Chicago Affair of 1886 and at first championed the ideas of Benjamin Tucker, to whose paper *Liberty* she contributed. She soon came under the influence of her friend and lover Dyer D.

Lum, however, who, like Tucker, was a mutualist, but favoured militant participation in trade union struggles. Towards the end of her life she began to work closely with the libertarian communists, but refused to commit herself to their ideas, preferring to call herself an "anarchist without adjectives" and adopting a pluralist view of any future "free society." Indeed, Paul Avrich shows conclusively that, despite claims by Rudolf Rocker and Emma Goldman, she did not embrace communism. But I am not convinced that her efforts to maintain a balance between individualism and communism rested on any sure foundation. My own experience is that one eventually has to choose one or the other and I chose individualism.

In this connection, Voltairine de Cleyre's attitude towards philosophical egoism is significant. Her mentor, Dyer D. Lum, believed that the "devotee of a cause is never the devotee of self" and he sneeringly dismissed egoists as "dung-beetles," "people who think a great deal of their ego and don't care a rap for society." In her obituary essay about him, written after his suicide in 1893, she describes his views without any dissent so one may take it that she then agreed with them. In her later writings, however, she began to stress the importance of thinking "a great deal" of one's ego. Even in one of her most "Tolstoyan" essays, *Crime and Punishment*, she wrote "I believe that the purpose of life (insofar as we can give it purpose, and it has none save what we give it) is the assertion and the development of strong, self-centred personality." In *Anarchism and Literature*, not only does she echo Max Stirner by stating that "none can decide…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," but she pays tribute to him as "the pride of Young Germany who would have the individual acknowledge nothing, neither science nor logic, not any other creation of his thought, as having authority over him, its creator."

Nonetheless, despite her recognition of the value of egocentricity, Voltairine de Cleyre remained haunted to the end of her life

by a religious concern for the sacredness of principles, the notion that one has to serve a "cause" greater than oneself. Two years before her death she wrote one of her most impressive essays, *The Dominant Idea*, which shows very clearly the conflicting strains of her thought. She praises the "liberty and pride and strength of the single soul" and "the immortal fire of Individual Will which is the salvation of the future." At the same time she holds up for emulation that most obnoxious source of support for authority, the view that "to conceive a higher thing than oneself and live towards that is the only way of living worthily." Indeed, she concludes her essay by transforming "Individual Will" into her "Dominant Idea" and thus negates it.

It is not surprising that not long after writing this essay she became overwhelmed by a bleak despair about her life and ideas. Her vain attempt to walk the philosophical tightrope between egoism and altruism, the profane and the sacred, eventually crumbled. She found emotional refuge from her dilemmas in the shape of the Mexican Revolution which "at any moment of our lives…may invade our homes with its stern demand for self-sacrifice and suffering." Abandoning her critical awareness, she plunged into a frenzied campaign to rally support for the Mexican revolutionaries whom she idealised in a manner beyond belief in one so intelligent. She died before she could witness the revolution ending in a mere change of rulers, as is the melancholy habit of such ventures.

The life and ideas of Voltairine de Cleyre offer much of interest to individualists. She came so near to adopting a thoroughgoing individualist position, but sadly could not overcome the religious-collectivist nonsense she had imbibed in her youth ("God must fall in every shape" cried John Henry Mackay). In my early days as an "anarcho-communist" I found her writings both inspiring and sufficiently disturbing to implant in my thinking a seed of doubt about my championing of this contradiction in terms that later formed part of a blossoming of anarchist individualism. In Paul Avrich she

has found an able biographer whose pages bring her to life once more.