Anarchist Poetics

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> "[The poet never] voices received opinions, or gives clear expression to the confused feelings of 'the masses': that is the function of the politician, the journalist, the demagogue."
>
> – Herbert Read, "Art and Alienation"

> "Poetry is the end(s) of politics."
>
> –L. Mirari, "The Politics of Refusal vs. the Refusal of Politics"

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I: Poetic Acts

How does poetics inform anarchism? And how does anarchism inform poetics? "Poetics," from the Greek verb *poieo* ("I create"), means "way of creating"; thus, "anarchist poetics," or anarcho-poiesis, is a way of creating anarchy, a way for anarchists to "reconcile utopian ideals with practical realities," as the announcement for this event describes the problem. Particularly in the 20th century, certain strains of poetics have informed, or were informed by, the anarchist movement. This exchange continues today.

Some would push the link between poetics and anarchism–the collective struggle for individual emancipation–further. In *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Vaneigem writes "Poetry is an act which engenders new realities: it is the fulfillment of radical theory, the revolutionary act par excellence." In a similar vein, in "On Poetic Living," Wolfi Landstreicher insists that *poiesis* should be understood as a creative act–and not simply as a literary artifact: "When I speak of poetry, I am not talking about versifying or wordsmithing. I am speaking about creating lives of passion, intensity and wonder." And the poet Laura Riding makes a succinct case for anarchist poetics–stressing the act over the ism–when she states bluntly that "Anarchism is not enough." But before we turn to the question how anarcho-poiesis might inform various anarchist projects, I want to offer some historical context to this overlooked element of anarchist thought.

II: "Little swarms of matter..."

In *Anarchy and Culture*, David Wier argues that where anarchism in the 19th century failed to coalesce into a mass social movement, it compensated for some of its losses by triumphing in the cultural field in the 20th century. Thus,

in its early modernist incarnations, for better or for worse, anarchism frequently adopted the form of an iconoclastic avant-garde aesthetic, one that was directed against bourgeois complacency and hypocrisy. As Allan Antliff observes, "anarchist discourses concerned with art were instrumental in shaping what it meant to be 'modern.'"

Thus we find that in their public statements and manifesti, many of the Dadaists, Futurists, and Surrealists expressed solidarity with the destructive tendencies of incendiaries such as Ravachol and Emile Henri, whose seemingly irrational bombings in the late nineteenth century captured the public's attention. In the classic surrealist novel Nadja, Breton celebrated the riots and looting in Paris following the convictions of Sacco and Vanzetti, while even the otherwise bookish Mallarme had earlier praised convicted bombers as "angels of purity."

As early as 1914, following in the footsteps of Kandinsky, whose essay "On the Question of Form" declared anarchism as an aesthetic model, the Dadaist poet Hugo Ball, who was also a seminal figure in the German and Swiss anarchist movements, had begun a major study of Bakunin, adopting the Russian anarchist's notorious statement "the urge to destroy is also a creative urge" as a slogan for Dada. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic in New York, one of the more prominent avant-garde publications adopted the perspicacious title TNT. So when we examine the various cultural formations within the movement, it becomes clear that anarchism, during its earliest phases, integrated its attacks on second-order representations such as the state, church, schools, private property, etc., with attacks on first-order representations, such as language and instrumental reason. Anarcho-poiesis establishes the critical missing link between these two orders of representation.

But we need to back up even further, to Kropotkin. Informed by his work as a geographer and naturalist, Kropotkin's social and political thought warrants close attention today because it appears to anticipate certain developments in contemporary radical theory. For example, in "Anarchism: Its Philosophy and its Ideal," Kropotkin argues that anarchism's challenge to the social order constitutes a political paradigm shift on par with science's challenge to "cosmic order" (I am drawing here on an essay by Graham Purchase ["Kropotkin's Metaphysics of Nature," FE #337, Late Summer, 1991]). After summarizing the developments in astronomy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the sun replaced the earth as the "centre" of the universe, in *Revolutionary Pamphlets*, Kropotkin goes on to question the notion of the universe having any "centre" at all: "interplanetary and interstellar spaces are peopled and crossed in all imaginable directions by little swarms of matter, invisible, infinitely small when taken separately, but all-powerful in their numbers."

Thus the "centre," the irreducible origin of force, formerly transferred from the earth to the sun, turns out to be scattered and disseminated. It is everywhere and nowhere. This realization led Kropotkin to speculate further that because a foundational "origin of force" was not verifiable by appeals to empirical data–or by appeals to arche–much of the intellectual scaffolding supporting Western civilization should also come crashing down: "The whole aspect of the universe changes with this new conception. The idea of force governing the world, preestablished law, preconceived harmony, disappears to make room for the harmony that Fourier had caught a glimpse of: the one which results from the disorderly and incoherent movements of numberless hosts of matter, each of which goes its own way and all of which hold each in equilibrium."

Such passages have a strikingly contemporary resonance. In *The Political Philosophy of Post- Structuralist Anarchism*, Todd May notes that one of anarchism's greatest strengths lies in the ambivalence of its understanding of power. Although the classical anarchists (Proudhon, Bakunin, and sometimes Kropotkin) seem at times to theorize power as inherently "bad" (that is, as necessarily restrictive), they also articulate a "tactical" rather than a "strategic" approach to political struggle.

Whereas a strategic approach, May argues, "involves a unitary analysis that aims towards a single goal," a tactical approach grows from the recognition that power is exercised at all levels of society, and cannot be reduced to one particular site (the economic base, for example); thus, "[a]narchist political intervention issues from a recognition of the network character of relationships of power and of the variety of intertwined but irreducible oppressions that devolve upon those relationships." Kropotkin's thought is unusual in this respect, because, as we can see, he often conceptualizes political space as being composed of a system or network of "disorderly and incoherent movements," as opposed to the "top down" or vertical models that often accompany 19th century anarchist critiques of political power.

This analysis finds further support in recent work examining how the anarchist suspicion of reductive analysis and "first principles"–a suspicion which is, ironically, built into the etymology of the word "anarchy" itself: ana-arche, or "without origin"–was a formative force in shaping the direction of 20th century poetry and poetics.

In *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatics, Culture*, one of several studies on anarchism and culture to appear in the last decade, David Madlec quotes anarchist-individualist Benjamin Tucker's tidy summation of anarchism's anti-foundationalist tendencies: "Anarchy does not simply mean opposed to archos, or political leader. It means opposed to arche. Now, arche, in the first instance, means beginning, origin. From this it comes to mean a first principle, an element, then first place, supreme power, sovereignty, dominion, command, authority, and finally, a sovereignty, an empire, a realm, a magistry, a governmental office."

According to Madlec, for the line of modernist poets who inherited, via psychologist William James, the legacy of anarchist anti-foundationalism, poets such as Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams, language itself becomes a terrain of struggle against centralized hierarchy and authority: linguistic systems are seen to be the first-order of representation upon which institutions are built. In this struggle, the iron law of textual (and, to read paradigmatically, social) cohesion–which is dependent upon the establishment of discursive ties to firmly anchored antecedents –, the "subordination" of clauses to "main points," and of prepositions to nouns and verbs, gives way to linguistic experiments which approximate an "anarchistic decentralization of...syntax." Thus, as Julia Kristeva observes, "certain currents of anarchism did not confine themselves to opposing existing social and state structures alone, but also propounded the necessity of a profound transformation in the very conception of the speaking-subject" (emphasis added).

While I cannot endorse the idea that anarchist struggle should begin with "the speaking-subject" and then move to institutions and the state afterwards, a theoretical position which seems to swap immediate social change for an abstract cerebral compensation, Kristeva is correct in her contention that the social order–as manifested in second-order representations such as the state–relies to a large extent upon psycho-linguistic alienation and conformity. This idea is perhaps similar to what Gustav Landauer had in mind when he wrote in 1910 that the state was best understood not as a "thing," but as "a relationship between human beings, a way by which people relate to one another." In other words, in order to communicate domination, the state must dominate communication: it must coordinate and control the discursive modes we rely upon to relate to one another.

III: The End of an Era

Anarchist poetics poses a significant challenge to traditional models of communication, models which some anarchists will find hard to abandon. Anarchists have long recognized that communication is inherent to all forms of social organization; indeed, the anarchist project, as Landauer, Kropotkin, and many others have stressed, is aimed largely towards the development of new forms of social relations, new forms of community, based on the essentially open-communicative concepts of mutual aid, free association, and autonomy. In this respect, classical anarchism is a rational, if somewhat wayward child of the Enlightenment.

However, as Fredric Jameson contends, in the current period of advanced capitalist globalization, "communicational development... is no longer one of 'enlightenment' in all its connotations, but rather of new technologies." In other words, capital and its attendant technologies have colonized everyday life to the extent that the very act of communication has internalized deeply the processes of capitalist production. In what communication theorists have identified as "the conduit metaphor," a metaphor which frames the way we think and talk about language, communication is described as a channel, a conduit, or a conveyor belt along which "a sender" tries to "get a message across" to a passive "receiver" who "decodes" it. Examples of this metaphor are statements such as "try to get your point across more effectively," or "express your ideas in a clearer form" (poets who are also anarchists generally ignore such school-room commands). For anarchists, the significance of this transformation of communication from an act of "mutual enlightenment" into a reified instrument of exchange cannot be ignored. In fact, because of the ambivalence in the anarchist conception of power as outlined above (by May), anarchist theory may be especially receptive to the recognition that the terrain of struggle has shifted, for the most part, from the factory

floor to a much wider "social factory": a dispersed site of fully socialized production which relies heavily upon the rationalization and standardization of language and communication to keep it functioning.

Certain currents of contemporary anarchism have already entered this terrain. Alfredo Bonanno, for instance, describes how the "greatly increased speed of productive operations" resulting from the intensification of organic capital in the form of information technology cleaves the proletariat into two new social strata–"the included and the excluded"–and brings about an important "cultural and linguistic modification." Unlike previous stages of capitalist stratification, these new "classes" are distinguished as much by their relationship to the dominant language as by their position within the economic order. Moreover, as Bonanno recognizes, the expansion of global capital has required the breakdown of community, the destruction of any kind of "common language," the denial of the excluded from the language of the programmers and financiers, and subsequently, the denial of any of the material "benefits" of advanced capitalist production. But Bonanno does not exactly lament this situation: as an anarchist, he does not put his hope in the legal instruments or rights extended by capital and the state in order to maintain the illusion of a dialogue rooted in so-called common interests; as Jacques Lacan quipped in 1968, "there is no such thing as dialogue, it is a swindle." Thus, while the included may attempt to provide a bogus social consensus by allowing the occasional collective agreement to be signed, or by providing "a pre-fabricated language to allow a partial and sclerotised use of some of the dominant technology," they will not be able to stop what has been set in motion by the destruction of a common language and the withering of the Enlightenment values that have sustained Western Civilization for the last 400 years. According to Bonanno, unorchestrated, insurrectionary forces will emerge, coalescing into large, autonomous social movements. Perhaps it was these new social movements that Samuel Morse had in mind in 1844, when he transmitted his historic first telegram: "What hath God Wrought"?

IV: From Activism to Anarchism

Anarchist poetics begins when we acknowledge that the radical project of "engendering new realities" requires having some idea of what needs to be changed in the present reality–and how. Thus, social transformation presents certain conceptual problems, problems requiring attention to language, reproduction, and representation. We could say that the different ways of imagining and describing social reality and social transformation are precisely how we distinguish one approach from another.

And it should come as no surprise that poetry–and here we must again stress that "poetry" is defined as a wide array of acts and not only literary compositions–has been one of the most effective modes in which anarchists have articulated their critique of the present and their vision of the future. This vision, if it is to remain anarchist, must grapple immediately with the problem of representation. Jesse Cohn puts the problem succinctly; in "Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation," Cohn writes: "while [the anarchist] challenge to institutions has been hailed by some as libratory, others have objected that we are left with no viable alternatives to 'representation' per se.

This 'crisis of representation' is the shadow under which all projects of interpretation, art-making, and political transformation are now forced to labor." So here we have arrived at the crux of the problem: to what extent can one articulate a radical, anti-authoritarian critique of representation at the level of society and politics (i.e., the anarchist critique of institutions, bureaucracy, the state, the nation, parliamentary democracy, and electoral politics, etc.) solely within the confines of standardized discursive modes, which, as any linguist will tell us, rely on duplication and normativity? More importantly, to what extent can one act within the confines of the officially sanctioned forms of opposition?

Such "theoretical" questions become especially acute when we turn our attention to what I have elsewhere called "the protest genres"–the very forms which encode oppositional speech with social meanings. (I address this further in "Protest Genres and the Language of Dissent.") Obviously, some form of normative discourse is required to coordinate our activity; anarchist poetics, however, like any avant-garde practice, pushes us to examine the limits of this discourse, these normalized genres of action.

Let's put anarchist poetics to the test by considering as an example the classical political strategy, or protest genre, of developing "campaigns" around rights-based "demands." Without a doubt, we might find it necessary to demand our right to welfare, to demand that a landlord return a deposit, to demand access to social housing,

medical care, better wages, etc. To deny the reality of these needs, as Jesus Sepulveda has pointed out, is to "fall into vanguardist self-righteousness." When such demands face the usual obstacles, we might then appeal to the policies, or even worse, to the "good-conscience," the noblesse oblige, of the various authorities and institutions set up to mediate and defer more combative forms of class struggle. At this point, activist groups or unions might attempt to converse with these institutions on behalf of the disenfranchised citizens they say they represent. In order to carry out this conversation, activist/political representatives must make themselves understood–they must mimic the discursive structures of the institution, its particular language, by reproducing its politics of representation. So, they develop various "campaigns," which are often justified on three grounds: 1) the campaign attempts to satisfy the immediate needs of an oppressed group; 2) the campaign will involve a degree of struggle that will unite and empower people with similar interests; 3) the campaign might interfere with capitalist accumulation. [This last justification, if it is made, is rarely made publicly. However, it is worth noting that in Italy in the 1970's, leading autonomist theorists argued that the demand for increased wages was to be viewed "as the focal nexus of class antagonism...a struggle where wages become the revolutionary assertion of the working classes' autonomous needs." To make such an assertion in North America today would be absurd, given the nearly complete recuperation of the labor movement by the managerial classes (see Zerzan, Unions Against Revolution).] While there's nothing overtly wrong with the necessary albeit superficial demands that help people survive, how will such representational politics address deeper, more radical, and perhaps indecipherable "demands" for self-determination, joy and autonomy, the demand for a freedom not conceived of as "political" in the narrow sense?

The notion that one can or should demand one's autonomy from a political institution is difficult to stomach. Engels once said that such "democratic" freedoms were "a farce, and the worst possible slavery." Landauer also insisted, for similar reasons, that anarchists should "under no circumstances have anything to do with politics." Most campaigns based on demands fall squarely into the old world of political representation because they seem to operate under the assumption that there is someone, some group, capable of granting the demands. This is specious, to say the least. To whom shall we address our demand for full lives? Who is this imaginary addressee who holds the keys to our self-determination? The only honest response I have heard to this question is that one must not ask for a full life–that one should take it "one step at a time." For the anarchists I know, such a statement marks the end of that particular conversation. We may continue to collaborate with our interlocutor on some project or task that requires swift action or that satisfies our immediate needs, but we do so with the recognition that our struggles now have quite different trajectories.

Thus, it is axiomatic of anarchist poetics that political discourse itself is a terrain of struggle. As dada poet Hugo Ball wrote: "The word has become a commodity...we must give up writing second-hand: that is, accepting words (to say nothing of sentences) that are not newly invented for our own use." Anarchists, then, might embrace the "crisis of representation" by breaking with the generic conventions of political speech (i.e., campaigns, demands, marches, sit-ins, leaflets, etc) in favor of unpredictable and unreadable poetic acts, acts that do not "represent" an anarchist critique but perform it, through a radical defection from politics itself, in favour of lived poetry. Anarchist poetics leads us to recognize that the adherence to the genres of political opposition is an adherence informed by the idea that one's language and one's acts should be used as representations of desires rather than eruptions of desire itself. Such conventional, predictable and a-poetic words and deeds not only reproduce hegemonic social meanings, they render us unable to articulate, let alone imagine, a radical and anti-authoritarian alternative to the current social order.

To quote Rimbaud, on the subject of his own notorious defection, "we're through with those birds."

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