

# Petrus Borel

## The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Anti-Authoritarian Lycanthrope

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a review of

*Champavert: Immoral Tales* by Petrus Borel, trans. Brian Stableford. Borge Press, 2013 **WildsidePess.com**

The long-forgotten radical novel, *Champavert*, is the only full-length book available in English by Petrus Borel. The anti-authoritarian poet was known in 19<sup>th</sup> century French underground circles as “The Lycanthrope” (Wolfman), and was central to the creation of the cultural avant-garde as both an idea and a functioning community in that era.

He was a vocal supporter of insurrectionary movements, but he marked out a proto-individualist anarchist position as early as 1831, stating that while he condemned the king and would support the establishment of a representational Republic, “I am republican as the lynx would be; my republicanism is that of lycanthropy! If I speak of the republic, it’s because this word represents for me the greatest independence that can permit association and civilization. I am a republican because I cannot be a Carib; I have need for an enormous sum of liberty: the Republic, will she give it to me?”

Borel was the spokesman of “Frenetic Romanticism,” a subculture melding the utopian-socialist far left, Gothic pulp fiction, and experimental art, who performed their dissent via distinctive hairstyles, clothes, and slang in a kind of beta-run for the punk movement and ontological anarchy of a century and a half later.

His fiction deploys the shocking violence and exaggerated melodrama of early horror, infused with a corrosive rage which is simultaneously political and savagely individual. It pushes into extremes of irony, pastiche, fractured structure, and weird language that still strikes and disorients today, corroding all the realist idioms of bourgeois fiction. *Champavert* is a collection of these often still-shocking stories, loosely connected by a nesting narrative that erases the borders between fiction and the real world.

Nearly every tale focuses on the social violence perpetrated upon some oppressed group—Black Caribbean slave and Maroon communities, Jews, the urban poor, women, dissident intellectuals—some of whom succumb as victims to the white, male, aristocratic, Christian villains, others of whom revolt and avenge themselves as solitary, righteous monsters wreaking chaos upon a restrictive social order.

Naturally, for a book from 1833, a few elements of orientalism and unconscious racism do creep in, which a writer of Borel’s commitments would be ashamed of today. Yet for a book written by a white European man less than two years after Nat Turner’s rebellion (by way of comparison), there is much less to apologize for than one would expect.

Beyond the subject matter, *Champavert* is the prose product of one of the most eccentric and uncompromisingly innovative poets of his time, and its chaotic, hybrid composition refuses the homogeneous, easy-to-read, mimetic dictates of bourgeois fiction which was then still in the process of developing, and which today still dominate even literature with radical content.

Borel’s formal fracturing, his dislocation and multiplication of the (no-longer authoritative) narrators’ voices, his delight in contrasting and demolishing “high” and “low” literary tropes, the linguistic anarchy he creates as he

melds literary, academic, and street language with elements of Old and Middle French all work together to yield a mode of storytelling which denies any ruling Effect, any hegemonic Idea, and which demands a new and anarchic way of thinking.

For instance, one chapter of the masterful story “Three-Fingered Jack: The Obi” is directly plagiarized from a pro-slavery tract he describes finding at a used book shop, to which Borel adds his own interjections, counter-arguments, and footnotes to turn this piece of propaganda against itself.

In “Andrea Vasalius,” he launches an ironic attack on the positivist underpinnings of science, history, and the bourgeoisie. The real-life 17<sup>th</sup> century medical researcher Vasalius, one of the most respected icons of modern positivist science, is turned into a cheap melodrama villain who murders the lovers of his young terrorized wife in revenge for his own impotence, before being killed by a vengeful mob of sans-culottes, all while gleefully flaunting the complete lack of historical underpinning for any of this.

He even blurs the lines between himself and his suicided titular protagonist.

It’s no wonder that Borel was cited as inspiration by anarchist writers and groups including Baudelaire, the Dadas, and the Surrealists. Yet, he remains all but unknown, especially in the anglophone world, and even then only on the fringes of avant-garde literary or Gothic/horror communities.

He is rarely if ever read in an anarchist context, and while the introduction by translator Brian Stableford is good, it does not do Borel full justice politically or artistically. Hopefully, this brief review has sketched out how an anarchist framework can, and should, unlock the radical power of this 188-year-old howl against misery

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