

George Woodcock on ‘The Anarchist Critic’

The Anarchist Critic first appeared in the Vancouver anarchist journal *Open Road* in 1982.¹ Robert Graham, who was a member of the collective, recalls Woodcock subscribed to *Open Road* though he never joined its social circle.² He would go on, at Graham’s prompting, to contribute an article-length review of Richard Attenborough’s film, *Gandhi*, to a special ‘Direct Action’ issue [George Woodcock, ‘Gandhi: The Price of Glory’, *Open Road* no. 15 (Spring, 1983): 21-22] and a feature on George Orwell for a themed issue, ‘Coming to terms with Direct Action’ [George Woodcock, ‘Orwell was no Cold Warrior’, *Open Road* 16 (Spring 1984): 19-20].³ The fact that the latter two issues of *Open Road* focus on the bombing campaign, subsequent arrest, and trial of the Vancouver-based anarchist urban guerilla group ‘Direct Action’ make Woodcock’s contributions all the more interesting.⁴

The Anarchist Critic asserts the role of the critic is to identify and encourage emergent anarchist tendencies in the arts and society as a whole, a pragmatic approach which Carissa Honeywell highlights in her invaluable study, *A British Anarchist Tradition*, as the core strategy adopted by Woodcock’s British confrères, Herbert Read, Alex Comfort and Colin Ward, in the post-World War Two period.⁵ Along the way Woodcock brings his sometime adversary, George Orwell, into the fold.⁶ The article is remarkable as he reveals that in the mid-1950s, while preparing to reinvent himself as a literary critic in Canada, he was reframing his anarchism to suite the new situation. Woodcock closes with an abridged passage from ‘A View of Canadian Criticism’ (1955) in which he critiques the desirability of a ‘Canadian literary tradition’, insisting that while ‘the peculiar nature of local experience’ is undeniable ‘the spark that gives life to [a] work’ is ‘the unique personal intelligence dealing with those problems of thought and morality which are universal’. Echoing the orientation of Derek Savage and others (cf. Antliff, *Pacifism, Violence and Aesthetics*), Woodcock founds his ‘Canadian (anarchist)’ literary criticism on the creative individuality of the artist—and by extension—the critic’s.⁷ — Allan Antliff

THE ANARCHIST CRITIC

George Woodcock

When it was suggested that I write an article on anarchist criticism, my immediate reaction was to remark that there isn't really any such thing as an anarchist criticism, in the way that there is a corpus of Marxist criticism, though there are critics who are anarchists and whose anarchism inevitably influences the way they write about literature and other arts.

There could only be an anarchist criticism if there were an anarchist orthodoxy, a body of dogma which we all accepted, and which could serve as the basis for establishing critical rules. This is what happens among the Marxists.

But Anarchism has always by its nature been resistant to what George Orwell used to call "the smelly little orthodoxies." It is a way of thinking that rests upon a radical criticism of existing society and a rejection of authority as much as in the artistic as in the political realm. This has always meant that whatever blueprints anarchists may have made for the future have always been tentative. How, we have always asked, can we plan for a future where we hope people will be freer than they are today? We have never created utopias. We have never carpentered party platforms. At most we have said, this is the kind of society at which we should aim, and this is the way it could work, and we have called on people to try for themselves. But we have never closed off the possibility of alternatives, and this flexibility, which puzzles people used to rigid political ways of thinking, is what allows anarchists to offer highly practical provisional or piecemeal proposals at any stage—as Paul Goodman did in the field of education and Colin Ward in town planning—and in that way keep anarchist practice alive even within a non-anarchist society. It is also what has kept anarchism alive as an idea for so many generations: it can always respond in new ways to different circumstances without having to wriggle its way out of a rubble of plans and projects whose relevancy is ended. Politicians are like generals who repeatedly fight the last war: their programmes are always outdated by the time they are applied.

Very much the same applies in the field of criticism and the arts. Because the anarchist critic has no set of dogmas or rules relating to writing or painting, he is able to respond directly, and the artist who happens to be an anarchist, because he has no partisan duty laid upon him, is able to express his vision according to the nature of his own mind by following the exhortation of Peter Arshinov, Nestor Makhno's comrade, to "look into the depths of your own being, seek out the truth and realize it yourself: you will find it nowhere else."

The well-known anarchists who became critics did not proceed by saying: How does this work fit in with or serve anarchist propaganda? They looked at the work

with a clear and open eye, and only at the end, when they had considered it in its own rights, did they relate their critical insight to their anarchist ideas.

Peter Kropotkin wrote a fine book of criticism, *Russian Literature: Ideals and Realities*, in which he showed how, under the tyranny of the Tsars, when open political discussion was suppressed, literature became a vehicle of social criticism and of rebellion. Inevitably, Kropotkin's insight was irradiated by his anarchist attitude, but at no point did he attempt to make partisan propaganda out of his survey of Russian writing, and thus what he had to say became all the more impressive, for the evidence of the works he quoted and summarized showed how intimately the urge to create depended on the liberty of expression, and how, in its turn, the assertion of the liberty of expression became an act of subversion, of rebellion.

When Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was moved by the works of his painter friend Gustave Courbet to write his never translated book on art, *Du principe de l'Art et sa destination social*, he was not concerned to make anarchist propaganda or to fit his view or art into an existing theoretical structure. He was enquiring and speculating freely on the relationship between art and society, and, as his very title suggests, he concluded that a "Social destination" was something inherent in art, not something to be imposed on it for political reasons. In other words, he reached a conclusion appropriate to an anarchist outlook: that art is autonomous, but at the same time—because it communicates between artist and audience—is a social activity and therefore has its part to play in the transformation of society.

In a similar way Herbert Read, who was a critic of literature and painting as well as an anarchist theoretician, proceeded from a direct observation of works of art through a consideration of the autonomy of the artistic process, to a view of the relationship between the arts and anarchism. Two complementary conclusions emerged from such a development. The first expressed in Read's book *Poetry and Anarchism*, is essentially that anarchism provides the ideological framework within which the creative urge can best be fostered and understood. *Education through Art*, and Read's shorter work *The Education of Free Men*, neatly tips the equation by arguing that in the formative years an education through the senses is more important than an education through the intellect, which can come later, and that the arts are the best way of achieving an education through the senses. Those who are trained in this way will more fully realize their inner selves and become naturally free people, and this process in its turn will lead towards the evolution of a free society. In other words, the practice and understanding of art are revolutionary activities and form one of the paths towards achieving anarchist aims.

In all these cases the anarchist idea is seen as *emerging* from the experience and study of art and literature, not as *imposed upon* it, which happens in Marxist contexts when critics approach works of art with theoretical prejudices developed from reading the sacred texts of Marx and Engels and their commentators. There are, fortunately, no canonical books for anarchists. Every anarchist thinker (which means every anar-

chist) begins anew, offers his own personal contribution, and invites his readers to do the same. And that is why there are anarchist critics, but no anarchist criticism.

Yet one can perhaps sketch out a general area of opinion which anarchist critics are likely to share. To begin with, they are concerned with social transformation—otherwise they would not be anarchists. But they also recognize the importance, even to social transformation, of the free individual insight, so that they never subordinate themselves to party dogma. George Orwell, who in his later years became very close to the anarchists, maintained that in our age writing could not avoid being in some ways political, but that the writer should never become the *servant* of a political cause. “He should never turn back from a train of thought because it may lead to a heresy, and he should not mind very much if his unorthodoxy is smelt out, as it probably will be.”

Orwell, of course, was both a critic and a novelist, and in both roles was a fearlessly honest social commentator. But he recognized that without some kind of aesthetic impulse, a love of the world of appearance and passion for form, the most sincere and passionate convictions could not produce a good artist. And there is one passage in a late essay called “Why I Write?,” which, while it is Orwell’s justification for his own way of writing, also seems to me to offer an excellent beginning point of view of literature within the social-individualistic equilibrium which is so basic to anarchist thinking.

What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of justice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, “I am going to produce a work of art.” I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience. Anyone who cares to examine my work will see that even when it is downright propaganda it contains much that a full-time politician would consider irrelevant. I am not able, and I do not want, completely to abandon the world-view that I acquired in childhood. So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information. It is no use trying to suppress that side of myself. The job is to reconcile my ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities that this age forces on all of us.

What emerges out of Orwell’s statement and out of the practice of libertarian critics like Read or, earlier, Kropotkin and Proudhon, is a sense of the multi-faceted attitude that seems implicit in an anarchist approach to the arts. The anarchist critic, it is obvious, can never be a mere formalist, yet he can never ignore the fact that form is

what differentiates art from non-art. He has always to keep his antennae active and seek to perceive the arts within a wider ambience of experience.

Once, years ago, I tried to work out in my mind what a critic should be doing in a society like Canada's in the late 1950's. It strikes me that what I said then might be easily applied—using a wide lens—to anarchist criticism in general.

The Canadian (anarchist)* critic will have a wider task than mere textual analysis: he will have to be something of a mythologist, besides having a developed consciousness of formal values and an imagination that is both creative and receptive. He will be concerned with the peculiar nature of local experience, what makes the temper of our life—despite so many superficial resemblances—essentially different from the American or the British, and how this regional pattern of living and thinking and reacting affects the work of Canadian writers. But he will also be aware of trends in other countries, and will have to consider in what relation life and literature here stand to the world continuum. He will have to delve into the past for the unifying threads and probe into the future for the sense of direction. But he will also not lose sight of the fact that, within the culture, each writer is inalienably an individual, with his own psychology and his own reaction to experience. This experience, which includes language and the whole complex of natural and social and cultural influences to which it is subjected, will mark the writer off as a Canadian—or an Englishman or a Russian—but the spark that gives life to his work will be that of the unique personal intelligence dealing with those problems of thought and morality which are universal. (excerpt from *Odysseus Ever Returning*).⁸

It seems to me that an anarchist critic anywhere needs the same range or perceptions as I suggested in the past were essential for a Canadian critic. In other words, no matter what his or her nationality, he or she should see the local and the universal in the same work, 'A World in a grain of sand. And a Heaven in a wold flower,' as Blake said, which means looking at the work of art with a fresh and innocent eye and a sense of all its possible dimensions.

*Note: 'anarchist' does not appear in the original article or *Odysseus Ever Returning*.

NOTES

- 1 George Woodcock, 'The Anarchist Critic', *Open Road* no. 14 (Summer 1982): p 17.
- 2 Robert Graham to Allan Antliff: March 17, 2015.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 'Direct Action' member Ann Hansen has published a personal account, *Direct Action*:

- Memoirs of an Urban Guerilla* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2001). I also reprint 'Direct Action' related communiques, interviews and debates from the anarchist press in Allan Antliff, *Only a Beginning: An Anarchist Anthology* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004).
- 5 Carissa Honeywell, *A British Anarchist Tradition: Herbert Read, Alex Comfort and Colin Ward* (London: Continuum, 2011).
 - 6 Woodcock clashed with Orwell over pacifism, but this did not prevent them from developing a close friendship. See Douglas Fetherling, *The Gentle Anarchist: A Life of George Woodcock* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1998), pp 38-39.
 - 7 George Woodcock, 'A View of Canadian Criticism', *Dalhousie Review* no. 35 (Autumn 1955): pp216-233. Anticipating the founding of *Canadian Literature*, Woodcock ends his piece musing 'it seems to me that a Canadian journal devoted specifically to the critical consideration of native and world literature is a goal to be aimed at, a minimum beginning.'
 - 8 George Woodcock, 'Views of Canadian Criticism 1/In 1955', (reprint) *Odysseus Ever Returning: Essays on Canadian Writers and Writings* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), pp130-137.