

PETER KROPOTKIN AND HIS VISION OF ANARCHIST AESTHETICS

Anarchist aesthetics are virtually unheard-of today. As a reflection of the birth of a new anti-authoritarian sensibility, as well as of the somewhat mechanical application of the general theses of the philosophy of anarchism to the problems of literary and artistic creation, these aesthetics did, however, know an hour of glory in the 19th century. But at the turn of the century anarchism lost its sense of immediacy when it no longer held its position as the ideology of the international worker's movement. Its fortune, like the fortune of any "political" aesthetic, depends very closely on the successes and failures of the ideology of which it is a point of reference.

Libertarian aesthetics also reflect the healthy pluralism of the different schools of anarchist thought. Under individualist thinking, they exalt creative qualities and energies, thus the originality of the individual. Under collectivist or communist thinking, they celebrate the creative force of the collectivity or the people. Quite opposed to the aesthetic attitudes of Marx and Engels, which are firmly anchored in the bourgeois sensibility of the 19th century and thus run contrary to the creative pro-

Translated by Simon Pleasance.

fusion of avant-garde modernism, anarchist aesthetics are directed towards the future and also take into account the problems of contemporary art. Having discovered a manifestation of authority in the traditional work of art, in imitation of the State and the various social institutions, they are in the forefront of a head-on attack against two thousand years of European culture (against the concept of the "masterpiece," the concept of the artist as genius, and of art which is destined for museums). Whether these aesthetics are calling for a 'brand-new' art, following the cult of the unknown as proposed by Proudhon or Bakunin, an art without any precedent in the whole history of art, or whether they are sanctioning the return to a primitive or 'folk'-inspired community art, their prime intention is to replace the art to which people are subjected by an art which people create.

In the long line of theoreticians of modern anarchism, Peter Kropotkin is the last to put forward his position with regard to art. His main interest lies in the task of reconciling the principles of an anarchist aesthetic which he discovers in the writings of Proudhon (*Du Principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale*), Wagner (*Art and Revolution*) and Tolstoy (*What is Art?*) with the theory of the 'social command' as elaborated by Bielsky, Tchernyevsky, Dobrogloubov and the 19th century Russian school of literary criticism. He studies the works of Ruskin and William Morris on art. He himself is a painter and amateur musician. In 1901 he visits the United States and gives a series of lectures on the history of Russian literature, from its origins up to the present day. His whole thought is thus enriched by a deep knowledge of and acquaintance with art and literature, as well as a personal and deepfelt involvement which he one day hopes to be able to share with those who are still excluded from the paths of artistic or scientific creation.

Kropotkin, faithful to the first principle of any socialist aesthetics, appoints to art a social, educative and moral mission. He invites artists to commit themselves to the causes of the rebels and the oppressed. He asks them to take sides with the great cause of the Revolution.¹ In so doing, not only will they be able

¹ "You, poets, painters, sculptors, musicians, if you have understood your true mission and the interests of art itself, then come and put your pens and

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to overcome the hardships and obstacles which lie in the way of the modern artist (like Proudhon, Bakunin and Sorel, Kropotkin is haunted by the idea of decadence),² but they will also be able to accept the *role of serving*, by reintegrating the community. When he invites artists to take up their commitments, Kropotkin accompanies his appeal with a preliminary condition: if you accept to join the ranks of the revolutionaries, he tells them, do not come as 'masters' but "as comrades in the struggle, *not to govern*, but to draw your inspiration from a new environment, *not so much to teach* as to conceive the aspirations of the masses, fathom and formulate them, then go to work, relentlessly, continually and with the full vitality of youth, to incorporate them in life itself."³ Before Kropotkin, Proudhon had detected a desire to dominate in the artist: "He has power over us in the same way that the magnetiser has power over the magnetised"; he should not be allowed to impose his laws. He notes: "Plato was quite right when he drove the artists and poets out of the republic; I am not suggesting that they be set aside from society, but from government; for if the artist, with his most positive means, is led and inspired by society, society, quite on the contrary, is lost in the end of the day if it allows itself to be inspired by the artist."⁴

If, by taking on his commitment, the artist can escape the sterility by which he is threatened, in what ways will the course of creation be affected by his commitment? Will it be free from all exterior constraint? or, on the contrary will it be subordinated to the laws of a new society which is proud of its conquests and consequently intolerant? Kropotkin's response to this question varies in terms of his complementary visions of the future.

As leader of the anarchist movement in its worldwide sense, and as the theoretician of a scientific anarchism, Kropotkin approaches the question of the society of the future from the angle of the social sciences. But as a "poet" of socialism he revives Bakunin's *cult of the unknown*, the Dionysiac cult of the

your brushes and your chisels at the service of the revolution." (*Words of a Rebel* p. 73.)

² From all sides we are getting complaints about the decadence of art... art seems to be running away from the civilized world. Technics are progressing, but artists' studios are visited less than ever by inspiration." (*La Conquête du pain*, p. 146.) Art is becoming banal. Mediocrity reigns.

³ *Words of a Rebel*, p. 67. — The italics are mine.

⁴ *Du Principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale*, p. 360.

revolutionary concepts of the “marvellous” and the “fantastic.” The diminished figure of present-day man is in no condition to grasp the future. (Any intention to enclose the future by thought, and shut it away in the prison of theories and systems, is the ultimate heresy!) But in his revolt, man can take away certain parts of it. The Revolution (“a festival which has neither beginning nor ending”) is the revelation of the unknown in action. And the captive in the Peter-and-Paul fortress combines his activities as a revolutionary with his love of the fantastic: “My nature always suffered from one capital defect: love of the fantastic, love of extraordinary and unheard-of adventures, love of exploits which open up boundless horizons, the issues of which can be foreseen by no one...”⁵

Constantly associating his thirst for adventure⁶ with the spirit of the anarchist, Kropotkin takes up this cult to his own account. What he hopes for, above all, from the Revolution is the acceleration of the movement of flight towards the unknown. Mobility and change are the very law of life. The evolution of the latter is sometimes swift, and sometimes more moderate. It encounters various extraordinary “formidable upheavals.” In reality, Kropotkin lives in the expectation of “great events” which will abruptly break the thread of history, fling mankind outside the rut in which it is bogged down, and launch it on to *new paths, towards the unknown*, in search of the ideal.⁷

As a consequence of this, nothing should limit the evolution of art; the path which art will follow has not yet been traced: “ART in our ideal is synonymous with creation; art must conduct its research in a forward direction; apart from a few rare, very

⁵ Bakunin, Michael. *Confession écrite au tsar*. p. 171.

⁶ In order to understand Kropotkin's cult of the unknown, one should relate this to the young officer's love of adventure. From 1864 until his resignation from the imperial army, Kropotkin undertook several missions in the recently annexed frontier regions of Siberia. He was often the first man to penetrate regions hitherto unexplored by Europeans. In carrying out these missions, he must have found new responses within himself to questions whose existence he cannot have known about beforehand. This discovery, together with the creation of new scientific theories, plays a primordial part in the formation of Kropotkin's anarchist attitudes. His aim, henceforth, is to make the “joy of scientific creation,” which is reserved today for a small minority, accessible to the greatest number of people possible. (Cf. Woodcock, George and Avakumovic, Ivan. *The Anarchist Prince. A Biographical Study of Peter Kropotkin*. p. 82.)

⁷ *Words of a Rebel*. p. 17 — Italics are mine.

rare exceptions, however, the professional artist is always too ignorant, too bourgeois to glimpse new horizons." He goes on to say, with Proudhon: "A new kind of art is in ferment, conceived in the guts of the Revoution; I can feel it, I can see it at a glance, although I myself am quite incapable of supplying the most humble example." Just like the life and the society of which he is the reflection, he will follow the mysterious paths of a vocation which is the vocation of society as a whole. Art does not boast its own history and its own laws of evolution. Nothing is more alien to the philosophy of Kropotkin than the vanquishing gratuitousness of Art for Art's sake and the anti-social aristocracies of the Bohemians and the artistic groups of the avant-garde. It is precisely because art is an integral part of a unified whole that it is destined to new forms of perfection, to a new Middle Ages.

For Kropotkin, just as for the apostles of anarchist aesthetics, the unknown and the familiar, the future and the past, all are united together. If Proudhon and Tolstoy perceived the model of a community-inspired form of art of the future in the architecture of the Middle Ages and if, with the same objective in mind, Wagner returns to the tragedy of Ancient Greece, Kropotkin— and Sorel after him—compose the eulogy of both these.

Kropotkin affirms that art can only be where there exists the "undivided city." "When a Greek sculptor was chiselling his marble, he would try to render the spirit and the heart of the city. All the city's passions and traditions had to relive in the work."⁸ And here is Tolstoy's formulation of the same idea: "The artists of the Middle Ages were inspired by the same source of feeling as the masses; they expressed their feelings in architecture, painting, music, poetry or drama; they were thus true artists, and their works, as befits works of art, transmitted their feelings to the whole community which surrounded them."⁹

It was through reading William Morris that Kropotkin reached this image of the city. Likewise he says that the art of the Middle Ages was created by the people; the city thus bore the mark of a "freely creative art": in the Middle Ages, the territory of Europe was scattered with "rich cities, surrounded by stout walls, which were in turn equipped with towers and gates, each one of which

⁸ *La Conquête du pain*. p. 147.

⁹ Tolstoy, Leo. *What is Art?* pp. 68-69.

was a work of art. The cathedrals, built in a style which is full of grandeur and generously ornate, sent their steeples soaring to the skies with a purity of form and an imaginative daring which we vainly attempt to achieve with much effort today. The arts and crafts had reached a degree of perfection which in many aspects we cannot boast having excelled.”¹⁰

The grandeur of mediaeval art and of mediaeval architecture in particular—“a social art above all else”—comes from the Idea behind it. “Like Greek art, it burst forth from a conception of brotherhood and unity engendered by the city.” It would be wrong of one to look for “the imagination of any one man” behind the public buildings of the Middle Ages: “the whole city contributed to them.” “A cathedral or a communal house symbolized the grandeur of an organism of which each mason and each stone-cutter was a builder.” This is the “Idea,” the “great idea”: “Like the Acropolis in Athens, the cathedral in a mediaeval city was erected with the intention of glorifying the victorious city, symbolizing the union of arts and crafts, and expressing the pride of each and every citizen in a city which was his own creation.”¹¹

When Raphael or Murillo covered the walls of cathedrals with their paintings, they were working for a whole community. Each one of these great artists “addressed himself to a crowd and in return received his inspiration.” Nowadays the painter no longer has the ambition of addressing himself to the community; the highest honour to which he aspires is to “see his canvas framed in gilt and hung in the museum.” But what is a museum at heart? A “kind of junk-shop.” And Kropotkin recalls the impression he received at the Prado, faced, side by side, with Murillo’s Ascension and Philip II’s Dogs by Velazquez. “Poor Velazquez and poor Murillo! Poor Greek statues which *used to live* in the acropolis of their cities and now are stifled under the red hangings of the Louvre.”¹² In setting forth his ideas about mediaeval art in *Mutual Aid*, Kropotkin again deals with the idea of the museum, which obsesses him: “The art of the Middle Ages, like Greek art, was not familiar with those curiosity shops which we call

¹⁰ *Mutual Aid*. pp. 266-267.

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 229-230.

¹² *La Conquête du pain*. p. 147.

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Museums or National Galleries. A statue was sculpted, a bronze ornament was cast or a picture was painted in order to be placed in its proper position in a communal artistic monument. In this frame, it was a living thing, it was a part of a whole, and it contributed to the impression of unity produced by the whole."¹³ It is from the standpoint of a similar sensibility that Proudhon rose up in objection against the museum as the destination for works of art and exclaimed: "The concert is the death of music."

If there is no "great idea," then no art whatsoever is great. The art of the Middle Ages owed its grandeur, its greatness, to the idea of the city. The art of the future will draw its inspiration from the idea of the "federation." Because, in the future, society will be a federalist one. Momentarily, then, Kropotkin abandons the cult of the unknown and sketches the outlines of a Proudhon-based and Bakunin-based diagram of social reconstruction. He foresees the establishment of a universal network of contracts, at the level of the individual, of the working-class association, of the commune, thus creating an organic society from the bottom upwards. Because this society is bound to be firmly integrated, it will revive, revitalize an art not of rupture or revolt, but an art grounded in assent, and in positive faith. During the time of revolt, the many diverse paths of art reflect the variousness of the social forces at work on the creation. Modern art is appropriate to the phase of decline of the bourgeois culture. The European avant-garde is condemned to vanish along with the society against which it is fighting. During the period when numerous symbolist poets were declaring themselves to be anarchists and when the battle of *vers libre* was being waged in France under the banners of anarchy (and patriotism), Kropotkin never envisaged symbolist poetry as 'anarchist' poetry. He has no word to say about the poetry of Rimbaud, Verlaine or Mallarmé.¹⁴ If he chastises Romanticism in all its various aspects, if he is the declared enemy of the Bohemians and ivory towers, if he ridicules Zola's and Zolaesque Naturalism, he is on the contrary tolerant when it comes to the modernist movements in Russia; in *Russian*

¹³ *Mutual Aid*. pp. 230-231.

¹⁴ Jean Grave, his French disciple, qualifies the art of revolt as anarchist. But he too ends up by requiring of the artist a direct participation in political struggles.

Literature he talks about the “incontestable talent” of members of such movements as the Decadents, the Impressionists and the Modernists, all of whom are the reluctant victims of Nicholas II’s Russia which is on the path of disintegration.

In his eight lectures given in 1901 at the Lowell Institute in Boston on the subject of the history of Russian literature, Kropotkin presents Russian literature of the 19th century in terms of the *idea* which constitutes the force behind it. He positions himself consciously within the perspective of Russian literary criticism as proposed by Bielinsky and Tchernysevsky, who looked for the aesthetic value of the work in its “philosophical and social significance.” He does not therefore require the writer to depict how men are living, but he does require the writer to depict how men should be living; as long as he fails to represent the universe and life in the light of great unifying idea, he is not on equal terms with his job.¹⁵ Kropotkin lays the blame on the reigning cult of naturalism (which he defines as ‘realism’ in *Words of a Rebel*) and on Zola, who is his real pet aversion, because he reduces the realism of Balzac to a “simple anatomy of society.” “For us... realism must have a more elevated back-cloth; realist description (must) be subordinate to an idealist objective.”¹⁷ The Russian writer must be inspired by Gogol, who showed his disciples “how realism can be subordinate to higher ends, without losing anything whatsoever of its force or ceasing to be a faithful reproduction of life.” For Kropotkin, it is Nekrassov, not Pushkin (“somewhat spoiled and in a word superficial child that he was”) who is the poet, and likewise Tolstoy rather than Dostoyevsky. He shows little understanding of the work of the latter; in it he sees a “curious mixture of realism and unbridled Romanticism.” He has great difficulty reading *The Brothers Karamazov* right to the end. He confesses to not having had the courage to finish *The Idiot*. (But he does reluctantly qualify *Memoirs from a Dead-House* as ‘artistic’). Dostoyevsky plunges his readers into “a Russia which is savagely passionate, drunken, and non-reformed,” into the universe inhabited by beings who have fallen so low that they have

¹⁵ *Russian Literature. Ideals and Realities.* p. 281.

¹⁶ *Words of a Rebel.* pp. 58-9.

¹⁷ *Russian Literature.* p. 90.

forgotten “the very idea of one day being able to rise up above their condition.”¹⁸ And Kropotkin finally sets against Dostoyevsky, painter of the fall of man, not Tolstoy, but Turgenev, “very probably the greatest novelist of his century.” In this latter the purest poetic genius joins forces with the evocative power of the historical genius. In his novels one witnesses the appearance of the principal types of intellectuals who, by the seal of their originality, have left their mark on successive generations in Russia. With deep intuition he discovers these precursors of the various intellectual and social movements which “make history”: “as soon as a new leading type of men or women appeared amidst the educated classes of Russia, it took possession of (Turgenev). He was haunted by it, and haunted until he had succeeded in representing it to the best of his understanding in a work of art, just as for years Murillo was haunted by the image of a Virgin in the ecstasy of purest love, until he finally succeeded in rendering on the canvas his full conception.”¹⁹

If Kropotkin finds the model of a progressive art in the realist tradition of Russia, why does he refuse to identify it with anarchist art? The reason for this is clear: the art which he eulogizes is addressed only to the cultivated élite of Russia. “Take the mass of excellent works that have been mentioned in this book,” he said to his readers at the end of *Russian Literature* and “How very few of them will ever become accessible to a large public!” *A new art is necessary*, an art which will speak everybody’s language, which will retain all the qualities of ‘great art’ and which will be able “to find access to every peasant’s cabin and inspire each and every peasant with lofty conceptions of thought and life.”²⁰

In the article on anarchism which Kropotkin submitted to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, he presents the different currents of the libertarian movement, and nevertheless mentions a *literary anarchism*; in modern literature he perceives the major ideas of anarchist philosophy. (The libertarian ideas proposed by writers have in turn influenced the philosophers of anarchism). One has only to consult the anthologies of *Literary Supplements* of weekly

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 180.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 93-94.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 326. - The reference to Tolstoy is clear.

magazines such as *La Révolte* and, later on, *Les Temps Nouveaux*, to convince oneself of this. One can find in these anthologies elevated passages in hundreds of works by modern authors expressing anarchist theses, and one instantly realises "how closely anarchism is associated with all the intellectual movements of our times."²¹ Among the examples quoted by him, let us note the names of J. S. Mill, Marc Guyau, Wagner (*Art and Revolution*, translated into French by *Les Temps Nouveaux*), Nietzsche, Emerson, Thoreau (the apostle of civil disobedience) and Herzen. But he also finds the primary ideas of anarchism in the theatre of Ibsen,²² in the poetry of Walt Whitman, in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and—no contradiction—in Zola's *Paris* and *Le Travail*. But anarchism as a literary movement does not and cannot express the principles of a so-called anarchist aesthetic. The ideas here are superior to the bourgeois ideology of the time, but they do not draw their inspiration from those works which exceed the horizon of the bourgeois world.

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From Proudhon and Wagner to Tolstoy, anarchist thinkers have seen an artist in each individual; they thought that it will be possible to liberate, in man, the creator who is today condemned to waste away by the conditions of life and by education. Does Kropotkin share this faith? At the first approach, the answer is not clear. Certainly, his objective is to guarantee the artistic education of every member of the community. For the man who does not eat enough appease his hunger, art is luxury. But for the man from the federalist era, art will become a need: "Anarchy embraces *all* the human faculties and all passions."²³ Anarchy

²¹ Baldwin, Roger N. (Ed.) *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*. p. 299.

²² In a letter written in 1902 to Max Nettlau, Kropotkin shows himself to be quite reserved with regard to Ibsen; if the latter has a correct conception of individualism, he does not succeed, according to Kropotkin, in expressing it in a comprehensible manner. But at the time of their first productions (respectively October and December 1893), *La Révolte* salutes *Rosmersholm* and *An Enemy of the People* as anarchist theatre. According to the critique which appeared in Jean Grave's weekly magazine, there were cries of "Vive l'Anarchie"! after the production of *An Enemy of the People*, at the Theatre de l'Oeuvre. (*La Révolte*. Issue of Dec. 2nd - 8th, 1893. p. 148.

²³ *La Conquête du pain*. p. 134. - Kropotkin would like to exclude the "commercial artist," who puts his works up for sale, from the city.

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will thus favour the expansion of creative gifts, and all the more so because "the artistic sense is no less present in the farmer than it is in the bourgeois." In the article published in the Encyclopedia Britannica he talks about the man who will guarantee the "full development of his intellectual, artistic and moral faculties," thus achieving "complete individualisation," a condition which is impossible under the present system of individualism or under any system of State socialism in the "so-called *Volkstaat* (popular State)."²⁴ And Kropotkin allows himself to be carried away by the dream; he predicts that, in the future, "by working four or five hours a day until the age of 45 or 50," man will "easily be able to produce *everything* necessary to ensure the well-being of society." After the hours spent in manual or intellectual work, he will be able to devote himself freely to the satisfaction of his "artistic or scientific needs."²⁵ And he will do this by forming artistic or scientific communities which are real laboratories of artistic creation and craftsmanship. The following is how he describes these model societies: "Some will be able to devote their hours of leisure to literature. They will then form various groups which will include writers, composers, printers, engravers and draftsmen, all of whom are in pursuit of a common goal: the propagation of those ideas which are meaningful for them." In these communities, the creative faculties of certain members who have hitherto been deprived of art will flourish: "when the man who was being exploited yesterday will have received instruction and has *his own* ideas to set down on paper and communicate to others, then men of letters and scholars will be bound to unite together in order to print their prose or their verses."²⁶ But if every one *can* become an artist, Kropotkin in no ways says that every one *must* become one. But he is in no doubt that each single person embodies *either* a potential artist *or* a potential man of learning.

Together with Godwin,—whose work he attaches to the history of anarchist thinking—Kropotkin is the only anarchist to admit the Industrial Revolution. (Proudhon also speaks of the

²⁴ *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*. p. 285.

²⁵ *La Conquête du pain*. p. 126.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 137 - Kropotkin would like to subject the artist to manual work: the artist is a citizen like any other person. The workshop strikes him as being like a school of reality.

relations between art and industry, but he does not express any deep conviction on the subject). Once again he finds himself inspired by the works of the “poet of socialism,” who, in his eyes, is William Morris. Art and industry are born to be reconciled one day: “In order to develop, art must be linked to industry by a thousand intermediary points, in such a way that the two are, as it were, intermingled; everything about and around a man, in his home, in the street, inside and outside public monuments must be pure and artistic in form.”²⁷

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In Kropotkin’s youth Italian opera was the most popular institution in Petersburg, “partly by virtue of its close relationship with the radical movement.” The revolutionary “recitals” of *William Tell* and *The Puritans* were warmly received there, so Kropotkin notes in his autobiography, by applause and shouts which went “straight to the heart of Alexander II.”²⁸ Between 1857 and 1861, like the majority of his contemporaries, Kropotkin looked for the political content, the message “dressed up in fiction,” in the works of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Herzen, Dostoyevsky and Ostrovsky.²⁹ He thus attributes an important role to art; art shows man the beauty or the ugliness of his life; it shows him how he might be able to alter his life. It is the timid revelation of the unknown—an unknown, however, which we would be mistaken in identifying totally with Baudelaire’s unknown (“Au fond de l’inconnu pour trouver du nouveau”—To the bottom of the unknown to find something new) or Rimbaud’s unknown.

The poet is no less bound to convey to the people of his times his own vision of the future: he is, after all, something of a “prophet”: “In the final analysis we should not forget that every economic or social question is also a question of psychology which affects both the individual and the social complex. It cannot be resolved by arithmetic alone. For this reason, as far as social science is concerned, and as in human psychology, the poet often finds his way more successfully than the physiologist. In any event, he too has his say in the matter.”³⁰

²⁷ *La Conquête du pain*. pp. 149-150.

²⁸ *Autour d'une vie*. p. 123.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 129.

³⁰ *Russian Literature*. pp. 265-66.