

“Anarchism and Literature”¹

By Yosef Luden

The difference between anarchism and both branches of Marxist socialism is that the dogma of Marxist socialism attacks economic facts and turns to the material side of the government-regime; anarchism is not satisfied with this and instead focuses fiercely on “spiritual production.” Therefore, the intimate relationship between anarchism and art, anarchism and literature, places the emphasis on personality, which for anarchism remains the axis of social progress. In the propaganda of its ideals, anarchism calls out to support art and literature.

Anarchism was never an established order, but a movement in process which can never be finally satisfied. Never enough freedom, never enough equality: anarchism is a psychological driving force that strives not merely to improve society, but also for more satisfied individuals. Anarchism attempts to balance both autonomy and constraint, thereby avoiding their mutual violation. Solidarity should be realized and based upon the future commune.

The anarchist is, then, different from other sorts of socialists, because he maintains that the future order is already being built today. It is built both before the revolution and after the revolution. Anarchism’s realization is a continual process which begins today. That is why communal life attracts anarchists. This means that it is through personal example and personal realization that the fabric of the future-order is constructed, in the forming of the future-human. Anarchism must, then, turn to artistic work.

Thus, literature is the closest and most intimate source for anarchism: one cannot entirely divide the two. Literature does a great deal for anarchism in cultivating the anarchist personality. Not in vain was [Henrik] Ibsen chastised by the Marxist theorist [Georgi] Plekhanov² as a “petty bourgeois anarchist.”³

¹ Yosef Luden, “*Anarkhism un literatur*,” in *Shturem-Glokn Eseyen* [Stormbell Essays], (Tel Aviv: Problemen, 1988), pp. 228-231.

² Georgi Plekhanov (1856-1916) was an influential Marxist theoretician and philosopher.

³ In 1891, Plekhanov critiqued Ibsen’s work and politics in “Ibsen, Petty Bourgeois Revolutionist.” See G. V. Plekhanov, “Ibsen, Petty Bourgeois Revolutionist,” Ed. Carl Rollyson (New Jersey: Salem Press, 2005).

The secret of the deep relationship between anarchism and literature was grasped by every anarchist theoretician who was inclined to use it. Kropotkin, after all, wrote the history of Russian literature and Rudolf Rocker wrote his “Six Characters of World-Literature,” which educated more anarchists than their own propaganda. Likewise, Emma Goldman utilized both anarchism and literature. It is no wonder that in the 19th and 20th Centuries, important artists and authors expressed their sympathy for anarchism as a humane philosophy. Herbert Read rightly declared that every artist had the potential to be an anarchist, not only because anarchism is the alternative to a relationship of “blind obedience” [*hern-knekht*], but because its goal is freedom of expression. According to E. Vindt, the restlessness, dynamism, and rebelliousness of anarchy fuels creative energy.⁴ More precisely: dissatisfaction with what exists can invigorate creative action.

Indeed, one can find no scarcity of anarchist writers, artists, and poets. It must suffice to mention only a few here: Leo Tolstoy, Henrik Ibsen, Franz Kafka, George Orwell, Albert Camus, and the “Prince of Poetry,” Percy Bysshe Shelly. To them we must attribute such poets as Ferdinand Freiligrath, Ernst Toller, and Erich Mühsam (the German-Jewish anarchist poet murdered by Hitler’s bandits); and to them belong the Yiddish poets Dovid Edelstadt, Yosef Bovshover, and E. Almi. This list of anarchist writers is certainly not exhaustive. Let us take the German writer, Felix Hollaender: he was not entirely an anarchist, but his novel *The Seeker of Truth* is an anarchist novel.⁵ We can also take into consideration the novels and stories of the mysterious author B. Traven, whose name and nationality is still disputed to this day. All that is known of him is that he was an anarchist who participated in the Bavarian Revolution of 1918, wrote in German, and had his novels translated into many languages and adapted into films. Dutch author Multatuli was also an anarchist; French writers Octave Mirbeau and Emil Zola were labeled philosophical anarchists. We find these deep anarchist ideas in every anarchist writer, beginning with Shakespeare. We

⁴ This may reference the Marxist journal *The East Wind* [1982-1989].

⁵ Usually known as *Der Weg des Thomas Truck* [1902].

find sympathetic anarchist types in Romain Rolland's "questionnaire,"⁶ Sholem Asch's *River Street*,⁷ and in many others.

This type of anarchist occupies a large place in popular literature, in both positive and negative portions. Take authors such as Anatole France, Romain Roland, Henry Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Martin Andersen Nexø, Wells, [Liu] Shaoqi, and others who recognized not only economic injustices, but also the vilification of people based on their skin color and origin, against their race and nationality, and all that makes miserable the lives of people and subsequently causes mutual hate. Every critique, every heresy, and even every honest person was discredited as an anarchist.

⁶ Rolland's novel *Jean-Christofe*.

⁷ Asch's novel *East River*.