



Surrealists and Anarchists, Affinities and Resistances: A Response to Gifford

Jesse Cohn
Purdue University North Central



It would have been tempting, until recently, to see a certain arc of literary research as having reached its peak in 2000 with the publication of the late David Kadlec's study, *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture*. As James Gifford reminds us, in the decade of modernist studies before the arrival of Kadlec's book, a series of studies had undermined the simplistic division of modernist writers into a fascist Right and an anti-fascist Left by retrieving the memory of another radical politics of modernism: anarchism. These critics demonstrated that anarchism had been a primary, central influence on almost every phase of modernism, from Symbolism to Surrealism, from Picasso to Pound. Far more than the addition of a few footnotes, reinscribing anarchism within the history of culture has asked us to rethink concepts laid down by critics and theorists such as Christopher Caudwell, Georg Lukács, and Antonio Gramsci, particularly the opposition of "realist" to "abstract" art, of "mass" to "elite" culture, of the "public sphere" to the "private." Anarchist-influenced forms of art often contest rigid distinctions between materialist realism and formalist abstraction (Antliff, *Anarchist* 57). To understand the relationships among writers constituted by anarchism, we have had to trace the histories of "counter-publics," "coteries," and "intimate circles," neither public nor merely private (Ferguson; Shaw 83; Colson 109-112). Finally, rather than situating *anarchisant* writers by political "commitments" or "alignments," we have had to think in terms of "traditions," "affinities," and, in the word of Gifford's title, "networks" (Löwy 14; Colson 333, 21; Day 9; Anderson 4, 233).

Gifford's essay, then, forms part of a fresh wave of scholarship that is now carrying this historiography of anarchist modernism forward, across the imposing boundary formed by the Second World War, into that stretch of history where the "modern" starts to lose its meaning. In particular, new studies of the generation of American poets who came of age in the 1940s and 1950s are underlining their entanglements with anar-

chism (e.g., Bertholf and Gelpi, Duncan and Levertov). But something else seems to be happening, too. The excitement of rediscovering modernism's forgotten anarchist patrimony is giving way to a more cautious accounting of exactly what the various moments of modernism and anarchism owe to one another. Few such analyses are more fraught than those bearing on the relation between surrealism and anarchism, the terrain of Gifford's explorations.

The primary embarrassment for studies of surrealist engagements with anarchism has not been the supposition of an apolitical formalism, as with so many other avant-gardes, but rather in the early and very public engagement of surrealism with the Communist Party. Notwithstanding some early signs of sympathy for anarchism (e.g., making anarchist assassin Germaine Berton into something like a surrealist saint), the surrealists were painfully slow in discovering anarchism, a process that only got under way after the end of World War II (e.g., in the series of "bulletins" penned by Breton, Péret, and others for the anarchist journal *Le Libertaire* between 1947 and 1953). This much is well known; the difficulty is not insuperable, particularly if, as Fernand Drijkoningen remarks, one regards anarchism as "a mindset," "an attitude," even "a mood," which then can be retrospectively read into the historical record of surrealism, in spite of everything (42-43). The overtures of the Paris surrealists to *Le Libertaire* then appears only as the belated confirmation of what has been a true "affinity" from the beginning.

What has been less remarked upon is the ambivalence with which these overtures were received by anarchists.¹ Surrealism is scarcely mentioned in anarchist journals, and often mentioned dismissively in the event—a mere mishmash of "Freudianism and a cloudy communism," according to Victor Méric, just the latest of the avant-garde "eccentricities *du jour*"; a form of "snobism" and a "waste of time," for Henry Poulaille; evidence of a "poverty of thought," according to Federica Montseny; "signs of the physical and moral degradation of the human species" in the eyes of Eugen Relgis (Méric 2075; Poulaille qtd. in Chapman 102; Montseny qtd. in Romero 26; Relgis 43; all trans. mine). These comments are published in loci of anarchist and syndicalist militancy: Sébastien Faure's *Encyclopédie anarchiste* (1934); *Le Peuple*, the newspaper of the syn-

¹ Some have noted (e.g., Antliff, *Anarchy* 117-123, Cabri 53-55) that late modernists (or early postmoderns) of an anarchist tendency are themselves divided over surrealism. Julian Symons, Kenneth Rexroth, and Robert Duncan, for instance, all express considerable disdain toward surrealism—making a reference to "the anarcho-surrealist tendencies of the Beats and Robert Duncan" a little hasty (Symons 2; Duncan 62-67; Rosemont 131, 126).

dicalist CGT union (1924); *L'En dehors*, E. Armand's individualist journal (1926); a pamphlet published in Marín Civera Martínez's *Cuadernos de Cultura* series, aimed at young anarchists and working-class autodidacts (1933).

Why consult sources like these? Of course, it cannot be in hopes of discovering an "official" anarchist stance on surrealism or on anything else; no one anarchist organization or institution has that kind of exclusive and all-encompassing normative authority. The opinions of individual militants such as Méric, Poulaille, Montseny, and Relgis are only of any interest insofar as they are indicative of the opinions of other anarchists; in fact, they represent a fairly broad cross-section of the opinions we might find in the various milieus of the anarchist movement prior to World War II. They are of interest, that is, if we are concerned to ask, not only when and where and how surrealists were able to recognize their desires in "the black mirror of anarchism," as Breton put it (*Free Rein* 265), but whether anarchists recognized theirs in surrealism. The reciprocity of these gazes is not a given, at least not if we are speaking of anarchism not only as an "attitude," a "state of mind," a "mood," or even, in Gifford's phrase, "a meaningful political philosophy," but as a *movement*, however decentered, fragmented, or dispersed, with its own modes of organization and action.

The poetics of the anarchist movement as such—the kinds of poetry published by anarchist presses, recited at anarchist *veladas*, set to music and sung by anarchist hoboos, printed in anarchist newspapers, taught in anarchist schools, etc.—is generally meant to be heard and understood by working-class audiences. As "social poetry," "popular poetry," or "tendency poetry," anarchist verse formed part of a culture of resistance, a project with revolutionary goals. In other words, it is far from identical with "Durrell's individualist escape from the political world," "a 'politics of the unpolitical' in Herbert Read's sense," or a "'personalist' emphasis," in the words with which Gifford describes the ostensibly anarchist character of the Villa Seurat network and its publications. It is this difference which explains, in large part, the distrust exhibited toward surrealism by anarchist militants, even those favorably inclined toward Breton's postwar gestures, preoccupied as they are with questions of popular "accessibility," a wariness of "extreme subjectivist tendencies," and the need for "coordinated action" (Un groupe de militants, trans. mine).

Is the anarchism of the participants in the Villa Seurat network *merely* ostensible? Are we to distinguish between the works of avant-gardists, "anarchist in form," and those of militants, "anarchist in content," and to attribute an authentic "anarchism" to the latter alone? The artist Josh MacPhee suggests that we can speak of a work as "anarchist" not only in terms of form or content, but insofar as it "enter[s] the world" in an anar-

chist manner—i.e., in its production and circulation, its authorship and audience—and/or insofar as it directly constitutes an anarchist *act*, contesting relations of domination and/or producing relations of mutuality and freedom (MacPhee xx). In a similar spirit, Vittorio Frigerio notes the existence of an entire spectrum of “anarchist” literature, ranging from “a literary practice of writing exercised by militants and published in anarchist newspapers” to “literature considered by non-anarchists to be ‘anarchist,’ regardless of the views of its author.” At some point on this spectrum, we can locate “a literature near to the anarchists, i.e., written by authors who are considered to be or who at some point consider themselves to be anarchists, and published entirely or partly in libertarian newspapers or by libertarian publishers,” as well as literary works which are “considered to be anarchist by militants regardless of the views of their author[s]” (Frigerio, n.pag, trans. mine). These broader considerations might allow us to make more nuanced and precise analyses of the role played by anarchism in the context of networks such as Miller’s.

It is clear that the poets and other writers associated with this network collaborate with individual anarchists (e.g., Herbert Read) and anarchist journals (e.g., George Woodcock’s *NOW*), if not necessarily with anarchist organizations. It is equally clear that their productions are sometimes infused with expressions of anarchist ideas and desires (albeit as refracted through a particular, one-sided interpretation: e.g., pacifist rather than warlike, pluralist rather than monist, individualist rather than collectivist, etc.). It is less clear that their poetry has anarchist ends or effects, particularly if Gifford is correct in observing, elsewhere, that “[t]he circle of authors around the Villa Seurat all increasingly turned *away* from direct political action as their interactions [with one another] increased” (“Anarchist Transformations” 66, emphasis mine). It may be, however, that this apparent quietism is not only a reaction against what were, in the thirties and forties, very loud calls for “engagement” and “commitment” from spokespersons for the most dubious causes—fascism, Stalinism, and the Western powers that had sold out Spain to both of them. Rather than constituting a mere despairing retreat or mystical withdrawal from the world’s demands, what we may see in the “personalism” of the Villa Seurat network is one of the first experiments in a new form of anarchist resistance culture.

Anarchists have always required a culture of resistance—symbolic practices that allow us to perpetuate our values in the context of a world that is thoroughly hostile to them. What we find in the period of late modernism, however, is an anarchist movement in crisis: routed and dispersed by the long string of defeats running from the Palmer Raids to the fall of Barcelona. During the 1930s and 1940s, then, we find this move-

ment, scattered and shrunken in size, in the process of turning inward, as historian Andy Cornell remarks, and reformulating itself for “valley times” during which “the possibilities for wide-ranging social transformation do not seem especially propitious.”² In this context, we can see the strategic value of the shift, between the generation of Spain and the generation of the Cold War, away from large-scale labor organizing or armed confrontation toward questions of lifestyle and sexuality and experimentation in the arts. Avant-garde writing à la Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, or Lawrence Durrell, however seemingly apolitical, might then constitute not only a means of resistance to the war but also a continuation of the social war by other means.

In this light, Gifford’s proposition that the English Surrealists and their correspondents are engaged in making “anarchist revisions to Surrealism” is both significant and incompletely demonstrated. What are these revisions? Gifford suggests that one entails simply “accepting Surrealism as a technique while rejecting its politics”—i.e., abrogating the terms of the social contract signed by Breton and company in 1927 (entering the Communist Party) and amended in 1938 (with the issuing of “Toward an Independent Revolutionary Art” with Trotsky and Rivera). This might constitute a reappropriation, but it is not much of a “revision.” More substantially, Gifford alludes to “anarchist revisions to surrealist metaphor”—a modification, rather than merely an application, of the “technique.” It is not entirely clear how Gifford understands surrealist metaphor, but if we take Breton’s discussion of it in his first *Manifesto* as our starting point, the most salient features might be a.) an intensification of the dimension of unlikeness between the two unlike things that are to be compared (and a corresponding weakening of the logical continuity or likening), and b.) a rejection of the intentionality of the comparison (*Manifestoes* 35-36). If this is what Gifford has in mind, it becomes clearer how the addition of a “personalist” emphasis to surrealism, insisting on the integrity of the author’s creative will, would qualify the commitment to the non-intentional, automatist character of surrealist metaphor, which formed one of its conceptual links to Marxist historicism and economism, with their emphasis on blind, mechanical, supra-individual processes (Gifford 60).

Another area warranting further exploration, although it is unclear how closely Gifford intends to tie it into his discussion of the surrealist engagement with anarchism, lies in his analysis of another form of jarring juxtaposition that undercuts Marxist historicism: “Mythistorema,” “present repetition of a past event.” Insofar as anarchism is radically committed

² Cornell borrows the concepts of “mountain times” and “valley times” from Myles Horton.

to a metaphysics of becoming, for which constant transformation is fundamentally real and fixity an illusion, it would seem equally foreign to this concept of mythic repetition (and to Durrell's even more irrationalist notion of the "Heraldic Universe," replacing temporal cause-effect relations with spatialized, symbolic correspondences). However, Daniel Colson has argued that anarchism is also "a stranger to the linear conception of time," and that, as such, it bears a strange kinship to certain Nietzschean conceptions of "repetition" for which the past indeed "becomes real again" and "ceases to be past": "it can be lived for a second time, a third, an infinite number of times, therefore remade, modified," so that what we experience is "a becoming in which everything is always to be resumed, repeated and revalued anew" (100, 104, 106, trans. mine). Could "Mythistorema" be an instrument for just such a subversive repetition? Here is an at least potentially illuminating intersection between a late modernist invention and a neglected, little examined aspect of the anarchist imaginary.

Jesse Cohn, Associate Professor of English at Purdue University North Central, is the author of *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, Politics* (Susquehanna University Press, 2006). More recent works include "Sex and the Anarchist Unconscious: A Brief History" (*Sexualities*, August 2010) and "'Don't Trust Anybody, Not Even Us': Kafka's Realism as Anarchist Modernism" (*Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, Summer 2011). A second book, *Underground Passages: Anarchist Resistance Culture, 1848-2011*, is forthcoming.

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