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BACK IN THE DAY

This feature extracts articles from The Independent Scholar, which became The Independent Scholar Quarterly (TISQ); these publications preceded the current peer-reviewed journal The Independent Scholar (TIS) which first appeared in 2015.. Papers that appeared in TISQ did not undergo the same peer review process as those critical papers appearing in the main body of TIS; there is nevertheless much of value to be gleaned from the earlier work in TISQ.



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For this volume I have selected Therese B. Dykeman's "Voltairine de Cleyre (1866-1912): Activist Scholar Without Borders," TISQ 22, 1 (Spring 2008): 8-11. In keeping with the theme of this number, Dr. Dykeman's paper, concerns a pioneering American radical, the anarchist and feminist Voltairine de Cleyre. De Cleyre, a comrade of Emma Goldman, turned to Anarchism after the execution of the Haymarket Anarchists in 1886, an event as influential in changing political minds as the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti would be in 1927. The deaths of the Haymarket Anarchists continued to haunt her for the rest of her life, and on the anniversary of their deaths she would make an annual address. Dr. Dykeman demonstrates the breadth and depth of her philosophy; for de Cleyre, freedom included political rights as well as the right to make reproductive decisions by using birth control. She spoke to the concerns of men and women, without granting priority to one over the other.

This paper appears with the kind permission of Dr. Dykeman.

SHELBY SHAPIRO

General Editor



VOLTAIRINE DE CLEYRE (1866-1912): ACTIVIST SCHOLAR WITHOUT BORDERS

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Tis ever the same—the celebration of the breaking of bonds

De Cleyre, The Case of Woman Versus Orthodoxy

The greatest of all human benefits, that at least without which no other benefit can be truly enjoyed, is independence.

Wm. Godwin *The Enquirer* 1797

I prefer dangerous liberty to quiet servitude.

Thos. Jefferson 1787 [ltr. Jan 20.]

It has been said, "Nature has a habit of now and then producing a type of human being far in advance of the times.... Such a being was Voltairine de Cleyre."¹ Voltairine de Cleyre was a radical. She was an anarchist but not a Communist, a freethinker but not a libertine, a feminist and scholar of the human condition who espoused unique theories of economics, freedom, and pacifism. Her honest insight and sincere passion led her to advance the borders of thought and action and at times push beyond them. Portraits of de Cleyre prove her to have been attractive, and a reading of her lectures and essays prove her eloquence, singular fervor, and fearless inquiry and judgment.

One critic has concluded that few men "were her equal in the development of a libertarian social philosophy," for she demonstrated "a breadth of vision and an ability to think outside of predetermined philosophical lines."² Her works may never be read in mainstream political science or philosophy books; nevertheless, her ideas are necessary for the full assessment of this country's past and for its preparation for the future.

Life

Born in 1866 in Leslie, Michigan, to parents who separated the following year, Voltairine was sent to live with her father at age twelve and to a convent school in Ontario at age fourteen where she was very homesick for her mother and sister Addie and unhappy in the authoritarian Catholic atmosphere. Graduating at age seventeen, she began her first lecture tour the next year as a freethinker, quickly becoming editor of the free thought *Progressive Age* and publishing her first volume of poems. After the Haymarket hangings in Chicago, 1886, she became an anarchist and later began friendships with Emma Goldman and many other anarchists here and abroad. Though she championed birth control, from a short-lived relationship she bore a son Harry but did not raise him thinking herself unsuitable to do so.

She eked out a living by teaching English and piano in the Russian Jewish ghetto in Philadelphia, continuing to write and lecture. The many periodicals she contributed included *Open Court* (1891-1896), *Rebel* (1895-1896), and *Mother*

¹ Jay Fox in his eulogy, "Voltairine de Cleyre," *Agitator* (July 15, 1912).

² William O. Reichart, *Partisans of Freedom: A Study in American Anarchism* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1979), 338.



Earth (1907-1911). Eventually, for a brief time, she lectured in Great Britain, Paris, Scotland, and Norway as well as in New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Kansas. Each anniversary of the Haymarket affair she journeyed to Chicago to give speeches.³ It was there that she died at age forty-six of complications from a gunshot wound and sinus infection. It is there in the Waldheim Cemetery that her monument stands, still today drawing admiring visitors.

This short biography does not tell the story of Voltairine de Cleyre fully or well, because her real story is that of her soul and its intense and elegant expression through her essays, speeches, and poetry. Perhaps it was her continuing poverty that motivated de Cleyre, or perhaps it was the pain and ill health that plagued her throughout her life that prodded her, or possibly, it was bearing the name of Voltaire and reading philosophy. Whatever the cause, from an early age de Cleyre had strong ideas about social conditions and was a rebel against authority and establishments that promoted inequality and injustice.

Writings and Speeches

The essay that first turned my attention to Voltairine de Cleyre, was her 1910 essay "The Dominant Idea" in which she views civilizations as dominated by ideas: "Everywhere in the shells of dead societies, as in the shells of the sea-slime, we shall see the force of purposive action, of intent within holding its purpose against obstacles without."⁴ In the medieval civilizations, for example, the idea was "greatening of God, lessening of man" who, however, wrought their aspiring spirit "into cathedral stones."⁵ She saw the 20th century, barely a decade old, with unusual clairvoyance. The dominant idea stretching into the future before her she conceived as "The Much Making of Things" - seeing it producing "heaps and heaps of things" not caring why or to what end, but "possessed with the idea that he must do it."⁶ Goldman judged this essay to have been the leitmotif of her life.⁷

De Cleyre's courage and radical thinking follow in the singular tradition of the early 19th century's Frances Wright, who lectured publicly against the immorality of religious leaders who condoned slave ownership and of male educators who denied female teachers and students.⁸ De Cleyre particularized Wright's principle of "human improvement" concerning the violence and abuse in marriage and more strongly railed against their economic inequality. Many New England women who led in demanding abolition and voting rights by less radical means were aging. Other women leaders, for example in St. Louis, kept to more traditional subjects, pushing the boundaries to gain serious positions in educational institutions. De Cleyre, in first lecturing in a white toga, imitated Wright. Both committed their thoughts to writing throughout their lives. Both were too nontraditional to be held generally and publicly as models by other women; yet, both broke new ground beyond traditional boundaries in their writings and speeches. Wright died in 1852, de Cleyre in 1912; neither witnessed women's franchise but both led in articulating inequalities and injustices not convincingly addressed by this country until the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Anarchism

De Cleyre's anarchism was not as close to the center of political philosophy as was Wright's pre-Mill utilitarianism. By its very definition, anarchism edges a border of political philosophy. In developing a consistent philosophy of anarchism, de Cleyre defined it in terms of freedom, plenty and peace. In her 1901 essay "Anarchism" she outlines four kinds of anarchism. She claims two spirits in the world, caution and dare, and society "a quivering balance, eternally struck afresh" between them. The guide of an anarchist is the Spirit of Dare, the aim is free play for the Spirit of Change, for it is that which gives freedom to the soul as to the body: "Once and forever to realize that one is not a bundle of well-regulated

³ Only eight of the speeches she delivered were located by Paul Avrich and reprinted in Voltairine de Cleyre, introd., notes and bibliography Paul Avrich, *The First Mayday: The Haymarket Speeches, 1875-1910* (New York: Libertarian Book Club, 1980).

⁴ Sharon Presley and Crispin Sartwell, eds. *The Exquisite Rebel: The Essays of Voltairine de Cleyre - Anarchist, Feminist, Genius* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 109.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷ Goldman also finds the "key" to de Cleyre's power in her essay "The Dominant Idea" from which she quotes: "In everything that lives...is limned to the shadow-line of an idea," Emma Goldman, *Voltairine de Cleyre* (Berkeley Heights, NJ: Oriole Press, 1932), 7, 8.

⁸ In her conclusion of "The Case of Woman Versus Orthodoxy," de Cleyre mentions other women who challenged the status quo besides Frances Wright: Hypatia, Mary Wollstonecraft, Ernestine L. Rose, Harriet Martineau, Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth and Lucy N. Coleman, Presley and Sartwell, 207.



little reasons bound up in the front room of the brain to be sermonized ... and stopped by a syllogism, but a bottomless, bottomless depth of all strange sensations, a rocking sea of feeling."⁹

She explained her revulsion at economic repression in her essay "Why I am an Anarchist?" in which she argues from emotion and politics of personality. In her essay "Our Present Attitude," she argues the necessity for "total disintegration and dissolution of the principle and practice of authority" in order that peace might triumph over injustice and violence.¹⁰ In "Open Your Eyes," she distinguishes anarchism from law: the one preaching peace, the other violence. Her most popular essay, her 1908-1909 "Anarchism and American Traditions," links the early ideas of equality and liberty in the words of Jefferson with anarchism, quoting him as saying that the nation would go downhill from the Revolution.¹¹ Finally, "In a Lance for Anarchy," (1891) she asserts the superiority of anarchist morality.¹²

De Cleyre defines anarchism as a philosophy of freedom. The rejection of authority - authority being the root problem of poverty - makes possible just distribution of wealth, morality, women's equality, and peace. Shaped from the thinking of Adam Smith, William Godwin,¹³ Mary Wollstonecraft, and Frances Wright, and finding guidance from Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, from the legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, as well as her contemporary anarchists Peter Kropotkin and Johann Most, de Cleyre's anarchism becomes "virtually unique in the history of American anarchism."¹⁴

Some have found de Cleyre's definition of anarchism to be less a matter of politics than of ethics, an ethics of "self-responsibility," a philosophy that bore "good news for the individual."¹⁵ However, de Cleyre argued that anarchism was a matter of political freedom, making "the greatest sin of our fathers that they did not trust liberty wholly."¹⁶ Hers was an individualist anarchism which opposed any fetters on the "soul and mind and heart," its higher principle being that "every man must be a law unto himself," and so affirming the "highest morality."¹⁷ Thus, De Cleyre's anarchism does not focus on the abolition of social restraint so much as it promotes an ethics to evolve from individual thought, actions and passions.

Probably unbeknownst to de Cleyre, her insistence upon political freedom and individual responsibility had been the keystone of 18th century American historian Mercy Otis Warren's political philosophy as well. Warren's greatest fears had been the loss of freedom in a federalist government for the individual and loss of personal and national morals from power and greed. De Cleyre found Warren's fears to have been realized, and she gave her life to urge no government in the face of the one she lived under.

Economics

Witnessing the immorality of government and industrial greed, Voltairine de Cleyre believed that the individual should be allowed decent earning power, but rejected the theory of economics that communist Emma Goldman held. De Cleyre's study of political economy began after hearing Clarence Darrow speak on socialism in 1887, the year she became involved with labor issues, especially as related to the Haymarket affair. The day after police fired into a crowd of strikers from the Chicago McCormick Reaper Works, anarchists met in the rain at Haymarket Square to protest. That day, May 4, 1886, police marched in killing four anarchists, and a bomb was thrown, it was believed, by an anarchist.

⁹ "Anarchism," *Free Society*, (October 13, 1901) 1.

¹⁰ Voltairine de Cleyre, *Selected Works of Voltairine de Cleyre*, ed. Alexander Berkman (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1914), 79-80. The *Selected Works* includes thirty-three poems, eighteen essays, and eleven stories and sketches.

¹¹ Here de Cleyre notes that Jefferson thought no government was best, but that it was also impractical.

¹² Surprisingly, Adam Smith, who concluded that of the extremes of the political spectrum, anarchy was "less destructive of security and leisure" than despotism, would have leaned in de Cleyre's direction, Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* [1795], (New York: Garland Publishing, 1971), 56. Smith is most noted for his *Wealth of Nations*.

¹³ In 1797, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft's companion, argued that "a servile spirit cannot feel what it is to be a man. Still, a man not provided for tomorrow cannot enjoy today," sentiments reflected in de Cleyre's works, William Godwin, *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1971), 240. In 1792, Wollstonecraft argued for national education, making the point that without it women cannot "participate in the inherent rights of mankind," Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Hamondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), 88.

¹⁴ Terry Perlin, "Anarchism and Idealism: Voltairine de Cleyre (1866- 1912)," *Labor History* 14 (Fall 1973): 506.

¹⁵ Reichart, 342, 344.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 350.

¹⁷ Voltairine de Cleyre, "A Lance for Anarchy," *The Open Court* (September 24, 1891), 2963-4.



Eight men were brought to trial (six of whom had never been there) and four were hanged, on November 11, 1887. Of the four remaining, one committed suicide, and the last three were not pardoned until 1893. It was proved later that the bomb thrower was not one of the eight after all. Still, the incident, having sent the erroneous message that anarchists engaged in violence, indelibly sealed the two together in the public's mind. The message of the Haymarket affair for de Cleyre was that with such sacrifice in moral revolution, "real justice and real liberty might come on earth."¹⁸

From her childhood and throughout her life, de Cleyre took on the causes of factory workers. Her two concerns were one, that life has higher appeals which deem a fair distribution of wealth, and two, the necessity for economic equality in marriage as opposed to economic slavery. She critiqued the modern consumer culture, believing that three hours a day of labor would satisfy all human economic needs, and favoring a "decentralized economic system according to the principle of worker's self management achieved by education and propaganda."¹⁹ Economics must be related to greater individualism, greater equality, and greater freedom. Living in harmony with nature rather than in industrial diminution of the individual laborer was de Cleyre's ideal, an ideal that demanded individual austerity in practice. She lived that ideal to a punishing extent.

Freedom

In de Cleyre's philosophy, freedom is the great principle. Without freedom the individual may be denied his wants to eat, breathe, sleep, love, dream and create, and become a "crippled creature."²⁰ "A hungry man," she says, "has the social right to bread."²¹ Hence, freedom must allow man to exist. Secondly, freedom must allow the individual not only to exist, but also to exist in equality. This means that women must be as independent and equal as men, for "without the independence of woman there can be no equality, and without equality no true adjustment of sex relations."²² Thirdly, freedom must allow man to be free from oppression. By this, de Cleyre means that there can be no essential difference between those who live lives of vice and crime and those who live lives of virtue. Crime is in each of us and in the world, so she bids us: "Ask yourselves, each of you, whether you are quite sure that you have feeling enough, understanding enough, and have you suffered enough, to be able to weigh and measure out another man's life or liberty, no matter what he has done?"²³

The great commandments of Jesus, Buddha, and Tolstoy to forgive and judge not come not from laws but only from "accumulated wisdom of man."²⁴ To allow freedom to ourselves and others and to grow in wisdom is the responsibility of the individual, for "every ethical advance must be wrought out in the individual."²⁵ In this sense of anarchist freedom, de Cleyre can say, "Liberty... is the mother of order."²⁶ It is lack of freedom that encourages inequality, injustice, chaos, and war.

Feminism

Often referred to as an anarchist-feminist, de Cleyre based her feminist position as well as her economics on the philosophical principle of liberty. She lists Hypatia with Socrates and Christ and personifies liberty as a woman in her poem, "O Mother Liberty!"²⁷ She believes it is freedom in education, marriage, and economics that will end the crippling of women's minds, sexual abuse, and slavery within marriage and promote financial independence for women. She blames government and churches or states and priests for fostering unequal freedoms with their unhappy consequences for women. She sees justice as an evolving issue. What was once considered just may no longer be, e.g.,

¹⁸ Paul Avrich, *An American Anarchist*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 17; "Our Martyred Comrades" delivered in Philadelphia, November 17, 1900; published in *Free Society* (San Francisco), December 16, 1900; reprinted (abridged) in *The Firebrand* (Mount Juliet, Tennessee), November 13, 1909.

¹⁹ Dave Baxter, "Voltairine de Cleyre," in *Women in World History. A Biographical Encyclopedia*, Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, eds. (Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 2002), vol. 4, 438.

²⁰ Voltairine de Cleyre, *Crime and Punishment*, Philadelphia (March 15, 1903): 17.

²¹ Idem.

²² Voltairine de Cleyre, "The Economic Relations of Sex," *The Open Court* (May 7, 1891): 2963.

²³ De Cleyre, *Crime and Punishment*, 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ Voltairine de Cleyre, "American Progress," *Open Court* (December 3, 1891): 3041.

²⁶ Emma Goldman, *Voltairine de Cleyre*, (Berkeley Heights, NJ: Oriole Press, 1932), 17.

²⁷ "In Memoriam: to Gen. M.M. Trumbull," *Open Court* 8 (19 July 19, 1894): 158.



monarchies that contributed to “antiquated sexual codes of the Victorian era” and feudalism that left women in “serfhood” rather than “selfhood.”²⁸ The remedy, she states emphatically, lies in “LIBERTY!”²⁹ In liberty lies morality and future. The new code of ethics founded on the law of equal freedom will allow women what she finds to be most important - complete individuality.

De Cleyre, still a part of the Victorian era herself, fearlessly brought into the forefront issues of birth control, rape and abuse, of women who as heads of families could not support their children. By speaking about these issues, she gave voice to the prison of silence to which they were condemned. Although de Cleyre admired Thomas Paine, friend of Mary Wollstonecraft and hero of Frances Wright, she asked why he had been given so much recognition while no other woman had been. Thus, in addressing these issues in public forum with power and eloquence, Voltairine de Cleyre was much in advance of her time. One observer claimed that she formulated “the most complete articulation of the anarchist-feminist position to appear in the nineteenth century.”³⁰

Pacifism

De Cleyre’s pacifism is related to her feminism. She judges that while most women “regard war as a barbarism ... [n]evertheless if it comes to that ... it is skill, not numbers, not muscular strength, which counts.... A single figure in the darkness, a flash, a blast -the work of an army is done! Was the figure man or woman?”³¹ Against wars, she yet praises the individual who assassinates tyrannical leaders. She found prisons to be engaged not in reforming but in punishment, to be violent and without redemption. Her pacifism is not simple. The seeming inconsistencies in condoning both pacifist and non-pacifist acts are derived from the distinction between individual acts with their responsibilities and those acts commanded by authority.

Conclusion

By the time she died, Voltairine de Cleyre, in pain and depression, harbored doubts about her thinking and direction of action. She had more or less reconciled with her son, and had come to appreciate the preparation in writing and speaking, music and poetry, the constant companions given to her in her convent education in spite of bitter feelings toward that experience. Giving herself, beyond the borders of benevolence, to the ignorant, the poor and the unjustly slain, she became a saint, but one from no organized religion, a secular saint. In addition to her legacy of writings, in Stelton, New Jersey, a street was named after her, as were many daughters. Emma Goldman requested that she be buried near de Cleyre’s grave.

Outside the borders of the mainstream, her life and her thinking challenged her contemporaries, and continue to challenge us to question our own lives and our own thinking and our political choices. Why are we so preoccupied with things, that we eliminate jobs and proper wages to get more and more things cheaply? Why do we punish? For justice, revenge? Why do we condone government in events that take away from the individual?

The borders of law and order that Voltairine de Cleyre came to and crossed over with her notion of anarchism, made clear the hypocrisy and unreasonableness, if not stupidity, of the status quo, of certain laws and order condoned and enforced at the turn of the century. Her thinking at the political edge elucidated for others the inappropriate, even transgressive and harmful political rules and habits. Its benefit continues to be in making us rethink the way we live. In what was, perhaps, her overreach, she established a different center or middle ground by which to measure political human progress.

In view of her experiences in witnessing the politically voiceless, de Cleyre would perhaps applaud women’s and minorities’ increased power, social security help for the elderly and disabled and better and safer working conditions that in the main eliminates child labor but would despise its coming from the state. Yet, she would continue to question the role of the individual in all this, the role of individual responsibility, the legalistic atmosphere, and the cumbersome weight and authority of government. And, were she alive today, she would decry the CEO salaries that selfishly denigrate

²⁸ Voltairine de Cleyre, “Sex Slavery,” Berkman, 350.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 356.

³⁰ Baxter, 346-440.

³¹ Voltairine de Cleyre, “The Gates of Freedom,” *Lucifer The Light-Bearer* (May 15, 1891): 4. See Carol I. Winkleman, *The Language of Battered Women: A rhetorical analysis of personal theologies*, (New York: SUNY Press, 2004).



the dignity of their workers and condemn them to unlivable wages, and decry the power of religions. In all she would still attempt to convince us that our main sin is the sin against freedom.

Perhaps Voltairine de Cleyre will eventually be in history the way Emma Goldman saw her, the “most gifted and brilliant anarchist woman America ever produced”³² and in the eyes of her more recent biographer Paul Avrich, “one of the most interesting if neglected figures in the history of American radicalism.”³³ I would add that her soul survives the consummation of her own life through its immolation in the fires of her exquisite passion for a better life for others.

³² Goldman, 5.

³³ Avrich, x