

Anarchist Authorities

Rebel Signifiers
and the Struggle for Control of the Anarchist Text

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A thesis submitted in candidature for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy

Cardiff University

June 2006

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Abstract

Anarchism rarely turns its revolutionary energies towards questions of textual politics. While anarchists have historically offered an uncompromising rejection of state authority, this thesis applies this position to the discourse of anarchism, mapping its critique onto a consideration of the authority in certain key texts.

By investigating such anti-authoritarianism, this study marks the beginning of an anarchist theory of textual politics. Understanding the text in both its literary and political guises, this study draws on the work of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault to interrogate the figure of authority legible within anarchist discourse. Commencing with a critical reappraisal of Emma Goldman's writings on theatre, chapter two compares them to the radical theatre criticism of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, establishing the centrality of the question of form, and identifying how anarchism does not depend on the figure of the author in order to produce meaning.

Turning to the political texts of anarchism, chapter three deconstructs the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, bringing his logic of authority to a point of crisis while at the same time maintaining the force of his analysis. Focusing on Michael Bakunin, chapter four shows how critical authority can enforce a univocality on its subject which simultaneously restricts interpretative freedom. Chapter five turns to Goldman's political writing, demonstrating how her textual constructions divorce the reader from the (revolutionary) referent.

Returning to literature, chapter six is informed by recent autobiographical theory, and establishes how questions of faith, interpretation and memory underwrite textual authorities in the overlooked genre of anarchist autobiography. Chapter seven ends the study with a consideration of the internally contradictory rhetorical strategies of contemporary anarchist writing. Concluding that anarchist discourse has too long left the figure of authority unchallenged within its own texts, this thesis argues that if anarchism is to maintain the commensurability of its means and ends, new textual forms must be sought.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Chris Weedon for the past years of patience, understanding and advice, through some less than usual circumstances.

The realisation of this thesis would not have been possible without the generous support of a scholarship from the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory. I would like to thank Professor Catherine Belsey for her assistance with securing this support, and for welcoming me back to the Centre.

This thesis has been immeasurably enriched by the help and suggestions of many individuals, but in particular I would like to thank: Andrew Williams for years of friendship above and beyond the call of academic duty, Anne McMonagle, Jodie Poppleton, Charlotte McBride, Dan Haines, Chris Michael, Jessica Osborn, Kieron Farrow, Jesse Cohn, Alex Prichard, Spencer Sunshine, John Purkis, Joe Mannion, Rhyall Gordon, and my *compañeros* of the Cardiff Anarchist Network for putting the theory into practice together.

My thanks to Patricia Barrera for unflagging patience and indulgence. *Con todo mi amor, como siempre.*

For Nuala

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed Garth S. van (candidate)

Date 1 June 2016

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Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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1

Introduction

Deconstruction's politics have been hotly debated in recent years. Yet encounters between anarchism and deconstruction have rarely been staged. It is not the purpose of this thesis to theorise an anarchist deconstruction – and by 'deconstruction' I am referring specifically to the work of Jacques Derrida. My project here is to bring a deconstructive critique to bear on a number of texts that can be gathered together under the rubric of anarchism.¹ The selection of these texts, for reasons that will become clear, is neither an attempt to represent the totality of the historical (textual) legacy known as anarchism nor the prospective elements of a future canon. It is, rather, an attempt to mark both a continuity and a point of rupture, to address previously unconsidered problems within a discursive field (anarchism) while simultaneously renewing the critique that that discourse has offered.

What, though, is 'anarchism'? The very question is a recurrent trope of anarchist texts, for generically they tend to begin with an explanation of the etymology of the word, which is derived from the Greek word meaning without a leader, hence a politics

¹ The elusiveness of the 'political' meaning of Derrida's work is perhaps signalled by the number of competing interpretations of it. Both Simon Critchley and Geoffrey Bennington argue that deconstruction posits a democracy-to-come, while Michael Ryan argues for a Marxist deconstruction, and Saul Newman argues for an anarchist one. See Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000); Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); and Saul Newman, 'Derrida's Deconstruction of Authority', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 27.3 (2001), 1-20. Derrida's own political interventions became more overt in the 1990s, most clearly in *Specters of Marx*. This garnered a host of varying critical responses which were collated (and then in turn answered by Derrida in the final essay) in the collection *Ghostly Demarcations*. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) and *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's 'Specters of Marx'*, ed. by Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999). See also Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida & the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996).

opposed to state authority.² Yet the recurrence of the question might seem to indicate, in relation to any answer given, a certain provisionality or a degree of anxiety as to its validity. At the beginning of his text ‘The Anarchist Tension’ Alfredo Bonanno asks the same question, and reflects, ironically, that faced with an audience of anarchists:

It might seem strange that I should take up such a problem in this situation as I know for certain that there are many anarchists here, because I know them personally. And if nothing else, anarchists should at least know what anarchism is.³

Bonanno, though, offers one of the most succinct justifications for the repeated asking of this question, ‘what is anarchism?’:

[...] it is not a definition that can be made once and for all, put in a safe and considered a patrimony to be tapped little by little. Being an anarchist does not mean one has reached a certainty; or said once and for all, ‘There, from now on I hold the truth and as such, at least from the point of view of the idea, I am a privileged person’. Anyone who thinks like this is an anarchist in word alone. Instead the anarchist is someone who really puts themselves in doubt as such, as a person, and asks themselves: What is my life according to what I do and in relation to what I think? [...]

Anarchism is not a concept that can be locked up in a word like a gravestone. It is not a political theory. It is a way of conceiving life, and life, young or old as we may be, old people or children, is not something definitive: it is a stake we must play day after day.⁴

Taking my cue, then, from Bonanno, this thesis will be a type of extended deconstructive consideration of ‘what anarchism is’. The anarchist critic, though, in approaching a text might be expected to come prepared with a ready-made critical yardstick by which to judge it. Yet this gesture would imply an already existing anarchism that is somehow extraneous to the texts under consideration. Rather than

² Kropotkin gives ‘from the Greek *an-* and *archē*, contrary to authority’. Malatesta offers ‘from the Greek and its literal meaning is *without government*’. Guérin suggests that it ‘means something like the absence of authority or government’. Marshall writes that ‘the word “anarchy” comes from the ancient Greek *αναρχία* meaning the condition of being “without a leader” but usually translated and interpreted as “without a ruler”’. Peter Kropotkin, *Anarchism & Anarchist Communism*, ed. by Nicolas Walter (London: Freedom Press, 1993), p. 7. Errico Malatesta, *Anarchy*, trans. by Vernon Richards (London: Freedom Press, 1995), p. 15. Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*, trans. by Mary Klopfer (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), p. 11. Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana, 1993), p. x.

³ Alfredo M. Bonanno, ‘The Anarchist Tension’, trans. by Jean Weir, available online at <http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/tension.html>.

⁴ Bonanno, ‘The Anarchist Tension’.

‘transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text’ as Derrida has written, I would hope to follow *Of Grammatology* in developing a reading that ‘although it is not commentary, [...] must be intrinsic and remain within the text’.⁵ The challenge then is simultaneously to map and explore, to allow an anarchist aesthetic to emerge from the texts under consideration at the same time as elaborating a critique of it.

The anarchism that I address is not taken on its own ostensible *political* grounds, nor do I seek to engage with its political content *qua* political science. This thesis is motivated to read the texts of anarchism on what might be called a literary basis, to read them for their more marginal aspects, their rhetoric and metaphors, in pursuit of their aporias which centre on one question: can an anti-authoritarian text legitimately (following its own logic) take up the authority to command its reader? And what, if any, are the implications for an anti-authoritarian theory of authority? The internal tensions that I explore in relation to the anarchist texts under consideration here are those which concern figures of authority. If anarchism is, as already suggested, a politics that rejects government and hence state authority, what happens when the figure of another type of authority creeps back into the anarchist text? Anarchism has long held to the notion that it must be a ‘prefigurative’ politics, in the sense that for anarchism the means become the ends. For example, Uri Gordon argues that direct action – as an example of prefigurative politics – is ‘widely recognised as the primary reference point for how anarchist groups should function’.⁶ Despite the easy stereotype of anarchism as hopelessly utopian, in fact anarchists have more typically disavowed any sense of a final (future) destination, and thus this absence of an identifiable future ‘state’ of affairs

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected edn. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 158, p. 159.

⁶ Uri Gordon, ‘Anarchism and Political Theory: Contemporary Problems’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford University, 2005), p. 103.

has meant that the ‘authority’ to take decisions can only reside in the hands of those directly affected by the decisions. This disavowal of a future condition is evident even from the early nineteenth-century writings of William Godwin, one of the precursors of modern anarchist thought. Godwin’s notion of ‘perfectibility’, for example, meant that ‘the term perfectible, thus explained, not only does not imply the capacity of being brought to perfection, *but stands in express opposition to it*. If we could arrive at perfection, there would be an end to our improvement’.⁷ Without a determining image of a future society by which to judge present actions, anarchism has traditionally insisted on the commensurability of its actions with its ethos as understood by the actors involved. Therefore the concern that motivates this thesis is the possibility that anarchist texts come to exhibit a disparity between their (textual) means and their (ideological) ends. Do anarchist texts attempt to govern the reading practice? In this critical re-reading of certain texts from the textual heritage of anarchism, the question I have sought to put to the texts is precisely this: is a figure of authority perceptible within those texts? And if this is the case, what does this come to signify for the reader, and consequently how does it impact on the production of the meaning of those texts?

My interest in these questions springs from a long-standing involvement with and commitment to anarchist politics, as practiced with varying degrees of success in various places around the globe. Yet I find it troubling to come across texts such as Murray Bookchin’s 1995 polemical essay, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*. Bookchin is undoubtedly the foremost anarchist theorist of the late twentieth century, and in this text argues for a social anarchism in the vein of Kropotkin’s anarchist communism (where the stateless society of the future is built on the image of the self-governing commune), against what he sees as a sub-Stirnerite ‘anarcho-individualism’ (where the state gives way in the face of the absolute

⁷ William Godwin, *The Anarchist Writings of William Godwin*, ed. by Peter Marshall (London: Freedom Press, 1986), p. 62 (my emphasis). Unless otherwise stated, all emphasis is in original texts.

sovereignty of the individual).⁸ ‘Like it or not,’ Bookchin writes, ‘thousands of self-styled anarchists have slowly surrendered the social core of anarchist ideas to the all-pervasive Yuppie and New Age personalism that marks this decadent, bourgeoisified era’.⁹ Despite Bookchin’s valid concern with the reaffirmation of the social anarchist heritage, his text becomes hugely problematic when one finds, on the final pages, exhortations such as the following – ‘Anarchism must not be dissipated in self-indulgent behaviour [...] it must not retreat into the primitivistic [*sic*] demimonde [...]. Anarchism today must resolutely retain its character as a *social* movement.’¹⁰ Bookchin’s tenor has not gone unnoticed by other readers, for Peter Marshall notes that ‘his style may be difficult at times and his tone unduly virulent’.¹¹ Yet beyond questions of style, textual constructions such as this surely raise difficult questions concerning the nature of the relationship of the text to the reader. On what grounds, in this instance, can another’s behaviour be judged as ‘self-indulgent’ and therefore un-anarchist? Where does the text derive the authority for its exhortations of what anarchism ‘must’ or ‘must not’ do?

Despite the tricky questions that such a mode of address may provoke, this issue has not been previously considered in relation to anarchist texts. When I wrote that encounters between anarchism and deconstruction have rarely been staged, the encounters that have taken place have tended to examine potential theoretical congruencies and productive imbrications. The most sustained anarchist engagement with Derrida’s thought has come from Saul Newman, particularly in his essay ‘Derrida’s Deconstruction of Authority’. Here Newman argues that the revolution that

⁸ Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1995), p. 9. For an introduction to this aspect of Kropotkin’s thought, see Alan Ritter, *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), particularly pp. 56-60. For a discussion of Stirner, see John P. Clark, *Max Stirner’s Egoism* (London: Freedom Press, 1976).

⁹ Bookchin, *Social Anarchism*, p. 1. Bookchin’s text has proved controversial in anarchist circles, prompting one book-length rebuttal from leading ‘post-left’ anarchist Bob Black, along with much heated online debate which unproductively focusses on disputed instances from the actual authors’ lives. See Bob Black, *Anarchy After Leftism* (Columbia: Columbia Alternative Library Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Bookchin, *Social Anarchism*, p. 60.

¹¹ Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 622.

‘classical’ anarchism aimed for is one which ‘substituted political and economic authority for a rational authority founded on an Enlightenment-humanist subjectivity’.¹² This is what he refers to as a logic of subversion, where state authority is ‘abolished as the first revolutionary act’ (as opposed to the Marxist logic of inversion, which replaces bourgeois political power with proletarian economic power).¹³ Nevertheless, both logics, for Newman, represent an inversion of the hierarchical structure of the binary opposition underwriting them, and therefore reaffirm ‘the place of power in the very attempt to overthrow it’.¹⁴ He consequently conceives of deconstruction making possible ‘an outside created by the limits of the inside [which] may allow us to conceive of a politics of resistance which does not restore the place of power’.¹⁵ In seeking to revitalise a (post)anarchism with deconstructive theory, Newman’s work takes a very different approach to the staging of the encounter between the two discourses than this thesis does.¹⁶

Newman’s text occupies a leading position in a field now recognised as ‘postanarchist’ thought.¹⁷ In a recent conference paper Benjamin Franks argues that postanarchism displays three identifiable characteristics:

First, a rejection of traditional anarchist concerns and the adoption of new critical approaches and tactics that lie beyond the remit of anarchist orthodoxy, using as their basis those poststructural theorists that are

¹² Newman, ‘Derrida’s Deconstruction of Authority’, p. 5. With this Newman is repeating the view that ‘classical anarchist politics [...] is governed by an original principle such as human essence or rationality’ (p. 17). A revised version of this article was included in Newman’s later text, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001).

¹³ Newman, ‘Derrida’s Deconstruction of Authority’, p. 5.

¹⁴ Newman, ‘Derrida’s Deconstruction of Authority’, p. 4.

¹⁵ Newman, ‘Derrida’s Deconstruction of Authority’, p. 11. While Newman’s argument is a serious attempt to harness deconstruction for the purposes of theorising a postanarchism, limitations of space do not permit me to detail my points of disagreement with it. See my ‘Challenging the Challenge: Deconstruction and the Politics of Naming the Anarchist Movement’, available online at <<http://www.psa.ac.uk/journals/pdf/5/2006/Gordon.pdf>> and also Jesse Cohn, ‘What is Postanarchism “Post”?’, *Postmodern Culture*, 13.1 (2002), available online at <<http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.902/13.1cohn.txt>>.

¹⁶ It should be noted that John Caputo’s article on Derrida’s ‘responsible anarchy’ investigates what he sees as the Levinasian ‘ethical turn’ in deconstruction’s responsibility. This text, though, has very little, if anything, to say to anarchism *per se*, short of it being a comparable questioning of the *arche*. John Caputo, ‘Beyond Aestheticism: Derrida’s Responsible Anarchy’, *Research in Phenomenology*, 18 (1988), 59-73 (p. 72).

¹⁷ For an overview of the postanarchist field, see Jason Adams, ‘Postanarchism in a Nutshell’, available online at <<http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=03/11/11/1642242>>.

antipathetic to traditional anarchism. Second, the adoption into anarchism of poststructural theory to enrich and enliven existing [*sic*] practices. Then finally, a postmodern post-anarchism, the reapplication of anarchist analyses and methods to the new globalized, post-Puitt-Igoe political economy.¹⁸

The first text to establish itself on what is now known as postanarchist terrain was Todd May's *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* in 1994. In this text May, as Franks suggests, attempts to weld poststructuralist thought to anarchist concerns. The text takes its cue from the work of Foucault, Lyotard and Deleuze, which May argues 'replaces traditional anarchism's *a priori* with, on the one hand, the positivity or creativity of power and, on the other, the idea that practices or groups of practices (rather than subject or structure) are the proper unit of analysis'.¹⁹ However with only one mention of Derrida, this text is not concerned with the encounter between anarchism and deconstruction.

A more recent work that pays slightly closer attention to deconstructive concerns is Lewis Call's 2002 text *Postmodern Anarchism*.²⁰ The focus, though, is primarily on the intersections of anarchist thought with that of Nietzsche, Foucault and Baudrillard, along with a re-reading of the works of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling as exemplars of the new types of subjectivities that Call theorises. Thus the text cannot be considered as a reading of the heritage of anarchism, such as I am attempting here. Moreover this text, along with that of May and Newman, has been criticised for offering

¹⁸ Benjamin Franks, 'Questioning Postanarchism in the Age of Security', available online at <<http://www.psa.ac.uk/journals/pdf/5/2006/Franks.pdf>>, p. 4.

¹⁹ Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p. 87. In a review of this text, John Moore rejects the anarchistic potential of poststructuralism, arguing that 'the poststructuralist perspective offered [by May] depends on piecemeal change, the mark of the reformist'. See John Moore, 'Anarchism and Poststructuralism', *Anarchist Studies*, 5 (1997), 157-161 (pp. 160-161). Yet as the debate has moved on, a more recent article argues that the current wave of anti-capitalist protests demonstrate a social anarchism 'that now possesses a distinctively poststructuralist dynamic'. See Dave Morland, 'Anti-capitalism and Poststructuralist Anarchism', in *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age*, ed. by Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 23-38 (p. 38).

²⁰ Quite how well focussed that attention may be is a moot point. Call writes, for example, that hypertext 'deconstructs conventional text by interspersing such text with nonlinear hypertextual links'. This sense of 'deconstruct' seems to me to owe more to the everyday usage propagated by newspaper columnists rather than the notion of uncovering an aporia at the heart of a system of logic that would be the more specifically Derridean sense of the term. Lewis Call, *Postmodern Anarchism* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002), p. 1.

a reductive picture of what is loosely referred to as ‘classical’ anarchism. Call holds that ‘the politics of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin – vibrant and meaningful, perhaps, to their nineteenth-century audiences – have become dangerously inaccessible to late twentieth-century readers’. So for Call his postmodern anarchism ‘is meant to elude troubling difficulties of classical anarchism, such as the disturbing reliance upon instrumental rationality, or the stubborn attachment to an implicitly Cartesian concept of human subjectivity’.²¹ I would reject Call’s position for a number of reasons, but primarily I would suggest that this thesis is an attempt to demonstrate that ‘classical anarchism’ has not exhausted its reserves of significance, is not ‘dangerously inaccessible’ and that it still does have something to say to the reader of the twenty-first century.

Call’s notion of a foundational essence to classical anarchism is one that has been nearly uniformly repeated by the first generation of postanarchist critics. Simultaneously, though, this trope has met its counter-critique from other sections of the postanarchist field that argue for a more nuanced reading of the anarchist canon.²² Moreover Süreyya Evren, editor of the Turkish postanarchist journal *Siyahi*, has criticised this new postanarchism for its lack of attention to ‘non-western anarchism(s)’, and argues for a different postanarchism that ‘will not construct itself from within a Western epistemology only’.²³ Hence Evren sees these three texts (by May, Newman and Call) as representing an introductory period which is now over.

I would share Evren’s hope that this introductory period of postanarchism is over. Indeed, the very purpose of this thesis is to try to demonstrate, *pace* Call and his

²¹ Call, *Postmodern Anarchism*, p. 117.

²² This notion has been perhaps equally perpetuated by ‘postanarchist’ theory and also rebutted by its critics. For a detailed rejection of what they call these ‘critical missteps’, see Jesse Cohn and Shawn P. Wilbur, ‘What’s Wrong With Postanarchism?’, available online at <<http://www.anarchist-studies.org/article/articleprint/26/-1/1/>>. See also my ‘Challenging the Challenge’. For a response to Newman’s argument, see Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Federation, ‘A Platformist Response to “Post-Anarchism”: Sucking the Golden Egg: A Reply to Newman’, available online at <<http://slash.autonomeia.org/article.pl?sid=03/10/10/1220218>>.

²³ Süreyya Evren, ‘Postanarchism and the “3rd World”’, available online at <<http://www.psa.ac.uk/journals/pdf/5/2006/Evren.pdf>>, p. 4.

notion of anarchism's 'stubborn attachment' to essentialist foundations, that there is still much more to be gleaned from a careful re-reading of the 'canon', and that the case for a univocal notion of classical anarchism is very far from closed. As Cohn and Wilbur write, 'in criticizing the supposed "essentialism" of "classical anarchism," rather too many postanarchists throw the baby out with the bathwater'.²⁴ This thesis will attempt to avoid such an infelicitous emptying of the anarchist bathtub.

In focussing my re-reading of anarchism around the figure of authority I have found instructive precursors in a number of earlier texts. Thomas Docherty's *On Modern Authority* offers an enormously broad survey of half a millennium of writing, but what I take from this is Docherty's argument that 'what is written can be considered as some kind of "pre-text" of its performance. In short, there are no texts, only interpretations or performances'.²⁵ Thus Docherty argues that there is 'an intrinsic "oppositionalism" at work' in the critical reading practice, and that (following Jeffrey Mehlman) 'the revolutionary critic strives to "rewrite" the text'.²⁶ I hope, therefore, that this thesis will be oppositional to anarchism in one sense, but at the same time fulfil the 'task of reading', in Docherty's words, which is 'to fulfil the hypothetical reference of the text, to enact meaning in such a way as to give voice to the critical consciousness'.²⁷ By 'oppositional', though, I have something slightly different in mind than Lennard Davis's sense of resistance. In *Resisting Novels* he argues that resistance 'is both a political and a psychoanalytic term. In the first sense, I mean "resistance" as the way politically oppressed groups fight back against the powers that oppress them'.²⁸ The second sense is borrowed from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* as 'all those forces

²⁴ Cohn and Wilbur, 'What's Wrong With Postanarchism?'

²⁵ Thomas Docherty, *On Modern Authority: The Theory and Condition of Writing: 1500 to the Present Day* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1987), p. 12.

²⁶ Docherty, *On Modern Authority*, p. 29, p. 32.

²⁷ Docherty, *On Modern Authority*, p. 43.

²⁸ Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 12.

within the patient which oppose the procedures and processes of analysis'.²⁹ So for Davis political resistance 'aims at change', while psychoanalytical resistance 'is defensive reluctance or the blockage of change'.³⁰ Yet Davis's focus is specifically on the novel, and how 'formal elements of the novel add up to a social formation that resists change [...] reading novels is an activity that prevents or inhibits social action as do so many leisure activities in a consumer society'.³¹ With this exclusive focus on the novel Davis's text considers an entirely different field of literature than this present study.

In relation to literature there has been very little published that investigates either anarchism from a literary perspective, or literature from an anarchist perspective. One recent notable exception to this observation is *'To Hell With Culture': Anarchism and Twentieth-Century British Literature*. This collection of essays, though, aims 'to trace how perceptions and misperceptions of anarchist ideas and practices have infiltrated British writing over the last one hundred years'.³² Thus as one of the contributors, Valentine Cunningham, notes, 'literary anarchism [...] is not quite the same thing as (though it clearly overlaps with) the literature of anarchism'.³³ In this sense my thesis approaches a somewhat different corpus of work, work that might be considered, in Cunningham's words, as the literature of anarchism. Another text that examines where anarchism and literature have overlapped historically is Lily Litvak's recent collection *El Cuento Anarquista*. The anthology brings together a selection of short stories printed in Spain in anarchist periodicals over a period from 1880 to 1911. In the introductory essay, Litvak claims that 'the anarchist short story follows a certain range of themes, plot structures and developmental patterns. In general it has little in the

²⁹ Freud, as cited by Davis, *Resisting Novels*, p. 12.

³⁰ Davis, *Resisting Novels*, p. 12.

³¹ Davis, *Resisting Novels*, p. 18.

³² H. Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight, 'Introduction', in *'To Hell With Culture': Anarchism and Twentieth-Century British Literature*, ed. by H. Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), pp. 1-10 (p. 5).

³³ Valentine Cunningham, 'Litvinoff's Room: East End Anarchism' in Klaus and Knight, eds, *'To Hell With Culture'*, pp. 141-161 (p. 141).

way of a narrative core, and is based on ideological exegesis'.³⁴ Litvak proposes that one of the objectives 'in conceiving of a revolutionary literature' in this period was 'to change the nature of creative production'.³⁵ This sentiment is valuable to me, for if this thesis is to have any significance as an intervention in anarchist discourse, then I would hope that its observations might serve as a call to rethink the nature of the anarchist text.

There has, as well, been recent attention to the historical influence of anarchism on cultural production in a wider sense. In *Anarchy & Culture* David Weir documents the influence of anarchist politics on the nascent modernist movement, and argues 'that avant-gardism and anarchism were closely connected in the late nineteenth century'. For Weir 'the politics of anarchism takes aesthetic form with modernism. Ideas particular to anarchism were adapted by poets and novelists in such a way that the outcome of those ideas was aesthetic rather than political'.³⁶ In place of addressing the texts themselves, though, Weir's study focuses on the (demonstrable) historical and textual interrelationships between the participants in the two scenes at that time. For reasons that will become clear in the following chapters, taking biographical features of the actual authors' lives as a guarantee of textual signification is not an approach that interests me here. Not only on this point, though, do I diverge from Weir's approach, for when he writes of 'the diminishing hope that anarchism might one day arrive as a social reality', he demonstrates a lack of engagement with the contemporary anarchist milieu, where autonomous spaces are created on a daily basis.³⁷

³⁴ Lily Litvak, *El Cuento Anarquista (1880-1911): Antología* (Madrid: Fundación de Estudios Libertarios Anselmo Lorenzo, 2003), p. 9 (my translation). The original text states that 'el cuento anarquista sigue una determinada temática, alineamientos y estructuras. Tiene por lo general muy poco núcleo narrativo, y se basa en una exposición ideológica'.

³⁵ Litvak, *El Cuento Anarquista*, p. 25 (my translation). The original reads 'al concebir una literatura revolucionaria, es el cambiar las bases de la creación'.

³⁶ David Weir, *Anarchy & Culture: The Aesthetic Politics of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), p. 161.

³⁷ Weir, *Anarchy & Culture*, p. 267. For only one of the very latest in a series of texts that document the struggle against an externally imposed social reality, see *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism*, ed. by Notes from Nowhere (London: Verso, 2003).

From a more positive perspective, Alan Antliff examines the role that anarchism had as ‘*the* formative force lending coherence and direction to modernism in the United States between 1908 and 1920’. Taking his cue from Emma Goldman, Antliff argues that:

it is perfectly feasible that activism could expand beyond matters of governance to encompass any sphere, including the artistic. The project of individual liberation lying at the heart of anarchism in the early twentieth century was not only antigovernmental: the movement generated a far-flung cultural rebellion encompassing lifestyles, literature, and art as well as politics.³⁸

Antliff’s text documents the influence that anarchism had on the first American avant-garde. In so doing, he addresses only the artistic, as distinguished from the literary, production of the period, and has little in common with this thesis. Nevertheless Antliff ends with a call for a ‘culture *of* anarchy’, self-consciously echoing the words of John Moore. As Antliff notes, Moore argued that ‘anarchism’s ultimate goal, beyond political change, is the realization of a new culture’.³⁹ In hoping, as I have stated above, that this thesis ‘might serve as a call to rethink the nature of the anarchist text’, I would likewise hope that it is indeed contributing to Moore’s notion of a ‘realization of a new culture’.

In re-reading the literature of anarchism (in the broadest sense), this thesis has adopted a two-pronged approach. I have sought firstly to examine what, from an anarchist perspective, has been said about literature in the past, and then, secondly, to re-read some key anarchist texts for their textuality in the light of my previous analysis. I have sought to employ a deconstructive approach to this re-reading, by which I mean a close and attentive double reading that reaffirms the text under consideration at the same time as it critiques it. Yet in stating this I am very conscious of Christopher Norris’s caveat that ‘to present “deconstruction” as if it were a method, a system or a settled body of ideas would be to falsify its nature and lay oneself open to charges of

³⁸ Allan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics, and the First American Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 1.

³⁹ Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism*, p. 216 and p. 263, n. 8. For a discussion of the work of John Moore, see my chapter seven below.

reductive misunderstanding'.⁴⁰ This will, I hope, go some way towards explaining the absence of 'Derrida' in this thesis. By rejecting deconstruction as a *methodology*, I have sought to avoid an analogical manner of re-reading based on a formula such as 'As Derrida showed X, I shall show Y'. I hope that for this reason it will not seem incongruous of me to claim this as a deconstructive reading of anarchism, for as Norris points out, 'deconstruction is *always already* at work, even in those texts that would seem most expressly committed to a "logocentric" order of assumptions'.⁴¹ At the same time, this re-reading must avoid what Derrida calls the 'respectful doubling of commentary' while, as I have already suggested above, it must simultaneously 'be intrinsic and remain within the text'.⁴² In attempting to understand the workings of authority in anti-authoritarian texts, I have been guided by Norris's sense of a deconstructive reading consisting 'not merely in *reversing* or *subverting* some established hierarchical order, but in showing how its terms are indissociably entwined in a strictly undecidable exchange of values and priorities'.⁴³ In questioning the text's attempts to exercise control over the production of meaning at the expense of interpretative freedom, my objective is most certainly not to invert this hierarchy and put the reader in charge instead.

To begin, then, with the literary, the thesis opens with a consideration of Emma Goldman's 1914 text of theatre criticism *The Social Significance of Modern Drama*. There has been practically nothing written about this text, and despite its modest status to date, I argue that there is useful insight to be derived from it, perhaps as much from the claims that it fails to make as from what it actually says. Goldman's text can be considered as the first English language intervention from an anarchist in the field of literary criticism and accordingly bears productive comparison with later theories of

⁴⁰ Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.

⁴¹ Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987), p. 57.

⁴² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158, p. 159.

⁴³ Norris, *Derrida*, p. 56.

theatrical production with an avowedly revolutionary intent, namely those of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal. The comparison brings to the surface the tension between the form and the content of a literary work, in this case the theatrical play, and so provides the departure point for a reconsideration of some of the canonical figures of anarchist theory. Therefore the literary frames my consideration of the political. The literary considerations produced by my reading of Goldman raise the question of form. Having established this (literary) form/content dichotomy, I bring this concern to bear on the question of the (political) content of traditional anarchist discourse, before returning once more to the framing question of the literary in the final chapters.

In the middle section of the thesis, I turn my attention to the content of anarchist discourse as found in several historically prominent figures. The second chapter examines the work of the writer who is recognised as the first self-identified ‘anarchist’ in modern history, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Proudhon is perhaps best known for his celebrated aphorism that ‘property is theft’ and this axiom provides an entry point into considering how Proudhon’s texts seek to exercise authority over their own significance. Having written specifically about the need to abolish authority, Proudhon reserves a limited sphere of action for it, namely the family, in a move that seems to function as a supplement to his general understanding of authority as intolerable. Hence his texts institute a gerontocracy, leaving the figure of Proudhon-as-author with the property rights to the very texts which aspire to do away with property. This proprietorial logic, according to Proudhon, effaces the social bond underwriting society. In my reading, though, it would also, by analogy, destroy the interpretative bond between reader and text. Proudhon’s observations are turned back on his own work with the result that this gerontocratic figure of authority undoes the text’s own claims to authorize it.

This then brings me to the controversial and contradictory figure of Michael Bakunin, Russian aristocrat and lifelong revolutionist. Bakunin's work seems to prompt anxiety in critical circles, due to the degree to which it is shot through with internal inconsistencies. This anxiety, though, is symptomatic of an urge to impose an external coherence, which comes to take on its own authoritarian character. Specifically, Bakunin's life seems to provide endless material for critics to dismiss his writings, and this chapter examines the relationship between biographical detail and textual detail to uncover the workings of critical authority in the process of what Foucault calls the construction of an author figure. At the same time it uses Bakunin's own writings as the basis for questioning the very authority that premises itself on them.

To finish the central section of the thesis which focuses on the overtly political literature of anarchism, I return to the work of Emma Goldman. Goldman, as should now be clear, wrote widely and prolifically, although her political work is mainly concentrated in the short collection *Anarchism and Other Essays*. Goldman's work attempts to balance the demands of individual and social emancipation, but my reading of her political texts suggests that in their mode of address they construct a particular concept of the mass (as non-reader) which both interpellates and repudiates the reader.

From here I turn my attention back towards the frame of reference for this thesis, the question of the literary. My sixth chapter addresses the largely overlooked category of anarchist autobiographies in the light of current thinking about autobiography as a literary genre. Autobiography raises intriguing questions about the nature of authority when it comes to narrating certain events from one's own life, and these questions become doubly complicated if one is dealing with the work of a writer who supposedly lived for the rejection of authority. Once more Emma Goldman comes under consideration, as her two-volume *Living My Life* is one of the most substantial autobiographies left by anarchist writers. This text is read alongside the partial

autobiography of her lifelong comrade and one-time lover Alexander Berkman, *Prisoner Memoirs of an Anarchist*, a particularly fascinating text which has not yet received any critical scrutiny. This is a comparison that strangely has not been undertaken until now, considering how intertwined their two lives were. In relating two different perspectives on a set of lived and shared experiences, these texts are read in the light of contemporary autobiographical theory which problematizes the notion of autobiographical truth in a narrated account of a past life. The chapter ends with a consideration of the problem of memory in relation to historical truth by examining the text left by leading anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker, *The London Years*, and that of his son, Fermin, *The East End Years*.

Finally, to bring the thesis to a close, my last chapter surveys present-day anarchist writing with the purpose of comparing the points derived from my earlier readings with what might be considered as (one aspect of) contemporary practice. As this chapter shows, although the mainstream of anarchist writing still follows the mode that I have sought to problematise here, there are currents of writing that confound the easy distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘literature’. Yet despite over a century and a half of questioning an external figure of authority, it would seem that there are clearly those writing for and within the anarchist movement who have not paused to consider the construction of textual authority.

In any study of this nature, there will inevitably be more left out than can possibly be included. It has never been my intention to provide anything approaching a ‘representation’ of the historical or current state of anarchist writing or writing about anarchism. A project, such as this thesis, that attempts to take in elements of an entire discursive field (that of anarchism) can never set itself the untenable proposition of being an exhaustive study. There are therefore always going to be omissions, some less glaring than others. The lack of attention to the works of Peter Kropotkin would perhaps

be the first and most notable absence on these pages. Kropotkin wrote as widely as Goldman, being in his day an influential geographer, as well as political theorist, pamphleteer, and activist. He left texts on art as well as ethics, alongside a substantial autobiography, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*.⁴⁴ On that basis alone the entire thesis could easily have been dedicated solely to a consideration of Kropotkin's work. Yet with the work of Proudhon and Bakunin already under examination, I wish to avoid repeating what Sharif Gemie has called the 'now standard Godwin-Stirner-Proudhon-Bakunin-Kropotkin approach'. For Gemie, 'too often works on anarchism have reduced the subject to the biographies of a few celebrated writers, or to the experience of particular moments of revolt'.⁴⁵ My desire to avoid a reiteration of a questionable canon has meant that Kropotkin has been sacrificed in favour of Proudhon and Bakunin in order to allow for a consideration of other writers who have not received the same degree of critical attention.

In addressing contemporary anarchist writing, there is another omission that might raise some eyebrows: Noam Chomsky. Yet I would argue that, above the ever-present limitations of space, there are more complex reasons for not addressing Chomsky in a study of this nature.⁴⁶ In the first place, Chomsky's own politics are not universally accepted as being anarchist: in an essay comparing the thought of Chomsky, Murray Bookchin and Fredy Perlman, John Moore cites an interview with Chomsky where he states that 'I don't really regard myself as an anarchist thinker. I'm a derivative fellow traveller, let's say'. Moore also cites the pre-eminent historian of anarchism, George Woodcock, who argues forcefully that the (economic) politics

⁴⁴ Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, ed. by Colin Ward (London: Folio Society, 1978)

⁴⁵ Sharif Gemie, 'Counter-Community: An Aspect of Anarchist Political Culture', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29 (1994), 349-36 (p. 350).

⁴⁶ Limitations of space mean, beyond the two examples I am discussing here, the impossibility of giving anything like a representative picture of anarchist thought and writing. One particular writer who I greatly regret having to leave out of the final chapter is the British anarchist Colin Ward, perhaps one of the most modest yet lucid theorists of anarchist thought in the latter half of the twentieth century. For an introduction to his inspirationally crystalline expositions of anarchism, see Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (London: Freedom Press, 1973).

espoused means that neither Chomsky nor Daniel Guerin (in relation to Guerin's *Anarchism*, for which Chomsky wrote the foreword) 'is an anarchist by any known criterion; they are both left-wing Marxists'.⁴⁷ Without wanting to take a position on this aspect of Chomsky's work, I hope it suffices to say that Chomsky is only one of so very many who could readily have found a place in the last chapter of this thesis.

As the quotation from Bonanno at the beginning of this introduction suggested, anarchism is perhaps the one political ideology that is *uniquely* obliged to constantly ask itself the question of its own nature. George Woodcock writes that:

To describe the essential theory of anarchism is rather like trying to grapple with Proteus, for the very nature of the libertarian attitude – its rejection of dogma, its deliberate avoidance of rigidly systematic theory, and, above all, its stress on extreme freedom of choice and on the primacy of the individual judgement – creates immediately the possibility of a variety of viewpoints inconceivable in a closely dogmatic system.⁴⁸

It is my hope, then, that this thesis does not provide a singular and definitive answer to the question 'what is anarchism?', based on my firm belief that such an answer will never come. It might, rather, be considered as something approaching a series of studies towards an embryonic anarchist theory of the text.⁴⁹ In considering 'why anarchism still matters', James Bowen and Jonathan Purkis write in the introduction to a recent collection of essays that 'the theoretical matters that define the global age of anarchism are complex, controversial and constantly adapting to new forms of conflict and struggle in ways that seem impossible to articulate coherently'.⁵⁰ Hopefully this present

⁴⁷ George Woodcock, as cited by John Moore, 'Prophets of the New World: Noam Chomsky, Murray Bookchin, and Fredy Perlman', available online at <<http://lemming.mahost.org/johnmoore/prophets.htm>>.

⁴⁸ George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 15.

⁴⁹ One major step towards the formulation of an anarchist literary theory would appear to be Jesse Cohn's forthcoming text *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation*. Unfortunately the draft manuscript of this work came to me too late to be able to include it in my considerations in this chapter. See Jesse Cohn, *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, forthcoming).

⁵⁰ James Bowen and Jonathan Purkis, 'Introduction: Why Anarchism Still Matters', in *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age*, ed. by Jonathan Purkis and James Bowen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 1-19 (p. 17).

work will offer a new perspective on one particular area of struggle that has so far been overlooked from an anarchist perspective: the struggle over the means of production of meaning or the struggle between text and reader for control of the anarchist text.

2

Emma Goldman's Theatre Criticism: Rehearsing Revolution?

Originally published in 1914, Emma Goldman's *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* is a revision and an extension of her lectures and articles on theatre – the germ of the book can be found, for example, in the earlier essay 'The Modern Drama: A Powerful Disseminator Of Radical Thought'.¹ The purpose of the text, she writes in the very first sentence, is to 'understand the social and dynamic significance of modern dramatic art'.² Taking a total of 32 plays, Goldman's text divides them into categories depending on the nationality of the author, with sections on Scandinavian, German, French, English, Irish and Russian theatre, and provides a brief synopsis and commentary. Given the pivotal status that Goldman's life and writings have for anarchist history (a life and writings which will be considered in subsequent chapters), the purpose of this chapter will be to examine to what degree *Modern Drama* can function as a template for an anarchist approach to the text, as I begin to trace the outline of a potential anarchist theory of the text. This chapter, then, will examine how Goldman's text functions and what characterises its approach to both the authors and plays that it considers. I will compare her readings of some of the plays to more recent readings. In his introduction to the 1987 reprint, Harry Carlson calls it an 'unpretentious survey', and remarks on Goldman's 'amateur status as a drama expert'.³ Perhaps Goldman's relevance to the world of contemporary theatre has long since come to an

¹ See Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1969), pp. 241-271.

² Emma Goldman, *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1987), p. 1. All further references in this chapter will be given in the text.

³ Harry G. Carlson, 'Introduction', in Emma Goldman, *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1987), pp. v-xiii (p. v).

end? To consider this, I will contrast her approach with that of two other authors, Brecht and Boal, who similarly espouse an openly revolutionary agenda in their theatre practice. Through all this I hope to develop a series of crucial questions that will, by way of conclusion, be turned back onto a number of plays in order to bring the chapter to a close with a reading of its own.

The ambition of Goldman's text, as expounded on the second page of its introduction, is to bring to the attention of the American public material that had up until then been unavailable. In this it shares a mission with Kropotkin's review of his own nation's literary history in *Russian Literature*, although Goldman's avowed remit is distinctly more interventionist and political than his.⁴ She writes that:

Because the modern drama of Europe has till recently been inaccessible in printed form to the average theatergoer in this country, he had to content himself with the interpretation, or rather misinterpretation, of our dramatic critics. As a result the social significance of the Modern Drama has well nigh been lost to the general public. (p. 2)

The text undermines its notions of the artistic object as an objective mirror, for if it were so then there could be no possibility of 'misinterpretations'. Rather than document what these misinterpretations may have been, the text moves on to its principle task, that of rescuing the 'social significance' of the plays under discussion.

In seeking to understand the 'social and dynamic significance of modern drama,' Goldman's text sets up a distinction between 'art for art's sake', which 'presupposes an attitude of aloofness on the part of the artist toward the complex struggle of life' and 'modern art', which is 'preëminently the reflex, the mirror of life' (p. 1). This formula appears to hark back to the Platonic opposition of the ideal to the real, where the first type of (Goldman's) artist is 'merely an artistic conjurer of beautiful forms, a creator of pure fancy' (p. 1). For Goldman this type of idealism is not a characteristic of modern art, where the artist, enmeshed in materiality, is 'a part of life [and] cannot detach

⁴ See Peter Kropotkin, *Russian Literature: Ideals and Realities* (London: Duckworth, 1916).

himself [*sic*] from the events and occurrences that pass panorama-like before his eyes, impressing themselves upon his emotional and intellectual vision' (p. 1).⁵ The introduction does not pursue the implications of what the first type of artist means to the world, but it does insist on the mirror function of modern art. Goldman's mirror function is presented unproblematically in the text, yet as Terry Eagleton observes, 'literature [...] does not stand in some reflective, symmetrical, one-to-one relation with its object. The object is deformed, refracted [and] dissolved.'⁶ The text, then, fails to interrogate the 'mirror' as a distorting or deceiving optic. Indeed such is its enthusiasm for the mirror's powers that Goldman claims that 'Modern Drama [...] mirrors every phase of life and embraces every strata of society' (p. 3). Goldman's mirror seems to be something akin to Borges' map, presenting a one-to-one scale image that ends up duplicating the original object.

Yet despite Goldman's desire to sustain a notion of the mirror as a faithful reflector, the text has already recognised the absence of any potential objectivity. In an interesting passage on the apparent reasons for the failure of political propagandising within the realm of the arts, Goldman writes that:

The reason that many radicals as well as conservatives fail to grasp the powerful message of art is perhaps not far to seek. The average radical is as hidebound by mere terms as the man devoid of all ideas. 'Bloated plutocrats,' 'economic determinism,' 'class consciousness,' and similar expressions sum up for him the symbols of revolt. But since art speaks a language of its own, a language embracing the entire gamut of human emotions, it often sounds meaningless to those whose hearing has been dulled by the din of stereotyped phrases. (p. 1)

This paragraph makes a number of linked points that are germane to the development of my argument here. Firstly, the text recognises that the failure to transmit the message of political art does not inhere in the artistic object, but rather in the 'dulled' hearing of the reader/listener. Hence, secondly, the content of the text is not at issue as much as the

⁵ This thesis will observe gender neutrality in its language. This will hopefully be sufficient comment on all further manifestations of the supposedly gender neutral generic 'he' in quotations from original texts.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1976), p. 51.

way in which its representation is constructed – Goldman comments on the ‘creative genius’ of the playwrights that she considers, which ‘strikes root where the ordinary word often falls on barren soil’ (p. 1). Thirdly, with the complaint about ‘stereotyped phrases,’ Goldman’s text locates the challenge to modern drama as making the familiar seem new again. Although this recalls a kind of Shklovskian formalism, for Goldman the motivation could not be more different. While Shklovsky wrote that ‘the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself’ and that the object itself was not important, for Goldman it is not so much about making the stone stony, but rather how to bring about a reaction in an audience that would lead it to pick the stone up and cast it against the oppressor.⁷

The readings, though, are clearly aimed at a particular audience, an audience that has a definite bearing on the interpretation of the text’s own politics. In the Foreword, Goldman argues that modern drama:

mirrors the complex struggle of life, – the struggle which, whatever its individual or topical expression, ever has its roots in the depth of human nature and social environment, and hence is, to that extent, universal. Such literature, such drama, is at once the reflex and the inspiration of mankind in its eternal seeking for things higher and better. (p. 3)

Goldman seems to identify a pedagogical value for drama, for while she concedes that those who ‘learn the great truths of the social travail’ in life do not need drama, ‘there is another class whose number is legion, for whom that message is indispensable’ (p. 3). This ‘class,’ as she calls it, refers to intellectuals, for she argues that ‘in countries where political oppression affects all classes, the best intellectual element have made common cause with the people, have become their teachers, comrades, and spokesmen’ (p.3). This has not yet happened, in her view, in America. For this reason ‘another medium [the modern drama] is needed to arouse the intellectuals of this country, to make them realize their relation to the people, to the social unrest permeating the atmosphere’ (p.

⁷ Viktor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’, trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 16-30 (p. 20).

3). While this didacticism might be seen nowadays as overtly mechanistic, it is worth bearing in mind the situation that Goldman in particular found herself in during her American years. She was a frequent protagonist in free speech battles, often arrested and at times suffered physical abuse for her attempts at her propaganda work. Candace Falk cites an ‘apocryphal story’ about:

a time when Goldman acquired a strong, heavy lock and chain, wound it around herself and the podium, then threw it out the window to have it attached to a pole outside. She anticipated that it would take the police so long to release her that they couldn’t possibly interrupt her lecture.⁸

Goldman’s text argues, then, that ‘the “common” people’ have learnt ‘the great truths of the social travail in the school of life’. It suggests that ‘in America political pressure has so far affected only the “common” people’, and that in other countries where oppression is more widespread, a common bond has developed between ‘the best intellectual elements’ and ‘the people’ (p. 3). As a frequent victim of police harassment, Goldman was looking beyond the ranks of striking workers, for example, who would be only too familiar with the repressive actions of the police; she was looking to others who could bring different forms of solidarity to bear in the struggle.

This underlying appeal in the Foreword gives a hint as to the thread that links the readings offered by the text. It can be seen that by *not* placing ‘the “common” people’ at the centre of its reading (and it might be supposed that by this term the text is referring to the working class), and by making this appeal to other classes, or elements thereof, the text rejects any economic determinism concerning the nature of social struggle. This is a familiar characteristic of anarchist thought – the emphasis on economic exploitation, but a refusal to make it central to the analysis offered. This is paralleled in the text of the readings, for one finds a wide thematic variety under consideration and there is no predisposition merely to consider situations through the prism of economics or class struggle. Goldman ranges across topics as diverse as

⁸ Candace Falk, ‘Emma Goldman: Passion, Politics, and the Theatrics of Free Expression’, *Women’s History Review*, 11 (2002), 11-26 (p. 13).

patriarchal oppression (in various forms, within marriage, within families, in terms of the definition of motherhood, in relation to the situation of sex workers, abortion and the right to choose); societal pressure on perceived misfits (tramps, gypsies); strikes; sexuality/morality and sexually transmitted diseases; the plight of exploited peasants; the arms trade and the morals of business; and prison. In all of these Goldman identifies something that she variously characterises as ‘sociorevolutionary significance’ (p. 8), ‘revolutionary message’ (p. 12), ‘revolutionizing factor’ (p. 71) or ‘important social lesson’ (p. 129). What the revolution would be *against* is perhaps harder to paraphrase. Indeed the breadth of thematic concerns of the plays considered make a simplifying reduction of their content to a single line a difficult task. *Modern Drama* largely focuses on plays where the protagonists experience some sort of social, familial or peer pressure to conform to a value system that they do not feel their own, or experience this pressure as a result of a situation of struggle in which they already find themselves. Therefore the significance of the drama that Goldman examines lies in the image of struggle against authority that it offers. It is clear, then, that Goldman bases her reading specifically on the overt content of the plays chosen, and not on some supposition of the political affiliation of the author. Indeed, as I will now show, it would be to overstate the case to suggest that this sense of ‘struggle’ is one that could be claimed as anarchistic, and Goldman conspicuously does not attempt to do that.

The Social Insignificance of the Author

The text commences with a look at ‘Scandinavian drama’, and turns first to Henrik Ibsen. Goldman cites a letter from Ibsen in which he wrote, after the Paris Commune, that ‘the State must go! That will be a revolution which will find me on its side’ (p. 5). Can this be sufficient cause to label Ibsen an anarchist? Goldman, though, does not go down the route of seizing on an author and trying to present a partial portrait that would

find favour amongst her contemporary anarchist ideologues. Indeed in the whole of the text of *Modern Drama* there are but three direct references to anarchism, and I will come to them in a moment. With regard to Ibsen, more recent critics have recognised the radicality of the critique contained within his work. In his introduction to one collection of essays, Rolf Fjelde argues that ‘Ibsen’s defensive reaction to that force [society] drove him to a position verging on anarchism’.⁹ Goldman does not try to claim Ibsen as an anarchist, though, insisting rather on the ‘revolutionary significance of his dramatic works’ (p. 5). Superficially, then, Goldman’s position seems to be in keeping with Eric Bentley’s appraisal of the contemporary late nineteenth-century reaction to Ibsen:

one either expressed one’s detestation of the dramatist’s iconoclasm or one’s enthusiastic acceptance of it. Either way, the Ibsen under consideration was the revolutionary; and one accepted or rejected him according as one was oneself a revolutionary or not.¹⁰

Bentley’s comments demonstrate a desire (on the part of contemporaries) for a univocal meaning for the term ‘Ibsen’, and Georg Brandes, the Danish literary critic and friend of Ibsen’s, writing in Emma Goldman’s journal *Mother Earth* in 1906, seems to identify what might be called the desire of the audience to create the author in its own image.¹¹ He noted how Ibsen had been all things to all people: in France, he had been ‘consecrated’ as an anarchist ‘during the years when it was good form to pose in favour of Anarchism’; ‘the English see in him the perfect materialist’; and that ‘the Norwegians have declared Ibsen a radical after having proclaimed him a conservative’.¹² Yet Bentley and Brandes both focus more on the personality of the author, whereas Goldman derives her reading of ‘Ibsen’ from the plays, and I will show

⁹ Rolf Fjelde, ‘Introduction’, in *Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Rolf Fjelde (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 1-10 (p. 7).

¹⁰ Eric Bentley, ‘Henrik Ibsen: A Personal Statement’, in *Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Rolf Fjelde (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 11-17 (p. 11).

¹¹ For some examples of Ibsen’s correspondence with Brandes, see *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 76, 79, 80, 102, 160.

¹² Georg Brandes, ‘Henrik Ibsen’, in *Anarchy!: An Anthology of Emma Goldman’s ‘Mother Earth’*, ed. by Peter Glassgold (Washington: Counterpoint, 2001), pp. 168-173 (p. 173).

how she does not replicate the uncritical ascription of a character's point of view to the author in question.

An examination of the three scant references to anarchy *per se* in *Modern Drama*, will reveal, I think, the text's position with regard to the traditional concept of author as psychological unity of the text, for Goldman's criteria for selecting texts seems more closely wedded to the texts themselves, rather than the explicit ideological position of an author. In the first, Goldman concludes her reading of Shaw's *Major Barbara* with what is, in truth, a gently self-deprecating reference to anarchism. Arguing that *Major Barbara* 'is one of the most revolutionary plays', Goldman writes that 'the sentiments uttered therein would have condemned the author to long imprisonment for inciting to sedition and violence' (p. 107). She then suggests that 'Shaw the Fabian would be the first to repudiate such utterances as rank Anarchy, "impractical, brain cracked and criminal."' Although Shaw's left-wing orientation is quite well known, his brief encounter with anarchism is less so. In his history of the nascent British anarchist movement at the end of the nineteenth century, John Quail records that Shaw contributed an article to the inaugural edition of a monthly paper, *Anarchist*, launched in March 1885.¹³ In *Socialism and Superior Brains*, though, Gareth Griffith argues that this was a 'flirtation with individualist anarchism [which] was of an equivocal kind' and not something that can be taken as wholly representative of Shaw's views, although he concedes that 'Shaw might well have been an anarchist at heart'.¹⁴ Despite *prima facie* biographical evidence being available to fashion some sort of claim of Shaw-the-anarchist, *Modern Drama* does no such thing. In fact Goldman's text makes a much more interesting gesture. Immediately following on the 'rank Anarchy' comment mentioned above, the text contrasts the position of 'Shaw the Fabian' with

¹³ John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (London: Paladin, 1978), p. 48.

¹⁴ Gareth Griffith, *Socialism and Superior Brains: The Political Thought of Bernard Shaw* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 34-35.

that of 'Shaw the dramatist' who is 'closer to reality, closer to the historic truth that the people wrest only as much liberty as they have the intelligence to want and the courage to take' (p. 107).¹⁵ So rather than forthrightly attempting to set out an unequivocal meaning of 'Shaw' based on the presupposition of a psychological (and ideological) unity of 'author', the text teasingly constructs a plural Shaw, 'Shaw the Fabian' against 'Shaw the dramatist'. What is more, it does not seek to establish the priority of one over the other, or of one as the 'true' Shaw.

The second mention of anarchism in *Modern Drama* is much slighter, a passing reference to Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (p. 115). The third, though, is more interesting, for again the text recognises a distinction to be drawn between text and author. While Goldman writes that Yeats's play *Where there is Nothing* is 'as true an interpretation of the philosophy of Anarchism as could be given by its best exponents', she immediately qualifies this with the explanation that 'I say this not out of any wish to tag Mr. Yeats, but because the ideal of *Paul Ruttledge*, the hero of the play, is nothing less than Anarchism applied to everyday life' (p. 139). Indeed the text makes clear that 'Mr. Yeats himself would repudiate any implication of a social character, as he considers such dramas too "topical" and therefore "half bad" plays' (p. 138). The play turns out to be an intriguingly anomalous choice from Yeats's repertoire, for it was originally co-written by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde, and Yeats later repudiated the play and gave it to Lady Gregory to re-write, the result being her *The Unicorn from the Stars*. Yeats subsequently banned it from his collected works of 1908.¹⁶ In their discussion of *Where there is Nothing*, Patricia McFate and William Doherty comment on his 'rather ostentatious disdain' for it.¹⁷ In opposition to what they

¹⁵ This is a familiar trope in Goldman's work. In *Anarchism and Other Essays* she cites Max Stirner approvingly, suggesting that 'man has as much liberty as he is willing to take' (p. 65).

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of the history of this text, see David S. Thatcher, 'Yeats's Repudiation of *Where there is Nothing*', *Modern Drama*, 14 (1971), 127-136.

¹⁷ Patricia Ann McFate and William E. Doherty, 'W. B. Yeats's *Where there is Nothing*: Theme and Symbolism', *Irish University Review*, 2 (1972), 149-163 (p. 149).

perceive as the received critical opinion that ‘behind the character of Paul [Ruttledge] is the author, Yeats, himself’, McFate and Doherty attempt to divine to what degree the writer George Moore provided Yeats with the inspiration for the central character.¹⁸ They cite various other critics who seem eager to conflate character with author, for example Richard Ellmann’s contention that ‘Paul Ruttledge is a kind of anthropomorphosis of Yeats’s secret desires’.¹⁹ Yet *Modern Drama* clearly refuses to engage with the text in any comparable fashion. Indeed, in place of attempting to conflate Ruttledge with Yeats, the text highlights the incongruities between Yeats’s rejection of plays with ‘a social character’, his ‘standard of true art’ and the programme at the Abbey Theatre, which Goldman describes as consisting ‘mainly of social dramas’, and *Where there is Nothing*, which she describes as ‘no less social in its philosophy and tendency than Ibsen’s “Brand”’ (p. 138). Goldman recognises the disparities, yet to her credit does not attempt to iron them out and manufacture a univocal version of Yeats – in fact she sums up Yeats’s work as being ‘deep in human appeal’ but having ‘no bearing on the pressing questions of our time’ (p. 138).

What can be concluded, then, from the brief references to anarchism that one finds on the pages of *Modern Drama*, is that Goldman did not choose authors that would fit some pre-formed ideological mould, but rather chose plays that offered material which could be considered propitious for her political concerns. In this sense, while *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* is absolutely clear, even from its very title, about its objectives in the readings that it provides of the plays, it opens up a productive gap between the texts under consideration and what might be described as their erstwhile authors’ demonstrable ideological persuasion.

As to the readings themselves, Goldman’s commentary on *A Doll’s House* establishes the ostensible subject matter of the play in the opening sentence, that being

¹⁸ McFate and Doherty, ‘W. B. Yeats’s *Where there is Nothing*’, p. 157.

¹⁹ Richard Ellmann, as cited by McFate and Doherty, ‘W. B. Yeats’s *Where there is Nothing*’, p. 157.

‘the Social Lie and Duty,— this time as manifesting themselves in the sacred institution of the home and in the position of woman in her gilded cage’ (p. 8). The text pre-emptively offers its own reading of *A Doll’s House* by suggesting straight away that the subject matter is that of the social lie, and thus the analysis works in a largely linear and expository fashion towards that conclusion. The text’s language shows, though, that there is a disavowal of any pretence of objectivity, for describing marriage as a ‘gilded cage’ surely leaves the text wearing its colours on its sleeve. Indeed in disavowing the more usual critical locus of dispassionate objectivity, Goldman’s text seeks in minor fashion to re-enact the dynamic of the play itself. The description of Torvald offered at the beginning of the reading is of ‘an admirable man, rigidly honest, of high moral ideals, and passionately devoted to his wife and children. In short, a good man and an enviable husband’ (p. 8). Hence the text eschews the traditional omniscient position of the critic, and it is not until it has provided a synopsis of the play’s action that the reader then finds that Torvald ‘proves himself a petty Philistine, a bully and a coward, as so many good husbands when they throw off their respectable cloak’ (p. 11). The reading in general deals principally with the dynamic of the relationship between Nora and Torvald, and picks up on, for example, only the innocent qualities that Nora exhibits in the opening scenes of the play. One reads that Nora is ‘light-hearted and gay, apparently without depth’, and the text asks ‘who, indeed, would expect depth of a doll, a “squirrel,” a song-bird?’ (p. 9). Yet despite reiterating the superficial presentation of Nora that occurs in the first act of *A Doll’s House*, once the reading introduces the figure of Krogstad, it suggests that ‘down deep in the consciousness of *Nora* there evidently slumbers personality and character’ (p. 9). In mirroring the contours of the play’s own revelations the reading seeks, with its own objectives in mind, to amplify those aspects that highlight the (political) message regarding the institution of marriage that Goldman wants to reinforce.

Goldman's reading of *A Doll's House* makes an interesting comparison to that offered, for example, by John Northam, in his essay 'Ibsen's Search for the Hero'.²⁰ Ibsen commented in his preliminary notes for the play that 'a woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view'.²¹ Although Ibsen's comments might well be said to be premised on a notion of female essence, they do highlight the way that patriarchal law has historically grounded itself as a universal value. Northam, though, seems not to take into account the question of competing value systems that are in conflict in the play, and indeed at times his reading borders on reproducing the very patriarchy that the play questions. In the middle of the reading, one encounters 'the one fundamental truth about women', which is apparently motherhood.²² Northam is referring to the scene in which Mrs. Linde announces to Krogstad that 'I need someone to mother, and your children need a mother'.²³ He adds that Mrs. Linde at the beginning of the play 'had nothing to live for' due to the fact that her two sons had grown up: moreover the scene (where Linde persuades Krogstad that they should be reconciled and together again) 'describes for us in advance the painful void into which Nora consigns herself at the end of the play' by dint of walking away from her own children.²⁴ Consequently for Northam a woman's worth is defined by her family, or lack thereof. Northam's reading of Nora's final revelation also sounds a curiously ambivalent note, for while he skips over Torvald's astonishing reversal of feeling towards Nora as a 'vulgar rage', he qualifies the notion that Nora has suffered at the hands of a patriarchal society as being a matter of *her perception*:

²⁰ John Northam, 'Ibsen's Search for the Hero', in *Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Rolf Fjelde (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 91-108.

²¹ Henrik Ibsen, 'Preliminary notes for *A Doll's House* (1878)' in *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology*, p. 90 (p. 90).

²² Northam, 'Ibsen's Search for the Hero', p. 106.

²³ Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, in *Four Major Plays*, trans. by James McFarlane and Jens Arup (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 65.

²⁴ Northam, 'Ibsen's Search for the Hero', p. 106.

They [Torvald and Nora's father] have both treated her as a doll-child. It is the men who run society who have condemned Nora to a stultifying life. That is the real crime, the real corruption, *as she clearly sees*, not her forgery or her little lies, but the male conspiracy to debase the female [...].²⁵

The deficiency in Northam's reading is not so much the question of Nora seeing the crime perpetrated against her – there can be no doubt she clearly realises the injustice she has been subjected to – but rather his failure to locate this injustice in a wider, social, realm. For a crime to transcend the category of personal grievance it surely must be recognised by society as such, otherwise it remains within the ambit of interpersonal relationships. Northam's failure to address this is compounded by the symmetrical sentence structure, which balances the 'real crime, the real corruption' against Nora's 'forgery or her little lies'.²⁶ Northam's elision of what Goldman calls the 'social significance' leaves Nora as not only the victim of injustice, but also the victim of any notion of justice in the play. For while Northam acknowledges that 'it is the Doll's House attitude that is the corruption which must not be transmitted', the responsibility for this falls back on Nora's shoulders – 'she must go into a hostile world and educate herself'.²⁷

With this in mind, Northam's conclusion that Nora's self-imposed exile from her family will be 'a life-in-death', and that she 'leaves the play [...] lonely, unhappy, with no one to love or live for' strikes a radical contrast with Goldman's opinion.²⁸ Goldman's contention is that 'when *Nora* closes behind her the door of her doll's house, she opens wide the gate of life for woman, and proclaims the revolutionary message that only perfect freedom and communion make a true bond between man and woman' (p. 12). The two readings could easily be held up as diametrically opposed interpretations

²⁵ Northam, 'Ibsen's Search for the Hero', p. 107, my emphasis.

²⁶ It might further be questioned as to whether or not these crimes are comparable. Northam brings them into an economy of equivalences. By so doing he ignores the heterogeneity of experiences that engender the two 'crimes', and thus reproduces the masculine system of jurisprudence where a putative equality before the law masks a gendered universality that favours the historically privileged male.

²⁷ Northam, 'Ibsen's Search for the Hero', p. 107.

²⁸ Northam, 'Ibsen's Search for the Hero', p. 108.

of the same text, but in fact, as will become clear below, if one begins to ask, for example, how the audience relates to Nora, the readings share more in common than at first appears.

Northam's reading tries to establish whether *A Doll's House* can really qualify as a modern tragedy, as Ibsen suggested in his preliminary notes, and whether Nora truly warrants the status of heroine. In so doing, Northam attempts to decide if Ibsen's play measures up to the Aristotelian standard, and whether the audience undergoes a *cathartic* theatrical experience as a result. Northam takes for granted the mechanisms of identification that are necessary for catharsis to take place, and therefore he shares with Goldman an exclusive focus on the content of the text. Indeed Northam writes that his 'method will be that of close analysis of the development of the play, that is to say of the growth of the play's meaning from first curtain to last'.²⁹ By a deft sleight of hand, Northam de-historicises meaning. Historical context and discourses of femininity, to take two pertinent examples, are suddenly excluded from the production of meaning. Yet at least Northam's text states as much openly -- this, in a certain sense, is what is missing from Goldman's analysis, a statement of the text's own approach to the material considered. Goldman's approach is wholly content-orientated, and this itself raises some interesting questions for elaborating an 'anarchist' approach to literature.

What are the implications of basing a reading wholly on the content of the text considered? Before turning to that question, it might be worth noting that Goldman's text is not completely oblivious to the varying formal concerns that surround a work of art. The clearest example of this comes during the discussion of Githa Sowerby's play *Rutherford and Son*. Goldman writes of how her first encounter with a performed presentation of the play left her feeling that one character's behaviour was 'unreal and incongruous'. Yet after 'repeatedly rereading the play' she becomes 'convinced' of

²⁹ Northam, 'Ibsen's Search for the Hero', pp. 99-100.

what she had previously found ‘unreal’ (p. 137). The text, though, tantalisingly leaves this potentially productive aperture unexplored at this point. The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this is that at the very least there is a tacit recognition of the polysemous nature of a text, or artistic/literary object. This, then, draws the critic’s attention to the question of form, in this case ‘performed’ versus ‘printed’ text.

In a certain sense the question that I want to ask of Goldman’s theatre criticism is ‘is it good enough?’ By this I mean to ask if what I have identified as the characteristics of the readings, namely their near exclusive focus on questions of content and their reliance on a simplistic reflectionist model of art coupled with an avowed didacticism, can be usefully integrated into a renewed anarchist approach to the text.

Terry Eagleton, writing in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, argues that:

In its cruder formulations, the idea that literature ‘reflects’ reality is clearly inadequate. It suggests a passive, mechanistic relationship between literature and society, as though the work, like a mirror or photographic plate, merely inertly registered what was happening ‘out there’.³⁰

If Goldman is to be condemned, as ‘inadequate’, what can be learned from her inadequacies? Given that Goldman was writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, it may seem odd that she should have focused so narrowly on questions of content. Although one might identify an earlier anarchist heritage in relation to art, for example with Proudhon’s insistence that ‘man will become his own mirror, and he will learn how to contemplate his soul through studying his true countenance’, and that the purpose of art, which for Proudhon was exemplified by Courbet, is to ‘improve us though portraying us as we really are,’ the debate around formal concerns was well under way long before Goldman’s time.³¹ David Bradby and John McCormick, in their history *People’s Theatre*, record how ‘impatience’ with existing theatrical forms began to manifest itself even before the end of the nineteenth century with the concerns of the

³⁰ Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, p. 49.

³¹ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, trans. by Elizabeth Fraser, ed. by Stewart Edwards (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 215-216.

Naturalists.³² At the turn of the century they note a ‘sudden burst of activity’ from the likes of the ‘social reformers [...] who wanted to democratise the theatre by ridding it of its aristocratic or bourgeois associations’.³³ Indeed even the very construction of the physical space where theatre was performed came in for reconsideration. For example, Brady and McCormick argue that Wagner’s reforms to the traditional horse-shoe-shaped auditorium, while attempting to do away with the class hierarchy of expensive seats with a good view versus cheaper seats with a view only of those who could afford the expensive seats, ‘strengthened the barrier of the proscenium arch’ and thus reinforced the ideality of the world presented as opposed to the real world of the spectators.³⁴ The question of form, then, has a long history, and although Eagleton warns that ‘a good deal of Marxist criticism has in practice paid scant attention to questions of artistic form’, one can find in the work of theatre critics Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal a thoroughgoing engagement with the question of form.³⁵ It is by an examination of their work that I hope to bring out some of the ‘sociorevolutionary’ aspects that are clearly absent from Goldman’s position.

Early in his career Brecht characterised the relationship between ‘new plays’ and the theatrical establishment as a ‘murderous clash’. Brecht argued that by trying to stage the new plays, theatre risked ‘being radically transformed’ and that all the audience had to do was ‘observe whether the theatre emerges as victor or vanquished’.³⁶ Brecht’s analysis of theatre was wide-ranging, for it can be seen that even before engaging with questions of the relationship of audience to play, his critical reflections included the material structure of the producing environment. One finds him, in *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, offering an unequivocal condemnation of the theatrical status quo of his

³² David Brady and John McCormick, *People’s Theatre* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978), p. 11.

³³ Brady and McCormick, *People’s Theatre*, p. 15.

³⁴ Brady and McCormick, *People’s Theatre*, p. 15.

³⁵ Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, p. 20.

³⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. by John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1964), p. 22. All further references in this chapter will be given in the text.

day, arguing that contemporary ‘entertainment emporiums [had] degenerated into branches of the bourgeois narcotics business’ (p. 179). Brecht conceived of the theatre as a ‘means of production’ and by underscoring the ‘economic reasons’ behind the logic of its attempts to defend itself from radical new plays, he mined a line of criticism that is absent from Goldman’s considerations (p. 43). In a sense one could say that while Goldman’s critique commences as the curtain rises, Brecht’s critique begins from the moment one enters the theatre and purchases a ticket. So the first lesson here would be that form can include the very locus of the theatrical presentation.

Brecht’s theatre practice was designed to rouse what he saw as the ‘cowed, credulous, hypnotized mass’ (p. 188) from the narcoleptic slumber that ‘culinary’ theatre had induced. As the theatre historian Robert Leach writes, Brecht sought ‘thinking theatregoers, not people who were swept away by an overwhelming tide of experienced feeling’.³⁷ The major technique employed to achieve this was Brecht’s *Verfremdung*, or alienation effect. Leach suggests that this effect owes its genealogy to Shklovsky and the Formalists, in its desire to shake the audience into seeing the artistic object anew. Hence Brecht’s ‘epic’ theatre is one that does not shy away from the didacticism that Goldman embraces – ‘the new purpose is called paedagogics’ as he wrote in ‘On Form and Subject-Matter’ (p. 30). This, however, was most decidedly not at the expense of the audience’s enjoyment – Brecht is often to be found commenting on the ‘fun’ or lack of it in productions.³⁸ Goldman, though, makes no mention of the enjoyment or otherwise of the spectators at the plays of which she writes. It would seem, perhaps, that for Goldman there is no space for an overlap between the openly didactic role that she assigns to theatre, and its more received role as entertainment. Brecht, on the other hand, encounters a putative opposition between education and entertainment:

³⁷ Robert Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 116.

³⁸ Although it should also be noted that Brecht perceived fun ‘in its current historical role: as merchandise’ (p. 36).

One of the chief objections made by bourgeois criticism to non-aristotelian plays like *Die Mutter* is based on an equally bourgeois distinction between the concepts 'entertaining' and 'instructive'. [...] Surprising as it may seem, the object is to discredit learning by presenting it as not enjoyable. But in fact of course it is enjoyment that is being discredited by this deliberate suggestion that one learns nothing from it. (p. 60)³⁹

So one can take from this that while the play, for Goldman as much as for Brecht, should be instructive, Brecht adds to this the sense that this should not be at the cost of it being entertaining. One finds Brecht suggesting a range of subject matters that come uncannily close to exactly what Goldman was examining – 'The proper way to explore humanity's new mutual relationships is via the exploration of the new subject-matter. (Marriage, disease, money, war, etc.)' (p. 29).

The question then is of how this message or lesson is to be transmitted to the audience. If one recalls Goldman's reading of *A Doll's House*, why should it be that the spectator comes out of the theatre having had some light cast on the position of women within marriage – could one not conceive of an audience member leaving a production of this play thinking that Torvald had proved a model husband hard done by? This raises the question of the mechanisms of identification.

One answer to this question is provided by the concept of empathy. The 'lesson', such as it is, of Ibsen's play is to be found once the spectator has identified with Nora. This empathy is of course a fundamental feature of Aristotelian drama, traditionally leading to the purging of fear and pity through the experience of catharsis. Brecht reacts strongly against this, arguing that:

the play's meaning is usually blurred by the fact that the actor plays to the audience's hearts. The figures portrayed are foisted on the audience and are falsified in the process. Contrary to present custom they ought to be presented quite coldly, classically and objectively. For they are not matter for empathy; they are there to be understood. Feelings are private and limited. Against that the reason is fairly comprehensive and to be relied on. (p. 15)

³⁹ As an example of the reaction against didacticism, one finds Eric Bentley, in an essay on Ibsen, writing that 'the playwright must not be directly didactic, for it is the didactic writer, out not to learn but to teach, who concentrates on finding effective form for thinking that was finished long ago'. Bentley, 'Henrik Ibsen: A Personal Statement', p. 16.

This, then, gives the defining feature of Brechtian drama, that being that it plays to the audience's reason, as well as its emotions. This in itself raises new problems, which are worth noting before moving on. The character's 'truth' of which Brecht conceives is based on presenting or exposing the historical production of the character, and in so doing portrays it as liable to being changed. Yet this act of presentation may not necessarily produce the liberation for the audience to which an anarchist textual theory might aspire. In his account of his production of Brecht's *Galileo*, the actor and director Sidney Homan comments that the audience's 'vital role had been anticipated, and to a large extent set up,' and that 'the audiences' reactions fell within clear limits'.⁴⁰ With Brecht, as Leach observes, the:

spectator has in fact been drawn into the productive process of the theatre. His critical response, his aesthetic judgement has been brought into play decisively, so that the play has, in a sense, produced him, just as he has produced the play. This was precisely the two-way dialectical process Brecht sought.⁴¹

The danger, as Homan's account shows, is that an audience of a Brecht play finds its participatory role already structurally pre-determined by the text. This would not seem to trouble the workings of the dialectical process that Leach describes, but does have implications for the freedom (or the lack thereof) of any given audience. I would argue that the work of Boal addresses this question more fruitfully, so for the moment I will leave to one side this question of the limits to an audience's role in Brecht's work. Nevertheless it throws Goldman's work into a new light when juxtaposed with it. For example, Goldman does not consider the question of why or how an audience member relates to the character onstage. Plays are repeatedly referred to as having a clear message, or lesson, or being a true picture of some suffering, yet time and time again Goldman fails to address the question of how the audience member is

⁴⁰ Sidney Homan, *The Audience as Actor and Character: The Modern Theater of Beckett, Brecht, Genet, Ionesco, Pinter, Stoppard, and Williams* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1989), p. 93.

⁴¹ Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre*, p. 120.

addressed by the play. To take one striking example, in her reading of Frank Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening* Goldman rails against children being sacrificed 'on the altar of stupidity and convention' (p. 64). For Goldman the play, concerning the sexual awakening of young children, goes against the 'traditional authority and [...] the sacred rights of parenthood' (p. 64).⁴² She then concludes that 'it is hardly necessary to point out the revolutionary significance of this extraordinary play. It speaks powerfully for itself' (p. 69). It would seem that Goldman's theatre criticism wants to have it both ways – to criticise the traditional authority of teachers (in the context of this play), and to rail against convention, but not to question the conventional nature of the didacticism that she relies upon in order to propose a revolutionary aspect to the plays.

That this position is untenable becomes even clearer if one turns to the work of Augusto Boal. Although Brecht is best known for his concept of 'epic' drama, 'non-Aristotelian' was another description that he employed, and in following on from Brecht, Boal fully explores the challenge to Aristotle. Boal states his intentions from the very first line of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, contending that 'all theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them'. Boal sees the theatre as being a vital weapon in the revolutionary armoury, and for this reason argues that 'the ruling classes [have striven] to take permanent hold of the theater and utilize it as a tool for domination'.⁴³ Even from the title of the first chapter, 'Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy', the orientation of Boal's critique is apparent.

Boal carefully works through the elements of Aristotle's poetics, and holds that pity and fear are what link the spectators to the protagonists. Yet against Aristotle, Boal contends that these are not the emotions to be purged as such, but are rather the bonds of identification between spectator and character that are instituted by drama. The

⁴² For a longer discussion of this aspect of Wedekind's work, see Elizabeth Boa, *The Sexual Circus: Wedekind's Theatre of Subversion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

⁴³ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. by Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (London: Pluto Press, 1979), p. ix. All further references in this chapter will be given in the text.

purgation that tragedy (and its concomitant catharsis) bring about is a corrective to be applied to circumstances when one has failed in achieving the objectives of ‘health, gregarious life in the State, happiness, virtue, justice, etc.’ (p. 27). Boal writes that Aristotle accepts ‘as “just” the *already existing* inequalities’ (p. 23). Aristotle’s failure is, for Boal, the failure to historicise the society that a drama both grows out of and confronts. The purgation that would take place with the catharsis of a tragedy would be the purgation of some ‘impurity’ that threatens the notion of the just – Boal arrives at this by arguing that what is purged is some impurity:

that threatens the individual’s equilibrium, and consequently that of society. Something that is not virtue, that is not the greatest virtue, justice. And since all that is unjust is forseen in the laws, the impurity which the tragic process is destined to destroy is therefore something *directed against the laws*. (p. 32)

For Boal, Aristotle’s theatre proposes that maximum virtue is ‘obedience to the laws [and that] the art of tragedy intervenes to correct [any] failure’ (p. 32). His critique suggests a wider function for theatre as a tool of social control far beyond anything that Goldman contemplated. The elements of Boal’s critique that are useful to me highlight the inherited and problematic features of the dramatic form. Boal gives a synopsis of his vision of the class history of theatre as beginning with ‘free people’ and ‘the carnival’.

Then:

the ruling classes took possession of the theater and built their dividing walls. First, they divided the people, separating actors from spectators: people who act and people who watch – the party is over! Secondly, among the actors, they separated the protagonists from the mass. The coercive indoctrination began! (p. 119)

Boal’s answer to this is that ‘the walls must be torn down’ (p. 119). He seeks to disrupt the accepted norms of theatrical presentation by challenging the division between audience and performers – his pedagogics are apparent in a different form, for he asserts that ‘perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!’ (p. 155).

Boal's frontal assault on the basic tenets of Aristotelian drama is perhaps surpassed by a yet more radical approach to theatre practice outlined in another essay in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. In the essay 'Poetics of the Oppressed' Boal recounts his 'experiments with the People's Theater in Peru' (p. 120), where he tried to put his theoretical approaches into action. He argues that:

the bourgeois theater is the finished theater. The bourgeoisie already knows what the world is like, *their* world, and is able to present images of this complete, finished world. The bourgeoisie presents the spectacle. On the other hand, the proletariat and the oppressed classes do not know yet what their world will be like; consequently their theater will be the rehearsal, not the finished spectacle. (p. 142)

Although Boal's position displays a militantly Marxist grasp of the dialectic that has already been observed in Brecht's work, with the questionable reduction of the world into opposing poles of bourgeois and proletariat, his observation permits a reassessment of the politics of the already composed text. The implications of this, I would contend, are that regardless of the nature of the *content* of any given text, for a text-reader relationship to be instituted, the text has clearly to exist prior to the encounter with the reader. A reader, or in this case a theatre 'spectator', will always necessarily be in a relationship of posteriority to the text in question. While this is not to be taken to imply the existence of any necessary hierarchy (premised on chronological antecedence), it does have certain implications for the scope of any potential meanings or presentations that a reader or actor can produce from a particular text. Boal describes the practicalities of this as the Brazilian theatre scene of the 1950s and 60s struggled to offer presentations that were both attractive to the Brazilian public, and relevant to their concerns. Boal describes an environment in which the alternative to 'good European theater' was 'Hellenic myths' (p. 159-160) – neither of which satisfied the demands of the theatre-going public. Hence, he writes, 'the only recourse left to us was to utilize modern realist texts, even though they were written by foreign authors' (p. 160). Yet despite this engagement with the work of, for example, Steinbeck, O'Casey or Brecht,

now performed in a realistic fashion, the problems of finding a Brazilian theatre for a Brazilian people remained – Boal writes that ‘if before our peasants were transformed into Frenchmen by our “deluxe actors,” now the Irish revolutionists were Brazilian villagers. The dichotomy continued, now inverted’ (p. 161).

For Boal the central issue is ‘to change the people – “spectators,” passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon – into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action’. To engineer an environment where this can take place means that ‘the liberated spectator, as a whole person, launches into action. No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action!’ (p. 122). This would then go beyond the boundaries of the theatre itself, for Boal wants to see ‘people reassume their protagonistic function in the theater and in society’ (p. 119). In order to achieve this, Boal takes the obvious yet hugely daring step of approaching the theatrical space without a text as such.

The scenario in which Boal describes this taking place is clearly far removed from the proscenium arch theatre that Europe has known for centuries, for his environment is peopled by ‘illiterates or semi-illiterates’, ‘peasants, workers or villagers [who] have quite likely never heard of theater and if they have heard of it, their conception of it will probably have been distorted by television’ (p. 126-127). Boal maps out what can best be described as a methodology, one which resembles what we might think of here as a workshop procedure. He outlines a series of ‘stages’ in a system that will transform ‘the spectator into actor’ (p. 126). Thus in the first two stages he describes a series of exercises for the participants in the ‘experiment’ (p. 127), exercises designed firstly to help to get ‘to know one’s body’ and secondly to gain expressiveness through the body (p. 126). But beyond the need to break complete novices gently into the world of theatre and performance, Boal goes on to propose in the third stage what he calls ‘the theater as language’. This, for him, is where ‘one begins to practice theater as a language that is living and *present*, not as a finished product displaying images from

the past' (p. 126). This stage of his plan comprises three 'degrees', those being 'simultaneous dramaturgy', 'image theater' and 'forum theater'. In essence the three signify the integration of the erstwhile 'spectators' in the process of the creation of the theatrical text. For example, simultaneous dramaturgy means, for Boal, that 'the spectators "write" simultaneously with the acting of the actors'. With 'image theater' the spectators intervene with their bodies to contribute to the language of the text via corporeal images, and with 'forum theater', the spectators 'intervene directly in the dramatic action and act' (p. 126). The culmination of this methodology is the fourth stage, 'theater as discourse', where Boal anticipates 'simple forms in which the spectator-actor creates "spectacles" according to his need to discuss certain themes or rehearse certain actions' (p. 126). Boal, then, reconceptualises the role of the audience to such a degree that the very name 'audience' becomes inadequate. This is something that was clearly absent from both Goldman and Brecht's approaches, but does not appear incompatible with them.

Boal goes on to describe workshop situations where the 'actors' have acted out every possible scenario as suggested by the participants. The subject matters that Boal mentions range from marital fidelity, to counter-insurgency violence by police, to strikers confronting a local factory owner. Clearly the topics were of direct relevance to the participants in the experiment, and validate Boal's claims of rehearsing revolution:

The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner. While he *rehearses* throwing a bomb on stage, he is concretely rehearsing the way a bomb is thrown; acting out his attempt to organize a strike, he is concretely organizing a strike. Within its fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one. (p. 141)

Boal's theatre practice is certainly a long way from the culinary delights served up nightly under the bright lights of the West End and Broadway, but does that mean that traditional theatre has to be overthrown, abolished, replaced? He does not propose that his theatre should suddenly usurp the theatrical status quo to the exclusion of all

else. Indeed, he recognises that what he is dealing with is ‘rehearsal-theater, and not a spectacle-theater. One knows how these experiments will begin but not how they will end, because the spectator is freed from his chains, finally acts, and becomes a protagonist’ (p. 142). Hence his conclusion – “‘spectator” is a bad word!’ (p. 154-155). What remains unstated in Boal’s work is what place there would be for the theatre of the spectacle in a transitional or post-revolutionary society. Indeed the fact that Boal identifies Aristotelian theatre as an instrument of social control would perhaps suggest that he would have little tolerance for it during times of social upheaval or revolutionary change. Nevertheless, *Theatre of the Oppressed* does not lay out a plan for the abolition of bourgeois theatre: perhaps Boal would be content with seeding a revolutionary rehearsal-theatre that would eventually supplant the theatrical old guard.

It is clear, then, that Boal addresses a space that is entirely absent from Goldman’s considerations on the theatre, and that is the empty space of the theatre itself, without a text as such. Boal insisted that ‘the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theater is action!’ (p. 155). In opposition to this Goldman’s aspiration that the plays she reviewed would inspire the American intelligentsia to take up the cause of the American labouring masses seems curiously vanguardist and limited in scope.

Yet Goldman’s theatre criticism clearly exists on a spectrum that extends towards Brecht and Boal. In commenting on one of the authors that Goldman considers, Gerhart Hauptmann, Leroy Shaw gives a précis that sums up Goldman’s strategy:

the drama is to function as a kind of mirror which reflects the historical situation and at the same time gives back to the people who look into it a true image of themselves. The fictional world is drawn from the actual state of affairs and returned to it again so that the audience will recognize its own experience and be moved to do something about it.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Leroy R. Shaw, *The Playwright & Historical Change: Dramatic Strategies in Brecht, Hauptmann, Kaiser & Wedekind* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), p. 37.

As this chapter has shown, Brecht retains the notion of approaching a performance with a rehearsed text, but seeks to address the audience on entirely different terms, not only to move them to action but also to appeal to their reason. Boal, at the furthest end of the spectrum of radicality, abandons even the idea of an already existing text, and thus turns audience into co-scriptor. What distinguishes Goldman's position from that of Northam, for example, is that her text does not exclude any of these radicalisations of its own position. Northam, by contrast, explicitly states that his critique will focus on the 'growth of the play's meaning from the first curtain to last', and so makes a gesture that now looks extremely reactionary. Goldman relies on Aristotle by default, whereas Northam actively enlists him and therefore replicates what Boal sees as the 'coercive system of tragedy'. By integrating the later insights of Brecht and Boal into the social orientation that Goldman insisted on in her drama criticism, the outline of an anarchist approach to the text starts to distinguish itself. In brief this includes not selecting a text on the basis of the perceived political affiliation of the author; not shying away from a pedagogical approach when one has a point of view to expound regarding the incessant struggle for justice within society (in fact Goldman sought this pedagogy through the content of the plays themselves, hoping that they would 'speak for themselves'); and aspiring to produce a reaction in the theatre audience that continues once they leave the precinct of the theatre, in other words, conceiving of the audience not as a theatre audience but as fellow members of society, bearing the responsibility for the future direction of it. This last links in with the work of Brecht and Boal, allowing one to imagine new ways of collective theatrical production that might indeed lead to rehearsals of little revolutions.

Playing Emma

By way of conclusion, then, I will attempt to use these brief points as a framework for producing a reading of my own of a number of plays that take Goldman herself as their subject. Martin Duberman's text, *Mother Earth: An Epic Drama of Emma Goldman's Life*, turns out to be neither an epic (in the Brechtian sense) nor a drama, but rather a screenplay for television.⁴⁵ While recognising that television is a distinct medium that will have its own grammar and would require a detailed critique of its own, it does throw an interesting light onto the discussion above about the relationship of the audience to the process of producing the text. In the preface to the text of his screenplay, Duberman recounts how the script was born out of his enthusiasm and admiration both for Goldman herself and for what she represented. Ironically the production of the television play was shelved before it even commenced, apparently due to government cutbacks in public service broadcasting in the United States during Nixon's presidency. The political decision to drop the play underlines the fact that there was going to be a certain message contained therein that was not agreeable to the Nixon administration. Yet if one concedes the potentially pedagogical nature of the piece on Goldman, can television be a suitable medium bearing in mind the issues previously examined? With the text of a television play hermetically sealed behind a glass screen, it would seem to offer little possibility for the audience to escape the traditional role of spectator. While Boal's methodology should not be enshrined as the exclusive mode of revolutionary theatre practice, it does seem to highlight the potential that the theatre uniquely offers for the reader to become co-scriptor of the discourse.

Although Duberman claims that by the early seventies no one had put Goldman's life on screen or on stage, in fact in 1974 the Canadian playwright Carol Bolt wrote a play entitled *Red Emma*, and by 1976 Howard Zinn had staged the first

⁴⁵ Martin Duberman, *Mother Earth: An Epic Drama of Emma Goldman's Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

production of his play *Emma*.⁴⁶ Bolt's play, in conventional terms, plays fast and loose with the historical record of Goldman's life: yet in so doing it does not reject the reflectionist model of art for something more akin to Goldman's own spirit. One conspicuous example concerns Johann Most, the most prominent member of the New York anarchist milieu at the time of Goldman's arrival there and instigator of her entry into the world of political activism and public speaking. The stage directions have Most entering '*carrying the banner of anarchy – a red flag is more exciting than the correct black*'.⁴⁷ Indeed the introduction openly recognises this when it records that:

Carol Bolt does not think of her plays as documentaries nor is she necessarily interested in presenting a fair and true picture of events or persons. She has stated that she would rather be interesting than accurate and rather be one-sided than give a well-rounded viewpoint honed to dullness.⁴⁸

This rather tendentious apologia would not be quite so problematic if the play itself succeeded in some area that was noticeably lacking in Goldman's own life. Yet by any measure Goldman led an extremely colourful and dramatic life, and so the false binaries that the above quotation sets up, of 'interesting' versus 'accuracy', or indeed 'one-sided' versus 'dullness', ring fundamentally hollow. Indeed they bring to mind the traditional binary of enjoyment and education upon which Brecht commented. By following Brecht's refusal to allow instruction to be privileged over fun, one might conclude that there should be no reason why Bolt's play could not be both accurate *and* interesting. It is, perhaps, a greater challenge, and one to which this play fails to rise.

The play brings together characters that never met, for example Goldman enters into several dialogues with Henry Clay Frick, the industrialist whom her then lover,

⁴⁶ Carol Bolt, *Buffalo Jump-Gabe-Red Emma* (Toronto: Playwrights Co-op, 1976). Howard Zinn, *Emma: A Play in Two Acts about Emma Goldman, American Anarchist* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1986).

⁴⁷ This comment leaves me entirely baffled – why should red be any more or less exciting than black? I personally find it dispiriting to turn up to a demonstration and find a sea of identikit red flags – while on the other hand a march that defiantly waves homemade black flags most certainly offers the prospect of more 'excitement'. Bolt, *Buffalo Jump-Gabe-Red Emma*, p. 135.

⁴⁸ Sandra Souchotte, 'Introduction', in Carol Bolt, *Buffalo Jump-Gabe-Red Emma* (Toronto: Playwrights Co-op, 1976), pp. 7-13 (p. 8).

Alexander Berkman, attempted to assassinate. It seems to focus to an alarming degree on the more sensational aspects of Goldman's love-life, indeed political tensions repeatedly give way to arguments over who is sleeping with whom. The play ends with Goldman singing:

I know I can show you wonders
I can paint the flags I fly
I know dreamers can build castles
I know castles can have banners
I know dreams are going to flash across the sky.⁴⁹

Here we are but one step away from castles in the air. In attempting to put a 'Goldman' onstage, Bolt's play neither tries to hold up a true mirror (as Goldman herself might have proposed) with its 'fast and loose' strategy, nor escapes Boal's category of spectacle-theatre. The audience is addressed firmly in its role as spectator, and thus this play offers an image of Goldman that bears little relation to the nexus of ideas that the name signifies. Although this laxity with regard to the historical record is not a problem in and of itself, from an anarchist textual theory perspective (bearing in mind the sense of pedagogics borrowed from Brecht) the play engages in this laxity for *no apparent purpose*. It succeeds merely in belittling Goldman's message.

Howard Zinn, on the other hand, approaches Goldman from an entirely sympathetic political position which leads him to want to propagate her message. Zinn is a radical historian who describes himself as someone who goes into the past 'for the purpose of trying to understand and do something about what is going on in the present'.⁵⁰ His play covers the period from Goldman's arrival in New York to the time just before her deportation, and thus focuses primarily on her American experiences. The play, moreover, is largely faithful to the historical record of Goldman's life, even adopting at times an intertextual strategy of lifting text directly from her speeches and publications. The play moves rapidly between various settings, and Zinn does not

⁴⁹ Bolt, *Buffalo Jump-Gabe-Red Emma*, pp. 183-184.

⁵⁰ Howard Zinn, *Artists in Times of War* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), p. 39.

hamper the potential of any production with overly specific stage directions or lighting requirements. Indeed there is an admirable degree of openness for any cast and director to make a production of the play their own.

Zinn swiftly establishes his protagonist and her motivations straight from the opening scene. Goldman is seen working in a garment factory with three other girls. The very first words go to the foreman, the voice of authority, who upbraids them for singing while they work. The girls are discussing the question of fire safety in the sweatshops where they toil, and the recent deaths that have occurred elsewhere. Finally Goldman confronts the foreman, and with the eventual backing of the other girls, who refuse to take her work on once she is sacked, she manages to convince him to open the back door of the factory as a fire escape. The scene encapsulates many aspects of Goldman's life and sets the tone of the play with a sure touch – in microcosm it presents the growing consciousness of collective strength gained from acting in union in the workplace, it questions authority, it notes the unequal division of labour between the genders, in fact it even appeals to human reason as the foreman himself realises that he too would die in the event of a fire. This is in marked contrast with Duberman's factory scene, where Goldman is portrayed as an outsider to the workforce who ridicule her concerns and where she is seen asking the factory boss for a raise in order to afford flowers or books or the price of a concert ticket.

Despite Zinn's greater sympathy for Goldman's ideas, his dramatic strategy perhaps shares more in common with that of Bolt or Duberman. For example, the play unsettles the audience/spectacle division at times, with the potential for some of the action to take place in the auditorium. The proscenium arch division fades precisely at moments when someone is making a public speech – the first example of this comes with Most's initial appearance onstage, and part of the stage directions are as follows: *'There is a policeman on each side of the stage, holding a club, in semi-darkness. It's a*

long speech for the stage, and can only work if Most grips the audience'.⁵¹ In a sense the stage directions are inviting the production to locate the theatre audience in the position of Most's actual audience – it could be said that Most's character directly addresses the theatre audience. This happens several times in the play, for example when Goldman is portrayed addressing crowds in Union Square, New York, urging them to take food if they cannot afford to pay for it (again, another incident from her life). In this fashion the pedagogical message of Goldman's life comes to be communicated directly to the audience of Zinn's play, an audience which oscillates between being addressed as the audience of the play and being addressed as the audience of the speeches of nineteenth-century anarchists.

Yet despite this attempt to disrupt the traditional role of the theatre audience as passive spectator, Zinn's play cannot be said to open a space for the audience to become the protagonist that Boal advocates. This is nowhere more evident than in the scene portraying Goldman on one of her lecture tours. The play scripts in voices that come from the auditorium, after Goldman has finished her speech and her manager (and lover) Reitman has asked for questions. Yet with Boal in mind, one can only wonder what would happen if the actual theatre audience were to start asking real questions of the actor playing Goldman. One of the speeches in this scene concerns Goldman's agitation against the First World War. Zinn himself, in *Artists in Times of War*, takes Goldman as one of his inspirations for his activism against the current war against the people of Iraq. Yet what would happen if, during a performance of this play, the theatre audience instigated an unscripted discussion about the rights and wrongs of the Iraq war of today, not just listened to a scripted debate about the rights and wrongs of the war of nearly a century ago? This would surely be the very thing that Boal would look for, with the aim of transforming an audience from passive spectators of a televised slaughter to

⁵¹ Zinn, *Emma*, p. 27.

demonstrating actors taking action about it. It would be my contention that the intervention of the audience, and the production of a debate about our current situation, would be the desired product of a Goldman-inspired anarchist textual theory approach, rather than an audience listening politely through to the end of the show.

Emma Goldman's theatre criticism leaves a mixed heritage. I would characterise it as being the first step on the path towards an anarchist theory of the text, a step that can only be built upon, and that offers greater radical potential when read against other theories of the text and of theatre. Utilising the later developments of Brecht and Boal, a rough outline of this theory would bear a number of concerns in mind when considering a text. In rejecting the objectivity/subjectivity binary, there would be no attempt to feign objectivity. This anarchist theory would have a clear (if fluid) agenda, and like Goldman, who struggled all her life against injustice and inequality, would seek to highlight the 'sociorevolutionary' aspects of texts under consideration, or the lack thereof, in order to advance the cause of freedom in all its forms. Following Goldman, and keeping Barthes's 'death of the author' in mind, this theory would not limit itself to merely discussing works by authors who were perceived to be loosely anarchistic, or sympathetic fellow-travellers.⁵² If the status quo is not an option, then following Goldman, Brecht and Boal, an anarchist textual theory should not be embarrassed about its desire to achieve a reaction in the reader of any given text that would lead towards potential change in society. Within the realm of theatre, this means, as with Boal, that this critical approach would seek to transform spectators into actors.⁵³ As with Brecht,

⁵² See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', trans. by Stephen Heath, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 167-172.

⁵³ I am thinking particularly of John Blankenagel's alarmist 1953 note on the way in which Hauptmann's *The Weavers* was originally employed in an agit-prop fashion in the United States. He seems much exercised by the fact that 'certain groups and individuals regarded *Die Weber* as a welcome means of promoting agitation and stirring up trouble. In some localities communist and anarchist elements greeted performances of this drama with violent enthusiasm'. Blankenagel's characterisation of the efforts of Goldman and her one-time mentor Johann Most (who acted one of the principal roles in an early production) was that these 'agitators regarded the drama as an effective aid to their sinister efforts'. John C. Blankenagel, 'Early Reception of Hauptmann's *Die Weber* in the United States', *Modern Language Notes*, 68 (1953), 334-340 (p. 335).

the false binary of enjoyment/instruction should be rejected. Politics can be fun. Learning from what Goldman failed to consider, the form of a text's construction is as significant as its putative content. Moreover this distinction offers greater possibilities to interrogate the manner in which a text addresses its reader.

These points could not be further from any notion of a manifesto. In elaborating them at this stage I hope to provide a basic framework with which to engage with the range of texts addressed in the following chapters. The single most salient feature, at this moment, is the tension between form and content. Content in the way that Goldman reads her plays refers primarily to the text, and in the theatrical environment, the spoken text. Derrida has noted that 'the stage is theological for as long as it is dominated by speech, by a will to speech, by the layout of a primary logos which does not belong to the theatrical site and governs it from a distance'.⁵⁴ He highlights the coercion that the 'author-creator' exercises over the stage, and so an anarchist textual theory would follow Derrida in seeking to avoid producing yet more 'interpretative slaves who faithfully execute the providential designs of the "master"'.⁵⁵ In so doing, in looking beyond the 'mere' content of a play for its potential significance, in drawing in many other aspects of the play-text's construction and aspects of its presentation, the form/content opposition begins to crumble as every feature of a theatre-going (textual) experience can potentially contribute to the production of meaning.

Each chapter that follows will explore and refine these points, contributing something of its own to a constellation of perspectives for which Emma Goldman has served as a fruitful, if perhaps necessarily ambivalent, inspiration.

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 232-250 (p. 235).

⁵⁵ Derrida, 'The Theatre of Cruelty', p. 235.

3

The Paradox of Père Proudhon: The ‘Mystery’ of Authority

Can we not, then, men of common sense, while awaiting the solution which the future will undoubtedly bring forth, prepare ourselves for this great transition by an analysis of the struggling powers, as well as their positive and negative qualities? Such a work, performed with accuracy and conscientiousness, even though it should not lead us directly to the solution, would have at least the inestimable advantage of revealing to us the conditions of the problem, and thereby putting us on our guard against every form of utopia. (Pierre-Joseph Proudhon)¹

In his 1994 article, ‘Counter-Community: An Aspect of Anarchist Political Culture’, Sharif Gemie recognises that ‘anarchist works were marked by a sense of urgency: their purpose was to rouse the ignorant and the apathetic to action, to show them the necessity of revolt’. Yet as Gemie notes, the ‘propagandistic stress on polarization [in the texts] often had unexpected consequences’ for the ‘counter-communities’ that were ‘supposed to provide a model of “anarchism in action”’, in that ‘anarchists were frequently unwilling to acknowledge or even to perceive the existence of oppressive practices within the designated group’.² The question that I wish to pursue here is whether Gemie’s concerns can be transposed onto the particular functioning of the anarchist text – can one identify ‘oppressive practices’ at the textual level? Gemie writes that ‘for many anarchist writers, clear, sharp polarization represented a type of ideal political situation, within which anarchism would begin to function as a commanding political force’.³ That this is still the case today can be seen by even a

¹ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *System of Economical Contradictions: or, The Philosophy of Misery*, trans. by Benjamin R. Tucker (Boston, MA: Benj. R. Tucker, 1888; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 51. All further references in this chapter will be given in the text.

² Gemie, ‘Counter-Community’, pp. 363-364.

³ Gemie, ‘Counter-Community’, p. 364.

cursory glance at, for example, the following statement on the first page of the website of the Anarchist Federation:

We see today's society as being divided into two main opposing classes: the ruling class which controls all the power and wealth, and the working class which the rulers exploit to maintain this. By racism, sexism and other forms of oppression, as well as war and environmental destruction the rulers weaken and divide us. Only the direct action of working class people can defeat these attacks and ultimately overthrow capitalism.⁴

There is a wealth of criticisms that could be levelled at this one small piece of text, indeed in some readings it would appear closer to an orthodox (if updated) Marxism than anarchism, and its binary opposition of rulers/working class would seem to leave no space for peasant, nomadic or indigenous societies. Nevertheless, the salient feature here is that although coming from a group that denominates itself as anarchist, the text attempts to govern its own meaning, and not only by offering a reductive Manichaeian analysis of society. When the text states that 'only the direct action of working class people' can 'overthrow capitalism', it dramatically imposes its own criteria on who is entitled or ought to participate in any liberation. Formally the text assumes the authority to impose the terms on any future revolutionary experience, and moreover its textual construction fails to make any acknowledgement of this. If the Anarchist Federation maintains that it 'aims to abolish Capitalism and all oppression to create a free and equal society' then the form/content dichotomy that its text displays returns to the centre of the discussion, this time in the guise of interpretative freedom and the question of the equality of the reader and the text with regard to the production of meaning.⁵

Having established in the previous chapter the instability of this form/content dichotomy, the next three chapters will function as a demonstration of the crumbling of that dichotomy, focused specifically around the rhetorical figure of authority. Already it can be seen that there is potentially a tension between authoritarian language in a given

⁴ 'Aims and Principles', *Anarchist Federation*, available online at <<http://flag.blackened.net/af/aims.html>>.

⁵ 'Aims and Principles', *Anarchist Federation*.

text and its putatively libertarian objective. My concern will be to examine how the workings of authority might be identifiable within anarchist texts, and to what degree that authority is in conflict with what might be supposed to be the spirit of the text itself. Beyond that, the question then becomes whether a text can be said to enjoy any partial degree of success in relation to its libertarian ends despite the identification of a potentially contradictory mode of address.

Fathering Anarchism

There is one figure, then, who is generally thought of as standing at the beginning of a self-consciously anarchist body of theory. That figure is Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the man who coined such challenging and inspirational aphorisms as ‘God is evil’ and ‘property is theft’, widely regarded as the ‘father’ of the anarchist movement.⁶ Even Bakunin, apparently without irony, wrote that ‘Proudhon is the master of us all’.⁷ Proudhon was born in the east of France, in Besançon, in 1809.⁸ Living in a period between the French Revolution and the Paris Commune, John Ehrenberg suggests that while he was ‘one of the nineteenth century’s most prominent social theorists,’ he was ‘trying to understand the new with theoretical tools partly inherited from an earlier period’.⁹ The focus of Proudhon’s work moved during his lifetime, from a defence of his original class, the petty bourgeoisie, to a broader and more militant anarchism, and then towards a mutualism and emphasis on contract as a solution to France’s economic woes. Ever since the publication of Proudhon’s first essay, Ehrenberg holds that ‘a clear and unwavering commitment to equality of conditions rested at the heart of everything

⁶ See for example L. Gambone, *Proudhon and Anarchism* (London: Red Lion Press, 1996), available online at <<http://flag.blackened.net/liberty/proudanar.html>>.

⁷ Cited by Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 236.

⁸ For an account of Proudhon’s life, see George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Biography* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1987) and Edward Hyams, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Revolutionary Life, Mind and Works* (London: John Murray, 1979). For the historical background to his life, see John Ehrenberg, *Proudhon and His Age* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996). For a discussion of his thought, see Robert L. Hoffman, *The Social and Political Theory of P.-J. Proudhon* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms Inc., 1968).

⁹ Ehrenberg, *Proudhon and His Age*, p. 1, p. 2.

Proudhon tried to do for the rest of his life'.¹⁰ He is certainly the first person to be credited with calling himself an anarchist as a positive denomination of a political persuasion.¹¹ In his 1840 text, *What is Property?*, Proudhon describes the following conversation with an imaginary interlocutor:

'But,' as some of my younger readers may protest, 'you are a republican.' – Republican, yes, but this word defines nothing. *Res publica*; this is, the public thing. Now, whoever is concerned with public affairs, under whatever form of government, may call himself a republican. Even kings are republicans. 'Well, then, are you a democrat?' – No. – 'What! You are a monarchist?' – No. – 'A constitutionalist?' – God forbid. – 'You are then an aristocrat?' – Not at all. – 'You want a mixed government?' – Still less. – 'So then what are you?' I am an anarchist.¹²

Robert Graham suggests that up until then 'the word "anarchist" had been exclusively used as a derogatory epithet to be flung at one's political opponents. Proudhon was the first person to adopt the label with enthusiasm'.¹³ Nevertheless, Hoffman claims that despite anarchism's 'negative sense of opposition to all forms of government', it is 'also a positive theory of how an ideal society is to be achieved in the virtual or total absence of government'.¹⁴ Whether Hoffman's claim is in fact sustainable is a matter for a different discussion, but I will now turn to the work of Proudhon to examine what 'positive theory' may be found therein.

To approach the question of what form authority might take within Proudhon's work it is useful to start with one of his later texts in which he addresses the concept itself. The 1851 text, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, was written while Proudhon was serving a three-year prison sentence for printing an article

¹⁰ Ehrenberg, *Proudhon and His Age*, p. 47.

¹¹ Hoffman writes that 'although there were earlier anarchists or near anarchists, most notably William Godwin, they had little or no influence on the movement when it developed. [...] Proudhon's role has been very different: not only have anarchists learned much directly from his work, or from précis of it, but the scope of his thought is so broad that they have been able to say little that he has not already discussed thoroughly, except in their venting of negative and destructive impulses.' Hoffman, *The Social and Political Theory of P.-J. Proudhon*, p. 13.

¹² Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?*, trans. and ed. by Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 204-205. All further references in this chapter will be given in the text.

¹³ Robert Graham, 'Introduction to the 1989 Edition', in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by John Beverley Robinson (London: Pluto Press, 1989), pp.vii-xxxix (p. viii).

¹⁴ Hoffman, *The Social and Political Theory of P.-J. Proudhon*, p. 13.

ridiculing the then newly elected president of France, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte. It was composed as a reflection on the 1848 February revolution and consists of seven 'studies', the fourth of which is titled 'The Principle of Authority'. Proudhon entertains clear ideas about the direction that human society is taking, ideas that are based on a notion of evolutionary origins and subsequent development. The text begins by arguing that 'negation is the preliminary requirement to affirmation. All progress begins by abolishing something; every reform rests upon denunciation of some abuse; each new idea is based upon the proved insufficiency of the old idea'.¹⁵ Following this developmental framework, it suggests that these ideas should be seen as of a piece with the great leaps forward in thought that were variously achieved by Christianity in asserting monotheism over polytheism; by Luther in asserting the 'authority of reason' over the authority of the church; and by the 'revolutionaries of '89, in denying the sufficiency of feudal rule' (p. 101). Proudhon's task, as he saw it then, was to elucidate what the revolutionaries of '89 had sought, that is to say to demonstrate the 'illegitimacy and powerlessness of government as a principle of order' (p. 101). Order, the text suggests, is the first priority for an emancipated people – 'What do the people do when they proclaim their own sovereignty [...]? They say to themselves: Before everything else, order is necessary in society' (p. 109).¹⁶

At this point it can be noted that the text does not appear to problematise the logic of substitution – by replacing the rule of government with the rule of reason the commanding structure is left in place.¹⁷ The authority of this structure is something that the text seems to want to claim, for while it rejects government as order, it wants to

¹⁵ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by John Beverley Robinson (London: Pluto Press, 1989), p. 101. All further references in this chapter will be given in the text.

¹⁶ Noland notes how the question of order was evident in Proudhon's work from his first publication (*The Utility of the Celebration of Sunday as Regards Hygiene, Morality and Social and Political Relations*), where he framed the problem thus: 'to find a state of social equality [...] characterized by liberty in order and independence in unity'. Aaron Noland, 'Proudhon and Rousseau', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 28 (1967), 33-54 (pp. 35-36).

¹⁷ For a greater discussion of the logic of substitution in anarchist thought, see Newman, 'Derrida's Deconstruction of Authority'. See also my comments on this article above in chapter one.

allow order to govern. Indeed, Proudhon's valorisation of Luther's assertion of 'the authority of reason' over the 'authority of the church' would appear to embrace the inversion of an opposition as long as the preferred term finds itself in the ascendancy, leaving the binarism unexamined. This becomes more troublesome when Proudhon (in responding to the intervention of a contemporary who had suggested that authority could be abolished through the simplification of government) argues, some pages further on, that:

Authority is to government what the thought is to the word, the idea to the fact, the soul to the body. Authority is government in principle, as government is authority in practice. To abolish either, if it is a real abolition, is to abolish both. By the same token, to preserve one or the other, if the preservation is effective, is to keep both. (p. 104)

It should be noted that in offering this definition, the text does not employ any qualifications or restrictions on the notion of authority (or of government). While the citation appears to demonstrate the rigidity of Proudhon's binarism as mentioned above, it also seems *exclusively* to link authority to government, and vice versa. This then leaves no textual room for Proudhon's previous enthusiastic affirmation of the 'authority of reason' – with an unrestricted rejection of authority here, the attempt to erect an authority or government of reason falls at the first hurdle.

In pursuing this developmental model, the text makes a comparison that is rather telling. It argues that:

It is with ideas as with machines. No one knows the inventor of the first tools, the hoe, the rake, the axe, the wagon, the plough. These are found among all the nations of the globe from the earliest antiquity. But this spontaneity is not found with perfected instruments, the locomotive, the daguerreotype, the art of ballooning, the electric telegraph. The finger of God, if I may venture to say so, is no longer there [...]. (p. 101)

Thus, for Proudhon, human progress weakens the bond with the 'immediate intuition' that provided the first tools. This is a progress that leads away from the divine creator that first placed humankind on earth. The development of human life has meant that 'common sense' is no longer adequate to provide for our needs, and so 'all nations have

produced and organized by themselves, without the aid of teachers, the ideas of authority, of property, of government, of justice, of worship' (p. 102). Government, then, 'presents itself as the absolute, necessary, *sine qua non* condition of order' (p. 129). The text reasons that this logic would hold that 'the stronger the Government, the nearer order approaches perfection,' and that the two are in a relation of 'cause and effect: the cause is *GOVERNMENT*, the effect is *Order*' (p. 129). The text rejects this faulty logic, though, on the grounds that order is the primary goal of society. Hence '*ORDER* is the genus: *Government* is the species' (p. 129).

This distancing from a divine origin and the subsequently mistaken direction taken by human thought would seem to point exclusively towards an ever-increasing worldly perdition, proportionate with the increase in human knowledge. The text traces out the various stages through which human organisation has evolved, and Noland suggests that Proudhon thought the reliance on God, religion and government 'belonged to the childhood period of mankind'.¹⁸ The text maintains that the origin of authority is to be found not in the relationship of the divine to the human, but in the family. Arguing that 'the governmental idea sprang from family customs and domestic experience', Proudhon imagines that there was no protest at this hypothesized first government because 'Government seemed as natural to Society as the subordination of children to their father' (p. 106). Moreover in responding to Rousseau Proudhon remarks that authority's 'proper sphere is the family,' and that it 'is a mystical principle, anterior and superior to the will of the parties interested, of the father and mother, as well as of the children' (p. 136). Within the text there is no debate as regards the legitimacy of authority within the family, nor is there any questioning of the foundation of this authority – at a stroke Proudhon asserts that 'authority imposes itself by *generation*' and consequently establishes a putatively natural gerontocracy (p. 137).

¹⁸ Noland, 'Proudhon and Rousseau', p. 41.

At the moment of instituting the first government, Proudhon seems to suggest (as highlighted above) that there would be no perceived conflict between the interests of the governed and the governors, as the familial model would seem so 'natural'. Yet he makes an absolute distinction between the family and society (to be considered below) which means that the two models are neither compatible nor interchangeable. Proudhon argues that in the family model authority would be absolute, and so the first manifestation of the principle of authority would be one of 'absolute power' (p. 128). Yet the attempt to translate this gerontocracy into public life leads to error, for those 'who take the family as the rudiments of Society' will 'arrive at a dictatorship, which is the most exaggerated form of government' (p. 106). This 'absolute power,' the text contends, in a curious reversal of its logic, is 'odious to reason and to liberty,' and so 'the principle of authority is forced to retire: it retires step by step, by a series of concessions, each one more insufficient than the other' (p. 128). The progression, as the text characterises it, is one from 'absolutism' to 'anarchy' (p. 128). Proudhon hails an 'Historic evolution leading Humanity inevitably to a new system' (p. 126).

As a result, the translocation of familial authority to the governmental sphere (to guarantee order to a developing and complexifying society) is not condemned to be an irrevocable march towards tyranny. In Proudhon's view the ideas of authority, property, and government are but an intellectual cul-de-sac, ideas that 'are growing weaker', and whose 'insufficiency' has been established 'at the bar of reason'. For him, 'the question is for us to discover, through science, what substitute we can find for ideas which, according to the verdict of science, are condemned as false and injurious' (p. 102). Proudhon's invocation of science, though, prompts a different question: does science come to provide an alternative authority by which Proudhon rejects the 'false and injurious' familial authority that he identifies in the state?

In constructing a text to confront the social and economic iniquities of his day, it is clear that Proudhon relied on several *a priori* foundations for his theory, and science was not the least among them. From the opening of his major work, *System of Economical Contradictions or, The Philosophy of Misery*, this science would indeed appear to fulfil Hoffman's notion of a 'positive theory'. Published in 1846, the first chapter begins with the bold declaration 'I affirm the reality of an economic science'.¹⁹

From there the text continues in the following vein:

I affirm, on the other hand, the *absolute certainty* as well as the *progressive* nature of economic science, of all the sciences in my opinion the most comprehensive, the purest, the best supported by facts: a new proposition, which alters this science into logic or metaphysics *in concreto*, and radically changes the basis of ancient philosophy. In other words, economic science is to me the objective form and realization of metaphysics. (p. 43)

Nevertheless, despite this confident assertion of the objectivity of economic science, within a few pages the text is already offering a basis from which to temper the stridency of the first pronouncement. It sets up an opposition between two 'powers', as Proudhon calls them, 'political economy' and 'socialism', and argues that political economy merely explicates what is and bases its authority in the world as it finds it, while socialism is utopian and 'makes vigorous efforts to reconstruct social economy from top to bottom' (pp. 45, 47). For Ehrenberg, 'Proudhon's entire approach was now based on his explicit desire to stand between political economy and socialism'.²⁰ Proudhon's *System* seeks to ground economics objectively, and so to solve the problems about which socialism complains without resorting to its utopianism. The text acknowledges that the two 'pursue the same end,' those being 'liberty, order, and well-being' (p. 52). Yet in considering the competing claims of each of these 'powers' the text defines them in relation to the already existing world, and not in transcendental terms – 'socialism affirms the irregularity of the present constitution of society,' and it 'asserts, and proves, that the order of civilization is artificial, contradictory, inadequate;

¹⁹ Proudhon, *System of Economical Contradictions*, p. 43.

²⁰ Ehrenberg, *Proudhon and His Age*, p. 72.

that it engenders oppression, misery, and crime' (p. 46). Given that he has already described political economy as 'a collection of the observations thus far made' (p. 45), it can be seen that in spite of his desire to institutionalise economics as an objective science, it has been presented in negative (or differential) rather than absolute terms.

Ehrenberg comments that:

If Proudhon had been abstracting from history or human relations he might still have been able to analyze real life with some measure of accuracy; but because the categories of political economy were now timeless and eternal, he was left with a set of propositions which only betrayed his own confusion because they were little more than emanations of his own mind.²¹

The new objective science that Proudhon boldly announces is in fact contingent on the existing order, deriving a differential significance in contradistinction to it. In defining what he takes to be his chosen target, the text seems to fight shy of bestowing upon it even a fictitious transcendental. When it argues that political economy claims its authority as 'the authority of the human race, the strongest authority possible' (p. 46), it is clear that it refuses political economy any objective foundation, but allowing rather a foundation firmly rooted in the world of human subjects. What is more, it again defines socialism in opposition to the transcendental when it states that socialists 'reject authority and faith' (p. 47). Yet if Proudhon rejects authority, what is it exactly that he feels he is rejecting? And can this be said to contradict the manner in which he formulates his text?

Contracting Readers

Within this reading it can be seen that Proudhon's argument invokes a number of *a priori* foundations such as order (while simultaneously arguing that government is incapable of guaranteeing this order to the people) and the objectivity of science. Proudhon, though, is not averse to condemning this rhetorical tactic in others. In

²¹ Ehrenberg, *Proudhon and His Age*, p. 72.

General Idea of the Revolution the first half of the fourth study goes to some lengths to rebut Rousseau's social contract.²² At one particular point, Proudhon identifies an *a priori* in Rousseau's work, which he lambastes in the following terms:

Rousseau is so far from desiring that any mention should be made in the social contract of the principles and laws which rule the fortunes of nations and of individuals, that, in his demagogue's programme, as well as in his *Treatise on Education*, he starts with the false, thievish, murderous supposition that only the individual is good, that society depraves him, [and] that man therefore should refrain as much as possible from all relations with his fellows. (p. 117)

While it would be a matter of individual opinion whether Proudhon's *a priori* was as 'false, thievish [and] murderous' as Rousseau's, the point here is that he employs the same tactic by founding his critique on order, without any discussion of this 'supposition'. This quotation, though, also points to the reasons why Proudhon so clearly distinguished the familial from the social, and why order could not be derived (via government) from a familial model. This distinction is evident from the reference to 'the *fortunes* of nations and of individuals'. Proudhon differentiates the familial from the societal on the grounds of economics, for the social is considered as an economic relationship between individuals, whereas the family is simply natural. This is where Proudhon bases his rejection of Rousseau's concept of the social contract, for it 'speaks of political rights only; it does not mention economic rights' (p. 119). Indeed for Proudhon the 'political idea and the economic idea' were 'a clear antithesis' (p. 127). In this analysis, Rousseau's social contract 'teaches us that the people, a collective being, has no unitary existence' (p. 119) and therefore conflicts with his notion of what a contract really is:

What characterizes the contract is the agreement for equal exchange; and it is by virtue of this agreement that liberty and well being increase; while by the establishment of authority, both of these necessarily diminish. This will be evident if we reflect that contract is the act whereby two or several individuals agree to organize among themselves, for a definite purpose and time, that industrial power which we have called *exchange*. (p. 113)

²² For a lengthier discussion of Proudhon's ambivalent relationship to Rousseau, see Noland, 'Proudhon and Rousseau'.

Thus for Proudhon, as Robert Graham suggests, 'only those obligations which the individual himself has freely assumed have any binding force'.²³ 'Economic criticism,' writes Proudhon, will show 'that political institutions must be lost in industrial organisation' (p. 126).

Yet to turn the focus to the issue of authority within the text, which raises the issue of the relationship of the reader to Proudhon's text, the question becomes one, in Graham's terms, of what relationship the reader can meaningfully be said to have 'freely' entered into with the text. Indeed Graham writes of 'obligations', though it is necessary to ask in what sense a reader can be said to have obligations to a text, or be said to enter into a 'contract' with the text. These are the questions that I would now like to pose to Proudhon's texts, in the light of the above considerations of his theories of authority. To recapitulate, it has been seen that Proudhon admits of the authority of reason, deploys the presupposition of 'order' as an *a priori* foundation for his arguments (despite criticising Rousseau for precisely the same thing), maintains that the family is the proper sphere of authority (where it would be unquestionable), and proposes that liberty would be achieved from a re-ordering of the economic relations in society, by a revision of the concept of contract. This leads me to the question of how these concerns can be brought to bear on the text-reader relationship and what impact they would have on the freedom of the reader.

Firstly, Proudhon's use of the concept of 'the authority of reason' and his enthusiasm for 'science' may not be as inflexibly positivist as they initially seem. Proudhon calls the authority of reason 'the eternal, positive idea, substituted by the Reformation for the authority of faith' (p. 111). This is not to premise authority on an objective sense of reason that would be automatically external to any one individual through which it would acquire a similar degree of transcendental significance as faith.

²³ Graham, 'Introduction to the 1989 Edition', in Proudhon, *General Idea*, p. xx.

Proudhon defines it as ‘an agreement between intuition and experience’ (p. 111). Both terms of his definition, though, are immediately intelligible within a Saussurean system of differences, and so fail to bestow transcendentalty on reason. In failing to acquire the status of what Saussure calls ‘positive terms’, intuition and experience become textual in Derrida’s sense where ‘there is nothing outside of the text’.²⁴ This notion of the differential nature of meaning had already been raised in *General Idea*, when in the second study Proudhon wrote that ‘it is by contrast with error that truth impresses itself upon the understanding’ (p. 59). The important point here is that although the text entertains a notion of external truth, its particular truth is only known by ‘contrast with error,’ and indeed it is only an ‘impression’ of truth that is actually left. This was also the case in *What is Property?*, Proudhon’s second major work which was published in 1840, some eleven years before *General Idea*. The text takes issue with ‘external axioms,’ and Proudhon suggests that the law-makers ‘have always followed the principle, adapted from the theologians, that what is universally, in all places, and at all times accepted is unquestionably true [...] as if a general but spontaneous opinion offered anything more than an appearance of truth’ (p. 81). The text clearly rejects an existing notion of truth on the grounds that it is a mere acceptance of an appearance. It continues by arguing that:

the opinion of all peoples may confirm the perception of a fact, the vague sense of a law; but it can teach us nothing about either fact or law. [...] Behind the appearance the truth remains hidden; faith may accept it, but only well-founded reflection can know. (p. 81)

Again, the crucial point here is that although there may be a ‘hidden truth’, it can only be comprehended through ‘well-founded reflection’, rather than being an external absolute that imposes itself in its transcendentalty, what Derrida calls ‘a signified outside the text’.²⁵ From this it may be concluded that while Proudhon’s ‘authority of

²⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Roy Harris, ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 118. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

²⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.

reason' initially appears as a bold re-instatement of a concept of authority, on closer inspection his rejection of external truths and his locating of reason within the epistemological sphere of the individual undermine such a view and suggest a textual reading of the world, not one anchored in objective truths.

Proudhon's language at times supports this latent textuality, for he elsewhere describes government as 'always man giving orders to man, the *fiction* which makes an end of liberty; brute force which *cuts questions short*, in the place of justice, which alone can answer them' (*General Idea*, p. 126, my emphasis). *General Idea of the Revolution* does not therefore exclude the sense of a textual world, indeed it could be said that Proudhon contemplates a materially textual world, for he wryly describes the proliferation of laws as falling 'like hail upon the unfortunate people. After a time the political ground will be covered with a layer of paper, which the geologists will put down among the vicissitudes of the earth as the *papyraceous formation*' (p. 132).

So if Proudhon's textual world offers a paper surface to walk upon, how does this world attempt to construct a subject position for the reader? It has been seen already how, in the opening of *System of Economical Contradictions*, the text announces its project of launching an economic science in an authoritarian fashion, by invoking the authority of science to reinforce its argument. This manner of investing the authorial voice with a hidden authority is evident elsewhere in Proudhon's work. For example in *General Idea* the text premises certain observations on a homogeneous concept of 'the people', without tempering this premise with any considerations of the reductive nature of the gesture – 'the reasoning of the masses is built upon this idea [progress]. The people is neither optimistic nor pessimistic; it admits the absolute not at all' (p. 41). Later the text describes the people being 'not at all utopian [...] they have no faith in the Absolute, and they reject every *a priori* system, as deadly in its nature' (p. 76). This rhetorical strategy finds an even more provocative shape in *What is Property?*, where

the text insists that 'all men attest these truths [that property and theft are synonyms] in their heart, I say; it remains only for them to understand them' (p. 16). Here the text has reached the questionable extremity of constructing a straw people, and then diagnosing what lies in their hearts, even while it admits that they themselves do not recognise this diagnosis. What is at stake here, is not so much the issue of presenting a 'positive theory', but rather the anterior movement of silently claiming the authority to articulate such a theory. The logic, though, of this authorial position for Proudhon, following the contours of his own arguments as laid out above, would surely be to locate him in a position of author-as-father. By employing an unquestioned authority to ground his arguments, Proudhon seems to encapsulate the very essence of what Barthes was criticising when he claimed that 'the Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child'.²⁶ By failing to question the premises behind their arguments, the logic of Proudhon's own texts locate the text-reader relationship in the realm of the familial, not the economic, and so the reader is offered a locus corresponding to that of the child within the nuclear family that Proudhon sees as the 'natural' sphere of authority. This is further complicated by the corresponding proprietorial relationship – Proudhon emerges as author/owner of the text and the text is vulnerable to the use and abuse that the 'author' may see fit to inflict upon it, rather than permit those who productively engage with the text (the readers) to reap the benefit of that work (the reading process).

But it is precisely the anarchism derived from Proudhon's texts, and his rejection of authority, that eschews familial authority as congruent with an ordered society. The challenge, then, for the remainder of this chapter is to explode what I will argue is the 'fiction', as Proudhon called government, of any authority over the text. I will use both

²⁶ Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 170.

a critique informed by the very terms of Proudhon's own texts, before then examining what remains, in order to attempt to formulate aspects of a theory of cultural criticism in the light of these considerations.

Proudhon the Proprietor

Amy Wiese Forbes has written on Proudhon's use of satire as a textual strategy. Setting Proudhon's work in the context of 1830s republican politics in France, she argues that 'drawing audiences into a joke and involving them in politics by inviting them to unravel satire's humour set up a model of popular participation'. Proudhon 'the great scientist was also a great satirist,' she maintains.²⁷ But what Forbes sees as a rhetorical strategy, I would like to suggest can also be read as a deconstructive strategy, working from within the text towards the limits of its own self-imposed logic, to the point where that logic finally collapses. For example, in *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* Proudhon addresses his 'First Study,' titled 'Reaction Causes Revolution,' to the reactionaries (as he calls them), whom he sees as impeding the progress of the February revolution of 1848. In an acerbic attack on the position of the reactionaries, Proudhon offers 'an outline of the policy and of the measures for organization and repression which the reaction must adopt in order to carry out what it has undertaken, *if it wants to be logical and to follow its fortune to the end*' (p. 36, my emphasis). This outline, that Proudhon so deceptively offers, amounts to '[suppressing] the whole representative system' (p. 34), and includes a seven-point plan which takes in an unlimited state of general siege, mass deportations, huge increases in army and police numbers, enforced separation of tightly structured guilds, book-burning and astronomical tax rises. This, he continues, 'will be necessary, if you [the reactionaries] expect your work to stand' (p. 35). Proudhon ironically prophesises that these measures

²⁷ Amy Wiese Forbes, "'Let's Add the Stomach': Satire, Absurdity, and July Monarchy Politics in Proudhon's *What is Property?*", *French Historical Studies*, 24 (2001), 679-705 (pp. 680, 681).

will herald a ‘social regeneration which carries civilization back to the fourteenth century, and restores feudalism, with the aid of the new elements furnished by the modern spirit and by experience of revolutions’ (p. 36). As Forbes notes, Proudhon ‘used seemingly absurd rhetoric himself to expose the faulty reasoning of some of the most respected thinkers of the day’.²⁸

Here Proudhon takes the logic of the reaction and forces it to its extreme, offering a tyrannical vision so horrific that it becomes untenable, one that is beyond the very bounds of possibility. He challenges the reactionaries with a taunting question: ‘Are you able to attempt even the first of these indispensable measures, from which a single omission will plunge you into the abyss?’ The conclusion, then, for him, is simple: ‘No, you can do nothing, you can dare nothing, royalists, imperialists, bancocrats, Malthusians, Jesuits, who have used and abused force against ideas’ (p. 37).

Where Proudhon seems to diverge from what might be thought of as a deconstructive strategy is in applying this questioning to his own position. Proudhon, as Kelly and Smith explain in the introduction to *What is Property?*, ‘was anxious that he should furnish absolute and incontrovertible “proof” of his arguments’.²⁹ As Marshall notes, he ‘hoped that the discovery of these laws [of development] would turn politics and economics into a science’.³⁰ Proudhon concludes his *General Idea* arguing that progress, revolution and reason ‘are the laws of necessity itself. No man has made them: nobody forces them upon you. They have little by little been discovered, and I exist only to bear witness of them’ (pp. 294-295). That this approach would leave Proudhon in the somewhat envious position of prophet-of-revealed-truth seems only strengthened by his opening remarks in *System of Economical Contradictions*. In the introduction, while explaining how, for him, God has become ‘a necessary dialectical tool’ (p. 2), he

²⁸ Forbes, “‘Let’s Add the Stomach’”, p. 683.

²⁹ Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith, ‘Introduction’, in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?*, trans. and ed. by Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. xi-xxxiii (p. xxviii).

³⁰ Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 242.

contends that ‘if humanity needs an author, God and the gods equally need a revealer’ (p. 7). The direction that these words seem to be taking is then confirmed some pages later when he writes that ‘God inspires, an Academy questions,’ and that he is ‘one of the prophets who attempt to answer’ (p. 39).

Now Proudhon-as-prophet will clearly only compound the problems of Proudhon-as-father-of-the-text, in terms of opening up the discursive spaces necessary to produce an anti-authoritarianism. Yet a careful distinction needs to be introduced here with regard to the means and ends of Proudhon’s work. Although Proudhon’s texts construct an author position of prophet (or father), the certainty implied by this position would correspond to the methodology employed. This is to say that Proudhon insists on a certainty for his methods, the ‘science’ that will work towards revealing the unfolding of a certain destiny. What that destiny will in fact be is something that the texts make no claim to foresee. This parallels his relationship to an external truth as discussed above – for example, he sees society as divided ‘into two great parties’. On the one hand there is ‘property’ (his shorthand for everything that is ‘traditional and essentially hierarchical’) and on the other ‘socialism’, which is ‘*anarchical* and *atheistic*; that is, rebellious against all authority, human and divine’ (*System*, p. 51). For Proudhon, ‘modern civilisation has demonstrated that in a conflict of this nature the truth is found, not in the exclusion of one of the opposites, but wholly and solely in the reconciliation of the two’ (p. 51). Once more, truth is not an absolute value which vanquishes all before it, but is differential. Moreover, Proudhon asks if he and his readers can not, ‘while awaiting the solution which the future will undoubtedly bring forth, prepare ourselves for this great transition by an analysis of the struggling powers, as well as their positive and negative qualities?’ (p. 51).

Hence the careful distinction that I am proposing here between the means (an objective science that works towards a future) and the ends (a destiny that is,

perpetually, an empty signifier) would maintain that Proudhon makes no claim about what the future solution might be, eschewing what Derrida has called the sense of the future being ‘announced, promised, called for in a performative mode’.³¹ Rather, the text’s convictions hang, in the citation above, on the word ‘undoubtedly’, for it is Proudhon’s own method that inspires his faith, not any teleological guarantees that might be on offer. Indeed the text even goes so far as to suggest that the analysis it is proposing might ‘not lead us directly to the solution,’ although it would have the ‘inestimable advantage’ of elucidating the problem at hand (p. 51).

So the paradoxes keep multiplying with Proudhon, for while he seems to forgo a *telos* that would determine exactly the route of his progress, he displays a firm conviction that the (usually scientific) methods will reveal the path to this as yet unglimped end. This would, then, expose a striking contradiction at the heart of Proudhon’s texts, one that has taken on various forms in the course of this reading, be it authorial paternity against readerly liberty or the objectivity of science as opposed to the differential significance of its results. The terms of this contradiction are fundamentally premised on what could be characterised as the knowable and the unknowable, meaning that from within the Proudhonian text, the admission of the unknowable allows one to derive the textual tools to deconstruct his own occasional bid for authorial dominance of the text. For example, when Proudhon argues that the constancy of humanity is to be found in the fact that ‘everything in it, at every period of its development, in the individual as in the mass, proceeds from the same principle, which is, not *being*, but *becoming*,’ it becomes impossible to restrict the logic of this ‘becoming’ from applying to his work as a whole (*System*, p. 420). In his own words, from a letter of 1851, his ‘theory of Progress [...] excludes all absolute notions and all so-called definitive hypotheses; it must, in my opinion, form the *solid but nevertheless fluid basis of the*

³¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 103.

future'.³² The text itself lets the genie out of the bottle, and therefore the Proudhonian text becomes a text *becoming*, not a text that is. As he argued elsewhere, 'the unforeseeable far surpasses in its richness the prudence of the statesman'.³³ But for statesman, here, one could substitute text, and indeed reader.

Having re-read Proudhon's work the restricted locus that he offers for the fluidity of the future cannot maintain its own restrictions: indeed, the future, in Derrida's terms, has '[dislocated] the self-presence of the living present and [installed] thereby the relation to the other'.³⁴ What, then, is left of what I characterised at the beginning of this chapter as the putatively libertarian objectives in Proudhon's work? Now that I have mapped the conflict between authority and liberty in Proudhon's texts, I am in a position to be able to offer one possible evaluation of *what* Proudhon's anarchism might mean in the light of *how* he expressed it.

In *Philosophie du Progrès*, Proudhon wrote that in calling himself an anarchist, he was:

declaring by this word the negation – or better – the insufficiency, of the principle of authority. That is to say [...] the notion of authority, like the notion of an absolute being, is only an analytic concept that is powerless to provide a constitution for society, regardless of the source of authority and the manner in which it is exercised.³⁵

One possible response to this, in the light of my reading (identifying Proudhon's authorial position as being commensurate with his description of the role of the father in the family) is that the paradoxical nature of his own texts has paradoxically achieved the full import of his words. The text's authority, that which underpins gestures such as proclaiming the truth of what was to be found in people's hearts, is now exposed as merely a 'concept that is powerless to provide a constitution for society,' or in other terms, powerless to enforce a particular meaning on a reader.

³² Proudhon, *Selected Writings*, p. 244, my emphasis.

³³ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *The Principle of Federation*, trans. by Richard Vernon (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 20.

³⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 154.

³⁵ Proudhon, *Philosophie du Progrès* (1853), cited in *Selected Writings*, p. 90.

Nevertheless authority was not the only target of Proudhon's critique. In attacking property, he was attempting to lay the foundations for an equitable distribution of society's wealth, and thus subsume the restricted legislative sphere of the political within the broader category of the economic. Hoffman proposes three aspects to Proudhon's attack on property: the first is 'the dominance of will, which permits the proprietor to misuse or not to use at all what can be put to other uses benefiting society or individuals'; the second is 'the exclusive character of ownership, unlimited in duration of time'; and the third is the possibility of unearned income.³⁶ To relate this to the textual, the first two features have an important bearing on the argument that I have made so far. Proudhon's texts, as has been suggested above, at times present a position of authorial certitude, where one can read, for example, that 'politically, the idea of *anarchy* is quite as rational and concrete as any other'.³⁷ These guarantees of the 'rational and concrete' nature of anarchism function as an attempt to overdetermine the significance of the text, creating, as Derrida has put it, a transcendental signified which 'would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign'.³⁸ Derridean *differance* is derived from a questioning of the concept of temporality, in that the concept traditionally presumes the eventual presence of the 'thing itself'.³⁹ For Derrida, the 'irreducibility of temporalizing' means the temporal deferring (without end) of the presence that the signified attempts to invoke.⁴⁰ Therefore one of the deconstructive readings of Proudhon's use both of *a priori*'s and positive values would be that it locates him not only in the position of 'father' of the text but also (following the outline of the critique of property) as the owner of the text, striving for the 'dominance of [his] will' and trying to protect the text against the vagaries of time and re-readings.

³⁶ Hoffman, *The Social and Political Theory of P.-J. Proudhon*, p. 62.

³⁷ Proudhon, *The Principle of Federation*, p. 11.

³⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 49.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Difference', in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 129-160 (p. 138).

⁴⁰ Derrida, 'Difference', p. 130.

Although Proudhon is credited with the origin of the aphorism ‘property is theft’, if one brings the slogan to bear on textual concerns the question becomes one of what it is that is being stolen.⁴¹

How, then, as owner of the text, does Proudhon escape the force of his own critique of property? Once again Proudhon employs certain incontrovertible values in the process of critiquing the concept of property – ‘liberty’, ‘equality’, and ‘security’ are all held to be ‘an absolute right’. Yet the nub of his argument is not that property *per se* is unacceptable, but that the right to title, and also to buy, sell, rent, amalgamate property, is in contradiction with, and infringes, the absolute rights mentioned above. A title, though, does not have to be a property deed – an author, for example, gives a title to his or her work. Can the same gesture of naming a written work (in the case of Proudhon) come to mean both giving and receiving a title? Property, in this sense, in going against these rights:

is a right outside of society [...] if we are associated for the sake of liberty, equality, and security, we are not associated for the sake of property; thus, if property is natural right, this natural right is not social but antisocial. Property and society are completely irreconcilable with one another. [...] Either society must perish, or it must destroy property. (*What is Property?*, pp. 42-43)

Following the thrust of Proudhon’s own argument, the position of author-as-proprietor of the text would establish the loss of a social bond between the reader and the text. By social I mean here any concept of an interaction between reader and text, or more simply, any act of *reading*. For without an act of reading in the sense elaborated by Barthes, in the sense of ‘a writing that can know no halt’, one would be left with the untenable proposition of a simple act of reference.⁴² Proudhon’s notion of the social

⁴¹ Hoffman discusses, and dismisses, the claims that Proudhon had stolen his ‘ideas and famous formula’ from J. P. Brissot de Warville, a ‘Girondin political leader of the Revolutionary period’. When Hoffman concludes that ‘it is not of great importance who had or had not attacked property previously’, he seems to bear out Barthes’s statement that ‘the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original’. Hoffman, *The Social and Political Theory of P.-J. Proudhon*, p. 56, p. 58. Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, p. 170.

⁴² Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, p. 170.

invokes Derrida's concept of the sign, for 'from the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs*'.⁴³

Proudhon's sense of the social, though, points towards Derrida's notion that 'what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence'.⁴⁴ This notion of language is already oriented towards an other. Here the non-origin of language has already been permeated by the absence of the referent, and hence signals a beyond of language that traditional logocentrism would seek to ignore. This beyond opens onto the realm of the other, and immediately for Derrida this signals the prior claim of the other on the self, or the responsibility of self to other. In a sense, language is already destined to an other before any speaking subject comes to form a phrase. To put this in Proudhonian terms, the social (the social considered as relation to the other) is what opens meaning and language. Therefore without the social/other, following Derrida, there would be no meaning or history or future. This is where the congruence with Proudhon comes to the fore, for the social is what makes impossible the concept of property title. Or to put it in an even more reduced form, if humans were not social then there would be no language, we would live in a world of 'things themselves' and property would be fully admissible for there would be no relation to the other.

This congruence is repeated in *What is Property?*, where Proudhon is elaborating a distinction between property considered as actual goods existing in the present, and property considered as land which holds the future promise of productive yields. He argues:

Destroy a bill of exchange, a promissory note, and as a paper you destroy almost nothing at all; but with this paper you destroy your title and, in losing your title, deprive yourself of your goods. Destroy the land or (what is the same thing) sell it; and you not only alienate one, two, or more crops, but you annihilate all the products that you could derive from it – you and your children and your children's children. (p. 84)

⁴³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 50.

⁴⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 159.

Although Proudhon is attempting to highlight the difference between actual and future losses, his analogy is striking insofar as it engages in a metaphor that sees the land functioning as a sheet of paper, upon which the future will be inscribed. Thus it neatly ties his own critique in with the deconstructive critique, and again shows how the future, or the Derridean *a-venir*, frustrates any determination of the present.

While Proudhon's texts seem to try to allow him a position of proprietorship, it is now clear that the same texts undermine the very ground upon which any claim to authorial title may be based. Moreover the Derridean critique only accentuates the impossibility of a text enjoying any 'dominance of will'. Indeed it might be suggested that a body of work such as Proudhon's, concerned with the social and liberty, ought by force of its own logic to put into practice – in the one locus available to it – a sense of the social with respect to its reader, that is to say to try to maintain a respect for the reader and not close down other avenues of interpretation. In this light (and to return to an earlier question), consistency can be seen as a fluctuating value. On the one hand, consistency could be seized upon as an excuse to attempt to predetermine a singular significance for a text by an author. On the other hand, a blatantly inconsistent or self-contradictory text runs the risk of lapsing into meaningless. Yet as I cited earlier, Proudhon wrote that in a conflict of opposing terms, 'truth is found, not in the exclusion of one of the opposites, but wholly and solely in the reconciliation of the two.' The 'answer' to the 'question' regarding consistency must be left open, for to do otherwise would be to pre-empt the reader who, following Proudhon's thinking, would have to reconcile the two poles to their own satisfaction.

So while one might ostensibly find a Proudhon who is prophet of revealed truth, both father and proprietor of his own text, a closer reading of some of the details of his writing allows for a space to challenge that authorial position, and to conceive of the text as what Barthes calls 'a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings,

none of them original, blend and clash'.⁴⁵ Moreover, while Proudhon's mode of address to the reader would apparently involve a degree of attempted dominance over the text, the texts themselves provide for the undoing of the very attempt. It is clear that in Gemie's terms Proudhon was trying to provide a 'structured sociology of revolt', and that his work is concerned with providing a detailed economic rebuttal of the situation as he found it in his day. In so doing, though, his texts at times demonstrate a logic which opens avenues of investigation that can point towards a plurality of readings of those very texts. To fail to acknowledge the plurality of these texts would be to grant Proudhon the author-function the authority over his texts that they occasionally seem to seek for him. This, though, would simultaneously construct the reader as enemy, for as Proudhon wrote, 'fear of the people is the sickness of all those who belong to authority; the people, for those in power, are the enemy'.⁴⁶ Given that his politics were based on his economic system, structured around his idea of contract, I would argue that his texts offer a contract to the reader, one based on a respect that ends in liberty, and that could not permit the notion of the reader as enemy. So despite the fact that the anarchist movement has historically looked to Proudhon as 'the real father of anarchy', this fatherhood, I would contend, is one that is neither productive nor conducive to the ends that Proudhon himself pursued.⁴⁷ The fact that more recent commentators describe Proudhon as 'a permanent contradiction' no longer seems to be entirely a matter for lament.⁴⁸

In addressing the work of Proudhon, this chapter has pursued a double strategy, one of critiquing the figure of authority as it is found within his texts, while at the same time elaborating an anarchism from within those same texts that permits a challenge to that authority. Following the conclusions of the previous chapter, I have sought a

⁴⁵ Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 170.

⁴⁶ Cited by Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 244.

⁴⁷ Cited by Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 236.

⁴⁸ See, for example, J. Hampden Jackson, *Marx, Proudhon and European Socialism* (London: English Universities Press, 1957), p. 159.

renewed affirmation of Proudhon's own aims, what could be said in this context to be a rejection of imposed inequalities between text and reader. This is not to propose some (positive) rights-based notion of equality, thus necessitating an entire apparatus of laws and constitutions to guarantee it. Rather, I would focus on the Derridean sense of the alterity of the other, or in this case, the reader. Any textual attempts to impose constraints on the interpretative freedom of the reader must, as a consequence, be refused. As with the previous chapter, this has been achieved after a consideration of the tensions between a text's content and its form. Ali Nematollahy argues that Proudhon demanded 'that form and content be united', but this chapter has shown, rather, that in producing a meaning for a text, the absolute nature of the distinction between the two crumbles.⁴⁹ This chapter can then add a point to the growing list of motivating concerns for an anarchist textual theory, and that would be a relentless interrogation of the figure and workings of authority within texts under consideration.

⁴⁹ Ali Nematollahy, 'Proudhon, from Aesthetics to Politics', *Anarchist Studies*, 13 (2005), 47-60 (p. 55).

4

Abolishing Bakunin

‘Without obedience there can be no power.’ (Michael Bakunin)¹

If Pierre-Joseph Proudhon is the father of the anarchist movement, then his theory (of permitting a certain amount of private property to the worker or peasant) was, according to *The Economist*, ‘too much’ for his successor, Michael Bakunin.² *The Economist*, however, is not a magazine renowned for its coverage of anarchist theory. Its 2005 article ‘For Jihadist, Read Anarchist’ attempts to historicise the current phenomena that it characterises as ‘jihadist’ terrorism – by comparing it to anarchist violence of the nineteenth century – and in so doing offers a nine-sentence précis of anarchist history that moves in one step from Proudhon, an ‘essentially non-violent man’, to Bakunin, ‘a revolutionary nationalist turned anarchist’ and apostle of destruction.³ Whether or not *The Economist* is concerned to have its version of anarchist history taken seriously is a question for another discussion, although in arguing that ‘the theoreticians for both movements [anarchism and jihadism] have often been bearded and angry, of course, and their followers have readily taken to the bomb’ one might be forgiven for suspecting that it was not.⁴ Yet *The Economist* is not the only recent publication that has sought to further demonise perceived opponents by association with anarchism – Tariq Ali,

¹ Michael Bakunin, Letter to *La Liberté*, 5 October 1872, in *Bakunin on Anarchism*, trans. and ed. by Sam Dolgoff (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 2001), p. 279. All further references in this chapter will be given as Dolgoff with page number.

² ‘For Jihadist, Read Anarchist’, *Economist*, 20 August 2005, pp. 17-19 (p. 17).

³ ‘For Jihadist, Read Anarchist’, *Economist*, p. 17. The comparison has not only been made by *The Economist* – in the wake of the London bombings in July 2005, Philip Stephens, writing in the *Financial Times*, argues that jihadist terrorism ‘is built around the propaganda of the deed, the strategy of the 19th-century anarchists’. See Philip Stephens, ‘Neither Force Nor Politics Alone Can Conquer Terrorism’, *Financial Times*, 8 July 2005, p. 19.

⁴ ‘Lessons from Anarchy’, *Economist*, 20 August 2005, p. 20 (p. 20).

writing in *The Guardian*, has referred to the targets of Western military attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq as ‘Islam-anarchists’.⁵ More problematic, though, was the (subsequently discredited) suggestion from the Australian High Commissioner in London, Richard Alston, that the London bombings of July 2005 were the work of a ‘group of anti-globalisation protesters or anarchists who seem to take great delight in disrupting meetings of international leaders’.⁶

The common feature of these texts, even from this cursory glance, is that they derive an unproblematic and univocal significance from the conflation of anarchism and violence. *The Economist* suggests that this orientation towards violence is first perceptible in the nineteenth-century anarchist Michael Bakunin. The figure of Bakunin looms large over anarchism to this day, with his legacy being felt across the spectrum of radical social movements. For example, Sam Dolgoff, editor of one of the standard collections of Bakunin’s writings, cites some 1920s research on the Industrial Workers of the World trade union (IWW). In 1910 the union’s journal, *Industrial Worker*, had this to say:

We must trace the origins of the ideas of modern revolutionary unionism to the International [Workingmen’s Association]... Many ideas originally drafted for the International by the famous anarchist Michael Bakunin in 1868 were similar to the twentieth-century slogans of the IWW.⁷

And from the earliest origins of syndicalism to the most controversial present-day tactics of direct action, some have suggested that Bakunin has been the intellectual inspiration for the ‘Black Bloc,’ the section of typically black-clad and masked individuals on current anti-capitalist demonstrations that unapologetically sets out with the intention of causing property destruction to targets seen as emblematic of

⁵ Tariq Ali, ‘The Price Of Occupation’, *Guardian*, 8 July 2005, available online at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/attackonlondon/comment/story/0,,1524359,00.html>>.

⁶ ‘Alston Points Finger At “Anarchists”’, *Financial Review*, 8 July 2005, available online at <<http://afr.com/articles/2005/07/08/1120704524463.html>>. This story prompted a statement to be issued in the name of a number of British and Irish anarchist groups which argued that ‘terrorist actions are completely at odds with any struggle for a freer, fairer society’. See ‘British and Irish Anarchist Statement on Bombing’, available online at <http://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=885>.

⁷ Paul Brissenden, as cited by Dolgoff, p. 156.

contemporary capitalism.⁸ The *Black Bloc Tactics Communiqué* of 2001, issued in the wake of the criticism of the perceived violence of some of the actions that took place during protests against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) summit in Seattle, 1999, argues that ‘the Anarchist movement, as stated by Bakunin, is driven by “the instinct to rebel”’.⁹ These actions perhaps guarantee (as the *Economist* article would seem to attest) that today Bakunin is most remembered for his celebrated aphorism that ‘the passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!’ (Dolgoft, p. 57). Yet not all of those who still feel the influence of Bakunin would think of it as being a positive influence: at a Communist Party of Great Britain conference in Cardiff to debate ‘Marxism vs. Anarchism: Which Path to Liberation?’ Bakunin was variously described as a terrorist, a hypocrite, and an authoritarian, while Louis Proyect, the moderator of the ‘Marxmail’ website, describes Bakunin’s work as ‘vulgar opinionating worthless to anybody trying to make sense of European society of the mid 19th century, let alone the world we live in today’.¹⁰ Bakunin, it would seem, is a hard figure to leave to the annals of history. I want neither to appropriate Bakunin as a simple justification for trashing a McDonalds, nor to castigate him as the historical scapegoat for the rupture of the socialist movement. The question, therefore, is this: how should I begin to approach Bakunin, and what should be the guidelines for an examination of his life and texts?

Saul Newman argues that the current wave of global protest (sometimes known as the anti-globalisation movement, but perhaps better labelled the global justice movement) that can arguably be dated from the Zapatista uprising in the Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994, and which stormed onto the front pages of the world’s press during

⁸ For an example of the rather polemical debate surrounding the actions of the ‘Black Bloc’, see *On Fire: The Battle of Genoa and the Anti-Capitalist Movement* ([n.p.]: One Off Press, 2001). Despite the polemic, one anarchist commentator sees the Black Bloc as representing a ‘relatively trivial threat’. See Andrew Flood, ‘Bakunin’s Idea of Revolution & Revolutionary Organisation’, available online at <<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/rbr/rbr6/bakunin.html>>.

⁹ ‘Black Bloc Tactics Communiqué’, available online at <<http://www.sheffieldmayday.ukf.net/articles/blackbloc.htm>>.

¹⁰ *Marxism vs. Anarchism: Which Path to Liberation?*, Communist Party of Great Britain conference held in Cardiff, 16 June 2003. Louis Proyect, *Bakunin: A Marxist Critique*, available online at <http://www.columbia.edu/~lhp3/mydocs/state_and_revolution/Bakunin.htm>.

the protests against the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999, is essentially 'anarchist'. Newman recognises the heterogeneity of the individual agendas and manifestos of particular groups, be they statist, reformist, revolutionary or non-existent. Despite that, for him the nature of the movement, a network established by the linking of disparate groups that share no common ground but perceive themselves to share a common enemy, is *de facto* anarchistic. This is based, Newman argues, on a 'refusal of centralist and hierarchical politics' and an 'openness to a plurality of different identities and struggles'.¹¹ This is neatly summed up in one of the slogans to emerge from this protest movement: 'one no, many yeses'.

Taking this global justice movement as a model, then, for a reading practice, I will look at the work of Michael Bakunin with the explicit aim of not imposing a unified significance on his text, nor to refute other competing interpretations of his work. Aileen Kelly argues that there are two faces to Bakunin, that of 'the rebellion of the individual against all repressive authorities' as well as 'that of a scheming megalomaniac'. These conflicting aspects lead her to insist that 'all studies of Bakunin are faced with the *necessity* of explaining or resolving the contradictions between them'.¹² Nevertheless Kelly fails to demonstrate the 'necessity' that she describes. This chapter will contest that necessity, and hence will explore rather than explain the contradictions in Bakunin's work, to weaken the premises of critiques that would establish themselves as univocal readings of Bakunin. In my analysis I will demonstrate how traditional biographies and critical accounts have often fallen into an embarrassed silence when confronted with the awkward multivalency of Bakunin's text, or have opted to ignore the aspects of his work that do not square with the identity that they look to impose.

¹¹ Saul Newman, 'The Politics of Postanarchism', available online at <<http://www.anarchist-studies.org/article/articleprint/1/-/1/1/>>.

¹² Aileen Kelly, 'The Fatal Charm of the Millennium', *New York Review of Books*, 22 January 1976, pp. 43-46 (p. 43, my emphasis).

In order to do this, I will interrogate the value of adopting a biographical approach to Bakunin when attempting to assess the import of his politics. His significance seems crucially to hang on the question of unity, or coherence, available in his work (including the 'work' of his life). This chapter will argue that the implications of this sought-after unity are not negligible for the anarchist critic, especially considered in the light of Foucault's comments concerning the role of an author. This is inspired both by a desire to map this problem from a post-structuralist position and, moreover, by the shortcomings that can be found in the existing biographies. Having done that, I will then address the question of what Bakunin's politics were. In order to do so I will consider both the written texts that have been left to posterity by the 'author' Bakunin, as well as accounts of Bakunin's actions during his life. In engaging with the events of Bakunin's life, however, a primary concern will be to avoid the problems of an uncritical biographical approach as highlighted in the first part of this chapter below. For this reason, I have chosen to examine Bakunin thematically and place the themes of his work in the surrounding context of the relevant period of his life. This has led to Bakunin's life being examined as background to the texts considered, and as such this approach has consciously eschewed the linear chronology typically found in biographies. While it might appear somewhat unusual at first, this approach attempts to take on board some of the criticisms raised in the opening part of the chapter, and so, for example, if the first question is 'who is Bakunin?', the reader will find the discussion going straight for one of Bakunin's texts written in the last years of his life. Hence my 'biography' attempts to provoke by beginning at the end. In conclusion the chapter ends with a consideration of what can profitably be derived from Bakunin's life-text for the benefit of an anarchist approach to reading and literature.

The unreality of Bakunin's 'flesh and blood'

Does telling the story of a revolutionary require revolutionary storytelling? The answer would appear to be negative, for even a glance at the scholarship on Bakunin reveals an unquestioning approach to the challenge of how to tell 'his' story. Consequently I shall begin by looking at the relationship between the critical text, be it commentary or biography, and its putative subject.

There is a feature that is common to a good portion of these works, and that is that the biographical accounts appear to demonstrate an obligation to comment on Bakunin's physical stature and personality. George Woodcock, in his history of anarchism, writes that:

Of all the anarchists, Michael Bakunin most consistently lived and looked the part. [He] was monumentally eccentric, a rebel who in almost every act seemed to express the most forceful aspects of anarchy. [...] Physically, he was gigantic, and the massive unkemptness of his appearance would impress an audience even before he began to win its sympathies with his persuasive oratory.¹³

Of his contemporaries, the composer Richard Wagner became friendly with Bakunin during the latter's stay in Dresden in 1849. Wagner later wrote in his autobiography that, upon meeting Bakunin, he was 'immediately struck by his singular and altogether imposing personality. He was in the full bloom of manhood [...]. Everything about him was colossal, and he was full of a primitive exuberance and strength'.¹⁴ Bakunin's life-long friend and fellow Russian exile, Alexander Herzen described him thus:

His activity, his laziness, his appetite, his titanic stature and the everlasting perspiration he was in, everything about him, in fact, was on a superhuman scale. He remained as of old a blue-eyed giant with a leonine head and a tousled mane.¹⁵

¹³ Woodcock, *Anarchism*, p. 134.

¹⁴ Richard Wagner, as cited by Marshall Shatz in his 'Introduction', in Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, ed. and trans. by Marshall Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. ix-xxxvii (p. xix).

¹⁵ Alexander Herzen, as cited by Brian Morris in *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1993), p. 1. All further references in this chapter will be given in the text.

More recently, Paul Avrich in his introduction to Bakunin's *God and the State* writes of 'his broad magnanimity and childlike enthusiasm, his burning passion for liberty and equality,' while Brian Morris, in his account of Bakunin's life and work, begins his description of him as 'a giant, full of energy, who exercised a volcanic force, and often fascinated all those with whom he came into contact'.¹⁶

Clearly the 'reality' of the man exerts such gravitational pull that it leaves writers in a somewhat awe-struck orbit. Yet as Derrida has observed (in relation to Rousseau), 'in what one calls the real life of these existences "of flesh and bone," beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing'.¹⁷ This presents a problem to the post-structuralist critic, for how, if at all, can one approach the 'reality', the 'flesh and bone' of a person from within language, regardless of the fact that that person may have died more than a century ago? Or to phrase the challenge in the terms that Foucault employs, how to write about Bakunin (the author) without endowing the proper name 'Bakunin' with the 'author-function', or ownership of the discourse, as identified in 'What is an Author?' and without presuming to go beyond the realm of the textual towards the actual Bakunin *per se*.¹⁸ This, as Geoffrey Bennington argues, would be premised on the automatic assumption that 'the proper name ought to insure a certain passage between language and world, in that it ought to indicate a concrete individual, without ambiguity, without having to pass through the circuits of meaning'. Bennington concludes that the proper name must function 'in a system of differences [...]. We are already in writing with proper names'.¹⁹

¹⁶ Paul Avrich, 'Introduction to the Dover Edition', in Michael Bakunin, *God and the State* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), pp. v-xii (p. vi). Morris, p. 1.

¹⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 159.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', trans. by Josué V. Harari, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 197-210 (p. 202).

¹⁹ Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 104-105.

In the opening pages of his biography, *Bakunin: The Father of Anarchism*, Anthony Masters offers an example that would precisely demonstrate the dangers inherent in this presumption of biographical proximity to the ‘real’ subject. Masters begins his text with the prologue ‘The Homecoming’ by relating a twenty-four hour period that Bakunin was permitted to spend at his family home in Premukhino. These twenty-four hours were all Bakunin had with his parents and siblings before embarking on his journey to exile in Siberia in 1857, after more than eight years in various prisons, principally in Russia. Masters, though, dramatises the encounter between the sickly Bakunin and his family, and the text adopts a narrative voice marked by a sense of its own omniscience: Bakunin arrives with ‘his feelings numbed and insubstantial’; the text tells the reader what Bakunin felt, thought and even smelt – ‘the heavy scent of cherry blossom at night’. Only for a second does the narrative falter in its own sense of conviction, when it recounts that ‘as Michael greeted them and walked into the Spartan hallway he *might* have remembered the yearning homesickness [of] fifteen years ago’.²⁰ Yet the text recovers its tone and proceeds, noting how he ‘looked upon [his family] with lethargy and indifference. [...] his apathy covered him like a shroud [...]’.²¹ Masters’s text clearly goes beyond a mere reconstruction of the moment based on piecing together the textual inheritance of diaries and letters. Spivak’s concerns about the status of the preface, contained in her own preface to *Of Grammatology*, cast an interesting light on Masters. She argues that it ‘is clear that, as it is commonly understood, the preface harbours a lie’. She continues that the preface is seen ‘not as a literary, but as an expository exercise. It “involves a norm of truth,” although it might well be the insertion of an obvious fiction into an ostensibly “true” discourse’.²² If one accepts Spivak’s truth/fiction dichotomy, then the ‘norm of truth’ to which she refers

²⁰ Anthony Masters, *Bakunin: The Father of Anarchism* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1974), pp. xxi-xxii (my emphasis).

²¹ Masters, *Bakunin*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

²² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Translator’s Preface’, in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. ix-lxxxvii (p. x).

becomes troubling in the case of Masters's preface. These opening pages construct a fictitious proximity to the subject of the biography that would seduce the reader into accepting the 'truth' of the subject so presented. The challenge, then, that this example illustrates, when examining the 'life' (as opposed to the legacy of written texts) of a historical figure, is to achieve this without resorting to an unproblematic invocation of what the 'reality' of a past moment in history might have been. With this in mind, I will attempt to consider the *accounts* of Bakunin's life, rather than discuss the *events* of the period 1814-1876, the span of Bakunin's existence. To engage in the latter would be already to make a claim about the accessibility of a reality, whether past, present or future, to language – a claim that is precisely what this chapter aims to render suspect.

Bakunin, it could be argued, had already pre-empted his later biographers by demonstrating a clear sensitivity to my concerns as outlined above. *God and the State* was published in 1882, six years after Bakunin died, when the manuscript, as Paul Avrich writes in the introduction to the text, 'was discovered among his papers by two well-known anarchists, Carlo Cafiero and Elisée Reclus'.²³ Unbeknown to them at that time, the text was originally part of the longer and unfinished work *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution*. This text was to become the best known of Bakunin's works and in it he takes issue with the authority of science over human affairs. The basis of his argument is that science, and human thought in general, can only deal in what he calls 'abstractions', and therefore is already cut off from the reality of what it is addressing. 'The general idea,' contends Bakunin, 'is always an abstraction and, for that very reason, in some sort a negation of real life.'²⁴ He continues that:

history is made, not by abstract individuals, but by acting, living and passing individuals. Abstractions advance only when borne forward by real men. For these beings made, not in idea only, but in reality of flesh and blood, science has no heart [...]. (p. 58)

²³ Avrich, 'Introduction to the Dover Edition', p. viii.

²⁴ Michael Bakunin, *God and the State* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), p. 54. All further references in this chapter will be given in the text.

Having established the gulf between external reality and human thought, he clarifies this in relation to the question of language. He argues that ‘individuals cannot be grasped by thought, by reflection, or even by human speech, which is capable of expressing abstractions only; they cannot be grasped in the present day any more than in the past’ (p. 61). Since science, and by extrapolation, language and thought, are incapable of addressing the radical heterogeneity of reality, Bakunin argues that:

it would be disastrous to entrust it with a mission which it is incapable of fulfilling. Since its own nature forces it to ignore the existence of Peter and James, it must never be permitted, nor must anybody be permitted in its name, to govern Peter and James. (p. 58)

This salient warning invites the reader to maintain a constant vigilance over the pretensions of language to ground its descriptions in the unquestioned authority of a denotative relationship to reality. Moreover, Bakunin’s particular mention of this applying not only to the present but also to the past should surely have served as a warning to his biographers. There can, consequently, be no ‘real’ Michael Bakunin to be the subject of any biographical account, but rather an ‘abstraction’ of Bakunin, a textual inheritance of accounts of a person who might once have lived but about whom no authoritative, no definitive, no irrefutable statement can be made. Masters and the others may want to produce what Bakunin called the ‘reality of flesh and blood’, but in elucidating the distinction between reality and representation, Bakunin offered a lesson that apparently has not yet been learnt by subsequent scholars.

Indeed this theoretical position is sustained by a closer examination of the language of some of the texts that I cited earlier. To begin with the earliest of the three that I wish to compare, in 1970 Paul Avrich described Bakunin’s ‘broad magnanimity and childlike enthusiasm, his burning passion for liberty and equality, his volcanic onslaughts against privilege and injustice – all this gave him enormous human appeal in

the libertarian circles of his day'.²⁵ Then in 1993 Brian Morris wrote that Bakunin was 'a giant, full of energy, who exercised a volcanic force, and fascinated all those with whom he came into contact' (p. 1). More or less simultaneously, Peter Marshall was writing that Bakunin's 'magnanimity and enthusiasm coupled with his passionate denunciation of privilege and injustice made him extremely attractive to anti-authoritarians'.²⁶ So while Morris borrows the trope of the volcano from Avrigh, and rephrases Avrigh's 'enormous human appeal' as 'fascination', Marshall appears not to have troubled himself to rework the language of the earlier text. He directly employs the same nouns (magnanimity, enthusiasm, privilege and injustice) as are found in Avrigh's introduction, and modifies 'passion' to 'passionate', while 'appeal' and 'libertarian' become 'attractive' and 'anti-authoritarian'. This, of course, might tend to suggest that an entire edifice of authorial rights, copyrights, legal protections and just compensations should be imposed all over again to prevent such inter-textual laxity, but nothing could be further from my purpose. The examples are cited to demonstrate the impossibility, as argued above, of escaping the paper chain and producing the 'real' biographical subject. To paraphrase Bakunin, one must not permit the biographer to attempt to govern the reality of Bakunin himself.

Freeing Bakunin

Now that the problems of engaging with the 'reality' of a historical subject have been delineated, the question returns (within the paradigmatic scepticism outlined above) to what 'Bakunin' can be said to mean. How does one begin to shape an identity for text or for its author? On an anecdotal level, one could probably write that Michael Bakunin was born in 1814 into a comfortable Russian family of the minor aristocracy. One could probably also go on to mention that James Guillaume, who Dolgoff describes as

²⁵ Avrigh, 'Introduction to the Dover Edition', p. vi.

²⁶ Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 263.

'Bakunin's friend and comrade-in-arms' wrote a 'Biographical Sketch' of Bakunin that, according to Dolgoff, 'is a primary source not only on the life of Bakunin, but also on the most significant events in the socialist movement of that period' (p. 22). Hence one could cite Guillaume's recollection that Bakunin's father had been 'a career diplomat', who married at forty and had a family of ten children on his large estate at Premukhino.²⁷ One could also observe that Morris suggests that the family 'had liberal tendencies' (p. 5) and his early life seems to have been comfortable and enjoyable. He was sent to military academy at the age of fifteen, but had left the army by 1836, stultified by the lack of intellectual stimuli. Bakunin moved to Moscow and for six years lived there, studying the philosophy of Fichte and Hegel. One could doubtless write all of the above without, I imagine, stirring up much controversy.

These bald details point in two different directions in terms of embarking on a journey of exploration of the significance of 'Bakunin'. Firstly, and most obviously, they clearly offer the seductive prospect of a straightforward and uncomplicated narration of the 'facts' of the life of a subject known as Michael Bakunin. Nevertheless, hidden within that tempting proposition is the unarticulated assumption that these facts can be considered as something akin to immutable relay batons, being passed from each narrator, hand to hand, without so much as the trace of a fingerprint being left visible on their surface. Secondly, and more challengingly, the brief introduction above is already cloaked in paper, such as recalls Proudhon's 'papyraceous formation' from the previous chapter, and makes no attempt to escape it – a birth certificate to convalidate the arrival of a son, an account by a friend to paint the picture of a family background, a biographer's story of a frustrated soldier to illustrate the early years. The short paragraph written above has straightaway plunged the reader into a world of second-

²⁷ James Guillaume, 'Michael Bakunin: A Biographical Sketch', in Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchism*, pp. 22-52 (p. 23). Marshall adds that the family's estate had five hundred serfs. Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 266.

hand accounts where the brute fact seems to have always already been referred to, and is never simply evident.

So the question seems no closer to finding an easy answer. Indeed Bakunin himself asked much the same question in his late text 'The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State'. Bakunin begins the text by rhetorically questioning himself over his own identity: 'who am I?' he asks. This approach seems to echo the imagined conversation in *What is Property?* that led to Proudhon's declaration of being an anarchist.²⁸ Bakunin offers the answer that he is 'a fanatical lover of liberty' (Dolgoft, p. 261) and freedom is one of the key concepts that remained constant in his thought throughout his life. What stood in the way of the realisation of freedom, for Bakunin, was primarily the state, which as a result became the major target of his anarchist critique. Nevertheless Engels asserted that this meant a lack of focus on the problem of capitalism. Engels argued that for Bakunin it was:

the *state* which has created capital, that the capitalist has his capital *only by the grace of the state*. As, therefore, the state is the chief evil, it is above all the state which must be done away with, and then capitalism will go to blazes of itself.²⁹

This, however, is not an accurate portrayal of Bakunin's thought, and certainly it was precisely the question of the *social*, taken to include the economic inter-relationships in society, over and above the question of the strictly *political*, in the sense of governmental power, that drove Bakunin to his anarchism. It is not, as Engels would have it, that Bakunin neglected the economic question in favour of an exclusive focus on the state. Bakunin stated that 'we also recognise the inevitable linking of economic and political facts in history'.³⁰ Indeed, his notion of 'social liquidation' ('the phrase,'

²⁸ See chapter three above.

²⁹ Letter from Engels to Theodor Cuno, 24 January 1872. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. by Lewis S. Feuer (New York: Fontana, 1969), p. 481.

³⁰ Michael Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, trans. and ed. by K. J. Kenafick (London: Freedom Press, 1998), p. 21.

he said, ‘that makes the bourgeoisie tremble’ (Dolgoff, p. 172)) went beyond the mere political. In *God and the State* he argued that:

the abolition of the organised political exploitation of the majority by any minority whatsoever [would be equivalent to] the direct and complete satisfaction of the needs and aspirations of the people, which would be equivalent to the complete liquidation of the political and economic existence of the bourgeois class, or again, to the abolition of the State. (p. 84)

It is clear that while Bakunin believed that economic freedom was inextricable from the abolition of the state, he did not privilege the latter at the expense of the former. Indeed he linked the two together in another of his celebrated aphorisms, from the text of ‘Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism’, when he concluded that ‘liberty without socialism is privilege, injustice; and that socialism without liberty is slavery and brutality’ (Dolgoff, p. 127).

Freedom, therefore, was a core value for Bakunin and it would be secured because there was, for him, ‘in men an inborn irresistible urge – the source of all freedom – to rebel against any arbitrary measure, even if imposed in the name of liberty’ (Dolgoff, p. 194). Indeed Bakunin suggests in *God and the State* that the two ‘faculties’ that Adam and Eve were endowed with were ‘*the power to think and the desire to rebel*’ (p. 9). This notion, of an innate urge to revolt, also found expression in his enthusiasm, shared with Proudhon, for Satan as a role model. In *God and the State*, he describes Satan as:

the eternal rebel, the first freethinker, and the emancipator of worlds. He makes man ashamed of his bestial ignorance and obedience; he emancipates him, stamps upon his brow the seal of liberty and humanity, in urging him to disobey and eat of the fruit of knowledge. (p. 10)

A query could immediately be raised against the logic of this sentence, for surely in ‘urging [man] to disobey,’ Satan could be construed to be issuing an instruction, which is then dutifully followed – obeying the injunction to disobey. The inversion of the logic of command does not reduce the binding force of its logic.

This freedom, for Bakunin, would be conditional on the structure of the society surrounding the individual. Hence a starting premise is one that was offered as a critique of Rousseau's theory of the state, in that for Bakunin 'liberty is indivisible; one cannot curtail a part of it without killing all of it' (Dolgoff, p. 129). This principle is then extended to the fullest extent across society, so that one subsequently finds the statement that 'I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free. The freedom of other men, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation' (Dolgoff, p. 237). Bakunin, here, is clearly trying to resolve the perennial opposition between the individual and the social that haunts all political discourse. In a sense he resolves it by integrating the two terms, and synthesizing a version of freedom that is equally dependent on both sides of the opposition.

This focus, though, on the individual, led Bakunin to one of the tenets of his thought that most radically differed from Marx's ideology. Bakunin saw the urban proletariat as already having some degree of investment in the capitalist system, and so their dependence on it would not necessarily make them the first in line to bring about its downfall. On the other hand, the elements of society considered marginal in Marx's theory come centre stage for Bakunin, for example the rural peasantry and urban *Lumpenproletariat*. Having least to lose from the abolition of capitalism, these groups would not be the 'benighted and primitive barbarians, the bulwark of counterrevolution' as was commonly thought at the time, but rather the most likely sources for capitalism's overthrow.³¹ Bakunin conceded that they were not 'by nature evil,' but rather that they were 'ignorant' (Dolgoff, p. 189). This presented Bakunin with the challenge of how to radicalise these same people, and he was, as Avrigh notes, very much 'a revolutionist of the deed'.³² Thus in his 'Letters to a Frenchman' Bakunin writes of the need to 'talk to

³¹ Paul Avrigh, 'The Legacy of Bakunin', *Russian Review*, 29 (1970), 129-142 (p. 131).

³² Avrigh, 'The Legacy of Bakunin', p. 130.

the peasants in simple language suitable to their sentiments, their level of understanding' (Dolgoff, p. 189). This leads to the suggestion that words themselves will prove insufficient for the cause:

Let us *talk less* about revolution and *do* a great deal *more*. Let others concern themselves with the theoretical development of the principles of the Social Revolution, while we content ourselves with spreading these principles everywhere, *incarnating them into facts*. (Dolgoff, p. 195)

Bakunin inaugurates a discourse of action, rather than words, but one that will have no less signifying power. Citing the preamble to the International's statutes, he argues that 'the emancipation of the workers is the task of the workers themselves', but that 'the workers know little about theory and are unable to grasp the implications of this principle. The only way for the workers to learn theory is through practice: *emancipation through practical action*' (Dolgoff, p. 167).³³

One comes, then, to a challenging juncture in the thought of Bakunin in terms of addressing his text as theory. As his texts proclaim the equivalence of action and word, as discussed earlier, how then should those actions be integrated into a textual analysis of Bakunin's work? And given that it has already been recognised that there is a lack of an overarching system to Bakunin's thought, what value can be placed on the commensurability – or lack of it – between these actions and the words?

Firstly, the same precautions would apply to a consideration of the 'actions' of Bakunin as were applied to the consideration of his life, that is to say that to attempt to discuss the actions as such would necessarily seek to ground the discussion on an *a priori* truth of what those actions were. In a sense, therefore, the actions themselves are always already lost, even at their moment of happening, for even as they take place, they acquire their significance from a system of differences, without, as Saussure said,

³³ For the full text of the International's rules, see 'Rules and Administrative Regulations of the International Workingmen's Association (1867)', available online at <<http://mia.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1867/rules.htm>>.

there being any ‘positive terms’.³⁴ Again it is worth repeating the caveat that this does not mean that one writes off the facticity of actual events, be they trees falling in the woods or bombs on tube trains, but rather that the moment they – the unnameable actual events – enter language, they are governed by the play of differences, which for Derrida is ‘the possibility of conceptuality’.³⁵

With this in mind it is clear to see that even from the outset, the ‘reality’ of any of Bakunin’s actions was not really the issue at stake even during his own lifetime, for the actions themselves, whether real or imagined, alleged or committed, came to exert more influence by the manner in which they were presented than by their actual repercussions. To start with, one could look at the ‘supposed’ actions of one of the several Bakunins that begin to emerge from the textual inheritance surrounding this life, that is to say the actions of Bakunin the Russian agent. According to Masters, these rumours were started by the Russian ambassador Count Kiselev, who suggested that Bakunin was a Russian agent who had been ‘planted among the émigrés and refugees in order to betray them’.³⁶ They found fertile soil amongst the Polish émigré population in France who had difficulty accepting the assistance of a Russian aristocrat with no discernible source of income. In 1848 Marx’s newspaper, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, published the allegations (which had until then only been spread by word of mouth) that George Sand had documents showing Bakunin to be an agent, although upon Bakunin’s protestations, the paper subsequently published Sand’s own denial of this. Carr suggests that Marx ‘must be acquitted’ of any suggestion of malice in this.³⁷ Masters argues that although Marx was less than ‘scrupulous’ in publishing unsubstantiated rumours, ‘it is unlikely that direct malice was the reason behind the publication’.³⁸ Guillaume, though, provides a more acerbic opinion. After quoting Sand’s own letter that the allegations

³⁴ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 118.

³⁵ Derrida, ‘Difference’, p. 140.

³⁶ Masters, *Bakunin*, p. 84.

³⁷ E. H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 163.

³⁸ Masters, *Bakunin*, p. 99.



were 'entirely false', Guillaume cites Marx's comment that he had 'fulfilled the obligation of the press [and] given M. Bakunin the opportunity to dispel suspicions which have been current in certain Paris circles'. Guillaume's observation on this was that 'it is useless to elaborate on the singular theory that it is the duty of the press to publish false and libelous [*sic*] accusations without attempting to verify the facts!'.³⁹

Yet these rumours dogged Bakunin's steps all his life, and Guillaume records how even just days after his death, a Zurich paper, the *Tagwacht* printed the comment that Bakunin 'was regarded by many fair-minded men and good socialists as a Russian agent. This suspicion, doubtless erroneous, was aroused by the fact that Bakunin greatly harmed the revolutionary movement; it was the reaction which benefited most from his activity'.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the original premise of the rumour, the suggestion that Bakunin was in the pay of the Russian government, has now been lost from sight. The paper somewhat disingenuously reports *the opinion* of unnamed individuals, which, however well founded or justifiable it may or may not have been, remained *in fact* their opinion. It then qualified this with the epithet of 'suspicion', before returning to the 'fact' of Bakunin having harmed the revolutionary movement. This, also, is somewhat contentious, for if Bakunin indeed spent much of his life hurrying from insurrection to insurrection, it is clearly an ideological judgement to come to the conclusion that he 'harmed' the revolutionary movement, and therefore not a 'fact' as such. On balance, then, the two short sentences balance two (supposed) facts against one suspicion, and Bakunin (posthumously) comes off the worse for it.

Yet while the actions of 'Bakunin the Russian agent' might be considered to be imagined actions, there are other actions whose accounts seem to have a firmer rooting in the records of Bakunin's life. One element from this life that has proved more difficult for commentators to reconcile with Bakunin's politics is the constant

³⁹ Guillaume, 'Michael Bakunin: A Biographical Sketch', p. 28.

⁴⁰ Guillaume, 'Michael Bakunin: A Biographical Sketch', p. 52.

enthusiasm for secret societies, something that was to be the ostensible motive for his expulsion from the International. Yet Dolgoff warns against viewing this obsession with secrecy out of context. He notes that ‘when dissent is outlawed, revolutionaries are forced to organize secret societies. Bakunin was not alone; everybody conspired – the Poles, the Italians, the Russians, the Blanquists, and the nascent unions camouflaged as “social clubs”’ (Dolgoff, p. 74).

The first evidence of this enthusiasm comes in Bakunin’s *Confession*, perhaps one of his most anomalous texts. After having been arrested in Germany in 1849, Bakunin passed the following year in prison there and was condemned to death only to have the sentence commuted to life imprisonment. He was subsequently extradited to Austria and underwent the same process – condemned to death, and then extradited once more. This time he was sent to Russia, eventually arriving in the fortress of Peter and Paul in St. Petersburg in 1851. Bakunin was to spend the next six years in prison, and it was there that he composed the *Confession*, a text written to the Tsar in the apparent hope of securing release.⁴¹

This text has proved something of a challenge to commentators on Bakunin’s life and work. On the one hand, at first glance the idea of a ‘confession’ does not fit well with the image of a life-long revolutionary. Hence it has provided material for critics of Bakunin, such as Proyect, who describes the text as a ‘self-debasing document [which] was not wrested out of torture, but was a ploy to win early release through flattery’.⁴² If it was a ploy, then it certainly failed as such, for Bakunin languished in Russian prisons for years, at great cost to his health. On the other hand, if it was a genuine confession, then it would also seem to have failed, for the Tsar himself, in notes added to the margins of the original manuscript, wrote that by refusing to divulge the names of his

⁴¹ Janko Lavrin writes that ‘abject servility, calculating flattery, even “piety,” unexpected frankness, as well as arrogantly self-assertive criticism of the police-ridden Russian regime – all this is mixed up in that unique deposition’. See Janko Lavrin, ‘Bakunin the Slav and the Rebel’, *Russian Review*, 25 (1966), pp. 135-149 (p. 143).

⁴² Proyect, *Bakunin: A Marxist Critique*.

fellow-travellers, Bakunin ‘destroys all confidence: if he feels all the weight of his sins, then only a PURE, complete confession, and not a CONDITIONAL one, can be considered a confession’.⁴³

In his *Confession* Bakunin describes to the Tsar the sort of revolutionary society that he wanted to see organised in Bohemia for the liberation of the Slavs. The content of this text borders on the incredible when contrasted with the central tenets of the rest of Bakunin’s work, and so makes the task of establishing a place for it in the context of his life all the more difficult. Bakunin writes that:

The society was to consist of three separate societies, independent of one another and unknown to one another. [...] Each was to be subordinate to a strict hierarchy and to unconditional discipline [...]. These societies were to be limited to a small number of people, including – as far as possible – all the talented, learned, energetic, and influential people, who, obeying central directions, would in their turn act invisibly, as it were, on the crowd.⁴⁴

Bakunin continued that the society’s three sections would be linked to a central committee, which would have five members – himself, a Czech revolutionary by the name of Emanuel Arnold, and three others who ‘would have to be chosen’.⁴⁵ He also expresses the hope that this model would be copied by the Bohemian Germans, and thus without participating in the central committee, he would become:

its secret leader so that, if my project had been realized, all the main threads of the movement would have been concentrated in my hands and I could have been assured that the contemplated revolution in Bohemia did not stray from the course I had prescribed for it.⁴⁶

As astonishing as this text is, it is easy to demonstrate where it is in clear contradiction with other parts of Bakunin’s work. For example, in the much later work,

⁴³ Michael Bakunin, *The ‘Confession’ of Mikhail Bakunin: With the Marginal Comments of Tsar Nicholas I*, trans. by Robert C. Howes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 33. Dolgoff also offers an unreferenced citation of the Tsar’s son, Alexander, saying that he didn’t ‘see the least sign of repentance’ (p. 32).

⁴⁴ Bakunin, *Confession*, pp. 118-119.

⁴⁵ Bakunin, *Confession*, p. 119.

⁴⁶ Bakunin, *Confession*, p. 119.

Statism and Anarchy, Bakunin offers the following, more typical, definition of his vision:

anarchy, meaning the free and independent organization of all the units and parts of the community and their voluntary federation from below upward, not by the orders of any authority, even an elected one, and not by the dictates of any scientific theory, but as a result of the natural development of all the varied demands put forth by life itself.⁴⁷

Yet the accusation of anarchism being based on invisible control by a manipulative elite is one that has consistently been thrown at the movement – even the cultural critic Slavoj Žižek has recently repeated this cliché in an interview with the magazine *Bad Subjects*, when he stated that for him, ‘the tragedy of anarchism is that you end up having an authoritarian secret society trying to achieve anarchist goals.’⁴⁸

The notion of the secretive conspirators is one that is found in Bakunin’s work, without necessarily being the defining characteristic of it. Is it, though, a ‘tragedy’ as Žižek asserts? In Žižek’s phrase, anarchism’s tragedy is that ‘you end up having an authoritarian secret society’. This suggests that there is no other option open to anarchism, and indeed in the same interview Žižek casually reiterates a simplistic endorsement of the Marxist-anarchist binary that is not an accurate representation of the complexities of influence that Marx had over both Bakunin and the anarchist movement: ‘Marx was right when he drew attention to how anarchists who preach “no state no power” in order to realize their goals usually form their own society which obeys the most authoritarian rules.’⁴⁹ What happens if one turns to Bakunin’s work to look for an answer to these allegations?

Bakunin secured his eventual freedom after the Tsar offered him the choice of remaining in prison or accepting permanent exile in Siberia in 1857. After being transferred to Siberia, Bakunin married, and he and his wife, Antonia Kwiatkowski,

⁴⁷ Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, trans. and ed. by Marshall S. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 198.

⁴⁸ Doug Henwood, ‘I am a Fighting Atheist: Interview with Slavoj Žižek’, *Bad Subjects*, 59 (2002), available online at <<http://eserver.org/bs/59/zizek.html>>.

⁴⁹ Henwood, ‘I am a Fighting Atheist’.

then moved to Irkutsk, where Bakunin was able to plan a spectacular escape that included a marathon round-the-world voyage and has been described as ‘highly complicated and [showing] great initiative’.⁵⁰ Leaving his wife behind in Siberia, he made his way to Japan, and from there to the United States, arriving in San Francisco in October 1861. He then continued to New York (via Panama) and finally departed for the United Kingdom in December of that year. He headed straight to London to be reunited with his friend Herzen and to launch himself back into the work of revolution.

While the Polish insurrection of 1863 gave Bakunin the opportunity to return to the sharp end of revolutionary activity, its failure, according to Morris, left him ‘highly disillusioned with the cause of the revolutionary nationalism’ (p. 27). Bakunin moved to Italy, although *en route* he passed through London, meeting Marx again. There appears to be some dispute as to whether Marx actually invited Bakunin to join the newly constituted International Working Men’s Association, although Carr argues convincingly that Marx’s later account of the inauguration of Bakunin into the International ‘is open to grave suspicion, being manifestly designed to magnify the turpitude of Bakunin’s subsequent attack on the International by emphasising his obligations to it’.⁵¹ In any case Bakunin had come away from the Polish experience with a resolution to ‘confine himself to participation in the Socialist Movement’ (Marx, as cited by Masters, pp. 163-164) and he seemed enthused with the idea of the International – although his support immediately took the form of organising secret societies that seemed often to have had more substance in his imagination than in the world around him.⁵²

One such venture, the International Brotherhood, was set up in Florence in 1864. Yet this enterprise seems in retrospect to have been rather a fantastical affair: Bakunin

⁵⁰ Masters, *Bakunin*, p. 131.

⁵¹ Carr, *Michael Bakunin*, p. 307.

⁵² For specific incidents of Bakunin’s secret societies and clandestine missions, see, for example, Masters, *Bakunin*, p. 142; and Carr, *Michael Bakunin*, p. 309 and p. 317.

wildly inflated his accounts of its international support and membership in letters to Herzen, and Carr suggests that he ‘made up for its shortcomings by magnificent make-believe’.⁵³ This period produced some of the most illuminating documents of Bakunin’s thoughts on how to organise for the coming revolution. Specifically these were ‘Program of the International Brotherhood,’ ‘Revolutionary Catechism,’ and ‘National Catechism’. Daniel Guérin, in his anthology of anarchism, cites H. E. Kaminski, an earlier biographer of Bakunin, who hailed them as ‘the spiritual foundation of the whole anarchist movement’.⁵⁴ In moving away from a more restricted focus on the situation facing the Poles, towards a more comprehensive vision of social revolution, Dolgoff suggests that these texts mark Bakunin’s ‘transition from revolutionary nationalism to the mature revolutionary anarchism expounded by him toward the end of his eventful life’ (p. 73). Yet the documents could be seen as being both foundational and problematic in equal measure.

Although Morris goes to some pains to defend Bakunin from hostile criticism, he recognises that ‘his advocacy of a secret revolutionary society does not accord well with his anarchism’ (p. 145).⁵⁵ For example, Bakunin concludes the principles of the ‘National Catechism’, written in 1866, with the instruction that ‘in order to prepare for this revolution it will be necessary to conspire and to organise a strong secret association coordinated by an international nucleus’ (Dolgoff, p. 101). Yet perhaps a point worth underscoring in this quotation is that Bakunin says the association is for the purposes of ‘preparing’ for the revolution. This does not jar quite so much with the sentiments expressed three years later in ‘The Program of the International Brotherhood’, where Bakunin writes of the ‘conviction that revolutions are never made by individuals or even by secret societies. They make themselves; they are produced by

⁵³ Carr, *Michael Bakunin*, p. 316.

⁵⁴ Kaminski as cited by Guérin. See *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism*, ed. by Daniel Guérin, trans. Paul Sharkey, 2 vols (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1998), I, p. 133.

⁵⁵ For an example of this hostile criticism, see Aileen Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin: A Study in the Psychology and Politics of Utopianism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

the force of circumstances, the movement of fact and events' (Dolgoff, p. 155). It could be argued that, on its own terms, this interpretation of the world would lead to a quietistic materialism constrained from intervening in the course of events as they unfold. Rob Knowles suggests that Bakunin theorised his way out of this apparent conundrum by arguing that:

The intimate nature or the substance of a thing [...] recognises itself through the sum of the different manifestations or *all of the actions* which it carries out external to itself... in a word, its action and its being are one.⁵⁶

Thus in seeing the actions of a thing, or a society, or elements within that society, as integral to its being, Bakunin does not resign his agency in the face of the 'movement of fact and events' as cited above. So 'The Program of the International Brotherhood' continues, holding that an association such as itself can only be:

A sort of revolutionary general staff, composed of dedicated, energetic, intelligent individuals, sincere friends of the people above all, men neither vain nor ambitious, but capable of serving as intermediaries between the revolutionary idea and the instincts of the people. (Dolgoff, p. 155)

For this task, Bakunin writes, 'one hundred revolutionaries, strong and earnestly allied, would suffice for the international organization of all of Europe' (Dolgoff, p. 155).

Yet this more open proposal for the preparation for the revolution is again contradicted by a different text, written in 1870, just one year after the 'Program'. This was a letter to Albert Richard, a French anarchist and a member of Bakunin's Alliance. The letter itself verges on outright self-contradiction at times, as at one point Bakunin argues that 'the Revolution emanating from all points should not, and must not, depend on a single directing center. The center must not be the source, but the product; not the cause, but the effect of the revolution' (Dolgoff, p. 180). Yet in the same text Bakunin writes that the role of the revolutionary activist is one where:

We must bring forth anarchy, and in the midst of the popular tempest, we must be the invisible pilots guiding the Revolution, not by any kind of overt power but by the collective dictatorship of all our allies [members of

⁵⁶ Bakunin, as cited by Rob Knowles, "'Human Light': The Mystical Religion of Mikhail Bakunin", *European Legacy*, 7 (2002), 7-24 (p. 10, my emphasis).

the anarchist vanguard organisation International Alliance of Social Democracy (*Dolgoff's note*), a dictatorship without tricks, without official titles, without official rights, and therefore all the more powerful, as it does not carry the trappings of power. This is the only dictatorship I will accept. (Dolgoff, pp. 180-181)

However much one tries to gloss this paragraph, the problem seems to remain the same, that this is a vanguard by any other name. Morris struggles with this problem, recognising that in the 'Revolutionary Catechism' Bakunin 'advocates a hierarchical structure and almost unlibertarian stress on internal discipline' (p. 33), yet can only come up with the unsatisfactory mitigation that Bakunin's 'pilots', rather than being a vanguard, would be 'midwives' to the revolution (p. 34). Indeed, in the paragraph following the above quotation, Bakunin tells his comrades that if they manage to build 'this collective and invisible power you will triumph; the well-directed revolution will succeed' (Dolgoff, p. 181). It seems difficult to comprehend why the text entertains the notion of a 'well-directed revolution', with its inevitable requirement of a director, rather than a 'self-directed revolution,' which would have been more in keeping with Bakunin's federalist sensibilities, as found, for example, in the text of 'The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State'. Composed in 1871, a year after the letter to Richard, Bakunin describes his more usual vision of social organisation:

The future social organisation should be carried out from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, starting with the associations, then going on to the communes, the regions, the nations, and, finally, culminating in a great international and universal federation. It is only then that the true, life-giving social order of liberty and general welfare will come into being, a social order which, far from restricting, will affirm and reconcile the interests of individuals and of society. (Dolgoff, p. 270)

This 'bottom up' approach is more typical of Bakunin's theory. This also served as the premise for his critique of Marx, for Bakunin fundamentally disagreed with the notion that a free society could be procured with authoritarian means. In responding to the 'rabid anti-authoritarians' in his 1874 essay 'On Authority', Engels was open about

the authoritarianism that his and Marx's theory would necessitate. He bluntly admits that:

A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will on the other part by means of rifles, bayonets, and cannon [...] and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries.⁵⁷

Yet when critiquing Marx's insistence on the necessity of the conquest of political power as a step on the road to the emancipation of the proletariat, Bakunin wrote that 'liberty can be created only by liberty'.⁵⁸ It was Bakunin, then, who raised the means/ends dilemma in his work. Yet in opposing Engels' type of 'imposition', it could be concluded that Bakunin's critique of Marx's theory can equally well be applied to his own theory. While maintaining a means/ends critique of the use of non-libertarian means for supposedly libertarian ends (in Marx), Bakunin failed to see the naked contradiction in his own work. The guidance of revolutionary 'pilots' does not sit well with a 'bottom up' approach to organisation.

So Bakunin's work, in terms of both his texts and his life, defies easy homogenization. That is not to say that there are not clear, and at times dominant, themes. Yet Peter Marshall's first sentence on Michael Bakunin describes him as a 'paradoxical thinker, overwhelmed by the contradictory nature of the world around him'.⁵⁹ This would seem to intimate that a consideration of Bakunin's political thought will produce a similar critique as was levelled at Proudhon in the preceding chapter; that is to say that there is an unavoidable conflict between form and content in his work. Marshall goes on to suggest that Bakunin was 'a "scientific" anarchist, who adopted Marx's economic materialism and Feuerbach's atheism only to attack the rule of science and to celebrate the wisdom of the instincts'.⁶⁰ I have already detailed the basis of

⁵⁷ Friedrich Engels, 'On Authority'. See Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, p. 522.

⁵⁸ Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, p. 179.

⁵⁹ Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 263.

⁶⁰ Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 263.

Bakunin's attack on the authority of science, but is it really accurate to describe his anarchism as 'scientific'? I find it a difficult description to sustain, especially given that some critics see a lack of systematicity in Bakunin's thought.⁶¹ It might be more reasonable to suggest that this conflict within Marshall's own appraisal of Bakunin is symptomatic of the general critical inability to tolerate the plurality – at times contradictory plurality – of the Bakunin text. Moreover, in relation to Marshall's criticism, surely it might be argued that one can entertain the notion of an economic materialism without it becoming a determining science? Marshall Shatz cites Marx's criticism of Bakunin's late work *Statism and Anarchy* that voluntarism underpinned Bakunin's politics: 'will, [...] not economic conditions, is the basis of his social revolution'.⁶² Yet as Shatz adds, what Marx 'did not perceive so clearly was that precisely the opposite criticism might be leveled against him'.⁶³

Finally, abolishing Bakunin

A perusal of related texts has produced Bakunin the Russian agent, Bakunin the secretive dictator, Bakunin the international revolutionary, Bakunin the father of anarchism, Bakunin the scientific anarchist and Bakunin the wilful voluntarist. Is the critic's task merely to pick one and nail his or her colours to that particular mast? It would be my hope that that should not be the case, and that all these Bakunins are not mutually exclusive. What it is fair to say is that Bakunin's thought developed through various stages, from his early philosophical Hegelianism (which continued to inform his later thought), to his pan-Slavism, to his fully-fledged anarchism. Yet to differentiate these various eras in his theoretical development would seem, in one way, to reinforce

⁶¹ See, for example, Avrich, 'The Legacy of Bakunin', p. 130, or Aileen Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin*, p. 184. An opposing view is given by Rob Knowles who argues that the 'paradoxical' Bakunin is a result of the influence of Isaiah Berlin's essay on Herzen and Bakunin, an essay that he characterizes as 'trivializing' Bakunin's 'seriously studied and argued belief in "freedom"'. See Knowles, 'Human Light' (p. 8), and Isaiah Berlin, 'Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty', in Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. by Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 82-113.

⁶² Marx, as cited by Shatz, 'Introduction', p. xxxi.

⁶³ Shatz, 'Introduction', p. xxxi.

what Foucault warned of as seeing the author as the ‘basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications’. This traditional use of the author, for Foucault, meant that criticism found therein ‘the principle of a certain unity of writing [...]. The author also serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts’.⁶⁴ This neutralizing of contradictions is exactly the opposite of what I have attempted in relation to Bakunin’s work. What now remains in the remainder of this chapter is to examine the results of this disavowal of the principle of unity.

Bakunin openly rejected the notion of absolute truths, particularly in relation to his spat with Marx over the direction of the International:

from the moment that the absolute does not exist, there cannot be any infallible dogma for the International, nor consequently any official political and economic theory, and our Congress must never claim the rôle of General Church Councils, proclaiming obligatory principles for all adherents and believers.⁶⁵

Again, in *God and the State*, he rejects the notion of universal values. He finds himself forbidden ‘to recognise a fixed, constant, and universal authority, because there is no universal man, no man capable of grasping in that wealth of detail, without which the application of science to life is impossible’ (p. 33). Bearing this in mind, can it really be fair to seek to derive an absolute, fixed notion of a ‘Bakunin’ from his work? On the one hand, this premise is what lies behind the critical works, such as Berlin’s essay and Kelly’s biography, the sense that Bakunin’s text (taken to mean both his written work and his life’s events) is internally incoherent. On the other hand, defenders of Bakunin would apparently cleave to the same notion, and thus one finds Morris and Knowles trying to argue for a coherent ‘Bakunist’ theory of freedom, anarchism and revolution.

What can be stated with confidence is that encountering Bakunin one encounters a mass of contradictions. For example, which Bakunin? The one portrayed by the

⁶⁴ Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, p. 204.

⁶⁵ Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, pp. 42-43.

defenders, or the one portrayed by hostile critics? Even this dichotomy is not watertight, for Peter Marshall apparently takes a defensive line with respect to Bakunin, arguing that he ‘made a major contribution to anarchist and socialist theory’. Yet at the same time he describes Bakunin as having used ‘dissimulation and fraud rather than reasoned argument and free choice in open association’ and for these reasons, undermined ‘his personal authenticity and moral example’. As if this were not damnation enough, Marshall concludes that ‘he was so thoroughly corrupted by the love of power that he singularly failed to see that the dangers he described in Marx’s revolutionary dictatorship were equally applicable in his own’.⁶⁶ As Daniel Guérin has commented, until some future event sees the realisation of Bakunin’s vision, in the meantime his theories leave anarchists ‘more or less imprisoned by contradiction’.⁶⁷ This contradiction, then, would appear to leave anarchists in need of employing secretly authoritarian means, and Žižek would be vindicated in proffering this as anarchism’s ‘tragic flaw’.

This is not, though, the position that I want this chapter to conclude with. As might be suspected from Bakunin’s comments on the authority of science, as cited earlier, there is, I would contend, enough leeway in his work neither to have to damn him for the cracks and inconsistencies, nor to have to paper over them. Nevertheless in considering the work of Bakunin I will not follow the example that he set in terms of his own theoretical coherence. I shall instead attempt to remain within the logic of Foucault’s questioning of the author that I referred to at the beginning of this chapter. Yet how is one to theorise Bakunin’s apparent mass of contradictions? Is contradiction to be valorised for its own sake?

Bakunin certainly had a holistic approach to freedom. Yet it seems unduly reductive to suggest that this holism extends to the totality of his thought, or that it can

⁶⁶ Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 307.

⁶⁷ Guérin, *Anarchism*, p. 37.

be reduced to a single plan or manifesto. Rob Knowles demonstrates this when he argues that Bakunin's vision of the future was 'a thoroughly humanist and non-authoritarian vision, without reservations'.⁶⁸ My contention is that this conclusion is not supported by the dizzying array of conflicting positions to be found within Bakunin's work, and that such a homogenising conclusion is symptomatic of the majority of critical work on this writer, work which seeks to establish first an unequivocal Bakunin to which one either pays homage or exposes the clay feet. Bakunin himself recognised the contradictory nature of constructed subjecthood when in the unpublished *Knouto-Germanic Empire* he wrote that:

The real individual is from the moment of his gestation in his mother's womb already predetermined and particularized by a confluence of geographic, climatic, ethnographic, hygienic, and economic influences, which constitute the nature of his family, his class, his nation, his race. [...] There are rudimentary faculties without any content. Whence comes their content? From society... impressions, facts, and events coalesced into patterns of thought, right or wrong, are transmitted from one individual to another. (Dolgoft, pp. 240-241)

Again, in 'The Program of the International Brotherhood', Bakunin contends that 'every human individual is the involuntary product of a natural and social environment within which he is born, and to the influence of which he continues to submit as he develops' (Dolgoft, p. 149-150). Cultural influences clearly do not function in a single, linear, fashion, on the subject of culture. Our subject positions are inherently contradictory, yet in recognising that, it seems that the question immediately arises as to the ideological investment in denying Bakunin the possibility of a contradictory subject position. The answer that I would offer, based on this chapter's readings of Bakunin's life and works, is that the construction of a unified and univocal subject is the first step on the path towards establishing the authority of the critic to write about that very subject.

Questioning this critical authority should be considered a matter of urgency for anarchist (literary) theory. This is evident from several examples. James Joll has written

⁶⁸ Knowles, 'Human Light', p. 19.

that for Bakunin ‘the act of destruction was sufficient in itself, for there was in his view a fundamental goodness in man and a fundamental soundness in human institutions which would automatically be released once the existing system was overthrown’.⁶⁹ All of the discussion in this chapter should prove sufficient to show that this characterisation is grossly reductive and very far from an accurate portrayal of Bakunin’s thought. Yet these judgements – once expressed – tend to become solidified into a discourse.⁷⁰ Foucault describes this as ‘a complex operation which constructs a certain rational being that we call “author.”’⁷¹ Yet even the most astute commentators on anarchism still find space for passing off this rather questionable characterization. For example, Saul Newman, while discussing the contributions that Foucault’s work could make to contemporary anarchist theory, flatly states that a ‘universal human subject’, a subject ‘whose natural human essence is repressed by power’ is ‘central to anarchism’.⁷² This chapter clearly demonstrates that such a description, and this from an author sympathetic to anarchism, is not borne out by an attentive reading of the texts described as the ‘spiritual foundation’ of the anarchist movement. The ‘postanarchism’ online discussion group recently debated, furiously, whether or not classical anarchism was essentialist (as both Joll’s and Newman’s texts clearly propose). The most apposite comment came from the American academic Jesse Cohn, who argued that ‘the problem isn’t essentialism so much as it is reification – the forcible imposition of fixity (via certain “spurious” categories, rules, norms, etc.) onto what is actually fluid, changing,

⁶⁹ James Joll, *The Anarchists*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1979), pp. 69-70.

⁷⁰ With respect to this, Dolgoff attempts to finesse somewhat Bakunin’s use of the term dictatorship, by suggesting that what he envisaged would not qualify as a dictatorship when measured against Lenin’s requirement of ‘institutionalised power to enforce its policies’ (p. 182). How, though, can one measure the power of a discourse? And what would count as an institution of a discourse? Surely the overwhelming power of the ‘always-already’, the fact that there can be no exterior to language, means that there can likewise be no easy excision from discourse of a text already written. Hence Joll’s text may not qualify as an *institution* of Bakuninist discourse, without power to enforce its reading, but at the same time it contributes to the coalescence of powers around the hegemonic approach of offering univocal readings of Bakunin (for however opposed those readings may be to each other).

⁷¹ Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, p. 203.

⁷² Newman, ‘The Politics of Postanarchism’, p. 4.

developing, undecided'.⁷³ While Cohn's words look to the future, the same logic is equally applicable to the past, in that attempting to present a univocal reading of Bakunin can no longer be acceptable.

This returns the focus to the question of coherence. Is coherence to be abandoned altogether as the vestigial remnant of a totalitarian reading practice now overthrown by Black Bloc activists with copies of Foucault and Derrida, rather than bricks and Molotov cocktails, in their hands? Would an anarchist textual theory find itself obliged to endorse incoherence as a guiding value? This is an unsatisfactory conclusion, not least for the simple fact that an inversion of the binary opposition of coherence-incoherence will do nothing to challenge the authority of such Manichaeic modes of thinking. Hence my conclusion here is that Bakunin's text consistently frustrates any attempt to impose a singular reading on it, and this should now be seen as a strength, not a limitation. As such it would serve as an inspiration to an anarchist reading practice, to resist the urge to find a satisfyingly conclusive single meaning to a text, such as when the Italian anarchist Alfredo Bonanno argues that 'being an anarchist does not mean one has reached a certainty'.⁷⁴

Bakunin at times saw conflict as 'both inevitable and necessary' (Dolgoff, p. 64), and also that 'order without struggle is death' (Dolgoff, p. 271). The same spirit should, in my view, be applied to his work. One of Bakunin's more famous phrases was a reversal of Voltaire's aphorism, when Bakunin wrote in *God and the State* that '*if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him*' (p. 28). Taking a lead from that example, perhaps it might rather be ventured that if Bakunin really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him instead.

⁷³ Jesse Cohn, 'Re: Clarifying Essentialism's Relation to Anarchism', posted 5 June 2003, previously available online at <http://lists.village.virginia.edu/cgi-bin/spoons/archive_msg.pl?file=postanarchism.archive%2Fpostanarchism.0306&msgnum=36&start=3671>.

⁷⁴ Bonanno, 'The Anarchist Tension'.

5

The Individual, Society and Emma Goldman

Ironically it would seem that Emma Goldman is more famous for something that she never said than for anything she ever did. Mention the name of Emma Goldman, and for those familiar with her life and work the first words that come to mind are a variant of the ‘If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be in your revolution’ aphorism. From t-shirt slogans to inspiring contemporary rock bands, these words have taken on a life of their own.¹ Yet despite being perhaps the best known of Emma Goldman’s words, they turn out to have little basis in her work. The Goldman scholar Alix Kates Shulman ‘confesses’ to having had a hand in the origins of the non-quotation when she recalls summarizing, for the benefit of an anarchist printer who wanted an idea for a fundraising t-shirt, an incident that Goldman mentions in her autobiography.² Goldman recounts spending an evening at a dance around 1890. At this time she had been involved in organising support for a strike of cloakmakers in New York, and in her autobiography she describes her enthusiasm for recruiting more workers to the strike’s cause. The passion she brought to her oratory carried over to her recreational activities, and at the dances she portrays herself as ‘one of the most untiring and gayest’.³ During the evening concerned, her abandon drew a reprimand from a cousin of her lifelong

¹ For an example of one of the many Emma Goldman t-shirts available that use this ‘quotation’, see this image from the AK Press catalogue: <http://www.akpress.org/images/cms/430_popup.jpg>. For providing musical inspiration, see ‘The (International) Noise Conspiracy’s Protest Dancing’, available online at <<http://www.chartattack.com/damn/2001/11/0802.cfm>>.

² Alix Kates Shulman, ‘Dances with Feminists’, available online at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Features/dances_shulman.html>.

³ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, 2 vols (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), I, p. 56. All further references in this chapter will be given in the text as volume number and page number.

soulmate and one-time lover, the anarchist activist and writer Alexander Berkman. The unnamed cousin suggested, according to Goldman, that ‘it did not behoove an agitator to dance’ and that her ‘frivolity would only hurt the Cause’. Goldman reacted with anger at the comment, and wrote that she ‘did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy’ (I, p. 56). This response is typical of her work, and the texts that I will consider in this chapter seem to throw out a radical challenge to the parameters that have traditionally limited the concept of the political. Goldman’s texts advocate what might be styled as a militantly holistic approach to life, and her work has been seen as one of the earliest formulations of the feminist affirmation that the personal is the political.⁴

One feels an excitement about approaching the work of Emma Goldman, perhaps a hope that her texts will display a similar defiance of their own ‘conventions and prejudice’. Indeed in the very first piece in the collection *Red Emma Speaks*, entitled ‘What I Believe’, Goldman writes encouragingly that “‘What I believe” is a process rather than a finality. Finalities are for gods and governments, not for the human intellect’.⁵ Perhaps with Goldman the anarchist canon might finally come to a body of work that manages to fulfil Barthes’s sense of the open, writerly text, with this clear disavowal of ‘finalities’.

This excitement finds a reflection in Goldman’s own account of her first experiences of attending anarchist meetings in the United States, in the preface to her

⁴ See Anna Rotkirch, ‘Emma Goldman’, in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, ed. Margaretta Jolly (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), pp. 385-386, available online at <<http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/staff/rotkirch/goldman.html>>. Jim Jose argues that Goldman’s ‘status as a political theorist is marginal [despite] her clearly acknowledged standing within the anarchist tradition and her almost cult-like status within American popular culture at the end of the twentieth century’. Jose, though, insists on her importance as a political theorist, and suggests that her ‘critique of patriarchy has been seen [...] as her original contribution to anarchist theory’. Jim Jose, “‘Nowhere at Home”, Not Even In Theory: Emma Goldman, Anarchism and Political Theory’, *Anarchist Studies*, 13 (2005), 23-46 (p. 24, p. 31).

⁵ Emma Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader*, ed. by Alix Kates Shulman, 3rd edn (New York: Humanity Books, 1998), p. 49.

collection *Anarchism and Other Essays*. She describes how she listened to ‘the inimitable John Most,’ impressed with his ‘wonderful eloquence’ and his ‘enthusiasm and fire’, and recounts how her ‘one great longing then was to be able to speak with the tongue of John Most, – that I, too, might thus reach the masses’.⁶ The question that this chapter will consider is exactly *how* did Emma Goldman speak to the masses – will this initial excitement prove to be misplaced? Or will there be any evidence of a textual strategy that might indeed free the reading process from what the previous two chapters have already pointed towards as contradictorily authoritarian textual constructions within anarchist discourse?

Who, though, was Emma Goldman? Although I will be addressing her autobiography more directly in a later chapter, it will be helpful here to have some historical detail, bearing in mind the caveats that were elaborated in the consideration in the previous chapter of Bakunin’s life story. Born into a Jewish family in 1869 in present-day Lithuania, Goldman’s autobiography recalls a stormy and at times violent relationship with her father, whose presence she describes as ‘terrifying’ (I, p. 11). Significantly, though, her autobiography begins not with the usual familial recollections, but rather with her arrival in New York in 1889. By this stage Goldman had already been living in the United States for several years, having emigrated to America with her sister when she was sixteen. She sketches in her life prior to this moment as retrospective supplementary detail to the events that follow on from this date. Hence by choosing this point to begin the narrative of her life story, the text can be seen to make a striking intervention in how Goldman is framed for the reader – a putatively ‘natural’ frame such as birth, genealogy, or first memory, is eschewed in favour of a dramatic intervention in the temporal linearity in order to begin the story when she was twenty years old. The moment that Goldman is born for us on the pages

⁶ Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, p. 41. All further references in this chapter will be given in the text.

of her autobiography is the moment that she begins her conversion to becoming an out-and-out anarchist – the text presents Goldman from the moment when she comes directly into contact with the organised anarchist movement in New York, and in particular, with Johann Most.⁷

This clearly poses what Laura Marcus calls a ‘crucial question’ with regard to the status of autobiography and ‘the relationship between identity, narrative and biographical time’ in her discussion on autobiographical discourses.⁸ The text displays a strategy of eschewing the chronological origins of autobiography in favour of a point in time chosen for its obvious significance. This can be read as a striking narrative assertion of Goldman’s own conscious sense of identity in opposition to accepting the convention of birth as the putatively natural starting point for an autobiography. My concern here, though, is whether such an active intervention can be read as a challenge to or as a reinforcement of existing structures. Hélène Cixous confronts these structures in ‘Sorties’, structures that she identifies as functioning by binary opposition. She calls this the ‘two-term system’ that eventually ‘subjects the entire conceptual organization to man’. For Cixous, the binarism always relates back to the opposition ‘activity/passivity’.⁹ If Goldman’s text makes such a dramatic (active) intervention in the conventional linearity of biographical time, if it escapes the (passive) conditions that Cixous sees as being traditionally ascribed to the feminine, does that mean that it is condemned to be relocated on the opposing pole of the binary? I would not want, as Cixous puts it, to fall ‘complacently or blindly into the essentialist ideological interpretation’.¹⁰ Yet to ignore the question might mean, in Marcus’s words, to ascribe to the text a ‘universal selfhood’ which she argues ‘is in fact gendered male because all

⁷ Although Goldman refers to Most in the earlier quotation from the preface to *Anarchism and Other Essays* as ‘John’, it can be taken as an Anglicisation of the original German ‘Johann’, which is used by most other commentators, as well as by Goldman herself in the autobiography.

⁸ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 197.

⁹ Hélène Cixous, ‘Sorties’, trans. by Ann Liddle, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 287-293 (p. 287, p. 288).

¹⁰ Cixous, ‘Sorties’, p. 289.

agency and identity are seen as masculine'.¹¹ Toril Moi warns that if Cixous's 'analysis is correct, for a feminist to continue advocating binary thought, implicitly or explicitly, would seem to be tantamount to remaining inside patriarchal metaphysics'.¹² On the one hand, it might be argued that Goldman's text perhaps challenges the conventional hierarchy of the binary. It thus heeds Marcus's warning about attempting to identify "innate" gender differences'.¹³ On the other hand what it does not do, at least not in this one gesture under consideration, is problematize the binary *qua* binary, and so Moi's concerns remain. This initial consideration of *Living My Life* raises questions about the implications of the text's narrative strategy, and therefore frames my discussion which, for the time being, will focus on the way Goldman's text calls upon a certain binary logic.

Goldman's arrival in New York soon brought her into contact with Johann Most, and, at his urging, she did indeed seek to emulate his fiery oratory, taking up the task of public speaking to advance the cause of anarchism. Yet her experiences were mixed: at her first meeting she describes quite a Wordsworthian spontaneous overflow – 'words I had never heard myself utter before came pouring forth, faster and faster [...] the audience had vanished, the hall itself had disappeared; I was conscious only of my own words, of my ecstatic song' (I, p. 51). After her second meeting, though, she leaves with the feeling that she has cheated the audience, by simply giving the gist of a text that Most had prepared for her. Moreover she characterises this as 'committing a crime against [herself] and the workers by serving as a parrot repeating Most's views' (I, p. 52). She comes away from the experience with 'a valuable lesson. It cured me somewhat of my childlike faith in the infallibility of my teacher and impressed on me

¹¹ Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p. 67.

¹² Toril Moi, 'Feminist, Female, Feminine', in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), pp. 104-116 (pp. 110-111).

¹³ Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p. 67.

the need of independent thinking' (I, p. 53). This lesson is one that I hope to be able to apply to Goldman's own work later in this chapter.

Goldman came to national public prominence with the attempt of her lover, Berkman, to assassinate Henry Clay Frick, the chairman of a steel company where private security had killed some eleven strikers. Although Berkman failed in his attempt to demonstrate that, as Goldman calls it, 'the proletariat of America had its avengers', her notoriety was guaranteed (I, p. 87). In the 'Biographic Sketch' that precedes the collection *Anarchism and Other Essays*, her colleague and contemporary Hippolyte Havel wrote that 'the police exerted every effort to involve Emma Goldman in the act of Alexander Berkman. The feared agitator was to be silenced by all means'.¹⁴ In the course of her career she was indeed arrested and served a number of prison sentences: for incitement to riot; for the distribution of birth control literature; and for anti-war agitation. Yet she continued her propagandistic work as enthusiastically as she could, and Peter Marshall records that in the wake of the publication of *Anarchism and Other Essays* 'she undertook a tour during which she spoke 120 times in 37 cities to 25,000 listeners'.¹⁵ One of the founders of the American Civil Liberties Union, Roger Baldwin, described a revelatory experience upon hearing Goldman speak: 'never before had I heard such social passion, such courageous exposure of basic evils, such electric power behind words, such a sweeping challenge to all values I had been taught to hold highest.'¹⁶ Yet this radicalism earned both Goldman and Berkman powerful enemies, and eventually J. Edgar Hoover directed their deportation to Russia, after having

¹⁴ Hippolyte Havel, 'Biographic Sketch', in Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1969), pp. 1-40 (p. 18).

¹⁵ Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 399.

¹⁶ Baldwin, as cited by Alix Kates Shulman, 'Biographical Introduction', in Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, pp. 20-40 (p. 27).

described them as ‘beyond doubt, two of the most dangerous anarchists in this country’.¹⁷

Goldman and Berkman were deported, along with 247 other radicals deemed unwelcome by the United States government, to Lenin’s Russia in 1919. Initially both Goldman and Berkman were excited at the prospect of participating in the work of the revolution, especially in the land of their birth. Yet inevitably the authoritarianism that Bakunin had warned was inherent in Marx’s ideology surfaced in post-revolutionary Soviet Russia, with direct consequences for the anarchists there. As Alexandre Skirda pithily puts it, Russian anarchists ‘came to realize [...] that the heads of Lenin and his faithful followers were still crammed with the centralist and statist outlook’.¹⁸ Goldman and Berkman were in Russia when the violent repression of the anarchist-led Kronstadt uprising took place. Marshall writes that ‘within three years, the Bolsheviki had succeeded in wiping out by military means the anarchist movement completely’.¹⁹ After only a short time in Russia the pair left, and Goldman subsequently became a vocal critic of the Bolsheviki.

From there she and Berkman moved to Western Europe. After a number of years spent constantly on the move with only temporary visas to count on, in 1925 Goldman married a Welsh miner, James Colton, in order to procure a British passport. With that she was able to make a speaking tour of Canada, and then joined Berkman in the south of France, where she dedicated herself to writing her autobiography. Despite the blow of Berkman’s suicide in 1936, Goldman threw herself into the cause of the Spanish anarchists in the struggle against Franco. Her agitation was cut short by a stroke, however, and she died in 1940 at the age of seventy.

¹⁷ See J. Edgar Hoover’s memo, available online at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Exhibition/eg27b.jpg>.

¹⁸ Alexandre Skirda, *Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organisation from Proudhon to May 1968*, trans. by Paul Sharkey (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2002), p. 112.

¹⁹ Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, p. 473.

The work that Emma Goldman produced during her life spans various categories of writing, but can be easily summarised. Of her political output, most of her work was in the form of essays, dictated by the fact that her pieces were destined for publication in magazines, principally the one she founded, *Mother Earth*. This journal first saw the light of day in New York in 1906, and continued publication until 1917, when it was brought to a close by wartime censorship.²⁰ A brief issue of the *Mother Earth Bulletin* continued until 1918, but Goldman and Berkman's prison sentences and subsequent deportation put a final stop to the publication of the magazine. In New York in 1910 Goldman collated a dozen of the essays from *Mother Earth* into the collection *Anarchism and Other Essays*. More recently a selection of her writings and speeches were anthologised in 1972 as *Red Emma Speaks*, and 2001 saw the publication of *Anarchy!: An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth*, which gives a sample from the wide range of contributors to the original magazine, including from Goldman herself. Goldman's range was broad indeed: she published *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* in 1914, as well as her two-volume autobiography, *Living My Life*, in 1931. Besides that, in 1923 she wrote of her time in Russia, in *My Disillusionment in Russia*, and a volume of the letters that she and Berkman exchanged, *Nowhere at Home*, was published in 1975.

Goldman's 'ignorant masses'

To begin to consider Emma Goldman's political theory, I will turn firstly to her collection *Anarchism and Other Essays*. Even in the preface to the text, Goldman reiterates the sentiments she had already expressed in 'What I Believe' with regard to the future as a measure of libertarian intentions. As cited above, she had eschewed

²⁰ For an account of the fortunes of Goldman's journal, see Peter Glassgold, 'Introduction: The Life and Death of *Mother Earth*', in *Anarchy!: An Anthology of Emma Goldman's 'Mother Earth'*, ed. by Peter Glassgold (Washington: Counterpoint, 2001), pp. xv-xxxvi.

‘finalities’ as being ‘for gods and governments’. In *Anarchism and Other Essays* she contends that:

the things every new generation has to fight, and which it can least overcome, are the burdens of the past, which holds us all as in a net. Anarchism, at least as I understand it, leaves posterity free to develop its own particular systems, in harmony with its needs. Our most vivid imagination can not foresee the potentialities of a race set free from external restraints. How, then, can any one assume to map out a line of conduct for those to come? (p. 43)

It should be clear by now that this is a familiar anarchist trope, the notion of leaving the future to look after itself, a refusal to plan for it. Goldman reiterates this sentiment later in the essay, writing that ‘anarchism is not, as some may suppose, a theory of the future to be realized through divine inspiration’ (p. 63). Indeed, on closer examination, Goldman’s text above demonstrates an even greater degree of caution and circumspection, for she qualifies her own statement about anarchism with the proviso ‘at least as I understand it’.

Nevertheless the inspiration that these words offer is called into question by the first essay in the text. Entitled ‘Anarchism: What It Really Stands For’, the subtitle immediately holds out the promise of establishing a foundational value for the doctrine to be expounded by Goldman. This is reinforced by the poem ‘Anarchy’ that precedes the essay. In this poem, by the contemporary anarchist writer John Henry Mackay, one encounters the lines:

[...] To them that ne’er have striven
The truth that lies behind a word to find,
To them the word’s right meaning was not given.
They shall continue blind among the blind. (p. 47)

Despite this portent of revealing a truth behind ‘a word’ – or rather, *the* word, ‘anarchy’ – in the pages that follow, the text adopts a different tack, and indeed avoids starting from an *a priori* premise by addressing what the current understanding of anarchism is. Goldman writes that ‘to deal even remotely with all that is being said and done against Anarchism would necessitate the writing of a whole volume’ and so proposes to deal

with 'two of the principal objections', those being the supposed impracticality of anarchism, and the notion that it signifies 'violence and destruction' (p. 48-9). Goldman identifies an ignorance surrounding the notion of anarchism, and locates the origins of this ignorance thus: 'Rather than to go to the bottom of any given idea, to examine into its origin and meaning, most people will either condemn it altogether, or rely on some superficial or prejudicial definition of non-essentials.' The methodology, then, is that 'anarchism urges man to think, to investigate, to analyze every proposition' (p. 50). So far, perhaps, so good. The redoubtable Goldman appears prepared to defy convention and strike out in a new direction.

Goldman recognises in the history of the world around her that 'the individual and society have waged a relentless and bloody battle for ages, each striving for supremacy, because each was blind to the value and importance of the other' (p. 51). Yet in distinction to Marx, for example, who wrote in the preface to *Capital* that 'individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests', Goldman sees the revolutionary salvation of society beginning with the individual not the class.²¹ The essay identifies three 'phantoms' that have held humanity captive – religion, property, and the state (p. 52). Hence, for her, anarchism urges the individual to 'break your mental fetters [...] for not until you think and judge for yourself will you get rid of the dominion of darkness, the greatest obstacle to all progress' (p. 53). This move locates all agency for social change in the individual, and only once the individual has found freedom 'will he realize the true force of the social bonds which knit men together, and which are the true foundations of a normal social life' (p. 61). Leaving aside the question of the significance of the essentializing terms that Goldman employs (true, normal), she sees a path to liberation that begins with the individual: 'anarchism stands

²¹ Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, p. 177.

for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth' (p. 62).

In her attempt to reconcile the competing demands of individual and society, and to privilege neither over the other, Goldman can be seen to be attempting to fuse two strands of anarchism that are generally thought of as being in opposition to one another. On the one hand there is the radical individualism of Max Stirner, the influential German individualist anarchist and author of *The Ego and Its Own*.²² Stirner argued that 'the individual is unique [and] enters freely into association and equally freely reclaims his freedom'.²³ One study of Stirner has described him as 'the foremost exponent of extreme individualist anarchism', with his belief in 'the metaphysical priority of the ego [and] the necessity and desirability of egotistic action'.²⁴ On the other hand, there is the more communistic anarchism of Peter Kropotkin, who saw cooperation and not Darwinian competition as an intrinsic feature of human society. In *Mutual Aid* Kropotkin insists on the 'immense part' that mutual aid played 'in the evolution of both the animal world and human societies'.²⁵ Yet it would not be accurate to represent this as a diametrically opposed position to that of Stirner. Kropotkin also acknowledges a parallel current in the course of human history, and that is:

the self-assertion of the individual, not only in its efforts to attain personal or caste superiority, economical, political, and spiritual, but also in its much more important although less evident function of breaking through the bonds, always prone to become crystallized, which the tribe, the village community, the city, and the State impose upon the individual.²⁶

Goldman's fusion of the two is not so much a reconciliation of radical opposites as a question of locating the individual in the process of revolutionary change. Her espousal of Stirner emphasizes Kropotkin's notion of the individual's function of 'breaking

²² Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, trans. by Steven Byington, ed. by David Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²³ Guérin, *No Gods, No Masters*, 1, p. 19.

²⁴ Clark, *Max Stirner's Egoism*, p. 15.

²⁵ Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1987) p. 232.

²⁶ Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, p. 231.

through' the arbitrary limits established by external authorities, but specifically makes this process a necessary and conscious precedent to the realisation of the 'social bonds which knit men together'. I shall return to the import of this particular focus on the individual in the light of the following considerations of the mode of address of Goldman's text.

What initially seemed to be a promising beginning to *Anarchism and Other Essays* quickly finds itself compromised. As the quotations above illustrate, Goldman seems happy to make sweeping generalizations about 'most people'. The disquiet, though, that this provokes is only multiplied when the text invokes the figure of 'the ignorant mass'. Goldman attempts to address the opposition to anarchism, arguing that it 'brings to light the relation between so-called intelligence and ignorance' (p. 48). The text apparently maintains the equitable idea that 'the opposition of the uneducated to Anarchism deserves the same consideration as that of the intelligent man' (p. 48) and similarly that 'the intelligent man and the ignorant mass judge not from a thorough knowledge of the subject, but either from hearsay or false interpretation' (p. 49). Yet the terms that the text employs reveal a distinct hierarchy. On the side of intelligence, for example, the metonymic figure put forth by the text is the 'intelligent man', displaying a certain degree of metaphoric specificity. In opposition to this, one finds 'the ignorant mass', without even an attempt to disguise its reductive cartoon-like qualities. Indeed this mass, according to Goldman, acts 'as it always does, by mere impulse, its reasons are like those of a child' (p. 48). The infantilising simile is all the more striking in contrast with the figure of the 'intelligent man', with the (positive) value of maturity on the side of the (gendered masculine) intelligent individual. The gendering of the opposition seems even clearer if one considers the essentializing ('always') impulsivity of ignorance, recalling one of Cixous's exemplary pairs, 'head/heart'.²⁷

²⁷ Cixous, 'Sorties', p. 287.

So while the 'Anarchism' essay aims to dispel popular misunderstandings of anarchism, Goldman concedes that 'the emotions of the ignorant man are continuously kept at a pitch by the most blood-curdling stories about Anarchism' (p. 49), yet simultaneously manages to link ignorance to the (feminine) term of emotionality. If the attentive reader is to follow Goldman's urging 'to think, to investigate, to analyze every proposition', not only do figures such as 'the ignorant mass' and 'the ignorant man' come to seem utterly reductive, but the discursive field surrounding them begins to appear heavily compromised in terms of a gender analysis. Moreover the sentence that urges the analysis of 'every proposition' continues in the following fashion: 'but that the brain capacity of the average reader be not taxed too much, I also shall begin with a definition' (p. 50). While 'average' is perhaps an ambiguous term, even allowing it the putatively neutral value of 'representative' or 'typical' still leaves the phrase evincing a desire to alienate the very readership to which it claims to appeal, with its condescending disdain for not taxing its 'brain capacity'.

Thus it seems hard to avoid the perception of a dismissive tone in the text, yet Goldman goes on to cite Emerson and conclude that 'the individual instinct is the thing of value in the world' (p. 52). Although Goldman premises her aspirations for the future on a notion of the liberated individual, it becomes clear that this premise relies on the textual construction of an already existing human mass that does not warrant a more nuanced treatment. The text's own logic would seem to suggest that if the thing of value is the individual instinct, the obverse of this is that the 'ignorant mass' (of any potential audience/readership) is without any value, or at best a latent or dormant value.

The examples quoted above amply demonstrate a textual failure to attempt to engage with the heterogeneity of Goldman's own audience (or the audience that she might have aspired to). Indeed in 'Minorities Versus Majorities' she constructs a 'uniform, gray, and monotonous as the desert' homogeneity for a certain section of the

community that is being written of, the majority that she in fact repudiates ‘as a creative force for good [...] as a compact mass it has never stood for justice or equality’ (p. 78). This is all the more surprising given that Goldman astutely differentiated between varying types of oppression, for example when she recognised the specific oppression that women suffered as women. In the essay ‘The Traffic in Women’ in the same collection, she turns her attention to the question of prostitution, and asks: ‘What is really the cause of the trade in women? Not merely white women, but yellow and black women as well. Exploitation, of course; the merciless Moloch of capitalism that fattens on underpaid labor’ (p. 178). Yet despite the opportunity to homogenize the economic exploitation of the prostitute as just another variant of capitalistic exploitation, Goldman seeks to distinguish it, and continues that ‘nowhere is woman treated according to the merit of her work, but rather as a sex’ (p. 179). Again, though, this more careful treatment of the subject of her critique seems to be effaced by her characterisation of the wider reading public. The essay was written in response to a media uproar about the ‘white slave traffic’ and Goldman begins the text with an appropriately sarcastic tone, wondering how it is that ‘an institution, known almost to every child, should have been discovered so suddenly?’ (p. 177). Although she suggests that there is something of a smokescreen about the sudden media exposure of the business of prostitution (to divert ‘the public mind [...] from a great social wrong’ (p. 177)), she then adopts a harshly critical tone that seems to blame the very readers themselves for allowing such a smokescreen to be put up in the first place:

Only when human sorrows are turned into a toy with glaring colors will baby people become interested – for a while at least. The people are a very fickle baby that must have new toys every day. The ‘righteous’ cry against the white slave traffic is such a toy. (p. 178)

The reference to ‘baby people’ is strikingly unsympathetic, and invites comparison to another essay, on the subject of ‘The Child and its Enemies’. Here Goldman takes issue with the prevailing mode of schooling, which she sees as being in conflict with the

innate individuality of the child. Hence she offers the opposition of ‘whether the child is to grow from within, whether all that craves expression will be permitted to come forth toward the light of day; or whether it is to be kneaded like dough through external forces’.²⁸ It would appear, then, that while Goldman is prepared to rail against societal forces that would treat a child like a lump of dough, she is prepared to treat her readers in comparable fashion when characterising them as ‘baby people’.

The sense that Goldman’s text tends to remonstrate with sections of society for the position in which they find themselves is borne out by other aspects of her work. Towards the end of the essay ‘Anarchism: What It Really Stands For’, she sets up an opposition between ‘the masses’ and ‘the true lovers of liberty’. Citing Stirner, Goldman suggests that ‘man has as much liberty as he is willing to take’ (p. 65). This tendency to censure others, what Shulman calls ‘a peculiar mix of understanding and blame’, is again expressed in her autobiography.²⁹ While returning from a visit to the recently incarcerated Berkman, convicted for his attempt on Frick’s life, she passes some steel works, and her eye is caught by the workers, ‘like galley-slaves of an era long past’ (I, p. 113). Goldman seems angered by the disparity between what she sees as Berkman’s sacrifice and the failure of the American proletariat to realise that this sacrifice had been made on its behalf. She writes that Berkman ‘had given his life to bring joy to these slaves, but they had remained blind and continued in the hell of their own forging’. ‘Their souls are dead,’ she commented to her companion at the time (I, p. 114).

Baby people – divorcing the reader from the referent

Goldman’s treatment of what she calls, in the essay ‘Minorities Versus Majorities’, ‘the mob’ (p. 72) is characteristic of a textual strategy that seeks to establish a hierarchy in

²⁸ Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, p. 131.

²⁹ Alix Kates Shulman, ‘Emma Goldman’s Feminism: A Reappraisal’, in Emma Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, pp. 3-19 (p. 13).

the tri-partite relationship between text (Goldman-as-author, presence of meaning for attentive reader), reader (Stirner-esque individual) and referent (inattentive mass, vainly spoken to, and therefore written about). Obviously it is not tenable (or useful) to consider these terms as either discrete units or mutually exclusive categories. Nevertheless in its mode of address the text can be seen to interpellate the reader as 'non-mob'. The way in which it constructs a disjunction between the reader and other sections of the community leads in a direction that is problematic for the wider dissemination of her own politics. Arguably this institutes an internally contradictory hierarchy among the three terms, but what I would insist upon is that it clearly points towards a discursive blockage in the flow of information that would be required to waken 'the mass' from its oppressive slumber as the 'omnipresent tyrant [...] a mass of cowards' (p. 73).

To comprehend this it is necessary to return to a curious statement that Goldman makes at the beginning of the preface to *Anarchism and Other Essays*. Bearing in mind that the comments were written after a long career as one of the fieriest orators in the United States, Goldman prefaces her collection with the admission that her 'great faith in the wonder worker, the spoken word, is no more. I have realized its inadequacy to awaken thought or even emotion' (pp. 41-42). She eschews the usual privileging of the spoken word that is the subject of so much of Derrida's critique in the first part of *Of Grammatology*, for example when he writes that the voice has been considered 'closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier'.³⁰ Goldman opts for the more typically under-privileged term in the opposition, writing. 'Oral propaganda,' she claims, 'leaves no lasting impression' (p. 42). I would like to correlate this image of Goldman, metaphorically leaving the stage for the confines of the written text, with the comments above regarding 'most people', 'baby people' and 'the mob'. My contention

³⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 20.

is that there is a parallel movement in the two scenes, the literal (autobiographical) and the textual (political): on the one hand, Goldman withdraws from direct contact with a living audience, while on the other hand, she constructs a text that appears to address itself to an individual/reader that is seen in contradistinction to the 'majority'. Despite the fact that Goldman inverts the traditional speech/writing binary, she does not abandon the logocentric privilege granted to presence. Following on from her renunciation of the spoken word, she writes that:

The relation between the writer and the reader is more intimate. True, books are only what we want them to be; rather, what we read into them. That we can do so demonstrates the importance of written as against oral expression. (pp. 42-43)

What Goldman not unreasonably fails to notice is that her comments on the polysemous nature of the written sign apply equally as well to the spoken sign – in fact her comments on the shortcomings of a living audience even point in that direction, when she laments the 'restlessness of the crowd', a restlessness which could just as likely be motivated by the audience's reflection on the spoken text, restlessness as synonym for the ceaseless play of signification. Nevertheless, Goldman's statement quoted above seems to both reinstate the presupposition of the presence of the final signified of her written text and indicate the impossibility of that very state of affairs – 'true, books are only what we want them to be; rather, what we read into them.' Indeed it could be perceived in this quotation that Goldman senses that the presence of the speaker, in his or her traditional role as guarantor of meaning, limits the interpretative autonomy of the audience, and for this reason she plumps, after years of public speaking, for the medium of the written word in order to allow greater independence to the reader.

In spite of this seemingly conscious move towards an attempt to open up greater interpretative space to the reader, Goldman's text simultaneously adopts a position that closes down the reader's freedom in the same gesture with which it apparently proffers

it. Without overlooking what I have already identified as the way in which Goldman's texts construct the (individual) reader as 'non-mob', supposedly distinct from the mass beyond the text, I would like to reconsider the 'What I Believe' essay cited in the opening pages of this chapter. Here Goldman states that "'What I believe" is a process rather than a finality. Finalities are for gods and governments, not for the human intellect'.³¹ Typographical errors notwithstanding, the above quotation puts a small letter 'b' at the beginning of the word 'believe', and hence it can be understood that the quotation refers to what the author believes, and not the essay itself (when Goldman refers to the essay itself several paragraphs further on, she capitalizes all three words of the title). Apparently whatever Goldman's beliefs are, they will be a 'process', but the text will not, frozen as it is in time on the page. Yet given my considerations above on her comments on the written word (books being 'what we read into them'), it is clear that, at least at one point, Goldman does entertain the concept of the reader's participation in the production of the text's significance.

If this is to be the case, it might not be an unreasonable expectation to hope that the text reflects this concept in some fashion. Yet despite the focus shifting slightly towards the text-reader axis, upon turning the page, one finds the text espousing such sentiments as 'anarchism is the only philosophy that can and will do away with this humiliating and degrading situation'.³² It strikes me that to posit anarchism as the 'only' philosophy to undertake a specific task is most definitely a certainty: it seeks to preempt any debate or discussion – if it is the only philosophy that will do this, it moves into the predictive with regard to the future, that it 'can and *will* do away with' capitalism. Therefore Goldman presents the reader not only with a textual ultimatum, that is to say, if you take issue with this degrading and humiliating situation (as she

³¹ Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, p. 49.

³² Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, p. 50.

describes it), anarchism is the only answer to that, but she also offers the guarantee that it *will* do away with that situation.

What can be understood as the process? How are we to reconcile the idea of the text-reader relationship (as a process) with such unequivocal statements about the present and the future, of what *is* and what *will* be? The inability to recognise in her own text a certain posture that she so readily criticises in others (for example, the contrast between her defence of the child and her remarks about ‘baby people’) would seem to establish a fundamental contradiction between Goldman’s mode of address to the ‘what is’ and to the ‘what ought to be’. By this I mean that she struggles for a world where individuality will be unfettered by government and state – ‘the individual is the true reality in life’ she writes in ‘The Individual, Society and the State’.³³ Yet her means of struggle towards that goal seem to rely on denying the heterogeneity of the very readers of her texts. Although my argument might be seen to be premised on the positive content of the appellation ‘individual’ for those readers of Goldman’s texts that she seems to dismiss so easily, I am not interested in constructing a positive value for ‘the individual’ here. I would, instead, like to offer a negative critique of the actual individual that the text constructs as its subject. In contradistinction to that critique perhaps the plurality and heterogeneity of Goldman’s audience might begin to be liberated from the restrictive interpellation of the reader.

My contention, then, is that there runs through Goldman’s texts a certain, clearly identifiable vein of univocality, where despite the emphasis on human liberation, the greater number of humans seem to get left behind by the theory. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the essay ‘The Individual, Society and the State’. In this text Goldman argues that ‘civilization has been a continuous struggle of the individual or of groups of individuals against the State and even against “society,” that is, against the majority

³³ Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, p. 111.

subdued and hypnotized by the State and State worship'.³⁴ Given that a central tenet of anarchist theory has been the critique of the Marxist-Leninist concept of the revolutionary vanguard, Goldman's admission that the struggle of the individual has at times been against 'society' seems to open up a realm of conflict where the self-liberated individual comes to occupy the locus of a vanguard. Bearing in mind Goldman's move away from the spoken word, which in effect would mean that she no longer had, literally, to face up to a multitudinous audience, I would argue that there is a move towards a reification of the individual in her work. Goldman offers a definition of her concept of individuality that would apparently transcend time and human understanding. She claims that:

The State and social institutions come and go, but individuality remains and persists [...]. The living man cannot be defined; he is the fountain-head of all life and all values; he is not a part of this or of that; he is a whole, an individual whole, a growing, changing, yet always constant whole.³⁵

This move towards the entrenching of the individual as a transcendental value in Goldman's texts has much significance. Firstly, the danger presents itself that the self-liberated (anarchist) individual, growing frustrated at the gulf between his or her understanding of the world and the continuing 'hypnosis' of the masses, falls into the temptation to wreak some dramatic act that will effect radical social change in and of itself. This, inevitably, seems to mean acts of violence, and it could be argued that the very order of the essays in *Anarchism and Other Essays* reflects the progression of this logic – the first essay is on 'Anarchism', the second on 'Minorities Versus Majorities', and the third discusses 'The Psychology of Political Violence'.³⁶ It might also be noted, in passing, that this order also reflects the early events of the lives of Goldman and Berkman, with the attempt on the life of Frick, and Berkman's subsequent incarceration.

³⁴ Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, p. 111.

³⁵ Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, pp. 111-112.

³⁶ While not wanting to overstate the importance of this observation, it could also be noted that the essay on political violence is then followed by an essay discussing prisons.

Secondly, though, there is the danger of creating a *de facto* vanguard by any other name. While Goldman the orator withdraws from engaging with the plurality of a public audience, her texts simultaneously construct a reified figure of the attentive individual who ‘has always been and necessarily is the sole source and motive power of evolution and progress’.³⁷ These individuals would seem to be but a variant on Bakunin’s ‘invisible pilots’ (as discussed in the previous chapter) who would guide the revolution.³⁸ This exposes the circular logic of Goldman’s idea of liberation, for although she acknowledges in ‘The Individual, Society and the State’ that ‘no government can exist without the consent of the people’ and that consent is ‘inoculated and indoctrinated by what is called “education,” at home, in the church, and in every other phase of life’, breaking with the domination of government surely requires the withdrawal of that consent, and that, presumably, requires the active participation of the masses.³⁹

Thirdly, it could be said that this figure of the reified individual answers the question that I posed at the beginning of this chapter, of *how* Goldman came to speak to the masses – in short, she appears to excise them from any participation as readers of her text. In this sense the decisive framing of her autobiography also seems, in Marcus’s terms, to signify that Goldman’s text comes to occupy a masculine locus for having so curiously tried to disempower this section of its readership, not only in the explicit content of her text, but also in the re-assertion of the (gendered) binary of active/passive. The internal logic of her text is that Goldman the activist author makes a call to an active Stirner-esque individual who is differentiated from the passive masses (conceived of as a millstone around the neck of progress). Even though Goldman wrote that she wanted to leave ‘posterity free to develop its own particular systems’, in this reading it can be seen that she most definitely re-inscribes a system of thought that

³⁷ Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, p. 111.

³⁸ Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchism*, p. 180.

³⁹ Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, p. 113.

would make the achieving of her vision a more difficult task. While the gender implications of this strategy are not the focus of my concerns, Cixous notes that the oppositions are 'a universal battlefield' where 'relationships of authority' struggle. For Cixous, moreover, the 'victory' of one term of an opposition over the other 'always amounts to the same thing: it is hierarchized'.⁴⁰

To rephrase this question in more literary terms, the issue is how a text can address a reader without isolating that reader from his or her environment. In terms of the tri-partite relationship that I identified earlier, is it possible to conceive of a purely dialogic relationship between text and reader-*in-situ*, a reader that has no experience of a separation between themselves and the community of which they are a part? Is it possible to address a community rather than an individual reader? Or alternatively, is it possible to conceive of a textual address to a reader that does not construct a third-person (referent) position for the community beyond the page, that does not construct an object status for it as something to be manipulated? Perhaps the concept of 'address' is what should be interrogated, not the person/thing addressed. After her first speaking dates, Goldman wrote of her sense of having committed a 'crime against [herself] and the workers by serving as a parrot' for Johann Most. This concern would apparently signal an implicit recognition of what I have highlighted as the text's logic of a tri-partite and hierarchical relationship: it would exist here between the text (Most), the speaker (Goldman), and the audience (Goldman's listeners). While Goldman's comments are seemingly based on an assumption of the moral requirement of the psychological unity of author and text, it can also be seen that she is aiming for a situation where there is only a dialogic relationship between text (unproblematized by the psychological division between author and orator) and audience. So while she carried that as an ambition in her public speaking, I have shown that conversely she

⁴⁰ Cixous, 'Sorties', p. 288.

opens up a tri-partite relationship in her written work. The shortcomings of this strategy would immediately become apparent if one imagines someone from 'the mass' (in Goldman's terms) picking up a Goldman text. This hypothetical reader would simultaneously find her or himself interpellated by the text as not-mass, and yet repudiated by the same text for not yet being a (self-)liberated individual.

Up until now we have seen, with Proudhon, how anarchist writing has tried to establish ownership of a text's meaning and yet has simultaneously provided the logic with which to undo that attempted ownership. With Bakunin we have seen how a body of work can challenge the entrenched concept of the authorial unity of the work, without the work losing its significance as a result. With Goldman what we see is perhaps the most challenging textual strategy in terms of its implications for interpretative freedom. As I have attempted to show, there is a construction of a reified reader that would severely restrict the 'mass' (that the text putatively seeks to liberate) from participating in the reading process. Yet if Goldman's texts are to be of any pedagogical value to their readers, the lesson, as she herself learnt (after her first speaking tour) and elucidated it, is not to accept the 'infallibility' of the teacher.

6

Facts and Faith: Anarchist Lives vs. Anarchist Stories

The trouble is the recognition of a fact does not make it easier to reconcile oneself to it.

(Emma Goldman, letter to Alexander Berkman, 18 November 1931)¹

Upon their separate releases in 1919 after serving a two-year jail sentence for anti-war activism, Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman were immediately asked for bonds of \$15,000 ‘pending enquiries by the Immigration Bureau’.² In the climate of reactionary hysteria that followed the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 by Leon Czolgosz, a young man who had fleetingly met Goldman at one of her speaking dates, the United States government had passed an anti-anarchist law in 1903.³ Among other powers, this law permitted the government to deport foreign-born radicals. As Berkman was a Russian exile and Goldman had long since been stripped of her US citizenship (acquired through an early and quickly forgotten marriage), both were vulnerable to the law’s sanction.⁴ After a number of weeks on bail, they were brought before what Goldman called a ‘revival of the ancient days of the Spanish Inquisition’.⁵ The investigation, as Berkman saw it, was to determine their ‘attitude of mind’, and thus they refused to cooperate or defend themselves, given that they had not been charged

¹ Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, *Nowhere at Home: Letters from Exile of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman*, ed. by Richard and Anna Maria Drinnon (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 49.

² Goldman, *Living My Life*, II, p. 693. All further references in this chapter will be given as volume and page number.

³ See *Living My Life*, I, pp. 289-290, p. 300. For an account of the genesis of this law and international reaction to anarchist violence, see Richard Bach Jensen, ‘The United States, International Policing and the War against Anarchist Terrorism, 1900–1914’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 13 (2001), 15-46.

⁴ Goldman realised that she had been stripped of her acquired citizenship in anxious anticipation of an opportunity to keep her out of the United States as long before this as 1909, resulting in her having to cancel a planned tour of Australia. See *Living My Life*, I, p. 449.

⁵ Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 10.

with any offence. As Berkman succinctly put it, 'no opinion a law – no opinion a crime'.⁶ Within a matter of weeks they were ordered to surrender and, along with 247 other 'reds', were hustled out of Ellis Island at the dead of night, just four days before Christmas, onto the US Buford, and a few days later found themselves on the open seas, en route to the new post-revolutionary Russia.

In her autobiography, Goldman records the excitement that the two of them felt, despite the forced deportation, about the chance to take part in the work of the revolution in Russia. This excitement was shared in radical circles worldwide. While Berkman and Goldman were imprisoned in the US for their anti-war activism, in London the German exile Rudolf Rocker, a leading anarcho-syndicalist and anti-militarist, had ironically been imprisoned by the British authorities as an 'enemy alien', despite his opposition to the Kaiser's regime. Rocker also writes of his joy at the news of the revolution, and of his frustration at not being able to join the exodus of Russian and other radical exiles, travelling to Russia to take up the work of the revolution for which they had striven for so long.⁷ They believed, perhaps naively although not unreservedly, that the revolution would be the incarnation of all their dreams. Despite decades working for the social revolution in a foreign country, Berkman and Goldman still considered Russia their homeland, what Goldman called their '*Matushka Rossiya*' – even though neither of them could now speak the language (II, p. 637).

Berkman's loyalty initially seemed uncompromising. He noted in his diary that 'all forces must be bent, first of all, to secure the complete victory of the workers. Bourgeois resistance within must be crushed; interference from without defeated. Everything else will come later'.⁸ Yet within two years Goldman and he would desperately be trying to find a way out of Bolshevik Russia. Once abroad, they went on

⁶ Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 10.

⁷ See Rudolf Rocker, *The London Years* (London: Robert Anscombe & Co. Ltd., 1956), pp. 325-328. All further references in this chapter will be given as *LY* with page number.

⁸ Alexander Berkman, *Life of an Anarchist: The Alexander Berkman Reader*, ed. by Gene Fellner (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1992), p. 170.

to spend their last years together working to publicise what they had experienced in Russia, earning for themselves the repudiation of most Western radicals enamoured with what was believed to be the birth of a new society.⁹ What dominated (and perhaps explained) this episode in their lives were the dangers of taking facts for granted, the difficulties of interpretation and the unsustainable nature of any presumption of narrative objectivity. Berkman and Goldman despaired of rousing an international audience to what they believed to be the horrors committed by Lenin's regime, and often lamented that if only people were aware of the 'facts', a campaign could be mounted against the excesses of the Bolsheviks.¹⁰ Yet perhaps the 'facts' in and of themselves are never enough. Despite having been in Russia themselves, despite having seen events with their own eyes, despite relating this evidence to others once abroad, to their amazement, this (autobiographical) story that they were telling at the time was not believed. Goldman touches on the kernel of the problem when she wrote, in a letter to Havelock Ellis in 1925, that there was 'a great confusion of mind and *unwillingness or inability to face the facts*'.¹¹ Although it could be reasonably surmised that Goldman's letter took the 'facts' for granted, and sought to redress the 'inability' to face them, the quotation works against itself. While the inability that Goldman and Berkman struggled to combat was volitional, if there is an '*inability*' to face the facts, then the 'facts' themselves become to a certain degree irrelevant, confronted with the impossibility of their ever being known *as such*.¹² As Linda Anderson has written, citing Regenia Gagnier, perhaps 'truth is less the issue than "the purpose an autobiographical statement

⁹ See Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, available online at <http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/goldman/disillusion/toc.html>.

¹⁰ Berkman subsequently wrote in 1922 in *The Russian Tragedy* that opinions were 'based on very incomplete and unreliable, frequently entirely false, information about the Russian Revolution [...] founded, as a rule, on insufficient or wrong data', and entertains the notion that a 'correct estimation' can be made of events there. Alexander Berkman, 'The Russian Tragedy', available online at <http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/berkman/russiantragedy.html>.

¹¹ Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 70, my emphasis.

¹² It might also be noted, in passing, the apposite use of the verb 'to face' – implying, among its various significances, the physical presence of the person 'facing' the fact. Though as soon as cognisance is taken of this fact as such, much less communicated to another, the 'as such', as such, disappears.

serves in the life and circumstances of its author and readers”¹³. In this sense, Berkman and Goldman’s relation to the Russian Revolution seems emblematic of the relationship between a reader and the ‘facts’ contained within the text of an autobiography. If this relationship is, as I will suggest below, problematic, what then is one to believe?

The nature of this relationship, and the status of autobiography as a genre, has been of anxious concern to literary critics from the beginning of a recognition of the genre’s existence. James Olney, in his introduction to the influential collection *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, quasi-religiously suggests that ‘in the beginning, then, was Georges Gusdorf’.¹⁴ If Gusdorf is indeed the beginning, his essay commences with the confident assertion that ‘autobiography is a solidly established literary genre, its history traceable in a series of masterpieces’ – masterpieces that are then listed, in an unembarrassedly canonical gesture, as written by ‘heads of government or generals, ministers of state, explorers, businessmen’, with the genre being both ‘peculiar to Western man’ and displaying a Christian aesthetic, commencing with St. Augustine.¹⁵ Yet Gusdorf then sets out to establish *a posteriori* the ‘conditions and limits’ of the genre, a move that suggests less confidence about its condition than his opening sentence would imply. Whether Gusdorf is a tenable starting point is moot, for Laura Marcus outlines a field of scholarship that pre-dates Gusdorf by more than a century and a half. In her extensive review of the theory, criticism and practice of autobiography, Marcus cites one of the earliest commentators, John Foster in 1805 suggesting that an autobiography should ‘[endeavour] not so much to enumerate the mere facts and events of life, as to discriminate the successive states of the mind, and so

¹³ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 91.

¹⁴ James Olney, ‘Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Bibliographical Introduction’, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 3-27 (p. 8).

¹⁵ Georges Gusdorf, ‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, pp. 28-48 (pp. 28-29).

trace the progress of what may be called the character'.¹⁶ The life recounted, according to another critic, A. O. Prickard some fifty years later, ought to be of 'great thinkers, who have either moulded the opinions of the age, or have at least awakened our sympathy by the remarkable changes which their own minds have undergone'.¹⁷ From that, one might deduce the rough outline of a genre that characteristically offers a developmental account of a noteworthy person. Gusdorf can be seen to follow a certain pattern within the tradition of autobiographical criticism, when he writes that:

The author of an autobiography gives himself the job of narrating his own history; what he sets out to do is to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch [...] the autobiographer strains toward a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny.¹⁸

Within these comments some basic tenets of the generic definition of autobiography are clear – the idea that the account offered is of the life of the author, that it should be complete (and, as a consequence, honest) and that it should not be self-contradictory. 'Autobiography,' he continues, echoing the developmental factor identified a century earlier, 'requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time.'¹⁹ Yet Gusdorf's account immediately prompts a series of questions: which version of the events ought to be taken as the true version? An account of the events that can be historically verified? Or the phenomenological account of the events as *perceived* by the self? Or more simply, perhaps just the memory of the events that the self can honestly offer? Gusdorf perhaps anticipates these challenges, for although his argument is premised on an untroubled concept of the self, the 'true person' as seen from the inside (a concept that would require a more detailed consideration than can be given here), he

¹⁶ John Foster, as cited by Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p. 19.

¹⁷ A. O. Prickard, as cited by Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p. 39.

¹⁸ Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', p. 35.

¹⁹ Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', p. 35.

ends on a less contentious note, writing that 'every man is the first witness of himself; yet the testimony that he thus produces constitutes no ultimate, conclusive authority'.²⁰

The question of honesty and authority become intertwined in Elizabeth Bruss's attempt to define the genre. She writes that the:

only valuable definition [of the genre] would be one that reflects a literary category that actually 'exists,' in the sense that it can be experienced as something that constrains or directs the acts of reading and writing, or at least provides readers and writers with an interpretation of their actions.²¹

Bruss's formulation would seem to be exactly what Derrida had in mind when he described the approach that 'utterly ignores the demands of a text which it tries to control with the most traditional determinations of what constitutes the limits of the written, or even of "publication"'.²² Robert Elbaz makes even clearer the political investment in imposing a definition on a genre. For him, genre is 'an ideological grid forced upon consciousness', and 'generic classification is a hegemonic phenomenon which restricts literary practice to approved, institutionalised forms of expression'.²³ While I would follow Derrida's rejection of the traditional imposition of limits, Bruss, in her study of the 'changing situation' of the genre, comes up with a rules-based approach to defining autobiography, premised on Searle's speech act theory. As a consequence the honesty, or lack of it, becomes key when one conceives of a contract between author and reader. That there is an authority lurking behind this legalistic sense of contract becomes apparent when Bruss writes that 'an autobiographer can be convicted of "insincerity"', citing the case of Clifford Irving, who was imprisoned for (falsely) claiming to be the editor of Howard Hughes's autobiography.²⁴ Yet if honesty or sincerity was to become the yardstick, then one would simultaneously need an

²⁰ Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', p. 36, p. 48.

²¹ Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 1.

²² Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell, ed. by Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 5.

²³ Robert Elbaz, as cited by Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 9.

²⁴ Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts*, p. 11.

indicator of authorial intention, and moreover perhaps a secondary set of witnesses to concur on the autobiographer's presence at a particular moment in history. An unpromising prospect if ever there was one.

From the canon to the contract, the figure of authority seems to be intimately bound up with the attempt to answer the questions regarding how autobiography should be defined. If autobiography is the story of the self, even Gusdorf's notion of the 'true person' comes under intense scrutiny. For example, the self itself can be a site of struggle and contestation. In her account of eighteenth-century autobiographies, Felicity Nussbaum brings the work of Émile Benveniste into play, to elaborate the 'distinction between the "I" who speaks and the "I" who is spoken. For Benveniste, language constructs subjectivity, and in turn subjectivity writes language'.²⁵ This concept of the split subject allows Nussbaum to use the work of Foucault to argue that 'the "self" of autobiography is an effect of ideology and a mediation of its conflicts, and that a politics of writing and reading is implicit within it'.²⁶ Nussbaum challenges dominant notions in autobiographical criticism: on the micro level, the developmental notion of 'the attainment of true self', while on the macro level the idea that there can be one developmental line of autobiographical evolution, where 'eighteenth-century self-writing can only be an attempt to strive toward nineteenth-century models and notions of self, and our attempts to read it will be constrained by that view'.²⁷

So the problem of generic identity remains for the critics. On the one hand, both Gusdorf and Bruss prompt the question of whether the genre can be said to 'exist' prior to the definition, or if it is rather the definition that brings the genre to birth. On the other hand, more recently Candace Falk has written that 'autobiography is indeed everywhere one cares to find it'.²⁸ How is one to discern something that is perhaps

²⁵ Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, p. 31.

²⁶ Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, p. xxi.

²⁷ Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, p. 8, p. 9.

²⁸ Candace Falk, as cited by Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, p. 1.

everywhere? Paul de Man sums up the dilemma when he writes that ‘attempts at generic definition seem to founder in questions that are both pointless and unanswerable’.²⁹

Moreover the pursuit of a binding generic definition then further complicates itself in the attempt to distinguish between autobiographies, memoirs, and other forms such as letters and diaries. This seems, invariably, to be bound up with hierarchical notions of worth. Laura Marcus suggests that:

the autobiography/memoirs distinction – ostensibly formal and generic – is bound up with a typological distinction between those human beings who are capable of self-reflection and those who are not. This opposition is still current, often correlated with class and cultural capital.³⁰

In rejecting this hierarchy (by not limiting the scope of this chapter to high or low forms of life-writing), I am not seeking to ignore the question of the generic definition of autobiography, but rather than answer it, I will examine its implications. From there, I will turn to authority, the central concern of this thesis. I will seek to identify where the figure of authority can be seen to function within anarchist autobiography, and to what purpose. In so doing, I will examine the autobiographies, memoirs and letters of various figures from anarchist history, while at the same time noting how they can be seen to exemplify (the disputed) generic norms, or alternatively challenge them, or even both.

The notion of the exemplar, of course, is itself a contentious area within autobiographical criticism, for as Marcus notes, it:

remains a constant preoccupation, both in overtly moral and didactic terms (in which the roles of biography and autobiography lie in their national and institutional functions in transmitting the achievements of one generation to the next) and in an ‘anthropological’ context, in which ‘great’ autobiographies, the expression of ‘great’ individuals, become the materials from which ostensibly ‘universal’ laws can be drawn.³¹

²⁹ Paul de Man, ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’, *MLN*, 94 (1979), 919-930 (p. 919). Although Laura Marcus describes De Man’s essay as ‘influential’ (p. 203), it seems impossible to cite his work without acknowledging, at least in passing, the troubling questions raised by the posthumous discovery of his war-time journalism. For a brief discussion of these in relation to the themes of autobiography, see Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, pp. 211-213.

³⁰ Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p. 21.

³¹ Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p. 49.

The subjects for this chapter's discussion are all in varying degrees anarchists, refugees, revolutionaries and convicts (and one artist), and it might be reasonable to assume that they are not the sort of 'great individuals' of whom the ruling arbiters of taste might look to make exemplars. Yet it will be seen how, within the reduced world of the anarchist milieu, the notion of the exemplar was very much alive, and bears greatly on the production of these life stories.

Emma Goldman – believing the story

One of the 'rules' that Elizabeth Bruss comes up with for the generic definition of autobiography 'necessitates that some shared identity bind author, narrator, and character together; no matter how vague, no matter how great the tension or disparity, the relationship itself is inescapable'.³² At various times Emma Goldman's autobiography, *Living My Life*, displays the gaps between the three disparate functions that Bruss identifies. Even the very title is worth comment, for it would seem to entertain the possibility of living a life in the sense of a theatrical role, or the possibility of living someone else's life, and hence that one's own life was lived as if it was a matter of choice to live that life and not any other. Indeed the elision of the active subject from the title, the absence of the 'Me' who is 'Living My Life' (in the way one might expect a truncated title below a family snapshot – 'Me playing football, age 8') leaves open the possibility that the expanded title might have been 'You living my life' or 'Mary living my life', none of which would be grammatically, even if logically, unacceptable. This immediately illustrates the split between the author and the narrator, for in a sense the narrator is telling the story of the author having lived the life of Emma Goldman, but at times the ('real') Emma Goldman (author) seems strangely distant from the pages of this text.

³² Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts*, p. 12.

It would definitely be stretching a point, though, to suggest that Emma Goldman the character narrated is in any way substantially absent from the pages of her autobiography. The text runs to two volumes, totalling nearly one thousand pages, and details, in what is at times a welter of minutiae, the day to day happenings in the life of one of the pre-eminent anarchist propagandists and activists of the turn of the last century. The narrative begins as Goldman arrives in New York in 1889 at the age of twenty, nearly four years after she had landed in America as an immigrant from Lithuania. In her discussion of *Frankenstein*, Barbara Johnson wonders, in relation to Nancy Friday's text *My Mother/My Self*, if autobiography is 'somehow always in the process of symbolically killing the mother off by telling her the lie that we have given birth to ourselves?'³³ Goldman's text does not seem to be overly concerned with the role of her mother; in fact in the first chapter she warrants only two mentions, the most descriptive of which states that her mother 'while less violent [than her father] with the children, never showed much warmth' (I, p. 11).³⁴ Indeed it is not until halfway through the second volume of the text that her mother is mentioned in any detail at all. Goldman gives a brief portrait of her mother at age eighty-one, and casually mentions that 'whenever I visited Rochester, Mother had new conquests to report' (II, p. 696). Curiously, these are visits and reports that have merited but a few scarce pages in the text (I, pp. 208-211). The portrait is of her mother as an activist, organising to assist the orphans of the local Jewish population. Strikingly, Goldman highlights a particular moment when her mother, speaking at one of the 'numerous lodges' of which she was a member, was told that she had exceeded her allotted time. Despite having been absent from the meeting in question, Goldman dramatises the moment with a first person account. 'Drawing herself up to full stature, my mother defiantly announced: "The whole United States Government could not stop my daughter Emma Goldman from

³³ Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 147.

³⁴ In a letter to Mary Leavitt, 2 November 1932, Goldman characterised her childhood as 'ghastly'. Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 175.

speaking, and a fine chance you have to make her mother shut up!” (II, p. 697). The scene demonstrates a clear inversion of (chronological, or perhaps ‘natural’ genealogical) precedence, with Goldman’s prowess as a free-speech activist determining the articulation of her mother’s identity. It is debatable whether Goldman is indeed ‘killing her mother off’, in Johnson’s words, for she would not appear, at least by the text’s account, to have been a major authority figure in Goldman’s formative years. Yet on the other hand, the temporal framing of *Living My Life* displays, in the narrator’s attempt to give birth to Goldman the character as anarchist activist, what Linda Anderson calls the desire ‘of becoming, within the realm of the symbolic, one’s own progenitor, of assuming authorship of one’s own life’.³⁵ Perhaps to achieve this it is necessary that the genealogical progenitor of Goldman’s story be removed from the scene.

From the opening, the narrative employs what seems to be a curiously religious vein of language. While St. Paul upon maturation put childish things away, Goldman writes that her younger self ‘was now left behind me’. The text next conjures a metaphor of a snake shedding its skin, when it continues to say that what was behind Goldman was ‘cast off like a worn-out garment’. The religious imagery threading its way through this prose is then made explicit with the text’s description of Goldman being in possession of ‘a passionate ideal’. Goldman’s story has become orientated, already by the end of the first paragraph, within the discourse of narratives of faith, with a hostile material world being portrayed as a test of her beliefs – ‘A new world was before me, strange and terrifying. But I had youth, good health, and a passionate ideal. Whatever the new held in store for me I was determined to meet unflinchingly’ (I, p. 3).

It is perhaps significant that Goldman’s ‘passionate ideal’ is stated as present before it is actually described for what it is or might be, for the ‘passionate ideal’ that

³⁵ Anderson, *Autobiography*, pp. 67-68.

motivates Goldman during the course of the life described in *Living My Life* takes more than one form. The text's starting point is Goldman's entry into the world of anarchist activism in New York. The prompt for this is her reaction to the episode of the Haymarket martyrs: after a series of violent confrontations between the Chicago police and strikers had culminated in the death of several strikers, a meeting was called to protest these deaths. That meeting ended with a bomb being thrown which killed several police. Eight men were convicted of this bombing, and four of them were subsequently hanged.³⁶ The text describes how Goldman, as a teenager still in Rochester with her sisters, travelled to a meeting organised as part of a campaign to try to save the accused men from their fate. Goldman suggests that it was 'the violence of the press, the bitter denunciation of the accused, the attacks on all foreigners' which turned the sympathies of her and her sister to the arrested men (I, p. 7). The speech that she heard, though, she characterises as a '*passionate* indictment against the forces that were about to destroy eight human lives' (I, p. 7, my emphasis). Whether or not *Living My Life* is a 'lie' that the text tells to Goldman's mother to kill her off is one thing, but it would seem clear that the text seeks to give birth to its own author through this encounter with faith. It is unequivocal about her reaction to the news of the eventual hanging of four of the men.

Goldman describes being overwhelmed by the news of the deaths, continuing:

I was put to bed, and soon I fell into a deep sleep. The next morning I woke as from a long illness, but free from the numbness and the depression of those harrowing weeks of waiting, ending with the final shock. I had a distinct sensation that something new and wonderful had been born in my soul. A great ideal, a burning faith, a determination to dedicate myself to the memory of my martyred comrades, to make their cause my own, to make known to the world their beautiful lives and heroic deaths. (I, p. 10)

³⁶ The suspicion lingers to this day that it was the work of an agent provocateur, for the trial of the union leaders themselves was widely regarded as a travesty of justice, and the three imprisoned men were subsequently pardoned by the governor of Illinois in a ruling that vindicated the sweeping criticisms that had been made of the trial judge, the packing of the jury and the behaviour of the Chicago police. See the text of Governor John P. Altgeld's pardon, 'Reasons for Pardoning Fielden, Neebe and Schwab', available online at <<http://www.chicagohs.org/hadc/books/b06/B06.htm>>. For a discussion of the background to the Haymarket incident, see Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Hence the reader encounters Emma Goldman, reborn in spirit, and birthed in the text within the frame of the judicial murder of the Chicago martyrs.³⁷ Indeed, Goldman would be more explicit about it ‘years’ later (in narrative time), when in the wake of her arrest in connection with Czolgosz’s assassination of McKinley, she found herself detained in Chicago. She writes:

Peculiar and inexplicable the ways of life, intricate the chain of events! Here I was, the spiritual child of those men, imprisoned in the city that had taken their lives, in the same jail, even under the guardianship of the very man who had kept watch in their silent hours. Tomorrow I should be taken to Cook County Jail, within whose walls Parsons, Spies, Engel, and Fischer had been hanged. Strange, indeed, the complex forces that had bound me to those martyrs through all my socially conscious years! And now events were bringing me nearer and nearer – perhaps to a similar end? (I, p. 307)

Goldman’s narrative can be forgiven for sounding somewhat melodramatic, for by both her and Berkman’s accounts, in the aftermath of McKinley’s assassination the press and popular opinion were baying for her blood, and many of her friends thought she was giving her own life away by voluntarily surrendering to the police in order to clear her name. The quotation, and perhaps even the act of surrender, both demonstrate the intimate link between faith and mortality – Goldman had such faith in her own innocence that she was prepared to face death. And yet it was the deaths of the Chicago martyrs that brought about the ‘life’ (as recounted) that she lived and which thus occasioned this particular standoff with mortality. This prompts its own set of problems with regard to the autobiography - how does one give face to a faith? How can a text put into words that which must necessarily transcend the constraints of language? How does this imply, as I suggested above, an absence of the ‘real’ Emma Goldman author from the pages of the text?

If one follows Paul de Man’s understanding of autobiography, he suggests that the genre thinks of itself as ‘a discourse of self-restoration’, and that particularly for

³⁷ The text/birth cycle would seem to come to a certain sense of completion in later years with the launch of Goldman’s own journal *Mother Earth*, which she describes as ‘the expected child’, complete with christening and ‘foster-parents’ (I, pp. 377-378).

Wordsworth, it was 'restoration in the face of death'.³⁸ What one finds here in Goldman's text is the restoration of the self as a subject willed (or self-willed) into existence, in the face of the death of the Chicago martyrs (and, both metonymically and literally, by her use of the term 'martyred comrades' for those she had never met; by her self-identification with their 'cause'; and by the possible sharing of their fate by all those who struggle against injustice, including herself). This movement, though, would seem to simultaneously mask the 'real' Emma Goldman. De Man argues that autobiography cannot offer 'reliable self-knowledge', for it 'demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions'.³⁹ Just as prosopopeia is for De Man 'the trope of autobiography, by which one's name [...] is made as intelligible and memorable as a face', the use of language to achieve this means the loss of the referent, the life, and so 'the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores'.⁴⁰ In trying to put her faith, her 'passionate ideal', into words, it appears that 'the real' Goldman only moves further beyond the grasp of the text.

This last comment, though, would seem to conflate Goldman with her faith. A closer scrutiny of her faith, though, will show that there is a more complex relationship at work here. If Goldman's faith is prompted by the death of the Chicago martyrs, then it takes on more than one form, as I suggested above. The most central of these, in the context of the autobiography, is her relationship to Alexander Berkman, or Sasha as she affectionately referred to him. The very same day that the narrative opens, she meets Berkman for the first time, and again the import of this textual framing cannot be

³⁸ De Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', p. 925.

³⁹ De Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', p. 922.

⁴⁰ De Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', p. 926, p. 930.

overlooked.⁴¹ Goldman's encounter with Berkman, also a Russian exile and anarchist activist, would mark both their lives indelibly. Decades later Goldman was to write to Berkman, just some months before his suicide (in what he in turn described as 'the most beautiful letter, perhaps' that she had ever written to him), that the 'secret' of her life was that:

the one treasure I have rescued from my long and bitter struggle is my friendship for you [...] no one ever was so rooted in my being, so ingrained in every fiber, as you have been and are to this day.⁴²

In 1889, though, the narrative of *Living My Life* plunges the reader into the world of revolutionary exiles, sitting round tables in Sach's cafe on the East Side of New York. Goldman is introduced to Berkman, although the text offers no commentary on the innocuous beginning of such a dramatic companionship. (This lack of commentary points up one of the textual artifices of *Living My Life*, which is that the events unfold on the page as if they are being recorded contemporaneously, rather than some forty years later.) I have detailed the events of their lives elsewhere, but in brief they became lovers, and threw themselves into the cause of anarchism with impressive dedication and energy. Influenced by the writings of Johann Most, the leading figure of the day in the anarchist movement in New York, they believed at this time in the power of the *attentat*, an act of political violence (the infamous 'propaganda by deed') that would inspire the masses to revolution. The brutality of the Homestead strike, in which workers had been killed by a privately hired 'security' force, led them to feel that an *attentat* would be justified in the case. As a result Berkman set off to Pittsburgh to assassinate Henry Clay Frick, the company manager held responsible for the strikers' deaths.

⁴¹ It might also be noted that the second volume of *Living My Life* opens with a reiteration of the same themes. On the first page, after the death of Voltairine de Cleyre, Goldman goes to Chicago to visit her grave, located, by De Cleyre's request, near the graves of the four hanged martyrs. On the second page, one encounters Berkman, working on the manuscript of his *Prison Memoirs* (II, pp. 504-505).

⁴² Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 248, p. 246.

Berkman's failed attempt to kill Frick led to him being imprisoned for 14 years, one positive outcome of which was his *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, discussed below. In the context of Goldman's story, though, the incident is the reason for Berkman's enforced absence from her narrative for the greater part of its first half. From the very moment of the mutual conception of the need for the *attentat* against Frick, the issue is portrayed by the text in religious terms. Goldman writes that as Berkman declares his intention to kill Frick, 'his clarity, his calmness and force, the sacred fire of his ideal, enthralled me, held me spellbound' (I, p. 87). The link that is already evident between Goldman's faith and mortality, be it her own or that of the Chicago martyrs, is transformed in the light of Berkman's imprisonment. By way of the familiar trope of the prison as alternatively a 'living death' for Berkman (I, p. 106), a 'living tomb' (I, p. 107), and a 'grave' (I, p. 249), the figure of the incarcerated Berkman becomes death-in-life for Goldman, and thus evolves into her motivating force. 'There was only Sasha – Sasha in convict's clothes, captive behind stone walls – Sasha with his pale set face pressed to the iron bars, his steady eyes gazing intently upon me, bidding me go on' (I, p. 107). After Goldman's own year of incarceration for incitement to riot, a letter from him upon her release prompts her to reflect that 'Sasha's spirit, fortunately, however, always hovered over me, helping me to forget everything personal' (I, p. 152). Later again, Goldman describes him as 'a shining meteor on the dark horizon [...] a white light that purged one's soul, inspiring even awe at his detachment from human frailties' (I, p. 177). This religious metaphor is extended further with a visit to the exterior of Berkman's penitentiary, where Goldman runs her hand over the 'rough surface' of the prison wall, conjuring lapidary images of a graveyard (I, p. 213).

This faith, though, undergoes a series of challenges, not least of which is Goldman's actual meeting with Berkman in prison. Apart from one short visit immediately in the wake of his trial, disguised as his sister, Goldman had to wait nine

years to see Berkman again. Once more disguised as his sister, she enters the prison 'with fast-beating heart'. She recounts seeing the guard, and 'beside him a man in a grey suit, the same greyness in his face. Could it really be Sasha, so changed, so thin and wan?' Despite the nine years of enforced estrangement (or perhaps because of it), 'Sasha made no sound. [...] I, too, was mute' (I, p. 295). Berkman's appalling physical condition was due to his extended periods of time in solitary confinement and the harsh treatment meted out by the prison authorities. Yet the silence of the meeting seems eloquent on another level. Faced with the incarnation of her ideal, Goldman is (uncharacteristically) reduced to muteness. The image appears to substantiate De Man's warning about the 'latent threat that inhabits prosopopeia, namely that by making the death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death'.⁴³

There is a fundamental alterity inscribed in the heart of Goldman's text, an inscription of the death, or absence, of that which prompts her faith.⁴⁴ This would be borne out by the letter that I cited earlier, in which Goldman describes Berkman as 'rooted in my being, so ingrained in every fiber'. Berkman is both part of Goldman and yet not of her. Nevertheless this apparently textbook definition of alterity is unsettled by the prison meeting with Berkman inasmuch as it is in fact Goldman's own *inscription* of the absence of Berkman that motivates her. The 'true' other, the living Berkman reduces

⁴³ De Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', p. 928.

⁴⁴ Derrida argues in *The Gift of Death* that 'this concern for death, this awakening that keeps vigil over death, this conscience that looks death in the face is another name for freedom'. The death in question, though, is the death of the self. Although Goldman's constant awareness is of the sacrifice of the Haymarket martyrs, it might be argued that bearing in mind her prison cell experience of the proximity of 'their' death, her text conflates her own death with theirs. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 15.

her to silence, challenging in his corporeal actuality the fragility of her authorised version of him.⁴⁵

This challenge multiplies itself. Goldman portrays Berkman as a martyr in religious terms, referring to the imprisonment as his ‘Calvary’ (I, p. 367). Berkman, along with Czolgosz and the Chicago martyrs, are ‘Christs’, crucified by an indifferent people on whose very behalf they had sought to act (I, p. 304).⁴⁶ The Christ imagery, though, has already experienced a fatal undermining, and by Goldman’s own hand. Goldman closes the chapter relating Berkman’s attempt on Frick and his subsequent arrest with a vow to herself – ‘I would rescue my boy, I would bring him back to life!’ (I, p. 107). Again, his release is described as a ‘resurrection’ (I, p. 382). Yet was Christ in fact willed back to life by the strength of belief of his faithful? Scripture suggests not, and so once more Goldman’s faith would seem to be more closely related to her own volition. That Berkman was indeed the object of her will and not her faith seems to become clearer with the metamorphosis of the imagery surrounding him – after his release from prison, and his subsequent fall into depression, she later upbraids herself for having been overly protective of him, motivated by ‘the mistaken belief, usual with mothers, that they know best what is good for their children’ (II, p. 541). Just as Berkman transubstantiates from Christ to child, Goldman writes of the jealous

⁴⁵ Even at their first meeting Goldman records that once they were prohibited from speaking in their ‘beloved Russian’, they both sat mute (I, p. 112). Strikingly, at each visit she describes an image of Berkman playing with her watch-chain. Goldman’s chain links Berkman to time, and thus death, yet his living presence would seem to frustrate this textual urge for her. At the same time, she quotes a *sub rosa* (illegally smuggled) letter from Berkman in the wake of the second visit, where he tries to explain his ‘strange behaviour’. It would seem that for Berkman as well, Goldman’s watch-chain comes to signify time, and thus life, as opposed to his living death. He writes that:

The sight of your face after all these years completely unnerved me. I could not think, I could not speak. It was as if all my dreams of freedom, the whole world of the living, were concentrated in the shiny little trinket that was dangling from your watch-chain. I couldn’t take my eyes off it, I couldn’t keep my hand from playing with it. It absorbed my whole being. (I, p. 322)

⁴⁶ The image of (anarchist) martyrs as Christ-like is later repeated for the thousands slaughtered by the Bolshevik forces led by Trotsky at the Kronstadt uprising (II, p. 889). The image of the prisoner being crucified by an inhuman system also runs through the collection of essays *Under the Yoke of the State: Selected Anarchist Responses to Prisons and Crime, Vol. 1, 1886-1929*, ed. by Dawn Collective (London: Kate Sharpley Library, 2003).

accusation of one of her longest lovers, Ben Reitman – ‘Sasha, he declared, was my god, Sasha’s life and work my religion’ (II, p. 581).

My argument is that Goldman’s faith is not so much a belief in some transcendental other but rather the product of her own will. Her will, in my reading, produces the passionate ideal that gives her the authority to live her own life, the life of Emma Goldman the anarchist activist. This closes a causal circle that requires no further linkage to the ‘reality’ of an external world, nor the ‘spirituality’ of a next world. It is not the case that this should be a problem in and of itself, but it does highlight the source of Goldman’s textual authority to embark upon her journey as Goldman. This is the meaning behind my earlier suggestion that the ‘real’ Emma Goldman seems at times to be distant from the pages of her autobiography.

This reading would be reinforced by the events of the Russian Revolution, which initially come to occupy the locus of the new vessel for Goldman’s faith. Despite being composed several years after she and Berkman departed from Russia, the text ostensibly attempts to recount their arrival there and introduction to the revolution without the rancour that one might expect hindsight to have brought her. The description of their arrival in Russia opens on a positively evangelical note, following the already established thread of religious imagery that runs through *Living My Life*:

Soviet Russia! Sacred ground, magic people! You have come to symbolize humanity’s hope, you alone are destined to redeem mankind. I have come to serve you, beloved *matushka*. Take me to your bosom, let me pour myself into you, mingle my blood with yours, find my place in your heroic struggle, and give to the uttermost to your needs! (II, p. 726)

At the same time, though, the text struggles not to show its hand too early. Within a few days of their arrival, Goldman and Berkman meet a former anarchist comrade from the U.S., Bill Shatoff, now an active member of the government. Despite Goldman recording that ‘the faith and fervour of [Shatoff] swept me along to ecstatic

heights', she continues that 'I could not entirely free myself from an undercurrent of uneasiness one often feels when left alone in the dark' (II, p. 731).

The text embarks on a carefully charted course which describes the slow loss of faith in the revolution as seen at first hand by Goldman and Berkman. Goldman attends a (clandestine) meeting of anarchists in Petrograd, and rapidly finds dissenting voices – they scorn her for her 'wilful blindness', telling her that Shatoff has become a "Sovietsky" anarchist' and is hiding 'facts' from her (II, p. 734). A few pages later the text makes the stakes of this wilfulness clear:

Thus I reasoned with myself, determinedly refusing to see the reverse side of Russia's face. But its scarred and twisted countenance would not be ignored. It kept calling me back, urging me to look, forcing me to view its suffering. I wanted to see only its beauty and radiance, longed passionately to believe in its strength and power, yet the very hideousness of the other side compelled with an irresistible appeal. (II, pp. 737-738)

Here the text embodies Roy Pascal's contention that 'autobiography is a shaping of the past' and that it 'imposes a pattern on a life, constructs out of it a coherent story'.⁴⁷ The text eschews any attempt to present the 'facts' as they occurred, and increasingly Goldman's unease takes control of the direction of the narrative. In a meeting with the American journalist John Reed, Goldman learns that the shooting that she had heard at night, and that she had been told was the 'target practice of *kursanty* (Communist students at the military training-school for officers)' was in fact the sound of summary executions (II, p. 740). She describes an interview with Maxim Gorky, who had been her 'idol', but ends with a retrospective observation that she 'would not see his feet of clay' (II, p. 745). Eventually the narrative recognises that Goldman's 'old values had been shipwrecked' and that she had been 'thrown overboard to sink or swim' (II, p. 813). Her struggle with the facts of the revolution eventually comes to a climax in an illuminating passage in which Goldman opposes the desire for faith against will:

⁴⁷ Roy Pascal, as cited by Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p. 163.

Alexandra Shakol [a Russian anarchist] had once told me that she would forgo half her life to wake up a Communist, so as to give herself unreservedly to the party's demands and service. Now I understood what she had meant. I felt that I would also give anything to be able to take Vetoshkin's [an enthusiastic Bolshevik functionary] hand and say: "I am with you. I see your cause with your eyes and I will serve with the same blind faith as you and your sincere comrades." Alas, there was no such short and easy way out of the mental anguish for those who seek for life beyond dogma and creed. (II, p. 831)

The narrative comes to its logical conclusion soon after when Goldman writes that 'only a year had passed, and nothing was left but the ashes of my fervent dreams, my burning faith, my joyous song' (II, p. 860).

The sense that Goldman the activist was brought to life in the text by the passion of her ideal is reinforced by this loss of faith, for it culminates in a dramatic loss of voice. This happens during an emergency meeting of the Petrograd soviet to discuss the protest of the Kronstadt sailors in solidarity with a strike being held in the city. Goldman writes that in comparison with an anti-war meeting in the United States, where likewise the 'spirit of vengeance and hate had run amuck', but where she had spoken out against 'the war-drunk patriots', in Petrograd the atmosphere of 'passion and hate' had 'crept into my being and held me by the throat' (II, p. 881). If this is perhaps Goldman's personal nadir, she rouses herself from it immediately and the same night she and Berkman send a letter in support of the doomed Kronstadt sailors.

What is more curious, though, is that the text moves on from this nadir to turn the language of religious fervour back against the Bolsheviks. Trotsky's resolution to exterminate the Kronstadt rebels prompts Goldman to write that 'daring to question the divine right of rulers was again to be punished by death' (II, p. 883). Moreover the arrival of various union activists known to Goldman and Berkman in Moscow for a 'Red Trade Unions' congress prompts a scenario of public betrayal that brings images of Judas to mind. Goldman writes scathingly that:

I felt that this treachery was not so much the fault of [those] who were on their knees before the holy shrine of the Kremlin. It was rather the

appalling superstition, the Bolshevik myth, that duped and ensnared them, as it had also formerly done to us.

Soviet Russia had become the modern socialist Lourdes, to which the blind and the lame, the deaf and the dumb were flocking for miraculous cures. (II, p. 916)

Unsurprisingly, her eventual exit from Russia is described as with her 'dreams crushed, my faith broken, my heart like a stone' (II, p. 927). Yet what does this language of faith achieve? The rapid volte-face in the text's treatment of the notion of ideological faith would seem to undo the possibilities for any easy confidence in the enduring, even transcendental, nature of faith. The text, it would appear, wants to have the reader accept Goldman-the-activist as a character possessed of a burning idealism, one which propelled her into a life of struggle. Yet at the same time, the text then stages several encounters with the 'reality' of the objects of her faith, and she is repeatedly left silenced, in her prison meetings with Berkman and in the face of Bolshevik scheming. What is more the faith of others, in this case the Bolsheviks, comes in for open scorn on her part, this after having been held up as an erstwhile object of desire.

This sense of contestation extends beyond the limits of this one text, though. The very notion of 'Goldman' becomes more complex when one turns to the volume of letters. In place of the image of a glassy-eyed zealot that her 'faith' might lead one to construct, the letters offer a portrait of a subject in conflict. For example, in the letter that Goldman and Berkman wrote from Ellis Island, shortly before the departure of the *Buford* with its cargo of deportees, they write that 'he who ascends to the greatest heights of faith is often hurled into the depths of doubt'.⁴⁸ This doubt is accentuated with the passage of the final years of their lives, and Goldman wrote in 1931 that 'I too have come to the conclusion, bitter as it is, that hardly anything has come of our years of effort'.⁴⁹ She compares herself, in terms of her incessant railing against injustice, to someone suffering from 'an incurable disease' but who visits every doctor regardless of

⁴⁸ Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 49.

the impossibility of a cure, and then wonders if her efforts are not quixotic, and if she is not 'a fool to keep pegging away at windmills'.⁵⁰ Indeed the letters even reveal absences within the text of the autobiography – for example in a letter to Berkman she discusses having 'left out quite a number of episodes' from her love life, considering the men concerned not to be of sufficient relevance to her story to merit inclusion.⁵¹

These 'Goldmans' must be ranked alongside the various Goldmans of the autobiography and indeed of the political texts. My contention would be that this plurality of Goldman's work consistently undermines the very motivating notion of faith supposedly offered within it, and in so doing can be seen to undermine the foundation of any authority that would spring from it. In this I would concur with Linnie Blake's argument that a life such as Goldman's 'may appear incomplete, contradictory, unstable, derivative or too eclectic to form a rational system of thought. But that [...] is its strength'.⁵² This is no faith in a transcendental other, but rather a faith that shifts and slips, a faith that struggles and that can be made and unmade in the face of challenges from the 'facts' of her life – challenges that it fails to measure up to. This failure should, though, be read as a source of inspiration, for despite Goldman's insistence on the necessity of facing the facts, with its apparent sense of the facts speaking for themselves, what her text demonstrates is a radical act of interpretation. Her faith is not that of the unswerving fundamentalist but rather the pragmatic realist committed to a notion of tolerance that would allow all faiths but enshrine none.

Alexander Berkman – learning the story

The fractured subject that can be seen to emerge from Emma Goldman's life writing establishes a fascinating contrast with the subject that emerges from Alexander

⁵⁰ Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 50, p. 59.

⁵¹ Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 146.

⁵² Linnie Blake, 'A Jew, A Red, A Whore, A Bomber: Becoming Emma Goldman, Rhizomatic Intellectual', *Angelaki*, 2.3 (1997), 179-190 (p. 182).

Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*. While Goldman's subject ostensibly maintains her 'faith' through the course of her life, yet emerges from her text as a subject that has undergone many a transformation, Berkman's subject apparently undergoes a radical conversion as a result of the experiences described in his *Memoirs*. Goldman's text tries (and fails) to maintain her 'faith' in the face of all odds, thus eschewing one of the traditional models of autobiography, that being the delineation of the development of the self during the course of one's life. Berkman's text, though, in clearly focussing on one particular moment in his life (albeit a moment of over fourteen years in prison), manages to plot a development all the more startling for the brevity of the section of lifespan that it covers. I will plot the course of this development before considering its significance in the light of Hayden White's essay 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality'.⁵³

Goldman's involvement in the planning of the assassination on Frick was such that when she came to write her autobiography, she was advised by an American lawyer to excise all mention of the episode in order not to imperil her chances of a possible return to the United States. For example, at one point, in a rather desperate attempt to find the money necessary to purchase a revolver, she tried her luck as a prostitute on the streets of New York (to no avail, according to her own account). Yet Berkman's opening chapter leaps from the arrival of 'the Girl' (as he always refers to Goldman in the *Memoirs*) with a newspaper giving details of the massacre of the striking Homestead workers, to a scene where he is travelling on the train towards Pittsburgh, removing all detail of the support of the others that he received in planning and executing the attempt on Frick's life.

Perhaps the framing of the narrative in these terms is more understandable given that Berkman's text does not pretend to be a complete autobiography as such, but rather,

⁵³ Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 5-27.

as the title highlights, the memoirs from his time in prison. The opening chapters swiftly bring Berkman to his fateful confrontation with Henry Clay Frick, weaving in ‘flashback’ details from his past life in Russia before emigrating to the United States, including his radicalisation as a student in St. Petersburg. In the train Berkman reflects on his motives, feeling supremely confident of his righteousness in joining the Homestead proletariat in their struggle – ‘This is my natural mission. [...] No shadow of doubt crosses my mind.’⁵⁴ While Goldman’s faith fails to make her sound like a fundamentalist, Berkman takes on the tones of a steely assassin:

Could anything be nobler than to die for a grand, a sublime Cause? Why, the very life of a true revolutionist has no other purpose, no significance whatever, save to sacrifice it on the altar of the beloved People. And what could be higher in life than to be a true revolutionist? It is to be a *man*, a complete MAN. A being who has neither personal interests nor desires above the necessities of the Cause; one who has emancipated himself from being merely human. (*PMOA*, p. 11)

Berkman’s attempt at transcendence of the ‘merely human’ sounds an austere note indeed, one that Goldman’s account of his clashes with their co-conspirator Fedya, over the frivolous spending of money that would have been better destined to serve the movement, would seem to reinforce. Berkman reminisces about the place of the Russian Nihilists in his early days, with their slogan of ‘go to the People’, and from the opening chapters it is clear (even from the quotation above, with its ‘altar’) that in his universe the ‘People’ have been deified (*PMOA*, p. 15). The ‘grand, mysterious, yet so near and real, People...’ he writes, before going on to picture the ‘People’ as Atlas, supporting the weight of the world on his shoulders (*PMOA*, p. 9). Thus the opening chapters apparently offer an insight into the thinking and motivation of Berkman the character at the time he was planning the assassination, and serve as an important point of reference given the subsequent directions his thought will take.

⁵⁴ Alexander Berkman, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (New York: New York Review Books, 1999), p. 10. All further references in this chapter will be given as *PMOA* with page number.

It is clear that his self-image of cold-blooded revolutionist displays a troubling emotional distance from the human world around him. The fact of his consecration of the 'People' (always capitalized, as if to emphasize its higher metaphysical status) seems to lead to a dramatic separation from 'real' people. This is most clear from Berkman's attitude to himself – he compares himself with the revolutionary hero of a Russian novel, who goes through a 'system of unspeakable, self-inflicted torture to prepare himself for future exigencies'. Berkman considers this notion of preparation 'a sign of weakness'. 'Does a real revolutionist need to prepare himself, to steel his nerves and harden his body?' he asks himself, and adds, 'I feel it almost a personal insult, this suggestion of the revolutionist's mere human clay.' (*PMOA*, p. 13) Again the human is reduced to 'mere' alongside the Olympian stride of the passing revolutionist, but the text is already working to undo the naïve belief in the superhuman status of the revolutionist. For example, with the integration of the scenes from his childhood, one might be prompted to paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir in response to Berkman, that one is not born a revolutionist but becomes one. Hence the family background serves to highlight the all-too-human roots of Berkman the revolutionist, however much the narrative apparently seeks to persuade the reader of the opposite.

The merely human Berkman, it would seem, has not been completely banished by the self-authored revolutionist. After the climax of the first section, Berkman's attempt on Frick's life, Berkman lies struggling on the floor of Frick's office. The wounded factory boss is lifted to his feet:

He stands in front of me, supported by several men. His face is ashen gray; the black beard is streaked with red, and blood is oozing from his neck. For an instant a strange feeling, as of shame, comes over me; but the next moment I am filled with anger at the sentiment, so unworthy of a revolutionist. (*PMOA*, p. 38)

Despite his best (narrative) intentions, Berkman cannot completely impose the revolutionist on his human self. The tension between these two poles continues in the

first section of the text, and is staged in a much more dramatic fashion when Berkman is in prison awaiting trial. The gulf between ‘the People’ and mere ‘people’ begins to widen inexorably. In a night-time vision, Berkman visualises a carpenter preparing him a scaffold, and then imagines that it is the same man who overpowered him in Frick’s office. ‘If he only knew what he had done. He is one of the People: we must go to them, enlighten them. [...] He doesn’t know his real friends.’ (*PMOA*, p. 40) Berkman’s action is already plagued with misinterpretation in his eyes. This misinterpretation comes to life with his first encounter with other prisoners, who fail to understand Berkman’s motives or action. His reflections on this incomprehension bring the first textual admission of the widening gap:

Why can’t they understand the motives that prompted my act? [...] Not a striker myself, I could and should have had no interest in the struggle [...]. In the purpose of the act they refused to see any significance,— nothing beyond the mere physical effect. [...] It is, of course, consoling to reflect that neither of those men can properly be said to represent the People. (*PMOA*, pp. 52-53)

Berkman excitedly pins his hope for understanding on another prisoner, a Homestead worker who has been arrested on charges of throwing dynamite at the Pinkerton private security militia that had attacked the strikers. In his cell, Berkman precipitously begins to imagine an entire bond with the man to whom he has as yet to speak:

he will understand: he is of the real People. My heart wells up in admiration of the man [...]. He is of the true spirit; the embodiment of the great, noble People: the giant of labor grown to his full stature, conscious of his strength. Fearless, strong, and proud, he will conquer all obstacles; he will break his chains and liberate mankind. (*PMOA*, p. 53)

The narrative has established an oscillating pattern of setting up expectations of its characters, only to frustrate them. This time, though, it does so quite mercilessly. When Berkman manages to speak to the Homestead man the next morning, the ‘fearless’ giant does not want to be seen talking to him for fear of prejudicing his upcoming trial. When they manage a whispered conversation over his shoulder, with

Berkman walking behind him, the striker comments “‘Too bad you didn’t kill him. Some business misunderstanding, eh?’”. Berkman attempts to explain that he was acting on behalf of the striker’s people, but is angrily interrupted. He is told that the strikers ‘don’t believe in killing; they respect the law’ and that while ‘Frick deserves to die. He is a murderer’, the strikers ‘will have nothing to do with Anarchists’ (*PMOA*, p. 55).

Berkman’s reaction to this is unsurprising. In his cell that night, the narrative records his anger – ‘My hero of yesterday, the hero of the glorious struggle of the People, – how contemptible he has proved himself, how cravenly small!’ (*PMOA*, p. 56) Yet his emotional estrangement from ‘mere humanity’ leads him to a disturbing conclusion regarding the fate of this one particular striker:

The Judas-striker is not fit to live. Perhaps it would be best they should hang him. His death would help to open the eyes of the People to the real character of legal justice. [...]

The thought somewhat soothes my perturbation. At least the cause of the People will benefit to some extent. The man himself is not to be considered. He has ceased to exist: his interests are exclusively personal; he can be of no further benefit to the People. Only his death can aid the Cause. It is best for him to end his career in the service of humanity. I hope he will act like a man on the scaffold. (*PMOA*, pp. 58-59)

The text does not record if Berkman proposed his plan to the Homestead striker. One can only wonder at what the outcome of such a conversation might have been.

Berkman is forced to adopt a position where he comes to categorise people as to whether or not they are ‘People’, depending on their reaction to his act against Frick. The opening of *Prison Memoirs* is peppered with instances where various people are excluded from the ‘People’ – Berkman anticipates his trial, where ‘the jury won’t understand. They, too, belong to the capitalist class’ (*PMOA*, p. 58). He reacts against the warden of the prison placing him under suicide watch – ‘it outrages me that even a *bourgeois* should so meanly misjudge the aspirations of an active revolutionist.’ (*PMOA*, p. 59) This people/People opposition, though, is clearly a question of

interpretation, one which comes to dominate the narrative once Berkman is convicted and sentenced.

Shortly after his arrival at the Pennsylvania state penitentiary, Berkman receives a clandestine communication from another prisoner. Unaware of the provenance of the note, Berkman ‘vaguely’ surmises its meaning, an attempt at escape. But the prison slang that the note employs to warn him to be on his guard defeats his comprehension:

I must read the note again. It contains so many expressions I don't understand. I should ‘keep my lamps lit.’ What lamps? There are none in the cell; where am I to get them? And what ‘screws’ must I watch? And the ‘stools,’— I have only a chair here. Why should I watch it? (*PMOA*, pp. 108-109)

Berkman's narrative borders on self-deprecation with the barrage of naïve questions. Yet the missive serves as a powerful analogy for his entire period of incarceration, and his development across the pages of the *Prison Memoirs* is one of learning to read this note, of learning to find his place within a ‘people’ now left uncapitalized. Not long after receiving the note, he talks one morning to the ‘rangeman’, a prisoner who has been trusted with the privilege of sweeping the ‘range’ of cells. When his interlocutor warns Berkman not to speak too loudly for ‘the screw's got long ears’, he immediately notices the unknown word. ‘A wild hope trembles in my heart. The “screw”! The puzzling expression in the mysterious note,— perhaps this man wrote it.’ (*PMOA*, p. 122) The rangeman explains further prison slang to Berkman, enjoying his role as educator, noting that the new prisoner is ‘not long on lingo’ (*PMOA*, p. 123).

The centrality of interpretation can be seen again in the result of Berkman's attempt at escape. Eight years into his sentence, and with his hopes waning of ever surviving his incarceration, his health ravaged after repeated periods in solitary and on bread and water diets, Berkman conceived of a plan of escape where rather than tunnel out of the prison, others would dig a tunnel in for him. As a precaution, he had elaborated a code, ‘based on a discarded system of German shorthand’, to guarantee the

security of his communication with the diggers on the outside (*PMOA*, p. 362). When the tunnelling begins, a letter comes from the outside informing him of this: it is ostensibly a personal letter, but Berkman writes that ‘I scan each word and letter, seeking hidden meaning, analysing every flourish and dash, carefully distilling the minute lines, fusing the significant dots into the structure of meaning’ (*PMOA*, p. 375). The act of interpretation has now become central to his very escape and survival faced with the living death that he confronts in the prison. The plan came within a fraction of success, for despite difficult digging conditions and various changes of route to which Berkman had not consented and which he blamed for the eventual failure of the tunnel, months of work ended with the tunnel entrance lying just beneath the surface of one of the inner yards in the prison. Unfortunately for Berkman, on the day of his planned flight, workmen had dumped a pile of building material right on the spot where he expected to be able to pull up the earth covering the tunnel entrance, and so his escape was frustrated. Eventually the authorities discovered the tunnel, but they were unable to divine its provenance. In the house from where the tunnel began the police found an encrypted note. No other evidence pointed to who might have been responsible for the tunnel. Berkman was named as a prime suspect in the case, but the Warden’s clumsy attempt to trick him into deciphering the note failed, and Berkman recounts how the various authorities vied for the goal of identifying the culprits. Eventually he was cleared of involvement for lack of evidence (but punished regardless). The tunnel lay silent, incomprehensible to those who would attribute meaning and responsibility to it. It undermined the very foundation of the prison, ran under its walls and compromised its integrity. As a referent it is indisputable – it was an escape tunnel. As a sign, it was illegible to the authorities, along with the discovered note. No one could be held to account for it, for its significance could not be established.

Things no longer just 'are', but rather have to be read. This returns the notion of the exemplar, as mentioned above, to the discussion. The narrative of the *Prison Memoirs* not only argues for the correctness of Berkman's cause, but also for the use of his life (and possible death) as an example to be held up to both the movement and the world at large for reading. This depends, simultaneously, on the greater space for interpretative freedom in the text, which goes hand in hand with a closing of the emotional distance that Berkman originally felt towards humanity, including himself. The value of human life (not, though, in simple repentant relation to Frick) undergoes a substantive revision in the light of Berkman's experiences. Initially Berkman had arrived in custody with a capsule of nitro-glycerine secreted in his clothing. Part of Berkman's concept of *attentat* is that the act should be rounded off with the suicide of the *attentater*. If the 'People's Cause', he writes before he makes his attempt on Frick's life, 'demand his life, so much the better.' (*PMOA*, p. 11) He even manages, subsequently, to distinguish between the involuntary sacrifice of the Chicago martyrs and what he expects his suicide to be:

To give a young life, full of health and vitality, to give all, without a thought of self; to give all, voluntarily, cheerfully; nay, enthusiastically – could any one fail to understand such love? [Chicago] lacked the element of voluntary Anarchist self-sacrifice in the interests of the People. (*PMOA*, p. 60)

Nevertheless even in the moment of its articulation, the exemplary suicide of the *attentater* is beset by self-doubt – 'could anyone fail to understand such love?' – the implicit worry being that someone could indeed fail to understand. Berkman's calculating coldness towards his own life is reflected in his authoritarian arrogance in seeking to persuade the other Homestead prisoner to forfeit his own life in service to the Cause.

Yet the question of interpretation just will not leave these issues to settle themselves – these are never self-explanatory acts, but symbolic gestures, requiring

careful reading, even explication. Berkman conceives of his prison suicide, once he has had his moment in court to explain his actions, as being of further propaganda benefit to 'the Cause'; he senses that his first letter from Goldman presumes to 'reproach me with my failure to suicide' (*PMOA*, p. 116). Yet slowly the 'meaning' that might be derived from this action changes in the light of the circumstances in which Berkman finds himself. In fact the 'Cause' itself (or its narrative articulation) proves to be more flexible in its demands: in a moment of despair in solitary confinement, Berkman ponders suicide, but feels that 'on the threshold of Nirvana life recoils; in the very bowels of torment it cries out *to be!*'. He conceives of the prison authorities as 'the vampire gloating over its prey' and thus resolves that 'I shall not disgrace the Cause, I shall not grieve my comrades by weak surrender!' (*PMOA*, p. 220). Later in the narrative, Berkman conjures an imagined scene of his suicide, and again 'the thought of the enemy's triumph fans the embers of life. It engenders defiance, and strengthens stubborn resistance' (*PMOA*, p. 404). In this sense, *Prison Memoirs* comes to share with Goldman's *Living My Life* the characteristic of a trial of faith. Berkman's life moves from being an alienated piece of fleshy property to be disposed of as he, or the Cause, sees fit, to being the intimate property of the narrator.

The closing of this emotional distance between Berkman and human life comes to a striking conclusion when he finally articulates a position that is in stark opposition to the thoughts that he set down upon first entering prison. Reflecting on the assassination of the King of Italy by an anarchist, he ponders on the inevitable death of Bresci, the assailant:

I feel that the individual, in certain cases, is of more direct and immediate consequence than humanity. What is the latter but the aggregate of individual existences – and shall these, the best of them, forever be sacrificed for the metaphysical collectivity? (*PMOA*, p. 403)

Whereas the newly incarcerated Berkman had exulted in the opportunity to give up his life for a 'metaphysical collectivity', he has now rethought his position on many issues.

No longer the aloof revolutionist sharing nothing in common with fellow convicts, he writes that ‘I marvel at the inadequacy of my previous notions of “the criminal.” [...] Daily association dispels the myth of the “species,” and reveals the individual’ (*PMOA*, p. 242). In the workshop he had once accused his assistant, Boston Red, of being ‘disgusting’ for speaking of homosexual love (in that passage the other prisoner had to explain the slang of having a ‘kid’), claiming that ‘I don’t think there can be such intimacy between those of the same sex’. Red presciently replies ‘you’ll know better before *your* time’s up, me virtuous sonny’ (*PMOA*, pp. 170-171). Years later, discussing the matter with another prisoner, Berkman writes that ‘I think it a very beautiful emotion. Just as beautiful as love for a woman’ and relates his own experience of love for a fellow convict (*PMOA*, p. 445). Where once the young Berkman had been mystified at the slangy content of a smuggled note, by the middle section of the narrative he confidently expounds on prison life, giving the reader a lesson in convict jargon, explaining who and what the ‘con man’, the ‘yegg’ and the ‘gun’ are (*PMOA*, pp. 272-278). Berkman’s text takes on the contours of a *Bildungsroman*, where he gradually comes to a reworked appreciation of those around him. Even the tunnel, which had previously been conceived of as an empty space, is suddenly populated by the men digging it:

Half-naked they had labored through the weary days and nights, stretched at full length in the narrow passage, their bodies perspiring and chilled in turn, their hands bleeding with the terrible toil. [...] How little thought I had given to my comrades, toiling underground, in the anxious days of my own apprehension and suspense! (*PMOA*, pp. 396-397)

But rather than treat Berkman’s text as novelistic fiction, I will consider it in the light of Hayden White’s essay. Berkman’s text moves from a simple acceptance of the untroubled categorical status of real things, be they people (or ‘People’) or objects, to a more nuanced approach to interpreting them. In so doing, it demonstrates White’s concern over narrativity, the ‘problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*’. White

writes that '*real* events should not speak, should not tell themselves. Real events should simply be'.⁵⁵ Central to White's analysis is the notion of authority, demonstrable in historical writing in the difference between the annals form and chronicles or history proper, as he calls it. In White's account, the annalist has 'no need to claim the authority to narrate events since there is nothing problematical about their status as manifestations of a reality that is being contested. [...] It is because there was a contest that there is something to narrativize'.⁵⁶ Now Berkman's situation is one that is clearly highly contested – a believer in freedom incarcerated, an advocate of workers' control forced into prison slavery, the list could be multiplied at length. Indeed, bearing in mind White's observation that 'narrative in general, from the folktale to the novel, from the annals to the fully realized "history," has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, *authority*', it would seem redundant to add that Berkman's imprisonment could not be a clearer instance of an encounter with law.⁵⁷ Yet is Berkman the simple object of judicial authority? From White's analysis, it would seem not, for a narrative springs from the need to establish a victor in competing 'moral orders' – in Berkman's case this could be translated in many fashions (anarchism/state, justice/injustice, etc.), but perhaps the most pertinent oppositions would be 'the People' (or 'the Cause') versus 'the merely human', or the prison death versus liberated life. Berkman's text is clear about the passage from death to life upon his release – the last section of the text is titled 'The Resurrection', and there is a plethora of earlier references to the prison as a tomb. Moreover, the depression that inevitably assails Berkman upon his release is sketchily described, and at one point he buys a gun with the intention of committing suicide, but his full return to 'life', the life of an anarchist, comes on the last page when he hears news of police harassment of anarchist comrades:

⁵⁵ White, 'The Value of Narrativity', p. 5, p. 8.

⁵⁶ White, 'The Value of Narrativity', pp. 22-23.

⁵⁷ White, 'The Value of Narrativity', p. 17.

The news electrifies me. I feel myself transported into the past, the days of struggle and persecution. Philo was right! The enemy is challenging, the struggle is going on!... I see the graves of Waldheim open, and hear the voices from the tomb.⁵⁸

White sees only one possible ending for a story – ‘What else could narrative closure consist of than the *passage* from one moral order to another?’. In the passage from death to life, in White’s words, Berkman’s ‘very *right* to narrate hinges upon a certain relationship to authority per se’.⁵⁹ Yet more fundamentally, the narrative shows a Berkman who learns valuable lessons from his experience, in contrast to Goldman’s troubled narrator, whose enabling faith seems to be a moveable feast. In moving from the moral order of ‘the Cause’ to an appreciation of the value of human life and the individual, Berkman’s narrative ‘I’ displays a marked narrational authority. This is evident from the very first line of the *Memoirs* – ‘clearly every detail of that day is engraved on my mind’ (*PMOA*, p. 5). The absolute declaration of memorial fidelity allows no room for debate, and hence while Goldman’s text apparently maintains a resolute commitment to her faith, but yet reveals a subject in conflict, Berkman’s text offers a journey leading to a reversal of values that seems, somewhat problematically, only to strengthen the authority of the *cogito* of the narrator. Yet in the volume of letters, Goldman explicitly criticises Berkman for including details that she finds anachronistic in his text, arguing that he has passed off his contemporary views as those of his period of incarceration – ‘you did not even reason that way when you came out in 1906’ she writes.⁶⁰ Indeed Berkman’s reworked feelings towards the individual could be complicated by some of his writing in the letters, for in 1934, with both he and Goldman in despair at the progress of fascism across Europe, he wrote to her that ‘I

⁵⁸ *PMOA*, p. 518. Waldheim is the cemetery where the Chicago martyrs were buried. Berkman’s return to ‘life’ is clearly complicated by a similar relationship to the Haymarket dead as the one which Goldman’s text demonstrates.

⁵⁹ White, ‘The Value of Narrativity’, p. 26, p. 22.

⁶⁰ Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 95.

have almost lost all faith in the “free individual as the basis of a free society”.⁶¹ As I have suggested with Goldman, there can be no one single Berkman, be it the narrator or character, the young prisoner or experienced lag. The textual heritage has a literal and a metaphorical tunnel undermining its foundation – just as with their bitter experiences in Russia, the facts never simply speak for themselves. White concludes his essay arguing that the ‘value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary’.⁶² Berkman was ever ready to assert the authority of will over life, and in fact he finally died by his own hand in 1936, rather than face the continuing pain of a disabling cancer. Yet the work of interpretation tunnels through this authority and exposes it, as White suggests, as imaginary.

Goldman can be seen to represent the authority inherent in the autobiography’s attempt to birth its author as narrator of the life lived. Berkman, on the other hand, represents the attempt by the narrating *cogito* to maintain a developmental coherence that would simultaneously establish its own authority over the text. In this reading they can be seen to both affirm central critical values surrounding generic expectations of autobiography while at the same time undermining themselves and their own authority. To conclude, though, there is one particular critical concern that I have not addressed in these texts and that is the question of memory. White comments, in passing, that ‘the reality of these events does not consist in the fact that they occurred but that, in the first place, they were remembered and, second, that they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence’.⁶³ A comparison of the autobiographical writings of

⁶¹ Goldman and Berkman, *Nowhere at Home*, p. 105.

⁶² White, ‘The Value of Narrativity’, p. 27.

⁶³ White, ‘The Value of Narrativity’, p. 23. Although in an answer to one of the critical responses to his essay White distinguishes between ‘personal rather than public memory’, as my concern is the authority of the narrator and not the status of history, the model seems translatable. See Hayden White, ‘The Narrativization of Real Events’, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 793-798 (p. 798).

Rudolf Rocker and his younger son Fermin makes for a demonstration of the contentious question of memory when it comes to putting a life onto a page.

Remembering the Rockers

In 1895, while Berkman was in prison, and Goldman was preparing for her first trip to London, Rudolf Rocker arrived in England with his partner Milly. His text, *The London Years*, recounts this period of his life spent in London (exiled from the Germany of his birth by dint of his politics) the last third of which covers his period as an interned ‘enemy alien’ during the First World War.⁶⁴ In tone and substance it strikes a contrast with the passion of Goldman or the drama of Berkman, for despite Rocker being the leading anarcho-syndicalist of his day, labour activist and advocate of the overthrow of the state, the text adopts a more measured approach to its narrative. Rocker even comes to reprove the more fiery Russian exiles who arrive in London with ‘terrorist ideas’ (*LY*, p. 193), while he writes approvingly of England as ‘a country with a liberal tradition, a land of tolerance and fair play’ (*LY*, p. 186).⁶⁵ Indeed even his son Fermin commented that ‘there is perhaps a certain irony in the fact that for all his espousal of the revolutionary method, my father never used anything more lethal than his fists’.⁶⁶

Rocker’s anarchism, as seen through the pages of *The London Years* is of an attractive stripe. In one passage he neatly sums up what might be described as his anti-foundationalist approach:

My innermost conviction was that Anarchism was not to be conceived as a definite closed system, nor as a future millenium [*sic*], but only as a particular trend in the historic development towards freedom in all fields of human thought and action, and that no strict and unalterable lines could therefore be laid down for it.

⁶⁴ For a fuller account of Rudolf Rocker’s life, see Mina Graur, *An Anarchist ‘Rabbi’: The Life and Teachings of Rudolf Rocker* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).

⁶⁵ It might be added that if Rocker had perhaps expanded his horizon to take account of what was happening in Ireland at the time, to take one country at random, this notion of fair play might have been somewhat more difficult to maintain.

⁶⁶ Fermin Rocker, *The East End Years: A Stepney Childhood* (London: Freedom Press, 1998), p. 82. All further references in this chapter will be given as *EEY* with page number.

Freedom is never attained; it must always be striven for. Consequently its claims have no limit, and can neither be enclosed in a programme nor prescribed as a definite rule for the future. (*LY*, p. 145)

This contrasts greatly with the likes of Goldman and Berkman's youthful sense that they were on the edge of a revolution, needing only one last heave to bring about dramatic social change. Rocker's less dramatic claim to transcendental authority over the rights and wrongs of the future direction of human society is also reflected in his activism. He argues against the notion that anarchists are merely utopians – 'it is completely wrong to suppose that Anarchists reject the idea of an improvement of conditions in present-day society. What we said was that the people must work and fight for that improvement. It would not come by itself' (*LY*, p. 168).

In keeping with this more measured approach the narrative of *The London Years* displays an unassumingly moderate tone. The order of events is largely chronological, but the text shows an occasional tendency to interrupt the narrative flow. For example, only one chapter after his narrated arrival in London, Rocker digresses to give portraits of Louise Michel, a survivor of the Paris Commune, and Errico Malatesta, an exiled Italian anarchist (*LY*, pp. 72-77). Occasionally during ancillary character sketches, the narrative leaps forward in time to close a particular sketch with the fact and date of a character's death (*LY*, p. 63, p. 131). At other times the narrative voice intervenes directly in the text to signal a deferment of some further detail – 'I shall have more to say about him later' writes Rocker of one acquaintance (*LY*, p. 235). These digressions and deferments would seem to represent a minor skirmish between memory and narrative chronological consistency. Yet Rocker the narrator never comes to question the status of his own memory. This might not be cause for much surprise if one accepts Fermin Rocker's portrait of his father's ability as a public speaker: he writes that 'his phenomenal memory proved to be an important asset, enabling him to cite with ease the historical facts, figures, and quotations needed to prove his point' (*EEY*, p. 76) While

Rudolf Rocker's unquestioning reliance on his memory might not be a hugely authoritarian gesture, it does strike a marked contrast to the memoirs of his son, Fermin.

Fermin Rocker's memoir, *The East End Years: A Stepney Childhood*, is of an even more limited period of time than his father's, the first ten years of his life, and given that it is published by the anarchist Freedom Press, its principal interest would seem to lie in its portrayal of a previous generation of anarchist activists. The title is clearly an echo and acknowledgement of Rudolf Rocker's title, and in the preface Fermin writes that his father 'plays a very important part in this narrative' (*EEY*, p. 5). Yet the differences begin almost immediately. The narrative of *The East End Years* is framed by Fermin's return to London in 1966, some thirty seven years (by his account) after he left. The very opening foregrounds the question of the temporal disjunction between the narrator and the subject of the narrative, and this is soon reflected in the text. Fermin's historical narrative begins with 'I must have been about three years old', and continues that prior to that age, he has 'only the haziest recollection' (*EEY*, p. 11). Hence the text makes no attempt to assert the sovereignty of the narrator's memory over the events recounted, and this becomes a recurring motif in *The East End Years*. Moreover the degree of self-questioning that the text displays goes beyond the mere issue of memory. For example, in recalling his (childhood) understanding of the politics of his father's comrades, Fermin writes that while he could not comprehend the 'Babel of tongues' of the numerous international visitors, 'this much, however, I did know, *or at least so I thought*: these were the people who were fighting the good fight' (*EEY*, p. 15, my emphasis). Even regarding Fermin's opinion of his father's oratorical skills, the text tempers his conclusion with a certain reserve – 'For all my bias in this matter, the chances are that my father was indeed the best speaker at those gatherings' (*EEY*, p. 75).

Fermin Rocker went on to have a moderately successful career as an artist.⁶⁷ He writes that his ‘visual memory’ was an asset to him in his artistic career, and it seems that its influence can be noted in an impressionistic streak in the terms the narrative uses to approach the subject of *The East End Years* (*EEY*, p. 28). The text is punctuated by reflections on the scene visible, or the light at play: for example, Fermin describes the view from the window of the family flat in Stepney – ‘I can still remember spectacular sunsets when the great cupola [of St. Paul’s Cathedral] was boldly silhouetted against the evening sky’ (*EEY*, p. 13). He writes that the area around Stepney Green made ‘a pleasing composition’ (*EEY*, p. 14). The ‘particular stamp and atmosphere’ of the flat was due to the portraits hanging on the walls, with Fermin’s attention focused on the portrait of Bakunin (*EEY*, p. 16). On regular walks with his father, they would pass blacksmiths ‘hammering away at a piece of glowing metal amid a shower of sparks, making a picture that never failed to attract us’ (*EEY*, p. 28). Later, when on holiday in Bournemouth, the family took a boat trip to see the Needles. Although a summer heat haze initially shrouded the rocks, the mist lifts, and ‘their abrupt emergence and the strange and dramatic light that illuminated the scene provided a visual experience I have never forgotten’ (*EEY*, p. 115). Even on the very last page, as Fermin recounts his mother and he being reunited with his now deported father, in Amsterdam, the city is described as ‘basking in the mellow light of the October sun’ and the houses ‘finding their quivering image in the waters below’ (*EEY*, p. 184). Just as the text offers the reader ‘images’ of the scenes the narrator witnessed, it equally suggests the possibility that the text itself is just one image among many potential images of the life recounted. This approach, while not escaping the criticism that Hayden White makes of the urge to narrate, can at least be said, in contradistinction to Rudolf Rocker’s text, to foreground the question of memory and thus the authority of the narrator over the subject narrated.

⁶⁷ Apparently the highpoint in his career was the sale of one of his canvases to Mick Jagger. See Andrew Whitehead, ‘Fermin Rocker: Painter from a Family of London Anarchists’, *Guardian*, 26 October 2004, available online at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,,1335868,00.html>>.

At the same time, this leaves untroubled the presumed identity between author and narrator: indeed none of the texts considered can be said to attempt to question that point of potential incongruity.

When Georges Gusdorf wrote that the testimony of an author regarding his or her own life would never produce an 'ultimate, conclusive authority', it was not only because, as he put it, 'objective scrutiny will always discover inaccuracies', but also 'much more because there is never an end to this dialogue of a life with itself in search of its own absolute.'⁶⁸ The absolute is a concept clearly rejected in the work of the (anarchist) authors considered above, whether as an ideological starting point, as with Rocker, or as a result of their experiences, as with Goldman and Berkman. Yet despite a lifelong struggle against the absolutist claims of state authority, the figure of authority can be perceived to be, perhaps unwittingly, at work within the accounts they have left of their lives. In some aspects the loose collection of anarchist autobiographical texts that I have considered here, which can neither be said to be representative nor comprehensive, demonstrates a surprising degree of conservatism in conformity with generic expectations. On the other hand, the work of interpretation opens out these texts and shows how there are still many lessons left to be learnt from them, just not, perhaps, the ones the texts themselves attempt to hand down. Inspiration can still be readily drawn from these accounts of previous lives lived in struggle, without contradicting their primary lesson, that of not ceding to authority, even if it is to the authority that the text seeks to claim. In his introduction to *The London Years*, Rudolf Rocker wrote that 'social ideas are not something only to dream about for the future. If they are to mean anything at all they must be translated into our daily life, here and now; they must shape our relations with our fellow-man' (*LY*, p. 56). What this chapter has attempted to show is that they should also be translated into the relations between the text and the reader.

⁶⁸ Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', p. 48.

7

Contemporary Anarchist Writing: ‘More Subtle Than Programs’?

‘An old anarchist idea is that the new world must be created within the shell of the old.’ (John Moore)¹

Having criss-crossed, temporally speaking, more than a century of anarchist writing, it might be reasonable to bring this study to something of a conclusion with a look at anarchist writing as it stands at the present. The panorama of such writing confronting the reader is certainly dizzying. If one begins to try to outline the current wealth of anarchist literature and publishing, one can only give a tiny flavour of what is available. There is the academic journal *Anarchist Studies* that has been referred to several times during this thesis; there are the American printed journals *Zmag*, *Fifth Estate*, *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, *Social Anarchism*, *Green Anarchy* and *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*; in the U.K. there are annuals such as *Aufheben* or the recently folded *Do or Die*; the magazines of the various federations, *Black Flag* and *Direct Action*; the newspapers *Freedom* and *Green Anarchist*; and the free sheets such as the widely read *Schnews*, the Anarchist Federation’s *Resistance*, or the South Wales-based *Gagged*. Of the online resources (which multiply and duplicate themselves daily) major ones would include the *Anarchy Archives*, referred to several times in this thesis, as well as the exhaustive *Znet*, along with the *Research on Anarchism* site, the *Green Anarchy Archive*, the ‘*flag.blackened.net*’ site, the *Primitivism* site, the *Marxists Internet Archive* (with a subsection on anarchism), or the *Postanarchism Clearinghouse*. Related to this would be the number of online discussion groups, such as the research on anarchism

¹ John Moore, *A Primitivist Primer*, available online at <<http://www.primitivism.com/primer.htm>>.

list, the postanarchism list or the newly established anarchist academics list. British academia has also seen a recent upswing in interest in anarchism, with the web-mounting of two unpublished PhD theses by Jamie Heckert and Uri Gordon, both inspired by and dealing with anarchism, as well as the formation of a new research body, the Specialist Group for the Study of Anarchism. Back in the non-virtual world, it would also be worth mentioning the various publishing houses, Freedom, A.K. Press, the Kate Sharpley Library, Black Rose, Black and Red and many more. Also the recent spate of more mainstream books covering the 'anti-globalization movement', for example *No Logo*, *One No, Many Yeses* or *We Are Everywhere*, has brought anarchist activism and an arguably anarchist critique more clearly into the public eye without perhaps labelling it as such. Such a list only begins to touch on the amount of English language material currently available. Taking the inspiration that I mentioned in the previous chapter to heart, if one goes forth to take up the struggle against the state and authority today, what textual experiences does contemporary anarchist writing hold out to the questing reader? And perhaps more importantly, from my point of view, can contemporary anarchist writing be seen to avoid the pitfalls that my previous chapters have argued are generated by the conflicts of form and content?

Once again, one encounters the prior question of definition – how to identify 'contemporary' and 'anarchist' writing. For the purposes of this chapter, I will take 'contemporary' to mean since the 1960s, a dating that allows for something of a break from the classical anarchism of the likes of Goldman and Berkman, and looks towards the new multiplicity of concerns that currently exercises the anarchist milieu. The defeat of the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War is generally viewed within the anarchist movement as signifying the twentieth-century nadir in the fortunes of anarchism, coming hard on the heels of the intoxicating successes experienced just a short while before in various parts of Spain with the collectivization of agriculture and

industry.² Yet with the advent of the counter-cultural sixties the fortunes of anarchism revived. As John Clark notes, ‘to the surprise of practically all observers (excepting the small remnant of believers and visionaries) the movement began its return to the historical stage in the late 60’s’.³ One might conceivably tie this dating in with Lyotard’s argument that ‘in contemporary society and culture [...] the grand narrative has lost its credibility’. He suggests that ‘the decline of the narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means’.⁴ If dominant discourses of dissent have seemed to struggle at times to deal with the plethora of critiques that feminism, anti-colonial struggles, environmentalism, gay rights, anti-militarism and others have offered them, anarchism’s broad church has apparently grown as a result.⁵ This could be attributed to what John Moore calls the ‘distinctive character of anarchism’, that being ‘its continual capacity to redefine and reconfigure itself’.⁶

What, though, defines an anarchist text? Indeed, given the points that I have made in the previous chapters, is Boal’s blank page not arguably more anarchistic than a page from the newspaper *Freedom*, founded over a century ago in London by Kropotkin and others? The texts that I have chosen to examine in this chapter can be said to be anarchist inasmuch as they all explicitly deal with questions concerning anarchism, or at the very least have been published in anarchist journals or papers.

² For a discussion of the Spanish anarchist movement at the time of the Civil War, see Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years 1868-1936* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1998).

³ John Clark, *The Anarchist Moment: Reflections on Culture, Nature and Power* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1986), p. 19.

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 37.

⁵ For a discussion of the diversified nature of the post-1960s left, focussing on the challenges thrown out by feminism, environmentalist and what he calls municipalism, see Murray Bookchin, ‘New Social Movements: The Anarchic Dimension’, in *For Anarchism: History, Theory, and Practice*, ed. by David Goodway (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 259-274.

⁶ John Moore, *Prophets of the New World: Noam Chomsky, Murray Bookchin, and Fredy Perlman*, available online at <<http://lemming.mahost.org/johnmoore/prophets.htm>>.

In considering anarchist writing since the 1960s, there is clearly one figure that stands out well beyond the boundaries of the anarchist milieu, and that is Noam Chomsky. I have already outlined in the introduction some of my reasons for not addressing his work here. Writing from a different perspective, the neo-primitivist David Watson recounts an interview with Chomsky for the journal *Anarchy*, in which the interviewers, in seeking to discuss the various merits and demerits of civilisation *per se*, met with a blank refusal on the part of Chomsky to even consider the type of critique that they advanced. Watson characterises Chomsky's faith in technology as 'disappointing'.⁷ For this reason the exclusion of Chomsky, a theorist who could be said to offer a vision of anarchism that is very much in keeping with the anarchisms considered in the previous chapters, may perhaps be allowed on grounds of opening up a little space for consideration of newer and differing forms of anarchism. This chapter will therefore consider texts which could loosely be grouped together under the green anarchist critique (still one of the most vital threads of anarchist thought), as well as contrast their varying relationships to technology, civilisation and the reader.

Chomsky's rejection of the position of the *Anarchy* interviewers paradoxically leaves him looking quite conservative. In contrast John Clark argues that Murray Bookchin's eco-anarchism 'must be judged to be the first elaborated and theoretically sophisticated anarchist position in the history of political theory'.⁸ Hence in the essay cited above, John Moore suggests that to locate the three thinkers that he considers on an anarchist spectrum, Chomsky would be the most traditional, followed by Bookchin and ending with the radicalism of Fredy Perlman. Although Moore himself questions the validity of such a spectrum, it serves as a useful pretext to turn initially to the work of Murray Bookchin.

⁷ David Watson, *Against the Megamachine: Essays on Empire & Its Enemies* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, [n.d.]), p. 177. All further references in this chapter will be given as *AM* with page number.

⁸ Clark, *The Anarchist Moment*, p. 202.

Murray Bookchin

Bookchin first came to prominence in the sixties. He has written widely on subjects ranging from the history of the Spanish Civil War, to trenchant critiques of Marxism and the environmental movement, to visions of the anarchist society of the future. He is perhaps best known for his notion of social ecology, which finds expression in one of his early texts, *Toward an Ecological Society*.⁹ This text is a collection of essays that were originally published during the 1970s and which begins with a note of disillusionment, suggesting that ‘it must be bluntly asserted *that hardly any authentic revolutionary opposition exists in North America and Europe*’. Bookchin holds that ‘what we now call “radical” is an odious mockery of three centuries of revolutionary opposition, social agitation, intellectual enlightenment, and popular insurgency’.¹⁰ ‘Perhaps at no time in modern history,’ the text argues, ‘has radical thought been in such grave peril of losing its very identity as a consistent critique of the existing social order and a coherent project for social reconstruction’ (*TES*, p. 11). From there the text moves on to what is the main focus of its consideration, the state of the environment. In the first essay in the collection, ‘The Power to Create, the Power to Destroy’, Bookchin writes that given the ‘despoilation [*sic*] of the planet’ already noted by that point, ‘little more that [*sic*] a generation may remain before the destruction of the environment becomes irreversible. [...] Time is running out’ (*TES*, p. 36).

Already from this dramatic opening, certain dominant themes and modes of address are evident. For example, one of the defining features of the ‘green’ text is that

⁹ Green anarchists, or in Bookchin’s case, social ecologists, sharply distinguish themselves from ‘environmentalists’. Environmentalism would be another example of the instrumentalist rationality that has engendered the current lamentable state of the biosphere’s health, a rationality that sees the ‘environment’ as an issue, a challenge, in short, a problem to be solved with the same means as occasioned the disaster in the first place. It could be said that environmentalism lives (albeit harmoniously) *with* nature (in the same sense as one lives with a microwave oven), whereas ecologists would seek to live *in* nature.

¹⁰ Murray Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1980), p. 11. All further references in this chapter will be given as *TES* with page number.

the ecological disaster facing the biosphere permits no vacillation. This is clearly not the place to examine the rights and wrongs of a scientific analysis that seems to suggest that we are in the process of eliminating ourselves from the universe. Such an understanding, though, of the current crisis in environmental affairs seems inevitably to lend campaigning or propagandistic texts (such as Bookchin's) a tone of apocalyptic urgency, and the implications of this are that the reader tends to be presented with something of an ultimatum. After outlining what he sees as the challenge to the environmental movement, the essay ends with a section entitled 'Between two choices'. This is aimed at the north American anti-nuclear movement which Bookchin sees as having lost its direction. The text makes the two alternatives explicit, and it openly ends on a binary flourish with the penultimate sentence suggesting that 'the choice lies in either direction and there is no "in-between" terrain on which to compromise' (*TES*, p. 54). Yet earlier in the essay Bookchin called for:

a revolution which will produce politically independent communities whose boundaries and populations will be defined by a new ecological consciousness; *communities whose inhabitants will determine for themselves* within the framework of this new consciousness the nature and level of their technologies, the forms taken by their social structures, world views, life styles, expressive arts, and all the other aspects of their daily lives. (*TES*, p. 45, my emphasis)

The question that this prompts is whether the type of reader who docilely accepts the ultimatum offered by the text is the same person that the text visualises as the necessary pre-requisite for the society of the future. It is hard to imagine that they would be the same person.

Nevertheless the textual practice of the ultimatum is not limited to this one essay. Although Bookchin is relentless in his desire to deepen the ecological analysis, to go beyond the mere question of an 'environmental crisis', the textual strategy for achieving this again forces the means/ends dichotomy into the discussion. For example, in the second essay 'Toward an Ecological Society' the text questions whether:

the environmental crisis does not have its roots in the very constitution of society as we know it today, if the changes that are needed to create a new equilibrium between the natural world and the social do not require a fundamental, indeed revolutionary, reconstitution of society along ecological lines. (*TES*, p. 58)

Bookchin convincingly argues that the basic notions of environmentalism are inadequate to the task that it faces: it does not ‘bring into question the underlying notion of the present society that man must dominate nature’ (*TES*, p. 59). Hence the text argues for ‘a broader conception of nature and of humanity’s relationship with the natural world. [Ecology] sees the balance and integrity of the biosphere as an end in itself’ (*TES*, p. 59). Yet in arguing for a more balanced and harmonious relationship between the human and the natural world, the text seems to overlook the opportunity to establish a more balanced relationship with the reader. As with the previous essay, this text self-consciously ends with an ultimatum:

either we will create an ecotopia based on ecological principles, or we will simply go under as a species. In my view this is not apocalyptic ranting – it is a scientific judgement that is validated daily by the very law of life of the prevailing society. (*TES*, p. 71)

One can immediately note both the problematic manner in which the text tries to preemptively counter the potential criticism that it is ‘apocalyptic ranting’, and also an echo of Proudhon’s texts in the bizarre recourse to science (given that the main thrust of Bookchin’s critique is against the problems that science, in the widest possible sense, has created for us). Perhaps most damningly, the blunt choice of an ‘either...or...’ leaves little room for the reader to determine his or her own responses to the issues raised in the text.

This rhetoric seems to fall even further out of step with the content of the text when one considers that in the same essay Bookchin criticises the ‘hierarchical mentality that arranges experience itself – in all its forms – along hierarchically pyramidal lines’, arguing that this is rather ‘a mode of perception and conceptualization into which we have been socialized by hierarchical society’ (*TES*, p. 60). While this is

not necessarily a linguistic argument, Bookchin makes it one by directly drawing on the research evidence of the anthropologist Dorothy Lee, who suggested that non-hierarchical communities, or ‘primitive’ societies do not contemplate the world in terms of hierarchical orders, and indeed ‘in the absence of inequality, these truly organic communities do not even have a word for equality’ (*TES*, p. 60). The text then goes on to comment on the ‘absence of coercive and domineering values’ in cultures such as the Wintu Indians of California. Bookchin focuses the discussion on linguistic features, and the reliance on linguistic evidence to support the claim of a lack of a dominating character seems to make it all the stranger that his own text engages in comparable coercive strategies. One might well wonder if the Wintu have an expression for Bookchin’s preferred ‘either... or...’ formulation.

The text continues in this vein and it comes to seem nearly inevitable that each individual essay ends up with a version of the ‘either... or...’ formulation. In ‘Open Letter to the Ecology Movement’ the last paragraph suggests that the ‘two directions’ that the text has identified ‘cannot be reconciled’ (*TES*, p. 83). In ‘Energy, “Ecotechnology,” and Ecology’ Bookchin argues that scientific knowledge and technology ‘if properly reworked and rescaled, could finally eliminate scarcity, want, and denial, or [...] could tear down the planet if used for profit, accumulation and mindless growth’ (*TES*, p. 95). And the entire collection ends with a final Manichaean flourish: Bookchin flatly states that ‘there can be no compromises with contradictions – only their total resolution in a new ecological society or the inevitability of hopeless surrender’ (*TES*, p. 286).

Yet Bookchin’s politics clearly go against the grain of the text’s typical address to the reader. Indeed at times the text’s content seems positively opposed to the formal ultimatums. For example, in place of the dogmatic authorial voice that allows no compromises, in ‘Spontaneity and Organisation’ Bookchin writes that ‘revolutionaries

have the responsibility of helping others become revolutionaries, not of “making” revolutions’ (*TES*, p. 262) – hardly a sentiment that would find favour in Bakunin’s many secret societies. The bloody sense of revolution that is more readily found in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century texts gives way here to a suggestion that:

The system must fall, not fight; and it will fall only when its institutions have been so hollowed out by the new Enlightenment, and its power so undermined physically and morally, that an insurrectionary confrontation will be more symbolic than real. (*TES*, p. 260)

In reformulating the very notion of the typical leftist revolution (‘revolution is not only an assault on the established order but also a festival in the streets. The revolution is desire carried into the social terrain and universalized’ (*TES*, p. 262)), Bookchin offers a thoroughgoing critique of many aspects of socialist and anarchist orthodoxy. The contrast that his critique makes with its own rhetorical form thus becomes all the more glaring. So when Bookchin writes that the ‘countercultural movement’ has ‘*concretely* redefined the now innocuous word “revolution” in a truly revolutionary manner, as a *practice* that subverts apocryphal abstractions and theories’ (*TES*, p. 253), one might well ask where better to begin this practice than in the very texts that discuss subversion. It would seem, then, that as with Emma Goldman’s theatre criticism, there is a distinct disparity between the content of Bookchin’s text and the mode in which it addresses the reader.

Although Bookchin’s texts engage with notions of subversion, revolution and a radical re-structuring of the social organisation, the question might be asked as to just how much of the social inheritance Bookchin seeks to disown. In the introduction to *Toward an Ecological Society* Bookchin specifically discusses the example of the ‘technically primitive hunting bands’ that the anthropological work of Marshall Sahlins has examined. Although Bookchin recognises that with their limited needs these communities seem not to have had a concept of ‘scarcity’ (in Bookchin’s analysis capitalism promotes the myth of scarcity to rationalise the unequal distribution of the

planet's resources, when in fact for him we live amongst mismanaged abundance), he refuses to contemplate the idea that they might provide a model for future human society – ‘it lies within human potentialities to be more than a “noble savage,” a product of natural history alone’ (*TES*, p. 24).

David Watson

The relationship to just such primitive societies provides a much more attractive model for another branch of contemporary anarchism, one which has been labelled primitivist. The British academic John Moore gives the most succinct précis of anarcho-primitivism in his text *A Primitivist Primer*. In it Moore cites the American journal *Fifth Estate*, from where much of the primitivist critique originated, offering a definition of it as a ‘critical analysis of the technological structure of western civilization, combined with a reappraisal of the indigenous world and the character of primitive and original communities’.¹¹ One of the writers of the *Fifth Estate* circle is David Watson, and his collection of essays, *Against the Megamachine*, identifies him as being further along the radical (green) spectrum than Chomsky or Bookchin, while also seeming to exemplify the primitivist critique. Moore cites the *Fifth Estate* as contending that they ‘are not anarchists per se, but pro-anarchy’, and Watson’s collection is, in a similar vein, prefaced by an epigraph from Gandhi – ‘I myself am an anarchist, but of another type...’ (*AM*, p. vi).¹² Watson’s text begins in quite a strikingly modest tone. It is true that it shares Bookchin’s sense of urgency, indeed being a more recent text perhaps the sense of urgency is heightened – Watson writes that ‘the green world in which we evolved is being shredded by our instruments, our way of life, our very rationality’ (*AM*, p. 8) and continues that ‘no generation has ever faced such prospects’ (*AM*, p. 9).

¹¹ *Fifth Estate*, as cited by Moore, *A Primitivist Primer*.

¹² *Fifth Estate*, as cited by Moore, *A Primitivist Primer*. For a discussion of the nature of the anarchist influence in the Indian independence movement, see Geoffrey Ostergaard, ‘Indian Anarchism: The Curious Case of Vinoba Bhave, Anarchist “Saint of the Government”’, in *For Anarchism: History, Theory, and Practice*, ed. by David Goodway (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 201-216.

Watson's text, though, would seem to differ from Bookchin's in terms of content when one considers the nuances of their critique of technology. Technology has deformed our relationship to nature – Watson sees Francis Bacon as 'exemplary' of this colonising mindset when he wrote that 'the harlot' nature should be bound into service – 'storm and occupy her castles and strongholds... and thus extend the bounds of human empire' (*AM*, p. 8). In questioning the traditional notion that technology is neutral, the text argues that 'missing from this view is the recognition that technology – actually an interlocking system of apparatus, rational techniques and organization – doesn't merely follow design but changes the world in a systemic, *ecological* way' (*AM*, p. 16). Citing Langdon Winner's work on technology, Watson argues that mass technics have become "structures whose conditions of operation demand the restructuring of their environments" [...] and thus of the very social relations that brought them about' (*AM*, p. 65). The end result of this historical process is that we are left with a human subject that has been (partly) determined by technology, and Watson judges that 'neither our technique nor our problem-solving rationality yield adequate responses to this catastrophe' (*AM*, p. 8).

Bookchin shares this critique of technology. When questioning the concept of 'self-management', he identifies a challenge to this traditional syndicalist notion in the very fact that 'modern technology is intrinsically authoritarian' and so escapes potential management by the self (*TES*, p. 117). Indeed he would even seem to share the notion that human subjectivity is changed by the encounter with technology – the text argues that 'the men and women who operate it [modern technology] are expected to undergo significant transformation as human beings' (*TES*, p. 117). Yet the text refuses to contemplate technology itself as the problem, instead arguing that 'what humanity needs is not a wholesale discarding of advanced technologies, but a sifting, indeed a further development of technology along ecological principles' (*TES*, p. 37). Bookchin's

response to the crisis would therefore be to scale technology down, to such a point that it is no longer beyond the control of the human person manipulating it or operating it. A return to the artisan, then. This is what he argues for with his concept of ‘a people’s technology’, one which would be ‘a highly decentralized technics that is human in scale, simple in construction, and naturalistic in orientation’ (*TES*, p. 130).

In comparison Watson’s critique begins to make Bookchin look positively reformist, for while *Against the Megamachine* shares the conceptual orientation that technology can determine human subjectivity, Watson does not look to down-size the scale of the technology in use. In one essay Watson takes issue directly with Bookchin, suggesting that the latter believes that ‘technological relations are merely the consequence of underlying social relations’ (*AM*, p. 225). Rather than change these relations, in an essay entitled ‘We All Live in Bhopal’, the text contends that ‘we have to find our way back to the village, out of industrial civilization, out of this exterminist system’ (*AM*, p. 47). Watson criticises what he characterises as the traditional view of both the left and bourgeois liberalism that ‘human freedom is based necessarily on a material plenitude of goods and services’ (*AM*, p. 64). In opposition to this he postulates that the demise of the megamachine will mean ‘the renewal of subsistence cultures, which still hang on in villages, among tribal peoples struggling to survive [...] it means revivifying an aesthetic not of the assembly line but of the forest’ (*AM*, p. 116).

Despite these comments, Watson’s text insists that ‘no one, in any case, seriously argues a literal return to the life of ancient Greeks or eighteenth century Indians’ (*AM*, p. 140). This is a common characteristic of these texts, indeed even Bookchin’s work, as mentioned above, deemed it necessary to hold out the consoling guarantee that it was not positing a return to hunter-gatherer levels of existence. As John Moore swiftly points out in *The Primitivist Primer*, ‘the aim is not to replicate or return

to the primitive, merely to see the primitive as a source of inspiration, as exemplifying forms of anarchy'.¹³

Given, though, that I have briefly sketched the object of Watson's critique and the outline of a response to it, how does the text go about putting these propositions to the reader? I suggested earlier that the collection of essays begins with a modest tone, and at the outset the text suggests that the essays are 'more useful for the questions they raise than for any specific response they recommend' (*AM*, p. xii). In the first essay Watson portrays the challenge thus: 'we have to talk tentatively about how an unprecedented, megatechnic empire and its corresponding constellation of cultures might become a qualitatively different kind of society' (*AM*, p. 9). The text posits a dialogue with the reader and argues against the notion that 'practical technique alone' will find a solution to the crisis facing the earth (*AM*, p. 9). Instead, Watson continues:

I wish to speak for something simpler and more subtle than programs: a mindfulness about where we find ourselves, our context (certainly a green sensibility), and a respect not only for what we know but also for what we do not know and especially for what we *cannot* know. (*AM*, p. 10)

Watson's text seems positively alive to the significance of language, and even goes so far as to suggest that in the society of the future 'a different language, spangled with eternity, [would] find its way into daily discourse as the conditioning of industrialism and manufactured values began to be shed' (*AM*, p. 40). Furthermore, in the essay 'Deep Ecology & Environmental Philosophy: On the Ethics of Crisis and the Crisis in Ethics' Watson specifically identifies the problems of binary thought underlying a section of the deep ecology critique, a thought that reduces the environmental question to one of hierarchies such as of nature over human. Watson observes that as opposed to the worldview of a Hobbes, for example, with deep ecology 'the values or poles are simply reversed; the undifferentiated mass of humanity is compelled to don sackcloth and ashes and make sacrifices in its standard of living to preserve nature' (*AM*, p. 228).

¹³ Moore, *A Primitivist Primer*.

This would seem to give cause for optimism that at least in terms of content, the text is aware of the shortcomings of simply forcing an inverted binary on the reader.

Yet in its more metaphorical language, Watson's text displays a much greater overlap with Bookchin's. Again the sense of impending crisis comes to overpower the text: when discussing the possibility that the greenhouse effect will perhaps suddenly cross a cataclysmic threshold (rather than produce a gradual meltdown), the text argues that 'since modern science cannot understand thresholds, there is no telling how much time is left, *only a certainty that it is running out*' (*AM*, p. 59, my emphasis). In 'We All Live in Bhopal' the text proposes that 'by throwing off this Modern Way of Life, we won't be "giving things up" or sacrificing, but throwing off a terrible burden. Let us do so soon before we are crushed by it' (*AM*, p. 47). On other occasions the earth is compared to a house on fire (*AM*, p. 68), and the entire collection is peppered with a series of references to Melville's *Moby-Dick*, in which the ruling classes or the captains of industry are compared to 'distracted Ahabs trying to maintain control of their foundering ship' (*AM*, p. 59). From there, then, it does not come as much of a surprise to find a Manichaean ultimatum awaiting the reader, when the text refers to the 'forces that we most need to destroy if life is to prevail' (*AM*, p. 81).

Watson's text seems caught between a degree of self-consciousness of its own textuality and the urgency that the environmentalist critique appears to require (the simple necessity, if one is to 'save the planet' (in crude terms), to act now while there is still something left worth saving). Indeed in the keynote essay of the collection, 'Against the Megamachine', Watson recognises that the very language the text employs is not free of the influence of the object of his critique. The essay begins with an invitation to the reader – 'how do we begin to discuss something as immense and pervasive as technology?'. The text then recognises that technology, in its view, has come to colonise not only the material world around us, but also 'that internalized

country of our thoughts, dreams and desires, in the way we consciously and unconsciously see ourselves and our world' (*AM*, p. 117). Hence, in critiquing technology, the text argues that 'the common notion of technology's "neutrality" does not recognize that all tools have powerful symbolic content, are suggestive models for thought and action which affect their users' (*AM*, p. 123). The text does not go so far as to suggest that we are now technologically determined subjects, seeking, rather, to retain an element of agency for the 'users' to accept or reject the 'model' of the tool. Yet the critique implies a challenge to the very text itself, for by following this logic there is an argument that the text itself becomes an instrumental model for the reader. This is something, though, that Watson addresses in the last section of the essay:

I recognize the contradictions in even publishing this essay. I am not sure how to move beyond the code [the language of technology]; in order to do so, with tremendous ambivalence and doubt, I partake in it in a limited, awkward, conditional way. (*AM*, p. 144)

In so doing, then, the text reveals an awareness of its own contradictory status, and so simultaneously weakens the grounds for it to offer some grand solution to the problems that it has identified, as well as opening up a greater discursive space for readerly participation in the process that the text aspires to kick-start. Watson continues that 'we need the courage to explore a process of change in our thinking and practice – to learn how we might become less dependent on machines, less linked to "world communications," not more' (*AM*, p. 144). Borrowing a term from another text on technology, Watson ends the essay arguing for an 'epistemological luddism', a 'conscious break with urban-industrial civilization' (*AM*, p. 145).

Against the Megamachine at times appears as overpowering as Bookchin's text, then at other moments seems a lot less closed to the reader that it is addressing. Of course it is necessary to situate this type of text within the larger discussion of which it forms a part. As my chapter on autobiography demonstrated, the supposedly real referent is immediately lost in the world of signifiers. Rather than suggest that Watson

is trying to insist on the reality of the subject (of a world in crisis, of a civilization out of control) of his own discourse, I would prefer to keep in mind the sense of debate with what might be loosely called the official story about the state of the planet's health. Indeed it might worth bearing in mind that up until very recently criticisms of the official story seemed to be relegated to the realm of pressure group discourse, and Watson's work has contributed to fragmenting the hegemonic status of the official story.¹⁴ At times the text engages directly with representatives of this story, and Watson, just as I suggested Proudhon does, demonstrates an occasional deconstructive turn in dismantling the terms of his opponents' logic. He addresses, for example, a text on *The Existential Pleasures of Engineering*, written by a 'professional apologist for technology, Samuel C. Florman' (*AM*, p. 138). When this text claims that the popularity of Luddite worries only 'adds the dangers inherent in self-deception to all of the other dangers we already face', Watson pinpoints how the text has already conceded that there are dangers in technology, those that we already face, and he shows how the text tries to evade a critical appraisal of technology based on a claim to universal human nature – technology is simply a product of 'the type of creature man is' (Florman, cited by Watson, *AM*, p. 138).

So Watson's is a contradictory text, one that at times seems to let the urgency of the crisis which it diagnoses overtake the responsible approach to the reader that it often shows. The challenge for a text such as this is to find a way to be an effective piece of propaganda without excluding the reader's interpretation from the debate. When Watson writes that 'civilization is like a jetliner', the question is whether or not the text seeks to have the reader adopt the crash position, head between legs, or whether the

¹⁴ The notion that the major oil companies have had a direct hand in constructing the official story, specifically by funding attempts to discredit the science behind the notion of climate change, would appear to be gaining recognition. See for example George Monbiot, 'The Fossil Fools', available online at <<http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2004/04/27/the-fossil-fools/#more-860>>. From a more activist perspective, see the campaign group Rising Tide's 'Factsheet Two: Dealing With Counter Arguments' on the debate about climate change, available online at <<http://risingtide.org.uk/pages/resources/f2counter.htm>>.

very act of reading opens up a space to begin debating the course the journey is taking (*AM*, p. 187).¹⁵

John Zerzan

While Watson recognises that ‘there are no easy answers’ (*AM*, p. 144), with John Zerzan the question itself becomes much more complicated. Zerzan is certainly seen by some as the most radical writer working within the anarchist milieu today. In fact the Primitivist website suggests that he ‘may well be the most extreme author on the planet’.¹⁶ Zerzan’s first collection of essays is entitled *Elements of Refusal* and the very title would seem to suggest a refusal of a totalising discourse, offering instead ‘elements’ of a critique. Yet this suggestion is quickly dispelled by the preface to the second edition of the text, in which Zerzan writes with apparent confidence that ‘everyone can feel the nothingness, the void, just beneath the surface of everyday routines and securities’.¹⁷ The ease with which the text invokes and speaks on behalf of an ‘everyone’ would seem to suggest that in the light of the challenge that I identified in the previous paragraph, Zerzan has opted for radical polemicizing rather than engaging with the difficulties of an open address to the reader. That this is the case becomes even clearer when he writes that ‘the group suicide of techno-occultists at Rancho Santa Fe (March 1997) is *too faithful* a reflection of the desperation generated by engulfing emptiness’ (*ER*, p. 7, my emphasis). It would seem that the text is more than overstating

¹⁵ The notion of what exactly an effective piece of propaganda would be is itself a subject for considerable debate. For example, one contrasting opinion from within anarchist circles would be Graham Purchase, who argues, somewhat definitively, that ‘the aim of the anarchist propaganda groups is to promote and facilitate the growth of a revolutionary workers movement and not to focus upon the structure, processes and development of their own organisations’. This sentiment is obviously in conflict with the eco-anarchist critique being considered in this chapter (with its ambition to do away with both the factory and work *per se*), and moreover conflicts with the notion expressed in the epigraph, that anarchism looks to build the new within the shell of the old. See Graham Purchase, ‘Anarchist Organisation: Why it is Failing’, available online at <<http://www.spunk.org/library/writers/purchase/sp001825.html>>.

¹⁶ See ‘Interview – John Zerzan’, available online at <<http://www.primitivism.com/zerzan.htm>>.

¹⁷ John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal*, 2nd edn. (Columbia: C.A.L. Press/Paleo Editions, 1999), p. 7. All further references in this chapter will be given as *ER* with page number.

its case by coercively suggesting that any sense of alienation or dissidence ('desperation'), with regard to the world as it currently is, finds a 'too faithful' reflection in an act of group suicide. Indeed, while Zerzan cites, with apparent sympathy, one of the 'would-be UFO voyagers' as saying 'Maybe I'm crazy but I don't care. I've been here thirty-one years and there's nothing for me here' (*ER*, p. 7), one can immediately reflect that in place of such a total rejection of this world, the majority of the anti-globalisation movement is happy to march under the somewhat more optimistic banner 'Another World Is Possible'.

Zerzan's text seems untroubled by speaking in the name of the reader, and this homogenising gesture is reinforced when the text removes the possibility that there might be more than one answer to a question, contending instead that 'the fragmentary, the cynical, and the partial define an extremely pervasive postmodern stance – if such a cowardly, shifting outlook even qualifies as a stance' (*ER*, p. 7). Zerzan's opposition to the postmodern leads him in the contrary direction, to raise 'the question of origins of our estrangement [which] is refused by a reigning culture that recognizes neither origins nor estrangement' (*ER*, p. 7). Yet the question of origin is one that has exercised deconstruction greatly, for clearly an identifiable origin provides a foundation, and a foundation leads, not just etymologically, to fundamentalism. The problem with Zerzan's text seems to be that it seeks to establish itself as a truth discourse, and it even acknowledges as much in the preface: in noting the degree of debate that the essays prompted when first published in *Fifth Estate*, Zerzan firstly rejects all the criticisms that have been levelled at his work, but then writes that 'in trying to put forth the most cogent lines of thought, I may have written essays that seemed definitively closed to other perspectives. If so, I regret it' (*ER*, p. 8).

Nevertheless, the breadth of the text's critique is quite astonishing, and the overwhelmingly tight focus on the object of critique may well be both the essays'

strength and weakness. In the first section of the collection, the five essays offer respective critiques of time, language, number, art and agriculture. Moreover, in lieu of Bookchin's worries about his text being 'apocalyptic ranting', Zerzan's text demonstrates an exhaustive wealth of earlier scholarship in each area that he addresses. Zerzan's consideration of the nature of the five topics develops the notion that their historical evolution is a reflection of a historical process of alienation of the human from the natural world, from an epoch when prehistoric humanity lived in a state of 'wholeness and grace' (*ER*, p. 31). This is unembarrassedly premised on a concept of an original plenitude that is now lost, or what the text occasionally refers to as a fall. For example, from the start of the first essay on time, 'Beginning of Time, End of Time', the text argues that 'as with nature, time did not exist before the individual became separate from it. Reification of this magnitude – the beginning of time – constitutes the Fall: the initiation of alienation, of history' (*ER*, p. 15). Likewise in the essay 'Language: Origin and Meaning', the text commences with a speculation on the state in which we existed prior to this estrangement:

Being alive in nature, before our abstraction from it, must have involved a perception and contact that we can scarcely comprehend from our levels of anguish and alienation. The communication with all of existence must have been an exquisite play of all the senses, reflecting the numberless, nameless varieties of pleasure and emotion once accessible within us. (*ER*, p. 31)¹⁸

Yet the text repeatedly follows a similar trajectory in the first five essays, and that is that it begins with the notion of an original plenitude, then traces out the progress of our alienation, before finally arriving at the present. This might be considered the weakness of the text inasmuch as it refuses to consider the epistemological security with which the origin can safely be stated.¹⁹ Simultaneously, though, this tight focus on the origins and

¹⁸ Elsewhere Zerzan has criticised what he refers to as the 'postmodernist-poststructuralist assumption that language constitutes the human world and the human world constitutes the whole world'. See John Zerzan, 'The Catastrophe of Postmodernism', available online at <<http://www.primitivism.com/postmodernism.htm>>.

¹⁹ This aspect of Zerzan's work has been the object of a rather poorly translated critique that was distributed as a leaflet at one of his meetings in the UK in September 2000. Although focussing more on

development of our alienation seems to make a distinct halt once it arrives at the present, and this is what I will now counterpose as the strength of Zerzan's text.

For all the radicality of his critique, and the ultra-polemical dismissal of other points of view, the text resolutely refuses to hand down any suggestions as to what should concretely be done about the state of affairs that it observes. Indeed in comparison to the degree of research that underpins the critiques offered, the comments that the text limits itself to offering seem comparatively desultory. For example, in 'Language: Origin and Meaning', in the opening paragraph the text argues that 'our time on earth, characterized by the very opposite of those qualities [wholeness and grace], is in deepest need of a reversal of the dialectic that stripped the wholeness from our lives as a species' (*ER*, p. 31). Or with regard to agriculture, that which enslaved free communities of hunter-gatherers to an alienated nature that they then had to domesticate in order to survive, the text concludes that 'liberation is impossible without its dissolution' (*ER*, p. 87). As for the evolution of number, Zerzan writes that it has left us with a world that is 'mathematized and empty' and as a consequence 'the beginnings of this bleak journey, including the origins of the number concept, demand

the second of Zerzan's texts, *Future Primitive*, the anonymous authors claim that he asserts, rather than proves, the original state of human nature. See 'John Zerzan and the Primitive Confusion', available online at <http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/zerzan_confusion.html>. Although differing substantially from the (perceived) political persuasion of the author of the anti-Zerzan piece, an online review agrees with the criticism that Zerzan seems to argue from an unproven starting point whilst trying to prove the subsequent alienation. See 'Review of "John Zerzan and the Primitive Confusion"', available online at <<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/3909/misc/petardprimrev.html>>. In a similar vein, critiquing Zerzan for what might be called the performative contradiction that his work presents, Pendelton Vandiver argues in an online text that 'epistemologically, we are getting into hot water when we simultaneously challenge the very existence of civilization while accepting its methodology and its conclusions.' See Pendelton Vandiver, 'Anarchist Epistemology', available online at <<http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/anarchistepistemology.htm>>. Michael Albert, the editor of *Zmag* offers a different, and more fundamental, critique of Zerzan's text when he argues that it has made the logically faulty:

leap from disliking instances of some category to rejecting the whole category [and which] would lead to rejecting pretty much everything that is social or otherwise a product of human exchange and thought, but which turns up with horrible aspects in contemporary societies, and would thus imply wanting humans to revert to a kind of pre-humanity state.

Amazingly, Zerzan follows exactly that trajectory.

Albert's criticisms, though, would seem to engage in what both Zerzan and Watson identify as a cost/benefit analysis of technology, ignoring their insight that as no system is perfect there will always be hidden costs, which in this case are costs that the biosphere is incapable of withstanding. See Michael Albert, 'Anarchism = Zerzan?', available online at <<http://www.zmag.org/zerzan.htm>>.

comprehension. It may be that this inquiry is essential to save us and our humanness' (*ER*, p. 62). None of which, of course, gives the slightest idea as to what the text might propose as a way of living or organising today. In concluding the essay on language, the text suggests that 'only a politics that undoes language and time and is thus visionary to the point of voluptuousness has any meaning' (*ER*, p. 43). The phrase, ironically, seems to hover on the border of meaninglessness, although its status as an empty signifier would accordingly imbue it with a degree of radical gesturality that in one sense returns the initiative wholly to the reader. Despite Zerzan's nostalgia for what he calls a 'free or whole life' (*ER*, p. 8), it is worth bearing in mind that the primitive critique is not, in John Moore's words, unaware of the fact that 'human beings can only now consciously choose to go wild; such a condition is no longer a spontaneous "second nature"'.²⁰ So although it would be tempting to characterise Zerzan as proposing some type of return to a prelapsarian past, bearing in mind that the second half of the collection of essays is focused on the history of resistance and insurrection, from Luddism to modern day riots, it would be fairer to conclude that he is merely observing and waiting – as he puts it in 'The Refusal of Technology', 'everything in the past and present is waiting, waiting to detonate' (*ER*, p. 205).

Fredy Perlman

If the anarcho-primitivist critique can be characterised by a concern to re-interpret the past, then the pre-eminent work in the genre, at least according to John Moore, is Fredy Perlman's *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!*.²¹ This concern can be linked to the conclusions that I made in the chapter on autobiography: it is a question not so much of what the reality may or may not be, but rather how it is described. Perlman's text is an

²⁰ John Moore, 'Beyond the Fragments: A Reaction to Industrial Society and Its Future', available online at <<http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/fragments.htm>>.

²¹ In an interview Moore suggested that for him 'everything follows from' Perlman's text. See John Filiss, 'Interview with John Moore', available online at <<http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/jminterview.htm>>.

attempt to answer his own question of why ‘people reproduce a miserable daily life?’ and is perhaps the text that most foregrounds this question of the language used to describe (or re-describe) a past that is no longer a given but is rather the object of interpretation.²² According to Moore, Perlman’s text is ‘a piece of genuinely subversive literature’, or what David Watson, in his ‘Homage to Fredy Perlman’ calls a ‘feverishly written book’, offering an account of the origins of human civilisation, and sitting uneasily, yet challengingly, between genres, ostensibly a history, at times novelistic, at times critique, at times myth.²³ From the first page the text seeks to disorientate the reader, opening with a series of quotations, jumping from Matthew Arnold’s ‘darkling plain’ to Eliot’s ‘waste land’ while Yeats’s ‘rough beast’ slouches onwards (*AH*, pp. 1-2). Moreover the text offers a variety of subject positions to the reader, at times adopting a direct second person interrogation (‘This is savagery! Do you call it freedom?’), at times employing a ‘we’ (‘We’re on the side with the angels.’), at times speaking only in the first person, referring to contemporaries (including Zerzan) ‘whose lights I’ve borrowed’ (*AH*, pp. 1-2). As Moore comments in his reading of this opening passage, the text is clearly ‘not written in the dry, abstract discourse of political science’, and that the quotations suggest that it is a work ‘of literary discourse’.²⁴

In seeking the answer to the question of alienation, Perlman re-writes history as the history of the Leviathan, borrowing the term from Hobbes to describe the birth and evolution of the state. In examining this history, Perlman wants to identify who is responsible for the ‘wrecking of the Biosphere’ (*AH*, p. 4). He rejects previous analyses which would blame humankind, for as a homogenising label, he finds it ‘too diffuse’

²² Fredy Perlman, *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!: An Essay* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), p. 25. All further references in this chapter will be given as *AH* with page number. For a different answer to this question from a more strictly economic perspective, see also his essay ‘The Reproduction of Daily Life’, in Fredy Perlman, *Anything Can Happen* (London: Phoenix Press, 1992), pp. 31-49.

²³ John Moore, ‘Public Secret: Fredy Perlman and the Literature of Subversion’, in *Twenty-first Century Anarchism: Unorthodox Ideas for a New Millennium*, ed. by Jon Purkis and James Bowen (London: Cassell, 1997), pp. 117-131 (p. 129). Watson, *Against the Megamachine*, p. 245.

²⁴ Moore, ‘Public Secret’, p. 125.

(*AH*, p. 4). Instead Perlman describes the development of ‘the beast’, retaining Yeats’ image, suggesting that this beast is ‘an excrescence on the planet’s surface’, a beast ‘excreted by a human community [...] at most two or three hundred generations old’ (*AH*, p. 5). Following the notion that the text displays characteristics of poetic discourse, it seeks to name anew features that a contemporary reader might take for granted: for example, a Marxist critique would hold that the proletariat is forced to sell its labour to acquire the means to survive. Perlman extends this understanding in the sense that a place where one is forced to work is a work camp, for ‘labor is always forced labor’ (*AH*, p. 37), and as a result our world is a ‘Gulag’ populated by ‘zeks (namely conscripts, inmates, labor gang members)’ (*AH*, p. 3). The text also seeks to puncture the overarching pretensions of today’s ruling episteme, contrasting that with the visionary knowledge of earlier times – ‘armored bullies stand guard and demand the password, Positive Evidence. No vision can pass by their gates.’ (*AH*, p. 2). Hence Perlman turns ingrained assumptions on their heads, and writes of the first human communities that:

Modern anthropologists who carry Gulag in their brains reduce such human communities to the motions that look most like work, and give the name Gatherers to people who pick and sometimes store their favourite foods. A bank clerk would call such communities Savings Banks! (*AH*, pp. 7-8)

The text’s strategy of renaming and reversing leads to a situation, in Moore’s words, in which ‘the reader must invert the binarisms which hierarchically privilege civilization over savagery. In short, the text attempts to subvert reader expectation concerning structures of cultural prestige’.²⁵

As with the other primitivist works considered earlier, Perlman’s text entertains a concept of an original plenitude. Yet the text seeks to both advance this concept while acknowledging the limitations upon our understanding of it (at one point he writes of his own account of Sumerian culture ‘There is no positive evidence for any of this’ (*AH*,

²⁵ Moore, ‘Public Secret’, p. 126.

p. 19)), as well as simultaneously deflating the more usual critique of primitive communities which would see them as under-developed. Perlman calls these communities 'the Possessed', and writes that:

The main part of our poverty is that the richness of life of the Possessed is barely accessible to us, even to those of us who have not chained our imaginations.

Our professors talk of fruits and nuts, animal skins and meat. They point to our supermarkets, full of fruits and nuts. We have an abundance our ancestors didn't dream of, Q.E.D. (*AH*, p. 10)

Perlman's text repeatedly asks why a people would choose to leave this state of plenitude, in which work is not known because it is not understood in opposition to play, activity which is freely undertaken for pleasure. Again Perlman inverts traditional binaries to challenge our prevailing world-view, suggesting that if the !Kung people of Africa who 'miraculously survived as a community of free human beings into our own exterminating age' were to visit 'our offices and factories, they might think we're playing. Why else would we be there?' (*AH*, p. 8). The exit from this state of plenitude is marked by a departure from nature, where 'nature' becomes something that lies outside the city walls, alien and something to be conquered or visited. The walling of cities also marks the sense of conflict, in that the original Leviathans came into existence as military machines, and so the cycles of history that *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* describes are ones of domination, resistance, rebellion and liberation of an enslaved people, only to chart how the newly liberated repeatedly end up becoming the new oppressors. One of the more prominent examples would be how the original Christians went from crucifixion to inquisition, how they were Imperial Rome's 'resistance movement', yet centuries later became a force that tortured heretics and burnt witches at the stake (*AH*, p. 113).

This sense of repetition is arguably a meta-narrational strategy to underscore one of the text's central points. In challenging developmental theories of the linear progress of history (and the text seems to reserve particular scorn for the Marxist concept of the

‘ripening’ of productive forces that brings about new social forms (*AH*, p. 136)), Perlman draws on the knowledge and traditions of peoples such as the Potawatomi of the Great Lakes, people who saw that if an event was ‘repeated, then the event was not linear but rhythmic, and it was already known’ (*AH*, p. 241). He argues that:

early resisters have some clear and powerful conceptions; the generations who follow them eventually invert every one of those conceptions and turn the initial commitment on its head.

In retrospect we can see that the paths of betrayal are already paved before anyone has recourse to them, but this tells why the betrayal follows these paths, not why the betrayal takes place. (*AH*, p. 113)

The invitation seemingly extended to the reader is one of learning from the history of Leviathan so as not to follow the well-worn paths of resurrecting a new oppression in place of the old. Despite being written before the demise of the Soviet Union, the text rejects any categorical distinction between the Leviathan of the West and that of the East, arguing instead that ‘what is known is that Leviathan, the great artifice, single and world-embracing for the first time in His-story, is decomposing’ (*AH*, p. 301). This then links to one of the central motifs, that of dancing, something which encapsulates freedom and which expresses the sense of cyclical time in its rhythmicity. While at the beginning of the text Perlman wrote paradoxically that the darkling plain was ‘the place to dance!’ (*AH*, p. 1), by the closing paragraph the dance is now something that is both forced on the inhabitants of Leviathan, and will signal its downfall:

The cycle has come round again. America is where Anatolia was. It is a place where human beings, just to stay alive, have to jump, to dance, and by dancing revive the rhythms, recover cyclical time. An-archic and pantheistic dancers no longer sense the artifice and its linear His-story as All, but as merely one cycle, one long night, a stormy night that left Earth wounded, but a night that ends, as all nights end, when the sun rises. (*AH*, p. 302)

Perlman at least ends on a note of optimism, the belief that a change will come, and his sense of a people withdrawing (again) from the entrails of a Leviathan ties in with Watson’s notion of an epistemological Luddism, or Zerzan’s positing of a ‘larger culture of withdrawal, from the state as from work’ (*ER*, p. 213).

Against His-story, Against Leviathan! is one of the few texts under consideration in this chapter that has been the subject of previous academic commentary. In 'Public Secret: Fredy Perlman and the Literature of Subversion' John Moore gives an excellent close reading of the opening passage, and argues that the text 'combines revolutionary content with revolutionary form, political content and literary style'.²⁶ Employing Kristeva's notion of heterogeneous contradiction, Moore suggests that Perlman's text overthrows 'hegemonic binarisms' and presents the reader with a 'mélange of conflicting signals', and therefore that it descends 'into incoherence and multivalence to stun the reader into fresh perception'.²⁷ It might be countered that Moore perhaps overstates the case when he writes that the text is a piece of 'genuinely subversive literature', basing this claim on the fact that it would apparently fall foul of still extant anti-sedition laws in the United States (laws under which Emma Goldman was persecuted). For example, the comparison might be made with the Italian insurrectionalist anarchist Alfredo Bonanno, who notes in the introduction to his text 'Armed Joy' (a discussion of the merits and demerits of the armed struggle against the state, such as was being pursued by the Red Brigades in Italy at the time of writing) that he was sentenced to eighteen months prison for writing the text, and that:

the book was ordered to be destroyed in Italy. The Italian Supreme Court ordered it to be burned. All the libraries who had a copy received a circular from the Home Ministry ordering its incineration. More than one librarian refused to burn the book, considering such a practice to be worthy of the Nazis or the Inquisition, but by law the volume cannot be consulted.²⁸

Leaving aside the question of establishing an external yardstick for subversiveness (or its lack) in a text, Moore's project, in his Kristevan reading of Perlman, seems very much to parallel my own, in the sense of seeking to question the relationship between content and form. Yet Moore's reading of Perlman would

²⁶ Moore, 'Public Secret', p. 129.

²⁷ Moore, 'Public Secret', pp. 126-127.

²⁸ Alfredo M. Bonanno, 'Armed Joy', trans. by Jean Weir, available online at <http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/a_joy.html>.

apparently problematise my own conclusions regarding the work of Watson. If one conceives of a spectrum of radicality in terms of the address to the reader (borrowing Moore's own notion of the spectrum of radicality from Chomsky to Perlman), Bookchin could be situated at one end of the spectrum (the authoritarian end), silently offering an ultimatum. In contrast to this, Watson's text would seem to extend – at times – a polite comradely hand to the reader. Nevertheless the text undertakes this in wholly conventional terms and so locates itself in the centre of this spectrum. Perlman, in contrast, makes no direct appeal to the reader in the way Watson does, and yet his text radically destabilises the reader's very epistemological locus, thus engineering a (Kristevan) subversion of the social order. This would prompt the question of whether a text (such as Watson's) that seeks a dialogue with its reader, but that does so by confirming that reader as a knowing subject within the already existing discursive conventions, can still be characterized as subversive, following Moore's schema.

John Moore

This question could be applied to one of Moore's own works, his *Anarchy & Ecstasy: Visions of Halcyon Days*. As should be clear already, Moore's work bears explicit testimony to having been greatly influenced by the work of Perlman, and this text mixes a range of discursive modes, from academic discourse to magic rites to myth and paganism. In the introduction Moore cites the Situationist Debord, acknowledging his insight that revolutionary ideology is now 'insufficiently radical'. Instead the text argues (in a gesture recalling Perlman's re-inscription of visionary knowledge) that 'total revolution must go beyond ideology to recover its roots through ecstatic visions'.²⁹

The text contains five short essays, including a re-reading of *Paradise Lost* that seeks to explode 'one of the central ordering myths in Western Civilisation', that being

²⁹ John Moore, *Anarchy and Ecstasy: Visions of Halcyon Days* (London: Aporia Press, 1988), p. 3. All further references in this chapter will be given as *AE* with page number.

the notion of creation and ‘subsequent fall of humanity’, which Moore understands as being common to both pagan and Christian discourse. (*AE*, p. 4) The reason for this is that Moore sees this structuring myth as responsible for the notion that humanity finds itself caught in a struggle between opposing forces, both fighting for control over it. Hence in the Christian myth, God and Satan battle for this control, although Moore multiplies the binaries to include ‘law and lawlessness for the community; capitalism and communism for the world; ruling class and proletariat for society [...] the list could be extended indefinitely’ (*AE*, p. 5). Moore identifies a ‘cuneal perspective’ here, ‘conceiving the structure of the universe in terms of an inverted triangle’, and argues that this establishes a relationship of struggle between the forces of control and counter-control, in which the controlled ‘apparently too weak to break the chains of control on their own [...] are doomed to remain pawns in an alternating game of eternal conformity or endlessly betrayed revolt’ (*AE*, p. 5). In order to intervene in this structure, Moore looks for an antipolitics, in the sense of being against politics in the dictionary definition as the science and art of government, an antipolitics ‘whose aim is the dissolution, not the seizure, of power’ (*AE*, p. 6).

In reading *Paradise Lost* then, Moore writes that ‘Chaos gave birth, and possibly can bring death, to nature’ (*AE*, p. 7). Therefore, he continues, the primordial matter of the universe is anarchic, anteceding creation, and consequently also awaiting the ‘biodegradation’ of what has been created – ‘to remerge with the extant realm of Anarchy’ (*AE*, p. 8). From this he argues that ‘the universe does not possess a cuneal structure, but (as a minimum) has a quadruplex form’ (*AE*, p. 6), which includes a fourth force, the ‘uncontrollables’ (*AE*, p. 8). As a call to arms, Moore’s text certainly strikes a radically different note to the types of texts considered above, lacking even the coercive sense of urgency that I have suggested is a characteristic of green-anarchist propaganda. Yet the text undoubtedly shares the same ambitions, for it turns its reading

of Milton towards a desire ‘to achieve the social ecology that is so desperately needed’. The text posits that ‘liberation [...] can be achieved only through an attentive and sagacious anarchy’ (*AE*, p. 9). This would combine with an opening for religious thought at the heart of an anarchist critique, in this case the praxis of Zen, which, Moore contends, breaks the dependence on authority.

The text, in the light of Moore’s reading of Perlman, does not trouble the position of the reader, for as can be seen, its call for liberation comes in a well-structured and clearly argued essay. This can be found again in the essay ‘On Ecdysis’, where the text makes the sort of concession that is wholly absent from the work of Bookchin, declaring that ‘we must remain eternally vigilant, and not allow tentative possibilities to solidify into proscriptive dogmas. Anarchy can be defined as maintaining a field of infinite potentialities’ (*AE*, pp. 18-19). For however attractive the formulations may be, they would seem to run up against the questions that Moore raised in the Perlman reading, for it could hardly be said that they display (as cited above) the ‘incoherence and multivalence’ which would ‘stun the reader into fresh perception’. Yet this, of course, is not to suggest that Moore’s reading of Perlman attempts to establish itself as a ‘proscriptive dogma’ as to how a subversive text should be written, although it does warn that ‘those who would write subversive literature would be well advised to pay attention to Kristeva’s notion of heterogeneous contradiction’.³⁰ Nevertheless this begets an interesting complication with regard to my own examination of the figure of authority within anti-authoritarian texts – does an explicit rejection of textual authority (such as Moore’s call for ‘eternal vigilance’) lose its force when couched in conventional language?

³⁰ Moore, ‘Public Secret’, p. 129.

The CrimethInc Collective

One text that would seem to exemplify this dilemma is the recent publication from the CrimethInc [sic] Collective, *Days of War, Nights of Love*. Even from the outside covers, the text seeks to challenge the reader's epistemological security – on the back cover the text cites 'reviews' from, among others, the New York Times Book Review and J. D. Salinger. Among the list of authors credited as being part of the CrimethInc Collective is Jeanette Winterson, 'a widely acclaimed British novelist and critic'.³¹ These textual pointers would seem to encourage a healthy scepticism towards the text, and in fact this scepticism is something the text itself looks to promote. Open the front cover and a bold 'Warning' greets the reader in block capitals - 'THIS BOOK WILL NOT SAVE YOUR LIFE!' (*DW*, p. 1). Indeed the visual layout of the text works as a challenge to the reader, for even at this stage a section of text appears at the foot of the first page upside down, a design tactic that is repeated at various stages during the book. At one point an article of several pages in length is printed upside down and in one quite literal sense the text could be said to challenge the position of the reader: the reader will be required to constantly shift the book around in order to be able to follow the text(s). The layout employs a style that owes more to the world of fanzines, with rapid changes in font, size, shading and orientation, and borrows (to use a neutral term) generously from other sources for graphic and comic strip material.³² All of this, then, combines to deny the reader any sense of continuity or stability, never mind the simple matter of the veracity of the cited material used. While the preface acknowledges that 'this book is composed of ideas and images we've remorselessly stolen and adjusted to our purposes' (*DW*, p.

³¹ CrimethInc Workers Collective, *Days of War, Nights of Love: Crimethink for Beginners* (Atlanta: CrimethInc Free Press, 2001), p. 281. All further references in this chapter will be given as *DW* with page number.

³² Paul Rosen argues that the fanzine phenomena, linked to the birth and growth of the punk music scene worldwide, promoted an 'access aesthetic', the sense that 'making and writing about music should be open to anyone'. In this sense the opening page of *Days of War, Nights of Love* reflects this notion when it states that the text as such is merely a 'tool' towards revolution – the question of making change is up to the reader (*DW*, p. 1). See Paul Rosen, "It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!": Technology and Anarchy in the UK Music Industry', in *Twenty-first Century Anarchism: Unorthodox Ideas for a New Millennium*, ed. by Jon Purkis and James Bowen (London: Cassell, 1997), pp. 99-116 (p. 103).

11), one graphic has a (Salome-type) figure with a speech bubble containing one of the better known aphorisms from Wilde's plays, 'I can resist anything, except temptation', along with the words 'William Burroughs' running perpendicularly alongside, as if in invitation to attribute the quotation to Burroughs (*DW*, p. 128).

Nevertheless the text does contain serious writing and should not be overlooked as a jumble of ephemera. If such a heterogeneous text can be characterised at all, perhaps the words from the preface suffice, suggesting that 'CrimethInc. is the first stirrings of a revolt that will take us all *out* of history' (*DW*, p. 9). In this sense the text shares something of an orientation with the likes of Zerzan and Perlman, who seek to re-establish an unalienated human selfhood, as opposed to the history of alienation and oppression as described in their texts. Thus in answer to the question 'Is CrimethInc a movement?', one of the contributors, Nietzsche Guevara, writes that 'our real quest [...] is for Life itself' (*DW*, p. 169). So the text proposes, in its many and varied articles and commentaries (the main section of the text is a 'CrimethInc Contra-diction-ary' with a series of texts beginning with 'A is for Anarchy' etc.), an escape or transcendence of current social values, be they in relation to sexuality, work, technology or politics. In doing so, it warns the reader, right from the preface, that:

It is crucial to point out that this book isn't designed to be used in the way a 'normal' book is. Rather than reading it from one cover to the other, casting perfunctory votes of disapproval or agreement along the way (or even deciding to 'buy in' to our ideas, in passive consumer fashion), and then putting it on the shelf as another inert possession, we hope you will use this as a *tool* in your own efforts – not just to think about the world, but also to *change* it. (*DW*, p. 11)

Yet the nature of the textual address is still relatively conventional, despite the disruption of the physicality of linear reading, and this returns the discussion once again to the question that Moore raised in relation to subversive content and subversive form. Indeed the text perhaps runs into even more serious difficulties when considered from a different perspective. The text attempts to fracture the humanist essence that would

underpin contemporary notions of self, encouraging the reader to ‘make your own good and evil’ (*DW*, p. 27), and ‘to be wary of culture and tradition: never to accept them as given but rather to choose what is right for you at the time and reject the rest’ (*DW*, pp. 85-86). In pop-culture tones, the text suggests that one thing history can teach is that humans ‘have lived in a thousand different kinds of societies, with ten thousand different tables of values, ten thousand different relationships to each other and the world around them, ten thousand different conceptions of self’ (*DW*, p. 14). The text is peppered with a general use of the ‘we’ along with arguments based on what individuals feel or do in given situations, and in fact recognises as much when one contributor argues that ‘you’ll find that if you speak honestly for yourself, you are probably speaking for others as well: that’s a part of being human (and our excuse for throwing around the word “we” so mercilessly in these pages’ (*DW*, p. 211).

This sense of reserving a locus from which one can speak on behalf of others raises the same problems as those that I identified in the chapter on Proudhon, those being his reservation of a certain space for unquestioned authority (in the family). The problem is, again, that once this discursive space is conceded or authorised, then it becomes a question of arguing over the limits to its mandate. This then leads inevitably to a species of bickering over just how representative the original text is, which (necessarily) displaces any revolutionary energies it may have had, or have sought to unleash, to begin with. This can be seen in the acerbic review that Ramor Ryan offers of *Days of War, Nights of Love* for the journal *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*. Although Ryan recognises that the text ‘is a manifesto against complacency, passivity, and pessimism’ and that ‘one can’t begrudge their productivity, or their fervent desire to

spread their plagiarized word', he damns the text for 'self-righteous sermonizing'.³³

Ryan's critique, though, is based on what is missing from the text, for in his view:

there is no analysis of the macro-political situation; no capitalist globalization, or US hegemony, or imperialism. [...] Their quest for individual freedom in the form of squatting, shoplifting, jumping trains, and eating out of garbage cans could be considered a way of living off the belly of the beast, if not inside the whale. As tactics and strategy, these don't get us very far toward the goal of 'total liberation.'³⁴

The response that Ryan offers is obviously premised on a traditional notion of anarchist struggle. Moreover his is a purely content-based critique, lamenting, for example, the 'unbearable lightness and depthlessness of their philosophy and praxis' and lambasting its 'individualist, selfish, and inchoate rebel ideology that eschews work, political organizing, and class struggle'.³⁵ Clearly the whole critique of work and mass movements that has emerged from eco-anarchism is not a major influence in the perspective that Ryan articulates. For Ryan, therefore, the form of the text seems to be a distraction from its lack of content, yet the review fails to consider whether there should be any correlation between the two. When he asks of the text 'to what end do they do it and for what purpose?', there is one question that is clearly necessarily absent from such a content-based critique – the one of *how* the text addresses itself to the reader.³⁶ In this sense, although I would disagree with Ryan's reasons for his dissatisfaction with *Days of War, Nights of Love*, I would share the sense of dissatisfaction, for once again, it seems to be another text that offers radical content without questioning the conventional posture that it adopts towards the reader.

To sum up, it can be seen that the problems that I identified in nineteenth and early twentieth-century anarchism are not ones that this discourse can be said to have happily surmounted. For example, in relation to Bakunin I demonstrated how the

³³ Ramor Ryan, 'Days of War and Nights of Horror', *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*, 8 (2004), 17-21 (p. 21, p. 20), available online at <<http://www.anarchist-studies.org/filemanager/download/7/vol8no2.pdf>>.

³⁴ Ryan, 'Days of War and Nights of Horror', p. 19.

³⁵ Ryan, 'Days of War and Nights of Horror', p. 21.

³⁶ Ryan, 'Days of War and Nights of Horror', p. 21.

unquestioned assumption of what the 'real' is permits a textual authoritarianism. This could be said to be one of the hallmarks of the ecologist texts that have been considered in this chapter. If one conflates this problem with Proudhon's trait of setting aside a sphere of permitted authority, then one can begin to see that the urgency of the 'real' threat to the biosphere begets a coercive textual address that offers the reader naked Manichaeic 'either... or...' ultimatums, or metaphorically and apocalyptically locates the reader on a crashing aeroplane. In defence of the texts considered in this chapter, it can be said that they do not engage in the type of construction of a readerly subject position that I identified at work in the (political) texts of Emma Goldman. With reference to the conclusions of my chapter on autobiography, in which Berkman's *Memoirs* offer a self-assured narrator that seems wholly in control of the events being narrated, these texts can be seen, at times, (perhaps gently) to question the author-status of their narrative voices, reflecting a greater communality with the fragmented subject that emerges from Goldman's text.

I would like, though, to return to the comments of my first chapter, in which I considered the dichotomy between form and content in Goldman's theatre analysis. If one attempts to translate the notion of the self-activity of the theatre spectator (now participant) that Boal proposes into the realm of the literature considered here, then Perlman's text would seem to be the only one that displays an address to the reader that would even begin to emulate this. Against this, perhaps, from an anarchist activist perspective, one might arguably have to weigh the requirements of propaganda: while Perlman's text might be the one that most disrupts the text's own tendency to impose its authority on the reading process, it might be asked if a somewhat obscure book, from a peripheral current of thought within a minor ideological position on the margins of left-wing politics (and a politics arguably on the back foot faced with the neo-liberal onslaught of the past few decades) can be said to be effective propaganda. This, though,

brings an entire constellation of values into the discussion which are simply not my concern here, but while John Moore writes that the new world must be created within the shell of the old, I would adapt this axiom to say that a new form of addressing the reader must be written from within the shell of an outmoded anarchist textuality.

8

(In)conclusion

In December 1851 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon wrote to a friend to rebuke the request for a revolutionary blueprint: ‘Do not expect me to provide you with a system. My system is Progress, that is to say the need to work constantly toward discovering the unknown while the past is being exhausted.’¹ With this Proudhon pinpointed the permanent challenge that theories of anarchism face – to elaborate their critique without imposing an artificial fixity that would coalesce into a ‘system’ that subsequently constrains the freedom of others yet to come. The particular challenge that this thesis has attempted to negotiate is one of outlining the possible shape of an anarchist textual theory, in this instance a politics of reading and writing which interrogates textual constructions as well as the significances that can be read in those constructions. This challenge, though, must unfold without setting the terms of the debate or foreclosing on future discussion, without ever, in Derrida’s words, placing a ‘reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign’.² Although Proudhon saw the ‘work’ towards the future as constant, that is to say, never-ending, in this case the work of elaborating an anarchist theory of the text has scarcely begun.

This thesis has examined the discourse of anarchism, focussing particularly on the figures of authority legible in certain texts. Joseph Raz, in his introduction to *Authority*, contends that ‘the notion of a right to rule is deeply disturbing’, arguing that ‘most people are puzzled by the idea that one person should have a right to rule

¹ Proudhon, *Selected Writings*, p. 243.

² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 49.

another'.³ While it is beyond the remit of this thesis to speak on behalf of 'most people', my motivation stemmed from a comparable puzzlement – how can a text, in this instance an anarchist text, seek to *rule* over the production of meaning? Is a text's bid for control of its own meaning ever tenable? And how does such a text set about the (textual) construction of such a 'right' to rule?

These are the questions that I have examined in this thesis. In analysing the textuality of anarchism, I have sought to bring a set of literary concerns to bear on its discourse. Thus the anarchism-literature conjunction was considered in chapter two, where Emma Goldman's text of theatre criticism was critically re-read for its potential as a starting point for theorising an anarchist approach to literature. Goldman's text yielded valuable insights, inasmuch as it constitutes a precursor to a renewed anarchist engagement with literary texts, a precursor that clearly disavowed the conflation of author and text when it comes to establishing the significance of a given text for a particular reader. Indeed rather than select texts on some naïve basis of ideological adequacy for anarchist ends, Goldman scarcely mentions her anarchist orientation and instead opts for eliciting their 'social significance'. This significance allows the plays to function within the cultural and historical context that produced them, a gesture that stands in stark contrast to some of the dehistoricising gestures of subsequent critics. Goldman's theatre criticism also demonstrated an openness to wider questions of literary form, beyond the bounds of the text as such, and as a result permitted a productive comparison with the theories of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal. By reading Goldman alongside Brecht and Boal, it was shown that she took the first steps on a path that would be more fully explored by these later critics. The didacticism that Goldman advocates is not in itself problematic, but the discussion clarified that bourgeois theatre and theatre critics argue against didacticism in a gesture seemingly

³ Joseph Raz, 'Introduction', in *Authority*, ed. by Joseph Raz (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 1-19 (p. 3).

designed to naturalise or make invisible their own ideological project. Nevertheless Goldman failed to make the leap towards action that Boal proposes, despite her concern for addressing the wrongs of society. Her appeal to a sector of the theatre-going public to support the cause of the working class would seem to institute a certain vanguardism that goes against the direct action ethic that is synonymous with anarchism, and so her theatre criticism locates the form/content debate (recast as means/ends) right at the heart of the discussion of anarchist texts.

Chapter three took the concerns raised in the preceding chapter and turned to the work of the 'father' of anarchism, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Proudhon directly addresses the question of authority in his work, and so sets some of the parameters for a consideration of the functioning of authority within anarchist texts. Proudhon's critique of state authority is premised on the rhetorical strategy of permitting a restricted sphere of legitimate authority within the family, while denying the legitimacy of translating this authority to the public sphere. My reading of this showed that Proudhon's text, by creating a discursive space for authority to go unchallenged, ended up by claiming that authority for its own critique, thus constructing the figure of Proudhon as father to his own text. Moreover, his theory foresaw that the public (state) realm would eventually be subsumed within the economic, and it is his theory of property-as-theft (in terms of temporal dominance) that allows the Derridean notion of the 'irreducibility of temporalizing' to be brought to bear on the concept of natural (familial) authority.⁴ By redeploying Proudhon's economic logic against the text's move to reserve a restricted sphere of legitimacy for authority in the family, the whole logic of authority is brought to a point of crisis where it is no longer sustainable. Proudhon's notion of the (economic) contract was then applied to the relationship between text and reader, consequently removing any grounds for accepting restrictions on interpretative freedom.

⁴ Derrida, 'Difference', p. 130.

Yet Proudhon's own criticisms of other models of societal organisation demonstrated a wily sense of the deconstructive by exhausting the internally contradictory logic of his opponents' positions. In turning that exhaustive critique back on the Proudhonian text, my reading recuperated Proudhon's insistence on liberty without submitting to his paternal authority.

Chapter four examined the notion of the authority of the real in relation to the work of Michael Bakunin. This chapter reviewed some of the critical and biographical texts that have been written on Bakunin, and discovered therein a tropological sedimentation that seems to betray the unwritten assumption of textual access to the 'truth' of who Bakunin was. Drawing on Foucault's notion of the author-function, I went on to argue that the contradictions apparent in both Bakunin's actions and texts prompt a critical response clearly marked by anxiety over these incoherencies. This anxiety is indicative of a desire to determine (and therefore control) a univocal meaning for 'Bakunin', something that can only be achieved at the cost of the reader's interpretative freedom. That this desire is untenable becomes clear from the terms of Bakunin's own theory, where he maintains the impossibility of conceptualising the 'reality of flesh and blood'. The reader is therefore plunged into a world of representations, where the reality has always already been lost and the freedom upon which Bakunin insisted all his life is restored to that same reader of his texts.

In chapter five I returned to Emma Goldman, but this time to consider her overtly political writings. Goldman's work attempts to reconcile the competing political claims of the individual and of society, but in so doing raises the question of the mode of address to the reader. In her work I mapped the construction of a subject position for the reader that explicitly institutes a disjuncture between the reader and the wider community whose liberation the text purports to seek. Hence Goldman's texts come to display a characteristic ambivalence, on the one hand castigating the unresponsive

'mass' while on the other hand appealing to the individual reader to exert him or herself for the benefit of that mass. By interpellating its reader as 'non-mass' Goldman's text frustrates its own revolutionary ambitions.

Having applied the insights I gleaned from Goldman's problematizing of the form/content dichotomy to anarchism in its more usual discursive articulation as politics, in chapter six I returned to more strictly literary terrain with a consideration of anarchist autobiographies. The genre of autobiography raises interesting questions about the nature of the relationship to the brute facts of a past life lived, and the authority necessary to tell its story. Autobiographical theory has established the instability of the putative congruence of the author, narrator and protagonist of an autobiographical story. Drawing on this theoretical insight, I showed how Emma Goldman's life story is narrated through the prism of what she calls her 'passionate ideal'. This invokes a discourse of faith that provides the authority and religious imagery for her story while at the same time constructing the Emma Goldman of the autobiographical page as a narrated fiction. Nevertheless Goldman's apparently unswerving faith comes to produce a fractured subject whose faith is one of constant negotiation with her surroundings. In comparison the text of Alexander Berkman's memoirs constructs a narrator who undergoes an immense change during the course of Berkman's fourteen-year prison sentence. Berkman's text takes on the contours of a *Bildungsroman*, but when read in the light of Hayden White's theory of narrativity it becomes clear that there is an authority that goes unremarked in the course of the story – that being the authority to narrate the story and more precisely to bring it to an end, to achieve what White sees as the passage from one moral order to another. In conclusion this chapter then compares the autobiographical texts left by leading anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker and his son Fermin Rocker. In contrasting the two accounts of lives that overlapped for a substantial time, the question of memory is brought into sharp relief. The unquestioned reliability

of the memory of the narrator of the autobiographical story is thus revealed as another figuration of textual authority.

My final chapter brought this thesis up to the present day with an examination of some examples of contemporary anarchist writing. This chapter largely focused on eco-anarchism, comparing the textual strategies of a mainstream anarchist theorist such as Murray Bookchin with the more radical periphery of the green anarchist tradition in the shape of the primitivists. Bookchin's texts call for a revolution in the way that humans live and interact, yet I showed how his texts evince an extremely authoritarian address to the reader, typically ending with a Manichaean flourish that attempts to impose the terms of that very revolution. Despite the apparent (and at times controversial) radicality of the primitivist critique of technology, some of the texts examined seemed unconcerned with searching for different textual tools with which to build a new type of relationship with their readers, again illustrating the gulf between content and form. However other anarchist texts have begun to move away from generic conformity in terms of their textual construction, and demonstrate a willingness to put their subversive content into subversive textual action. This chapter illustrated that when it comes to what I would contend are outmoded forms of anarchist textuality, there is arguably as much continuity as there is rupture among the texts currently being produced.

The work that this thesis has undertaken is, as I have already suggested, really only beginning. Although individual anarchist authors have in the past written texts on art and on literature, there has as yet been no serious study of the relationship of anarchism to literary production, nor much consideration of how anarchism's politics might be brought into dialogue with a theory of reading and writing. Standing like a signpost at the beginning of an intersection of anarchist concerns with literature, this thesis points to several different avenues of future research. Firstly it strikes me that my argument here could only be strengthened by further research into the historical

antecedents of anarchism's engagement with artistic production in general. Although it derives most of its arguments from a consideration of visual art, Proudhon's *Du Principe De L'Art et Sa Destination Sociale* would be one text worthy of future consideration, along with Kropotkin's survey of his national literature, *Russian Literature*.⁵ Likewise the writings concerning aesthetics of twentieth-century anarchists such as Herbert Read, Alex Comfort or Paul Goodman could also be investigated, along with works such as Rudolf Rocker's more sociologically orientated *Nationalism and Culture*.⁶ In political terms, a consideration of the rhetorical strategies of some of the more recent anarchistic global justice movements, specifically groups such as People's Global Action and the UK-based Dissent network, would extend the trajectory of the three chapters that focused specifically on political discourse.⁷ This aspect could be greatly expanded to include a consideration of the structural role and demands of propaganda in relation to the literary text, something I was only able to remark on here. The genre of anarchist autobiography would also merit much greater scholarly scrutiny, given that there is a rich tradition of material still to be considered, such as Albert Meltzer's record of a life dedicated to the anarchist cause, or Stuart Christie's account of his attempt to assassinate General Franco and his involvement with the Angry Brigade.⁸ The identification of a body of specifically anarchist fiction would be a more challenging task, given that the genealogy could run from William Morris's *News From Nowhere* through to Ursula Le Guin's landmark science fiction novel *The Dispossessed*,

⁵ See Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Du Principe De L'Art et De Sa Destination Sociale* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1865; repr. Farnborough: Gregg International, 1971). This text, along with the vast majority of Proudhon's work, sadly remains untranslated into English. See also Kropotkin, *Russian Literature*.

⁶ See for example Herbert Read, *Poetry and Anarchism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938); Alex Comfort, *Art and Social Responsibility: Lectures on the Ideology of Romanticism* (London: Falcon Press, 1946); Paul Goodman, *Speaking and Language: Defence of Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1971); Rudolf Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, trans. by Ray E. Chase (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1998).

⁷ These groups could be located in a post-Zapatista world. Although the discourse of the Zapatista uprising in Mexico has received a great deal of critical attention, other groups that are largely inspired by them have not. For a recent example of the scholarship on the Zapatistas, see Simon Tormey, "'Not in my Name": Deleuze, Zapatismo and the Critique of Representation', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59 (2006), 138-154.

⁸ See Albert Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels: Sixty Years of Commonplace Life and Anarchist Agitation* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996); Stuart Christie, *Granny Made Me an Anarchist* (London: Scribner, 2005).

a text that has received a reasonable degree of attention, and which illustrates the overlap with utopian fiction.⁹ One author, though, who seems to have received little by way of academic scrutiny is the American writer Edward Abbey, whose *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is credited by some as having been the fictional inspiration for the birth of ‘ecotage’, environmental direct action carried out by groups under the umbrella of names such as Earth First! or the Earth Liberation Front.¹⁰

Gustav Landauer, the German anarchist who was murdered in the aftermath of the Bavarian Revolution of 1918, once wrote that ‘the state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently’.¹¹ This thesis has sought to explore the nature of the historical construction of certain anarchist texts as well as the relationships between them and their readers. In offering this critique, in exploring the textual figurations of authority, this thesis has looked to open up the possibility of textually establishing just what Landauer calls an ‘other relationship’. This would mean continuing this process of interrogating anarchism’s textuality. Although authority may etymologically lie in the hands of the author, I have shown how it functions in many differing aspects of textual construction, whether it be Proudhon’s claim for an extra-textual locus of natural authority; the desire for critical authority over the meaning of ‘Bakunin’; or the attempt by the text either to define the reader (in Goldman’s case) or confront the reader (in Bookchin’s case). Hence an anarchist textual theory cannot be simply about dethroning the author from his or her textual sovereignty – a gesture that, in any case, has long since been accomplished. This thesis has thus highlighted a number of concerns that can

⁹ See William Morris, *Three Works: A Dream of John Ball, The Pilgrims of Hope, News from Nowhere* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968); Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Millennium, 1999).

¹⁰ See Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (London: Picador, 1982). Abbey has also left a text of memoirs which would warrant inclusion in further discussion of anarchist autobiographies. See Edward Abbey, *Confessions of a Barbarian: Selections from the Journals of Edward Abbey, 1951-1989* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994).

¹¹ Gustav Landauer, as cited by Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (London: Freedom Press, 1973), p. 23.

serve, for the time being, as the starting point for an anarchist theory of the text. Taking Bakunin's insistence on (the reader's) freedom as a watchword, these would include: a relentless and self-conscious questioning of the figure of authority within anarchism; an affirmation of the implications of Barthes's death of the author; a rejection of the restriction of the locus of signification as being exclusively limited to the (printed) text; a refusal to subscribe to the critical demand for authorial consistency, adopting, rather, a bricoleur's approach to reading such texts as are useful or relevant at a given moment; and a careful consideration of the implications of the mode of address to the text's reader. In bringing these concerns to the forefront of a discussion of anarchism, I hope that this investigation of the textuality of anarchist politics can serve as the first step towards establishing the provisional form of an anarchist politics of the text.

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