

Voltairine De Cleyre

American Anarchist, Feminist, and Freethinker, With Roots in Individualism and Collectivism

(1866 - 1912)

Description : Yet the ascetic also had the soul of a poet. In her poetry and even in her prose, Voltairine eloquently expressed a passionate love of music, of nature, and of Beauty. (From : The Storm!)

Tags : american, anarchist, feminist, antistate, freethinker, essayist, individualist, lecturer.

Quotes :

"There is not upon the face of the earth today a government so utterly and shamelessly corrupt as that of the United States of America. There are others more cruel, more tyrannical, more devastating; there is none so utterly venal." (From : Anarchism and American Traditions.)

"It is an American tradition that a standing army is a standing menace to liberty..." (From : Anarchism and American Traditions.)

"...so long as the people do not care to exercise their freedom, those who wish to tyrannize will do so; for tyrants are active and ardent, and will devote themselves in the name of any number of gods, religious and otherwise, to put shackles upon sleeping men." (From : Anarchism and American Traditions.)

"For the basis of all political action is coercion; even when the State does good things, it finally rests on a club, a gun, or a prison, for its power to carry them through.)" (From : Direct Action.)

"...political action is never taken, nor even contemplated, until slumbering minds have first been aroused by direct acts of

protest against existing conditions." (From : Direct Action.)

"...Life cries to live, and Property denies its freedom to live; and Life will not submit." (From : Direct Action.)

"...the doctrine of free-will has raised up fanatics and persecutors, who, assuming that men may be good under all conditions if they merely wish to be so, have sought to persuade other men's wills with threats, fines, imprisonments, torture, the spike, the wheel, the ax, the fagot, in order to make them good and save them against their obdurate will."
(From : The Dominant Idea.)

"What, then, would I have? you ask. I would have men invest themselves with the dignity of an aim higher than the chase for wealth; choose a thing to do in life outside of the making of things, and keep it in mind, --- not for a day, nor a year, but for a life-time." (From : The Dominant Idea.)

"We are so free! and so brave! We don't hang Brunos at the stake any more for holding heretical opinions on religious subjects. No! But we imprison men for discussing the social question, and we hang men for discussing the economic question!" (From : The Economic Tendency of Freethought.)

"...the law makes ten criminals where it restrains one." (From : The Economic Tendency of Freethought.)

Biography :

Voltairine de Cleyre by Sharon Presley

Emma Goldman called her "the most gifted and brilliant anarchist woman America ever produced." Yet today Voltairine de Cleyre is virtually unknown even among libertarians. She is discussed only briefly in histories of American anarchism and is not even mentioned at all in the more general studies of James Joll, George Woodcock, and Daniel Guerin. Though her writing was both voluminous and powerful, she appears in only one modern anarchist anthology. Only two recent collections of American radical thought include her classic "Anarchism and American Traditions"; and, ironically, neither is primarily anarchist in content. Voltairine de Cleyre was, in the words of her biographer, Paul Avrich, "A brief

comet in the anarchist firmament, blazing out quickly and soon forgotten by all but a small circle of comrades whose love and devotion persisted long after her death." But "her memory," continues Avrich, "possesses the glow of legend."

Born in a small village in Michigan in 1866, Voltairine, plagued all her life by poverty, pain, and ill health, died prematurely at the age of 45 in 1912. The short span of her life, ending before the great events of the 20th century, is, in Avrich's opinion, the major reason why Voltairine de Cleyre has been overlooked, unlike the longer-lived Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman.

The strength of will and independence of mind that so strongly characterized this remarkable woman manifested themselves early in Voltairine's life. Forced into a Catholic convent school as a teenager, she chafed at the stifling, authoritarian atmosphere and was later to speak of the "the white scars on my soul" left by this painful experience. Bruised but unbroken, Voltairine emerged an atheist and soon gravitated toward the flourishing freethinker's movement. Influenced by Clarence Darrow, she flirted briefly with socialism, but her deep-running anti-authoritarian spirit soon rejected it in favor of anarchism.

As with Emma Goldman, the hanging of the Haymarket martyrs made a profound impression on Voltairine and was the major impetus in her turn toward anarchism. In 1888, she threw herself into the anarchist movement, dedicating herself passionately and unceasingly to the cause of liberty for the rest of her life.

Though seldom in the public limelight--unlike Emma Goldman, she shrank from notoriety--Voltairine was a popular speaker and an untiring writer. In spite of financial circumstances that forced her to work long hours, and despite a profoundly unhappy life, which included several near-suicides, and almost fatal assassin's bullet, and a number of ill-fated love affairs, she authored hundreds of poems, essays, stories, and sketches in her all-too-brief life. Highly praised by her colleagues for the elegance and stylistic beauty of her writing, Voltairine possessed, in Avrich's opinion, "a greater literary talent than any other American anarchist," surpassing even Berkman, Goldman, and Benjamin R. Tucker. Goldman herself believed Voltairine's prose to be distinguished by an "extreme clarity of thought and originality of expression." Unfortunately, only one collection of her writings,-- *The Selected Works of Voltairine de Cleyre*, edited by Berkman and published by *Mother Earth* in 1914--was ever put together, leaving much fine material

buried in obscure journals.

Both Voltairine's life and her writings reflect, in Avrich's words, "an extremely complicated individual." Though an atheist, Voltairine had, according to Goldman, a "religious zeal which stamped everything she did...Her whole nature was that of an ascetic." "By living a life of religious-like austerity," says Avrich, "she became a secular nun in the Order of Anarchy." In describing that persistence of will that inspired her, the anarchist poet Sadikichi Hartmann declared, "her whole life seemed to center upon the exaltation over, what she so aptly called, the Dominant Idea. Like an anchorite, she flayed her body to utter more and more lucid and convincing arguments in favor of direct action."

"The Dominant Idea," wrote Emma Goldman in her commemorative essay, *Voltairine de Cleyre*, "was the leitmotif through Voltairine de Cleyre's remarkable life. Though she was constantly harassed by ill-health, which held her body captive and killed her at the end, the Dominant Idea energized Voltairine to ever greater intellectual efforts, raised her to the supreme heights of an exalted ideal, and steeled her Will to conquer every handicap in her tortured life."

Yet the ascetic also had the soul of a poet. In her poetry and even in her prose, Voltairine eloquently expressed a passionate love of music, of nature, and of Beauty. "With all her devotion to her social ideals," says Emma, "she had another god--the god of Beauty. Her life was a ceaseless struggle between the two; the ascetic determinedly stifling her longing for beauty, but the poet in her determinedly yearning for it, worshiping it in utter abandonment..."

Another manifestation of Voltairine's complex nature was her ability to be both rational and compassionate, a combination that Benjamin Tucker, like some modern-day individualist anarchists, thought led to inconsistency and ambivalence. Voltairine didn't see it that way. "I think it has been the great mistake of our people, especially our American Anarchists represented by Benjamin R. Tucker, to disclaim sentiment," she declared. In her essay "Why I am an Anarchist," she wrote, "It is to men and women of feeling that I speak...Not to the shallow egotist who holds himself apart and with the phariseism of intellectuality, exclaims, 'I am more just than thou'; but to those whose every fiber of being is vibrating with emotion as aspen leaves quiver in the breath of Storm! To those whose hearts swell with a great pity at the pitiful toil of women, the weariness of young children, the

handcuffed helplessness of strong men!"

But Voltairine was no emotional sentimentalist, wanting in serious arguments. Though Tucker became increasingly skeptical of her talents, most of her associates considered her a brilliant thinker. Marcus Graham, editor of *Man!*, called her "the most thoughtful woman anarchist of this century," while George Brown, the anarchist orator, declared her "the most intellectual woman I ever met." Joseph Kucera, her last lover, praised her logical, analytic mind. Avrich himself, a careful historian not given to undue praise, concludes that she was a "first-rate intellect."

Voltairine's political stance in the anarchist spectrum was no less well understood. Avrich dispels the myth created by the erroneous claims of Rudolf Rocker and Emma Goldman that Voltairine became a communist anarchist. In 1907, points out Avrich, Voltairine replied to Emma's claim, saying, "I am not now and never have been at any time a Communist." Beginning as a Tuckerite individualist, Voltairine turned in the 1890s to the mutualism of Dyer Lum. But she eventually grew to the conclusion that neither individualism nor collectivism nor even mutualism was entirely satisfactory. "I am an Anarchist, simply, without economic labels attached," she was finally to declare.

Unhyphenated anarchism or "anarchism without adjectives" had other adherents as well--Errico Malatesta, Max Nettlau, and Lum among them. These advocates of nonsectarian anarchism tried to promote tolerance for different economic views within the movement, believing that economic preferences would vary according to individual tastes and that no one person or group had the only correct solution. "There is nothing un-Anarchistic about any of [these systems]," declared Voltairine, "until the element of compulsion enters and obliges unwilling persons to remain in a community whose economic arrangements they do not agree to."

Voltairine's plea for tolerance and cooperation among the anarchist schools strikes a modern note, making us realize how little things have changed. Factionalism rages yet, with fervent apostles still all too eager to read the other side (whether "anarcho-capitalist" or "anarcho-communist") out of the anarchist fold. The notion that the pluralistic anarchist societies envisioned by people like Voltairine de Cleyre might in fact be the most realistic expectation about human nature seems even most lost on anarchists today than in her time.

Probably Voltairine's best-known intellectual contribution is the often-reprinted

essay "Anarchism and American Traditions," in which she shows how the ideas of anarchism follow naturally from the premises on which the American Revolution was based. The Revolutionary Republicans, she says, "took their starting point for deriving a minimum of government upon the same sociological ground that the modern Anarchist derives the no-government theory; viz., that equal liberty is the political ideal." But the anarchist, unlike the revolutionary republicans, she goes on to point out, cannot accept the premise of majority rule. All governments, regardless of their form, say the anarchists, will always be manipulated by a small minority. She then goes on to cite other similarities between the ideas of the anarchists and the republicans, including the belief in local initiative and independent action. "This then was the American Tradition," she writes, "that private enterprise manages better all that to which it is equal. Anarchism declares that private enterprise, whether individual or cooperative, is equal to all the undertakings of society."

Another of Voltairine's special concerns was the issue of sexual equality. In a time when the law treated women like chattel, "Voltairine de Cleyre's whole life," says Avrich, "was a revolt against this system of male domination which, like every other form of tyranny and exploitation, ran contrary to her anarchistic spirit." That such a brilliant, unusual woman would be a feminist is no surprise. "Let every woman ask herself," cried Voltairine, "Why am I the slave of Man? Why is my brain said not to be equal of his brain? Why is my work not paid equally with his? Why must my body be controlled by my husband? Why may he take my children away from me? Will them away while yet unborn? Let every woman ask." "There are two reasons why," Voltairine answered in her essay, "Sex Slavery," "and these ultimately reducible to a single principle--the authoritarian supreme power GOD-idea, and its two instruments--the Church--that is, the priests--and the State--that is, the legislators...These two things, the mind domination of the Church and the body domination of the State, are the causes of Sex Slavery."

These themes of sexual equality and feminism provided the subjects of frequent lectures and speeches in Voltairine's years of activity, including topics like "Sex Slavery," "Love in Freedom," "The Case of Woman vs. Orthodoxy," and "Those Who Marry Do Ill."

The subject of marriage was one of Voltairine's favorite topics. Though she valued

love, she totally rejected formal marriage, considering it "the sanction for all manner of bestialities" and the married woman "a bonded slave." Her own unfortunate experiences with most of her lovers, who, even without the ties of formal marriage, treated her as sex object and servant, convinced Voltairine that even living with a man was to be avoided. When she learned that William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft (her heroine) had lived in separate apartments even though they were lovers, she was delighted. "Every individual should have a room or rooms for *himself exclusively*," she wrote to her mother, "never subject to the intrusive familiarities of our present 'family life'...To me, any dependence, any thing which destroys the complete selfhood of the individual, is in the line of slavery and destroys the pure spontaneity of love."

Not surprisingly for that day, Voltairine's bad experiences with the traditionalism of her lovers was a misfortune she shared with Emma Goldman. Though totally different in personality--"Voltairine differed from Emma as poetry differed from prose," says Avrich--the lives of the two women had curious parallels. Most of their lovers turned out to be disappointingly conventional in matters of sex roles but there was in each woman's life at least one lover who was not of this traditionalist stripe. Each loved a man who was her intellectual equal and who treated *her* as an equal--for Voltairine, it was Dyer Lum; for Emma, Alexander Berkman. But, sadly, both women lost these men as lovers. Lum committed suicide in 1893 and Berkman's 14 years in prison left psychological scars that changed the nature of his physical relationship with Emma, if not their emotional one.

But in other matters, Voltairine and Emma had little in common. In fact, they quickly took a personal dislike to each other. Voltairine thought Emma flamboyant, self-indulgent, unattractive, and dumpy; Emma considered Voltairine ascetic and lacking in personal charm. Emma claimed that "physical beauty and feminine attraction were withheld from her," another myth that Avrich shows to be false. In truth, most of Voltairine's comrades, both men and women, found her beautiful, elegant, and charming. The photos of Voltairine included in Avrich's biography testify to the truth of these views--pictured is a delicate woman with a soft, mysterious beauty that was in sharp contrast to Emma's earthy robustness. Emma, a friend once pointed out, was not above jealousy.

Yet, in spite of their personal differences, Emma and Voltairine respected each

other intellectually. For her part, Voltairine publicly defended Emma on several occasions, including the passionate plea "In Defense of Emma Goldman and Free Speech," which Emma notes in her commemoration of Voltairine. In that essay, Emma pays eloquent tribute to Voltairine. She was, writes Emma, "a wonderful spirit...born in some obscure town in the state of Michigan, and who lived in poverty all her life, but who by sheer force of will pulled herself out of a living grave, cleared her mind from the darkness of superstition--turned her face to the sun, perceived a great ideal and determinedly carried it to every corner of her native land...The American soil sometimes does bring forth exquisite plants."

From : "Voltairine de Cleyre," by Sharon Presley, *The Storm!*, Winter, 1979.

Works :

Author of *Anarchism and American Traditions* (November 30, 1931)

Author of *Bastard Born* (December 31, 1890)

Author of *Direct Action* (December 31, 1969)

Author of *The Dominant Idea* (November 30, 1909)

Author of *The Economic Tendency of Freethought* (December 31, 1969)

Author of *The Eleventh of November, 1887* (December 31, 1969)

Author of *Francisco Ferrer* (December 31, 1969)

Author of *The Gods and the People* (December 31, 1969)

Author of *In Defense of Emma Goldman* (December 16, 1893)

Author of *The Making of an Anarchist* (December 31, 1969)

Author of *The Paris Commune* (December 31, 1969)

Author of *Sex Slavery* (December 31, 1969)

Author of *They Who Marry Do Ill* (December 31, 1969)

Author of *The Worm Turns* (September 30, 1897)

Chronology :

November 17, 1866 : Voltairine De Cleyre's Birth Day.

June 20, 1912 : Voltairine De Cleyre's Death Day.

November 15, 2016 : Voltairine De Cleyre's Added to
<http://www.RevoltLib.com>.

March 12, 2018 : Voltairine De Cleyre's Last Updated on
<http://www.RevoltLib.com>.

Links :

- **Anarchy Archives: Voltairine de Cleyre Archive**

http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/cleyre/Cleyrearchive.html

- **Anarchist Library: Voltairine de Cleyre**

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/category/author/voltairine-de-cleyre>

- **Wikipedia: Voltairine de Cleyre**

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voltairine_de_Cleyre

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