

Nameless in the crowd of nameless ones

Some thoughts on *The Story of A Proletarian Life*

Bartolomeo Vanzetti

1923

I can't remember when I first read "The Story of A Proletarian Life." I just know that one edition or another has been in and around my life for a long time. I read it most years, and usually I find myself reading it in a different way from the time before. Sometimes I read it as the voice of the immigrant experience and am moved by the image of Vanzetti, alone in the Battery, trying to make sense of where he was and realizing his essential loneliness and alienation from all that he saw around him. His portrayal of the exhausting search for work and the seeking out of fellow country people for help and support is both grim and poignant reading and one can understand how the acts of kindness he receives begin to drive and shape his philosophy of life. His experience (and the experience of many others, I would guess) reflected the experiences of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman who, although rebels of a kind in their home country, were made anarchists by the conditions and situations they encountered after in America. In early twentieth century America, anarchism wasn't necessarily a foreign import, even if the press did live in fear of being swamped by immigrant devils arriving with hidden anarchist newspapers and pamphlets written in alien and crude languages. In truth it was American capitalism, with its casual, everyday cruelties that helped turn some immigrants into anarchists, Vanzetti his comrades among them.

Other times I read the pamphlet in the way I think Vanzetti wanted us to read it—as the autobiography of a working class man—as a "proletarian". I think he was very clear as to what that actually meant by the word proletarian and it is important to him that we discover that clarity through our engagement with his writing.

He wanted us to understand in concrete terms what it meant to be working class. In *The Story of a Proletarian Life* we read of the physical cruelties of his working life in Italy, a life that led to his contracting pleurisy; while his work experiences in America are no better. He endures hard, brutal labour in unbearable conditions that leave him exhausted and ill at the end of each working day. We need to be acutely aware when we read this section; the words on the page convey the smells, the aches, the exhaustion, and the mental misery that lie behind them and it would be inexcusable if we did not reflect on the life he is trying to describe. I sense he saw this as the most important section of his text and was trying to guide us into a foreign place; one few of us have any understanding of. Simply put, the experience he describes is the existence that constituted the living, everyday reality for many immigrant and poor working class communities torn between unskilled and skilled labour. It shaped who Vanzetti was and until we realize that I rather think we cannot even begin to understand him or the ideas that gestated from the economic and emotional situation he found himself in. Such a reading of his writing leaves us astonished as to how he and others could maintain their dignity and sense of self in the world they had to inhabit. The twenty four or so pages that detail his experience of both finding and enduring work can stand with the very best of working class autobiography. Concise, detailed, and passionate they still somehow ensure that we never lose sight of Vanzetti the human being amidst all the squalor and viciousness that made up his day-to-day existence, just as he never did. He was more than that. As he wrote “ I learned that class-consciousness was not a phrase invented by propagandists, but was a real, vital force, and that those who felt its significance were no longer beasts of burden, but were human beings.” (18)

What has always fascinated me, though, is the idea of Vanzetti as a self-educated man, as an autodidact, and what that meant with regard to his anarchism. Time and time again I go back to his chapter “My Intellectual Life and Creed.” I know, I think, why this chapter fascinates me and, perhaps, other anarchists of my generation. When I was growing up I met many self-educated working class men and women. They were everywhere in the community I lived in. They had left school at 13 or so, often having shown some promise there, because economic necessity had driven them to work. This was especially so in the case of women like my mother, never without a book in her hand, who left school early to work in a factory wrapping boiled sweets. Their learning had never followed the accepted trajectory of a university or “higher” education, that sense of order, shape and chronology that formed what we might call intellectual knowledge. Instead their intellectual life could be described as messy and contradictory, sometimes confrontational and often consisting of patterns that they had picked out for themselves from what they had read. Proscribed by what they could find in libraries, afford to buy, or

could borrow from friends, they became autonomous learners in charge of their own education. They always recognized the “literary canon” and had, sometimes, a rather exaggerated respect for it. That said they brought their own frame of reference to the classics. I can remember sitting in a pub listening to two old miners tell me that Sir Walter Scott’s “Ivanhoe” was a radical novel because they read it as an exercise in solidarity and anti-racism. Others felt the same about those awful novels of the English public school, (The Bounder of Greyfriars, that sort of thing) which they saw as friends together against the world, and authority in general, rather than the classist, racist novels that many critics felt they actually were. Sometimes these readers did meet in small groups to talk about what they were reading. Mostly though it was, I think, a rather solitary and lonely business. Some of these people were in the English anarchist movement when I joined all those years ago. Like many working class autodidacts they saw learning in unique and individual patterns that cut across all sorts of disciplines and genres, informing both how they saw anarchism, and their relationships with other anarchists not from their background.

It was like that for Vanzetti. He very carefully lists what he was reading after his arrival in America. There are the usual anarchist suspects as well as Marx, Darwin, and Spencer. I imagine him, in his room after, or before work, poring over Renan’s Life of Jesus a popular (and it has to be said, rather turgid) mainstay of late nineteenth and early twentieth century freethought, and re-affirming his antipathy to religious belief. We sense his coming to terms with history and discovering it’s cycles and movements from Greece and Rome onwards and his belief that only now was humanity leaving the prehistoric age -indeed “human history has not yet begun”. Of course there was also “literature”—Hugo, Tolstoy, Zola, poetry and, above all, The Divine Comedy. One senses that the latter was as much an influence on him as any anarchist writing that came his way. All of it, all this reading shaped, cemented, and challenged his ideas. The words of these writers struck a chord, crystallized what he was already sensing and made him aware of the beauty that could be found in the way words related to each other. Literature provided a balm to the exhaustion of his everyday life and lit up the world around him with a hope that was tangible. Waiting for him was anarchism and a movement that celebrated worker’s culture and literacy, containing comrades who had a shared understanding of the dignity of life that he recognized and related to and helped him read, what he called, “The Book of Life; that is the Book of Books! All the others merely teach how to read this one.” (29)

Through The Story of a Proletarian Life we can trace what contributed to Vanzetti’s embrace of the “ideal”, the pursuit of which made his life worth living. Given his circumstances when he wrote this pamphlet it is understandable that he does not mention some matters, but we should remind ourselves of a few things

about the anarchist world he moved in. His anarchist context, if you will. Vanzetti was a committed and passionate anarchist communist whose anarchism meant a permanent contestation. Influenced by the ideas of writers such as Luigi Galleani, Peter Kropotkin, and Max Stirner, and re-inforced by their affinity with each other, some of Vanzetti's comrades, using any weapons they could, had been at war with the American government since the summer of 1914. Theirs (and his) was an anarchism that combined a fierce belief in the right of the individual to fight back and resist any "invasion" of his or her freedom and individuality, combined with a practical recognition of mutual aid and support: from each according to their ability; to each according to their need. Their anarchism was atheistic, opposed to any form of conciliation with capitalism, all embracing, and passionate in a way that might make some of us uneasy. Galleani's writings in the paper he edited, *Cronaca Sovversiva*, constantly celebrated individuals and groups who had carried out attacks on the rich and powerful. He lauded those men and women who had fought back by refusing to be acquiescent to the economic, physical and mental cruelty he defined as characteristic of both authoritarian and "democratic" states. This paper was critical in developing Vanzetti's appreciation of how anarchists should be; how they should carry themselves in a world that saw them as the enemy. That said, we do need to be careful though when we talk about influences and how they work. We can't say a paper said that so they did this. That's a convenience of approach that belongs in the archive and nowhere else. Processes of thinking went on, experiences in life were considered and a constant assessment of words was taking place, even if the words of anarchism resonated with them like only a few other words had ever resonated in their lives. A did not necessarily lead to B without often pulling in F, Q, and S. If anarchism was the end of their journey we need to know far more about their intellectual, economic, and emotional journeys before we make too many casual or sweeping statements about any comrades's relationship with it, never mind the relationship between reading and action. We should also remember it wasn't just Galleani doing the writing. In some cases it was working class and "uneducated" writers striving to find the right words to describe the elation and possibilities that were inherent in the struggle for the attainment of anarchy. If anarchy was to be new and original and startlingly wonderful what words could they find to express these hopes, dreams, and potential possibilities? Inevitably they drew on their experiences with what we might call the literary canon and, as a result, their writings are often awkward, ungainly, hyperbolic and hauntingly beautiful, often all at the same time.

We also know that this anarchism offered an alternative cultural life that appealed to the self-educated militant. One in which they could play an integral part. Drama performances, picnics and musical concerts proliferated, all put on by the anarchists themselves and seen as integral to the pursuit of the ideal and the pro-

motion of worker culture. Vanzetti and his comrades embraced all of this with a passion. Watching a play by Gori, listening to arias and folksongs, reading novels and poetry, talking and learning, all became part of the fabric of anarchism and, we might suggest, this anarchism became for Vanzetti, as much intuition and feeling as it was intellect.

We are entering awkward territory here. For so long we have seen Vanzetti as a victim, as the innocent man executed by the American state alongside his comrade, Nicola Sacco. He has been characterized as a simple working man with a devoted, if rather awkward belief system. This pamphlet shows us that those images will not do. He was a complex man, driven by a fierce morality. He reflected deeply on the world around him and was clearly aware of the power and possibility of language and its relationship to literature, ideas and action. His writing traces the journey that led him from Italy to the prison cell where he awaits execution, but it does much more. As well as describing to us just what proletarian could mean, it presents us with an anarchism that we cannot fully trace in anyone's writings or in any newspaper. This is an anarchism that is equally based upon emotion and intuition as it is on any theoretical writing. It's a fierce, uninhibited ideal, centred on the assertion of dignity in the face of appalling economic and emotional oppression. It maintained Vanzetti's dignity in the face of the most disgusting living and working conditions that capitalist America threw at him. Knowing this we would do well to remember that the anarchist communism of the Galleanisti was aimed not just at the solid and hardworking man of Kropotkin's "Appeal to the Young" or Morris' "New From Nowhere" but rather to the outsiders; those men and women at the very edge of capitalist life, living and working in a grim squalor we cannot imagine. Those people who were the very lumpenproletariat that Bakunin appealed to in some his writings.

Of course they are people that anarchism has very little contact with nowadays. It has little, regular relationship with the multitudes of desperate poor, and, in truth, the working class self-educated men and women who Vanzetti and his comrades were typical of are, for the most part, people of the past. Both of these realities mean we may have lost something very precious from our ranks—something that made anarchism richer and more complex. Anarchism, once, was able to re-enforce the dignity and self-perception of outsiders like Vanzetti and we should realize that any state that threatened that dignity had to bear the consequences. Vanzetti and others like him had not much else to lose except their own sense of worth. If they couldn't choose their battles they would not run away from one. They would fight rather than surrender who they were or deny the hope that anarchism gave them.

So, after all those years I mull over the words of this man whose pamphlet has played no small part in my own life. If I became confused on some readings, uncertain or contradictory, I have never really worried. I feel pretty sure that he wouldn't

mind. Life for him was thinking, questioning, and always tangling one self up with words and meanings, never forgetting they are worthless without the emotions they stir in us. Ninety-one years on and Vanzetti still has much to offer me. I am thankful I have had the chance to read him and I am thankful to him for his words that have always encouraged me to think, question and act.

I am and will be until the last instant (unless I should discover that I am in error) an anarchist-communist, because I believe that communism is the most humane form of social contract, because I know that only in liberty can man rise, become noble, and complete.

From: imminent rebellion #13: <http://www.rebelpress.org.nz/publications>.

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Retrieved on December 21st, 2014 from
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