

# Dora Marsden "The Stirner of Feminism" ?

Did Dora Marsden "transcend" Stirner?

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# Contents

Abstract . . . . .	3
Life summary . . . . .	3
”The Max Stirner of Feminism” ? . . . . .	5
From anarchism to archism . . . . .	6
Bibliography: . . . . .	8

## Abstract

Dora Marsden (1882-1960) was the editor of some avant-garde literary journals (1911-1919; Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce made their debuts in these) as well as an author with philosophical ambitions. She is being rediscovered of late, sometimes as "The Stirner of Feminism". This article, after presenting a biographical sketch, focuses on that title. It shows that Marsden was at no time a true follower of that infamous "egoist" philosopher, but instead went through an evolutionary period in which she bypassed Stirner and arrived at standpoints which cannot be classified as having transcended Stirner – firstly at a simple assertive "archism" (as opposed to anarchism), finally at a mystical "egoist" cosmology.

## Life summary

[Dora Marsden, born: 5 March, 1882 in Marsden/Yorkshire/England; died: 13 December, 1960 in Dumfries/Scotland.]

The fourth of five siblings, Marsden was born on the fifth of March, 1882, in Marsden, a small village near the industrial town of Huddersfield in the British county of Yorkshire. Her father was the owner of a small textile factory. After losing this means of income as a result of his own mistakes, he abandoned his family in 1890, forcing Marsden to grow up from then on in very meager circumstances. Marsden attended a school that was incidentally one of the few free of church influence and that offered her at the age of thirteen the possibility to teach the lower grades, thereby contributing to the family's livelihood. By the time she was eighteen, she had through this job already acquired the qualifications necessary to become a teacher; however, she chose not to seek a higher position at the school, instead applying for –and receiving – a stipend for study at a university in Manchester. Her three full-paid years of study were then followed by five obligatory years working as a teacher.

Even during the course of her studies, Marsden involved herself with the British women's rights movement (suffragettes). At the end of her compulsory service as a teacher, and after she was arrested in 1909, owing to political activity, she accepted a full-time position with the WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union) and became nationally recognized as the organizer and aggressive leader of a number of spectacular campaigns. In spite of – or rather, due to – her daring efforts on behalf of the cause of women's rights, Marsden found herself in ever-growing conflict with the authoritarian leadership of the WSPU, which favored moderate tactics, and in early 1911, she decided to leave the group.

At the same time, Marsden further developed the philosophical foundation of her political involvement, which she had begun during her years of study. This can be observed in detail through examination of her contributions to the periodicals which she, with financial support of well-to-do female patrons – mainly the author Harriet Shaw Weaver (1876-1961) – published in London in the years that followed: »The Freewoman« (November, 1911 to October, 1912), »The New Freewoman« (June, 1913 to December, 1913), and »The Egoist« (January, 1914 to December, 1919). Like the sequence of titles, the varying captions signal Marsden's development in the – here, especially – interesting stage of 1912 to 1914; "A Weekly Feminist Review," which found the suffragette movement to be too confining, soon became in May of 1912, "A Weekly Humanist Review," and in June, 1913, "An Individualist Review," which, a bit later, received the lasting title of »The Egoist.« During this time, 1912-1914, Marsden continued to develop and change her philosophy, and in doing so, "transcended" anarchism.

Marsden's periodicals had, however, no explicit political objective, instead representing above all products of the Anglo-American literary avant-garde of the time (futurism, modernism, egoism, imagism, vorticism, etc.). A few writers who later achieved fame were more or less closely associated with these magazines. Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Herbert Read, and others published their early attempts here, while James Joyce printed his »Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man« for the first time as a serial in »The Egoist.«

In the articles following that phase of 1912 to 1914, which Marsden herself wrote in »The Egoist,« her tendency to base her own initially individual-anarchist, later termed "egoist," philosophy and her resulting opinions on a new idea of anthropology became ever clearer. This new anthropology still needed to be advanced and embedded in a likewise new type of cosmology by means of the newest scientific knowledge. Eighteen articles under the title »The Science of Signs« (1916-1919) were the collective beginning of the endeavors pursued by Marsden until the end of the nineteen-twenties.

In order to have more time for these philosophical ambitions, Marsden had in 1915 already left a good deal of the editorial work to a few committed co-workers (Weaver, Pound, Eliot). In 1920, after »The Egoist« came to an end, she withdrew to a secluded spot in the Lake District, where she and her mother spent the next one and a half decades alone. During this period of self-imposed isolation, Marsden worked on her "great work," which continued to expand and incorporated into itself mathematics, physics, biology, and – theology. Of this magnum opus, which was laid out in six volumes, only two titles appeared, however, published again by her loyal friend and patron Harriet Shaw Weaver via her "Egoist Press": »The Definition of the Godhead« (1928) and »Mysteries of Christianity« (1930).

This work of ten laborious years in which Marsden wanted to integrate her earlier feminist, anarchist, and egoist thoughts, as well as establish as – irrespective of mainstream opinion – ”scientifically valid,” came up against absolute indifference not only from the general public but also from Marsden’s former supporters. That was the main cause for Marsden’s ”breakdown” in 1930, from which she would for intermittent periods briefly recover. When her mother finally died in 1935, Marsden sank into ”deep melancholy” and was taken by relatives to a home for psychologically ill patients in Dumfries/South Scotland. She lived there for another twenty-five years without ever taking up her literary work again.

## **”The Max Stirner of Feminism” ?**

The development of Marsden’s theory formation is of interest here only insofar as it directly relates to the theme of anarchism in the relatively short period from ca. 1912 to 1914. Until 1912, Marsden’s viewpoint had progressed from a socialist to a feminist and humanist and finally to an individualist point of view, which she termed egoist and in which all that had come previously was ”alike contained and transcended.” Literary ”egoisms” had come into vogue since ca. 1890, most from the Continent, penetrating the Anglo-Saxon sphere (Nietzsche, Barrès, and others) and causing the discourse in Marsden’s »Freewoman« to affirm egoism before the name of Stirner was even mentioned. Nevertheless, the American culture critic Floyd Dell addressed Marsden even then – due to her programmatic opening article (»Bondwomen,« 23 Nov 1911) – admiringly as ”The Max Stirner of Feminism” (»Women as World Builders,« p.103).

After Stirner’s »The Ego and His Own« appeared in English (London, 1912) this book seemed to Marsden to be of especially remarkable value. Contrary to habit, she even spoke about the book once, enthusiastically and with unchecked superlatives: it was (not ”one of the,” but rather) ”the” ”most powerful work” that had ever appeared (1 Sept 1913). – Only he or she who is familiar with the peculiar ways in which Stirner’s thought was received, particularly those approving (Mackay, Ruest, Jünger; see Laska, 1996), will look more closely here.

The first time Marsden dealt with Stirner was in her article, »The Growing Ego« (8 Aug 1912). An unidentified correspondent had asked her to subject Stirner’s theories to the most thorough of tests. This, she said at the outset, ”we” (she always used the plural here) will without a doubt soon do; for the time being, however, we need to gain control over the penetrative influence which Stirner’s book exerts on us, and namely, we must first put aside the profound truth which it contains and instead expose the ”abrupt and impossible termination of its thesis.”

Marsden then proceeded as follows: She qualified and reduced Stirner, as she, like many authors before and after her, interpreted his theories as being tautological. She opined that Stirner had indeed done away with the concept of ethics, religion, God, and the human being as external powers that affected the ego – which, incidentally, was nothing great, because these are, in any case, unreal – but: "If the Ego needs the realisation in itself of morality, or religion, or God, then by virtue of its own supremacy, the realisation will be forthcoming." The problem lies within each ego itself. Fortunately, there are some few "positive persons whom we call personalities," and from them, the "poets and creative Thinkers," we (we, incl. Marsden?, who are not that) could experience what such a positive ego "realizes." This is, above all, the idea of God. It originates spontaneously from the ego and has nothing to do with external authority. The bottom line: "Let us agree with Stirner that God neither postulates nor controls the Ego. But the Ego does postulate God..."

Marsden's resistance to Stirner's "penetrative influence" gives an impression of hastiness. How she handled Stirner can only be inferred, because she never wrote the in-depth, argumentative analysis of him which she had promised. Instead, a year later, one read the cited, gushing – but at the same time oddly casual and isolated, and above all, previously disclaimed – judgment of Stirner's »Ego.« Soon after, in reply to reader's letters, which attacked Marsden, claiming her magazine was purely "Stirnerian," Marsden wrote (15 Jan 1914) that, while Stirner's certain influence undoubtedly suited her work, such was certainly not the appropriate adjective for the periodical meanwhile being published under the name of »The Egoist.«

This statement held true. Marsden let the matter concerning Stirner drop without any public argumentation. He was barely mentioned again in »The Egoist«; at most, one of his showier sayings was paraphrased from time to time. In the aforementioned series of articles, with which Marsden began to develop her "egoist" anthropology and cosmology, Stirner never appeared again, not even in the chapter titled »The "I" and the "Ego." - A differentiation« (Sept 1916). Floyd Dell's opinion that Marsden was the (female, Anglo-American) counterpart to Stirner, which can still be found in texts every now and then, barely stands on solid ground.

## **From anarchism to archism**

Although Marsden avoided making an analysis of Stirner, she still adopted an eclectic few pithy theses from him; however, none were either fundamental or specific. The manner of her selective appropriation in particular was seen in the dispute she fought out with Tucker in her periodicals (see Parker, 1986, both articles).

Benjamin R. Tucker (1854-1939) was from 1881 to 1907 publisher of the individualist-anarchist magazine »Liberty,« which was published in New England (Boston, New York). In the late 1880s, the polyglot journalist James L. Walker introduced Stirner, who was then relatively unknown even in Germany, as a topic of discussion in the magazine. The result was an irreconcilable polarisation of opinions, within both the readers and the editorial staff. Stirner's morally indignant opponents respectively canceled their subscriptions and contributions. Therefore, in spite of Tucker and the remaining contributors, »Liberty« became in no way Stirnerian. On the contrary, once the periodical divided, the theme of Stirner was only briefly and in a subdued manner discussed and quickly "forgotten." In 1907, after a twenty-year delay, Tucker finally issued the first English translation of »Der Einzige und sein Eigentum.« Shortly after, as a result of the fire that destroyed his publishing house, he ended his journalistic career and moved to France with the intention of spending the rest of his life in seclusion.

However, Tucker once broke his resigned silence after 1907, because Marsden's newly established »The Freewoman« gave him a reason to be somewhat optimistic again. He began to write from June, 1913, onwards in »The New Freewoman.« His contributions were mostly correspondence from Paris but also theoretical articles in which he, as before in »Liberty,« promoted Proudhon's mutualism. A social contract was practically indispensable for a life in society, he said, and such a contract that did not bind the citizen to God and a sovereign ruler but only to his own conscience "would have been acceptable even to Max Stirner as a charter for his 'Union of the Free'." Marsden replied that such a society would, in effect, be more repressive than all those that came before, because the "State" which had been transferred to the conscience would be omnipresent. She saw no fundamental difference between Tucker's "individualist" anarchism and collectivist anarchism, terming it a "clerico-libertarian" doctrine – a criticism with which she could have quoted Stirner and proclaimed: Our anarchists are pious people!

Tucker was angered and finally broke off the debate. He refuted Marsden's claim of being an anarchist, instead terming her "archist and egoist," and in March, 1914, he withdrew for good from public debate. Marsden took up this polemic designation positively and professed her "archism" in a direct reply (2 March 1914), as well as in a later article about »The Illusion of Anarchism« (15 Sept 1914). Every living being, she said, is archist from birth, because it seeks through all means to foster its own interests rather than those of others. Anarchism, on the other hand, preaches – "like any church" – that one should deny his innate archism=egoism. An "inner spiritual police," the conscience, should prohibit him from indulging his natural need for domination and for the unhampered gratification of his wishes. Some anarchists were indeed for the idea of the ego as a sovereign ruler, but only when it had first changed itself in a definite way, whereas Marsden, as an archist,

meant the real, existing, unchanged individuals and their egos, their spontaneous wishes and desires as well as their "vulgar simple satisfaction according to taste – a tub for Diogenes; a continent for Napoleon; control of a trust for Rockefeller." [And what for Dora Marsden?] Referring to Tucker's remark, which noted that history up until the present took exactly this course, Marsden answered that this showed exactly – in line with philosophical pragmatism – that the concept was correct. The sooner the miserable wretches became archists, that is to say, looked after their own interests, the better (2 March 1914).

The discussion between Marsden and Tucker touched upon that theoretical as well as practical problem which is of chief importance to any thoroughly considered, radical (not just "socialist") anarchism: the anthropological phenomenon that one can try to name and circumscribe as that of "voluntary servitude" / of "conscience" as an internalized governing authority / of the "enculturation" of every newborn in a social system rooted in millennia / of an unconscious and irrational "superego," which is implanted in every individual, or as related concepts. Characteristic of this discussion between two protagonists who are often portrayed as being Stirnerian is that they, like many other thinkers (see Laska, 1996), never once perceived the quality of Stirner's given form of the problem, allegedly or ostensibly developing Stirner's ideas but actually missing them, Tucker in individualist anarchism and Marsden initially in an assertive trivial-egoism, called "archism," later in a mystical-cosmological "all-egoism."

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