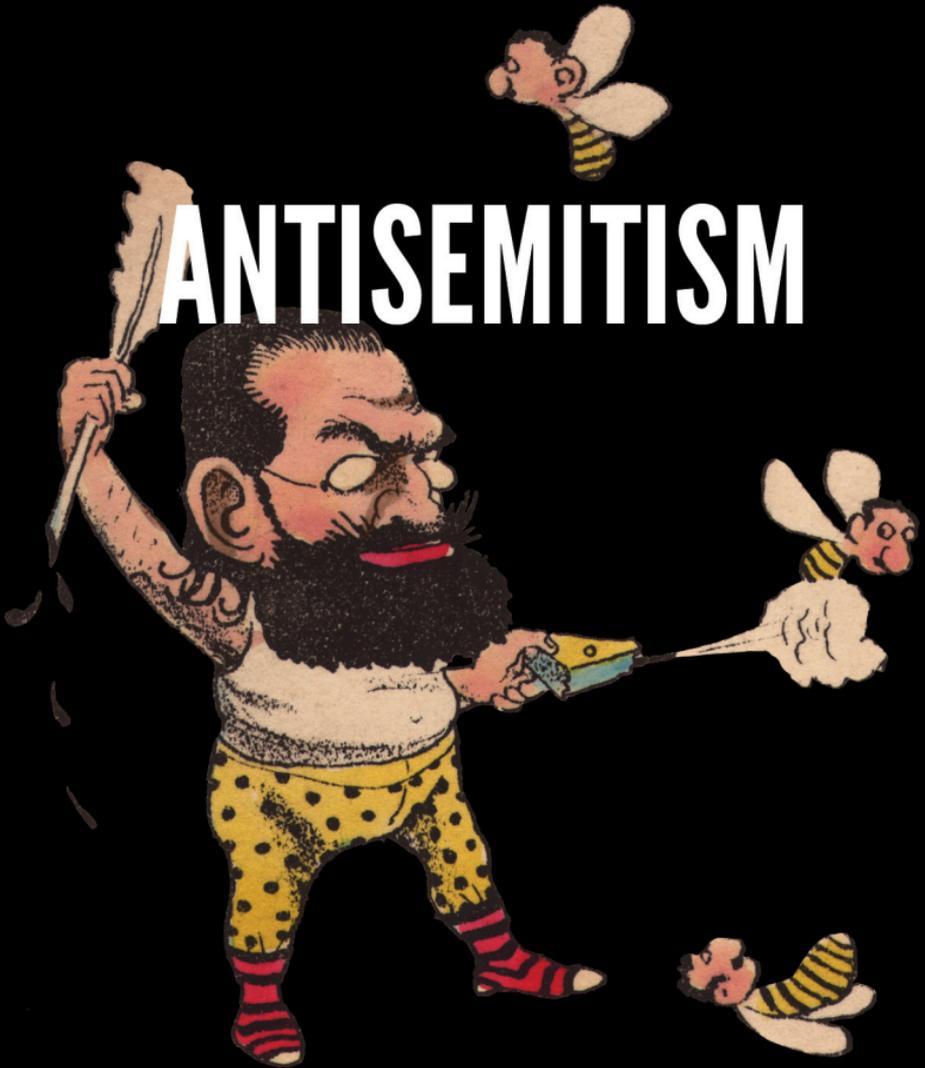


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ANTISEMITISM



HERMANN BAHR

Translated by James J. Conway

ANTISEMITISM

PREVIEW

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JOHN HENRY MACKAY

It was back then, when I was writing all those wild things, raging against all coercion and domination, wishing for the same freedom for all men. That's when we became close, because the same passion, a wild yearning for a happier and nobler life roared in us both, and we exchanged letters, each rebuking the other and praising himself and solemnly swearing to use our powers in the service of humanity. We were in a hurry to break all order and create a better world.

He was living in Zurich. I was in Paris. I need not tell how I conducted myself there. It is recorded in a dear old book; everyone knows the 'Gypsy life' of Murger and Musette; Phenice and Mimi are unforgettable. There one may read the tone, the customs, the adventures of the 'Momus' café, where even the waiters were dumbstruck by the conversations of these philosophers, these artists in the prime of their lives. This gives a clear, accurate picture of how I lived, and in between I wrote those very wild things, especially when there was

no more money in the house.

The great exhibition had just opened on the Champs de Mars, we were settled quite happily in our hotel, painters, poets, all important personages, each more decadent than the next, and the corresponding feminine contingent – suddenly I am presented with a card. A stranger wishes to speak to me. I read: John Henry Mackay – and I am terrified of the gloomy apostle of liberty, who might well ruin my hardly pessimistic situation. But he already knows that I am here, and there is nothing I can do.

He arrives. He looks more human than the fanatic I imagined. Certainly there are heavy, dull clouds on his mighty forehead. But when he sees the many bottles and the female contingent, he is visibly cheered and assuaged. We resume our revelry immediately and he readily takes part. Within ten minutes we are the best of friends. Within an hour we drink to brotherhood. And this night and the next we do not part and must surely have discussed important things.

We have remained good friends, although our careers kept us apart. He diligently maintained his wild urge for freedom and turned it into a system until the philosophical singer became the rigid dogmatist of anarchism, perhaps the greatest that Europe has today – certainly the most honest. I have become calmer, more sceptical, and am now more concerned with myself, with nurturing, maturing, and unfurling beautiful things within myself rather than with others, who nonetheless must find the right path within themselves. So we are asunder. But the gentle threads of dear memory bind us always.

He is famous now. Few heard the poet of 'Helene', *Storm* and the *Strong Year*. But *The Anarchists* – circulated throughout world, translated into French by Louis de Hessem, translated into English by Georg Schumm and now appearing in cheap editions for the public – is known to all. It was angrily criticised and enthusiastically praised. Only no one has understood it the way the poet intended.

He is fat and conducts himself like a thin man. The impetuous, nervous haste of erratic, rapid gestures, his sudden, effervescent speech, do not accord with his broad, sedate body and plump shining cheeks. He has short legs and tends to push his heavy behind forward somewhat, so that he always seems to be blown from behind, about to fall on one. The words do not obey him fast enough. While speaking a sentence he thinks, and becomes entangled and stutters; he stutters with his hands and feet as well.

He laughs heartily when I ask him about anti-semitism. His full, thick cheeks wobble. It strikes him as inadmissibly foolish and pitiable for people to argue about such things. 'Tell the antisemites that they are bad economists and generally asses. That is my opinion. Otherwise I do not know what else to say about this issue.'

'Now you know you cannot get off that easily. Antisemitism is after all ...'

'But dear child, you cannot possibly demand that a serious person take antisemitism seriously. Anyone who continues to argue about religion or race, rather than positioning oneself as a person among people, convicts himself. Today there is only one question that supersedes

all others and decides everything: freedom or constraint. There is no other choice. He who desires liberty must, if he pursues his thoughts honestly and without fear, profess my anarchism, which disdains uproar and seeks only the peaceful reconciliation of all peoples.'

'You are simply an incorrigible utopian.'

'And you cannot think logically or maybe you do not wish to ...'

'You should leave logic alone – it could do you harm. From those premises your entire anarchism can only arrive at its conclusion by a logical leap.'

'Prove it!'

'Easy! You start with liberty. As do I. I wish for the greatest liberty. But as long as another beside me is also free, it will always remain stunted, because my will is always inhibited and constrained by his. To be absolutely free I would have to be an absolute ruler. And so I arrive at Nietzsche and Barrès, and not you.'

'Only those who wish to be alone can be absolutely free.'

'So, if you yourself recognise that – but then your theory is already finished. If I cannot be absolutely free, only relatively so, then a little more or less matters not to me.'

'But you are forgetting that the higher the freedom of the individual, the higher the freedom of the other becomes.'

'Yes, if you could prove it, and if it were not just one of your empty assertions!'

'You always think solely of your condition of freedom, instead of thinking of it in general terms.'

‘What do I care about the general public? If I am to change and improve, then I wish to do so radically. But you lot are strange. You want to do away with kings and priests and police because they irk you; but any old philistine, some idiot who is blind to art who disturbs me far more is free to remain. How do I get from the assertion of my liberty to the general liberty that you assert? That is the leap. It is the love of the people that is constantly invoked – but if I already love, then I do not need your revolution at all and will submit myself to any servitude.’

‘It is not for love that I wish for general liberty, but because it promotes and secures my own liberty. I leave others alone so that I myself may be left alone. Of course, I must waive some of my desires. Of course, there will always be violence – no longer aggressive, but defensive. The condition of anarchy is not a flawless ideal, merely the best order of society in comparative terms. It cannot grant me the liberty to do anything I want. But it grants me the liberty not to do anything that I do not wish to do. I am not forced, and I must not force others ...’

‘Except to anarchism –’

‘Not at all. I reject all violence. We need to make violence impossible; we do not achieve that by countering it with violence – the Devil cannot be driven out by Beelzebub. Passive resistance to aggressive violence is the only way to break it. I am not at all concerned with dynamite and bombs. I wait patiently, in the unshakeable conviction that liberty is the goal of natural development. There is no other route to it but that of calm, tireless, certain enlightenment, and of the example one offers,

until everyone understands the general advantage and no one wishes to be a slave to his slaves any longer.’

‘Not all anarchists are so peaceful –’

‘What people in Germany call anarchists are in fact dynamitists or communists – our worst enemies.’

‘But where else do you aim to find followers?’

‘In Paris, the *Autonomie individuelle* movement is growing, and in America a small but steady and confident band of excellent men has been at work for years – Tucker in Boston, who owns *Liberty*, is their leader. I have come to regard Europe as a dying land ... and even Germany, dear God! The Germans are always last in culture, but the first in any universal stupidity – like antisemitism. I have given up looking for reasonable people here.’

ALPHONSE DAUDET

Daudet is a real Wandering Jew of lodgings. He moves constantly. Each novel is written in a different home, chosen according to his latest mood. He has made every corner of Paris his home at some point. But again and again he is irresistibly drawn to the Latin Quarter, to the Jardin du Luxembourg, where the enthusiastic young man once indulged sultry dreams, the audacious desires of young distress, beneath the squat, mean forms of the round towers of Saint-Sulpice which he viewed from his narrow, miserable, tumble-down mansard at the Grand Hotel du Sénat, at fifteen francs a month.

He now lives on rue de Bellechasse, a dark, silent, forlorn street that rises from quai d'Orsay, the wide, solemn square of the Academy, where the booksellers offer old black, crumbling folios; through the quarter, past the Cour des Comptes, which has been slumbering in sooty ruins since the Commune, shot through with the heavy green of long, dark, lush grass now sprouting there.

To the rear courtyard. And then up three steep

flights of stairs. I recall what Bardoux, the Fine Arts Minister of 1877, once said to an English emissary: 'You do not know Paris, my dear, and that is because you do not climb high enough when you go visiting. *La France n'habite pas au premier, la France loge au troisième étage, au quatrième, parfois sous les toits.*'

A dark, austere, quiet room enrobed in dull, soft, tender, placatory colours with heavy drapes drawn against the world, against light and noise from without. An anxious, apprehensive, suspended mood, like the sick bed of a shy and sensitive woman. And all bathed in a deep, cloudy grey from which, beneath the bright image of Edmond de Goncourt by Bracquemond, the white pallor of his face shines spectral and tormented. Everything seems on the verge of fleeing, trickling away, and his features, his forms float in the mist, like a dream of a visitation from spirits. The famous portrait by Carrière captures the mystical and disembodied essence of the nervous writer.

He is holding the crutch without which he can no longer move, and he squirms without cease, like a feverish patient turning the pillows over and vainly seeking relief from a thousand layers. The noble face, marked by suffering, bears an inexpressible refinement of lines and wrinkles; they speak of the habit of long torments, deep convulsions, a mild glimmer of that ultimate grace often seen in consumptive maidens. He seems ill, but he does not seem old; one would not suspect his 53 years. He seems more like a beautiful youth marked for death. And anyone alert to the strange contradiction of profound reverie in his veiled glances and the mockery of his harsh

lips will realise that he has always been a troubadour, a boulevardier.

He speaks softly and gently, but the words are warm and moist, shining and swelling with sentiment, ever thawing under that *sensibilité violente* which Lemaître referred to as the dominant element of his works, of his life. He speaks nervously, shifting from one topic to another, without rigorous order, in ragged, rushing sentences.

‘I am not a politician, I do not care for politics, I do not understand it – I imprudently follow my moods, and they are changeable. So – I do not know anything about the antisemitic doctrine; I cannot offer reasons for or against it. I can only speak for my moods, which may not always be just – I am merely the vassal of my nerves. Suddenly I will feel well-disposed for no reason, and for no reason I may become ill-disposed again. It is an odd thing with me and antisemitism. When I was still on close terms with Drumont I was a fierce opponent of the antisemites. Now that we no longer see each other – I do not know why it should be, but sometimes I feel that I am moving closer to his thinking. We were once very close. He would often come to see me, and each time we would argue about antisemitism. But we could never agree. I am unlucky enough to have very little religion – it does not interest me, or appeal to me. Perhaps that is a misfortune, but it is one I cannot change. And to hate a person for his belief, to revile him, persecute him, that struck me as quite shameful and abominable. So we always quarrelled; and my wife especially, who is just and gentle, would become quite agitated. Now we no

longer see each other. He is an outstanding person and a writer of unusual importance, but passionate, unjust and entirely immoderate. The things he says about me now! The fact that he says I may have talent, but then utters the most ghastly things about my greed and my ungovernable urge to amass money ... that I married off my son to the Hugo girl to enrich myself ... as if sons could be married off so easily ... and I ask you, what does one see of one's daughter-in-law's money? But that is just how he is. Yes – what was I saying? At that time I was a fierce opponent of the antisemites. But now – I cannot deny that now and then I catch myself thinking strange thoughts. If you look at the great swindles and fiddles, and when you realise that in all those dirty dealings the Jews always play the leading role – well, ultimately it becomes difficult to avoid a certain antipathy. This does not prevent me maintaining friendships with numerous Jews. But in the depths of my soul I have become slightly suspicious. If antisemitism were to triumph, I would be the first to protest against it ... because it is unacceptable, and it could endanger our culture. But as long as the Jews prevail and run all the major businesses and the entirety of politics, I feel *vaguement* antisemitic. For example: I used to live in the old Hôtel Richelieu on the place des Vosges. It was the only building on the whole square that was not yet owned by the Jews. Now, there is nothing one can actually say against that. But I cannot help it, I must confess that it gives me an unpleasant feeling. I am not a specialist in the matter; I do not much distinguish between Portuguese and German Jews, like the connoisseurs of Jewry; naturally I condemn agitation against the

Jews; I recognise the dangers that antisemitism holds for order and freedom – but I would be lying if I were to deny a certain slight, vague aversion that sometimes stirs within me.’

‘What do others in your circles think about the issue ... the writers and artists?’

‘I do not believe that there is any antisemitism there. I have never found a trace. But I have to say it is very difficult to judge – how would it manifest itself?’

‘I mean in the Société des gens de lettres, for example. Has there been an antisemitic strain apparent there?’

‘No, never – not that it would prove anything in any case. The Société des gens de lettres has no significance. You should not believe that because Zola is now president – he would be president anywhere now. There is no association whose president he does not wish to be: fire brigade, janitors, nightwatchmen – since he has acquired his new academic mind, it is all the same to him. *Il adore la présidence* ... But no, I do not believe that antisemitism exists in our circles. Some of the younger writers have depicted what goes on in the Jewish world, as Lavedan does in *Prince d’Aurec*. But then I did that twelve years ago, in *Rois en exil*, which was created out of a strong feeling for the power of money. At the time I was booed and hissed, because both the Jews and the swank aristocrats were appalled by the play ... And by the way, I am not at all a theatre person, either.’

‘You are writing a new play for next season?’

‘Yes, I am creating a drama and a novel from the same material. It is entitled *Le soutien de famille*. The title

is ironic – a pillar of the family who has breakfast brought to him in bed at 11 am, something like that. The novel takes a very bitter, harsh turn. For the stage, of course, I have to smooth it out a little and soften it, because everything there must always have a taste of *féerie*, so to speak.’

END OF PREVIEW

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