

**BAROJA'S APPROACH TO ANARCHY IN  
*LA MALA HIERBA* AND *AURORA ROJA***

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## INTRODUCTION

Before describing the characters in Baroja's two novels *La Mala Hierba* and *Aurora Roja* and their political views, we thought it to be advisable to give a short definition of what 'anarchy', 'nihilism', 'Government' and 'State' mean.

1) Anarchy: —a political theory, the negation of government, which would dispense with all laws, founding authority on the individual conscience and allowing individual autonomy its fullest development.

2) Nihilism: —the rejection of all religious and moral principles as the only means of obtaining social progress; the denial of all reality in phenomena.

3) Government: —act of governing, exercise of authority, regulation, control.

4) State: —a politically organized community; the civil powers of such a community; one of the political divisions forming a federation or republic.

Baroja did see a difference between 'nihilism' and 'anarchism' although they had much in common. What makes them distinct is the fact that there could be anarchists inclined to religion and that even those who were ready to be brutal and destructive had a 'moral' aim.

It is interesting that nearly all the characters whom we meet in those two novels are anarchists. In our opinion the reason for this is the truly terrible state of ordinary people's lives at that time that produced so many rebellious minds. On the morass of poverty, cruelty, corruption, sexual depravity, indifference of the better-off classes and total disintegration (in the spiritual sense) of the Church grew, metaphorically speaking, strange and twisted minds, like deformed plants. Anarchy ought not to be a set of political thoughts, but a set of individual wills. This being so, anarchists could not form a political party, they only could talk and try to convert.

In order to clarify, as far as possible, what direction Baroja's anarchist-characters took, we give a short resumé of those anarchists who could have influenced them.

1) **Bakunin.** Bakunin was the leading spirit among the Latin federations (Spanish, Italian, Belgian and Jurassic). He demanded the complete abolition of the state, which —he wrote— is a product of religion, belongs to the lower state of civilization, represents the negation of liberty, and spoils even that which it undertakes to do for the sake of general well-being. The state was an historically necessary evil, but its complete extinction will be, sooner or later, equally necessary.

2) **Kropotkin**. Kropotkin does not, like Bakunin, speak of a complete extinction of the state, but his aim was to prove that Communism – at least partial – has more chance of being established than Collectivism, especially in communes taking the lead, and that Free, or Anarchist – Communism is the only Communism that has any chance of being accepted in civilized societies. Communism and Anarchy are therefore two terms of evolution which complete each other, the one rendering the other possible and acceptable. In order to elucidate the main factors of human evolution, he has analysed the part played in history by the popular constructive agencies of mutual aid and the historical role of the state.

3) **NIETZSCHE**. A German philosopher who fostered the cult of “superman”, exalted self-assertation, the will to power, and denounced Christianity as ‘slave-morality’, a defence-mechanism of the weak against the strong.

One of the characters in *La Mala Hierba* is Jesús, a poor young man working in a printer’s shop; he was an anarchist dreaming of a perfect future world:

*“No más odios, no más rencores, ni jueces, ni polizontes, ni soldados, ni autoridad, ni patria. En las grandes praderas de la tierra, los hombres libres trabajan al sol. La ley del amor ha sustituido a la ley del deber, y el Horizonte de la Humanidad se ensancha cada vez más extenso, cada vez más azul...”* (p. 517) <sup>1</sup>

In this idealistic dream we can note that Jesús denies all authority and patriotism. What seems naive in his belief is that people will become so good and unselfish that the destructive and aggressive instincts will die out. Jesús also denies the authority of parents and the existence of God:

*“Lo primero que un hombre debe aprender es de desobedecer a sus padres y a no creer en el Eterno”* (p. 435) <sup>2</sup>

Jesús’s anarchism springs from compassion for people:

*“Desde que he visto las infamias que se cometen en el mundo; desde que he visto cómo se entrega friamente a la muerte un pedazo de humanidad; desde que he visto cómo mueren desamparados los hombres en las calles y en los hospitales...”* (p. 516) <sup>2</sup>

Manuel, a friend of Jesús, who too suffers great poverty, feels himself, although subconsciously, also to be an anarchist;

*“rabioso, invocó, a todos los poderes destructores para que redujesen a cenizas esta sociedad miserable”* (p. 516) <sup>1</sup>

One of the maxims of true anarchism is the view that the individual must not be forced to obey any authority whatsoever. Jesús denies the authority of parents and the Church. But in the same novel we meet a character who also practised the maxim of not being responsible to anyone for his deeds. We refer to Bonifacio Mingote, a clever rascal, whose philosophy was the following:

*"Mingote comulgaba en las ideas anárquico-filantrópico-colectivistas; algunas de sus cartas terminaba poniendo: Salud y Revolución Social, lo cual no era obstáculo para que intentase unas veces establecer una casa de préstamos, otras una casa de citas o algún otro 'honrado' comercio por el estilo. Había hecho aquel prestamista una porción de ignominias con los compañeros de la dinamita del ácido picrico, sacándoles dinero, ya para dar un golpe y comprar bombas, ya para escribir un diccionario libertario en donde él, Mingote, desmenuzará con su análisis formidable, más formidables que los más furiosos explosivos, todas las ideas tradicionales de esta estúpida sociedad"* (p. 410) <sup>1</sup>

Mingote's anarchism is so far removed from any idea of real anarchism (except the concept of free will of an individual, not responsible to anyone) that one may take him to be not entirely normal and suffering from a persecution mania. Baroja writes:

*"Mingote suponía que Madrid entero se confabulaba contra él para no dejarle prosperar; pero él esperaba el momento bueno en que les daría en la cabeza a sus enemigos"* (p. 410) <sup>2</sup>

Mingote's pretended anarchism has for its aim the desire to gain money by fraud. In *La Mala Hierba* we learn how Mingote makes use of Manuel, how he meets Roberto and is introduced by the latter to learn a trade in a printing office. There he meets and becomes friendly with Jesús. But as pay is minimal, the work tiring and boring, both friends decide to leave the office. Manuel and Jesús live like vagrants for about two months. They spend the nights in caves or Asylums for the poor. Everywhere they see appalling poverty, dirt, cruelty and misery. No compassion for the lowest of the low. The Church is hypocritical and heartless. Manuel says:

*"Qué diría Jesús si estuviera aquí... En la casa de Dios donde todos son iguales es un crimen entrar a descansar: el sacristán le entrega a uno a los guardias, los guardias le meten a uno en cuarto oscuro: y vaya usted a saber lo que nos harán después"* (p. 469) <sup>2</sup>

Religion, especially as acting through a corrupt and faithless Church naturally destroys the acceptance of any religion. In Jesús the terrible misery he has witnessed evokes hatred for the rich:

*"Si le quita usted al rico la satisfacción de saber que mientras él duerme otro hiela y que mientras él come otro se muere de hambre, le quita usted la mitad de su dicha"* (p. 461) <sup>2</sup>

Baroja also mentions the fate of the 'repatriados' who fought in Cuba and the Philippines and have never received any pay or help from the Government. On the way Manuel meets his cousin Vidal who is a homosexual and lives by his wits and money taken from prostitutes. He helps Manuel and tells him:

*"... Creo que en el mundo hay dos castas de hombres: unos que viven bien y roban trabajo y dinero; otros que viven mal y son ro-*

bados" (p. 481) <sup>2</sup>

Vidal also introduces Manuel into gambling houses. The people there:

*"Eran todos tipos sin sentido moral, a quienes, a unos la miseria y la mala vida, a otros la inclinación a lo irregular, había desgastado y empañado la conciencia y roto el resorte de la voluntad" (p. 483) <sup>2</sup>*

The story of *Aurora Roja* begins by relating that two young men, both seminarians, Martin and Juan, decide to leave the seminary, because both have no faith and think that in 2000 years there will be no churches or seminars any more. After unpleasant experiences on the way Martin and Juan part. Juan is an artist, a designer and sculpter. On the way he stays a few days in a doctor's house who has recognised his talent. In Madrid, after fifteen years, Juan meets his brother Manuel. There are many characters in the novel *Aurora Roja* and much is said about the inhabitants of the house where Manuel lives, but we are mostly concerned about the element of Anarchism in this novel. Juan is able to help Manuel to buy a printing machine by gaining a prize for one of his exhibitions. Both Manuel and Salvadora love work and Manuel's idea at that time is:

*"... a mí la anarquía me parece bien, con tal que venga en seguida y le dé a cada uno los medios de tener su casita, un huertecillo y tres o cuatro horas de trabajo; pero para hacer más que hablar y hablar, como hacéis vosotros, para llamarse compañeros y saludarse diciendo '¡salud!', para eso prefiero ser sólo impresor" (p. 562) <sup>2</sup>*

Those words make Juan consider Manuel as a real "burgués infecto" (p. 562) <sup>2</sup>. As we shall see later, Manuel, for a time, will be influenced by anarchism, but under Roberto Hastings' influence he will return to his moderate ideas.

Juan meets a friend who has praised his painting 'Los Rebeldes'. They talk in a tavern where they meet the editor of an anarchist periodical called *Libertario*. El *Libertario* proposes to Juan that he should meet his comrades in an old hothouse behind the tavern in order to discuss different political ideas. El *Libertario* refuses to create a group because for him it would be against his views which were:

*"Yo soy enemigo de todo compromiso y de toda asociación que no esté basada en la inclinación libre... Si hay necesidad de comprometerse y de votar, no quiero pertenecer al grupo" (p. 564). <sup>1</sup>*

Here, in our opinion Baroja shows, perhaps ironically, that anarchism should, by definition, not be a body of political thought, but a set of individual wills. Therefore, anarchism cannot form an active political party; and so all that true anarchists can do—as of now—is talk and try to convert. Those anarchists who attend the meetings in the *Aurora Roja* are all different. On the whole:

*"En el grupo se manifestaron pronto tres tendencias: la de Juan, la del 'Libertario' y la del estudiante César Maldonado. (we meet César Maldonado in *La Ciudad de la Niebla*, where he is ready to obey Toledano who commands him to send a bomb from London*

to Spain) (p. 564) <sup>2</sup> ... *El anarquismo de Juan tenía un carácter entre humanitario y artístico. No leía Juan casi nunca libros* (p. 564) <sup>2</sup> *anarquistas; sus libros favoritos eran los de Tolstoi y de Ibsen. El anarquismo del Libertario era el individualismo rebelde, fosco y hueraño, de un carácter más filosófico que práctico* (p. 565) <sup>1</sup>; y la tendencia de Maldonado entre anarquista y republicana radical, tenía ciertas tendencias parlamentarias. Este último quería dar a la reunión aire de club; pero ni Juan, ni el Libertario aceptaban esto: Juan, porque veía una imposición, y el Libertario, además de esto, por temor a la policía" (p. 565) <sup>1</sup>

*"Una última forma del anarquismo, un anarquismo del arroyo, era el del señor Canuto, del Madrileño y de Jesús. Predicaban estos la destrucción, sin idea filosófica fija, y su tendencia cambiaba de aspecto a cada instante, y tan pronto era liberal como reaccionaria"* (p. 565) <sup>1</sup>

As we can see, every person in *Aurora Roja* was different, although all of them insisted on full liberty in the expression of their opinions, all of them refused to accept any kind of Government with its right to exercise authority, to control and to regulate; all of them also considered the State with its civil powers not to be free enough for their concept of individual will. It seems to us that Baroja did see a difference between nihilism and anarchism, although at first glance both anarchism and nihilism seem to be very close. Whereas nihilism rejected *all* religious and moral principles as the only means of achieving social progress, anarchism could be religious (as in Tolstoy) and, in spite of its dogma of destruction, often had a moral aim, the aim to bring happiness to Humanity in some future time. The common factors of the majority of anarchists who visited *Aurora Roja* was the disregard of what means should be applied to reach the desired state of happiness for all. They were ready to destroy by force (including Jesús) and murder innocent people who were living *now* for some future utopia. Maldonado, who also visited *La Aurora Roja* was of the opinion that one had to be practical. However,

*"excepto tres o cuatro partidarios de Maldonado que defendieron la utilidad del compromiso, los demás no quisieron asociarse"* (p. 564) <sup>1</sup>

We could call Maldonado and his friends semi-anarchists.

Baroja is ironical about the meetings and discussions of those belonging to *Aurora Roja*. He writes that all wanted to meet in order to discuss, to talk, to make propaganda according to everyone's individual conscience.

*"En todos ellos se notaba cierta alegría de jugar a los revolucionarios"* (p. 564) <sup>2</sup>

Maldonado is more inclined to the theory of Kropotkin who preached popular constructive agencies and mutual aid for *living* persons, whereas the others were more under the influence of Bakunin. Juan was an idealist, versed in Tolstoy and Ibsen:

*"La autoridad era todo lo malo: la rebeldía todo lo bueno; la autoridad era la imposición, la ley, la fórmula, el dogma, la restricción; la rebeldía era el amor, la libre inclinación, la simpatía, el altruismo, la bondad..."* (p. 605) <sup>2</sup>

But he, like many others, contradicted himself. Shortly before he died he said:

*"...Aquella mayor parte de la Humanidad que agonizaba en el infierno de la miseria se rebelaría e impediría la piedad por fuerza, e impediría que se siguieran cometiendo tantas infamias, tantas iniquidades. Y para esto, para excitar a la rebelión a las masas, todos los procedimientos eran buenos: la bomba, el incendio, el regicidio..."* (p. 641) <sup>1</sup>

As to Aurora Roja, every Sunday a new member joined the discussions; the most exotic ones were a Frenchman and a Russian. For the Frenchman, all anarchism was art; for the Russian, science:

*"La del francés todo arte, y la del ruso, todo ciencia"* (p. 583) <sup>1</sup>  
*"... Y todos los domingos aumentaba el número de adeptos en la Aurora Roja. Unos, contagiados por otros, iban llegando... Y crecía el grupo anarquista libremente como una mancha de hierba en una calle solitaria"* (p. 588) <sup>2</sup>

We also can call Roberto Hastings an anarchist, since he believed in the freedom of the individual will.

As his point of view was that only the individual, and not the masses, matter, his so-called anarchism becomes emotional Fascism. We have to think of Nietzsche and Stirner when Roberto expresses his views to Manuel:

*"... la anarquía para todos es nada. Para uno sí es la libertad... El montón, la masa, nunca será nada. Cuando haya una oligarquía de hombres selectos, en que cada uno sea una consciencia, entre ellos la libre elección, la simpatía, lo regirán todo. La ley sólo quedará para la canalla que no se ha emancipado"* (p. 575) <sup>2</sup>

In spite of the fact that Roberto has no compassion for the weak and stupid, his anarchism is that of an idealist: he thinks it possible that there could be men who would be able to rule justly, according to their conscience. He is pessimistic about the outcome of a lefwing anarchist victory: once the weak, the stupid and the immoral have power in their hands, they would destroy the strong and the intelligent ones.

Meanwhile the two emotional and violent anarchists, Jesús and señor Canuto have begun to rob graveyards, selling marble, copper etc. to second-hand dealers. Jesús does not consider their actions to be criminal. He says:

*"Y ¿qué no se puede ser una buena persona y aprovecharse de lo que no sirve para nadie?"* (p. 582) <sup>1</sup>

Manuel is afraid of the police and persuades Jesús to go to Tangiers.

It seems to us that we have said enough of the kind of people who went to



Aurora Roja where they expressed their various anarchistic views. It is interesting to note that Baroja himself did not have a high opinion of anarchists, realizing that they and their views had no real future; he also made a sharp distinction between the anarchists and the socialists. He writes:

*"Al bando anarquista iban sólo los convencidos y exaltados, y al ingresar en él sabían que lo único que les esperaba era ser perseguidos por la Justicia; en cambio, en las agrupaciones socialistas, si entraban algunos por convencimiento, la mayoría ingresaba por interés. Estos obreros, socialistas de ocasión no tocaban de las doctrinas más que aquello que les sirviera de arma para alcanzar ventajas: el 'societarismo' les hacía autoritarios, despóticos, de un egoísmo repugnante. A consecuencia de él, los oficios comenzaban a cerrarse y tener escalafones: no se podía entrar a trabajar en ninguna fábrica sin pertenecer a una Sociedad, y para ingresar en ésta había que someterse a su reglamento y pagar además una gabela. Tales procedimientos constituían para los anarquistas la expresión más repugnante del autoritarismo"* (p. 602)<sup>2</sup>

It seems to us that it would be right to mention here the dialogue between Manuel and Roberto. Roberto presents Manuel with enough money to be the proprietor of his own business. Salvadora tells Roberto that Manuel works very little as he is preoccupied with anarchism. Roberto explains to Manuel his own point of view:

*"... La república, la anarquía, el socialismo, la religión, el amor... cualquier cosa, la cuestión es engañarse..." "El remedio está en la misma lucha; el remedio está en hacer que la sociedad se rija por las leyes naturales de la concurrencia"* (p. 645)<sup>1</sup>

Then, in one sentence, Roberto expresses Baroja's philosophy:

*"En el fondo no hay más que un remedio, y un remedio individual: la acción... Ya que nuestra ley es la lucha, aceptémosla, pero no con tristeza, con alegría. La acción es todo, la vida, el placer. Convertir la estática en vida dinámica; éste es el problema. La lucha siempre, hasta el último momento, ¿por qué? Por cualquier cosa"* (p. 645)<sup>2</sup>

Roberto also tells Manuel:

*"¿Quieres destruirlo todo? Destruyelo dentro de ti mismo. La sociedad no existe, el orden no existe, la autoridad no existe"* (p. 644)<sup>2</sup>

We see that Roberto is also an anarchist, but one who follows Nietzsche's philosophy as far as the feeble, sick and very poor are concerned. For Manuel it is difficult to accept those views absolutely, because deep down he is an ordinary man who wants to work and live comfortably. But he also has a soft heart which becomes apparent when discussing Juan's way of thinking that one has to sacrifice the life of many people in order to achieve felicity. Manuel says:

*"... Y si a mí me dijeran que la felicidad de la Humanidad entera se podría conseguir con el lloro de un niño, y esto estuviera en mi mano, yo te digo que no le haría llorar a un niño, aunque todos los hombres del mundo se me pusieran de rodillas..."* (p. 640)<sup>2</sup>

(One has to think here of the dialogue between Ivan and Aliosha Karamazov in Dostoevski's novel).

If we want to decide whether Baroja considered anarchism better than so-called 'Societarismo' we have again to refer to Manuel. When Roberto asks him about his business Manuel replies:

*"...va muy despacio; pero me matan los obreros socialistas."  
"Está uno atado de pies y manos. Las Sociedades hacen ya en todos los oficios lo que quieren ¡con un despotismo! Uno no puede tener los obreros que se le antojen, sino que los que ellos quieren.  
... Es una tiranía horrible."* (p. 642)<sup>2</sup>

When Roberto suggests to Manuel that his tendency towards anarchy has grown, Manuel answers that it is so. Apparently Baroja had some sympathy with the anarchists who had high ideals and refused to obey anybody of anything in authority, and less sympathy with socialism, which he calls ironically 'societarismo'. The implication is that socialism is more useful than anarchy because even if it is misused, it often provides the workers who depend on their masters with better pay and conditions of life. Manuel represents a so-called 'ordinary' human being, who is not 'ordinary' but, as most humans are, very complicated, especially where his emotions are concerned. He has become an idealistic anarchist and has succeeded in interesting Salvadora in questions of politics, conditions and ways in which the state works and has made her think that women ought to have a voice in ruling the country. She tells Roberto:

*"Soy algo avanzada ... casi casi libertaria, y no es por mí, precisamente; pero me indigna que el Gobierno, el Estado o quien sea, no sirva más que para proteger a los ricos contra los pobres, a los hombres contra las mujeres y a los hombres y a las mujeres contra los chicos."* (p. 643)<sup>1</sup>

Before Roberto leaves Madrid he presents Manuel with enough money to buy his business and to marry Salvadora. Manuel accepts. It is left to the reader to imagine how Manuel's future life is going to develop. He is inclined to be a man of property (in a modest way) who pays his workers with bad grace, who is full of anarchistic ideals and compassion for the poor and who is placed in the position of a 'burgués'. But there are many 'Manuels' in this world and it is not for us to judge him. The only time we hear the words "alegría" and "placer" is when Roberto describes "la lucha por la vida".

The only member of Aurora Roja who dies for his beliefs is Señor Canuto. After Manuel and Salvadora's wedding a certain man called Silvio Fernández Trascanejo gained the confidence of the members of Aurora Roja.

*"Y les había hecho creer que había una conjuración revolucionaria"*

ria terrible para el día de la coronación." (p. 647) <sup>1</sup>

Juan was the most convinced of all; as an artist and convinced anarchist he could exercise his imagination:

*"Veís la brillante comitiva de reyes, de príncipes, de embajadores, de grandes damas, pasando por en medio de las bayonetas, y se veía a él avanzando, deteniendo la comitiva con el grito estridente de ¡Viva la anarquía!"* (p. 647) <sup>2</sup>

However, el Libertario finds out that Silvio is a policeman and he throws him out. Still, some of the members of Aurora Roja, among them Juan, Manuel and Señor Canuto join the mob in order to watch the procession. When the king's carriage follows other carriages with ambassadors, princes, etc. they note that:

*"El rey saludaba militarmente, hundido en el coche, con el aire fatigado e inexpresivo."* (p. 649) <sup>2</sup>

In the crowd Manuel meets Señor Canuto who seems to be drunk. He is happy that the reign of María Cristina has come to an end. He exclaims:

*"¡Vaya un reinado! Miles de hombres muertos en Cuba, miles de hombres muertos en Filipinas, hombres atormentados en Montjuich, inocentes como Rizal fusilados, el pueblo muriendo de hambre... ¡Vaya un reinado!"* (p. 649) <sup>2</sup>

El Libertario was also very disappointed:

*"Aquí no hay nada es una raza podrida; esto no es pueblo; aquí no hay vicios, ni virtudes, ni pasiones, aquí todo es m.... —y repitió la palabra dos o tres veces— Política, religión, arte, anarquistas, m.... Puede ese niño abatido y triste recorrer la ciudad. Ese rebaño de imbéciles no se incomodará."* (p. 650) <sup>1</sup>

Later, Señor Canuto refuses to take off his hat when the procession passes by, is pushed by the police and disappears in the crowd not to be seen any more. El Libertario subsequently learns that Señor Canuto is gravely ill in hospital after having received blows on the head and is probably dying. Juan also seems to Manuel to be on the point of death, but Juan refuses to see a priest and is indeed grateful to Salvadora that she did not allow him to enter his room. Juan is happy to die; before dying he tells his comrades:

*"Adios compañeros. Yo he cumplido mi misión, ¿verdad?... Seguid trabajando..."* (p. 653) <sup>1</sup>

Juan's friends, the anarchists, stay in the house talking; all upset. In the morning the police come to the house suspecting an anarchist reunion, but learning of Juan's death, and perceiving the grief of his friends, they leave.

Manuel's reaction to the death of his brother is one of deep pessimism:

*"Ni los miserables se levantarán, ni resplandecerá un día de nuevo, sino que persistirá la inicuidad por todas las partes. Ni colectiva ni*

*individualmente, podrán libertarse los humildes de la miseria, ni de la fatiga, ni del trabajo constante y aniquilador."* (p. 654) <sup>1</sup>

The funeral attracted many of Juan's friends from Aurora Roja and it was observed by police and guards on horseback. El Libertario says, standing by Juan's grave:

*"...Entre nosotros, llenos de odios, él sólo tuvo cariños; entre nosotros, desalentados, él sólo tuvo esperanzas..."* (p. 655) <sup>2</sup>

Baroja finishes his novel in a tragic way. There is not so much irony as pathos in his presentation of the different kinds of anarchists; some deserved to be observed with irony, but a few were worthy to be considered with sympathy and compassion.