WRITING AND REVOLUTIONARIES

Avarich, Paul. *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
Goldman, Emma. *Anarchism and Other Essays*. New York: Dover Publications, 1969.
Henri, Robert. *The Art Spirit*. Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1960.

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Between the revolutionary fervor in the arts and politics which characterized modernism in the early decades of this century and our current hopes for educational reform have intervened decades of forgetting. We have forgotten that the ferment that produced modernist art and modernist poetics also produced the idea of radical schooling. Avant-garde art has come to seem distant from the concerns of educators. Perhaps the separation of mass culture from serious art prevented a public institution like the schools from effectively joining the modernist revolution. But for whatever reasons, the separation of the modernist revolution from radical schooling has obscured a history of modernism that might be useful as we try to rethink our educational practices.

The three books under review here suggest connections not only between modernist art and politics but also between early modernism and some of our current interests in teaching. Paul Avrich has written the story of experiments with radical schooling in *The Modern School Movement*. Robert Henri's *The Art Spirit* recommends that students abandon their copying of the old masters and follow their own eye. Materials by Emma Goldman in *Anarchism and Other Essays* are key documents in this history, showing what shifts in the relationship of teachers to traditional authority are implied by radical artists and activists.

All three books I am addressing take their significance from Emma Goldman, the figure at the center of the story. For

Goldman, anarchism implied not only political action, but also involvement with culture and with artists, and it required a new approach to education, inspired by the Spanish anarchist and educational reformer Francisco Ferrer. Goldman and other revolutionaries who worked hard to establish Ferrer-style Modern Schools in this country were joined by an astonishing assortment of progressive Americans, rich and poor, well-educated and self-taught. In New York, the Modern School served as one of the major centers for the bohemian avant-garde in the formative years just before World War I.

But even though this defiant tradition of writers, artists, political activists, and teachers links, perhaps wordlessly, the anarchic practices of bohemian revolutionaries to present practices, we are used to thinking of modernist poetics as disconnected from radical pedagogy. It is often an alienated version of modernism which influences the ways we teach writing and literature in the English departments of American universities. Through the years the modernist revolution became academic, installing Eliot and Pound as the (anti-progressive) exemplars of the movement and obscuring the ways in which literary modernism was involved with pedagogy. Academic modernism was mediated by critical interests whose reductive focus made modernism a formalist and reactionary doctrine. Together with the neo-Aristotlelians at Chicago, New Critics John Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren attempted to found literary study on a strictly aesthetic logic, carefully differentiated from other forms of inquiry that looked outside the text for its meaning. Murray Krieger summarized their case—and its difficulties—in *The New Apologists for Poetry* (1954), but the fifties saw the modernist exclusively begin to seem less like a school and more like an unconscious, the "common sense" of English departments.

Thus modernism as we have received it makes the specific historical, cultural, and rhetoric situation of the classroom irrelevant. This disempowering formalism, moreover, is in sharp contrast to the way early modernist writers, artists, and rebels thought about teaching. Those around Emma Goldman thought of writing as a site of struggle and understood schooling in terms of the cultural struggle over the subjectivity of students. The tradition of pedagogy carried on by artists and writers, in terms that were defined by Robert Henri in *The Art Spirit* and William Carlos

Williams in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, has survived as a practice without a history.

Let's return to the nexus of anarchy, revolution, bohemia, and the arts which was the early culture of modernism in the United States, in the years between 1912 and 1930. This collection of innovators in a number of fields, radical or liberal in politics for the most part, included a wide range of people: it saw an explosion of creative work by women from Sara Teasdale and Gertrude Stein to Djuna Barnes; by the black artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including Zora Neale Hurston; and by working-class authors like Meridel LeSueur. It is important for us to recognize that the broad spectrum of modernist experimentation was tremendously reduced as it entered the academy: we have inherited a truncated and reactionary modernism represented most of all by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and we have lost contact with the cultural context which defined their work—the anarchist moment that made Emma Goldman the very figure of its desire. We retain, indeed, only the revulsion against the immediate past which now ironically works to cut us off from the progress that modernism made.

Paul Avrich's history, *The Modern School Movement*, helps to give us access to the way these cultural revolutionaries thought about *teaching*. He shows that the idea of the avant-garde included not only a revolution in painting, drama, fiction, and poetry, but also in education. According to Avrich, Hutchins Hapgood said "Postimpressionism is as disturbing in one field as the I.W.W. is in another. It turns up the soil, shakes the old foundations, and leads to new life, whether the programs and ideas have permanent validity or not" (138). The foundations of classroom knowledge would undergo as great a syntactical upheaval as was introduced into poetic language—and the revolution had a shared site: it was the Ferrer-inspired Modern School.

The Ferrer Association was established in 1910. Avrich tells us of the large influence of Emma Goldman on the Modern School Movement—anarchists made up half the membership of the Association—but there were also freethinkers, libertarians, and socialists. The Advisory Board included anarchists Emma Goldman and Jaime Vidal; socialists Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Charles Edward Russell, J.G. Phelps Stokes, and Rose Pastor Stokes; Leonard Abbott, former socialist and convert to anarchism; and the uncategorizable reformists Alden Freeman and Hutchins

Hapgood. Denizens of what Avrich calls the "cultural underworld" before World War I, the founders of the Modern School were part of a progressive movement which included friends like Max Eastman, John Reed, Alfred Stieglitz, Theodore Dreiser, and Eugene O'Neill—and John Dewey, who, according to Avrich, said that Emma Goldman's "reputation as a dangerous woman was built up entirely by a conjunction of yellow journalism and il-advised police raids. She is a romantic idealistic person with a highly attractive personality" (38).

The Ferrer Association brought together people of widely varying backgrounds, as teachers, members, contributors. They held meetings all across the country—in New York City, 5000 people crowded into Cooper Union to hear about the martyred Ferrer—and raised the funds to start Modern Schools in Philadelphia, Chicago, Salt Lake City, Seattle, New York, Portland (Oregon), Detroit, Brooklyn, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Paterson, Stelton, Lakewood, and Mohegan. Of the twenty-two Modern Schools, only five—in New York, Los Angeles, Portland, Mohegan, and Stelton—were Day Schools, but most offered classes for adults as well as children, and all shared a belief that radical schooling could contribute to social change.

The chief difference between the Modern School movement and later developments of modernism is not revolt against convention but the social optimism of radical schooling. The "progressive" at some level believes progress is possible. Avrich says that what anarchists, socialists, freethinkers, and liberals had in common—and what distinguishes them from modernists such as Pound and Eliot—was a "faith in reason and progress and in a nineteenth-century belief in the ability of science to cure the ills of society" (44).

Ferrer took his inspiration from the history of educational experiments in the nineteenth century in Europe, inspired by Locke, Rousseau, Godwin, Pestalozzi, Fourier, Bakunin. In particular the Modern School grew out of the anarchist or "Libertarian" school at Cempuis, in France, established by Paul Robin and involving Louise Michel, Peter Kropotkin, and Leo Tolstoy. This anarchist community overlapped with the avant-garde community of symbolist writers like Mallarme. In the United States, the Modern Schools drew on a tradition of "free schools" which went back to William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionists, to Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ferrer wanted his schools to be truly secular

and rational, free from religious authority and dogma. Thus Ferrer advocated teaching through experience, encouraging children to see education as a *process*, to take charge of their individual development and their sense of educational projects, which might very well combine the arts with history or science. Avrich lists as "key words": "freedom," "spontaneity," "creativity," "individuality," and "self-realization" (8).

Emma Goldman's *Anarchism and Other Essays* includes a central essay about her commitment to establishing the Modern Schools. Goldman devoted regular space in her periodical, *The Mother Earth News*, to articles about education by herself and others, including Ferrer. Goldman wrote the essay "Francisco Ferrer and the Modern School" to describe Ferrer as a new hero of schooling and, like other artists and revolutionaries, a martyr to his cause. Francisco Ferrer was condemned for his political work—not for instigating strikes or mass protests but for organizing one hundred and nine Modern Schools in Spain during the years between 1901 and 1909. Emma Goldman and the artists and writers who gathered at the Modern School in New York thought of the Modern School in the United States as a way to continue Ferrer's revolutionary progress. When Ferrer was arrested and shot by the church-dominated government of Spain, Goldman declared, "Ferrer, the obscure teacher, became a universal figure, blazing forth the indignation and wrath of the whole civilized world against the wanton murder" (145). What institutions do not learn, according to Goldman, is the lesson of force—how it creates martyrs and rebellion.

For Emma Goldman, the Modern School was a way of attacking the apparatus of ideology by replacing dogma with experience. A central part of the anarchist project was to free the minds of individuals from the dogma of church and state, and so Goldman attacked "that mind and soul-destroying institution, the bourgeois school" which fills its students with "superstitions"—where "the atmosphere is saturated with ghosts" (148). Goldman's idea of the child was not precisely romantic, because she believed that the child needed to be shaped—the teacher, in fact, ought to be like the artist: "The child is to the teacher what clay is to the sculptor. Whether the world will receive a work of art or a wretched imitation, depends to a large extent on the creative power of the teacher" (148).

An important contribution of the Modern School was to counteract the idea that poverty was inherited:

> Proper economic and social environment, the breath and freedom of nature, healthy exercise, love and sympathy, and, above all, a deep understanding for the needs of the child—these would destroy the cruel, unjust, and criminal stigma imposed on the innocent young. (149)

The early school experiments she cites—Louise Michel at Montmartre, Paul Robin at Cempuis, Sebastian Faure's "La Ruche" ("The Beehive")—all took in children from orphanages, asylums, reformatories, and poor parents. They had considerable success. Faure reports in a 1907 issue of *Mother Earth* that the children "have learned a new method of work, one that quickens the memory and stimulates the imagination. . . . Our children never accept anything in blind faith, without inquiry. . . . We should feel at fault if the children were to fear or honor us merely because we are their elders" (153).

Ferrer wrote in *Mother Earth* that this purpose "leaves to the child itself the direction of its effort . . . the real educator is he who can best protect the child against his (the teacher's) own ideas, his peculiar whims; he who can best appeal to the child's own energies" (163). This is not an anti-intellectualism; indeed, it is rationalistic: "we hope for the deliverance of the child through science." Nevertheless there is this romantic antagonism to church and state: "I like the free spontaneity of a child who knows nothing, better than the world-knowledge and intellectual deformity of a child who has been subjected to our present education" (165).

Goldman's antagonism to discipline is based on a sense of the normalizing of discourse that Foucault has taught us to understand. The enemy, she says, is "discipline." "Had Ferrer . . . organized the riots, had he fought on the barricades, had he hurled a hundred bombs, he could not have been so dangerous to the Catholic Church and to despotism, as with his opposition to discipline and restraint" (165). It is important to underline the principles of anarchism operating in Goldman's concept of the school. The point is not to make the school political in a narrow sense, teaching a specific doctrine. Rather, it is to use a concept of individual freedom to organize a challenge to authority which would redefine knowledge. Educated persons would not be those who knew what the authorities believed, but rather, as Ferrer put it,

"men capable of evolving without stopping, capable of destroying and renewing their environments without cessation, of renewing themselves also, men whose intellectual independence will be their greatest force . . ." (163-4). Clearly, this independence from institutions of church and state would appeal to the anarchist, Goldman. Nietzsche as well was an important influence on her concept of independent thought.

How is this connected to the teaching of writing? I want to suggest that these involvements with schooling show how early modernism in the United States was deeply committed to thinking about teaching as well as thinking about artistic texts, and in similar ways. The avant-garde broke with old conventions of thinking about the classroom as well as with the old forms of writing and representation, and the school at the Ferrer Center, in Avrich's words, "became a laboratory of artistic innovation" where artists and writers like Lola Ridge, Sadakichi Hartmann, and Man Ray could experiment in a number of forms. The school was not just for passing information and instructions on to children. It was a project-centered environment, where children who wrote might also learn how to go on to work a printing press and print their works. The school was at the center of an artistic and political community, and it was the place where the most energetic and productive members of the community did their work.

This is the context of Robert Henri's *The Art Spirit*. The book is a collection of Henri's teachings, presented as a kind of collage of lecture fragments, notes, and letters. It represents something of the performative aspect of pedagogy, then, rather than a more traditional kind of prose. Henri taught the most popular evening course at the Ferrer Center from 1911 to 1918, in association with his younger protege of the Ash Can School of artists, George Bellows. Some children attended with the adults, who studied paintings, charcoal drawings, sculpture, clay modeling, and woodcuts (Avrich 149). His students there included John Sloan, Rockwell Kent, Man Ray, Max Weber, Abraham Walkowitz, Moses Soyer, Robert Minor, and even, for two months, Leon Trotsky on a visit from Russia (Avrich 150).

Henri may be the most influential teacher of art in modern times, perhaps because he viewed art as a mode of life and teaching as a kind of art: the artist "does not have to be a painter or sculptor to be an artist. He can work in any medium. He simply has to find the gain in the work itself, not outside it" (15). This attitude

is aesthetic, but markedly different from the aesthetics of a literary criticism which found this kind of intrinsic value only in the canonized text. The book itself, *The Art Spirit*, is not to be read as an argument, seeking agreement, but rather "the opinions are presented more as paintings are hung on the wall, to be looked at at will and taken as rough sketches for what they are worth" (11). Henri's notion of teaching is profoundly democratic, which involves getting his students to take themselves seriously as artists. This does not take place in a hierarchy of distinctions or excellence: "Art when really understood is the province of every human being" (15). All this emerges from a radical individualism—radical because Henri conceives of the individual first of all as an artist: "I am not interested in art as a means of making a living, but I am interested in art as a means of living a life. It is the most important of all studies, and all studies are tributary to it" (158). Teachers should above all resist the institution's pressure to teach students to make a living with surface techniques, "the negligible skill and trick, which have vogue for a while, and then die" (157).

Emma Goldman, anarchist, and Robert Henri, painter, have something to say to teachers of writing because of the way they thought about *school*. They took seriously the place of the school in producing and reproducing culture; they did not view teaching as a matter of techniques and enthusiasm, but as an art among the arts. They thought the arts were the way to transform ideology. And they established the Modern School in New York and the series of Modern Schools all over the country as a way of encouraging students to think differently. When Pound said "make it new," he advocated an inventiveness that cut itself off from progressive histories. The anarchists and socialists and liberals who met together at the Modern School thought that the student's individual experience emerged from the new community and might, in turn, work to reinvent community through time. They were taking the new foundation—shaking thought of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud into their idea of teaching; if we hope to understand the impact of modernism on our teaching of writing, we need to learn from them still.

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