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The Challenge of Emma Goldman

Margaret C. Anderson

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EMMA GOLDMAN has been lecturing in Chicago, and various kinds of people have been going to hear her. I have heard her twice — once before the audience of well-dressed women who flock to her drama lectures and don't know quite what to think of her, and once at the International Labor Hall before a crowd of anarchists and syndicalists and socialists, most of whom were collarless but who knew very emphatically what they thought of her and of her ideas. I came away with a series of impressions, every one of which resolved somehow into a single conviction: that here was a great woman.

The drama audience might have been dolls, for all they appeared to understand what was going on. One of them went up to Miss Goldman afterward and tried, almost petulantly, to explain what she believed in property and wealth. She was utterly serious. No one could have convinced her that there was any humor in the situation; that she might as well try to work up a fervor of war enthusiasm in Carnegie as to expect Emma Goldman to sympathize in the sanctity of property. The second audience, after listening to a talk on anti-Christianity, got

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to its feet and asked intelligent questions. Men with the faces of fanatics and martyrs waved their arms in their excitement pro and con; some one tried to prove that Nietzsche had an unscientific mind; a suave lawyer stated that Miss Goldman was profoundly intellectual, but that her talk was destructive — to which she replied that it would require another lawyer to unravel his inconsistency; and then some one established forcibly that the only real problem in the universe was that of three meals a day.

Most people who read and think have become enlightened about anarchism. They know that anarchists are usually timid, thoughtful, unviolent people; that dynamite is a part of their intellectual, not their physical, equipment; and that the goal for which they are striving — namely, individual human freedom — is one for which we might all strive with credit. But for the benefit of those -who regard Emma Goldman as a public menace, and for those who simply don't know what to make of her — like that fashionable feminine audience — it may be interesting to look at her in a new way.

To begin with, why not take her quite simply? She's a simple person. She's natural. In any civilization it requires genius to be really simple and natural. It's one of the most subtle, baffling, and agonizing struggles we go through — this trying to attain the quality that ought to be easiest of all attainment because we were given it to start with. What a commentary on civilization! — that one can regain his original simplicity only through colossal effort. Nietzsche calls it the three metamorphoses of the spirit: "how the spirit becometh a camel, the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child."

And Emma Goldman has struggled through these stages. She has taken her "heavy load-bearing spirit" into the wilderness, like the camel; become lord of that wilderness, captured freedom for new creating, like the lion; and then *created new values*, said her Yea to life, like the child. Somehow *Zarathustra* kept running through my mind as I listened to her that afternoon.

tity. Also, if it is true that the person to be distrusted is the one who has found an answer to the riddle, then Emma Goldman is to be discounted. Her convictions are presented with a sense of definite finality. But there's something splendidly uncautious, something irresistibly stirring, about such an attitude. And whatever one believes, of one thing I'm certain: whoever means to face the world and its problems intelligently must know something about Emma Goldman. Whether her philosophy will change the face of the earth isn't the supreme issue. As the enemy of all smug contentment, of all blind acquiescence in things as they are, and as the prophet who dares to preach that our failures are not in wrong applications of values but in the values themselves, Emma Goldman is the most challenging spirit in America.

“She’s trying to break up our government,” he responded heatedly.

“Have you ever read any of her ideas?”

“No.”

“Have you ever heard her lecture?”

“No! I should say not.”

In a play, that line would get a laugh. (It did in *Man and Superman*.) But in life it fares better. It gets serious consideration; it even has a certain prestige as a rather righteous thing to say.

Another man threw himself into the argument. “I know very little about Emma Goldman,” he said, “but it has always struck me that she’s simply trying to inflame people — particularly to do things that she’d never think of doing herself.” That charge can be answered best by a study of her life, which will show that she has spent her time doing things that almost no one else would dare to do.

In his *Women as World Builders* Floyd Dell said this: “Emma Goldman has become simply an advocate of freedom of every sort. She does not advocate violence any more than Ralph Waldo Emerson advocated violence. It is, in fact, as an essayist and speaker of the kind, if not the quality, of Emerson, Thoreau, and George Francis Train, that she is to be considered.” I think, rather, that she is to be considered fundamentally as something more definite than that: — as a practical Nietzschean. I am incapable of listening, unaroused, to the person who believes something intensely, and who does intensely what she believes. What more simple — or more difficult? Most of us don’t know what we believe, or, if we do, we have the most extraordinary time trying to live it. Emma Goldman is so bravely consistent — which to many people is a confession of limitations. But if one is going to criticise her there are more subtle grounds to do it on. One of her frequent assertions is that she has no use for religion. That is like saying that one has no use for poetry: religion isn’t merely a matter of Christianity or Catholicism or Buddhism or any other classifiable quan-

Emma Goldman preaches and practises the philosophy of freedom; she pushes through the network of a complicated society as if it were a cobweb instead of a steel structure; she brushes the cobwebs from her eyes and hair and calls back to the less daring ones that the air is more pure up there and “sunrise sometimes visible.” Someone has put it this way: “Repudiating as she does practically every tenet of what the modern state holds good, she stands for some of the noblest traits in human nature.” And no one who listens to her thoughtfully, whatever his opinion of her creed, will deny that she has nobility. Such qualities as courage — dauntless to the point of heartbreak; as sincerity, reverence, high — mindedness, self — reliance, helpfulness, generosity, strength, a capacity for love and work and life — all these are noble qualities, and Emma Goldman has them in the *nth* power. She has no pale traits like tact, gentleness, humility, meekness, compromise. She has “a hard, kind heart” instead of “a soft, cruel one.” And she’s such a splendid fighter!

What is she fighting for? For the same things, concretely, that Nietzsche and Max Stirner fought for abstractly. She has nothing to say that they have not already said, perhaps; but the fact that she says it instead of putting it into books, that she hurls it from the platform straight into the minds and hearts of the eager, bewildered, or unfriendly people who listen to her, gives her personality and her message a unique value. She says it with the same unflinching violence to an audience of capitalists as to her friends the workers.

And the substance of her gospel — I speak merely from the impressions of those two lectures and the very little reading I’ve done of her published work — is something of this sort:

Radical changes in society, releasement from present injustices and miseries, can come about not through *reform* but through *change*; not through a patching up of the old order, but through a tearing down and a rebuilding. This process involves the repudiation of such “spooks” as Christianity, conventional morality, immortality, and all other “myths” that

stand as obstacles to progress, freedom, health, truth, and beauty. One thus achieves that position beyond good and evil for which Nietzsche pleaded. But it is more fair to use Miss Goldman's own words. In writing of the failure of Christianity, for instance, she says:

I believe that Christianity is most admirably adapted to the training of slaves, to the perpetuation of a slave society; in short, to the very conditions confronting us today. Indeed, never could society have degenerated to its present appalling stage if not for the assistance of Christianity... . No doubt I will be told that, though religion is a poison and institutionalized Christianity the greatest enemy of progress and freedom, there is some good in Christianity itself. What about the teachings of Christ and early Christianity, I may be asked; do they not stand for the spirit of humanity, for right, and justice?

It is precisely this oft-repeated contention that induced me to choose this subject, to enable me to demonstrate that the abuses of Christianity, like the abuses of government, are conditioned in the thing itself, and are not to be charged to the representatives of the creed. Christ and his teachings are the embodiment of inertia, of the denial of life; hence responsible for the things done in their name.

I am not interested in the theological Christ. Brilliant minds like Bauer, Strauss, Renan, Thomas Paine, and others refuted that myth long ago. I am even ready to admit that the theological Christ is not half so dangerous as the ethical and social Christ. In proportion as science takes

very last spark of energy, yet forced to breed; the woman, tied to a man she loathes, yet made to breed; the woman, worn and used-up from the process of procreation, yet coerced to breed, more, ever more. What a hideous thing, this much-lauded motherhood!

With the economic war raging all around her, with strife, misery, crime, disease, and insanity staring her in the face, with numberless little children ground into gold dust, how can the self and race-conscious woman become a mother? Morality cannot answer this question. It can only dictate, coerce, or condemn — and how many women are strong enough to face this condemnation, to defy the moral dicta? Few indeed. Hence they fill the factories, the reformatories, the homes for feeble-minded, the prisons... . Oh, Motherhood, what crimes are committed in thy name! What hosts are laid at your feet. Morality, destroyer of life!

Fortunately, the Dawn is emerging from the chaos and darkness.... Through her re-born consciousness as a unit, a personality, a race builder, woman will become a mother only if she desires the child, and if she can give to the child, even before its birth, all that her nature and intellect can yield ... above all, under, standing, reverence, and love, which is the only fertile soil for new life, a new being.

I have talked lately with a man who thinks Emma Goldman ought to have been hanged long ago. She's directly or indirectly "responsible" for so many crimes. "Do you know what she's trying to do?" I asked him.

must turn to cats, dogs, canary birds, or the Bible class.

Now as to the prostitute. In spite of laws, ordinances, persecution, and prisons; in spite of segregation, registration, vice crusades, and other similar devices, the prostitute is the real specter of our age... . What has made her? Whence does she come? Morality, the morality which is merciless in its attitude to women. Once she dares to be herself, to be true to her nature, to life, there is no return; the woman is thrust out from the pale and protection of society. The prostitute becomes the victim of Morality, even as the withered old maid is its victim. But the prostitute is victimized by still other forces, foremost among them the Property Morality, which compels woman to sell herself as a sex commodity or in the sacred fold of matrimony. The latter is no doubt safer, more respected, more recognized, but of the two forms of prostitution the girl of the street is the least hypocritical, the least debased, since her trade lacks the pious mask of hypocrisy, and yet she is hounded, fleeced, outraged, and shunned by the very powers that have made her: the financier, the priest, the moralist, the judge, the jailer, and the detective, not to forget her sheltered, respectably virtuous sister, who is the most relentless and brutal in her persecution of the prostitute.

Morality and its victim, the mother — what a terrible picture! Is there, indeed, anything more terrible, more criminal, than our glorified sacred function of motherhood? The woman, physically and mentally unfit to be a mother, yet condemned to breed; the woman, economically taxed to the

the place of blind faith, theology loses its hold. But the ethical and poetical Christ-myth has so thoroughly saturated our lives, that even some of the most advanced minds find it difficult to emancipate themselves from its yoke. They have rid themselves of the letter, but have retained the spirit; yet it is the spirit which is back of all the crimes and horrors committed by orthodox Christianity. The Fathers of the Church can well afford to preach the gospel of Christ. It contains nothing dangerous to the regime of authority and wealth; it stands for self-denial and self-abnegation, for penance and regret, and is absolutely inert in the face of every indignity, every outrage imposed upon mankind... . Many otherwise earnest haters of slavery and injustice confuse, in a most distressing manner, the teachings of Christ with the great struggles for social and economic emancipation. The two are irrevocably and forever opposed to each other. The one necessitates courage, daring, defiance, and strength. The other preaches the gospel of nonresistance, of slavish acquiescence in the will of others; it is the complete disregard of character and self-reliance, and, therefore, destructive of liberty and well-being... .

“The public career of Christ begins with the edict, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

Why repent, why regret, in the face of something that was supposed to bring deliverance? Had not the people suffered and endured enough; had they not earned their right to deliverance by their suffering? Take the Sermon on the Mount, for instance; what is it but a eulogy on submission to fate, to the inevitability of things?

“Blessed are the poor in spirit. ...”

Heaven must be an awfully dull place if the poor in spirit live there. How can anything creative, anything vital, useful, and beautiful, come from the poor in spirit? The idea conveyed in the Sermon on the Mount is the greatest indictment against the teachings of Christ, because it sees in the poverty of mind and body a virtue, and because it seeks to maintain this virtue by reward and punishment. Every intelligent being realizes that our worst curse is the poverty of the spirit; that it is productive of all evil and misery, of all the injustice and crimes in the world.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

What a preposterous notion! What incentive to slavery, inactivity, and parasitism. Besides, it is not true that the meek can inherit anything.

“Blessed are ye when men shall revile you ... for great is your reward in heaven.”

The reward in heaven is the perpetual bait, a bait that has caught man in an iron net, a strait-jacket which does not let him expand or grow. All pioneers of truth have been, and still are, reviled. But did they ask humanity to pay the price? Did they seek to bribe mankind to accept their ideas? ... Redemption through the Cross is worse than damnation, because of the terrible burden it imposes upon humanity, because of the effect it has on the human soul, fettering and paralyzing it with the weight of the burden exacted through the death of Christ... .

The teachings of Christ and of his followers have failed because they lacked the vitality to lift the burdens from the shoulders of the race; they have failed because the very essence of that doctrine is contrary to the spirit of life, opposed to the manifestation of nature, to the strength and beauty of passion.

And so on. In her dissolution of other “myths” — such as that of morality, for instance, — she has even more direct things to say. I quote from a lecture on *Victims of Morality*:

It is Morality which condemns woman to the position of a celibate, a prostitute, or a reckless, incessant breeder of children.

First as to the celibate, the famished and withered human plant. When still a young, beautiful flower, she falls in love with a respectable young man. But Morality decrees that unless he can marry the girl, she must never know the raptures of love, the ecstasy of passion. The respectable young man is willing to marry, but the Property Morality, the Family and Social Moralities decree that he must first make his pile, must save up enough to establish a home and be able to provide for a family. The young people must wait, often many long, weary years... . And the young flower, with every fiber aglow with the love of life? She develops headaches, insomnia, hysteria; grows embittered, quarrelsome, and soon becomes a faded, withered, joyless being, a nuisance to herself and every one else... . Hedged in her narrow confines with family and social tradition, guarded by a thousand eyes, afraid of her own shadow — the yearning of her inmost being for the man or the child, she