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Berkman's diary 1910–1917

October revolution included

Alexander Berkman

1910s

« I, too, must look for work, and not only look, but find a job. I can't live on the movement. It sickens me to the very soul. The little money I borrowed is almost gone, and life is so dear in N.Y. The book may suffer, but the principle is with me—or is it just a feeling, an instinct—the supreme consideration. If I get money from the book, I must give a lot to the movement. Kind of restitution. » (1 Diary Oct 4 1910)

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« Explained my dissatisfaction with the movement. The futile propaganda. I am as of old—I don't and can't justify living on the movement, at least not for myself. An editor etc., one constantly giving his whole time, may be justified, or forced to it. But I don't give all my time. M[other] E[arth]. isn't a daily, not even a weekly paper. I won't do it. I was teaching all winter, and now I must find work. This book is very important, but this parasitism is a more weighty consideration. There can be sch a thing as parasitism within even the An[archist] movement. » ; « Tonight I began to translate H's biogr[aphical]

sketch of E[mma Goldman]. A good piece of work, from the purely literary standpoint. H seems tremendously proud of it. H is good ; but one thought kept pressing on my mind all during the translation ; it interfered with the work, too. I wondered why one can not be big enough to write his autobiography, or allow his biography to be written, in accordance with—well, I will say honesty. It isn't the right word. One may be unconsciously dishonest, especially with himself, especially with herself, I mean. Would never try a biography of oe living, especially of a friend. The perspective is interfered with, by intimacy and proximity. Many characteristic things are missing in the biography (Bernstein, who probably was the first An[archist] she met). Many innuendos false. There is a great deal of hypocrisy among ourselves. It akes our great pretensions look very cheap to me, sometimes. » (1 Diary Oct 6 1910)

« Voltairine de Cleyre arrived, 2 P.m. Two lectures in N.Y. That on Literature the Mirror of Man was splendid. She read my 1st part of the book. She said that she preferred to write her criticism later on. But she indicated the line of attack. She thinks the average American reader, when through with first part, will decide I was crazy, bugs. I tried to suppress external signs of feeling, but I was rather saddened. It's best not to be optimistic about the reception of my book. But to hell with it all : I'll write as I feel. » (1 Diary Oct 7 1910)

« First time in Sunday School. Children very glad to see me. And I really felt happy with them. I gave them a talk on the genral course this season—I'll take up the earth, food etc., show the important rôle of the eath and natural forces in our

Thursday Nov 8. 4.30 P.M.

« Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah ! Kerensky Deposed ! Bolsheviki in control ! Land to be returned to the people, Armistice and peace !

I am wild with joy. I never before have known such a happy moment. Indeed, this is the happiest moment of my life. Never have I experienced something like this before ! I have no words. I have been shouting and calling to the prisoners. Am just boiling over—bubbling over—with uncontrollable bliss. Ah, to be in Russia now. Well, may be—may be soon.

I could have hugged the prisoner that showed me the « World » and pointed to the big headlines : Bolsheviki in Control of Petrograd !

Ah, for a few friends and champagne to celebrate this great, this wonderful, blessed news.

Telegram just to hand « Rejoicing over Russia. Let us go now. Long live the Social Revolution » 87PCL

Great, wonderfully thoughtful of them to send me this wire. I at once dispatched the telegraph boy to them with a message. Oh, the glorious news. Just to be out tonight in the midst of my people.

Good for Trotzky and Lenine. Let them hold Francis (?) and demand my delivering to Russia. And E's etc.

I hope the Soviets inland will not start a counter-revolution. No—I don't want to think of it tonight. My joy is unconfined. Hurrah, hurrah once more and again !!!

life, in all animal life. The evolutionary theory, in every day application, per vehicle of interesting stories. The Ferrer class is a very intelligent and interesting one. I want especially to develop emotional nature and critical ability. Dear kids. » (1 Diary Oct 9 1910) « But teachers get paid... Poor Ferrer, did he die for this ?»

« It was such a hot day I would not keep the children in the classroom. Took them to Bronx Park. I wish we had funds, to do it all the time. Now the poor kids have to go out in nature. Some of them have never been in the park before. We had about 50 out. It was a pleasure to watch their joyous faces. We got them lunch. Too bad I could not stay with them. Had appointment with E. for 2 P.M. to look over her mss. » (1 Diary Oct 16 1910)

« No use wasting time in N.Y. I can't work there on the book. And life is dear. Borrowed money again.

The fatality of disension. Argued with E., one thing and another. The futility of her propaganda, her bourgeois leanings. Both were in bad humor and we both exaggerated and hurt each other. How foolish it all is. I am fighting with everyone. » (Oct 20 1910)

Maeterlink Blus Bird (Oct 22)

Blackie's Master passed. Told me Whitie was found poisoned at the grocer's. Poor dog, I felt like crying as over the loss of a rare true friend. I loved that dog, he was such a proletarian, a veritable under dog. I could tell by the way he would watch me at mealtime.

« Not a single textbook is obtainable as to F schools in Spain. I'm afraid there was more smoke than fire. »

Havelock Ellis

« Will have to give up my work on M.E. till I'm through with book. »

Oct 28

« Voltairine is disgusted with her lecture tour—bourgeois, respectable propaganda—we have gone wrong, she says. I agree with her. Emma disagreed. Thinks I have influenced Voltairine. Emma sees only prejudice, perhaps jealousy and envy, in this criticism. Back to the people, should be our motto. »

Nov 1st

« The first of the month, and nothing written yet, for my book, since I came out to the farm Oct 20. Today I looked over my last chapter. It was written Sep. 25. How much time wasted, it's criminal. Have in the meantime translated H's sketch, biographical, for E.G. book and did a few other things, but nothing on the book. Tried to write today, but the prison atmosphere is lacking. I am at page 246, Chapter X, Second Part. I have been living the last month in a different world, but I must return to the prison. » « I didn't seem to have any « ambition » for anything, especially in the pen and ink line »

Nov 4

« What rat it is, this aristocracy of intellect. It is running nowadays to stupidity, narrow-mindedness and intolerance. «

E. said the translation is bad. I think it rather good. » « Quite a change to the « Arabian Nights », edited by Andrew Lang. At first interesting, though I've read them before. It grows monotonous. Lang's comparison of these tales to the sagas and folklore of other races is quite inadequate. Gods and deities are non-existent in the « Nights ». It's all the good or evil genii. And the eternal moral is, of course, that the path of virtue is a thorny one, but it's sure to be rewarded in the end. It lacks entirely the spirit of Slavic folklore ; the social consciousness. The racial essence, entirely lacking. Only one story in all the « Nights » might be interpreted as somewhat tinged with social sense. « The Two Envious Sisters »—the two brothers and their good sister seeking the Talking Bird and Golden Water etc on top of the mountain, harassed on their way by abuse and threats—to turn around means death—the way leads over thousands of black stones, their predecessors thus punished for their daring and lack of perseverance in their quest. »

Theater. Funds. Jewish Nationalist Convention.

Wednesday Oct 31

Complains about neighbour « an ignorant Austrian Jew of the Vienna café type.—A cheap swindler. » « Colored fellow got 20 to life—a damn shame. He killed a man in self-defense. A fellow gauged out his eye and was about to strike him with a hatchet. He took the hatchet away ; there was a scuffle and he killed his attacker.

And young Winslow, the pious Sunday School teacher, who took a street girl up to a hotel, bound and gagged her and killed her in cold blood—he was sent to Elmira, where he can be released in 13 months. But he isn't a friendless n***** and his father has money.

Justice is not blind. » Other prisoners' stories. « Fremder » and speech about Nationalist Convention again.

1911

« Beck is with me, typewriting my mss. » « Several publishers returned the manuscript. I guess it's too radical for them ; the name also is not respectable. We'll have to publish it ourselves. The reading of my mss by E. at Poe's was successful. Those present liked as much as was read—I part. Jack London is asking for more mss. »

1911

« Dear Ch.. contributed to publication of book \$200.00. The same old devoted friend. »
San Francisco

April 27th, 1916

« May 1st Last evening Social and Dance for The Blast. Good cosmopolitan, international bunch. Good crowd. Tonight mass meeting arranged by Italian-Spanish I.W.W., where I speak with Tresca, who is here from N.Y. lecturing. »

April 27 1916

« Letter from E.G. Doing 15 days prison (...) The act of writing to her to prison was what resurrected the diary. It feels queer for me to do so—it used to be the reverse. »

Nov 10 (Monday) 1918

Operation.

Loose page Prison visits, Katherine Davis. « Reading « A German Deserter's War Experience », translated by J. Koettgen.

An intellectual man » ! Rats. Usually it means a vain ass, lacking all originality of thought and appearing « learned » because he has immersed his sponge brain in the printed stuff of olden days. I'd rather a man of little such pseudo-knowledge, but with the courage to think and speak unafraid an unconventional, unaccepted thought. »

« I have been trying to write, but no success whatever. I seem to forget what I have already said in Book II (I mean, Part II of Book) I have therefore made out a Table of Contents, chapter by chapter. Now, a glance informs me what incidents I have written about etc. But my task now is much more difficult. In Part I I have presented my first impressions of prison. But I cannot continue with mere impressions. The psychology will gradually be developed. But I want more in the book. I want to show the physical, moral, mental and sexual effects of prison life on a) myself ; b) on other prisoners ; c) on the guards, and finally, by reaction, d) on Society. And not merely the brutality of the officers I want to portray, but the unspeakable injustice, uselessness and evil of the whole system of Punishment, of the Idea, indeed. Writing mere impressions will not do. And it would require half a dozen volumes to give all the incidents etc—even only the typical ones—of a life of 14 years. I must therefore select, combine types and incidents into typical representation. I must, so to speak, first correctly imagine my plot, then adequately describe it. I must guard there should be proper distinctiveness and vitality in the execution as well as in the conception. So far, I think Part II is distinctive and vital in the expression, the representation. Conception did not much enter there, as it is mostly personal psychology ? But now I must formulate more clearly my conception as to the total ensemble and purpose, so to speak. Only then can I begin the execution. And that's why I find it difficult to proceed with the writing. I am in danger of being swamped by my wealth of material. I must be selective. I have given much thought to the matter this week. May be I can soon begin to do the work. It's high time.

The book I figured to be completed by end of October. I've lost precious time, no end of it. And it grows ever harder to « come back ». It's already the 4th of November. Yet I feel within me the confidence to accomplish my work. It presses for expression. It rages, and it is perhaps because of that very rage that I can't work. I must put my soul house in order, as it were. » « and now the matter of the Japanese Anarchists. We will not change the death sentence, but a strong protest should be made. Wouldn't be bad to smash the windows of Japanese Consulate ; but not as H. suggested by one or two men. Should be done after the meeting, in corpore. Otherwise no moral effect. » « I think she's almost more anxious to see the book out than I am. Naturally, it's part of her own life, so to speak. She speaks of my book as « the baby soon to be born ». Well, they say giving birth to a first child is very painful, and my literary accouchement is certainly a difficult matter. Is it because my intellectual womb is virgin ? » « I wonder how E's meeting is tonight. It's just 9 P.M. Must have begun. And the « Outcast Meeting »—Ben's idea. Pretty good only the question is where do the real outcasts come in, at 25 cent per admission. » Tolstoy dead. Bohemian Anarchist Almanach. Mexican revolution and Magonists. Lillian Brown. Misogyny and Schopenhauer. Preface by Shaw to Doctor's Dilemma/Brieux's dramas. E writes to pregnant Becky. Sinclair's Love's pilgrimage. Becky's abortion. Becky and Ben. « I am glad he was here, I wanted his opinion on my book. I was working in the little room upstairs and he sat at the long table outside opposite my window, reading my mss. I felt like a schoolboy full of trepidation for the impression it would make on him. When he put the manuscript away, I felt like rushing down for the verdict, but I controlled the impulse. I think he likes it ; he said it was very good, interesting and dramatic and very realistic. He offered to translate it into German, to be published in Germany. That pleased me more than his words—it is an indication he thinks it worth while. He is so weakly-poken in such things. But E. says he is

enthusiastic about my book... Well, after all, I know myself its good and weak points. But neither Max nor H. seem to have a eye for the poetic. H. cares nothing at all for prose-poetry. » Increased wants, against neo-malthusianism. « Last night I have been troubled about the title. The Autobiography of an Anarchist is a good title, but not for my book. I am opposed to autobiographies ; they should not be published till at least 25 years after the uthor's death. Otherwise they can be neither consciously nor unconsciously sincere. And besides, I'm not intending an autobiography. I am writing of my prison life, with only an occasional look backward to illumine my prison life. It's essentially the story of my prison experiences—the title should be comprehensive, not misleading. » Poe and Becky. « The faces at 210 the night of the ball reflected the condition of the movement, as influenced by E & B. Usually we'd have the boys who help at the bar etc come up to the house after the ball, for a cup of coffee. They work very hard, the poor devils. But though they worked as hard as usual, this time only the « intellectuals » were invited to 210 after the ball. There was not a single proletarian among them, except Haywood. None of the boys who really helped and worked hard was there. The house was full of middle class « intellectuals », pure bourgeois, without much intellect either. » E's lecture on Mary Wollstonecraft : « I feel sickened with it. The thing will go on as before : sensationalism, high admission, double prices, and the rest of it. Yet these scenes between E and Ben will grow more frequent and he will now realize more than ever the power he exerts over E. Poor girl, the worst of it is, with all her revolutionary spirit and clinging to our old traditions, she is blind to having gotten away from her moorings. Kropotkin is right, after all—no movement is worth the effort, except it be rooted in the masses »