

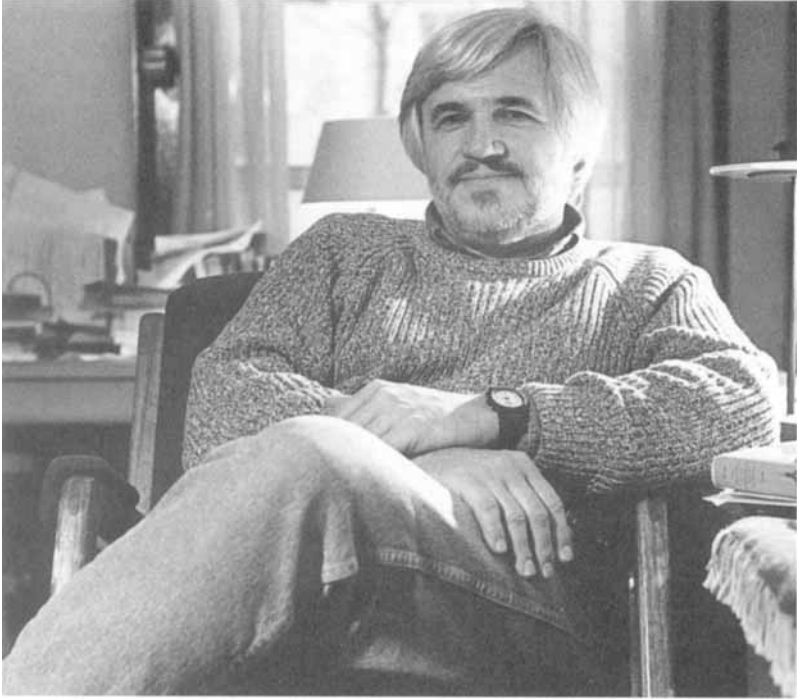
The Origins of Progressive Education

William F. Reese

By the dawn of the twentieth century, a new way of thinking about the nature of the child, classroom methods, and the purposes of the school increasingly dominated educational discourse. Something loosely called progressive education, especially its more child-centered aspects, became part of a larger revolt against the formalism of the schools and an assault on tradition. Our finest scholars, such as Lawrence A. Cremin, in his magisterial study of progressivism forty years ago, have tried to explain the origins and meaning of this movement. One should be humbled by their achievements and by the magnitude of the subject. Various defined, progressivism continues to find its champions and critics, the latter occasionally blaming it for low economic productivity, immorality among the young, and the decline of academic standards. In the popular press, John Dewey's name is often invoked as the evil genius behind the movement, even though he criticized sugar-coated education and letting children do as they please. While scholars doubt whether any unified, coherent movement called progressivism ever existed, its offspring, progressive education, apparently did exist, wreaking havoc on the schools.¹

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¹On educational progressivism, see especially Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964); Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); and Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). E.D. Hirsch, Jr. contends that romantic, child-centered views triumphed in the twentieth century, and he blames Schools of Education for disseminating these and other harmful pedagogical ideals; see *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996). The literature on progressivism more generally is too vast to cite, but the best recent contributions include Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991); and Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).



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Without question, something fascinating had emerged in educational thought by the nineteenth century. Critics of traditional forms of child rearing and classroom instruction condemned what they saw as insidious notions about the nature of children and the antediluvian practices of the emerging public school system. In often evangelical and apocalyptic prose, an assortment of citizens proclaimed the discovery of new insights on children and how they best learned. Despite many differences among them, they produced an impressive educational canon. They proclaimed that children were active, not passive, learners; that children were innocent and good, not fallen; that women, not men, best reared and educated the young; that early education, without question, made all the difference; that nature, and not books alone, was perhaps the best teacher; that kindness and benevolence, not stern discipline or harsh rebukes, should reign in the home and classroom; and, finally, that the curriculum needed serious reform, to remove the vestiges of medievalism. All agreed that what usually passed for education was mind-numbing, unnatural, and pernicious, a sin against childhood.

These views became ever expressed in books, educational magazines, and public addresses across the course of the nineteenth century. While it was easier to condemn schools than perfect them, the spirit of educational reform reflected well a nation continually revitalized by waves of religious revivalism and utopian experiments during the antebellum period. After the Civil War, voices for pedagogical change multiplied and formed a mighty chorus, singing in praise of the child and insisting that a “new education” must supplant an “old education” based on false and wicked ideas. Some writers even substituted the word “progressive” as a synonym for “new,” adding the phrase “progressive education” to the nation’s pedagogical lexicon, without always defining it very clearly or consistently.² At the turn of the century, John Dewey brilliantly presented the case for each side, the old and new education, in landmark books. Knowing the complex origins of the child-centered ideal, Dewey refused the honorific title of father of progressive education, which defenders of tradition already viewed as the demon child of romanticism. Even without DNA testing, Dewey’s paternity seems doubtful.³

²The phrase “new education” proliferated in editorials and articles in educational journals and various magazines after the Civil War. Similarly, book titles followed suit, as for example, Joseph Rhodes, *The New Education: Moral, Industrial, Hygienic, Intellectual* (Boston: Published by the Author, 1882); Mrs. [Elizabeth?] Peabody, *The New Education* (Cincinnati: Press of Robert Clarke & Co., 1879); and Robert H. Thurston, *The New Education and the New Civilization: Their Unity* (Columbus, OH: Press of Hahn & Adair, 1892).

³On evangelical movements and nineteenth-century reform movements, read Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, rev. ed., 1997), chapter 1; Steven Mintz, *Moralists & Modernizers: America’s Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). Dewey cleverly

The sources of this “new education” were passionately debated from the start. The poet William Blake, publishing his *Songs of Innocence* at the outbreak of the French Revolution, pointed to religious visions since childhood as central to his inspiration.⁴ Other champions of the child said they were simply following Nature’s Laws. The Swiss reformer, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, whose words became Holy Writ to many, was frankly unsure of where his ideas originated. Acknowledging the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762) and his own learning by doing, Pestalozzi wrote in 1801 that “My whole manner of life has given me no power, and no inclination, to strive hastily after bright and clear ideas on any subject, before, supported by facts, it has a background in me that has awakened some self-confidence. Therefore to my grave I shall remain in a kind of fog about most of my views.” But, he concluded, “it is a holy fog to me.”⁵ *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* (1801) remains difficult to classify: parts of his classic evoke the empiricism of Bacon, the mechanistic world of Newton, and the sometimes inconsistent, though confidently, asserted claims of his mentor Jean Jacques. Like most pedagogical pilgrims, however, Pestalozzi regarded his mission as a holy one. Shrouded in a holy fog, he nonetheless emitted celestial light from afar.

Lifting some of the historical clouds that have obscured the origins of early progressivism remains a challenge. So I will try to make my central propositions clear. In its American phase, child-centered progressivism was part of a larger humanitarian movement led by particular men and women of the northern middle classes in the antebellum and postbellum periods. This was made possible by changes in family size, in new gender roles within bourgeois culture, and in the softening of religious orthodoxy within Protestantism. Progressivism was also part and parcel of wider reform movements in the Western world that sought the alleviation of pain and suffering and the promotion of moral and intellectual advancement. Like all reform movements, it sought both social stability and social uplift. In

contrasted the old and new education in *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1899); and *Interest and Effort in Education* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, c. 1975). The latter was first published in 1913.

⁴Geoffrey Keynes, “Introduction,” in William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, c. 1967), 10; Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), chapter 1; and E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York: The New Press, 1995), on the complex dissenting religious traditions that shaped Blake’s world.

⁵Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children: An Attempt to Help Mothers To Teach Their Own Children and An Account of the Method* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., c. 1915, translation by Lucy E. Holland and Francis C. Turner), 6. Historians commonly note Pestalozzi’s inconsistent views on education and society; see Gerald Lee Gutek, *Pestalozzi and Education* (New York: Random House, 1968), 53, 98-99, 157-58, 167-68; and Robert B. Downs, *Heinrich Pestalozzi: Father of Modern Pedagogy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975).

addition, child-centered ideas gained currency as activists drew very selectively upon particular romantic traditions emanating from Europe. A trans-Atlantic crossing of ideas from the Swiss Alps, German forests, and English lake district thus played its curious role in the shaping of early progressivism. Finally, the hopes of many child-centered educators were ultimately dashed by the realities of American schools at the end of the nineteenth century. Their moral crusade nevertheless permanently changed the nature of educational thought in the modern world.

I

Looking back on the famous reform movements that burst forth in the Western world between the 1750s and 1850s, scholars disagree considerably on the sources and consequences of change yet underscore the complex transformations that altered society. During this period, the shift from a rural, agrarian, mercantilist world, to one of markets, commercial and industrial capitalism, and cities proceeded apace. The American and French Revolutions led many citizens to dream of a more just world based on universal respect for Enlightenment precepts of reason, the rule of law, science, and progress. As Thomas L. Haskell persuasively argues in his study of Anglo-American reform movements, dissenting religious groups such as the Quakers, among the most successful capitalists of the new age of Adam Smith, disproportionately led movements for moral reform and uplift. With other Protestant groups and a variety of secular reformers, they championed many unpopular causes: pacifism, women's rights, the abolition of slavery, and the more humane treatment of children, criminals, and the mentally ill. Unlike other scholars, Haskell causally locates a rising ethos of caring within an emergent capitalism, which increased human misery but also made social ties more expansive and intense, promoting empathy, compassion, and social action.⁶

Whatever the multiple causes of this growing humanitarianism, reform movements on both sides of the Atlantic reflected activist strains within Protestantism and the secular promise of social change and human improvement spawned by political revolution. Thus the rise of a child-centered ethos among a minority of vocal, middle-class activists by the middle of the nineteenth century emerged during an era of sweeping change. A generation of American historians has focused their attention on the making of northern middle-class family life and culture. In the decades after the American Revolution, middle-class families shrank in size, enhancing the possibility of placing more attention on the individual child. Gender roles in

⁶Thomas L. Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), chapters 8-9.

middle-class homes became more starkly separated in urban areas, the locus of social change, which intensified the domestic labors of mothers, including child rearing. By mid-century, middle- and upper-class Protestant congregations increasingly softened their view of original sin and emphasized Christian nurture over hellish damnation; more moderate, non-Calvinist views were heard from the pulpit and registered in child-rearing manuals. The gap between thought and practice, ideal and reality, likely diverged in all of these fundamental areas of northern bourgeois life. But the convergence of changes in demography, gender roles, economics, and religious ideology helped make some members of the northern middle classes receptive to new ideas about children and their education.⁷

The growing fascination with child-centered education often deteriorated into pure sentimentality in the Victorian era or was transmuted into a revived effort at discovering the scientific laws of physical and human development reminiscent of the eighteenth century. But the discovery of the child owed an enormous debt to the age of Locke and Newton as well as to Rousseau and Wordsworth. American Progressivism was literally the child of Europe. As Hugh Cunningham has argued, Locke had challenged the seemingly timeless Christian precept of infant damnation by arguing that children's ideas, if not exactly their talents and destiny, were capable of change and improvement through the influence of education and environment. Locke also stressed the need to observe the individual child to determine the most suitable education, a foundational idea of child-centered thinking. Newton, in turn, held out the promise of discovering the natural laws that governed the universe, which similarly generated hopefulness of the human capacity to know the world, unlock its secrets, and thus improve its fate. Before the so-called romantic poets and novelists penned their odes to childhood, English evangelical Protestants by the mid-eighteenth century had created a new genre of reading materials, from children's hymns to a wide array of children's literature, whose messages and

⁷Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experiences in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Karen Halltunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Barbara Finkelstein, "Casting Networks of Good Influence: The Reconstruction of Childhood in the United States, 1790-1830," in *American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook*, ed. Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 127-28; Bernard Wishy, *The Child and the Republic: The Dawn of Modern American Child Nurture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968); Robert V. Wells, *Revolutions in Americans' Lives: A Demographic Perspective on the History of Americans, Their Families, and Their Society* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), chapters 5-6; Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), chapter 3; and William J. Reese, *The Origins of the American High School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

didactic approach differed considerably from an emerging romantic ethos but similarly stressed the heightened importance of the young. Moreover, the child became a more prominent character in novels and popular writing generally. And, as markets expanded, toy shops proliferated, peddling their wares to the middling and upper classes.⁸

The motives of utilitarians, rationalists, shopkeepers, and revivalists obviously varied enormously. But the ascending importance of childhood was clear by the end of the eighteenth century, when revolution and romanticism together further led to what critics called a veritable cult of childhood. Increasingly within enlightened circles—among artists, poets, novelists, and educators—new ideas about the nature of the child arose that continue to resonate in the twenty-first century. Some, following Rousseau's lead, assumed that the child, naturally good, was corrupted not by Adam's fall but by human institutions. Innovative thinkers of various stripes—sometimes appalled by the shocking criticisms of religion by the author of *Emile*—nevertheless questioned whether childhood was preparation for salvation or even adulthood. Those later known to the world as romantics or transcendentalists often concluded that childhood was a holy, mystical place, superior to the corrupted lives of adults. Blake invoked the child's innocence, Wordsworth its "natural piety." To many, childhood was a metaphor for goodness, a special time of life, or even a timeless, sublime essence worthy of contemplation. In his first book, *Nature*, in 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child." Infants, in fact, were a "perpetual Messiah."⁹

The relationship of European Romanticism to the rise of American child-centered thought is nevertheless more complicated than it may appear. Literary critics (never mind the historians) have now published many more words on the romantics than their subjects ever wrote, and the very vocabulary ordinarily associated with romanticism is sometimes very ambiguous. The adjective romantic, derived from the word romance, appeared in English in 1650 and in French and German soon after. It referred specifically to medieval verse dealing with "adventure, chivalry, and love," as Raymond Williams explains, but soon had the added connotations of sentimentality, extravagance, and an appeal to the imagination. Only in the 1880s did schol-

⁸Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (London: Longman, 1985), chapter 3. On the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); and Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Education Research* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), chapter 1.

⁹Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society, A Study of the Theme in English Literature* (London: Penguin Books, c. 1967), 29; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff, (New York: Penguin Books, c. 1982), 13; and Barbara Beatty, *Preschool Education in America: The Culture of Young Children from the Colonial Era to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 28.

ars routinely mean by Romanticism a distinctive movement of writers, poets, and artists who lived in Europe between roughly the 1790s and 1830s. And, as Williams points out, most of the essential key words in our usual understanding of romanticism enjoy conflicting definitions. Nature, for example, “is perhaps the most complex word in the language,” as any dictionary indicates.¹⁰

For many decades, scholars have recognized that there was never any unified, single romantic movement. This may help explain the inability of scholars to discover a unified, single progressive movement in education. In the 1920s, the distinguished philosopher and historian of ideas, Arthur O. Lovejoy, noted that different writers claimed that romanticism originated in the mind of Francis Bacon, or Jean Jacques Rousseau, or Immanuel Kant, or began with that famous couple in the Garden of Eden, since obviously “the Serpent was the first romantic.” By the 1920s, writers routinely praised or blamed romanticism for producing such incongruous phenomena as the French Revolution and the Prussian state, or Cardinal Newman and Friedrich Nietzsche. “Typical manifestations of the spiritual essence of Romanticism have been variously conceived to be a passion for moonlight, for red waistcoats, for Gothic churches, for futurist paintings, for talking excessively about oneself, for hero-worship, for losing oneself in an ecstatic contemplation of nature.” Lovejoy knew that the human mind seeks clarity and simplicity, however much it distorts the past. Yet he still hoped one might recognize “a plurality of Romanticisms.” There were indeed “several strains” within European romanticism, yielding ideas that were “exceedingly diverse and often conflicting.”¹¹

William Blake, who despised the rationalist thought of Locke and Newton, equally disliked Rousseau for his materialism and harsh words on religion and Voltaire for his faith in reason. “Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau/Mock on, Mock on; ‘Tis all in vain/You throw the sand against the wind/And the wind blows it back again.”¹² And yet he shared Rousseau’s hostility to institutions, likened schools to cages where teachers taught birds

¹⁰Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, c. 1976), 219, 274-75. As Alan Richardson notes, “In the Romantic poet’s appeal to nature lay the basis for a potentially radical critique of the disciplinary forms of contemporary educational theory and practice.” See *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 104.

¹¹Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, c. 1960), 229, 231, 235, 252. Also see Richardson, *Literature*, 9-10, 30; and the essays in *Romanticism in National Context*, eds. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For the ongoing debates among educators, see the essays in John Willinsky, ed., *The Educational Legacy of Romanticism* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990).

¹²William Blake, “Mock On, Mock On, Voltaire, Rousseau,” in *The Portable Romantic Poets: Blake to Poe*, ed. W.H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Penguin Books, c. 1978), 13. Also see Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 49-50.

to sing, and thought educational institutions, like marriage, government, and the military were fairly Satanic. Blake and Wordsworth assumed that children were good and innocent, and their early dissenting politics were set aflame by the American and French Revolutions. As the Terror showed the unhappy face of change, however, Blake retained his radical politics but wrote a parody of his *Songs of Innocence* entitled *Songs of Experience*. Both were printed together by 1794, showing the “Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.” London born and bred, he never shared Wordsworth’s views on nature, nor did he tilt his politics Tory-side, like the famous bard from the Lake District.¹³

Without question, a wide variety of “romantics” influenced the rise of child-centered ideas in America in the nineteenth century. The inspiring words of Rousseau or Wordsworth were hardly unknown among those who attacked the old education and called for more humane treatment of the innocent child. Yet many of the romantics had conflicting views on human nature, society, and the prospect of social change. They were sometimes individually inconsistent and could not offer blueprints for imagined educational utopias. European romantic writers, poets, and artists had come of age in a different time and place than those who struggled to make emerging, comprehensive, public school systems in the American north more humane and child-centered. They could provide insights into the evil ways of child rearing and education in the past and inspiration for reformers. But anyone who read the romantics, who could be quite suspicious of institutions, closely enough, would have detected that they usually were not encumbered by the challenging problems of teaching, raising school funds, or dealing with parents on a regular basis. The romantics mattered on these shores. But only those who wrote specifically and extensively about education and schools—especially Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827), in particular, and Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) afterwards—had a clearly decisive impact. Even then, not surprisingly, their disciples took their ideas and made them compatible with the perceived needs of northern urban culture, tearing them from their original context.

¹³On Blake’s views on children, institutions, and politics, read S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Hanover: University Press of New England, c. 1988), 81, 145; Coveney, *Image*, 54-55; and David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (New York: Dover Publications, c. 1977), 120-22, 271-72. In various editions of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Blake rearranged the placement of some poems, showing that he did not place “hard and fast” boundaries on the two contrary “States of the Human Soul.” See Andrew Lincoln’s “Introduction,” in William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, c. 1991), 17. Wordsworth’s politics, poetry, and views of children have generated an enormous list of secondary sources; consult at least Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 33, 56-58; and Nicholas Riasanovsky, *The Emergence of Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), chapter 1.

American romantics nevertheless eloquently and movingly described the sweetness, harmony, and holiness of childhood, views that echoed among native poets, progressive religious figures, and assorted visionaries. The transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau among others, saw something artificial about the schools, which nevertheless bore their names by the thousands in the twentieth century. Having failed in a brief stint as a district school teacher—reportedly quitting after discovering that using the switch came with the job—the author of *Walden* (1854) thought the common schools were decent enough but inferior to the village and nature. “It is time that we had uncommon schools,” Thoreau told his readers, and “villages were universities, and their elder inhabitants the fellows of universities, with leisure . . . to pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives. Shall the world be confined to one Paris and one Oxford forever? Cannot students be boarded here and get a liberal education under the skies of Concord?”¹⁴ What was needed was not another schoolmaster sequestered between four barren walls but a modern Abelard urging people to think unconventional thoughts: precisely what common schools were never intended to do.

Poets such as Walt Whitman, whose genius belies any easy literary classification, similarly found a more natural, not institutionally deadening, form of learning as essential to the making of the new education. Another former teacher, Whitman had, while editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, frequently excoriated corporal punishment and demanded better teaching methods. In his poems he applauded the contemplation of morning glories over memorizing facts in books, elevated human intuition over intellect, merried in the joys of play, and snickered at the arrogance of the educated. As he grew old, he realized that schools were here to stay. At the inauguration of a new one in Camden, New Jersey, in 1874, he offered “An Old Man’s Thought of School.”

And these I see, these sparkling eyes,
These stores of mystic meaning, these young lives,
Building, equipping like a fleet of ships, immortal ships,
 Soon to sail out over the measureless seas,
On the soul’s voyage.

Only the lot of boys and girls?
Only the tiresome spelling, writing, ciphering classes?
 Only a public school?

¹⁴Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Penguin Books, c. 1986), 154. On Emerson and teaching, read Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 41, 57.

No, Whitman answered, the school, like the church, was not simply “brick and mortar” but a place of “living souls,” “the lights and shadows of the future. . . . To girlhood, boyhood look, the teacher and the school.”¹⁵

II

American advocates of the new education drew as they pleased from a large corpus of romantic writings, domestic and foreign. But few Europeans were as influential as Pestalozzi and Froebel, even though their ideas were bent and adapted to local conditions and sometimes rejected in theory and practice by some who invoked their names as the source of their inspiration. The Swiss-born Pestalozzi and German-born Froebel had emphasized the importance of motherhood, spirituality, and natural methods in educating little children, sentiments soon embraced by many progressive thinkers. Emerson E. White, who had recently retired as Cincinnati’s superintendent, told local high school graduates in 1889 that “The theories and methods of Pestalozzi and Froebel have permeated elementary schools, and science and other modern knowledges, have entered the universities and are working their way downward through secondary education.”¹⁶ This may have surprised the graduates, since their academic success was mostly a testimony to the power of memorization and recitation of a traditional sort. But many educators like Emerson, searching for a way to improve their craft and answer their perennial critics, thought change was imminent and inevitable thanks to new ideas from abroad. As a contributor to *The School Journal*, based in New York and Chicago, said in 1895, “The educational world, as it is spoken of here, has existed from only a modern date. It took on a distinct form when the impact of the Pestalozzian wave struck our shores.”¹⁷

Indeed, Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and other promoters of a gentler pedagogy eagerly publicized the romantic ideals emanating from Europe, which assailed memorization, textbooks, physical discipline, and the usual features of the neighborhood school. Children, as Whitman said, were “stores of mystic meaning,” not empty vessels waiting to be filled with use-

¹⁵Walt Whitman, “An Old Man’s Thought of School, For the Inauguration of a Public School, Camden, New Jersey, 1874,” in *Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy (New York: Penguin Books, c. 1986), 418-19. In “Song of Myself,” he typically wrote “A morning-glory at my windows satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.” But, as a former teacher, he often showed great respect for teachers and their labors, and was quite familiar with Locke’s writings and the soft pedagogical ideals of Horace Mann and other contemporaries. See Florence Bernstein Freedman, *Walt Whitman Looks at the Schools* (New York: King’s Crown Press, Columbia University, 1950); and David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 15-16, 34-35, 52-63, 75.

¹⁶E.E. White, “Address to Graduates,” *Pennsylvania School Journal* 38 (October 1889): 153.

¹⁷“The Educational World,” *The School Journal* 51 (October 5, 1895): 289.

less knowledge through brutal methods. But something had obviously gone wrong. Otherwise he could not have alluded to the “tiresome” methods of the school in his poem in 1874. Changing school practices along the lines of the European masters was no simple matter. Mann himself had anticipated the future by sponsoring city-wide examinations in Boston in 1845 to demonstrate what children had learned at school, knowledge largely acquired by memorizing facts contained in textbooks. Written tests had become the rage after the Civil War, especially in the cities, where admission to high school still required mastery of traditional textbook knowledge and passing a rigorous test. Recitations, too, retained their high place on all levels of instruction in the 1870s. Learning the value of work, not play, discipline, not doing as one pleased, said many citizens, were among the most important lessons taught at school. Textbook salesmen continued to hawk their ubiquitous stock, a familiar part of the business of education. Many teachers still tried to teach caged birds to sing.¹⁸

As in every transfer of ideas, American child-centered educators and reformers reworked Pestalozzi and Froebel in ways that made sense to them. Born to middle-class parents in 1746, Pestalozzi wrote extensively in Rousseauian fashion on the power of nature, while elevating the spiritual and practical significance of womanhood and motherhood through his idealized views on peasant women, which had more than a hint of nostalgia for the countryside. This was music to the ears of northern middle-class Americans in the nineteenth century, as cities and factories transformed the landscape. An early enthusiast of the French Revolution, Pestalozzi ultimately recoiled just like other early romantics against its violent turn, centering his hope for the future in education and social cooperation, not political radicalism and conflict.¹⁹ That, too, made him palatable to urban reformers.

An avowed socialist such as Robert Owen found Pestalozzi’s writings and model schools on the continent one of several sources of inspiration for infant schools and for his wider communitarian experiments in New Lanark and New Harmony. But the famous Swiss educator embedded his views in a mystical but clearly Christian world view, which furthered his appeal among middle-class reformers building schools in capitalist America. His writings sometimes evoked a pantheistic flavor, a synthesis of naturalistic and Christian imagery, common to romantics of his generation. Besides criticizing the horrors of traditional, adult-centered education and invoking the child’s innocence, Pestalozzi explained that a mother could

¹⁸On testing and the controversies surrounding it, see Reese, *Origins*, 142-61. On the traditional emphasis on rote memorization and didactic teaching, see Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 18, 45-46, 97; Reese, *Origins*, 132-41; and Cremin, *Transformation*, 20-21.

¹⁹Gutek, *Pestalozzi and Education*, 6-8, 70-73.

teach the child “to lisp the name of God on her bosom” and to see “him the All-loving in the rising sun, in the rippling brook, in the branches of the trees, in the splendor of the flower, in the dewdrops.”²⁰ Like many romantics, he personified Nature as female, the giver of life, seemingly synonymous with all that was holy and good. His message on the power of women as educators made sense to many American educators, who witnessed the transformation of the public school teaching force from male to female, especially in the primary and elementary grades.²¹

Even Pestalozzi’s garden-variety slurs on Jesuits and the Papacy as the source of many evil school practices would hardly undermine his popularity among educational reformers.²² Otherwise gentle folk, such as the Reverend Horace Bushnell, a neighbor and ally of Henry Barnard’s in Connecticut, could invoke themes of childhood benevolence and Christian nurture in one breath and spew forth anti-Catholic diatribes in another.²³ Finally, by saying that children learned best by experience with concrete objects, guided by the maternal power of educators, Pestalozzi’s popularity seemed assured. To the northern Protestant middle classes, there was something practical and comforting in his overall message.

Those who visited Pestalozzi’s model schools, read his writings, or even taught with him, however, had found inspiration, not an infallible guide to the future. A former colleague who later opened an upper-class male boarding school in Britain, supposedly on Pestalozzian lines, insisted that the grand master’s ideals were more important than how they were

²⁰Pestalozzi, *How Gertrude*, 192. On Owen, see Beatty, *Preschool Education*, 1-2, 17-19; and Arthur Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian Origins and the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1829* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, c. 1970), 138-39.

²¹Gutek, *Pestalozzi and Education*, 61-67; Beatty, *Preschool Education*, 11-12; and Pestalozzi, *How Gertrude*, where the themes of motherhood, morality, Christianity, and educational goodness intertwine. The significance of images of motherhood and a feminine Nature in romantic poetry is underscored in Barbara Shapiro, *The Romantic Mother: Narcissistic Patterns in Romantic Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), ix. Feminist criticism of male romantic poets and writers are extensive and diverse; they often critique the men for appropriating “female” virtues such as empathy and nurture, already important themes in women’s writings by the eighteenth century. For a small sampling of this literary criticism, see Anne K. Mellor, ed., *Romanticism and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and Meena Alexander, *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Mary Shelly* (Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble Books, 1989).

²²See Pestalozzi, *How Gertrude*, 46, 104, 146, 153, where he offers slurs on “monkish” education and barbarian peoples, presumably Slavs and Italians, and calls for the elimination of “Gothic monkish educational rubbish.”

²³Reese, *Origins*, 52. For a taste of Bushnell’s views, see Horace Bushnell, *Common Schools: A Discourse on the Modifications Demanded by the Roman Catholics, Delivered in the North Church, Hartford, On the Day of the Last Fast, March 25, 1853*. (Hartford, CT: Press of Cass, Tiffany, and Company, 1853). Unless Catholics (and Jews) were willing to send their children to Catholic schools, and the former end their campaign to divide the school fund, Bushnell urged them all to leave the country.

implemented. So he dropped many of Pestalozzi's ideas and practices.²⁴ Despite the fame of his model schools, Pestalozzi emphasized educating better mothers and improving home-based education, but that did not stop those seeking to spread his ideals into schools. And the inconsistencies in his writings allowed child-centered educators and activists on opposite sides of a question to claim him as their authority. His insistence upon educating the head, heart, and hand led some reformers to demand vocational education for the masses. Others, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, endorsed manual labor schools but said one should be educated for life, not merely for work.²⁵ In addition, Pestalozzi's search for a science of education, where he invoked the spirit of empiricism and rationalism, inspired disciples on both sides of the Atlantic to create variations on a formal method—object teaching—that proved as rigid as any other pedagogical system.

A former student who actually attended one of Pestalozzi's model schools noted that from a child's perspective, "What was so emphatically called Pestalozzi's *method* was an enigma to us. So it was to our teachers. Like the disciples of Socrates, every one of them interpreted the master's doctrines in his own fashion; but we were far from the times when these divergencies created discord, when our chief masters, after having each one of them laid claim to be the only one who really understood Pestalozzi, ended by declaring that Pestalozzi did not really understand himself."²⁶ However holy, his pedagogical fog could be impenetrable. Much the same was said about John Dewey's prose over a century later, as innovative educators tried to translate it into educational programs and practices. His prose was variously called "lumbering and bumbling" or, as William James said, "damnable; you might even say God-damnable."²⁷

Discord usually follows the lives of educational rebels, and Pestalozzi was no exception. Like Wordsworth's *Prelude, How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* was semiautobiographical, and it includes discussions of his battles with bullheaded, working-class parents, certain he is using their children as guinea pigs, and with rival teachers at his middle-class model schools unhappy with, among other things, his failure to balance the books. Everyone who worked with the poor, Pestalozzi said, knew the difficulties in trying to teach them. Their diction was bad, and their parents wanted traditional discipline and religious orthodoxy ever present in the classroom. "Let him who lives among such people come forward and bear witness, if he has not

²⁴Downs, *Pestalozzi*, 117-18; and Gutek, *Pestalozzi and Education*, 159-60.

²⁵Middle-class Americans were also attracted to Pestalozzi's emphasis on the individual, which appealed to those who wanted to nurture an ethos of personal responsibility among the young. Emerson even cited him in his famous call for American literary independence, "The American Scholar," in Ziff, *Selected Essays*, 103.

²⁶Quoted in Downs, *Pestalozzi*, 71.

²⁷Quoted in Cremin, *Transformation*, 237.

experienced how troublesome it is to get any idea into the poor creatures. But everyone agrees about this”—from the magistrates to the clergy. When he tried teaching the working classes without the standard books or catechism in a school in Burgdorf, “They decided at a meeting that they did not wish experiments made on their children with the new teaching; the burghers might try on their own.”²⁸ Progressive educators for decades to come would ask whether child-centered methods had any chance among the children of the poor. In the end, they would conclude, like many American advocates of kindergartens—the romantic reform par excellence—that the innovations should stress moral education and social control when it came to the urban poor. Thus were child-centered ideals among the middle classes continually shaped by social position.²⁹

Froebelian ideas and practices also provided enormous inspiration for the champions of the child and faced continual reinterpretation after the mid-nineteenth century, when German emigrés spread the kindergarten gospel after the failed Revolution of 1848. Born in one of the German states in 1782, Froebel drew upon an eclectic source of Enlightenment and romantic writings, and upon a variety of experiences that included an apprenticeship to a forester and military service against Napoleon, as he fashioned his educational ideas in the early nineteenth century. He studied with Pestalozzi, taught in several schools, and similarly emphasized the heightened significance of motherhood, womanhood, and early education along natural lines.³⁰ Inventing an elaborate, highly symbolic, graduated series of what he called gifts and occupations, Froebel cast the kindergarten in the red hot glow of Christian pantheism. The child of a Lutheran minister, Froebel, like Pestalozzi, had a very unhappy childhood, but he grew up in a spiritual world rich in symbolism. More bookish than his Swiss counterpart, he had similar financial problems but became a teacher when “he accepted the call from

²⁸Pestalozzi, *How Gertrude*, 113. Pestalozzi added that it was understandable that those in the expensive seats at the theater scorned those in the pit, that employers complained about workers not following orders, and so forth. As a result of faulty teaching methods in the lower schools, he concluded, society bore the blame for the depressed state of Christianity in Europe among the poor and the resulting low state of moral life.

²⁹Beatty, *Preschool Education*, chapters 5-6; Robert Wollons, “Introduction,” in *Kindergartens and Cultures: The Global Diffusion of an Idea*, ed. Roberta Wollons (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 7; Barbara Beatty, “‘The Letter Killeth’: Americanization and Multicultural Education in Kindergartens in the United States, 1856-1920,” in *Kindergartens and Cultures*, 42-55; and Selwyn K. Troen, *The Public and the Schools: Shaping the St. Louis System, 1838-1920* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1975), chapter 5, on the early establishment of kindergartens in a major city.

³⁰For a sense of the range of intellectual and social forces that shaped Froebel's life and educational views, see Robert B. Downs, *Friedrich Froebel* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978); Beatty, *Preschool Education*, chapter 3; Michael Steven Shapiro, *Child's Garden: The Kindergarten Movement from Froebel to Dewey* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), chapter 2; and the innovative volume by Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1997), chapter 1.

Providence.”³¹ Put the concrete before the abstract and experience before books in the education of little children both men, and their disciples, would say. Froebel’s writings were a fascinating blend of naturalism and Christian piety, as when he described the kindergarten: “As in a garden, under God’s favor, and by the care of a skilled, intelligent gardener, growing plants are cultivated in accordance with Nature’s laws. . . .”³²

In one of history’s many ironic twists of fate, Prussia banned the kindergarten in 1851, the year before Froebel’s death, since religious and political radicals and women activists had championed, and thus cast suspicion upon, the innovation. As historian Roberta Wollons explains, however, the kindergarten, ever malleable, ultimately found favor in many different corners of the world, championed by dictators and democrats alike.³³ Froebel’s kindergarten, melding the sweet sounds of nature, human goodness, social harmony, holiness, and maternalism into a pedagogical symphony, proved as appealing and flexible in America as Pestalozzi’s broader educational philosophy. Middle- and upper-class women, whether moralizing reformers or champions of the liberation of the child, found in Froebel what they wanted. The well-known transcendentalist, Elizabeth Peabody, became a leading champion of the kindergarten, yet hardly read any of Froebel’s writings, which could be alternatively obtuse and highly prescriptive. And as Barbara Beatty explains, in her already standard history of early childhood education, the kindergarten had to be Americanized before it could find favor with the urban middle classes.³⁴

Many scholars have shown that America’s kindergarten advocates divided into rival camps, each claiming true discipleship and possessing the authentic vision.³⁵ Froebel’s followers substantially revised the master’s highly formalized gifts and occupations, and the commercialization of kindergarten materials (principally to make money, not to produce pantheists) further undermined any uniform kindergarten ideal. Froebel hoped

³¹Quoted in Downs, *Froebel*, 19.

³²*Ibid.*, 42. Froebel thus wrote of the child in *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten, Or, His Ideas Concerning the Play and Playthings of the Child* (New York: D. Appleton, c. 1899, translated by Josephine Jarvis), 7: “Man, as child, resembles the flower on the plant, the blossom on the tree; as these are in relation to the tree, so is the child in relation to humanity: a young bud, a blossom; and as such, it bears, includes, and proclaims the ceaseless reappearance of new human life.”

³³Wollons, “Introduction,” 1-14; Ann Taylor Allen, “Children Between Public and Private Worlds: The Kindergarten and Public Policy in Germany, 1856-1920,” in *Kindergartens and Cultures*, 16-37; and Joachim Liebschner, *A Child’s Work: Freedom and Play in Froebel’s Educational Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, c. 1992), chapter 8.

³⁴On Peabody, see Louise Hall Tharp, *The Peabody Sisters of Salem* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950), chapter 25; Beatty, *Preschool Education*, 57-64; and Beatty, “‘The Letter Killeth,’” 46.

³⁵In addition to the previously cited scholarship by Beatty and Wollons, also read Evelyn Weber, *The Kindergarten: Its Encounter with Educational Thought in America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1969), x, chapters 3-4; and Shapiro, *Child’s Garden*, chapters 5-6.

that the kindergarten would reach all children, but America's public schools, despite important exceptions, adopted them very slowly. Moreover, those built for the urban poor often wore the badge of class stigma. To the northern middle classes, the kindergarten might help promote social mobility for their own children but for the laboring, increasingly immigrant masses, the emphasis was on discipline, control, and moral uplift.³⁶ Thanks to Pestalozzi, Froebel, and their acolytes, games, stories, play, and more informal learning experiences became part of a widened educational discourse, but the question of social class bias in child-centered progressivism would never disappear.

III

After the Civil War, the American champions of the new education frequently invoked the names of Pestalozzi, Froebel, and other European romantics, along with a wider range of writers and theorists who, while more conservative in their views, similarly placed greater emphasis on the importance of education in the lives of children. Despite their many differences, advocates of a "new education" insisted that young children, who should be educated in kindly and natural ways, learned best not through books but through sensory experience and contact with real objects. Kindergartners soon fought over the best way to plant and cultivate children's gardens. Many others who wanted to humanize and enliven instruction in the expanding public schools saw Pestalozzian object teaching as the cure for many pedagogical ills. They faced a difficult battle, since the forces of tradition proved very powerful, as various European romantics and innovators had earlier discovered.

And yet the champions of the child persevered. The great European thinkers had demonstrated that most educational maladies could be corrected, said Calvin M. Woodward, the nation's leading advocate of manual training, if young people of all ages worked with their hands. Class conflict, industrial alienation, and urban violence could be averted if the schools did their part for humanity. "Did you ever see one whose mind was nauseated with spelling books, lexicons, and grammars, and an endless hash of words and definitions?" Woodward asked in 1885, "And did you, in such a case, call in the two doctors, Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel? And did you watch the magic influence of a diet of *things* prescribed by the former in the place of words, and a little various practice in *doing*, in the place of talking, under the direction of the latter?"³⁷ In the South following Reconstruction, white racists cited Pestalozzi approvingly, saying schools which

³⁶Beatty, *Preschool Education*, chapter 4.

³⁷C. M. Woodward, untitled contribution, *Journal of Education* 22 (December 24, 1885): 411.

emphasized books had no place in the education of African Americans. The ex-slaves were lazy, said many white educators, and extensive book-knowledge for the masses (as Booker T. Washington and others agreed) was a luxury society could ill afford. As one North Carolinian fancifully believed, Pestalozzi had helped turn a “poor, shiftless, helpless Swiss peasantry” into modern, virtuous, hard-working capitalists. Without manual training for the working-class children, white and especially black, crime would persist and the chain gang remain a necessity.³⁸

Like other northern activists, the charismatic Francis W. Parker, who also wanted to break “the chains of the old education,” envisioned a bountiful pedagogical future. He was widely quoted for condemning pail parrot teaching and the emotional slaughter of the innocents in the classroom. Too many teachers, he reported, worried about such trivial matters as a shortage of teaching apparatus; they lacked sufficient imagination. In a clear reference to the Swiss master, Parker asked, “Have we not pebbles, and shells, and leaves, and flowers, and the free skies?”³⁹ Edward Sheldon, who established a model normal school in Oswego, New York, that became a Mecca for progressive teachers, saw object teaching as a panacea. Though he claimed to have devised his theories prior to learning about Pestalozzi, he shared the master’s desire to discover the “laws of childhood” by observing children. Like his counterparts on both sides of the Atlantic, he complained about the rigidities of the old education and tried to surround himself with like-minded teachers, who similarly proclaimed that schools had an exaggerated interest in books and words and not in things and Nature.⁴⁰

An anti-intellectual strain was fundamental in many child-centered educators, who saw a broad array of sensory experiences as the basis of education and often emphasized transcendence, intuition, and feeling. They

³⁸“Cooking and Sewing in Colored Grade School of Durham, N.C.,” *North Carolina Journal of Education* 3 (November 1899): 10-11. On the opposition of African-Americans to white attempts to water down their academic instruction, see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

³⁹Col. F. W. Parker, “Training that Educates,” *Wisconsin Journal of Education* 13 (November 1883): 445.

⁴⁰E. A. Sheldon, *A Manual of Elementary Instruction, For the Use of Public and Private Schools and Normal Classes; Containing a Graduated Course of OBJECT LESSONS for the Training [of] the Senses and Developing the Faculties of Children* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., c. 1869), 5, 15, 96; Mary Sheldon Barnes, ed., *Autobiography of Edward Austin Sheldon* (New York: Ives-Butler Company, 1911), 124; and Ned Harland Dearborn, *The Oswego Movement in American Education* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1925), 16-17, which perceptively notes the messianic, religious, and educational views shared by Sheldon and Pestalozzi. The commanding place of textbooks in the Oswego, New York, schools remained an impediment to the rise of object teaching, as a committee of educators reported to the National Teachers’ Association in 1865. See S.S. Greene, “Object Teaching: Its General Principles, and the Oswego System,” in *Pestalozzi and His Educational System*, ed. Henry Barnard (Syracuse: C.W. Bardeen, Publisher, 1881), 455.

could ably cite key passages in the writings of European romantics which questioned the importance of books, textbooks, grammars, and catechisms in the instruction of the young. In *Emile*, Rousseau had called reading “the greatest plague of childhood.” In 1801, Pestalozzi boasted that he had not read a book in thirty years. Wordsworth playfully told everyone to put away their books: “Books! Tis a dull and endless strife/Come, hear the woodland linnet Come forth into the light of things/Let nature be your teacher.”⁴¹ But schools, and their books, were here to stay. And popular suspicion about the life of the mind, as historian Richard Hofstadter once wrote, had multiple sources in the American past.⁴²

In a century marked by recurrent religious revivals among Protestant denominations, child-centered school reformers actually deepened the wider evangelical faith among countless educators and citizens that schools could improve and perhaps perfect society. The mystical, quasi-religious, and Christian imagery that often found prominence in European romanticism (especially in Pestalozzi and Froebel) also found ample expression here. Many activists traveled to Europe to examine model schools first hand, much like religious pilgrims seeking inspiration, personal salvation, and human redemption. A religious aura frequently surrounded those who lobbied for kindergartens or manual training or who published progressive training manuals or articles and books on the new education. A beautiful, radiant Madonna graced the cover of one kindergarten manual by William Hailmann, among the nation’s leading proponents of kindergartens and object teaching.⁴³ In 1892, Louisa Parsons Hopkins, a supervisor of teachers in Boston, published a book entitled *The Spirit of the New Education*. Like other reformers, she attacked the “medievalism” of the schools and their unnatural preoccupation with “an exclusively book education.” In addition, upon visiting one kindergarten, she experienced an epiphany. The teacher and her tender charges sang joyfully and engaged playfully in their classroom activities. It was like a “baptism of the spirit.” “There was an ineffable sweetness, and almost holiness, about the atmosphere of the place. The children’s faces were lighted up with real inspiration and interest, and one could almost see a tongue of flame on the forehead of the teachers.”⁴⁴

⁴¹*The Emile of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, edited by William Boyd (New York: Teachers College Press, c. 1971), 51; Pestalozzi, *How Gertrude*, 25 (the volume is filled with slurs on books); and William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned: An Evening Scene on the Same Subject,” in *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden (New York: Penguin Books, c. 1990): 1: 357.

⁴²Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

⁴³See W.N. Hailmann, *Law of Childhood, and Other Papers* (Chicago: Alice B. Stockham & Co., 1889), among his many writings.

⁴⁴Louisa Parsons Hopkins, *The Spirit of the New Education* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1892), 9, 20-21.

Appropriately, a fine reproduction of the Madonna hung on the classroom wall, a fitting image of the mother's role as savior. The Madonna, so significant to Catholic women's devotion, had crossed into a largely Protestant world that frequently retained anti-Catholic sentiments even within polite middle-class circles.⁴⁵

Leading school men of the age, from editors of mainstream educational magazines to administrators, were insulted by the many charges hurled at their institutions. Calling Parker an "apostle of the new education," a writer in the *Pennsylvania School Journal* simply remarked, "If Col. Parker is right, nearly all of us are wrong."⁴⁶ In the 1870s, William T. Harris, St. Louis's famous superintendent, led the nation in establishing public kindergartens and science instruction in the primary grades. But he remained suspicious of utopian claims on behalf of manual training and sugary views of the child, defended the importance of academics, and warned that starry-eyed teachers seemed more impressed with their bug collections and field trips than in the unglamorous task of teaching children to read. Harris presciently said that manual training would evolve into a class-based vocational system, anti-intellectual in tone and undemocratic in practice.⁴⁷ Emerson E. White similarly mocked the grandiose claims of manual training advocates: "I shall not be surprised to hear some enthusiast say that manual training is the only road to heaven. Every other possible claim has been made for it."⁴⁸ Still other critics of the new education rejected the notion that play, and not work, should be the basis of a sound education, and even worried that the kindergarten, despite the saccharine image, was often a "disorderly nursery."⁴⁹

The late nineteenth century was a difficult time to be a child-centered educator, at least if one wanted to overturn the familiar practices of the common school. That the interests of the child should guide classroom instruction was given a boost in the 1880s and 1890s thanks to the followers of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), but resistance to change was

⁴⁵On urban middle-class Protestant fascination with Catholicism, see T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

⁴⁶William L. Ballantine, "Examinations," *Pennsylvania School Journal* 32 (May 1883): 437.

⁴⁷William J. Reese, "The Philosopher-King of St. Louis," in *Curriculum & Consequence: Herbert M. Kliebard and the Promise of Schooling*, ed. Barry M. Franklin (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000), 165, 171-72.

⁴⁸"Manual Training," *Journal of Education* 35 (March 3, 1892): 134. The same article quoted William Hailmann, who wrote approvingly of manual training as essential in teaching social cooperation, work habits, and hand and eye coordination, arguments common at the time.

⁴⁹"Drift," *Journal of Education* 19 (May 22, 1884): 326. This editorial takes a swipe at Hailmann and other kindergarten enthusiasts.

pervasive.⁵⁰ Of course, depending on what books or journals one read or classrooms one visited, citizens could conclude that the schools had witnessed a pedagogical revolution and the annihilation of tradition, or its opposite. In a richly diverse nation, with hundreds of thousands of public schools spreading into the poorest, least populated, and recently settled corners of the nation, America had examples aplenty to confirm or deny educational change, the watchword of the era. In 1896, however, a dejected contributor to the *School Journal* sadly wrote that “the study of pedagogy has been, and still is, derided by what may be termed the Three R men. They have said and still say that it is enough to know the subjects to be taught, and how to keep order.”⁵¹ Another writer similarly feared that a “dead common school tone” prevailed in many classrooms.⁵²

Without question, there was abundant evidence that teachers still forced children to memorize knowledge learned from ubiquitous textbooks. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., who helped publicize Francis Parker’s labors as superintendent in Quincy, Massachusetts in the 1870s, said that before the latter’s arrival the town schools hired teachers who “unconsciously” made pupils into “parrots.” Children would “glibly chatter out the boundaries and capitals, and principal towns and rivers of States and nation, and enumerate the waters you pass through and the ports you would make in a voyage from Boston to Calcutta, or New York to St. Petersburg.”⁵³ Parker’s stay in Quincy proved to be short-lived; he was off to Boston in 1880, where he would face another round of resistance to change. Other examples of hostility to the spirit of the new education abounded. In 1882, a study of “common school studies” sponsored by the United States Bureau of Education discovered that teachers still spent most of their time on the basics. The purpose of instruction, said the researcher, seemed to be “the guessing of so many riddles” and memorizing incredible quantities of facts. Drill and recitation were more common than exercises that tapped the imagination.⁵⁴

Teachers everywhere frequently spent most of their time drilling children in the basic subjects. A foreign visitor to several New York City schools in the 1890s was struck by the heavy reliance on memorization: “I heard in one class the boys get up one after another recording the names, dates, and

⁵⁰For a masterful history of Herbartian ideas and their American expressions, see Kathleen Anne Cruikshank, “The Rise and Fall of American Herbartianism: Dynamics of an Educational Reform Movement,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993).

⁵¹Editorial, *The School Journal* 53 (September/October 1896): 388.

⁵²Editorial, *Wisconsin Journal of Education* 28 (August 1898): 169.

⁵³Charles F. Adams, Jr., *The New Departure in the Common Schools of Quincy and Other Papers on Educational Topics* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1879), 33, 43.

⁵⁴John M. Gregory, “Some Fundamental Inquiries Concerning the Common School Studies,” *Circulars of Information of the Bureau of Education* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1882), 87.

chief performances of the eighteen presidents of the United States. In another school, the girls recited in order the names of the principal inventors and discovers, with a description of the exploits of each."⁵⁵ By the time Joseph Mayer Rice published his celebrated book attacking the old education in 1893, a generation of reformers had come to realize that despite some celebrated victories, tradition had proven more than a little enduring. A pediatrician, Rice catalogued the usual litany of problems in urban, graded schools, where children memorized materials they did not understand, teachers resembled Gradgrind, and cram was king.⁵⁶

The advocates of the new education could point to some triumphs. The curriculum in some urban districts had been enriched by object teaching, occasionally by kindergarten classes, and even more by manual training classes of great variety and quality. Nature study and field trips were not unknown. Even Rice noticed an occasional ray of light in the city systems. In Indianapolis, Nebraska Cropsey, the supervisor of elementary teachers and alumnae of Oswego, had introduced and encouraged more active, natural teaching methods in some schools.⁵⁷ Maybe other places would take heed. And yet the apostles of the new education were aware that the seeds of reform often died on the hard soil of tradition. Even Harris in 1891 complained about the excessive preoccupation with memorization in the schools, where sing-song drill, question-and-answer teaching methods, and the heavy use of textbooks remained common.⁵⁸

Despite all the fears of traditional educators, the schools had not been won over by child-centered education. Books remained central to the public schools, and the familiar basics had not been crowded out by fashionable romantic substitutes. The messianic visions of a Colonel Parker, Hailmann, or countless child-centered progressives were difficult to translate into reality. Real schools and ordinary teachers valued the traditional curriculum, books, and old-fashioned pedagogy. That was how most teachers had been taught. To their credit, early progressives often recognized that primers on object teaching, kindergartens, and manual training could deteriorate into formula, rules and regulations, and question-and-answer

⁵⁵J.G. Fitch, *Notes on American Schools and Training Colleges* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1890), 51.

⁵⁶Joseph Mayer Rice, *The Public-School System of the United States* (New York: Century, 1893).

⁵⁷Rice, *Public-School System*, 93, 101-15; and Laura Gaus, "Nebraska Cropsey," in *The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, ed. David J. Bodenhamer and Robert G. Barrows (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 483.

⁵⁸William T. Harris, "The Present Status of Education in the United States," *Journal of Education* 34 (August 13, 1891): 101, where he wrote: "The elementary school will always have the character of memory work stamped upon it, no matter how much the educational reforms may improve its methods. It is not easy to over-value the impulse of such men as Pestalozzi and Froebel; but the child's mind cannot seize great syntheses."

formats, an odd result for a movement that began as an assault on formalism and expressed supreme faith in intuition and the individual. Turning romantic ideas into a program was never easy, and critics noticed the irony of discovering kindergarten and manual-training teachers instructing step-by-step from guides and primers.⁵⁹ And after the idea of formulating a “science of education” resurfaced late in the century, originally as part of scientific child study, children were soon measured by percentages and known by their placement on the curve.⁶⁰ Middle-class private experimental schools, university laboratory schools, and a handful of suburban school districts would keep child-centered progressivism alive, but working-class parents, suspicious of their betters and more supportive of the basics in all things, would usually remain outside of their orbit.⁶¹ As Pestalozzi had said in a different context, they did not like having experiments performed on their children.

It is not coincidental that the most famous American theorists of the new education were not teachers or if so left the classroom quickly. The transcendentalist and romantic poets beat a quick retreat for larger public roles. Susan Blow, who headed the kindergartens in St. Louis, apparently influenced hundreds of teachers through her training courses and lectures and became an outspoken defender of Froebelian orthodoxy.⁶² While serving as public school administrators, both Edward Sheldon and William Hailmann had faced resistance from teachers and parents. But Sheldon ultimately spent decades at the helm of a prestigious, progressive normal school at Oswego, and Hailmann moved on to other administrative posts, where he championed manual training, kindergartens, and object teaching.⁶³ When

⁵⁹See John Dewey’s perceptive comments in *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, c. 1944), 58-59, 198-99. The book was originally published in 1916.

⁶⁰Max van Manen, “Romantic Roots of Human Science in Education,” in *Educational Legacy*, ed. Willinsky, 115-39.

⁶¹Patricia Albjerg Graham, *Progressive Education: From Arcady to Academe, A History of The Progressive Education Association* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1967), 8-16; and Arthur Silversmit, *Changing Schools: Progressive Education Theory and Practice, 1930-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁶²Shapiro, *Child’s Garden*, 60-63; and Barbara Beatty, “Susan Elizabeth Blow,” in *Historical Dictionary of American Education*, ed. Richard J. Altenbaugh (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 48.

⁶³Will S. Monroe, *History of the Pestalozzian Movement in the United States* (Syracuse: C.W. Bardeen, Publisher, 1907), 179, briefly describes the reaction against Sheldon’s system by local residents. After serving as superintendent of schools in LaPorte, Indiana, for nine years, Hailmann reported continued resistance from parents, since he reduced the traditional emphasis on textbooks and increased classroom time spent on drawing and manual training and “experimental” methods. See *Report of the Public Schools of LaPorte, Indiana, for the School Year 1891-1892* (LaPorte, Indiana: Wadsworth & Kessler, 1892), 11. On Hailmann’s varied career, see Beatty, *Preschool Education*; William J. Reese, “Urban School Reform in the Progressive Era,” in *Hoosier Schools: Past & Present*, ed. William J. Reese (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 44; and Ted Stahly, “Curricular Reform in an Industrial Age,” in *Hoosier Schools*, 62-63, 65-66.

asked to reminiscence about her high school teacher, John Dewey, a woman vividly recalled that he was unable to control the unruly boys and led a school prayer that was unusually long. As a college teacher, he often lectured and students labored to stay awake, even if their notes revealed his brilliance.⁶⁴ People who were charismatic like Colonel Parker, however, were not called apostles and prophets for nothing—they inspired many who found the classroom experience dull and deadening, as student and teacher. Reformers assumed at times that their charisma would infect others and thus help transform school bureaucracies, which became bloated in the cities. As reformers moved out of the classroom and into administrative positions, they found that changing practice was not impossible but extremely difficult.

The advocates of the new education had nevertheless invented a whole new vocabulary and way of thinking about the child, the curriculum, and the purposes of schools. What they said and attempted to implement remained an important legacy for future child-centered activists. Dewey became the patron saint of something called progressive education, even though he, like his friend Harris, criticized its romantic side.⁶⁵ But by the turn of the century, many school critics would say that the child should be an active, not passive, learner; that the teacher should be a guide, not master; that the curriculum should adapt to a changing industrial society, not remain lodged in the past; and that something needed to be done about the many incompetent teachers who sent their pupils to nearly eternal sleep. When he published “My Pedagogical Creed” in 1897, Dewey himself had exemplified the highly spiritual, mystical, quasi-religious side of the new education by claiming that “the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true Kingdom of God.”⁶⁶ The language of reform became more secular in the twentieth century, but a millennial faith in the gospel of education never disappeared.

Child-centered education had been born in an age of romance and revolution, in the rich soil of human imagination. Dreamers and visionar-

⁶⁴George Dyshuizen, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 25; Lagemann, *Elusive Science*, 52; and Russell B. Goodman, *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 92.

⁶⁵In recent years, scholars have increasingly and properly recognized that Dewey opposed child-centered education. See, for example, Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 108-09; and Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 134.

⁶⁶John Dewey, “My Pedagogical Creed,” in *Dewey on Education*, ed. Martin S. Dworkin (New York: Teachers College Press, 1959), 32. On the moral foundations of progressive reform generally, see Crunden, *Ministers of Reform*; and Timothy L. Smith, “Progressivism in American Education, 1880-1900,” *Harvard Educational Review* 31 (Spring 1961): 173-74. Cruikshank notes that the moral and spiritual foundations of Herbart’s ideas, which drew inspiration in part from Pestalozzi, helped in their popularization in America. See “The Rise and Fall,” 873-74.

ies from Europe knew that something was wrong with how children were treated and educated, and some sympathetic Americans agreed that only the stone hearted could ignore the prophetic words of the poet.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!⁶⁷

⁶⁷William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," in *The Portable Romantics*, 199.