

50p 1A

Let them turn to the bottle
the Yogi and the rope,
some of them go to Uncle Joe,
some of them to the Pope—

one by one grown prosperous
of excellent intent
they set their names on the payroll
of God and Government;

one is turned evangelist,
another is turned Knight:
let them go wherever they wish—
we will stay and fight.

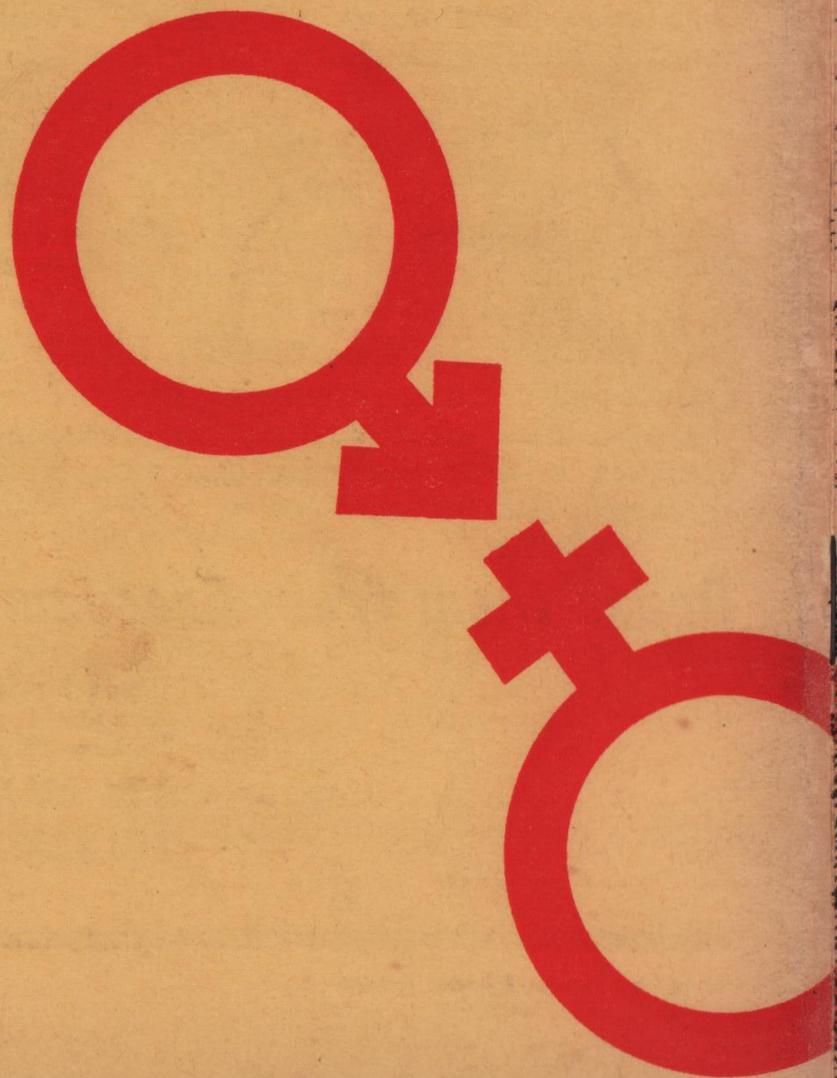
I may come to the light at last
as others have come there;
I think they will not put my bones
in Moscow's Red Square:

I can turn both coat and mind
as well as any man—
I think they will not put my head
towards the Vatican.

All fierce beasts grow corpulent,
mature and come to hand.
Lions lie down with sheepskin wolves—
we will see them damned.



THE ANARCHISM OF
ALEX COMFORT



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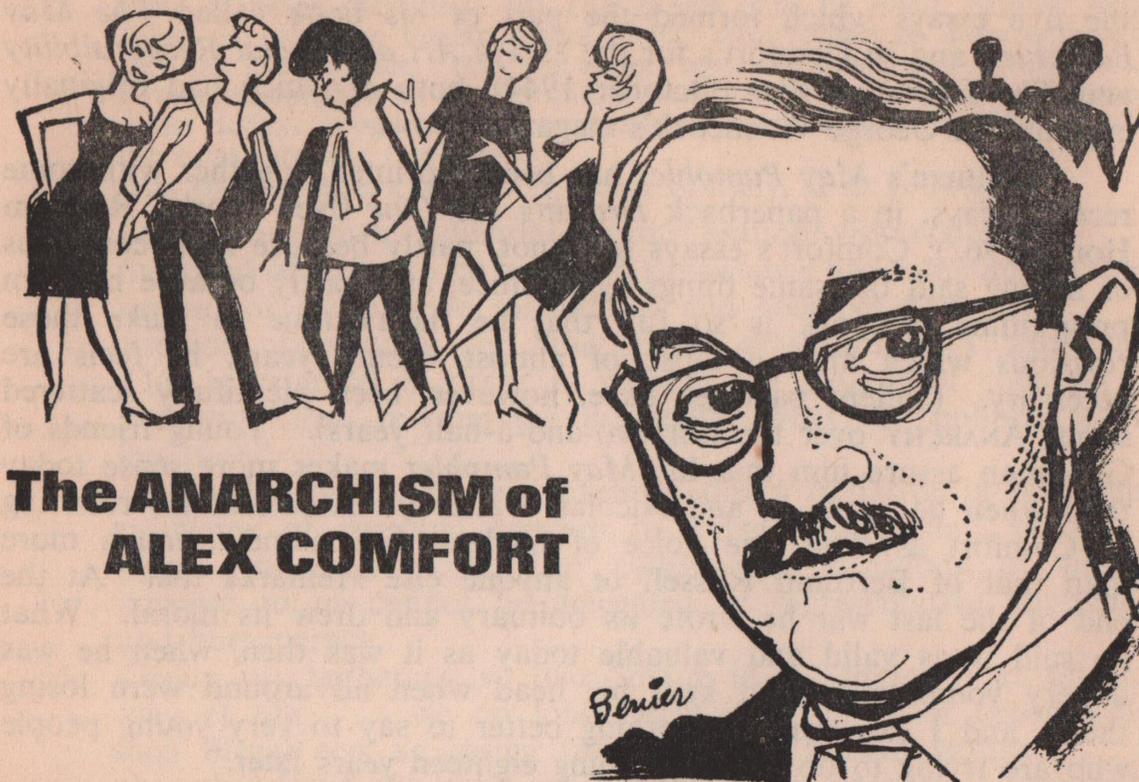
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The ANARCHISM of ALEX COMFORT

JUST AFTER THE WAR, TWO YOUNG WRITERS on either side of the Atlantic published collections of their wartime essays. Their books had a similar tone and character, both were of social as well as literary criticism, and they even had similar titles: Paul Goodman's was called *Art and Social Nature*, Alex Comfort's was called *Art and Social Responsibility*. Goodman's was put together when "I was having a disagreement with the Selective Service and was set to go to jail, though this was entirely against both my prudent principles and my wishes . . . my philosophical and political position was Dodging." Comfort's was written when, according to his publisher, he had become known as "an aggressive anti-militarist, having headed the agitation against indiscriminate bombing and himself refusing military service . . . "From now on," he declared, "the deserter is every man's friend."

Neither book attracted much attention when published, but an interesting thing has happened since: in the last few years, both authors have frequently had the suggestion put to them that these long out-of-print essays from obscure publishers and from a period of which little of permanent value awaits resurrection should be reprinted. It is as though, after a new generation had grown up, people suddenly found them relevant, suddenly found that they "speak to our condition." Nor was it for the sake of their criticism of literature and the arts that the requests for a reprint came, it was for those more "ephemeral" essays which took the form of political manifestoes: in Goodman's case for

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the five essays which formed the part of his book called *The May Pamphlet*, and in Comfort's for the essays *Art and Social Responsibility* and *The End of a War* (October 1944), both of which had originally appeared in George Woodcock's magazine *Now*.

Goodman's *May Pamphlet* has been reprinted, together with some recent essays, in a paperback *Drawing the Line* (New York: Random House 1962); Comfort's essays have not, partly because he is conscious of having said the same things again since, and partly because his own programme of work is so full that he hasn't time to make those revisions which after a lapse of almost twenty years, he feels are necessary. (Salient passages have, however, been plentifully scattered about ANARCHY over the last two-and-a-half years). Young friends of Goodman assure him that his *May Pamphlet* makes more sense today than when he wrote it, and Nicolas Walter (in ANARCHY 14) referring to Comfort as "the true voice of nuclear disarmament, much more than that of Bertrand Russell or anyone else" remarks that "At the end of the last war he wrote its obituary and drew its moral. What he said is as valid and valuable today as it was then, when he was a very young man who kept his head when all around were losing theirs, and I can think of nothing better to say to very young people who are trying to do the same thing eighteen years later."

Comfort and Goodman are characters of a very different kind, but their preoccupations are similar. Both bridge the so-called two cultures, both are novelists and poets, while Goodman is a teacher turned psychotherapist and Comfort is a physician turned biologist. Each has evolved a distinctive anarchism of his own in which resistance to war and war preparation is combined with the search for alternatives to authoritarian and coercive social institutions. This is the reason why they have become relevant for a generation which, after the smug nineteen-fifties, became for the first time involved in public affairs through the campaign for nuclear disarmament, and found that the campaign against the bomb was inevitably a campaign against the state, and then that a campaign against the state became a campaign for different kinds of social and economic institutions based on participation and co-operation rather than coercion and competition. The kind of war resistance which these two anarchists called for years ago, and have not ceased to advocate since, is precisely the kind which has continually seemed about to grow from the radical wing of the campaign against the bomb. The philosophy which Comfort set out in October 1944, is precisely that of the Committee of 100.

Two writers and their programmes

Both these writers have at one time or another felt impelled to set out some form of programme, and it is interesting to compare them. Goodman prefaces his (in *The May Pamphlet*) with three preconditions:

(a) It is essential that our programme can, with courage and mutual encouragement and mutual aid, be put into effect by our own effort, to a degree at once and progressively more and more, without recourse to distant

party or union decisions. (b) The groups must be small, because mutual aid is our common human nature mainly with respect to those with whom we deal face to face. (c) Our action must be aimed not, as utopians, at a future establishment; but (as millenarians, so to speak) at fraternal arrangements today, progressively incorporating more and more of the social functions into our free society.

His programme, condensed rather crudely, is as follows:

1. Satisfactory work, industrial decentralisation, workers' control.
2. Standard of living to be based on subsistence and humane well-being instead of exploitative institutions and coercive advertising.
3. Provide opportunity for "the sexual gratification of adolescents. This is essential in order to prevent the pattern of coercion and authority from re-emerging no matter what the political change has been".
4. In small groups we must exercise direct initiative in community problems of personal concern to ourselves (housing, community plan, schooling, etc.). The constructive decisions of intimate concern to us cannot be delegated to representative government and bureaucracy.
5. Group psychotherapy so that "living in the midst of an alienated way of life . . . we no longer regard as guilty or conspiratorial such illegal acts as spring from common human nature . . . On the other hand, we must see that many acts commonly regarded as legal and even meritorious are treason against our natural society, if they involve us in situations where we cease to have personal responsibility and concern for the consequences."
6. "We must progressively abstain from whatever is connected with the war . . . If we are to have peace, it is necessary to wage the peace. Otherwise, when their war comes, we must also hold ourselves responsible for it."

Comfort's programme (in *Authority and Delinquency in the Modern State*) is followed by the observation that

Direct pressure through the mechanism of parliamentary parties does not figure in this list of aims. There are those who will feel that such an omission is perverse. On the other hand, it is doubtful, on the grounds which have been set out in this book, whether progress through the institutional pattern is worth attempting, and whether a more revolutionary approach is not valuable in itself, as a means of bring home our point.

His programme, again condensed, is as follows:

1. Measures to increase public awareness of the state of society and of the results of research into human social psychology. The focus here is educational, through the explanation of the mechanics of specific problems such as war or social neurosis . . .
2. Fundamental experiments in communal living and control of resources. These have a demonstration value out of all proportion to their size. They are often to the criticism that they depend on the society which they are attacking, but it is hard to see why they should not do so. A widespread growth of spontaneous experiment of this kind is likely to prove a serious competitor to the less satisfactory institutional apparatus, and influence it as

much as experimental rehabilitation has influenced penology.

3. Specific pressure, towards controlled break-up of large city aggregates, increased workers' control in industry, with decentralisation of large units.
4. Concentrated propaganda to introduce sociality into the place where character-formation takes place, the family and the school. The value of this type of instruction has been proved by the striking change in ideas of parental and educational discipline during the last twenty years.
5. Individual psychiatry . . . The task of adjustment is not the reaction of centralised morale and of acquiescence, but the building of a morale based on negative resistance to bad institutions and positive determination to experiment in social living so that they can be superseded. This is the most specifically revolutionary part of our work. It may involve not only individual therapy but such measures of propaganda as we can undertake through writing, speaking and living. It may involve specifically revolutionary activity, such as the encouragement of direct resistance to delinquent authority and the withdrawal of scientific support from projects involving secrecy, the suppression of information, and the abuse of technology for war purposes.

The tone as well as the content of these two programmes are similar, and they are reflected very closely in the approach to anarchism of contributors to this journal, and in the topics discussed by the newest generation of anarchists. One of the new student groups for instance defines its field thus: "We are interested in workers' control of industry, child-centred education, the abolition of the punitive element in justice, the increased decentralisation of institutions, co operation not competition, the maximum self-determination of individuals. Such preoccupations allow plenty of scope for action; and when the opportunity arises, we will act."

Against the bomb

Like Goodman, whose works were discussed in ANARCHY 11 and 24, Comfort is a man whose ideas flow from one field of his work to another. He says of himself, "I build up a fund of ideas as a result of my various activities and then use them in whichever sphere is most appropriate. For instance, I was studying the colours of horses' coats in the Stud Book from a genetic point of view, as part of my research into ageing. Then I found myself using the different colours of women's hair as a theme in a poem." Another by-product of the same research was a radio talk on the changing fashions in the names given to horses, which provided him with the unlikeliest of pretexts to bring in the topic of nuclear disarmament. Comfort never lets these opportunities slip, whether it is a public discussion of Britain's morals or an article in the press on earlier maturity. Having been concerned with anti-war propaganda all his adult life, he has never ceased to seek out new ways of getting a hearing. In 1950 he wrote an official-looking

leaflet (published by the PPU) called *Civil Defence—What you should do now*, which was the subject of angry questions in the House of Commons because of what the Home Secretary called its "subversive" character. In 1958, at the meeting which launched the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, he declared:

Much has been said about a summit conference. Sanity is always hardest to restore at the summit—the air there is rarified. It seems to affect the brain. We can reassert it at the base. The people must take over.

I do not see the parties giving an answer to the hundreds of people of all persuasions who are asking what they individually can do to reassert the rule of sanity. That is the foundation of the campaign we are launching tonight; to make every individual reassume the normal responsibility for opposing insanity. The issue is one for direct action.

He was one of those original members of the Committee of 100 who were sentenced to a month's imprisonment for organising the Trafalgar Square sit-down, his voice has frequently been heard on the pirate radio station Voice of Nuclear Disarmament, he was arrested for sticking up anti-bomb posters, and is the author of a collection of anti-bomb songs called *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* For him the important thing about the campaign is that it has made people vocal, has made them ask questions, and has brought them out into the street. "The people learn slowly, and learn incompletely" he wrote nineteen years ago, "They remain somnambulists, but the pressure of the times moves them." And in that remarkable wartime manifesto he concluded "When enough people respond to the invitation to die, not with a salute but a smack in the mouth, and the mention of war emptied the factories and fills the streets, we may be able to talk about freedom."

Sex without guilt

The other subject on which Comfort's views have gained a certain notoriety, is of course, the ever-interesting topic of sexual relations, less through his books (reviewed elsewhere in this issue) than as a result of his recent Sunday night television discussion. Here he summed up his code on sexual behaviour in the words of Bertrand Russell's definition of the good life: that it should be inspired by love and directed by intelligence, and the two aspects to which he applied this approach were the sexual lives of adolescents, and monogamy. The fact that sex is still regarded as "a problem" is the major negative achievement of Christianity, he suggested. "We might as well make up our minds that chastity is no more a virtue than malnutrition." Now everybody knows that teenage lovemaking does not stop short of copulation, but because of the myth of "chastity", nobody inculcates the simple and obvious moral and technical rules of sexual behaviour. His moral injunctions—which have become quite well-known thanks to the publicity which followed this TV programme—are "Thou shalt not exploit another person's feelings" and "Thou shalt under no circumstances, cause the birth of an unwanted child". The technical requirement is of course that "sex education" should include instruction to the young on the intelligent and correct use of foolproof contraceptives.

The reference to "commandments" led Maurice Carstairs to question why, as an anarchist, Comfort was prescribing rules, to which he replied that a philosophy of freedom demanded higher standards of personal responsibility than a belief in authority. The lack of ordinary prudence and chivalry which could often be observed in adolescent sexual behaviour today was precisely the result of prescribing the code of chastity which did not make sense, instead of principles which are "immediately intelligible and acceptable to any sensible youngster."

But the observation which won him the *Daily Mirror* headline "TV Doctor's Amazing Sex Talk" was his definition of a chivalrous boy as one who takes contraceptives with him when he goes to meet his girl friend.

He was equally provocative when he came to talk of adult sexual relationships. A good many marriages and a good many personalities, he suggested, require an "adulterous" prop to keep them on their feet. The extended life span in modern Western society means that "till death do us part" is, as he put it, "a hell of a long time", and the concept of romantic love places a very heavy strain on marriage. (He refers of course to the relationship rather than the legal institution).

In choosing a partner we try both to retain the relationships we have enjoyed in childhood, and to recoup ourselves for fantasies which have been denied us. Mate-selection accordingly becomes for many an attempt to cast a particular part in a fantasy production of their own, and since both parties have the same intention but rarely quite the same fantasies, the result may well be a duel of rival producers. There are men, as Stanley Spencer said of himself, who need two complementary wives and women who need two complementary husbands, or at least two complementary love-objects. If we insist first that this is immoral or 'unfaithful', and second that should it occur there is an obligation to each love-object to insist on exclusive rights, we merely add unnecessary difficulties to a problem which might have presented none, or at least presented fewer, if anyone were permitted to solve it in their own way.

The anarchist reader, who presumably takes all this for granted, will notice in comparing *Barbarism and Sexual Freedom*, or *Sexual Behaviour in Society*, with Comfort's most recent utterances on sex, that his opinions have apparently become more radical. When I put this to him, he replied that it was not so much his opinions that had changed—although the arrival of the contraceptive pill *had* altered the situation—as his manner of expressing them. "In offering advice to people, especially the young, you incur a responsibility, which considering the weird use that people *do* make of your advice, is pretty heavy." The young are making their own sexual revolution whether their elders like it or not, and Comfort's point is that they should be supported and *armed*, as well as being given some awareness of the emotional reactions of the opposite sex.

Comfort notes in his book *Darwin and the Naked Lady* that "the actual content of sexual behaviour probably changes much less between cultures than the individual's capacity to enjoy it without guilt", and he believes that Western society is beginning to get away from the

"operatic" view of sex. He argues in the introduction to his forthcoming translation of *The Koka Shastra and other mediaeval Indian writing on love* that the function of erotic literature is not vicarious stimulation but reassurance:

The gain which modern English readers are likely to get from Indian erotic literature is precisely of this kind . . . what is profitable to them—and us—in spite of the distance of time and culture which separates us from Sanskrit literature, is the contrast of attitudes—acceptance and pleasure where we have for generations been taught to look for danger and guilt.

Science and anarchism

What links Comfort's attitude to war resistance and his attitude to sexual freedom is the notion of personal and social responsibility. This, and his confidence in scientific method are at the root of his anarchism, which is based on a few quite simple propositions which have recurred frequently, with variations, in his work over the last twenty years, in his fiction and poetry as much as in his "sociological" writings. The first (as set out in his series of broadcast talks *The Pattern of the Future*) is that Western society has "grown out of and beyond" the Christian tradition, into a new tradition of thought which demands "evidence to support statements, evidence of their conformity to the same tests of reality which we employ in scientific study or in everyday life", the tradition, that is, of scientific humanism. "Humanism does not formulate ten commandments. It formulates one only. Man's survival depends on the outcome of his struggle with a morally neutral universe, and on the maintenance of responsibility between men. Do nothing which increases the difficulties which any individual has to face, and leave nothing undone which diminishes them." Where the orthodox morality has sanction in scientific fact, he once wrote in *FREEDOM*, "I will support it; where it has not, a new morality must be devised which has."

This is the position which leads him to anarchism: "I write as an anarchist, that is, as one who rejects the conception of power in society as a force which is both anti-social and unsound in terms of general biological principle. If I have any metaphysical and ethical rule on which to base my ideas, it is that of human solidarity and mutual aid against a hostile environment . . ."

Comfort claims that his anarchism is founded in his scientific approach, and consequently it is not surprising that those anarchist thinkers of the past whom he cites with approval are Godwin, who was rooted in the eighteenth century spirit of rational enquiry (and who is described in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* as "the first political psychologist") and Kropotkin, who consciously sought to give anarchism a scientific basis (and who Comfort calls "the founder of modern social ecology"). Only Comfort could introduce a long quotation from Malatesta with the words, "Malatesta, *though not a social psychologist*, gives a statement of the anarchist case which is possible more balanced than any since Godwin." (Our italics).

Modern sociology, he says, in *Authority and Delinquency*, "would seem to uphold the libertarian-anarchist rather than the totalitarian-

institutional conception of social change, though it does so with marked reservations". And he continues

If the word 'ANARCHISM', as a name for the attempt to effect changes away from the centralized and institutional towards the social and 'life-oriented' society, carries irrational implications, or suggests a pre-conceived ideology either of man or of society, we may hesitate to accept it. No branch of science can afford to ally itself with revolutionary fantasy, with emotionally determined ideas of human conduct, or with psychopathic attitudes. On the other hand suggested alternatives—'biotechnic civilisation' (Mumford), 'para-primitive society' (G. R. Taylor)—have little advantage beyond their novelty, and acknowledge none of the debts which we owe to pioneers. 'Free society' is equally undesirable for its importation of an emotive and undefinable idea of freedom.

If therefore the intervention of sociology in modern affairs tend to propagate a form of anarchism, it is an anarchism based on observational research, which has little in common with the older revolutionary theory besides its objectives. It rests upon standards of scientific assessment to which the propagandist and actionist elements in nineteenth-century revolutionary thought are highly inimical. It is also experimental and tentative rather than dogmatic and Messianic. As a theory of revolution it recognises the revolutionary process as one to which no further limit can be imposed—revolution of this kind is not a single act of redress or vengeance followed by a golden age, but a continual human activity whose objectives recede as it progresses.

Authority and Delinquency in the Modern State, which is subtitled "A criminological approach to the problem of power" is undoubtedly Comfort's most important contribution to anarchist thought. Its theme is not merely that power corrupts but that corrupt men seek power and he seeks to provide evidence for the view that democratic, as well as totalitarian societies tend to select for executive and legislative office individuals who are potentially or actually anti-social delinquents. Its author describes it as a text-book. If it is, it must be the only text-book to contain the injunction that "Obedience in modern societies is more often a hideous vice than a Christian virtue". This book's insistence on a "sociological" anarchism is reiterated in Comfort's most recent book *Sex in Society*.

The present age is an age, in England, of very depressed revolutionaries. Revolution in its nineteenth-century significance, a mass movement of the people against a particular institutional system and in support of another, seems farther off than ever it has been. The depression of those who wish to revert to this pattern of political reform is fully justified . . . That the application of sociology to life will involve 'revolutionary' action by the mass of individuals, which may prove at least as strenuous and exacting as that envisaged by the older revolutionaries, should not be allowed to obscure the difference between the new and the old . . .

Writers on political revolution tend to distinguish between two types of attitude, the revolutionary and the reformist, by which they mean the approach to a problem based upon the acceptance of radical change, and the approach based on the gradual pushing and pulling of existing institutions into the desired form. A rather similar division exists in constructive sociology. In educating the society in which we live, we have to distinguish between objectives and palliatives. I have said that an approach to sexual adequacy is only one facet of the approach to social adequacy, and that social change of the type which recent work appears to favour must involve positive solutions of the problem of power in society. This is both a

political and a sociological objective, and we are fully justified in reasserting that attempts to secure such reform through the existing mechanisms of government are likely to be a waste of time, and to incur the same failure as that of the ideals of the French and the Russian revolutionaries. The only intelligible basis for social change lies in the modification of individual attitudes and the encouragement of resistance to irrational authorities.

Anarchists as educators

But where do we as anarchists fit into all this? What does he recommend us to do? Comfort's answer appears in the passage from his anarchist summer school lecture which Ian Stuart quoted in his article *Anarchism and Crime* in ANARCHY 32, "Personally I would like to see more of us, those who can, take training in social sciences or engaging in research in this field. I do not want to turn anarchism into a sociological Fabian Society, from which non-scientists are excluded. I want to see something done which has not been done before—a concerted, unbiassed and properly documented attempt to distribute accurate teaching of the results of modern child psychiatry, social psychology and political psychology to the general public on the same scale as we have in the past tried to disseminate revolutionary propaganda."

Some anarchists took this advice seriously—a by-product of the result can be seen in some of the authoritative material which has been published in this journal, but in fact he is asking the anarchists to be what they have always been: educators as well as agitators. To take a phrase of Comfort's out of context, "Godwin tried to do precisely this in *Caleb Williams* and *St. Leon*. If he did not make anarchism popular at least he inspired Shelley." Kropotkin's most penetrating observations on crime and punishment, using the latest material available from the emerging sciences of criminology and psychology, were made to an audience of working-men in Paris. It was the role of the anarchist element among the Russian *narodniks* of the last century, of the *obreros conscientes* of Spanish rural anarchism reading to their illiterate fellow-villagers, or the anarchist 'penny teacher' remembered by Arturo Barea in Madrid, or the Sicilian anarchist prisoner mentioned by Dolci who opened the eyes of his fellows to the printed word, or the wandering anarchists of Latin America bridging the gulf between the European and mestizo population and the Indios with their message: "build a school and start a union". In our own society our task is more sophisticated, but just as urgent. In "educating the society in which we live", we may very well find that since we are few and they are many, we have to educate the educators. Certainly if every teacher, social worker or psychiatrist who reads *Authority and Delinquency* and *Sex in Society* were to apply these two books' implications in daily practice, a revolutionary social change would be set in motion.

Comfort poses other questions for the anarchist, on his relationship with a non-anarchist society. Writing in FREEDOM (9/12/50) he observes that

The political dissident in a society has a positive relationship to that society, as we have in our own, but it is a resented and therefore a limited

one. Perhaps the best example of a minority setting out to change a culture in which it has to live, without accepting a limited relationship of this kind, has been the Quaker movement. Social psychiatry of the type which I think is our obligation depends increasingly upon a group relationship with other individuals who do not share our convictions, but who know themselves to be accepted as individuals, and anarchism as an individualistic view of society, is today the only non-religious ideology capable of doing this.

But what of a society in which anarchist ideas have spread sufficiently to be diluted by a fringe of semi-anarchism? Years ago, Comfort posed this situation in these terms:

English history has shown a consistent tendency, which cannot be ignored, to disappoint the apocalyptic prophesies which political theorists make. It is conceivable that in any conflict English resistance may be sufficient to arrest the progress into irresponsibility, or that factors arising to postpone the collapse of barbarism may give time for libertarian and anarchist ideas to assert themselves in a field which they expressly repudiate—the field of political power. Anarchists stand apart from parliamentary activity because they cannot logically take part in a process which depends upon power, and which they variously regard as self-vitiated or fraudulent or both. But extreme purism of this kind, while it may be ideologically necessary, is apt to be as roughly handled by the historical event as was the theory of inevitable socialism. There has been an almost unique tendency in English history for institutions to be absorbed and perpetuated in their own reform, and in defiance of all ideological logic, a process which enabled an unconstitutional monarchy to be absorbed in its own destruction and finally retained as nominal guardian of the very rights it had formerly attacked. Just as a revolution must look to the probability of history for its opportunity, it must inevitably look to the traditional community-pattern and pattern of social behaviour in the society which it proposes to reform. We cannot ignore this process of retaining institutions as the guardians and opponents of themselves, and while anarchists may abstain from parliamentary activity they cannot prevent the misunderstanding and partial adoption of their ideology by those who do not wholly reject power. However improbable, therefore, a compromise between power and decentralisation may appear, it is not historically impossible, least of all in England.

Obviously, if we ever do succeed in transforming anarchism from a minority sect into a social force we are going to be faced with this kind of problem, not because of our willingness to participate in political pressure groups like the campaign for the abolition of capital punishment, or the Abortion Law Reform Association, nor because we want to use the political and governmental machine as a short cut like the office-holders of the CNT in Spain in 1936, but because any idea or system of ideas becomes a little muddied and fragmented and imperfectly comprehended the wider it is held. We have to remember that, as Malatesta put it, we are in any case only one of the forces acting in society. If we want a touchstone for our own conduct and attitudes we could not do better than to adopt the principle suggested by Comfort in his observations on *The Right Thing To Do*:

Human beings are social as long as they recognise one another as human beings. At the personal level we have certain common ground for our social actions. Once that relationship breaks down in any society, and particularly if we begin to treat institutions and conceptions as if they were human individuals, to individualize a group to which we belong, and transfer our responsibility for our neighbour to it, then our social sense shows increasing

signs of breakdown, and we are left with a moral deficiency covering our whole public conduct, however well we may behave in our home or our street. And when I have to decide how far I can accept the directions and the laws of a centralized state as guides to my conduct, I have to remember that a centralised state is one of these stuffed substitutes for responsibility. Power in society is a product, not of responsibility crystallized, but of group aggression . . . The greater the concentration of authority, the greater the strain on those who accept it, the greater the likelihood that psychopaths will come to the top, and that those who do come to the top will be psychopathic.

Our moral sense only functions reliably in the type of relationship which exists between individuals: if I allow myself to swallow my conscience in deference to a graven image, however laudable, or if I allow myself to exercise a position of coercive power, my social sense will fail me exactly as it has failed every generation of rulers, whatever their standards and whatever their intentions.

Let them turn to the bottle
the Yogi and the rope,
some of them go to Uncle Joe,
some of them to the Pope—

one by one grown prosperous
of excellent intent
they set their names on the payroll
of God and Government;

one is turned evangelist,
another is turned Knight:
let them go wherever they wish—
we will stay and fight.

I may come to the light at last
as others have come there;
I think they will not put my bones
in Moscow's Red Square:

I can turn both coat and mind
as well as any man—
I think they will not put my head
towards the Vatican.

All fierce beasts grow corpulent,
mature and come to hand.
Lions lie down with sheepskin wolves—
we will see them damned.

ALEX COMFORT: "Maturity" from *Haste to the Wedding*
(Eyre & Spottiswoode 1962)

Sex, Kicks and Comfort

CHARLES RADCLIFFE

"HOW DARE YOU READ THAT FILTHY BOOK IN PUBLIC!" I am unaccustomed to unwarranted acts of verbal aggression on London buses but I rather think the middle-aged, flower-pot hatted woman who said this to me, about Dr. Comfort's book, is typical of the vast mass of individuals for whom any public acknowledgment of even the existence of sex is filthy. Madam, it may be filthy but it is certainly here to stay.

Alex Comfort's views on sex provoke somewhat explosive reactions. his recent widely-reported, BBC appearance which doubtless appeared to most anarchists as a sane and moderate viewpoint, occasioned another public roar of indignation from the outraged guardians of the anti-life idea.

His latest book* is similarly moderate in tone. It will doubtless cause as much offence to those who value 'real' sexual freedom, as it will to the Beaverbrook newspapers and the Moral Re-Armament movement. It will be a pity, however, if anarchists whose views are 'more libertarian' than Comfort's do not read this book, for it contains a clear, undogmatic argument for an understanding and less guilty enjoyment of "the healthiest and most important human sport". It also contains a serious, considered, witty and penetrating analysis of the social and psychological pressures against sex, its discussion and enjoyment.

Sex in Society is not really a new book: it is a revised, clarified and lengthened version of *Sexual Behaviour in Society*, which was first published in 1950 (which in turn grew out of his 1948 Freedom Press volume *Barbarism & Sexual Freedom*). Comfort clearly states its basis: "The view put forward here is based on the form of rationalism and humanism which seems to the author closest to the general spirit of experimental science: that no form of sexual behaviour can be regarded as unacceptable, sinful, or deserving of censure unless it has demonstrable ill effects in the individual who practises it, or on others."

This refreshing honesty sets the tone for the rest of the book. Comfort starts by examining the purposes of sexual sociology and by demolishing some of the anti-life, anti-sex myths which make it almost impossible to discuss the real issues seriously and calmly.

He finds a steady direction in the medical literature of sex, part of a tradition whose concern was "far less to ascertain facts than to

**Sex in Society*, by Alex Comfort (Duckworth, 21s.).

uphold existing belief by exhortations and threats . . . Every deviant form of sexual behaviour . . . was not only morally wrong, but, in case that failed to check it, ruinously unhealthy as well". This was the echo of the anti-life tone of the 'overt culture'. It led to terror theories surrounding masturbation (though, as Comfort says, any physician who had taken the trouble to check among his colleagues could have discovered that most of them had masturbated and the hideous ill effects were wholly imaginary) and even heterosexual intercourse, "a dangerous business which was grudgingly admitted provided there was not too much of it—the risk of excess being always at hand to prevent over enthusiastic enjoyment".

Much of this will be familiar to anarchists, as well the temper of the whole book and I do not therefore propose to give a synopsis of Comfort's very clear ideas. What I want to do is to give some indication of his views on a number of subjects and to try in this way to convey the spirit of this extremely valuable book.

Sex in Society is both an assertion of the need for individual judgment and freedom, and an attempt to clear the deadwood of sexual taboos which are designed to prevent anything so un-English as sexual enjoyment and also to cause a great deal of unnecessary guilt, unhappiness and confusion. The main effect of giving the public scientific information, and of attempting, through a co-operative endeavour between education and psychiatry, to end the long-standing association of sex and guilt, is "likely to be a gain in candour and realism and the good done by letting in so much fresh air is likely to outweigh the possibility that a few may catch cold".

But there are powerful traditional forces ranged against what one BBC producer has called the 'New Morality' (of which Dr. Comfort is the leading apostle), not least of all in the legal field. An isolated sex offence may well have been committed as a simple experiment but, as Comfort points out, to say so in court will probably ensure "a spiteful sentence and a judicial homily on corruption. Judges do not experiment in this field—only in the vicarious satisfactions peculiar to punishment and moralism". It is, on the evidence, far more likely that sexual behaviour will reform the law, than that the law will reform sexual behaviour.

Comfort deals only briefly with the association between sexual guilt and the desire for unlimited authority. He has dealt with the subject at length and in great detail in *Authority and Delinquency in the Modern State** but the short piece in *Sex in Society* indicates that the authorities are likely to remain the most vocal opponents of any rational re-shaping of our sexual behaviour patterns.

That this is likely to be the case is further shown by Comfort's brief but devastating comments on atrocity propaganda. This indicates very clearly just how much the power structure has to lose through rational sexual education of the public. The reaction to an atrocity

*Routledge and Kegan Paul (1950).

story is one of sexual excitement, of a kind which individuals will rarely admit to themselves and they react by conscious indignation against the alleged perpetrator of the atrocity.

Equally official censorship favours sexual violence and hatred rather than sexual tenderness and love. "Love is corrupting and dangerous—violence is cathartic and wholesome, besides being politically useful". The real truth about pornography is that it disturbs. "Murder does not disturb the would-be censors. Normal coition does. This is the real lesson of the campaign against Lady Chatterley. If she had been disembowelled under erotic but less explicit circumstances, that would not have been liable to corrupt us, whereas coition might". We have been effectively cut off from any artistic tradition celebrating the physical experience of sexuality. "The depictions of coition in Hindu temples . . . idealise genital pleasure as we have idealised death and barrenness. A Hindu may have difficulty in understanding art in which mother and child are the conventional symbol of virginity, but he will be familiar with ascetism—European taste, however, has banished genital sexuality altogether, and is now experiencing the need to re-grow a self-amputated limb."

Again, venereal disease is used as a weapon in the 'defensive war' against rationalism, for with the advent in Europe of syphilis the conception of the sinfulness of sexuality received "a physical and inescapable sanction. Syphilis, like the code of ecclesiastical morals was no respecter of persons". But the cure cannot be an institutional one, although this is as popular with politicians as it is predictably unsuccessful, but a radical reform of patterns of living, as predictably successful as it is unpopular with politicians.

The odds are against rationalism and the picture is a gloomy one—most anarchist ones are—but Comfort is reasonably hopeful. Furthermore the picture is based, not on vague threats of eternal damnation or warnings of proximate occasions of grave sin, but on the scientific evidence, as it appears to Comfort and interpreted in the light of his admitted prejudices.

What are the solutions? Comfort finds the monogamous marriage pattern most likely to be successful and the one which appears most suitable to the bringing up of children, providing them with emotional and social stability and security. He finds little evidence for believing that children would benefit from communistic upbringing in a complex modern society, even if it were to be 'free'. However the pattern must be flexible, providing for individual needs. There must be no coercive measures, such as the tightening-up of divorce laws, because "in a society that itself creates, by its attitudes and climate, the conditions of failure in marriage, they are as ineffective in bringing about such changes as punishment of the barometer is in modifying the weather". The pattern should not be rigid because "a good many marriages and a good many personalities require two partners. To complain, in such cases, of immorality or unfaithfulness, is simply to create difficulties where none might have existed. The clue to a better adjusted

sexual code is contained in the now-famous Comfort 'commandments', which form the basis of the 'New Morality': "Thou shalt not exploit another person's feelings and wantonly expose them to an experience of rejection" and "Thou shalt not, under any circumstances, negligently risk producing an unwanted child".

Comfort thinks we may come to consider that "chastity is no more a virtue than malnutrition" yet among many contemporary adolescents this is already an accepted ethic. In these circumstances it is an elaborate and cruel farce to deprive the younger generation of elementary knowledge of sexual hygiene and contraceptive technique. When such adolescents continue to have sexual intercourse, as they will, the dangers arising from inadequate or distorted knowledge are just those dangers which the responsible adult should be attempting to prevent. It is as ridiculous to attempt to ban sex as it is cruelly irresponsible to turn a blind eye.

What place has political action in altering these failings? In terms of the *traditional* politics, little or none, Comfort thinks. But while sociology supersedes politics, in the same way as epidemiology supersedes magic, it does not supersede individual or group action in defence, or furtherance, of life-centred values—just those values which *traditional* politics totally or partially ignores. And the society in which he visualises sexual and mental health becoming an overall reality will be one based on agriculture and technology, a 'paraprimitive' society, decentralised and demechanised yet making full use of technology to serve its own ends, and based on groups and communities acting together, voluntarily, for specific or unspecific ends, as occasion demands.

However the old-style methods for attaining this end are hopelessly outdated. Revolution, in the sense of mass movement against one institution in favour of another, seems farther off than ever. Comfort comments, somewhat acidly but equally aptly, that "the depression of those who wish to revert to this pattern of political reform is fully justified. So is the depression of those surviving enthusiasts who hope to abolish cancer by means of amulets, or malaria by purifying the air". This is not to rule out 'revolutionary' action—the application by any number of people of progressive sociology to life will involve such action—but to emphasise that the new revolution is very different from the old. Comfort recommends G. R. Taylor's *Conditions of Happiness* (Bodley Head) (1949) as the best exposition of the 'new revolution' but adds that, broadly speaking, the guesses of anarchists like Godwin, Bakunin and Kropotkin have been confirmed by sociology.

The tenets of the 'New Morality' can be spread through an effect on 'the intellectual climate', through institutions (though in practice these tend to be inimical to progressive-ism) and through psychiatric work. Affecting the intellectual climate is change at the drawing board level and psychiatric work a change at the repair shop level but work through institutions is at best an uneasy amalgam of both and at worst a positive menace to rational ideas. Comfort makes it all sound rather easier than I think it is. The undesirable social pattern of the present

militates against the desirable social pattern of the future. "At the crudest level, one cannot rear children 'in a stable home environment' if one is going to be put in the street by the landlord as soon as pregnancy becomes evident; one cannot develop happy marital relationships if one is to be conscripted and sent abroad, or unemployed and anxious or compelled to live at close quarters with in-laws for lack of a house. At the subtler level one cannot easily be mature and secure in a commercially competitive society where nobody knows their neighbour, and where nuclear war is round the corner. Nor can one expect to be happy, permissive and adaptable if one has been reared by parents who laboured under these social handicaps."

The answer to these problems amounts in effect to sexual direct action and the encouragement of resistance to irrational authorities, resistance based on the modification of individual, and ultimately social, attitudes. This, again, is not as easy as it sounds. The enemies of sexual freedom are ranged heavily against the 'New Morality'; they range from governments to senseless psychiatrists, from the middle aged woman on the bus to clergymen and doctors, many of whom "seem to possess more than their proper share of innocence . . . the last quality . . . of value in giving advice to the sexually perplexed. Its possessors are very often as wise as doves and as harmless as serpents".

Comfort also believes that a literature of sexual enjoyment, written at the level of books on ballroom dancing, would be useful in providing pleasure and heightening the play element in our sexual relationships. There are very few European works in this *genre*, although marriage manuals, of one drivelling sort or another, make up in quantity what is lacking in quality.

Comfort concludes his book optimistically. He thinks the force of progressive sociology will be felt and in the liberation of family and sexual relationships he sees the possibility of a victorious conclusion of the struggle against unreason, power and death, the struggle with which he has been concerned for many years. He argues his case as forcibly and eloquently as ever but I cannot help wondering if it is as easy as he thinks. I find his optimism encouraging but unrealistic. I have a horrible feeling that the sociological revolution will, after all, have one big thing in common with the other revolutions and that it will be bought out, or die or be killed. I hope I'm wrong because I know that sociology is a better, more humane, more relevant ally, and one *more* likely to be successful, than the barricade compulsion which directs so many people. But has truth very much relevance when the force of tradition opposes it?

However, I have written at length on this book because I believe it to be an important, interesting and often brilliant piece of scientific writing, one which is as witty as it is serious, as informed as it is informative, and as readable as it is valuable. I commend it to every serious anarchist.

Alex Comfort's art and scope

HAROLD DRASDO

ALEX COMFORT'S FIRST BOOK, *The Silver River*, was in print before he left school. It is a record of ten weeks at sea during the summer of 1936. Comfort sailed with his father on a Dutch tramp to Buenos Aires, calling at Madeira; they returned on a Greek boat *via* Dakar. His narrative consists of impressions of place and seascape, of notes on life and manners, of botanical and zoological observations. The young author writes already with an impressive assurance. He is an idealist with an engaging sense of humour; more remarkably, he is a precise observer and a very well-informed student of natural history. There is a feeling of receptiveness, of an insatiable curiosity, in his book and yet, from this admirable beginning, no-one could have deduced much about the novels which were to follow.

The bulk of Comfort's fictional work was written during the forties. His views on the task of the writer appear in *Art and Social Responsibility* but they are repeated or particularised in *The Novel and Our Time* which was published in 1948 and against which his work of this period may best be examined. He begins by reaffirming his attitude to art:

My own position is that of romanticism, which I have discussed elsewhere and tried to define in such a way that realism as a novelistic quality is not made an antithetic quality to it. For me, romanticism implies a belief that humanity, by virtue of the development of autonomous mind, is in a constant state of conflict with the external universe; a conflict, in face of the human instinct for survival, with death, and with those members of the human race who have lost their nerve and sided with death against man: the advocates of power. The main literary and ethical conclusions of this view are that human standards, beauty, justice, and so on, exist only so long as we assert them, but are none the less valid for that; and the main ethical value is a sense of biological human responsibility, against death and against power.

He advances the view that the novel is the most socially useful art form of Western culture. Because of the fragmentation of modern civilisation; because the only fixed points now are our scientific achievement and our art; because the novel is observational and so may lay claim to the scientific method; because it addresses the reader in privacy and can still be patronised when other art forms are beginning to succumb to totalitarian pressures . . . for these reasons it has great potentialities as a social force provided that there are sufficient novelists of the right stamp. And if the novel disappears it will be to be replaced by "the unanimous literature of tyranny or the spontaneous literature of a free society".

He goes on to consider some of the practical problems posed by the novel, suggesting that the cinema may have had a liberating influence on modes of narration and discussing the ways in which the reader may identify with central figures. He deals with realism at length: it is "the method which appeals most directly in a period when events are apocalyptic in character and scale. It would be difficult to invent more perfect or moving tragic patterns than those which actually exist". The realist must observe carefully and must train himself to assimilate any sort of technical knowledge in order to obtain a definitive picture of the sorts of lives his characters must lead. In addition to this Comfort's own approach, so as to maintain coherence, is to trust to his normality and to use ordinary people—he will concentrate on the onlooker, rather than the firing-squad or the condemned man, who may be disorientated by the occasion: "someone is there at every big crime and every big swindle, and because he is a man you know roughly what he is thinking and how he feels. Instead of your own armour of prejudice and rationalisation, you can add his . . ."

The sex-and-violence discussion inaugurated in *Art and Social Responsibility* in relation to the sexual character of atrocity propaganda is extended in *The Novel and Our Time*. The ways in which men react to violence are examined. Responsible writers, he says, are in a difficult position: "the power of handling violent events is essential if one is going to write about modern Europe at all." But writers run the risk of making the situation worse by directing yet more attention to it—"unless they possess great power of exposition and an unshakeable integrity in the perpetual drumming-in of the ethic of responsibility."

This ethic of responsibility, the principle of the New Romantic, is again presented: "I mean the refusal to abandon the basic conception of humanness for any extraneous object whatsoever—victory, democracy, the nation, the party, the civil list, or the libraries." The responsible writer is perforce an anarchist. He is opposed by the collaborator, the writer who cannot recognise the meaning of the times or who is afraid to stand alone. Between romanticism and collaboration there are two escapes: the pure form escape (*Finnegan's Wake*, various types of abstract art, and so on); and the escape into fantasy or surrealism, when it is used to evade the need to make explicit comment. And so Comfort must reserve his admiration for—"Zweig's *Grischa*, Silone, Mann, Giono, some Koestler, the earlier Malraux." The tests of the reader should be: "Is this writer capable of recognising a human being? Is he able to reject the art of diverse weights, for which an act identical in every respect is a heroic but regrettable necessity when done by Our Side and a contemptible atrocity when done by Their Side? Is his judgment of human decisions level or weighted; does he know filth from food, whatever the wrapper?"

The first of the novels, *No Such Liberty*, appeared in 1941 when Comfort was 21. Its efficiency is striking. The first half of the book is a rather inflammatory description of the atmosphere in Cologne just before the war. It culminates in the first pogrom. The narrator is a young German doctor whose wife has involved herself with Jewish

friends. They effect a hairsbreadth escape and are seriously ill on arrival at London but they are received with sympathy and are given assistance in the island of the free. Up to this point the novel must have been perfectly acceptable at the time of its publication. A casual reader would pass by some hints of other evidence and would be ready to put it on the shelf beside *I, James Blunt*.

At this point, however, war is declared and Dr. Breitz must go before the Aliens' Tribunal; and now he declares for pacifism on Christian grounds. This, he tells the judge, involves the belief that love can overcome evil by suffering—if necessary, to the point of death. When the judge enquires why he didn't stay to test this theory he can't provide an answer and so he is registered as a Class B Alien. Shortly he is interned and the remainder of the novel develops into a forceful exposure of internment conditions in Britain at the beginning of the war. The doctor is released after some influence has been applied only to find that his wife has also been taken. Ultimately she is traced but the conditions at her camp have led to the death of her baby. The story ends on a note of calm but of uncertainty with the couple awaiting permission to sail to still-neutral America. They are almost broken by their experiences and, with hindsight, we can't help wondering what lies ahead of them. The novel, in essence, is a study of the two faces of mass hysteria.

The Almond Tree, which followed, goes back to the first World War. Pyotr Tomaszewski lives in his vineyard on the Moselle with his grandchildren: Theresa, Hilde, Yelisaveta and Fyodor—another, Serge, has already escaped and is a philosopher at Bonn. Pyotr's distaste for his German neighbours holds them in isolation but in 1911 his death releases and disperses the family. Theresa, already married, stays on the estate with her husband. Hilde, who knows what she wants, leaves immediately; we never learn whether she gets it. Yelisaveta and the young Fyodor go to Paris where the girl is to be companion to the wife of a chance acquaintance and the boy is to go to school. Eventually he runs away from this school (very much like the one in *Zero de Conduite*, down to the dwarfish, bearded magician-headmaster) and arrives back at the house at a critical moment: Madam Roux, a lesbian, is assaulting his sister. Fyodor lives in a world divided between concrete unhappiness and elaborate fantasy and he is only sustained by his love for Yelisaveta. He cannot confront this discovery and he runs out into the night. A kindly old Spaniard looks after him and takes him to sea; he dies of the plague in South America six years later. Yelisaveta, after escaping Madame Roux, lives happily for two years with her lover but has to take work in a convent when he goes into the army and to his death. Serge, on the opposite side, is in ill-fated Huygebeek Wood when an English assault begins. In panic he runs away in the confusion, is severely wounded, and ironically finds himself decorated for heroism. So, back at Müden after the war has rolled away, the survivors gather: Serge, a cripple who sits beneath his grandfather's almond tree; and Theresa and Yelisaveta, older and discontented.

This abrupt summary must give an impression of extravagance which is not felt on reading the novel. Each episode firmly exclude the feeling of the previous section—some of them might be read separately as powerful short stories. The atmosphere of the house in Paris is steadily built up to a quite terrifying crisis. The balance in Fyodor's voyage between a naturalistic description of the external world and the commencing resolution and dissipation of the boy's fantasy-world conjures up a mood like that of *A High Wind in Jamaica*. In the novel as a whole there is an impression of innocence besieged; with, in the background, a claustrophobic sense of the constraints of institutions—the school, the convent, even the patriarchal family.

The Power House, which appeared 1944, is complex and ambitious and from several points of view looks like the centre-piece of Comfort's work. It offers a panoramic view of the collapse of France and the early occupation through the experiences of its two principal characters and a large number of lesser figures. Fougueux is a weaving-mill engineer in a Channel port; he is reluctantly forced to seek concealment in the army with a close friend whose affair has ended in the girl's death. The young Lieutenant Vernier is posted to their unit and presently the battery is moved up to the front. Fougueux and Vernier are thrown together in the chaotic retreat and manage to reach Paris, which is already occupied, in safety. They work in the city for a while but become involved with the Resistance and their first action ends as a disastrous misadventure. They are obliged to enlist as volunteer labourers and find themselves back at Fougueux' mill where they narrowly escape the consequences of an abortive insurrection.

This action takes place against a background of extraordinarily precise description thick with unforgettable minor figures—Uncle Pécquard, Arsule, Mélusine, Valtin's wife. The weight of detail helps to obscure a multiplicity of coincidences in the plot; these coincidences arranged, perhaps, to put into personal terms the repercussions of mis-carried plans and to show the characters in a variety of situations without extending the novel intolerably.

In intention the novel is an assessment of the condition of Europe at that time and an examination of various forms of resistance. A defined position, shared by several of the men, is gradually made clear. The little doctor has decided that politics is irrelevant: the real struggle is against Society. "The State is a lunatic in these days," says Valtin. ". . . Society in this age is just a vast criminal conspiracy by the majority of the lunatics against the minority of the sane." And Vernier is steadily drawn to this view. But the Christian approach of Dr. Breitz in *No Such Liberty* seems to have been abandoned now. The men in *The Power House* either hit back or evade. There is no implication, too, that retaliation by violence is dangerously or stupidly inaccurate: Loubain's murder of the German soldier leads to the execution of Valtin; Vernier's assistance to the saboteurs contributes to the death of Germaine. Evasion, it is true, is not always successful. We do not learn what happens to the young man whose birth was not registered by his father; but Valtin, who recognises that "the great

thing about history is to avoid being killed by it" and works his release from the army, dies before a firing squad in spite of all his plans: the best-laid schemes of mice and men. . . .

The penultimate scene is set in a detention camp hospital. Claus, the unknown political prisoner with an untold experience of internment camps, watches another detainee feeding Vernier. Here the writer interpolates that this scene is characteristic of the world at present: that as Breughel painted village weddings to represent his time, so someone must paint this. And Claus sums up in the tone of voice we associate especially with Comfort and in the words, almost of *Art and Social Responsibility*:

We are the enemies of society and we must learn disobedience. Then we shall probably inherit the earth by default when the maniacs have burnt each other to a cinder. We shall be alive, they won't. Europe stinks of murder and groans with partings: your strength or your skill has got to be hidden, or if you display it, your mind—all sources of danger: the lunatics either desire you or fear you, and I do not know which kills you more rapidly. Banners are wagged in your face, guns are thrust in your ribs, grinning flat-footed gangs of citizens, all mouthing the same bilge, push around you and threaten to educate you by cutting your throat. People ask, what is the use of life to a slave? That's bilge—what's the use of freedom to a corpse? You carry your freedom inside your skull and your ribs, and if anyone makes a hole it pours out and wastes with your blood. . . .

Everyone today who has a whole body is liable to find himself in the wings of a stage melodrama. They take him to the stage side. There is a crime being committed—there's the villain, whiskers and all—there's a victim yelling blue murder. "Act up to your principles," whisper the thimblerriggers and prompters. You rush to help—every step you take crushes an innocent person—before you reach your objective you are drenched in blood, and by now that objective has been skilfully moved out or reach. Never mind, they show you another—act up to your principles, save civilisation—once more you set out, a trail of irresponsible ruin behind you. By now you have caused so much bloodshed in your fat-headed enthusiasm that the thimble riggers are pointing you out to other would-be heroes as a villain. Everywhere people are crying out for release—out of reach. Your natural kindness is canalized to swell the massacre. You set out to save the Jews and find yourself butchering civilians in crowded cities. There is only one responsibility—to the individual who lies under your feet. To the weak, your fellows.

Letters From An Outpost is a collection of a dozen short stories. Resistance is again a major theme and the deserter-hero promised in *Art and Social Responsibility* appears now as a central figure. The physical abnormality of children is seen as a source of pleasure, since it ensures exemption from service in future wars. Some of the stories are allegorical. "The Lemmings" shows war as a form of group insanity—though even the lemmings have deserters. Others are simply realistic descriptions of a disaster or of a violent or macabre event. There is a sense of strain, indeed, of beleaguerment, behind several of them: a frustration turning desperate and barely contained so that we are reminded of Kafka's most unpleasant pieces—"Behind Bars" has the horror of "In a Penal Settlement". This is the least enjoyable of Comfort's books: one can't read it without a feeling of depression.

"Every man of my age, reckoning the sober possibilities, must

have realized that he had a small, a diminishing chance of living to be forty," says the hero of *On This Side Nothing*. "At one time one would have been safer for being a Jew, a non-military person, a cosmopolitan, but now the historical roulette had thrown up the number JEW, as it had frequently done before, and I had long known I was for it . . ." Nonetheless, Szmul Weinstock lets pass his chance to escape the Second War and goes to join his friends and relatives in Libya whilst the contending armies are fighting the desert war. He arrives illegally the day before the city's Jews are impounded in the ghetto. Conditions inside deteriorate steadily. A tunnel is pierced under the wall of the Old City but the Germans withdraw as the Allies announce their arrival by levelling the ghetto instead of the main town.

As in *No Such Liberty* the reader imagines that the time of deliverance is near and he is again mistaken. The fascists in the Italian civil police remain in office, adapting themselves as flexibly to the British administration as they did to the German. Wires are re-erected round the Old City and with British propriety the sexes are segregated. The hero is unwillingly involved in the murder of a German who has deserted and found employment with the occupying powers. The body is buried at the end of the tunnel outside the city wall until it is discovered and contested, like Polynices, by the dogs. Weinstock is seized but escapes by his route of entry to find the Italian mayor and a British lieutenant are defecting with him. Still rejecting Palestine, he is bound now for America perhaps. His philosophy of refusal and exile only asks one question: does a man move of his own volition or does he simply obey?

A Giant's Strength (1952) focusses on a scientist's struggle to escape the world's War Departments. Dr. Hedler, a German mathematician who had worked reluctantly for the Nazis, crosses into East Germany when the Americans try to claim him but finds that his intelligence is now to be conscripted in the Russian cause. He is sent to work at the University of Tashkent. He plans to escape to a country where his services are not indispensable but the plan misfires and he finds himself in precarious circumstances in the middle of the Turkestan desert. He is not quite alone for, by chance, two other parties are in the neighbourhood: a scientific expedition from his own university and some itinerant bandits who have just moved across the Afghan frontier. It would be a pity to say more about the development of a most exciting story. The attitudes of intelligent Soviet academicians and officials are represented with what appears to be a scrupulous honesty. And there is a particularly interesting, long dialogue in the Marx-Bakunin tradition, for anarchism is represented not only by Dr. Hedler but also by an old Russian who once sat at the feet of Kropotkin himself.

Reverting, now, to Comfort's views on writing, it will not be necessary to labour the ways in which the novels are used as vehicles for his themes. Obviously, tried by his intentions he is impeccable. He looks the twentieth century in the face, presents his material with the utmost authenticity, and makes his message abundantly clear. His books teach the uniqueness of the individual and they teach where

men's loyalties lie. They are, in fact, interesting in construction and, without exception, they are exciting as stories. Their inhabitants represent a range of class and nationality which few contemporary British novelists can match. Yet these characters are neither national stereotypes nor uprooted cosmopolitans; they are steeped in their own cultures and if they become international or extranational in outlook it is when reason or experience has forced it. They move, too, before a backcloth detailed by minute observation in the city and by the understanding of the biologist in the natural world. They struggle with their personal problems: Uncle Pécquard copes in stoical secrecy with whatever sort of tumour is steadily blinding him; Fougueux is plagued by his impotence and Arsule dies through her nymphomania; Fyodor folds his private horrors into his imagination. It is a broad canvas and it is astonishing that these throngs of Europeans should have been created by a very young English writer.

It does not seem profitable to attempt to discuss *The Novel And Our Time* in any wider context here. It is true that some readers might consider that it states an unnecessarily dogmatic approach. They might say that minds are affected in multifarious ways and that the writer ought to place more confidence in the intelligence and discrimination of the reader. But we should remember that Comfort's own novels are not intended exclusively for that audience which already reads with more or less discrimination. On the other hand, it is noticeable that apart from asking for "a sense of dramatic construction" there is little to suggest that quite unreadable novels might not be written to his formula. Even if we take a good contemporary novelist, Alan Sillitoe, whose books embody Comfort's principles almost perfectly—how many entirely sympathetic readers take him as our most valuable young writer, even from a social point of view? In fact, persuasive attacks on closely similar positions predated Comfort's book: Richards on Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* twenty-four years earlier, for instance. A defence against any such criticism today might very well be based on the final standards of urgency and survival. But, in any case, it is fifteen years since *The Novel And Our Time* was published; there was a gap of almost ten years between *A Giant's Strength* and the latest novel; and with this novel, *Come Out To Play*, and a new collection of essays, *Darwin and The Naked Lady*, it is apparent that we have new emphases and a change of tactics.

Come Out To Play came out in 1961. It is Comfort's first venture into comedy. A biologist who is a specialist on sexual matters forms a liaison with a beautiful and mysterious stranger whom he encounters on a coach tour. In Paris, without money or work, they set up a school for those who would improve their coital performance; it is so successful that its NATO clients find more to entertain them than the hotbeds of the cold war—even the Russians are enrolling by the end. A research chemist isolates a group of substances with disconcerting properties: one perfume makes men attack each other and is tested practically in the United Nations Assembly (anarchists have been up to this before in Geoffrey Household's *The High Place*); aphrodisiacs of irresistible

power are created and are given field trial at a Buckingham Palace garden party. Politicians, pressmen, clergy and nobility are outwitted or improved by superior intelligence, common decency, and the resources of the scientist and scholar.

Humour is a notoriously erratic weapon but most readers without insuperable political sexual barriers ought to enjoy this book thoroughly. In fact, despite the fact that it offended some critics, observations in the library show that copies are never on the shelves for more than a few minutes. It is a racy tale (apart from some cunning technical interludes) and in places it is vastly amusing. Simultaneously, it presents serious and humane ideas about sexual and personal relationships and about modern science and politics.

The theory behind *Come Out To Play*, together with the sources of a good deal of the raw material, is to be found in *Darwin and The Naked Lady*, a collection of seven essays. This is in some ways the richest and most stimulating of Comfort's books. The colossal range of reference, the frequent appeal to psychology and biology, the dense texture of the argument, and a vocabulary sometimes unnecessarily abstruse or international, combine to intimidate the general reader. In mitigation, apart from the absorbing nature of the ideas presented, the characteristic lucidity of style is backed by a zest which keeps flashing into the most sparking asides; and there is a unique fund of fascinating minutiae from many provinces of science and art. We see, too, that Comfort is less prone now to argue about what, for instance, Romanticism is—he looks at things rather than names in this book.

One chapter, "The Rape of Andromeda", has already been printed in ANARCHY (with some variations in text) and the rationale of *Come Out To Play* may be seen in the conclusion of this essay. After considering the novelist's problems he decides—

One alternative is to write popular fiction. I think it is safe to say that there is no functioning art-form, however poor its present execution, which cannot be exploited if one has enough ingenuity . . . at least the requirements are not more stringent than those stylisations which myth and ceremony imposed on Greek, or Elizabethan taste and politics on Tudor, drama . . . I would rather write like Longus than like Mr. Fleming, but if editors, readers, or censors compel me to write like Mr. Fleming in order to be heard—or for that matter like the conformist colleagues of Pasternak—I would make a fair offer to turn any imposed restrictions into horrid arms against their originators.

Come Out To Play cannot properly be called popular fiction—the vocabulary is too wide to begin with—but it is a move in that direction: from the cover onwards it tries to seduce the casual reader. (And if anyone feels sceptical about what can be done through the popular arts he should try to get hold of an American record of Judy Collins singing a ballad about the Evans-Christie case.)

One of the major themes of *Darwin and The Naked Lady* might be called sex-or-violence: men in love, Comfort says, tend to resist such civic privileges as conscription. He discusses Eastern erotic art at length and hopes that if the trend in the West towards more permissive and "more polymorphous" sexual behaviour continues it may tend to

discharge our preoccupation with violence. This might have the incidental effect of gradually displacing the stereotyped sex-and-violence material and might therefore benefit the general taste; whilst talented artists who were to commit themselves to the erotic function of art might find a release from the minority audience—the "Third Programme ghetto".

The reader who was upset by the prescriptions of *The Novel And Our Time* might be equally disturbed by *Darwin and the Naked Lady*, though for different reasons. The horizons of the scientific humanist place art in a wider and colder landscape than many may care to think about: "To acquire Freud's toughness, one must be able to see human pre-occupations, art among them, as interesting derivatives of primate behaviour, without ever losing confidence in their value . . ." And Comfort is not afraid to speculate about a time when modern English may have become so archaic as to be unintelligible: a disquieting vision to some lovers of literature. There is that breadth behind the whole of the book. Art is to be considered alongside erotic experience—"its older twin"; even its senior partner!—as a form of play and also as a stiffener of resistance. Through our legitimate fantasies we must oppose and undermine the pathological fantasy-makers—the world's rulers. We need an ability to recognise two modes of thinking, or attitudes, in human affairs in general. He defines these loosely, calling them "hard-centred" and "soft-centred". They are, in fact, very much like the extensional and intensional orientations of post-Korzybskian semantics.

The book also contains a provocative essay on criticism and another on the relationship of psychology and art; it includes, too, a rather technical account of how Darwin nearly became Freud as well. But, altogether, *Darwin and The Naked Lady* is inexhaustibly interesting, so brilliant and various that an attempt to encompass it in a few paragraphs must look quite pitiful. It repays whatever amount of attention the reader is prepared to give it and it is a splendid culmination to twenty-five years of writing.

It seems remarkable today that Comfort—the novelist, biologist, social psychologist, essayist of pacifism, philosopher of anarchism—was so frequently referred to, in his early career, as a poet. In fact, although his books of verse are rather slim volumes he must have devoted a good deal of his time during the forties to the writing of poetry. And he was active, too, as an editor or co-editor of selections of new writings: *Lyra*, *New Road*, *Poetry Folios*. It is always foolish to doubt the reversibility of taste but it is not likely that his work of the forties will receive much attention in the future except from those who approach it through his other activities. Even in the anthologies it is being crowded out—symptomatically Hermann Peschmann, selecting from 1930 to 1950, gave him two-and-a-half pages and considerable praise whilst Elizabeth Jennings, covering 1940 to 1960, allows him twelve lines. It appears to us now that during the war years poetry had a more sympathetic or a less demanding audience than it has today. Comfort's work of that time drew attention, perhaps,

for the independence of its message and (trying to allow for the reaction often developed by readers of a pursuing generation) for its affinities with a manner which looks as stylised now as that of any period of literary history. Rather than argue about this poetry at length, however, we ought to present some of it. Here are two short extracts intended to represent its characteristic tones. The first is one of the eight sections of "Aeschines in Samos" which appeared in *Elegies* (1944). The poem as a whole gives the impression that Gerontion or Phlebas may be in the neighbourhood but its combination of simplicity and technical skill is indisputable and it lodges in the memory easily.

*Argas the banker was a friend of mine
all his white balconies were full of birds*

*and the green Hellespont was his private water
its clouds scaly as fish; until he found*

*a cold unruly wind, sailing off Athos—
a flaw in the mast, and all his rowers sick:*

*as through the following days of calm he floated
pressing his white lips to the water's windows*

*seeing the white birds fall like wingless snow.
It is his head that tumbles like a child*

among the wreaths of froth, an old man playing with girls.

By contrast, the aggressive poetry of "The Song of Lazarus" in *The Signal To Engage* (1946) is, despite a certain incantatory impact, somewhat profuse and vehement. Some of the poems in "The Beginning of a War" (dedicated to the editors of FREEDOM who went to prison for sedition in 1945) are more elegant—"Song for John Hewetson", for instance. But you can see the limits of this poetry by looking at the concluding lines of this group of poems.

*For Freedom and Beauty are not fixed start,
but cut by man only from his own flesh,
but lit by man, only for his sojourn*

*because our shout into the cup of sky...
brings back no echo, brings back no echo ever:
because man's kind lives at his stature's length*

*because the stars have for us no earnest of winning
because there is no resurrection
because all things are against us, we are ourselves.*

The shout is made in all seriousness but it sounds a trifle thin in these spaces; the only response that seems appropriate is that of agreement. A recent contributor to the *New Left Review* spoke of "a loose libertarian rhetoric" in a poetic tradition stretching from Whitman to the Beats and the phrase might fairly be applied to some of Comfort's work. Up to this point he seems to be one of those writers like Thoreau whose best poetry is found in their prose—who can't stop playing with words. We see this in *The Power House* and *Art and Social Responsibility* when, for example, "Europe stinks of murder and groans with partings" is varied as "Europe stinks of blood and groans with separation".

With *And All But He Departed* in 1951 there is an indeterminate change half-apparent. He is still appealing for the revolution but the poetry is rather more tense and even uses rhyme:—

*This is the work I do—
I gather your scattered No
your inarticulate salvage
of bloodymindedness
drive your doubts in a row. . . .*

*Give me this for my work.
I ask you to speak, not hear.
I am your audience. Give
the disobedient word
that will open history's ear
like the prince's kiss that woke, and the sleepers stirred.*

These lines are from the longest poem in the book; if we read the shortest, the evasive and interesting "Between", we suddenly have an impression of unused resources. The cloud in this poem may be the one that Fougueux saw in *The Power House* and Comfort saw before the war perhaps but it is used here as something more than a symbol of the inquietude or presentiment; it dominates the poem and gives it cohesion. And despite its generality the language remains simple.

*the third between ourselves
hung in that tideless sky
under a sail as wide
as time or history.*

Some of the earlier characteristics of Comfort's poetry are still in evidence. The second poem in the book, "The Petrified Forest"—again on the disobedience theme—has unity and is confidently developed. But it concludes with a moral: "This was a city where too few refused/ and every yes-man's mouth is filled with sand." This sounds all right on the first reading; later it seems too obvious, so neat and facile that it punctures the mood the poem has built.

As with the novels, there was a hiatus of ten years before the

appearance of the most recent volume of poetry, though the pieces in *Haste To The Wedding* may represent that period uniformly. The most surprising thing about it is that whilst the earlier poetry was frequently admired his latest collection was found disappointing or distasteful in some quarters. It is hard to see why. Certainly it is uneven in the extreme but it includes half a dozen poems which are not only very impressive in themselves but also happen to be couched in an idiom rather like that of the Movement. In fact, if you compare "In The Museum"—surely one of the best poems Comfort has ever written—with Philip Larkin's "Churchgoing", one of the most-discussed poems of the fifties, you will see distinct similarities in tone and method: and Comfort's poem is not damaged by the comparison. "In the Museum" is ambitiously conceived. The poet watches a girl sketching a celebrated relic from the graves of Ur; he reflects upon the barbaric burial practices of the ancient world and wonders whether she will take the message of these exhibits; there is a moment of understanding, the reference to our contemporary situation is seen, and the poem concludes as an assertion of faith—for life and against power. The humanity and intelligence, the undertones of tenderness and humour, are in flawless harmony; the speech-rhythms are conversational but melodic; rhyme, assonance and dissonance are used flexibly with splendid control. It is one of the most remarkable poems of the last decade.

Amongst the other noteworthy pieces there is a moving love poem, "Never Say Never", with Comfort's peculiar blend of seriousness and tenderness. "Dylan Thomas on a gramophone record" is an appropriately resonant remembrance. There are some witty and scholarly celebrations of physical love. And, of course, there are the tilts at Government: in "Maturity" the intransigent states his position with rousing finality, an absolute assurance and a lashing scorn; a proclamation for drum accompaniment.

Comfort, at the age of 43, already has more than thirty books to his name. Typically, his ideas and sentiments are expressed with equal fluency in any form so that one finds the same material presented in a variety of ways; a poem in *Haste To The Wedding* restates a paragraph in *Come Out To Play*; the theme which the latter book uses humourously is argued seriously in *Darwin and The Naked Lady*; we are told to spit at recruiting officers in an essay in *Art and Social Responsibility* and in a poem in *The Signal To Engage*. He has urged his views for over twenty years now, holding a difficult stance with courage and persistence yet without losing a sense of humour. We follow his work with the utmost admiration and pleasure.

The last novel and the last book of verse provoked some scathing criticism which might itself form an interesting subject for enquiry. But ignoring those critics with an impediment in their politics, one suspects that even reputedly liberal-minded reviewers struggle with two submerged assumptions: the tendency to feel that a man with such art and scope can't be right at the top in any of his provinces—it wouldn't be fair on those who dedicate their lives to one endeavour; and the

related myth that really significant artists tend to have some sort of imbalance or to hold reactionary views (Pound, Yeats, Eliot)—besides, if a writer is a talented libertarian how can the critic possibly write a "balanced" review?—he might appear from his unqualified praise to lack acuity!

In fact, we have our own difficulties in writing about Comfort's books. We are too eager to take as proof what he has advanced as evidence and we are persuaded already of what he sets out to prove. But the greatest embarrassment in discussing his work is that he expresses himself so memorably that one is always tempted to use massive quotations. This shows, however, that there is little point in reading about the books when you can get hold of them. We know that those not well acquainted with his writings will draw from them encouragement and insight to enrich their personal lives; we hope, too, that they will find principles to guide their corporate actions.

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Alex Comfort, born 1920, is Nuffield Research Fellow in the biology of senescence, Department of Zoology, University College, London and was formerly Lecturer in Physiology at the London Hospital. In addition to the books and pamphlets listed above and to articles and reviews, he is the author of many papers in scientific journals and symposia.

Of uncollected articles in the anarchist press the most important is "The Social Psychiatry of Communism" (FREEDOM Vol. 11, 24 and 25 (25/11/50 and 9/12/50).

Comfort has also written two unpublished plays, *Gengulphus* and *The Besieged*, and was the author of the polemics contributed by "Obadiah Hornbooke, B.A." to *Tribune* during the war, and the anonymous author of the pamphlet *Civil Defence: What You Should Do Now* (P.P.U. 1950) and of the song *Ban, Ban, Ban the Bloody H-Bomb*.

A disappointed revolutionary

MEMOIRS OF A REVOLUTIONARY, by Victor Serge. Translated by Peter Sedgwick. (Oxford University Press, 42s.).

THESE MEMOIRS TRACE THE LIFE OF VICTOR LVOVICH KIBALCHICH—alias Victor Serge—"revolutionary, novelist and poet", who began his political life as a young socialist in Belgium, became active in individualist anarchist circles in Paris, worked with the syndicalists in Barcelona, joined the Russian Communist Party just after the 1917 Revolution, was expelled for belonging to the Left Opposition, left Russia after a period of exile in Central Asia, and died a revisionist Marxist in Mexico in 1947. Serge writes well and the poet is present in many passages (particularly in his evocations of Paris), but the book left me with a sense of emptiness, a feeling of sadness that so much talent should have been wasted in useless politicking.

The chapter I found the most interesting—and the most disappointing—was the first, the bulk of which is devoted to Serge's anarchist activity before World War I. Repelled by the academic anarchism preached by Jean Grave, Serge became prominent—under the name of Le Rétif—among the individualists inspired by Albert Libertad (1875-1908) and was a close friend of two of the so-called "Bonnot Gang" who, despairing of peaceful propaganda, waged their war against society by means of armed bank robberies. Serge gives only the sketchiest of descriptions of the ideas he held at this time and the merest hints of his activities. Reviewing the first French edition of the "Memoirs", E. Armand remarked that Serge was

" . . . a memoir-writer with a short memory who forgets the rôle he played in regard to 'l'anarchie' (an individualist weekly—S.P.) with which he collaborated from September, 1909 to January, 1912. If he tells us in detail of the private life of Libertad . . . he guards himself from saying that he (Serge) was the man who searched for 'rare sensations', the man of the unbounded 'I deny', the glorifier of the 'Bandits' on the morrow of the rue Ordener affair ('l'anarchie', January 3, 1912), the exalter of 'the unsubmitive, deserters, thieves, because they are not adapted to slavery . . . for us (he wrote) they are the only men who dare to revindicate life.' Kibalchich has forgotten the endless Stirnerian, Nietzschean and Ibsenian litanies that he gladly reeled off. As he forgets rather indelicately that Rirette Maitrejean was his companion and that he did not stop writing to her for a long time . . ." (This last omission is made good by a note by the translator in the English edition—S.P.)

In addition, Serge makes the almost traditional misrepresentation of Stirner and attempts, in usual Marxist style, to link conscious egoism with "the most brutal bourgeois individualism." He also tries to give yet another death sentence to anarchism: "Between the copious theorizing of Peter Kropotkin and Elisée Réclus, and the rage of Albert Libertad, the collapse of anarchism in the bourgeois jungle was now obvious." Unfortunately this rather contradicts what he had written earlier about Libertad being "the heart and soul of a movement of such exceptional dynamism that it is not entirely dead even at this

day (*i.e.* 30 years later.—S.P.). A case of "he's dead, but he won't lie down"?

The remainder of the book retells the now well-known and wearying tale of the fate of enthusiastic idealists who supported the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. Once more the tragic farce of the biters being bit is unfolded and the ghosts of persecutors who fell victims to the machine they helped to create are paraded before us. Serge sees these men as the iron cohort of the Revolution. Actually they appear to be more possessed men who drove themselves and others to pointless destruction. He quotes "certain French individualists" who said to him: "Revolutions are useless. They will not change human nature. Afterwards reaction sets in and everything starts all over again. I've only got my own skin; I'm not marching for wars or for revolutions, thank you." These words he dismisses as "cynical stock phrases", but in view of the evidence he himself provides one is led to the conclusion that "certain French individualists" were not all that wrong.

In spite of his earlier individualist associations and his youthful enthusiasm for Stirner, Nietzsche and Ibsen, Serge seems always to have wanted to serve something greater than himself. He claims that even in his individualist days "other influences were at work on me and there were other values which I neither could nor would abandon: basically, the revolutionary idealism of the Russians." Outlining his conception of the purpose of writing, he states that "Individual existences were of no interest to me—particularly my own—except by virtue of the great ensemble whose particles . . . are all that we ever are." Even when, in his final summing-up, he says that "I view human personality as a supreme value", it is so "only integrated in society and history." And while disclaiming "any yearning for self-effacement" he nonetheless concludes "nothing of us is truly our own unless it be our sincere desire to share in the common life of mankind."

From all of this his abandonment of anarchism for Bolshevism becomes understandable. Russian "revolutionary idealism", like other idealism, was founded on the idea that the individual should give "all for the Cause." If "individual existences" are only of interest insofar as they are particles of the "great ensemble of life", and the "supreme value" of human personality is dependent on being "integral in society and history" and desirous of sharing "the common life of mankind", then individual uniqueness is at a discount and the forces that really matter are abstractions like "society", "history", and "mankind". Enraptured by these spooks Serge left the clear-eyed shown by Libertad and other "cynics" and stuck his head into the Marxist-Leninist noose. He paid the price with his suffering, his despair at the betrayal of his hopes, his agony at the deaths of his friends. So did thousands of others. The pity of it is that the lesson taught by his life will only be learned by those who have tasted at least a few of the bitter ashes which are all that remains of a once searing fire.

SID PARKER.

Alex Comfort

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