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For Émile Henry

Victor Serge

May 23, 1908

I think that acts of brutal revolt strike their target, for they awaken the masses, shake them up with the lashing of a whip, and show the real face of the bourgeoisie, still trembling at the moment the rebel climbs the gallows.

To those who say to you that hatred doesn't engender love, answer that it is living love that often engenders hatred.

First, a few words to the comrades.

Let them not reproach me for glorifying a man, making him into a banner. We want neither tribunes nor martyrs nor prophets. But in order to be strong you have to know yourself, and in order to better support the struggles of today you have to know the joys and fears of past hours. And then it is so good, in this world governed by so many crooked interests, among the base masks that surround us, to once again see the clear profiles of those who were able to be honest in a humanity of brutes.

I will also not write an apology for murder of whatever kind. Murders will be the most painful page in our history. And it is certainly one of society's greatest crimes to have forced us, we who want peace and love, to shed blood.

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<https://www.marxists.org/archive/serge/1908/05/emile-henry.htm>

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On May 21, 1894, Émile Henry, twenty-one and a half years old, died on the gallows at la Roquette Prison in Paris.

The previous April 28, he had been sentenced to death by the jury of the Seine, having admitted his guilt in a series of terrorist attacks: “The explosion on the rue des Bons-Enfants that killed five people and led to the death of a sixth; the explosion at the Café Terminus that killed one person, mortally wounded another and wounded a number of others; finally, six shots fired at those who pursued him.” He had acted with complete lucidity and never once sought to attenuate the terror his acts inspired.

He was twenty-one; it was the springtime of his life; it was the month of May, the spring of nature; and though the death sentence was certain, his tranquil courage, made up of intelligence and enthusiasm, never flagged for a second.

He was the son of a worker and a worker himself, having worked in a shop. A rational education backed by a remarkable spirit of logic and observation led him to anarchism. At first, simply revolted by the sight of social injustice he became a socialist. “Attracted to socialism for a moment,” he said, “it didn’t take long for me to move away from the party. I loved freedom too much, had too much respect for individual initiative, too much repugnance for being part of a group to take a number in the matriculated army of the Fourth Estate. In any case, I saw that in the end socialism changes nothing of the current order. It maintains the authoritarian principle and this principle, whatever so-called free-thinkers might say, is nothing but a holdover of faith in a supreme power.” His studies showed anarchism to be “a gentle morality in harmony with nature that will regenerate the old world.” He became a militant.

The strike in Carmaux had just failed, killed by politicians, leaving the workers weakened and starving. In the general depression Émile Henry decided to make heard a voice more fearful and virile than that of speechmakers: dynamite. It told the

defeated who the real revolutionaries were; it told the victors that outside the speechifiers and the passive crowd, there were men who knew how to act.

Then came the Vaillant Affair (who was guillotined for having thrown a bomb in the Chamber of Deputies). The repression was frightful; in just a few days, mass arrests, searches, confiscation of publications, and expulsions decimated the ranks of the propagandists. The rebels were hunted down. Henry responded with an act: the bomb in the Café Terminus.

He was arrested.

At the hearings his calm and tranquility were disconcerting. The newspapers said this was either cynicism or an act. Not at all! It was the satisfied awareness of someone certain of having lived a useful and beautiful life. An actor? It's a strange actor who throws his head to the spectators.

For his judges, he had subtle raillery, astounding responses. When the president of the tribunal evoked Henry's blood-stained hands, Henry pointed at his red robe. When the same man reproached him for having abandoned a military career begun at the École Polytechnique, he had this marvelous response: "A beautiful career to be sure. One day they would have ordered me to fire on the unfortunate like Commandant Chapu at Fourmies. Thanks, but I'd rather be here."

Up to the guillotine, he remained as good, as brave. And can anyone say that such an end wasn't worth more than the long labor of the submissive and pointless death in a hospice or on a park bench? To be sure, there are other struggles that are less bloody and perhaps more useful; to be sure, speech that inspires enthusiasm, the written word, the invincible propagator of ideas, and above all a life spreading examples of love and fraternity are means of combat that are more beautiful. But to end by delivering an axebow to the crumbling edifice, to end with the consciousness of having contributed even a bit to the

great labor of emancipation, was a hundred times better than the idiotic death of a worker filling the bosses' safes.

On the gallows, his dry throat launched at the radiant May sun a cry of hope and bravery that the sound of the blade couldn't stifle: "Courage, comrades! *Vive l'anarchie!*"

It was a death whose memory will live on. A death that free men will later remember with gratitude. For alongside the people of our century, the arrivistes, crushers, deceivers of all kinds; the immense mass of imbecilic followers and serfs, this young man marching towards death when everything in him wanted to live, this young man dying for the ideal is truly a luminous figure.

His blood was a beautiful seed from which new fighters will be born. And someday soon, when the wind will spread fire and construct barricades, the bourgeois who thought they'd crushed the new idea with bullets and guillotines will see the fatal harvest bloom.

Yes, anarchy is an ideal of peace and happiness. Yes, we love men with an infinite love, and every drop of their blood causes us pain. And it's because we love him, because we want to see him free, good, and happy, that we are merciless towards everything that blocks the road of humanity on its march towards the light!