

Standing Up for Wilhelm Reich
Review of Christopher Turner's recent book,
Adventures with hte Orgasmatron,
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2011)

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Like many readers of non-fiction I love biographies. Writing the biography of someone you think important and worth writing about seems so obviously sensible that I did not think further about it and carried on happily reading biographies. I assumed without question that authors write the biographies of people they admire, even worship in some cases, at least people they think are important. I imagine it is a positive experience to soak in the world of, say, Robert Hooke, Charlotte Bronte, or Charles Darwin for a couple of years. It is certainly a positive experience for me, the reader, to spend a week or two in their worlds.

So what motivates an author to write about someone who he clearly despises, thinks is completely worthless, and wishes to destroy, not just to denigrate and ridicule, and whose work and history he aims to grind to dust and eliminate every positive trace of, so that posterity will not even come across him again? This hapless victim is not a celebrity or a political fanatic whose evil influence is destroying the world as we know it, but someone who is dead and all but forgotten. That seems to be the aim of Christopher Turner in his recent history of Wilhelm Reich. He spent seven years at the job, too. It can't have been a very enjoyable seven years.

The title of Turner's book gives the game away. This is not going to be a scholarly history, though it is dressed up as one, with pages of references. The orgasmatron was Woodie Allen's satirical name for a gadget that did not really resemble the orgone

accumulator at all. It was a true machine, depending on electric input, as I understand it. (I haven't seen the film in which it stars). The orgone accumulator, devised by Wilhelm Reich, used no active input of energy from any ordinary source at all and simply worked because of the physical properties of the materials in its panels. Turner pursues his thesis with a tabloid knack for sliding things together, papering over cracks in his arguments, and leading readers on from A to G or even J and K before they realise that they have left A. It seems a strange project to spend seven years and take 450 pages and piles of apparently scholarly references to make a point that is, at heart, little more than a red-top headline. His book has been embraced in exactly the spirit in which it was written, with lurid headlines, ridiculous, unsupported claims, and abusive, contemptuous comments on newspaper websites.

A good example of how Turner bends his evidence is his version of Ola Raknes's first encounter with Reich in Oslo in 1934. (Raknes was a lay psycho-analyst and later became a staunch, informed, and sober advocate of orgonomy.) 'According to Reich's future disciple Ola Raknes (who would be bowled over by his "vitality, his vivacity and his charm"),...' Now Raknes was never the disciple of anybody or anything but the truth. He had a tenacious respect for evidence and always investigated things before he came to a conclusion about them. He was Reich's future *student*, a very different thing. Also he was the last person to be bowled over by anything or anybody. I looked up the original words to see how accurate this quotation was. In his book, *Wilhelm Reich and Orgonomy*, Raknes wrote, 'What first impressed me when I met Reich personally was his vitality, his vivacity and his charm.' The real quotation gives a very different picture from the one Turner gives.

This is not a scholarly book. For all the time and energy spent on his project, Turner gets to the end of it without realising that Reich's work published in 1927 in German, *Die Funktion des Orgasmus*, is not the same work as his *The Function of the Orgasm*, published in 1942 in English. He repeatedly refers to it as the English edition of the former title, even though it is obvious to any careful reader that they are not the same book. Reich says so clearly on the inside of the dust-jacket of the 1942 title. Such a basic misreading of Reich's bibliography undermines Turner's credibility from the start. None of the reviewers so far, whose sensational, uninformed glosses have been given generous headline space, knows enough about Reich and orgonomy to notice this major howler. This mistake is all the more bizarre, as Turner quotes from the English translation of *Die Funktion*, not published in English until well after Reich's death, as *Genitality in the Theory and Treatment of Neurosis* in 1980, without apparently realising that this is *Die Funktion*, even though the preface says so and

makes it clear that this book has so far not been published in English, whereas *The Function* had been published in 1942 and has been again several times since. This clanger is not Turner's only bibliographical mistake. He cites *Cosmic Superimposition* and its subtitle as two separate works and then cites another work *Ether, God and Devil* with *Cosmic Superimposition* as its subtitle. I can't take an author seriously whose grasp of his material is so weak and superficial.

Turner's thesis is that Reich's advocacy of sexual happiness and self-regulation from birth onwards is to blame for the disastrous 'sexual revolution' which took off in the sixties and whose effects we see all around us today. He also castigates Reich's 'invention' of the orgone accumulator, which he blasts as a worthless quack's device that, according to Reich, would cure people's sexual problems, promise them greater sexual happiness, better orgasms, and cure all their illnesses. These alleged claims are pure fantasy and emerge from Turner's shallow misunderstanding of Reich and from his own fevered imagination's version of Reich's life-work, orgonomy.

Turner will have it that Reich claimed that his orgone accumulator would cure neurosis, give users 'better' orgasms, and cure illnesses, even though he twice cites long quotations of Reich's that make it quite clear that Reich did not make such lurid, impossible promises about the accumulator. He made it clear that the accumulator won't do any of these things. Turner also quotes the words of Peter Reich, Reich's son, which make it quite clear that the ridiculous view of the accumulator held by the counter-culture, who Turner quotes generously, was well known to Reich and his colleagues and was anathema to them. Turner gets his 'scientific' opinion of the effectiveness of the orgone accumulator from interviews with famous users such as Norman Mailer and others. He cites Mailer's eventual dismissal of the accumulator as useless, and that, for Turner, is enough, the passing opinion of someone who probably never conducted an experiment in his life. Nowhere in his book does he cite the work of scientific orgonomists carrying out serious research with the accumulator. I notice that he has taken great care not to speak to a single working orgonomist, those working with Reich's concepts and discoveries all the time and using them as grist to their everyday mill. An early finding of Reich's was that a user's temperature rose slightly but definitely after 20-30 minutes in an accumulator. I don't think Turner mentions this finding once! I have checked my own temperature and that of other users hundreds of times and there has always been this small rise, varying from, say, 0.2 to about 1.0 degree Celsius. There have been two randomised control trials that demonstrate the effects on physiology of the orgone accumulator. Turner cites neither and, I presume, does not even know of them. Reich also observed a slight rise in the

internal temperature of an accumulator with no subject inside. He labelled this phenomenon the T^o-T finding. (T^o = temperature inside an accumulator, T = ambient atmospheric temperature measured in a control container with no accumulating capacity.) It has more recently been refined in enormous detail over a long period by Dr James DeMeo using modern computerised temperature-recording equipment. (DeMeo is one of the working organomists that Turner failed to meet, while carrying out his research for the book.) Seeds germinating in an accumulator germinate faster with fewer failures and produce larger seedlings than controls that do not germinate under the influence of 'extra' orgone energy. Turner does not mention these experiments at all. The seed-germination experiment has been replicated by many different workers in different countries. It is almost tedious to do, the results are so predictably positive. An attentive ten-year-old with an interest in science could do this experiment.

In 2004 Dr Jorgos Kavouras, a German GP, published a book of summarised case-histories from his experience using the orgone accumulator and medical DOR-buster, *Heilen mit Orgonenergie* (Healing with Orgone Energy). These are only 'anecdotal' histories, but the results in many cases are so striking that they definitely suggest that the accumulator is worthy of further serious medical research. The most spectacular example in this book is of the effect of the orgone accumulator on a severe third degree burn on a man's hand. When he was treated at the local A and E department after a burning catherine wheel spewed its fluid contents all over his hand, he was informed after first aid treatment that the hand would certainly need a skin graft and that he could expect the usual after-effects of such a burn, scarring and contractures. Thirty days later, after extensive orgone treatment, his hand had completely healed, with no visible scarring, no contractures, and no loss of function. Turner is so obsessed with the sensational 'counter-culture' connections with the orgone accumulator that he seems to have taken good care not to speak to any of the workers in the field, in case he discovered anything positive about the orgone accumulator.

Turner tries hard to disprove, and if he can't disprove it, to abuse Reich's research on sexuality and health. He presents Reich's work as if it were a complete mental fabrication and makes no reference to Reich's clinical findings, recorded in detail in *The Function of the Orgasm* and *The Cancer Biopathy*. He ignores Reich's findings that people's behaviour and medical symptoms changed when they became capable of greater sexual satisfaction. He did not prescribe behaviour to his patients: he observed that they changed. Some changed in a direction that contradicts Turner's 'sexual revolution' version of Reich's work. Compulsively promiscuous patients became more

contactful and loving and less promiscuous, as they made contact again with their inner depths and became capable of emotional contact with a partner. Yet again, all these subtleties of Reich's work are ignored by Turner. The capacity for emotional contact, such a crucial element of Reich's work and orgone therapy, does not, as far as I can see, get a single mention in Turner's book.

Turner's brief version of Reich's bion experiments is similarly bowdlerised. He refers to Reich's claiming to have observed the origin of life in a 'primordial soup', (Turner's phrase, not Reich's). Presumably this is a reference to the fact that Reich, when he first acquired his microscope, played about with what he could see under it and one investigation he carried out was to cook up a 'stew' of food products and to observe them carefully. He then greatly refined his investigations, examining single items under his microscope, starting with blades of grass and getting down to such well-known soup ingredients as iron filings or sea-sand which he heated to red heat before plunging them into water or potassium chloride. Turner ignores Reich's reports of his experiments, which enable modern workers to repeat his experiments, as he ignores so many other items which would embarrass his theory. There are several researchers dotted about the world who have repeated, confirmed, and developed Reich's findings in this realm. Most of them are in the USA, where Turner spent a good deal of time while writing this book. Yet again, he took good care not to speak to any of us. He does not cite a single authentic experimental finding in support of his case. He does quote the one example of the FDA's poor efforts at replicating Reich's medical tests with the orgone shooter, a device that allows the user to direct orgone energy to a small area. In this test an orgone-accumulating tube was used to treat vaginal infections of *trichomonas vaginalis*. The tests showed the shooter to be effective, but the FDA's testers explained this away as caused by the cooling effect of the glass tube that was used. Turner does not take the FDA to task for their slapdash testing and failure to observe basic atmospheric precautions, as prescribed by Reich, but accepts this dismissal at face value.

He accepts another dismissal of Reich's findings which is completely preposterous and mendacious, but Turner's knowledge of Reich's actual work, as opposed to his own imagined version of it, is so shallow and limited that he does not even realise this dismissal is completely erroneous and concocted. Reich was the first to observe what he named *T-bacilli*. The T stands for the German *Tod*, which means death. He observed them in cancer tumours and in the blood of patients suffering from the cancer biopathy. One of the FDA's assessors dismissed this finding of Reich's as a misinterpretation of the natural crenation of the red blood cells. You can see this

process easily at a magnification of 400-600x. You need a magnification of 5000x to see the T-bacilli. Turner doesn't even notice this clanger, as his knowledge doesn't stretch to these details of Reich's findings. You don't need to be a trained medical organomist to know this much. A single careful reading of *The Cancer Biopathy* or even an observant perusal of the photomicrographs at the end of the book would show you this information, too.

While ignoring work actually being done in the field in the present, Turner manages to conjure up an imagined historical connection with naturism. He includes amongst the illustrations a photo of naked women dancing in a ring in a field. These women were, according to Turner's caption, part of the socialist body culture school run by Adolph Koch. Koch does not appear in the index or the text and the picture is clearly included to egg up Turner's image of Reich and his work. These women have nothing whatsoever to do with Reich and his work. It is surprising that Turner's publisher's, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, let him get away with such slipshod work. What a paradox that they have published this hatchet job on Reich when their late founder, Roger Straus, was responsible for keeping Reich's books in print after they had been burnt by legal injunction after his trial in 1956. He was so outraged by this act of censorship that he committed his firm to keeping Reich's books in print and they have remained available to this day, albeit now mostly in print-on-demand format.

About half-way through the book it suddenly dawned on me what Turner's position is. It is that of the malicious gossip. He loves reporting other people's nasty words about Reich, about almost anyone in fact. He quotes about five times as many negative comments on Reich as he does positive ones. With what relish he quotes the damning list of Reich's crimes compiled after his death later in her life by his last partner, Aurora Karrer. Earlier information about Karrer, quoted by Turner, shows that she was mystically besotted with Reich and the opposite extreme of besotted mystical worship, to which all mystics swing in the end, is a raging, disillusioned urge to destroy the object of one's worship, the cycle we see the tabloids go through with celebrities that they build up only to bring them to their knees.

Turner obviously wants to be taken as a serious cultural theorist. To prove his point at the end of the book he cites Huxley's *Brave New World* to prove that more 'sexual liberation' means more political passivity and conformity. He could just as well have cited Orwell's 1984 and the Party's plan to abolish the orgasm. Amazingly, he has already cited the quotation where Julia describes this aim, in order to rubbish Orwell for the thought crime of swallowing Reich's theories. But maybe he had forgotten that

by the time he had got to the last page. To quote Huxley's story as evidence shows us how shallow and thoughtless Turner's book is. He does not seem to realise that he is quoting a work of imaginative literature and you can find a novel or a character in a novel to prove anything. If depth of feeling and sense of contact with the world is anything to go by, Orwell's Julia is far closer to life, far more convincing, than the cynically promiscuous characters of *Brave New World*, the young people that we apparently have today, as described clearly and horrifyingly in Natasha Walter's recent book, *Living Dolls*.

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