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The End of Criticism

*My Life Among the Deathworks:
Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority*
by Philip Rieff. University of Virginia Press, 2006.

Tout commence en mystique et finit en politique, Charles Péguy once observed. Everything begins with religious sensibility and ends with the agitations of political life. Péguy's affirmation of the primacy of the sacred cuts against the general currents of the modern age. The dominant thinkers of our time have been much more inclined to say that everything begins with economics and ends with politics. Karl Marx may have been characteristically dogmatic when he insisted that economic relations directly determine political loyalties and institutions, but we still tend to accept the idea that economic classes, corporate interests, and the overall economic climate decisively shape politics and society.

On those occasions when we do not tacitly reduce politics to economics, we usually turn in the direction of modern liberal theory for a different sort of reductionism. From Hobbes through Kant and from Mill through Rawls, the basic dynamic remains the same. Essential truths about the human animal, if properly understood and analyzed, will provide us with a genuinely humane, satisfying, and just politics. Everything should and, with enough reformist zeal, will begin with reason and end with politics.

The late Philip Rieff was a thinker not unlike Péguy. For many decades the Benjamin Franklin Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, Rieff in his writings was as likely to refer to Dostoyevsky as to Durkheim, to Oscar Wilde as to Max Weber. A gifted writer, Rieff was the master of bold, aphoristic summaries, and his striking characterizations of late modernity as therapeutic and theatrical have become commonplaces on the lips of a legion of postmodernists. He sought to understand himself as part of our strange, late-modern and perhaps postmodern world, and he wrote for an intelligent, well-read public that shared his interest in self-knowledge. In sum, Rieff was, to use a word now increasingly colored by nostalgic longing for a lost time in American academic and literary life, an intellectual.

After two widely acclaimed books early in his career—*Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (1959) and *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (1966)—by the 1970s Rieff had largely stopped publish-

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ing. What little he released was couched in a sometimes playful, sometimes bitter and denunciatory, but always idiosyncratic style designed to defeat easy assimilation into the usual modes of academic discussion and classroom teaching. His earlier facility with the *bon mot* turned into extended, usually dark and joking literary conceits after the fashion of Kierkegaard. For example, he introduced *Fellow Teachers: Of Culture and Its Second Death* (1985), an earlier, extended reflection on the perversions of pedagogy in the emerging postmodern culture of academia, as a “postmortem letter to the dead, myself self-addressed among them.” It takes a sense of humor to survive intellectually and spiritually in the halls of our higher ignorance.

Rieff’s recursive, paradoxical, and hyperbolic style is on full display in *My Life Among the Deathworks*, the first installment of a promised multivolume study of the sacred sources of social order. Rieff wrote, and rewrote, and rewrote this book through his final decades. It is a difficult, complex, and elaborately rhetorical book, and readers unfamiliar with Rieff’s larger project may easily become discouraged. I do not gainsay that reaction, but in this case, I must warn against putting down what puts off. *My Life Among the Deathworks* is one of those remarkable books that are both indigestible and indispensable. At once confirming and overthrowing the modern project of sociological self-understanding, *My Life Among the Deathworks* exhibits a mind approaching that most elusive and essential of conservative goals: reflective piety.

In *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, Richard Weaver observed that certain words enter into public discourse surrounded with a plentitude of authority. They function as “god terms” that organize and sanctify our cultural and political outlooks. By Rieff’s analysis,

whether for good or ill, we cannot do without god terms. They are the truths that we serve rather than question, the imperatives we honor with obedience—or with disciplining self-accusations of guilt when we transgress. “Culture,” writes Rieff in a transformation of Clauswitzian wisdom, “is a continuation of war by other—normative—means.” On the fields of battle both social and psychological, god terms *command*. They draft the young into their service, fashioning personality into a weapon in the great ongoing struggle for world rule.

God terms must have a Moses, a voice that transliterates sacred order into a social order. The practices of transliteration constitute what Rieff calls the “aesthetics of authority.” Traditional cultural practices—childrearing, education, politics, manners, literary and artistic taste, and more—are expressions, reinforcements, and illuminations of sacred order. From which hand to grasp the fork and knife to whether the majority ought to rule, the aesthetics of authority governs, and our imaginations are stamped and our souls fashioned along one or another axis of good and evil, beautiful and ugly, true and false. In this way, human life is brought into conformity with god terms. This process of transliteration constitutes everything we call culture. Its disruptions and failures as well as its continuities and successes are what provide the light and shadow of cooperation, conflict, and conscience that make the human animal a social being.

For the most part, *My Life Among the Deathworks* presupposes rather than explains Rieff’s fundamental theory of culture and personality. Attention focuses on interpreting our particular moment in the grand human project of transliterating sacred order into social order. In what Rieff calls the “first world” of ancient, pagan culture, the world was crisscrossed by potencies both higher and lower than human-

ity, and cultural elites read the sacred order to produce strategies of managed equilibrium in a cosmos governed by fate. Against this “first world” emerged the “second world” of monotheism. A more aggressive and ambitious stance evolved, recruiting warriors of faith who set out to bring all things captive to the transcendent and undivided authority of the divine. The great monuments of Western culture, both orthodox and heterodox, sought to read God’s commandments ever more deeply into social and personal life. Protestant and Catholic fought over god terms, but they fought both about and out of loyalty to the sacred order.

The struggle that preoccupies Rieff in *My Life Among the Deathworks* is not, however, the great, timeless cultural project of transliterating the sacred order into social order. No longer fighting over which god terms to obey and how to obey them, we are now living through a *Kulturkampf*, a culture war that is sociological rather than theological. For the first time in human history, cultural elites now insist that we can flourish *without* sacred authority. Their goal is revolutionary—and by Rieff’s account, utterly unprecedented. “A culture of civility that is separated from sacred order has not been tried before,” he warns. Like patients without hope of normal methods of cure, we are being dosed with untested medicines. The age-old pain of life lived under the necessities of either first-world fate or second-world faith is now medicated by new anti-god terms that promise to help us to live for the sake...of life itself.

Rieff’s genius as a social analyst has long been evident in his ability to draw out the fundamental spiritual therapies of modernity, which he took to be exemplified in Freud’s psychoanalytic project. Freud interpreted the neuroses of his patients as individual symptoms of a dysfunctional cultural economy of repression. God terms

may be necessary, but inherited authorities can become overbearing. The goal of therapy, then, is to readjust and humanize the circulation of desire, reality, and repressive self-limitation. In order to achieve this goal, analysis adopts a paradoxical attitude toward the patient’s past. Early childhood experiences are brought to consciousness and interrogated, but the larger purpose of recollection is to drain the commanding power out of prior experiences. Overburdening psychological traces of parental authority must be made conscious; precisely because they are made conscious and framed analytically, their power is diminished. Thus does the therapist weave his magic of both seeing and softening the operation of traditional authority.

Because Freud saw personal and social dynamics as closely interrelated, therapeutic recollection and neutralization implies a parallel social therapy. We can reframe inherited concerns about conformity to law as instances of “anal personality.” Or we can analyze a particularly ardent reformist or revolutionary movement in terms of Oedipal dynamics. As Rieff recognized long ago in *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer*, the persuasiveness of Freud’s psychological and sociological theories matters little. What remains of lasting importance is the shift from debate about god terms to a meta-debate about the meaning and origins of god terms, a shift that relaxes their power and allows us to manage their influence over our lives. An aesthetics of therapy replaces the aesthetics of authority.

By Rieff’s reckoning, this analytic emasculation of god terms is now widely dispensed in countless ways. A new anti-culture dominates elite opinion. Those he calls “virtuosi of de-creation” obey a single anti-commandment: *all prohibition is prohibited*. This anti-culture has a similarly paradoxical disciplinary agenda (*all repression must be repressed*) that serves an anti-god

term (*the only truth is that there is no truth*). What postmodern theorists call “difference,” the dispersive and destructive powers once carefully managed by the first world of fate and then domesticated by the second world of faith, is now celebrated as the power of liberation, authenticity, and life. For this reason, Rieff proclaims the emergence of a “third world” in which fiction and theatrical roles take the place of second-world faith and self-examination.

My Life Among the Deathworks was written to war against the growing dominion of this third world. The gloves don’t come off, because they are never on. But it is clarity of insight and not violence of rhetoric that gives Rieff’s analysis power. He is not sidetracked by the futile campaigns that tend to preoccupy proponents of traditional moral, aesthetic, and intellectual norms. Many defenders of reason—itsself a second-world god term—have reduced Derrida to absurdity, just as countless philosophy professors have demonstrated the incoherence of the solipsistic relativism of so many undergraduates. But they make no headway, because the third-world project is therapeutic rather than dogmatic. It urges fictions rather than truths; it cannot come into focus as a positive project with this or that position or doctrine to be rationally assessed. To play the professor and observe that the truth that there is no truth refutes itself only brings a wry, knowing smile to the face of the third-world acrobat.

Therefore, *My Life Among the Deathworks* takes a different tack. The great majority of the book pursues an analysis of what Rieff calls “image entries” selected from the world of art, film, literature, philosophy, and popular culture. These image entries, which Rieff labels “deathworks,” are instances of third-world cultural practices. They exemplify the aesthetics of therapy, the anti-cure of the nonexistent soul that follows from

the third-world anti-faith. Rieff’s goal is not to refute these deathworks. Instead, by cutting slices out of the third-world aesthetics of anti-authority, Rieff hopes to “analyze third world works in an effort to disarm them.” He wants his readers to *see* just how deathworks work, and in seeing, to acquire critical power over the world midwifed by the softening magic of critique.

An example illustrates. James Joyce appears frequently in Rieff’s meditations on the spirit of our age as “the exemplary third world man.” The point is not that Joyce’s works encourage or even address death. What matters is the way in which Joyce’s novels show us how to pull apart our cultural inheritance, rearrange the pieces, and produce a playful new culture that finds its psychic joys in a mockery of and freedom from the old. Because Joyce carries this off with such comic genius and literary brilliance (“I hear, O Ishmael, how thy laud is only as my loud is one”), *Finnegan’s Wake* is, in Rieff’s judgment, “the greatest third world literary creation.”

At issue are not artistic intentions (although artistic manifestos frequently champion the destruction of cultural norms); what matters are the functional god terms. Just as Freud’s therapy promises to unburden the soul by way of an analytically fueled release from inner psychic powers, so also does *avant garde* art promise to deliver us from the alienating conventions that block our vision and impoverish our experience. Its aesthetic power rests in a promised release from inherited authorities. The anti-faith is straightforward: life will be better if the power of *this* commandment (perspective and proportion, sequential narrative, prohibitions against adultery: take your pick) is diminished. Life becomes fuller with the death of the sacred. In view of this faith, the transgressive violence of deathworks leads to their celebration as *lifeworks*. The more that is destroyed, the more can life

flourish. Hence the trajectory of post-modern culture has been toward ever more routine assaults upon all forms of piety. Release from virtue becomes its own reward. The god term is negation itself. "Where nothing is sacred," Reiff writes, "there is nothing."

Rieff was a learned man, and he focuses most of his attention on an analysis of texts and images that are accounted among the works of high culture. However, as *My Life Among the Deathworks* progresses the scope of deathworks broadens. It would be impossible to detail the connections here; indeed, the connections are not entirely clear. But suffice to say that Rieff consistently draws images such as Marcel Duchamp's *Etant donnés* (an installation that involves peering through peepholes to see an image of a naked dead woman holding a gas lantern) into the same aesthetic domain as Auschwitz. He links Robert Mapplethorpe's homosexual imagery to Nazism's romance with final solutions. And an evocation of contemporary cultural indifference about abortion prefaces a discussion of the now dominant educational ideology of forgetfulness: we can dispose of our inhibiting cultural legacy as easily and with as little remorse as we vacuum up troubling legacies of sexual intercourse.

Some readers will balk at these associations of art with politics, especially the insane politics of Nazism. Others will find themselves defending favorite authors and artists against implication in the emerging culture of death. I certainly did. But on the whole, Rieff is surely right to emphasize the ways in which the imaginative work of cultural elites fundamentally influences our moral, political, and intellectual imaginations. *Tout commence en mystique...* Even if we want to defend the legacies of Picasso or Joyce (or, in my case, Joseph Conrad), we nonetheless do well to reflect upon the

political atmosphere likely to follow upon a now conventional third-world culture of transgression, a habit of negation that is most deeply affirmed by the best-educated and most powerful members of our society.

Although *My Life Among the Deathworks* is charged with existential passion and hot with rhetorical violence, Philip Rieff strikes me as having become one of the most sober men of our time. He observed of his own interior life many decades ago in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, "I, too, aspire to see clearly, like a rifleman, with one eye shut; I, too, aspire to think without assent. This is the ultimate violence to which the modern intellectual is committed." His critical mind worked itself to its own dark bottom.

Rieff never renounced the dark aggression of critical inquiry. On the contrary, in *My Life Among the Deathworks*, he remains ever the marksman. Turning his rifle upon his own kind, he has become a traitor to the third-world therapy dominant in our universities: the way of dispassionate seeing and unbelieving. He blinds the mind's eye with the critical truth that our cultural identities emerge out of the superluminous darkness of a sacred order that admits only of affirmation or denial. When confronted by the deepest claims of God upon our souls, we either obey or we rebel. Everything else—that is to say, culture and personality itself—asserts, negotiates, or evades the consequences of the one or the other.

A more piercing bullet could not be fired into our present age. For if everything human follows from obedience or rebellion, then to want a life free from the towering demands of the sacred order, to imagine life without a sacred order, is to conjure anti-human spirits. This is what Rieff knew, feared, and fought.