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—Robert Jay Lifton, *The New York Times Book Review*

ESCAPE FROM EVIL

Ernest Becker



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of his life because he is stuck with his natural and universal experience of guilt. Brown says that the "man who takes is strong enough to shoulder his own guilt," that the process of expiation of modern man "has been reified and passes into piles of stone and gold."²⁸ Granted that money represents the new *causa sui* project, that the infantile omnipotence is no longer in one's body but in things. But to repress guilt is not to "shoulder" it; it is not that guilt has vanished by being transmuted into things or expiated by things; rather, as Freud taught us, that which is denied must come out by some other means. History is the tragic record of heroism and expiation out of control and of man's efforts to earn expiation in new, frantically driven and contrived ways. The burden of guilt created by cumulative possessions, linear time, and secularization is assuredly greater than that experienced by primitive man; it has to come out some way.

The point I am making is that most of the evil that man has visited on his world is the result precisely of the greater passion of his denials and his historical drivenness. This leads us directly from problems of psychoanalysis and history right up to the problem of the science of man itself: what is the nature of evil in human affairs, and how can we come to grips with it as thoughtful men trying to take back some control over our own destiny, trying to fish ourselves out of the whirlpool of our historical passion? The only way that seems open to reason is to continue to try to soberly sort out our own motives, those that have led to our present state.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Basic Dynamic of Human Evil

All our human problems, with their intolerable sufferings, arise from man's ceaseless attempts to make this material world into a man-made reality . . . aiming to achieve on earth a "perfection" which is only to be found in the beyond . . . thereby hopelessly confusing the values of both spheres.
Otto Rank¹

These words by Otto Rank, if read quickly, seem like a wise enough commentary on human folly: we always knew man tried to achieve the impossible, that he was a proud, confused, and stubborn animal and that because of it he got into mischief. Like a puppy with a shoe or a kitten with a ball of string, man tends to endear himself to us because of the swashbuckling ways in which he tries to grasp reality. But Rank's words are not a mere commentary about an endearing, pathetic, and confused animal. They are much more than that: they are a complete scientific formula about the cause of evil in human affairs. We know today that the world-historical importance of psychoanalysis is precisely that it has revealed to us the dynamics of human misery.

You can see this most clearly not in the works of Freud, but in those who dissented from his work. Take three disparate thinkers like Otto Rank, Wilhelm Reich, and Carl Jung. There is nothing to identify them with one another except that they dissented from Freud; each had his own work and distinctive style, sometimes at a polar opposite from the other dissenters. What two people are more dissimilar than Reich and Jung? Yet at the bottom of all this unlikeness there is the fact of a fundamental agreement on what exactly causes evil in human affairs. This is not a remarkable

coincidence: it is a solid scientific achievement that argues for the basic truth of what the dissenters found.

We have already had a preview of this truth in our overview of history with Rank: that man wants above all to endure and prosper, to achieve immortality in some way. Because he knows he is mortal, the thing he wants most to deny is this mortality. Mortality is connected to the natural, animal side of his existence; and so man reaches beyond and away from that side. So much so that he tries to deny it completely. As soon as man reached new historical forms of power, he turned against the animals with whom he had previously identified—with a vengeance, we now see, because the animals embodied what man feared most, a nameless and faceless death.

I have shown elsewhere that the whole edifice of Rank's superb thought is built on a single foundation stone: man's fear of life and death. There is no point repeating this here except to remind us why these fundamental motives are so well hidden from ourselves. After all, it took the genius of Freud and the whole psychoanalytic movement to uncover and document the twin fears of life and death. The answer is that men do not actually live stretched openly on a rack of cowardice and terror; if they did, they couldn't continue on with such apparent equanimity and thoughtlessness. Men's fears are buried deeply by repression, which gives to everyday life its tranquil façade; only occasionally does the desperation show through, and only for some people. It is repression, then, that great discovery of psychoanalysis, that explains how well men can hide their basic motivations even from themselves. But men also live in a dimension of carefreeness, trust, hope, and joy which gives them a buoyancy beyond that which repression alone could give. This, as we saw with Rank, is achieved by the symbolic engineering of culture, which everywhere serves men as an antidote to terror by giving them a new and durable life beyond that of the body.

At about the same time that Rank wrote, Wilhelm Reich also based his entire work on the same few basic propositions. In a few wonderful pages in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* Reich lays bare the dynamic of human misery on this planet: it all stems from man trying to be other than he is, trying to deny his animal

nature. This, says Reich, is the cause of all psychic illness, sadism, and war. The guiding principles of the formation of all human ideology "harp on the same monotonous tune: 'We are not animals. . . .'"²

In his book Reich is out to explain fascism, why men so willingly give over their destiny to the state and the great leader. And he explains it in the most direct way: it is the politician who promises to engineer the world, to raise man above his natural destiny, and so men put their whole trust in him. We saw how easily men passed from egalitarian into kingship society, and for that very reason: because the central power promised to give them unlimited immunities and prosperities. We will see in the next chapter how this new arrangement unleashed on mankind regular and massive miseries that primitive societies encountered only occasionally and usually on a small scale. Men tried to avoid the natural plagues of existence by giving themselves over to structures which embodied immunity power, but they only succeeded in laying waste to themselves with the new plagues unleashed by their obedience to the politicians. Reich coined the apt term "political plague-mongers" to describe all politicians. They are the ones who lied to people about the real and the possible and launched mankind on impossible dreams which took impossible tolls of real life. Once you base your whole life-striving on a desperate lie and try to implement that lie, try to make the world just the opposite of what it is, then you instrument your own undoing. The theory of the German superman—or any other theory of group or racial superiority—"has its origin in man's effort to disassociate himself from the animal." All you have to do is to say that your group is pure and good, eligible for a full life and for some kind of eternal meaning. But others like Jews or Gypsies are the real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and bringing disease and weakness into your vitality. Then you have a mandate to launch a political plague, a campaign to make the world pure. It is all in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, in those frightening pages about how the Jews lie in wait in the dark alleys ready to infect young German virgins with syphilis. Nothing more theoretically basic needs to be said about the general theory of scapegoating in society—although we will look at it in more detail in the next chapter.

Reich asks why hardly anyone knows the names of the real benefactors of mankind, whereas "every child knows the name of the generals of the political plague?" The answer is that:

Natural science is constantly drilling into man's consciousness that fundamentally he is a worm in the universe. The political plague-monger is constantly harping upon the fact that man is not an animal, but a "zoon politikon," i.e., a non-animal, an upholder of values, a "moral being." How much mischief has been perpetuated by the Platonic philosophy of the state! It is quite clear why man knows the politicians better than the natural scientists: He does not want to be reminded of the fact that he is fundamentally a sexual animal. *He does not want to be an animal.*³

I give Reich's view of the dynamic of evil without any technical adornment because I don't think that it needs any. But there is plenty of adornment in the psychoanalytic literature, for anyone who wants to follow out the intricate theoretical workings of the psyche. The marvelous thing about psychoanalytic theory is that it took simple statements about the human condition, such as man's denial of his own animality, and showed how this denial was grounded in the psyche from earliest childhood. Thus psychoanalysts talk about "good" objects and "bad" ones, about "paranoid" stages of development, "denials," "split-off" segments of the psyche which includes a "death enclave," etc.

In my view no one has summed up these complex psychic workings better than Jung did in his own poetic scientific way by talking about the "shadow" in each human psyche. To speak of the shadow is another way of referring to the individual's sense of creature inferiority, the thing he wants most to deny. As Erich Neumann so succinctly summed up the Jungian view:

The shadow is the other side. It is the expression of our own imperfection and earthliness, the negative which is incompatible with the absolute values [i.e., the horror of passing life and the knowledge of death].⁴

As Jung put it, the shadow becomes a dark thing in one's own psyche, "an inferiority which none the less really exists even though only dimly suspected."⁵ The person wants to get away from this

inferiority, naturally; he wants to "jump over his own shadow." The most direct way of doing this is by "looking for everything dark, inferior, and culpable in others."⁶

Men are not comfortable with guilt, it chokes them, literally is the shadow that falls over their existence. Neumann sums it up again very nicely:

The guilt-feeling is attributable . . . to the apperception of the shadow. . . . This guilt-feeling based on the existence of the shadow is discharged from the system in the same way both by the individual and the collective—that is to say, by the phenomenon of the *projection of the shadow*. The shadow, which is in conflict with the acknowledged values [i.e., the cultural façade over animality] cannot be accepted as a negative part of one's own psyche and is therefore projected—that is, it is transferred to the outside world and experienced as an outside object. It is combated, punished, and exterminated as "the alien out there" instead of being dealt with as one's own inner problem.⁷

And so, as Neumann concludes, we have the dynamics for the classic and age-old expedient for discharging the negative forces of the psyche and the guilt: scapegoating. It is precisely the split-off sense of inferiority and animality which is projected onto the scapegoat and then destroyed symbolically with him. When all explanations are compared on the slaughter of the Jews, Gypsies, Poles, and so many others by the Nazis, and all the many reasons are adduced, there is one reason that goes right into the heart and mind of each person, and that is the projection of the shadow. No wonder Jung could observe—even more damningly than Rank or Reich—that "the principal and indeed the only thing that is wrong with the world is man."⁸

Let us now look at how this dynamic functioned in other historical contexts and at some of the other things that feed into it.

ends of his problematic dualism—he gets physical and spiritual energy. An Associated Press dispatch from the “Cambodian Front Lines” quotes a Sgt. Danh Hun on what he did to his North Vietnamese foes:

I try to cut them open while they're still dying or soon after they are dead. That way the livers give me the strength of my enemy. . . . [One day] when they attacked we got about 80 of them and everyone ate liver.¹⁹*

The Logic of Scapegoating

From all this we have to agree with an observation by the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre: “Hell is other people.” From the beginning men have served the appetites of one another in the most varying ways, but these were always reducible to a single theme: the need for fuel for one’s own aggrandizement and immunity. Men use one another to assure their personal victory over death. Nothing could be further from the “irrationality” that Mumford complained about. In one of the most logical formulas on the human condition Rank observed, “The death fear of the ego is lessened by the killing, the sacrifice, of the other; through the death of the other, one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying, of being killed.”²⁰ No wonder men are addicted to war. Rank’s insight is foreshadowed in

* There is a naturalness about trophy taking that may stem partly from man’s primate nature. I am thinking of the interest that primates show for striking details and objects in their environment. Children show real fascination over gadgets and trinkets, and are constantly engaged in hoarding and swapping quantities of marbles, picture cards, etc. I remember how the agate stones that we called “moonies” seemed to possess real magical powers and how we coveted them. More than that, there may be some natural connection between trophy taking and being a hunter, oriented to a triumph over the prey. It gives a real feeling of power to bring back a part of the prey; it is a way of physically affirming one’s victory. The victor does not leave the field of triumph empty-handed as he came, but actually increases his own organism as a result of the encounter, by adding to it some of the volume of the victim. A recent film study of baboons in their natural habitat showed them beating a dummy lion until its head broke off, upon which the leader seized the head and took it away with him.

the basic theory of psychoanalysis and was given by Freud himself.²¹ Freud saw that when it comes to enemies and strangers, the ego can consign them to the limbo of death without even a second thought. Modern man lives in illusion, said Freud, because he denies or suppresses his wish for the other’s death and for his own immortality; and it is precisely because of this illusion that mankind cannot get control over social evils like war. This is what makes war irrational: each person has the same hidden problem, and as antagonists obsessively work their cross purposes, the result is truly demonic; the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* summed this up beautifully. Not only enemies but even friends and loved ones are fair fuel for our own perpetuation, said Freud: “In our unconscious we daily and hourly deport all who stand in our way, all who have offended or injured us.”²² This is the price of our natural animal narcissism; very few of us, if pressured, would be unwilling to sacrifice someone else in our place. The exception to this is of course the hero. We admire him precisely because he is willing to give his life for others instead of taking theirs for his. Heroism is an unusual reversal of routine values, and it is another thing that makes war so uplifting, as mankind has long known: war is a ritual for the emergence of heroes, and so for the transmutation of common, selfish values. In war men live their own ennoblement. But what we are reluctant to admit is that the admiration of the hero is a vicarious catharsis of our own fears, fears that are deeply hidden; and this is what plunges us into uncritical hero worship: what the hero does seems so superlative to us. Thus from another point of view we see how right Freud was on enslavement by our illusions based on our repressions.

The logic of scapegoating, then, is based on animal narcissism and hidden fear. If luck, as Aristotle said, is when the arrow hits the fellow next to you, then scapegoating is pushing the fellow into its path—with special alacrity if he is a stranger to you. A particularly pungent phrasing of the logic of scapegoating one’s own death has been given by Alan Harrington: it is as though the sacrificer were to say to God after appraising how nature feeds voraciously on life, “If this is what you want, here, take it!”²³—but leave *me* alone.

If anyone still thinks that this is merely clever phrasing in the

minds of alienated intellectuals trying to make private sense out of the evil of their world, let him consult the daily papers. Almost every year there is a recorded sacrifice of human life in remote areas of Chile to appease the earthquake gods. There have been fifteen recent *officially reported* cases of human sacrifice in India—one being that of a four-year-old boy sacrificed to appease a Hindu goddess, and another involving a west Indian immigrant couple in England who sacrificed their 16-year-old son, following prayer and meditation, to ward off the death of the mother. Freud was right; in the narcissism of earthly bodies, where each is imprisoned fatally in his own finite integument, *everyone* is alien to oneself and subject to the status of scapegoat for one's own life.*

The logic of killing others in order to affirm our own life unlocks much that puzzles us in history, much that with our modern minds we seem unable to comprehend, such as the Roman arena games. If the killing of a captive affirms the power of your life, how much does the actual massive staging of life-and-death struggles affirm a whole society? The continual grinding sacrifice of animal and human life in the arenas was all of a piece with the repressions of a society that was dedicated to war and that lived in the teeth of death. It was a perfect pastime to work off anxieties and show the ultimate personal control of death: the thumbs up or thumbs down on the gladiators. The more death you saw unfold before your eyes and the more you thrust your thumbs downward, the more you bought off your own life. And why was the crucifixion such a favorite form of execution? Because, I think, it was actually a controlled *display* of dying; the small seat on the cross held the body up so that dying would be prolonged. The longer people looked at the death of someone else, the more pleasure they could have in sensing the security and the good fortune of their own survival.²⁴ The whole meaning of a victory celebration, as Canetti argued, is that we experience the power of our lives and the visible decrease

* Canetti speculates beautifully on how sacrifice springs from crowd fear, the same kind of fear a herd of gazelles experiences when the cheetah is chasing it: the moment of catharsis for the herd is when the fear abates because the cheetah has singled out *one* for a kill. The sacrifice of one for the many is thus a kind of natural appeasement of hostile powers. See Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (London: Gollancz, 1962), p. 309.

of the enemy: it is a sort of staging of the whole meaning of a war, the demonstration of the essence of it—which is why the public display, humiliation, and execution of prisoners is so important. "They are weak and die: we are strong and live." The Roman arena games were, in this sense, a continued staging of victory even in the absence of a war; each civilian experienced the same powers that he otherwise had to earn in war.²⁵ If we are repulsed by the bloodthirstiness of those games, it is because we choose to banish from our consciousness what true *excitement* is. For man, maximum excitement is the confrontation of death and the skillful defiance of it by watching others fed to it as he survives transfixed with rapture. Today only those such as racing-car drivers and sports parachutists can stage these kinds of dramas in civilian life.

It seems that the Nazis really began to dedicate themselves to their large-scale sacrifices of life after 1941 when they were *beginning to lose* and suspected at some dim level of awareness that they might. They hastened the infamous "final solution" of the Jews toward the closing days of their power, and executed their own political prisoners—like Dietrich Bonhoeffer—literally moments before the end. Retreating Germans in Russia and Italy were especially apt to kill with no apparent motive, just to leave a heap of bodies. It is obvious they were offering last-minute hostages to death, stubbornly affirming in a blind, organismic way, "I will not die, you will—see?" It seems that they wanted some kind of victory over evil, and when it couldn't be the Russians, then it would be the Jews and even other Germans; any substitute scapegoat would have to do. In the recent Bengali revolt the Western Pakistanis often killed anyone they saw, and when they didn't see anyone they would throw grenades into houses; they piled up a toll of over 3 million despised Bengalis. It is obvious that man kills to *cleanse* the earth of tainted ones, and that is what victory means and how it commemorates his life and power: man is bloodthirsty to ward off the flow of his own blood. And it seems further, out of the war experiences of recent times, when man sees that he is trapped and excluded from longer earthly duration, he says, "If I can't have it, then neither can you."

Other things that we have found hard to understand have been hatreds and feuds between tribes and families, and continual

butchery practiced for what seemed petty, prideful motives of personal honor and revenge. But the idea of sacrifice as self-preservation explains these very directly. As Rank saw, the characteristic of primitives and of family groups was that they represented a sort of soul pool of immortality-substance. If you depleted this pool by one member, you yourself became more mortal. In Rank's inspired words:

It is my opinion that this ideology offers a basis for understanding both the bitter hatreds and feuds between North American Indian tribes, and the feuds or vendettas currently practiced in many European countries. Whether it was the theft of women under exogamy, or the murder of male members of the tribe, it was always a matter of avenging serious offenses upon the *spiritual economy* of the community which, being robbed of one of its *symbols of spiritual revenue*, sought to cancel or at least avenge the shortages created in the *immortality account*.²⁶

This kind of action is natural to primitives especially, who believe in the balance of nature and are careful not to overly deplete the store of life-stuff. Revenge equals the freeing of life-stuff into the common reservoir "from which it can then be reassigned," as Jordan Scher very nicely put it. In fact, he extends the primitive notion of life-stuff right up to modern society and sees it as a motive for genocidal war and even the everyday secular process of justice: the guilty one is punished in order to return his life-stuff to the community.²⁷

I don't know how much of a burden of explanation we would want to put on the pool of life-stuff in modern, secular society. For one thing, we no longer believe in the balance of nature; for another, we don't often grant to others the same life quality that we have. But whether or not we believe in a steady pool of life-stuff, numbers are important to man: if we "buy off" our own death with that of others, we want to buy it off at a good price. In wartime, as Zilboorg put it:

We mourn our dead without undue depression because we are able to celebrate an equal if not greater number of deaths in the ranks of the enemy.²⁸

This explains the obsessive nature of "body counting" of the enemy as well as the universal tendency to exaggerate his losses and minimize those of one's own side. People can only lie so blatantly and eagerly when their own lives are at stake; these exaggerations always seem silly to outsiders to the conflict precisely because their lives are not involved. Rank sees, correctly we now have to believe, that *all* warfare and revolutionary struggle are simply a development of feuding and vendettas, where the basic thing at stake is a dramatization of the immortality account. We couldn't understand the obsessive development of nationalism in our time—the fantastic bitterness between nations, the unquestioned loyalty to one's own, the consuming wars fought in the name of the fatherland or the motherland—unless we saw it in this light. "Our nation" and its "allies" represent those who qualify for eternal survival; we are the "chosen people." From the time when the Athenians exterminated the Melians because they would not ally with them in war to the modern extermination of the Vietnamese, the dynamic has been the same: all those who join together under one banner are alike and so qualify for the privilege of immortality; all those who are different and outside that banner are excluded from the blessings of eternity.²⁹ The vicious sadism of war is not only a testing of God's favor to our side, it is also a proof that the enemy *is* mortal: "Look how we kill him." As Alan Harrington so well put it, in a remarkable book which contains the most brilliantly pungent phrases of (Rankian) insights that one is ever likely to see:

Cruelty can arise from the aesthetic outrage we sometimes feel in the presence of strange individuals who seem to be making out all right. . . . Have they found some secret passage to eternal life? It can't be. If those weird individuals with beards and funny hats are acceptable, then what about my claim to superiority? Can someone like that be my equal in God's eyes? Does he, that one, dare hope to live forever too—and perhaps crowd me out? I don't like it. All I know is, if he's right I'm wrong. So different and funny-looking. I think he's trying to fool the gods with his sly ways. Let's show him up. He's not very strong. For a start, see what he'll do when I poke him.³⁰

Sadism naturally absorbs the fear of death, as Zilboorg points out, because by actively manipulating and hating we keep our organism

absorbed in the outside world; this keeps self-reflection and the fear of death in a state of low tension. We feel we are masters over life and death when we hold the fate of others in our hands. As long as we can continue shooting, we think more of killing than of being killed. Or, as a wise gangster once put it in a movie, "When killers stop killing they get killed."

This is already the essence of a theory of sadism. But more than that it is the clinical proof of the natural "wisdom" of tyrannical leaders from the time of the divine kingships up to the present day. In times of peace, without an external enemy, the fear that feeds war tends to find its outlet *within* the society, in the hatred between classes and races, in the everyday violence of crime, of automobile accidents, and even the self-violence of suicide.³¹ War sucks much of this up into one fulcrum and shoots it outward to make an unknown enemy pay for our internal sins. It is as Mumford said, but—one final time—how rational this "irrationality."

The Science of Man after Hitler

It should already be obvious that with observations like these on sacrifice and scapegoating we are taking in immense areas in human relations; when we think in these terms, we already feel quickened in our thoughts and our pulse—we know we are onto something big. I have lingered on guilt, sacrifice, heroism, and immortality because they are the key concepts for the science of man in society that is emerging in our time. And the key works for these concepts have already been written, which is good news in the life of any aspiring science; the only rub is that the scientific community itself has not realized this good news, and so we have been painfully slow in forging an agreed science of man. The application of the ideas of guilt and sacrifice to modern sociology has been done largely by a few men—notably Kenneth Burke and Hugh Dalziel Duncan. Let us dwell on this critical chapter in the evolution of an authentic science of man.

Burke recognized that guilt and expiation were fundamental categories of sociological explanation, and he proposed a simple

formula: guilt must be canceled in society, and it is absolved by "victimage." So universal and regular is the dynamic that Burke wondered "whether human society could possibly cohere without symbolic victims which the individual members of the group share in common." He saw "the civic enactment of redemption through the sacrificial victim" as the center of man's social motivation.³²

Burke was led to the central idea of victimage and redemption through Greek tragedy and Christianity; he saw that this fundamentally religious notion is a basic characteristic of any social order. Again we are brought back to our initial point that all culture is in essence sacred—*supernatural*, as Rank put it. The miraculousness of creation is after all magnified in social life; it is contained in persons and given color, form, drama. The natural mystery of birth, growth, consciousness, and death is taken over by society; and as Duncan so well says, this interweaving of social form and natural terror becomes an inextricable *mystification*; the individual can only gape in awe and guilt.³³ This religious guilt, then, is also a characteristic of so-called secular societies; and anyone who would lead a society must provide for some form of sacred absolution, regardless of the particular historical disguise that this absolution may wear. Otherwise society is not possible. In Burke's generation it was above all Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini who understood this and acted on it.

If there is one thing that the tragic wars of our time have taught us, it is that the enemy has a ritual role to play, by means of which evil is redeemed. All "wars are conducted as 'holy' wars"³⁴ in a double sense then—as a revelation of fate, a testing of divine favor, *and* as a means of purging evil from the world at the same time. This explains why we are dedicated to war precisely in its most horrifying aspects: it is a passion of human purgation. Nietzsche observed that "whoever is dissatisfied with himself is always ready to revenge himself therefore; we others will be his victims. . . ."³⁵ But the irony is that men are always dissatisfied and guilty in small and large ways, and this is what drives them to a search for purity where all dissatisfaction can come to a head and be wiped away. Men try to qualify for eternalization by being clean and by cleansing the world around them of the evil, the dirty; in this way they show that they are on the side of purity, even if they themselves

are impure. The striving for perfection reflects man's effort to get some human grip on his eligibility for immortality. And he can only know if he is good if the authorities tell him so; this is why it is so vital for him emotionally to know whether he is liked or disliked, why he will do anything the group wants in order to meet its standards of "good": his eternal life depends on it.³⁶ Good and bad relate to strength and weakness, to self-perpetuation, to indefinite duration. And so we can understand that all ideology, as Rank said, is about one's qualification for eternity; and so are all disputes about who really is dirty. The target of one's righteous hatred is always called "dirt"; in our day the short-hairs call the long-hairs "filthy" and are called in turn "pigs." Since everyone feels dissatisfied with himself (dirty), victimage is a universal human need. And the highest heroism is the stamping out of those who are tainted. The logic is terrifying. The psychoanalytic grouping of guilt, anality, and sadism is translatable in this way to the highest levels of human striving and to the age-old problem of good and evil.

From which we have to conclude that men have been the midwives of horror on this planet because this horror alone gave them peace of mind, made them "right" with the world. No wonder Nietzsche would talk about "the disease called man."³⁷ It seems perverse when we put it so blatantly, yet here is an animal who needs the spectacle of death in order to open himself to love. As Duncan put it:

. . . as we wound and kill our enemy in the field and slaughter his women and children in their homes, our love for each other deepens. We become comrades in arms; our hatred of each other is being purged in the sufferings of our enemy.³⁸

And even more relentlessly:

We *need* to socialize in hate and death, as well as in joy and love. We do not know how to have friends without, at the same time, creating victims whom we must wound, torture, and kill. Our love rests on hate.³⁹

If we talk again and shockingly about human baseness, it is not out of cynicism; it is only to better get some kind of factual

purchase on our fate. We follow Freud in the belief that it is only illusions that we have to fear; and we follow Hardy—in our epigraph to this book—in holding that we have to take a full look at the worst in order to begin to get rid of illusions. Realism, even brutal, is not cynicism. As Duncan so passionately concluded his Nietzschean and Dostoevskian exposition of the terrifying dynamics of purity and love, ". . . we cannot become humane until we understand our need to visit suffering and death on others. . . . The sociology of our time must begin in [such an] anguished awareness. . . ." ⁴⁰ It has already begun in the work of Burke, Duncan, Mumford, and Lifton; but its theoretical formulations were already plentifully contained in the neglected work of Rank. From the point of view of such a sociology, the great scientific problems of our time have been the successful and grand social cohesions, especially of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. Burke and Duncan have amply described the religious horror drama of Germany under Hitler, where the dirty and evil Jews were purged from the world of Aryan purity by the Nazi priesthood.⁴¹ Buchenwald and Auschwitz were the result of one of the most massive mystifications of history, a religious use of man's fundamental motives and fears. Today we still gape in unbelief that such a holocaust was possible in our "civilized" world, refusing to see how true it was to man's nature and to his ambitions to transcend that nature. Hitler's rise to power was based on his understanding of what people wanted and needed most of all, and so he promised them, above everything else, *heroic victory over evil*; and he gave them the living possibility of ridding themselves temporarily of their real guilt. As many die-hard rightists in the U.S. today realize better than anyone else, the tragedy of Vietnam is that it has loaded the Americans with a huge burden of unresolvable guilt and it has not been a victory. They rightly say that leaders who saddle a nation with such a bafflement of its true aspirations have no right to lead. The nation represents victory and immortality or it has no mandate to exist. It must give tangible, straightforward victories or its credit is dissipated in the hearts of all its citizens. The rightists rally behind the convicted war criminal Lieut. William Calley because they cannot stand the burden of guilt of a nonvictorious war, so they simply deny it by insisting that he is a straightforward hero. There is no immortality without

guiltless victory. On these matters rightists have always been a candid barometer of basic human urges.

It took Stalin's purge trials to show us that the highest humanistic ideals of socialist revolutionaries also have to be played out in a religious drama of victimage and redemption—if one is to have a pure and cohesive socialist society at all.⁴² The Russians exiled religious expiation but could not exile their own human nature, and so they had to conjure up a secular caricature of religious expiation. And they are still doing it: the magician-priests who give absolution to the clean communist masses now wear the white coats of hospital psychiatrists who transform dirty dissident victims with the latest techniques of "secular" science. It is grotesque, but Burke had warned us to always watch for the "secular equivalents" of the theological formula of victimage and redemption; the scapegoat is not a "necessary illusion" of savages, children, and the masses,⁴³ but now an achievement of the "most advanced" socialist society.

Most recently Robert Jay Lifton has extended the Rankian framework of analysis into a brilliant dissection of that other great socialist drama of redemption of our time—the one staged by Mao, the biggest drama of all to date, yet one that uses the same time-honored dynamics. Lifton's analysis reveals Maoism as still another version of age-old historical themes dating from the time of the emergence of the very first states. Here is a reenactment of the drama of cosmic government, with Mao as the god-king who channels sacred power to those on the side of purity and right. Those who are not on that side fit into the now familiar formula of "victimization . . . the need to reassert one's own immortality, or that of one's group, by contrasting it with its absolute absence [of immortality] in one's death-tainted victim."⁴⁴ Mao emerges as a hero-savior who has the particular skill of defying death and giving expiation to his followers—"a man closely attuned to the pulse of immortality," as Lifton put it.⁴⁵ The vehicle for immortality is, of course, the revolution itself, the noble mission of the Chinese masses, the mission into which one merges his entire identity and from which he receives his apotheosis. In this cosmology it is the people themselves who carry the "immortal revolutionary substance"; God, then, "is none other than the masses of the Chinese people." It is as though China herself and her staggering population

had the life power to be immune to the normal limitations of human existence.⁴⁶ From Lifton's analysis it seems that modern China is reliving the idea of the primitive group soul which is a sacred fount of regeneration on which the whole community can draw so long as it remains pure. If one imagines these analogies far-fetched, he should go to Lifton himself and see how firmly they rest on a now well-founded tradition of social and psychological analysis.⁴⁷

The Two Sides of Heroic Self-Expansion

In all this we see the continuity of history; each heroic apotheosis is a variation on basic themes because man is still man. Civilization, the rise of the state, kingship, the universal religions—all are fed by the same psychological dynamic: guilt and the need for redemption. If it is no longer the clan that represents the collective immortality pool, then it is the state, the nation, the revolutionary cell, the corporation, the scientific society, one's own race. Man still gropes for transcendence, but now this is not necessarily nature and God, but the SS or the CIA; the only thing that remains constant is that the individual still gives himself with the same humble trembling as the primitive to his totemic ancestor. The stake is identical—immortality power—and the unit of motivation is still the single individual and his fears and hopes. To see graphically how constant these things have remained, we have only to tune in on the early-morning sign-offs on American television. The message is striking in its primitiveness: several minutes of the alternation of a picture of the flag with that of soldiers in landing barges, combat aircraft streaking across the sky, soldiers marching, the green fields and hills of home, a glistening white military cemetery, again the flag unfurled in the wind, the timeless Lincoln Memorial, and again the firm and determined faces of soldiers marching. The unspoken text is relentless in its assurance of vital power to each person, and a firm place in an immortality system. How the heart must quicken at what is suggested by these images, how the throat must choke up with gratitude.

Of course militarism and the flag hardly begin to cover the various types of things that the person can expand into; human ingenuity is not so limited, which explains why rich and imaginative people often make such poor patriots. Samuel Johnson saw this clearly when he said that patriotism was the last refuge for scoundrels. In our time the young are turning to forms of what Lifton called "experiential transcendence"—the intense experience of a feeling state which, for a little while anyway, eliminates the problem of time and death.⁴⁸ This is a variation on the historical mode of mysticism, only in our time people can imbibe in it *en masse*, helped by the modern technology of color and sound. Alan Harrington caught the mood of it beautifully:

By embracing the Primordial Oneness I escape death before it can hit me. How can that shadowy menace keep an appointment in Samara with a man whose consciousness has already been dissolved? . . . In a discotheque, the careworn self is smashed by echoing guitars and electronic shrieking, and its fragments are scattered even more finely by showering and splitting light effects. . . . The narcotic drift will take you to spaces beyond time and death, as will an organ or a church organ.⁴⁹

This explains the massive attendance at rock music festivals which the older generation has such trouble understanding. The festivals represent a joyful triumph over the flat emptiness of modern life, the mechanical succession of news events which carry everyone on willy-nilly, the ticking away of life in an absurd anarchy. The festival is the attempt by the young to reawaken a sense of the awesome and the miraculous as they throb in full communion to the beating of the music. As one rock music authority so well put it, what the modern young are seeking through this is a way to adequately express wonder, an expression that modern, secular, mechanistic society has denied them. This kind of communion in joy and in intensive experience is, we have to conclude, modern youth's heroic victory over human limitation. Yet it, too, is hardly a modern invention despite the new technics which mediates it. It is a replay of the basic Dionysian expansiveness, the submergence and loss of identity in the transcending power of the pulsating "now" and the frenzied group of like-minded believers.

My point is that heroic expansiveness, joy, and wonder have an underside—finitude, guilt, and death—and we have to watch for its expression too. After you have melted your identity into transcending, pulsating power, what do you do to establish some kind of balance? What kind of forceful, instrumental attitude do you summon up to remarshal yourself and your grip on experience? One cannot live in the trembling smallness of awe, else he will melt away. Where is the object on which to focus one's new self-assertion—an object that is for most people a victim? This is what we have to be constantly on guard for. The Dionysian festival reflected man's experience in the round, and so for the masochistic loss of self there was the corresponding sadistic affirmation of self: the Dionysian celebrators tore apart with their bare hands and ate raw a scapegoat or a bull to climax the ceremony. Every heroic victory is two-sided: it aims toward merger with an absolute "beyond" in a burst of life affirmation, but it carries within it the rotten core of death denial in a physical body here on earth. If culture is a lie about the possibilities of victory over death, then that lie must somehow take its toll of life, no matter how colorful and expansive the celebration of joyful victory may seem. The massive meetings of the Nazi youth or those of Stalin in Red Square and Mao in Peking literally take our breath away and give us a sense of wonder. But the proof that these celebrations have an underside is in Auschwitz and Siberia: these are the places where the goats are torn apart, where the pathetic cowardliness of what it is all about on its underside is revealed. We might say that modern heroism is somewhat out of joint compared with Dionysianism, where both aspects of transcendence took place on the spot; modern scapegoating has its consummation in bureaucratic forms, gas ovens, slow rotting in prison camps. But it still is all about the real, lived terror of the individual German, Russian, and Chinese over his own life, however coldly and matter-of-factly it may be staged, whatever the clean and disinterested scientific methods used. Hannah Arendt in her brilliant and controversial analysis of Adolf Eichmann showed that he was a simple bureaucratic trimmer who followed orders because he wanted to be liked; but this can only be the surface of the story, we now see. Rubber-stampers sign orders for butchery in order to be liked; but to be liked means to be admitted to the

group that is elected for immortality. The ease and remoteness of modern killing by bespectacled, colorless men seem to make it a disinterested bureaucratic matter, but evil is not banal as Arendt claimed: evil rests on the passionate person motive to perpetuate oneself, and for each individual this is literally a life-and-death matter for which any sacrifice is not too great, provided it is the sacrifice of someone else and provided that the leader and the group approve of it.

Whatever side of heroism we look at, one thing is certain: it is an all-consuming activity to make the world conform to our desires. And as far as means are concerned, we are all equally insignificant and impotent animals trying to coerce the universe, trying to make the world over to our own urges. The cultural lie merely continues and supports the lie of the Oedipal *causa sui* project*; when it is exposed, we literally become impotent. From which we can conclude that man is an animal who has to live in a lie in order to live at all. Psychiatrists who practice in New York report that the complaints of impotency increase when the stock market is in a low. Conversely, potency is vigorous when the market is high, or a "bull" market as the apt term has it. We are reminded of how archaic man quickly killed the king as soon as he became impotent: it is conceivable that for primitives, like Wall Streeters, actual impotency might develop if the cultural system of denial lost its power. All of which supports those who hold that death anxiety always lingers under the surface and is never surely and smoothly absorbed in the cultural hero system. How can the body ever be surely transcended by an animal who is body and maybe *nothing but* body and who fears this very thing on some level of his awareness?

I mention these things in passing only to remind the reader of the tragic aspect of human heroics and the naturalness of vicious scapegoating: somebody has to pay for the way things are. This is the meaning of the Devil in history, as many authorities have told us. The Devil represents the body, the absolute determinism of man's earthly condition, and that's why the Devil is so dangerous:

* For an elaboration of the *causa sui* project see *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

he reveals the reality of our situation, the fact that we can't really escape our earthly destiny.⁵⁰ To fight the Devil is to fight what he stands for, and to make the Devil a scapegoat is to do away with what he represents: the defeat of the supernatural, the negation of the spiritual victory over body-boundedness. Hence all the vampire stories where the blood-feasting evil one is the terrifying threat. The truth of the vampire story, of bats, blood, and canine teeth, is the same as the truth of the castration complex: that the *causa sui* project via the body is a lie, that our bodies are really our doom; so long as we are in them we are subject to the complete dominion of earthly laws of blood and animality. Hence only the sign of the cross can win out over the vampire, only the domain of invisible spirit that promises victory over the body and death can save man. Thus the vampire story is a perennial horror-passion play reflecting the entire truth of the human condition and the hope beyond it. Hence, too, the gory stories throughout history about the Jews' appetite for Gentile children, etc.; for the Nazis the Jews were devils, just as Mao's adversaries were for him.⁵¹ The Devil is the one who prevents the heroic victory of immortality in each culture—even the atheistic, scientific-humanist ones. On matters of spiritual apotheosis every leader shows his basic kinship to Martin Luther, because he has to decry the fettering of man's glorious spirit by the body, by personal appetite and selfishness. As Lifton so aptly points out, Mao, in his scatological lyricism (denouncing of the Chinese government's subservience to the West), reminds one precisely of Luther: "If one of our foreign masters farts, it's a lovely perfume."⁵² The Devil always confounds the body with the ethereal and makes the decadent capitalist world seem like socialist heaven.

Conclusion: Cultures as Styles of Heroic Death Denial

It is fairly easy to draw the moral from all this, even though it will be shocking to some of the older styles of doing social theory. The continuity from the Enlightenment through Marx, Weber, Mannheim, Veblen, and Mills is all there plain as day. The impor-

tant thing about the analyses of Rank, Burke, Duncan, and Lifton is that they reveal precisely those *secular* forms which the traditional religious dramas of redemption now take. It would be easy to argue that we now have a fairly good working catalogue of the general range of social expressions of basic human motives, and that this represents the completion of the work of the great Max Weber, who had already shown the social dramas of several historical societies, both eastern and western, in the round.

But with our greater and even more tragic historical experience which includes Hitler and Stalin, we can give the Weberian tradition even more life and critical force: we can extend it from primitive man right up to the modern revolutionary monoliths, all the while basing it on a few universal principles of human motivation. Since there is no secular way to resolve the primal mystery of life and death, all secular societies are lies. And since there is no sure human answer to such a mystery, all religious integrations are mystifications. This is the sober conclusion to which we seem to be led. *Each society is a hero system which promises victory over evil and death.* But no mortal, nor even a group of as many as 700 million clean revolutionary mortals, can keep such a promise: no matter how loudly or how artfully he protests or they protest, it is not within man's means to triumph over evil and death. For secular societies the thing is ridiculous: what can "victory" mean secularly? And for religious societies victory is part of a blind and trusting belief in another dimension of reality. Each historical society, then, is a hopeful mystification or a determined lie.

Many religionists have lamented the great toll that the Hitlers and the Stalins have taken in order to give their followers the equivalent of religious expiation and immortality; it seemed that when man lost the frank religious dimension of experience, he became even more desperate and wild; when he tried to make the earth alone a pure paradise, he had to become even more demonic and devilish. But when one looks at the toll of scapegoats that religious integrations have taken, one can agree with Duncan that religious mystifications have so far been as dangerous as any other.⁵³ No world view has a claim on secure truth, much less on greater purity—at least as it has been practiced historically in the social world. Harrington, as usual, sums it up very colorfully:

The plotters of earthly and heavenly paradise have fought, slandered and sabotaged one another for hundreds of years. One stands accused of unbridled hubris (risking divine retaliation, jeopardizing everybody's chances); the other of superstition (cringing before mystery); and each finds the other obstructing the road to eternal life.⁵⁴

Dostoevsky thought that the only hope for Russia was to worship the body of Christ and to have a contented peasantry. When we look at the toll of Stalinism we may feel wistful, but we would have to be able to count the toll of Dostoevsky's solution and then compare. We don't have to get embroiled in any abstract arguments because the shape of social theory is clear. If each historical society is in some ways a lie or a mystification, the study of society becomes *the revelation of the lie*. The comparative study of society becomes *the assessment of how high are the costs of this lie*. Or, looked at from another way, cultures are fundamentally and basically *styles of heroic death denial*. We can then ask empirically, it seems to me, what are the costs of such denials of death, because we know how these denials are structured into styles of life.* These costs can be tallied roughly in two ways: in terms of the tyranny practiced within the society, and in terms of the victimage practiced against aliens or "enemies" outside it.⁵⁵

By assessing the cost of scapegoating and by trying to plan for alternative ideals that will absorb basic human fears, we seem to have brought up to date the Marxist critique of the human evasion of freedom; we seem to have finally a secure grip on the social problem of death denial. In the Marxist view death is an ideology, as the title of an essay by Marcuse has it. This means that although death is a natural fear, this fear has always been used and exploited by the established powers in order to secure their domination. Death is a "culture mechanism" that was utilized by societies from primitive times on as a means of social control and repression, to help an elite enforce its will on a meek and

* Franz Borkenau talks about cultures as death-denying, death-defying, and death-accepting, alternating with each other in history. But this kind of classification seems to me to refer more to different types of transcendence; one still has to ask how self-perpetuation is secured in each culture—at least for the masses, if not for the few intellectual formulators. See his "The Concept of Death," *The Twentieth Century*, 1955, 157:317.

compliant populace. The definition of culture, after all, is that it continues the *causa sui* project of the transcendence of death; and so we see the fatality and naturalness of human slavishness: man helps secure his own domination by the tribe, the polis, the state, the gods, because of his fears.⁵⁶

When we phrase the problem in these terms, we can see how immense it is and how far it extends beyond our traditional ways of doing science. If you talk about heroics that cost mountains of human life, you have to find out why such heroics are practiced in a given social system: who is scapegoating whom, what social classes are excluded from heroism, what there is in the social structure that drives the society blindly to self-destructive heroics, etc. Not only that, but you have to actually set up some kind of liberating ideal, some kind of life-giving alternative to the thoughtless and destructive heroism; you have to begin to scheme to give to man an opportunity for heroic victory that is not a simple reflex of narcissistic scapegoating. You have to conceive of the possibility of a nondestructive *yet victorious* social system. It was precisely this problem that was designed by William James over two generations ago, in his famous essay "The Moral Equivalent of War," but needless to say we have done nothing about it even on a conceptual level, much less on an active social level. Little wonder that things are in a mess.

One of the reasons social scientists have been slow in getting around to such designs has been the lack of an adequate and agreed general theory of human nature. James didn't have one, and it has taken us this long to begin to sort out the real legacy of Freud. Modern Marxism still does not show man in the round and so still seems naive to mature scholars in its easy optimism. Even the injection of Freudian dogma into Marxism, in the work of Marcuse, is still too clumsy a commentary on the human condition. I will sum up a critique of Marcuse toward the close of this book; but right now it is important to direct the reader in the quest for an agreed general theory of human nature to *exactly what cripples the autonomy of the individual*. The Enlightenment hope for free and autonomous men was never born; and one reason is that we have not known until after Freud the precise dynamics that makes men so tragically slavish. Why are all enjoiners to us to take command

of our fears, to stand upright, to build a science in society that reflects rational control—why are these so impossibly utopian? We have already in this book seen most of the reasons for this. It remains now to put the last technical piece into place. This should enable us to finally piece together the legacy of Freud for social science.

Transference

Freud saw that the patient in analysis developed intense attachment to the person of the analyst. The analyst became the core of his life, the object of his every thought, a complete fascination. Seeing that this was an uncanny phenomenon, Freud explained it as transference—that is, the transference of feelings the patient once had towards his parents to the new power figure in his life, the doctor. Expanding his findings into a theoretical framework using transference as a universal mechanism, Freud directed his interests to the psychology of leadership and produced his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Here, in less than 100 pages, he explained why men were so sheeplike when they functioned in groups—how they abandoned their egos to the leader, identified with his powers just as they did once before when as dependent children they yielded to their parents.

Gradually, through the works of Adler, Rank, Fromm, Jung, and others, we have seen a shift in emphasis to a more comprehensive view of transference, building on Freud. So that today we can say that transference is a reflex of the fatality of the human condition. Transference to a powerful other takes care of the overwhelmingness of the universe. Transference to a powerful other handles the fear of life and death. To avoid repetition of myself, I refer the interested reader to "The Spell Cast by Persons," a complete chapter on transference in *The Denial of Death*.