

Books

Romanticizing the Void, Psychologizing the Real

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Robert J. Lifton and Eric Olson's *Living and Dying* (Praeger; 156 pp.; \$6.50) will be welcomed by the reader who desires a speculative cultural treatment of the problems of death in these all too mortal times. Committed to a "psychohistorical approach to the questions of life and death in the twentieth century," the authors assert that contemporary man's sense of life and death is inseparable from the terrifying and shattering events of the twentieth-century collective experience, and that contemporary man's very survival hinges on rethinking the meaning of life and death.

Each chapter of the work is part of an exploration of this familiar but dramatic theme. In Chapter One ("Death—The Lost Season") we encounter a world in extreme crisis. The condition of rootlessness plagues nearly everyone; past institutions no longer adequately function, and everywhere they are called into question; science and technology have removed life and death from any natural human measure; a hundred million people have lost their lives in this century to man-made violence; and the atomic bomb has destroyed all past boundaries of life, threatening the whole race with premature extinction. In Chapter Two ("Death and The Life Cycle") we are told that if man is not to perish, he must discover a meaning to his life, "an inner psychological continuity to his being." Forever threatened at all stages of his individual development and at all points in his collective historical being by fears of separation, lack of movement, and disintegration, man today is yet further and uniquely threatened by a "symbolic gap" born of the total destructiveness of nuclear weapons. As is made clear in Chapter Three ("Symbolic Immortality"), man suffers this gap because he "aspires to live forever"; he cannot endure unless he finds a meaning which, "at least in some symbolic way," assures him that his life will extend beyond his biological death. This aspiration for immortality not only accounts for man's abiding attempts "to affirm life in the face of death," and "to achieve, maintain or reaffirm a collective sense of immortality under constantly changing conditions," but it equally explains man's enduring efforts to secure immortality in terms of a continuity with his progeny, works, God, and nature. In turn, it is this perennial aspiration toward immortality that has been challenged at its very roots by the atomic bomb and all it portends. For the authors the very existence of the bomb has created a

new state of human history and consciousness. It has irrevocably proclaimed that man himself is the lord of life and death; and for the first time man can no longer look into the mirror without seeing the face of his and nature's absolute mortality.

In Chapter Four ("Death and History"), Chapter Five ("The Nuclear Age"), and Chapter Six ("Death and Rebirth: The Survivor as Creator") the authors discuss the implications of this new psychohistorical situation and two basic reactions to it. One reaction is on the side of life; the other is on the side of death. The allies of death are all those who remain unaware of the antilife forces that engulf mankind, all those who find their identities in the artificial immortalities of the ruling collectivities that purchase their lives at the price of the death of others, and, most terrifying of all, all those who transform the absolute destructiveness of nuclearism into a new and totalistic faith.

Opposing the allies of death are those who awake to the terrors of our age, who resist the slaughter of the innocent, and who seek out new life-giving identities. The heroes for the authors are those who find it impossible to live by the old creeds and refuse to tolerate the new evils. They are the people who plunge into life in all its meanings, reorder themselves in accord with new experiences, and redirect their understanding and energy so that they are in the service of a full human life. The heroes—the reborn people—are for the authors none other than the radical youth of the 1960's. It is they and their followers who, in the view of the authors, resisted the horrible and unjust war in Vietnam. It is they who, while often the victims of a proteanism devoid of all direction and dangerously involved with drugs, nevertheless sought to validate past and present human possibilities and pursued a humanism that restores significance to the older creeds of nature, God, and meditation, all the while opening new roads to life during a time of chaos and death.

As Lifton and Olson's broad speculations will truly excite some readers, they will radically disappoint others. Among the most disappointed will be those who are already favorably acquainted with Lifton's past writings. Even if these readers do not judge this work a commercial exploitation of Lifton's well-earned popularity, they will find in it only a short summary of themes far better developed in his past writings on the psychology of the survivors of Hiroshima, contemporary Japanese and American youth, the Chinese revolutionaries, and Vietnam veterans. And they, as other readers of contemporary cultural criticism, will not be able to overlook the varied flaws that mar this work from beginning to end.

At the outset we encounter a syrupy preface by Lifton that fails to explain the work and the nature of

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the collaboration that produced it. Throughout the work there is a string of clichés about America, past and present, as a death-denying society. These flaws, however, seem minor in light of a pervasive and distorting ahistorical presentism that dominates the work and leads the authors to treat the atomic bomb as the beginning of modern history and the Vietnam war as the beginning of contemporary history. It is as if the last two centuries of worldwide war and revolution, and the social, political, and ideological expectations and catastrophes linked to them, had no importance for the authors' assessment of contemporary man's sense of life and death.

This ahistorical presentism is objectionable in yet other ways. Supported rhetorically by tones of existential anguish and searching humanistic concerns, it permits the authors to proclaim—almost perfunctorily, and certainly with no sense of responsibility to philosophy—the death of all past faiths. They issue a call for a new and desirable, but never defined or clarified, “experimental transcendence.” In fact, the nature of this experimental transcendence remains so vague in formulation that one is forced to ask whether its idealization and its ideal embodiment in the new protean person amount to anything more than the self-dramatizing language of upper-class, academic secularism. It is a Nietzscheanism of the uprooted intellectual that furnishes him with a means to elevate his identity crises and with a claim to being a new type of superman.

Romanticizing the void and psychologizing the real are always dangerous undertakings. There is surely no worth to a spiritual masochism that encourages man forever to take heart in his symbolic striving for an immortality he can never in truth attain. Likewise, there is no substantive value in a psychohistorical approach that offers no political values to deny the technological and ideological totalisms endangering man, no critical analysis to expose the social-economic roots of human misery, and worse, no ethical grounds whatsoever to prefer one form of life to another, peace to war, Nirvana to the Third Reich.

For the past decade Lifton has been an important part of contemporary American self-understanding. The overall value of his psychological explorations of a world in chaos, a world in which all people are increasingly formed by an awareness of tragedies that have been or might be, cannot be denied. As I read his works, however, it seems they have always held forth the promise that one day he would carry his psychohistorical studies forward in order to make a broad exploration of twentieth-century man's experience. This book does not fulfill the promise. Perhaps this work, despite its provocative speculations, makes clear what most of us knew all along: We need more than a psychology of identities to analyze the nature of our times and to contend against the demons of our own creation.

Energy and U.S. Foreign Policy

A Report to the Energy Policy Project of the Ford Foundation

by Joseph A. Yager
and Eleanor B. Steinberg

(Ballinger; 473 pp.; \$15.00/\$6.95)

Christopher T. Rand

The Brookings Institution study *Energy and U.S. Foreign Policy* is one of twenty-four research programs to receive funding from the massive Ford Foundation Energy Policy Project, which, according to a foreword by McGeorge Bundy, received a total of about \$4 million in late 1971. The scope of this particular project, to paraphrase the authors Joseph Yager

and Eleanor Steinberg, is the international consequences of possible U.S. energy policies.

In spite of its length, the book is on the whole quite readable. It contains numerous simple tables and footnotes, but no esoteric econometric calculations or Wilkinson's-sword supply-demand curves. Though much of it is not very informative, it is worth read-

ing for what it portrays, if not for what it says.

The latter observation applies especially to the first half of the book, which outlines the world energy markets and probable future energy developments in the oil-exporting and oil-importing nations, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China. This section is a routine survey which tells us very little about the role of the international oil industry in the world's current oil price and supply troubles. Indeed, reading this section, one would not get the impression that the oil companies had influenced the drastic price increases at Tehran and Tripoli in 1970 and 1971, at any rate not by their most uncharacteristic acquiescence in the hikes, or that Iraq Petroleum Company has consistently suppressed the growth of the oil industry in Iraq, or that relations have not always been bland and uneventful over the past twenty years between the gov-