

**THE DENIAL
OF DEATH**



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*To the memory of my beloved parents, who
unwittingly gave me—among many other
things—the most paradoxical gift of all:
a confusion about heroism.*

***Introduction: Human Nature
and the Heroic***

In times such as ours there is a great pressure to come up with concepts that help men understand their dilemma; there is an urge toward vital ideas, toward a simplification of needless intellectual complexity. Sometimes this makes for big lies that resolve tensions and make it easy for action to move forward with just the rationalizations that people need. But it also makes for the slow disengagement of truths that help men get a grip on what is happening to them, that tell them where the problems really are.

One such vital truth that has long been known is the idea of *heroism*; but in "normal" scholarly times we never thought of making much out of it, of parading it, or of using it as a central concept. Yet the popular mind always knew how important it was: as William James—who covered just about everything—remarked at the turn of the century: "mankind's common instinct for reality . . . has always held the world to be essentially a theatre for heroism."¹ Not only the popular mind knew, but philosophers of all ages, and in our culture especially Emerson and Nietzsche—which is why we still thrill to them: we like to be reminded that our central calling, our main task on this planet, is the heroic.*

One way of looking at the whole development of social science since Marx and of psychology since Freud is that it represents a massive detailing and clarification of the problem of human heroism. This perspective sets the tone for the seriousness of our discussion: we now have the scientific underpinning for a true understanding of the nature of heroism and its place in human life. If "mankind's

* In the following discussion I am obliged to repeat and sum up things I have written elsewhere (*The Birth and Death of Meaning*, Second Edition, New York: Free Press, 1971) in order to set the framework for the other chapters.

common instinct for reality" is right, we have achieved the remarkable feat of exposing that reality in a scientific way.

One of the key concepts for understanding man's urge to heroism is the idea of "narcissism." As Erich Fromm has so well reminded us, this idea is one of Freud's great and lasting contributions. Freud discovered that each of us repeats the tragedy of the mythical Greek Narcissus: we are hopelessly absorbed with ourselves. If we care about anyone it is usually ourselves first of all. As Aristotle somewhere put it: Luck is when the guy next to you gets hit with the arrow. Twenty-five hundred years of history have not changed man's basic narcissism; most of the time, for most of us, this is still a workable definition of luck. It is one of the meaner aspects of narcissism that we feel that practically everyone is expendable except ourselves. We should feel prepared, as Emerson once put it, to recreate the whole world out of ourselves even if no one else existed. The thought frightens us; we don't know how we could do it without others—yet at bottom the basic resource is there: we could suffice alone if need be, if we could trust ourselves as Emerson wanted. And if we don't feel this trust emotionally, still most of us would struggle to survive with all our powers, no matter how many around us died. Our organism is ready to fill the world all alone, even if our mind shrinks at the thought. This narcissism is what keeps men marching into point-blank fire in wars: at heart one doesn't feel that *he* will die, he only feels sorry for the man next to him. Freud's explanation for this was that the unconscious does not know death or time: in man's physicochemical, inner organic recesses he feels immortal.

None of these observations implies human guile. Man does not seem able to "help" his selfishness; it seems to come from his animal nature. Through countless ages of evolution the organism has had to protect its own integrity; it had its own physicochemical identity and was dedicated to preserving it. This is one of the main problems in organ transplants: the organism protects itself against foreign matter, even if it is a new heart that would keep it alive. The protoplasm itself harbors its own, nurtures itself against the world, against invasions of its integrity. It seems to enjoy its own pulsations, expanding into the world and ingesting pieces of it. If you took a blind and dumb organism and gave it self-consciousness and

a name, if you made it stand out of nature and know consciously that it was unique, then you would have narcissism. In man, physicochemical identity and the sense of power and activity have become conscious.

In man a working level of narcissism is inseparable from self-esteem, from a basic sense of self-worth. We have learned, mostly from Alfred Adler, that what man needs most is to feel secure in his self-esteem. But man is not just a blind glob of idling protoplasm, but a creature with a name who lives in a world of symbols and dreams and not merely matter. His sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically, his cherished narcissism feeds on symbols, on an abstract idea of his own worth, an idea composed of sounds, words, and images, in the air, in the mind, on paper. And this means that man's natural yearning for organismic activity, the pleasures of incorporation and expansion, can be fed limitlessly in the domain of symbols and so into immortality. The single organism can expand into dimensions of worlds and times without moving a physical limb; it can take eternity into itself even as it gaspingly dies.

In childhood we see the struggle for self-esteem at its least disguised. The child is unashamed about what he needs and wants most. His whole organism shouts the claims of his natural narcissism. And this claim can make childhood hellish for the adults concerned, especially when there are several children competing at once for the prerogatives of limitless self-extension, what we might call "cosmic significance." The term is not meant to be taken lightly, because this is where our discussion is leading. We like to speak casually about "sibling rivalry," as though it were some kind of by-product of growing up, a bit of competitiveness and selfishness of children who have been spoiled, who haven't yet grown into a generous social nature. But it is too all-absorbing and relentless to be an aberration, it expresses the heart of the creature: the desire to stand out, to be *the* one in creation. When you combine natural narcissism with the basic need for self-esteem, you create a creature who has to feel himself an object of primary value: first in the universe, representing in himself all of life. This is the reason for the daily and usually excruciating struggle with siblings: the child cannot allow himself to be second-best or devalued, much less left out. "You gave him the biggest piece of candy!" "You gave him

more juice!" "Here's a little more, then." "Now she's got more juice than me!" "You let her light the fire in the fireplace and not me." "Okay, you light a piece of paper." "But this piece of paper is smaller than the one she lit." And so on and on. An animal who gets his feeling of worth symbolically has to minutely compare himself to those around him, to make sure he doesn't come off second-best. Sibling rivalry is a critical problem that reflects the basic human condition: it is not that children are vicious, selfish, or domineering. It is that they so openly express man's tragic destiny: he must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else.

When we appreciate how natural it is for man to strive to be a hero, how deeply it goes in his evolutionary and organismic constitution, how openly he shows it as a child, then it is all the more curious how ignorant most of us are, consciously, of what we really want and need. In our culture anyway, especially in modern times, the heroic seems too big for us, or we too small for it. Tell a young man that he is entitled to be a hero and he will blush. We disguise our struggle by piling up figures in a bank book to reflect privately our sense of heroic worth. Or by having only a little better home in the neighborhood, a bigger car, brighter children. But underneath throbs the ache of cosmic specialness, no matter how we mask it in concerns of smaller scope. Occasionally someone admits that he takes his heroism seriously, which gives most of us a chill, as did U.S. Congressman Mendel Rivers, who fed appropriations to the military machine and said he was the most powerful man since Julius Caesar. We may shudder at the crassness of earthly heroism, of both Caesar and his imitators, but the fault is not theirs, it is in the way society sets up its hero system and in the people it allows to fill its roles. The urge to heroism is natural, and to admit it honest. For everyone to admit it would probably release such pent-up force as to be devastating to societies as they now are.

The fact is that this is what society is and always has been: a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism. Each script is somewhat unique, each culture has a dif-

ferent hero system. What the anthropologists call "cultural relativity" is thus really the relativity of hero-systems the world over. But each cultural system is a dramatization of earthly heroes; each system cuts out roles for performances of various degrees of heroism: from the "high" heroism of a Churchill, a Mao, or a Buddha, to the "low" heroism of the coal miner, the peasant, the simple priest; the plain, everyday, earthy heroism wrought by gnarled working hands guiding a family through hunger and disease.

It doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning; that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. When Norman O. Brown said that Western society since Newton, no matter how scientific or secular it claims to be, is still as "religious" as any other, this is what he meant: "civilized" society is a hopeful belief and protest that science, money and goods *make man count* for more than any other animal. In this sense everything that man does is religious and heroic, and yet in danger of being fictitious and fallible.

The question that becomes then the most important one that man can put to himself is simply this: how conscious is he of what he is doing to earn his feeling of heroism? I suggested that if everyone honestly admitted his urge to be a hero it would be a devastating release of truth. It would make men demand that culture give them their due—a primary sense of human value as unique contributors to cosmic life. How would our modern societies contrive to satisfy such an honest demand, without being shaken to their foundations? Only those societies we today call "primitive" provided this feeling for their members. The minority groups in present-day industrial society who shout for freedom and human dignity are really clumsily asking that they be given a sense of primary heroism of which they have been cheated historically. This is why their in-

sistent claims are so troublesome and upsetting: how do we do such an "unreasonable" thing within the ways in which society is now set up? "They are asking for the impossible" is the way we usually put our bafflement.

But the truth about the need for heroism is not easy for anyone to admit, even the very ones who want to have their claims recognized. There's the rub. As we shall see from our subsequent discussion, to become conscious of what one is doing to earn his feeling of heroism is the main self-analytic problem of life. Everything painful and sobering in what psychoanalytic genius and religious genius have discovered about man revolves around the terror of admitting what one is doing to earn his self-esteem. This is why human heroes is a blind drivenness that burns people up; in passionate people, a screaming for glory as uncritical and reflective as the howling of a dog. In the more passive masses of mediocre men it is disguised as they humbly and complainingly follow out the roles that society provides for their heroes and try to earn their promotions within the system: wearing the standard uniforms—but allowing themselves to stick out, but ever so little and so safely, with a little ribbon or a red boutonniere, but not with head and shoulders.

If we were to peel away this massive disguise, the blocks of repression over human techniques for earning glory, we would arrive at the potentially most liberating question of all, the main problem of human life: How *empirically true* is the cultural hero system that sustains and drives men? We mentioned the meaner side of man's urge to cosmic heroism, but there is obviously the noble side as well. Man will lay down his life for his country, his society, his family. He will choose to throw himself on a grenade to save his comrades; he is capable of the highest generosity and self-sacrifice. But he has to feel and believe that what he is doing is truly heroic, timeless, and supremely meaningful. The crisis of modern society is precisely that the youth no longer feel heroic in the plan for action that their culture has set up. They don't believe it is empirically true to the problems of their lives and times. We are living a crisis of heroism that reaches into every aspect of our social life: the dropouts of university heroism, of business and career heroism, of political-action heroism; the rise of anti-heroes, those

who would be heroic each in his own way or like Charles Manson with his special "family", those whose tormented heroics lash out at the system that itself has ceased to represent agreed heroism. The great perplexity of our time, the churning of our age, is that the youth have sensed—for better or for worse—a great social-historical truth: that just as there are useless self-sacrifices in unjust wars, so too is there an ignoble heroics of whole societies: it can be the viciously destructive heroics of Hitler's Germany or the plain debasing and silly heroics of the acquisition and display of consumer goods, the piling up of money and privileges that now characterizes whole ways of life, capitalist and Soviet.

And the crisis of society is, of course, the crisis of organized religion too: religion is no longer valid as a hero system, and so the youth scorn it. If traditional culture is discredited as heroics, then the church that supports that culture automatically discredits itself. If the church, on the other hand, chooses to insist on its own special heroics, it might find that in crucial ways it must work against the culture, recruit youth to be anti-heroes to the ways of life of the society they live in. This is the dilemma of religion in our time.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this brief introduction is to suggest that the problem of heroics is the central one of human life, that it goes deeper into human nature than anything else because it is based on organismic narcissism and on the child's need for self-esteem as *the* condition for his life. Society itself is a codified hero system, which means that society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning. Every society thus is a "religion" whether it thinks so or not: Soviet "religion" and Maoist "religion" are as truly religious as are scientific and consumer "religion," no matter how much they may try to disguise themselves by omitting religious and spiritual ideas from their lives. As we shall see further on, it was Otto Rank who showed psychologically this religious nature of all human cultural creation; and more recently the idea was revived by Norman O. Brown in his

Life Against Death and by Robert Jay Lifton in his *Revolutionary Immortality*. If we accept these suggestions, then we must admit that we are dealing with the universal human problem; and we must be prepared to probe into it as honestly as possible, to be as shocked by the self-revelation of man as the best thought will allow. Let us pick this thought up with Kierkegaard and take it through Freud, to see where this stripping down of the last 150 years will lead us. If the penetrating honesty of a few books could immediately change the world, then the five authors just mentioned would already have shaken the nations to their foundations. But since everyone is carrying on as though the vital truths about man did not yet exist, it is necessary to add still another weight in the scale of human self-exposure. For twenty-five hundred years we have hoped and believed that if mankind could reveal itself to itself, could widely come to know its own cherished motives, then somehow it would tilt the balance of things in its own favor.

 PART I

THE DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY OF HEROISM

*I drink not from mere joy in wine nor to scoff
at faith—no, only to forget myself for a moment,
that only do I want of intoxication, that alone.*

—OMAR KHAYYAM

The Terror of Death

Is it not for us to confess that in our civilized attitude towards death we are once more living psychologically beyond our means, and must reform and give truth its due? Would it not be better to give death the place in actuality and in our thoughts which properly belongs to it, and to yield a little more prominence to that unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed? This hardly seems indeed a greater achievement, but rather a backward step . . . but it has the merit of taking somewhat more into account the true state of affairs. . . .

—SIGMUND FREUD¹

The first thing we have to do with heroism is to lay bare its underside, show what gives human heroics its specific nature and impetus. Here we introduce directly one of the great rediscoveries of modern thought: that of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death. After Darwin the problem of death as an evolutionary one came to the fore, and many thinkers immediately saw that it was a major psychological problem for man.² They also very quickly saw what real heroism was about, as Shaler wrote just at the turn of the century:³ heroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death. We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration; it moves us

deeply in our hearts because we have doubts about how brave we ourselves would be. When we see a man bravely facing his own extinction we rehearse the greatest victory we can imagine. And so the hero has been the center of human honor and acclaim since probably the beginning of specifically human evolution. But even before that our primate ancestors deferred to others who were extrapowerful and courageous and ignored those who were cowardly. Man has elevated animal courage into a cult.

Anthropological and historical research also began, in the nineteenth century, to put together a picture of the heroic since primitive and ancient times. The hero was the man who could go into the spirit world, the world of the dead, and return alive. He had his descendants in the mystery cults of the Eastern Mediterranean, which were cults of death and resurrection. The divine hero of each of these cults was one who had come back from the dead. And as we know today from the research into ancient myths and rituals, Christianity itself was a competitor with the mystery cults and won out—among other reasons—because it, too, featured a healer with supernatural powers who had risen from the dead. The great triumph of Easter is the joyful shout "Christ has risen!", an echo of the same joy that the devotees of the mystery cults enacted at their ceremonies of the victory over death. These cults, as G. Stanley Hall so aptly put it, were an attempt to attain "an immunity bath" from the greatest evil: death and the dread of it.⁴ All historical religions addressed themselves to this same problem of how to bear the end of life. Religions like Hinduism and Buddhism performed the ingenious trick of pretending not to want to be reborn, which is a sort of negative magic: claiming not to want what you really want most.⁵ When philosophy took over from religion it also took over religion's central problem, and death became the real "muse of philosophy" from its beginnings in Greece right through Heidegger and modern existentialism.⁶

We already have volumes of work and thought on the subject, from religion and philosophy and—since Darwin—from science itself. The problem is how to make sense out of it; the accumulation of research and opinion on the fear of death is already too large to be dealt with and summarized in any simple way. The revival of interest in death, in the last few decades, has alone already piled up

a formidable literature, and this literature does not point in any single direction.

The "Healthy-Minded" Argument

There are "healthy-minded" persons who maintain that fear of death is not a natural thing for man, that we are not born with it. An increasing number of careful studies on how the actual fear of death develops in the child⁷ agree fairly well that the child has no knowledge of death until about the age of three to five. How could he? It is too abstract an idea, too removed from his experience. He lives in a world that is full of living, acting things, responding to him, amusing him, feeding him. He doesn't know what it means for life to disappear forever, nor theorize where it would go. Only gradually does he recognize that there is a thing called death that takes some people away forever; very reluctantly he comes to admit that it sooner or later takes everyone away, but this gradual realization of the inevitability of death can take up until the ninth or tenth year.

If the child has no knowledge of an abstract idea like absolute negation, he does have his own anxieties. He is absolutely dependent on the mother, experiences loneliness when she is absent, frustration when he is deprived of gratification, irritation at hunger and discomfort, and so on. If he were abandoned to himself his world would drop away, and his organism must sense this at some level; we call this the anxiety of object-loss. Isn't this anxiety, then, a natural, organismic fear of annihilation? Again, there are many who look at this as a very relative matter. They believe that if the mother has done her job in a warm and dependable way, the child's natural anxieties and guilts will develop in a moderate way, and he will be able to place them firmly under the control of his developing personality.⁸ The child who has good maternal experiences will develop a sense of basic security and will not be subject to morbid fears of losing support, of being annihilated, or the like.⁹ As he grows up to understand death rationally by the age of nine or ten, he will accept it as part of his world view, but the idea will not

poison his self-confident attitude toward life. The psychiatrist Rheingold says categorically that annihilation anxiety is not part of the child's natural experience but is engendered in him by bad experiences with a depriving mother.¹⁰ This theory puts the whole burden of anxiety onto the child's nurture and not his nature. Another psychiatrist, in a less extreme vein, sees the fear of death as greatly heightened by the child's experiences with his parents, by their hostile denial of his life impulses, and, more generally, by the antagonism of society to human freedom and self-expansiveness.¹¹

As we will see later on, this view is very popular today in the widespread movement toward unrepressed living, the urge to a new freedom for natural biological urges, a new attitude of pride and joy in the body, the abandonment of shame, guilt, and self-hatred. From this point of view, fear of death is something that society creates and at the same time uses against the person to keep him in submission; the psychiatrist Moloney talked about it as a "culture mechanism," and Marcuse as an "ideology."¹² Norman O. Brown, in a vastly influential book that we shall discuss at some length, went so far as to say that there could be a birth and development of the child in a "second innocence" that would be free of the fear of death because it would not deny natural vitality and would leave the child fully open to physical living.¹³

It is easy to see that, from this point of view, those who have had early experiences will be most morbidly fixated on the anxiety of death; and if by chance they grow up to be philosophers they will probably make the idea a central dictum of their thought—as did Schopenhauer, who both hated his mother and went on to pronounce death the "muse of philosophy." If you have a "sour" character structure or especially tragic experiences, then you are bound to be pessimistic. One psychologist remarked to me that the whole idea of the fear of death was an import by existentialists and Protestant theologians who had been scarred by their European experiences or who carried around the extra weight of a Calvinist and Lutheran heritage of life-denial. Even the distinguished psychologist Gardner Murphy seems to lean to this school and urges us to study *the person* who exhibits the fear of death, who places anxiety in the center of his thought; and Murphy asks why the living of life in love and joy cannot also be regarded as real and basic.¹⁴

The "Morbidly-Minded" Argument

The "healthy-minded" argument just discussed is one side of the picture of the accumulated research and opinion on the problem of the fear of death, but there is another side. A large body of people would agree with these observations on early experience and would admit that experiences may heighten natural anxieties and later fears, but these people would also claim very strongly that nevertheless the fear of death is natural and is present in everyone, that it is the basic fear that influences all others, a fear from which no one is immune, no matter how disguised it may be. William James spoke very early for this school, and with his usual colorful realism he called death "the worm at the core" of man's pretensions to happiness.¹⁵ No less a student of human nature than Max Scheler thought that all men must have some kind of certain intuition of this "worm at the core," whether they admitted it or not.¹⁶ Countless other authorities—some of whom we shall parade in the following pages—belong to this school: students of the stature of Freud, many of his close circle, and serious researchers who are not psychoanalysts. What are we to make of a dispute in which there are two distinct camps, both studied with distinguished authorities? Jacques Choron goes so far as to say that it is questionable whether it will ever be possible to decide whether the fear of death is or is not the basic anxiety.¹⁷ In matters like this, then, the most that one can do is to take sides, to give an opinion based on the authorities that seem to him most compelling, and to present some of the compelling arguments.

I frankly side with this second school—in fact, this whole book is a network of arguments based on the universality of the fear of death, or "terror" as I prefer to call it, in order to convey how all-consuming it is when we look it full in the face. The first document that I want to present and linger on is a paper written by the noted psychoanalyst Gregory Zilboorg; it is an especially penetrating essay that—for succinctness and scope—has not been much improved upon, even though it appeared several decades ago.¹⁸ Zilboorg says that most people think death fear is absent because it rarely shows its true face; but he argues that underneath all appearances fear of death is universally present:

For behind the sense of insecurity in the face of danger, behind the sense of discouragement and depression, there always lurks the basic fear of death, a fear which undergoes most complex elaborations and manifests itself in many indirect ways. . . . No one is free of the fear of death. . . . The anxiety neuroses, the various phobic states, even a considerable number of depressive suicidal states and many schizophrenias amply demonstrate the ever-present fear of death which becomes woven into the major conflicts of the given psychopathological conditions. . . . We may take for granted that the fear of death is always present in our mental functioning.¹⁹

Hadn't James said the same thing earlier, in his own way?

Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet.²⁰

The difference in these two statements is not so much in the imagery and style as in the fact that Zilboorg's comes almost a half-century later and is based on that much more real clinical work, not only on philosophical speculation or personal intuition. But it also continues the straight line of development from James and the post-Darwinians who saw the fear of death as a biological and evolutionary problem. Here I think he is on very sound ground, and I especially like the way he puts the case. Zilboorg points out that this fear is actually an expression of the instinct of self-preservation, which functions as a constant drive to maintain life and to master the dangers that threaten life:

Such constant expenditure of psychological energy on the business of preserving life would be impossible if the fear of death were not as constant. The very term "self-preservation" implies an effort against some force of disintegration; the affective aspect of this is fear, fear of death.²¹

In other words, the fear of death must be present behind all our normal functioning, in order for the organism to be armed toward self-preservation. But the fear of death cannot be present constantly in one's mental functioning, else the organism could not function. Zilboorg continues:

If this fear were as constantly conscious, we should be unable to function normally. It must be properly repressed to keep us living with any modicum of comfort. We know very well that to repress means more than to put away and to forget that which was put away and the place where we put it. It means also to maintain a constant psychological effort to keep the lid on and inwardly never relax our watchfulness.²²

And so we can understand what seems like an impossible paradox: the ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning of our instinct of self-preservation, as well as our utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life:

Therefore in normal times we move about actually without ever believing in our own death, as if we fully believed in our own corporeal immortality. We are intent on mastering death. . . . A man will say, of course, that he knows he will die some day, but he does not really care. He is having a good time with living, and he does not think about death and does not care to bother about it—but this is a purely intellectual, verbal admission. The affect of fear is repressed.²³

The argument from biology and evolution is basic and has to be taken seriously; I don't see how it can be left out of any discussion. Animals in order to survive have had to be protected by fear-responses, in relation not only to other animals but to nature itself. They had to see the real relationship of their limited powers to the dangerous world in which they were immersed. Reality and fear go together naturally. As the human infant is in an even more exposed and helpless situation, it is foolish to assume that the fear response of animals would have disappeared in such a weak and highly sensitive species. It is more reasonable to think that it was instead heightened, as some of the early Darwinians thought: early men who were most afraid were those who were most realistic about their situation in nature, and they passed on to their offspring a realism that had a high survival value.²⁴ The result was the emergence of man as we know him: a hyperanxious animal who constantly invents reasons for anxiety even where there are none.

The argument from psychoanalysis is less speculative and has to be taken even more seriously. It showed us something about the child's inner world that we had never realized: namely, that it was

more filled with terror, the more the child was different from other animals. We could say that fear is programmed into the lower animals by ready-made instincts; but an animal who has no instincts has no programmed fears. Man's fears are fashioned out of the ways in which he perceives the world. Now, what is unique about the child's perception of the world? For one thing, the extreme confusion of cause-and-effect relationships; for another, extreme unreality about the limits of his own powers. The child lives in a situation of utter dependence; and when his needs are met it must seem to him that he has magical powers, real omnipotence. If he experiences pain, hunger, or discomfort, all he has to do is to scream and he is relieved and lulled by gentle, loving sounds. He is a magician and a telepath who has only to mumble and to imagine and the world turns to his desires.

But now the penalty for such perceptions. In a magical world where things cause other things to happen just by a mere thought or a look of displeasure, anything can happen to anyone. When the child experiences inevitable and real frustrations from his parents, he directs hate and destructive feelings toward them; and he has no way of knowing that malevolent feelings cannot be fulfilled by the same magic as were his other wishes. Psychoanalysts believe that this confusion is a main cause of guilt and helplessness in the child. In his very fine essay Wahl summed up this paradox:

... the socialization processes for all children are painful and frustrating, and hence no child escapes forming hostile death wishes toward his socializers. Therefore, none escape the fear of personal death in either direct or symbolic form. Repression is usually . . . immediate and effective. . . .²⁵

The child is too weak to take responsibility for all this destructive feeling, and he can't control the magical execution of his desires. This is what we mean by an immature ego: the child doesn't have the sure ability to organize his perceptions and his relationship to the world; he can't control his own activity; and he doesn't have sure command over the acts of others. He thus has no real control over the magical cause-and-effect that he senses, either inside himself or outside in nature and in others: his destructive wishes could explode, his parents' wishes likewise. The forces of nature are con-

fused, externally and internally; and for a weak ego this fact makes for quantities of exaggerated potential power and added terror. The result is that the child—at least some of the time—lives with an inner sense of chaos that other animals are immune to.²⁶

Ironically, even when the child makes out real cause-and-effect relationships they become a burden to him because he overgeneralizes them. One such generalization is what the psychoanalysts call the "falcon principle." The child crushes insects, sees the cat eat a mouse and make it vanish, joins with the family to make a pet rabbit disappear into their interiors, and so on. He comes to know something about the power relations of the world but can't give them relative value: the parents could eat him and make him vanish, and he could likewise eat them; when the father gets a fierce glow in his eyes as he clubs a rat, the watching child might also expect to be clubbed—especially if he has been thinking bad magical thoughts.

I don't want to seem to make an exact picture of processes that are still unclear to us or to make out that all children live in the same world and have the same problems; also, I wouldn't want to make the child's world seem more lurid than it really is most of the time; but I think it is important to show the painful contradictions that must be present in it at least some of the time and to show how fantastic a world it surely is for the first few years of the child's life. Perhaps then we could understand better why Zillboorg said that the fear of death "undergoes most complex elaborations and manifests itself in many indirect ways." Or, as Wahl so perfectly put it, death is a *complex symbol* and not any particular, sharply defined thing to the child:

... the child's concept of death is not a single thing, but it is rather a composite of mutually contradictory paradoxes . . . death itself is not only a state, but a complex symbol, the significance of which will vary from one person to another and from one culture to another.²⁷

We could understand, too, why children have their recurrent nightmares, their universal phobias of insects and mean dogs. In their tortured interiors radiate complex symbols of many inadmissible realities—terror of the world, the horror of one's own wishes, the fear of vengeance by the parents, the disappearance of things, one's

lack of control over anything, really. It is too much for any animal to take, but the child has to take it, and so he wakes up screaming with almost punctual regularity during the period when his weak ego is in the process of consolidating things.

The "Disappearance" of the Fear of Death

Yet, the nightmares become more and more widely spaced, and some children have more than others: we are back again to the beginning of our discussion, to those who do not believe that the fear of death is normal, who think that it is a neurotic exaggeration that draws on bad early experiences. Otherwise, they say, how explain that so many people—the vast majority—seem to survive the flurry of childhood nightmares and go on to live a healthy, more-or-less optimistic life, untroubled by death? As Montaigne said, the peasant has a profound indifference and a patience toward death and the sinister side of life; and if we say that this is because of his stupidity, then "let's all learn from stupidity."²⁸ Today, when we know more than Montaigne, we would say "let's all learn from repression"—but the moral would have just as much weight: repression takes care of the complex symbol of death for most people.

But its disappearance doesn't mean that the fear was never there. The argument of those who believe in the universality of the innate terror of death rests its case mostly on what we know about how effective repression is. The argument can probably never be cleanly decided: if you claim that a concept is not present because it is repressed, you can't lose; it is not a fair game, intellectually, because you always hold the trump card. This type of argument makes psychoanalysis seem unscientific to many people, the fact that its proponents can claim that someone denies one of their concepts because he represses his consciousness of its truth.

But repression is not a magical word for winning arguments; it is a real phenomenon, and we have been able to study many of its workings. This study gives it legitimacy as a scientific concept and makes it a more-or-less dependable ally in our argument. For one thing, there is a growing body of research trying to get at the

consciousness of death denied by repression that uses psychological tests such as measuring galvanic skin responses; it strongly suggests that underneath the most bland exterior lurks the universal anxiety, the "worm at the core."²⁹

For another thing, there is nothing like shocks in the real world to jar loose repressions. Recently psychiatrists reported an increase in anxiety neuroses in children as a result of the earth tremors in Southern California. For these children the discovery that life really includes cataclysmic danger was too much for their still-imperfect denial systems—hence open outbursts of anxiety. With adults we see this manifestation of anxiety in the face of impending catastrophe where it takes the form of panic. Recently several people suffered broken limbs and other injuries after forcing open their airplane's safety door during take-off and jumping from the wing to the ground; the incident was triggered by the backfire of an engine. Obviously underneath these harmless noises other things are rumbling in the creature.

But even more important is how repression works: it is not simply a negative force opposing life energies; it lives on life energies and uses them creatively. I mean that fears are naturally absorbed by expansive organismic striving. Nature seems to have built into organisms an innate healthy-mindedness; it expresses itself in self-delight, in the pleasure of unfolding one's capacities into the world, in the incorporation of things in that world, and in feeding on its limitless experiences. This is a lot of very positive experience, and when a powerful organism moves with it, it gives contentment. As Santayana once put it: a lion must feel more secure that God is on his side than a gazelle. On the most elemental level the organism works actively against its own fragility by seeking to expand and perpetuate itself in living experience; instead of shrinking, it moves toward more life. Also, it does one thing at a time, avoiding needless distractions from all-absorbing activity; in this way, it would seem, fear of death can be carefully ignored or actually absorbed in the life-expanding processes. Occasionally we seem to see such a vital organism on the human level: I am thinking of the portrait of *Zorba the Greek* drawn by Nikos Kazantzakis. Zorba was an ideal of the nonchalant victory of all-absorbing daily passion over timidity and death, and he purged others in his life-affirming flame. But Kazant-

zakis himself was no Zorba—which is partly why the character of Zorba rang a bit false—nor are most other men. Still, everyone enjoys a working amount of basic narcissism, even though it is not a lion's. The child who is well nourished and loved develops, as we said, a sense of magical omnipotence, a sense of his own indestructibility, a feeling of proven power and secure support. He can imagine himself, deep down, to be eternal. We might say that his repression of the idea of his own death is made easy for him because he is fortified against it in his very narcissistic vitality. This type of character probably helped Freud to say that the unconscious does not know death. Anyway, we know that basic narcissism is increased when one's childhood experiences have been securely life-supporting and warmly enhancing to the sense of self, to the feeling of being really special, truly Number One in creation. The result is that some people have more of what the psychoanalyst Leon J. Saul has aptly called "Inner Sustainment."³⁰ It is a sense of bodily confidence in the face of experience that sees the person more easily through severe life crises and even sharp personality changes; it almost seems to take the place of the directive instincts of lower animals. One can't help thinking of Freud again, who had more inner sustainment than most men, thanks to his mother and favorable early environment; he knew the confidence and courage that it gave to a man, and he himself faced up to life and to a fatal cancer with a Stoic heroism. Again we have evidence that the complex symbol of fear of death would be very variable in its intensity; it would be, as Wahl concluded, "profoundly dependent upon the nature and the vicissitudes of the developmental process."³¹

But I want to be careful not to make too much of natural vitality and inner sustainment. As we will see in Chapter Six, even the unusually favored Freud suffered his whole life from phobias and from death-anxiety; and he came to fully perceive the world under the aspect of natural terror. I don't believe that the complex symbol of death is ever absent, no matter how much vitality and inner sustainment a person has. Even more, if we say that these powers make repression easy and natural, we are only saying the half of it. Actually, they get their very power from repression. Psychiatrists argue that the fear of death varies in intensity depending on the developmental process, and I think that one important reason for

this variability is that the fear is transmuted in that process. If the child has had a very favorable upbringing, it only serves all the better to hide the fear of death. After all, repression is made possible by the natural identification of the child with the powers of his parents. If he has been well cared for, identification comes easily and solidly, and his parents' powerful triumph over death automatically becomes his. What is more natural to banish one's fears than to live on delegated powers? And what does the whole growing-up period signify, if not the giving over of one's life-project? I am going to be talking about these things all the way through this book and do not want to develop them in this introductory discussion. What we will see is that man cuts out for himself a manageable world: he throws himself into action uncritically, unthinkingly. He accepts the cultural programming that turns his nose where he is supposed to look; he doesn't bite the world off in one piece as a giant would, but in small manageable pieces, as a beaver does. He uses all kinds of techniques, which we call the "character defenses": he learns not to expose himself, not to stand out; he learns to embed himself in other-power, both of concrete persons and of things and cultural commands; the result is that he comes to exist in the imagined infallibility of the world around him. He doesn't have to have fears when his feet are solidly mired and his life mapped out in a ready-made maze. All he has to do is to plunge ahead in a compulsive style of drivenness in the "ways of the world" that the child learns and in which he lives later as a kind of grim equanimity—the "strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting"—as James put it. This is the deeper reason that Montaigne's peasant isn't troubled until the very end, when the Angel of Death, who has always been sitting on his shoulder, extends his wing. Or at least until he is prematurely startled into dumb awareness, like the "Husbands" in John Casavetes' fine film. At times like this, when the awareness dawns that has always been blotted out by frenetic, ready-made activity, we see the transmutation of repression redistilled, so to speak, and the fear of death emerges in pure essence. This is why people have psychotic breaks when repression no longer works, when the forward momentum of activity is no longer possible. Besides, the peasant mentality is far less romantic than Montaigne would have

us believe. The peasant's equanimity is usually immersed in a style of life that has elements of real madness, and so it protects him: an undercurrent of constant hate and bitterness expressed in feuding, bullying, bickering and family quarrels, the petty mentality, the self-deprecation, the superstition, the obsessive control of daily life by a strict authoritarianism, and so on. As the title of a recent essay by Joseph Lopreato has it: "How would you like to be a peasant?"

We will also touch upon another large dimension in which the complex symbol of death is transmuted and transcended by man—belief in immortality, the extension of one's being into eternity. Right now we can conclude that there are many ways that repression works to calm the anxious human animal, so that he need not be anxious at all.

I think we have reconciled our two divergent positions on the fear of death. The "environmental" and the "innate" positions are both part of the same picture; they merge naturally into one another; it all depends from which angle you approach the picture: from the side of the disguises and transmutations of the fear of death or from the side of its apparent absence. I admit with a sense of scientific uneasiness that whatever angle you use, you don't get at the actual fear of death; and so I reluctantly agree with Choron that the argument can probably never be cleanly "won." Nevertheless something very important emerges: there are different images of man that he can draw and choose from.

On the one hand, we see a human animal who is partly dead to the world, who is most "dignified" when he shows a certain obliviousness to his fate, when he allows himself to be driven through life; who is most "free" when he lives in secure dependency on powers around him, when he is least in possession of himself. On the other hand, we get an image of a human animal who is overly sensitive to the world, who cannot shut it out, who is thrown back on his own meagre powers, and who seems least free to move and act, least in possession of himself, and most undignified. Which ever image we choose to identify with depends in large part upon ourselves. Let us then explore and develop these images further to see what they reveal to us.

Human Character as a Vital Life

Take stock of those around you and you will . . . hear them talk in precise terms about themselves and their surroundings, which would seem to point to them having ideas on the matter. But start to analyse those ideas and you will find that they hardly reflect in any way the reality to which they appear to refer, and if you go deeper you will discover that there is not even an attempt to adjust the ideas to this reality. Quite the contrary: through these notions the individual is trying to cut off any personal vision of reality, of his own very life. For life is at the start a chaos in which one is lost. The individual suspects this, but he is frightened at finding himself face to face with this terrible reality, and tries to cover it over with a curtain of fantasy, where everything is clear. It does not worry him that his "ideas" are not true, he uses them as trenches for the defense of his existence, as scarecrows to frighten away reality.

—JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET¹

The problem of anality and the castration complex already takes us a long way toward answering the question that intrigues us all: if the basic quality of heroism is genuine courage, why are so few people truly courageous? Why is it so rare to see a man who can stand on his own feet? Even the great Carlyle, who frightened many people, proclaimed that he stood on his father as on a stone pillar

buried in the ground under him. The unspoken implication is that if he stood on his own feet alone, the ground would cave in under him. This question goes right to the heart of the human condition, and we shall be attacking it from many sides all through this book. I once wrote² that I thought the reason man was so naturally cowardly was that he felt he had no authority; and the reason he had no authority was in the very nature of the way the human animal is shaped: all our meanings are built into us from the outside, from our dealings with others. This is what gives us a "self" and a superego. Our whole world of right and wrong, good and bad, our name, precisely who we are, is grafted into us; and we never feel we have authority to offer things on our own. How could we?—I argued—since we feel ourselves in many ways guilty and beholden to others, a lesser creation of theirs, indebted to them for our very birth.

But this is only part of the story—the most superficial and obvious part. There are deeper reasons for our lack of courage, and if we are going to understand man we have to dig for them. The psychologist Abraham Maslow had the keenest sense for significant ideas, and shortly before his recent untimely death he began to attack the problem of the fear of standing alone.³ Maslow used a broad humanistic perspective in his work, and he liked to talk about concepts like "actualizing one's potential" and one's "full humanness." He saw these as natural developmental urges and wondered what holds them up, what blocks them. He answered the question in existential language, using terms like the "fear of one's own greatness" and the "evasion of one's destiny." This approach throws a new light on the problem of courage. In his words:

We fear our highest possibility (as well as our lowest ones). We are generally afraid to become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments. . . . We enjoy and even thrill to the godlike possibilities we see in ourselves in such peak moments. And yet we simultaneously shiver with weakness, awe and fear before these very same possibilities.⁴

Maslow used an apt term for this evasion of growth, this fear of realizing one's own fullest powers. He called it the "Jonah Syndrome." He understood the syndrome as the evasion of the full intensity of life:

We are just not strong enough to endure more! It is just too shaking and wearing. So often people in . . . ecstatic moments say, "It's too much," or "I can't stand it," or "I could die" . . . Delirious happiness cannot be borne for long. Our organisms are just too weak for any large doses of greatness. . . .

The Jonah Syndrome, then, seen from this basic point of view, is "partly a justified fear of being torn apart, of losing control, of being shattered and disintegrated, even of being killed by the experience." And the result of this syndrome is what we would expect a weak organism to do: to cut back the full intensity of life:

For some people this evasion of one's own growth, setting low levels of aspiration, the fear of doing what one is capable of doing, voluntary self-crippling, pseudo-stupidity, mock-humility are in fact defenses against grandiosity. . . .⁵

It all boils down to a simple lack of strength to bear the superlative, to open oneself to the totality of experience—an idea that was well appreciated by William James and more recently was developed in phenomenological terms in the classic work of Rudolf Otto. Otto talked about the terror of the world, the feeling of overwhelming awe, wonder, and fear in the face of creation—the miracle of it, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of each single thing, of the fact that there are things at all.⁶ What Otto did was to get descriptively at man's natural feeling of inferiority in the face of the massive transcendence of creation; his real *creature feeling* before the crushing and negating miracle of Being. We now

* As we shall see in the pages that follow, other thinkers had their version of the "Jonah Syndrome" long before Maslow; I am thinking especially of Rank, who gave the idea no special name, and of Freud, who probably began our scientific approach to it with his famous discovery of the "Wrecked by Success" syndrome. He saw that certain people couldn't stand success after they had achieved it; as it was too much for them, they quickly gave it up or went to pieces. I am leaving Freud out here because Maslow so well represents the existential approach that I believe is a considerable expansion of the Freudian horizon—even though Freud himself developed far toward an existential framework, as we shall see in Chapter Six where we discuss this problem again.

understand how a phenomenology of religious experience ties into psychology: right at the point of the problem of courage.

We might say that the child is a "natural" coward: he cannot have the strength to support the terror of creation. The world as it is, creation out of the void, things as they are, things as they are not, are too much for us to be able to stand. Or, better: they *would* be too much for us to bear without crumbling in a faint, trembling like a leaf, standing in a trance *in response* to the movement, colors, and odors of the world. I say "would be" because most of us—by the time we leave childhood—have repressed our vision of the primary miraculousness of creation. We have closed it off, changed it, and no longer perceive the world as it is to raw experience. Sometimes we may recapture this world by remembering some striking childhood perceptions, how suffused they were in emotion and wonder—how a favorite grandfather looked, or one's first love in his early teens. We change these heavily emotional perceptions precisely because we need to move about in the world with some kind of equanimity, some kind of strength and directness; we can't keep gaping with our heart in our mouth, greedily sucking up with our eyes everything great and powerful that strikes us. The great boon of repression is that it makes it possible to live decisively in an overwhelmingly miraculous and incomprehensible world, a world so full of beauty, majesty, and terror that if animals perceived it all they would be paralyzed to act.

But nature has protected the lower animal by endowing them with instincts: An instinct is a programmed perception that calls into play a programmed reaction. It is very simple. Animals are not moved by what they cannot react to. They live in a tiny world, a sliver of reality, one neuro-chemical program that keeps them walking behind their nose and shuts out everything else. But look at man, the impossible creature! Here nature seems to have thrown caution to the winds along with the programmed instincts. She created an animal who has no defense against full perception of the external world, an animal completely open to experience. Not only in front of his nose, in his *umwelt*, but in many other *umwelten*. He can relate not only to animals in his own species, but in some ways to all other species. He can contemplate not only what is edible for him, but everything that grows. He not only lives in this moment, but expands his inner self to yesterday, his curiosity to centuries

ago, his fears to five billion years from now when the sun will cool, his hopes to an eternity from now. He lives not only on a tiny territory, nor even on an entire planet, but in a galaxy, in a universe, and in dimensions beyond visible universes. It is appalling, the burden that man bears, the *experiential* burden. As we saw in the last chapter, man can't even take his own body for granted as can other animals. It is not just hind feet, a tail that he drags, that are just "there," limbs to be used and taken for granted or chewed off when caught in a trap and when they give pain and prevent movement. Man's body is a *problem* to him that has to be explained. Not only his body is strange, but also its inner landscape, the memories and dreams. Man's very insides—his self—are foreign to him. He doesn't know who he is, why he was born, what he is doing on the planet, what he is supposed to do, what he can expect. His own existence is incomprehensible to him, a miracle just like the rest of creation, closer to him, right near his pounding heart, but for that reason all the more strange. Each thing is a problem, and man can shut out nothing. As Maslow has well said, "It is precisely the god-like in ourselves that we are ambivalent about, fascinated by and fearful of, motivated to and defensive against. This is one aspect of the basic human predicament, that we are simultaneously worms and gods."⁷ There it is again: gods with anuses.

The historic value of Freud's work is that it came to grips with the peculiar animal that man was, the animal that was not programmed by instincts to close off perception and assure automatic equanimity and forceful action. Man had to invent and create out of himself the limitations of perception and the equanimity to live on this planet. And so the core of psychodynamics, the formation of the human character, is a study in human self-limitation and in the terrifying costs of that limitation. The hostility to psychoanalysis in the past, today, and in the future, will always be a hostility against admitting that man lives by lying to himself about himself and about his world, and that character, to follow Ferenczi and Brown, is a vital lie. I particularly like the way Maslow has summed up this contribution of Freudian thought:

Freud's greatest discovery, the one which lies at the root of psychodynamics, is that *the* great cause of much psychological illness is the fear of knowledge of oneself—of one's emotions, impulses, memories, ca-

pacities, potentialities, of one's destiny. We have discovered that fear of knowledge of oneself is very often isomorphic with, and parallel with, fear of the outside world.

And what is this fear, but a fear of the reality of creation in relation to our powers and possibilities:

In general this kind of fear is defensive, in the sense that it is a protection of our self-esteem, of our love and respect for ourselves. We tend to be afraid of any knowledge that could cause us to despise ourselves or to make us feel inferior, weak, worthless, evil, shameful. We protect ourselves and our ideal image of ourselves by repression and similar defenses, which are essentially techniques by which we avoid becoming conscious of unpleasant or dangerous truths.⁸

The individual has to repress *globally*, from the entire spectrum of his experience, if he wants to feel a warm sense of inner value and basic security. This sense of value and support is something that nature gives to each animal by the automatic instinctive programming and in the pulsating of the vital processes. But man, poor denuded creature, has to build and earn inner value and security. He must repress his smallness in the adult world, his failures to live up to adult commands and codes. He must repress his own feelings of physical and moral inadequacy, not only the inadequacy of his good intentions but also his guilt and his evil intentions: the death wishes and hatreds that result from being frustrated and blocked by the adults. He must repress his parents' inadequacy, their anxieties and terrors, because these make it difficult for him to feel secure and strong. He must repress his own animality, his compromising bodily functions that spell his mortality, his fundamental expendability in nature. And with all this, and more that we leave unsaid, he must repress the primary awesomeness of the external world.

In his later years Freud evidently came to realize, as Adler had earlier, that the thing that really bothers the child is the nature of his world, not so much his own inner drives. He talked less about the power of the Oedipus complex and more about "human perplexity and helplessness in the face of nature's dreaded forces," "the terrors of nature," "the painful riddle of death," "our anxiety in the

face of life's dangers," and "the great necessities of fate, against which there is no remedy."⁹ And when it came to the central problem of anxiety, he no longer talked—as he had in his early work—about the child's being overwhelmed from within by his instinctual urges; instead, Freud's formulations became existential. Anxiety was now seen largely as a matter of the reaction to global helplessness, abandonment, fate:

I therefore maintain that the fear of death is to be regarded as an analogue of the fear of castration, and that the situation to which the ego reacts is the state of being forsaken or deserted by the protecting superego—by the powers of destiny—which puts an end to security against every danger.¹⁰

This formulation indicates a great broadening of perspective. Add to it a generation or two of psychoanalytic clinical work, and we have achieved a remarkably faithful understanding of what really bothers the child, how life is really too much for him, how he has to avoid too much thought, too much perception, too much *life*. And at the same time, how he has to avoid the death that rumbles behind and underneath every carefree activity, that looks over his shoulder as he plays. The result is that we now know that the human animal is characterized by two great fears that other animals are protected from: the fear of life and the fear of death. In the science of man it was Otto Rank, above all, who brought these fears into prominence, based his whole system of thought on them, and showed how central they were to an understanding of man. At about the same time that Rank wrote, Heidegger brought these fears to the center of existential philosophy. He argued that the basic anxiety of man is anxiety *about* being-in-the-world, as well as anxiety *of* being-in-the-world. That is, both fear of death and fear of life, of experience and individuation.¹¹ Man is reluctant to move out into the overwhelmingness of his world, the real dangers of it; he shrinks back from losing himself in the all-consuming appetites of others, from spinning out of control in the clutchings and clawings of men, beasts and machines. As an animal organism man senses the kind of planet he has been put down on, the nightmarish, demonic frenzy in which nature has unleashed billions of individual

organismic appetites of all kinds—not to mention earthquakes, meteors, and hurricanes, which seem to have their own hellish appetites. Each thing, in order to deliciously expand, is forever gobbling up others. Appetites may be innocent because they are naturally given, but any organism caught in the myriad cross-purposes of this planet is a potential victim of this very innocence—and it shrinks away from life lest it lose its own. Life can suck one up, sap his energies, submerge him, take away his self-control, give so much new experience so quickly that he will burst; make him stick out among others, emerge onto dangerous ground, load him up with new responsibilities which need great strength to bear, expose him to new contingencies, new chances. Above all there is the danger of a slip-up, an accident, a chance disease, and of course of death, the final sucking up, the total submergence and negation.

The great scientific simplification of psychoanalysis is the concept that the whole of early experience is an attempt by the child to deny the anxiety of his emergence, his fear of losing his support, of standing alone, helpless and afraid. The child's character, his style of life, is his way of using the power of others, the support of the things and the ideas of his culture, to banish from his awareness the actual fact of his natural impotence. Not only his impotence to avoid death, but his impotence to stand alone, firmly rooted on his own powers. In the face of the terror of the world, the miracle of creation, the crushing power of reality, not even the tiger has secure and limitless power, much less the child. His world is a transcendent mystery; even the parents to whom he relates in a natural and secure dependency are primary miracles. How else could they appear? The mother is the first awesome miracle that haunts the child his whole life, whether he lives within her powerful aura or rebels against it. The superordinacy of his world intrudes upon him in the form of fantastic faces smiling up close through gaping teeth, rolling eery eyes, piercing him from afar with burning and threatening glances. He lives in a world of flesh-and-blood Kwakiutl masks that mock his self-sufficiency. The only way he could securely oppose them would be to know that he is as godlike as they, but he can never know this straightforwardly and unambiguously. There is no secure answer to the awesome mystery of the human face that scrutinizes itself in the mirror; no answer, at any rate, that can

come from the person himself, from his own center. One's own face may be godlike in its miraculousness, but one lacks the godlike power to know what it means, the godlike strength to have been responsible for its emergence.

In these ways, then, we understand that if the child were to give in to the overpowering character of reality and experience he would not be able to act with the kind of equanimity we need in our non-instinctive world. So one of the first things a child has to do is to learn to "abandon ecstasy," to do without awe, to leave fear and trembling behind. Only then can he act with a certain oblivious self-confidence, when he has naturalized his world. We say "naturalized" but we mean unnaturalized, falsified, with the truth obscured, the despair of the human condition hidden, a despair that the child glimpses in his night terrors and daytime phobias and neuroses. This despair he avoids by building defenses; and these defenses allow him to feel a basic sense of self-worth, of meaningfulness, of power. They allow him to feel that he *controls* his life and his death, that he really does live and act as a willful and free individual, that he has a unique and self-fashioned identity, that he is *somebody*—not just a trembling accident germinated on a hothouse planet that Carlyle for all time called a "hall of doom." We called one's life style a vital lie, and now we can understand better why we said it was vital: it is a *necessary* and basic dishonesty about oneself and one's whole situation. This revelation is what the Freudian revolution in thought really ends up in and is the basic reason that we still strain against Freud. We don't want to admit that we are fundamentally dishonest about reality, that we do not really control our own lives. We don't want to admit that we do not stand alone, that we always rely on something that transcends us, some system of ideas and powers in which we are embedded and which support us. This power is not always obvious. It need not be overtly a god or openly a stronger person, but it can be the power of an all-absorbing activity, a passion, a dedication to a game, a way of life, that like a comfortable web keeps a person buoyed up and ignorant of himself, of the fact that he does not rest on his own center. All of us are driven to be supported in a self-forgetful way, ignorant of what energies we really draw on, of the kind of lie we have fashioned in order to live securely and serenely. Augustine was a

master analyst of this, as were Kierkegaard, Scheler, and Tillich in our day. They saw that man could strut and boast all he wanted, but that he really drew his "courage to be" from a god, a string of sexual conquests, a Big Brother, a flag, the proletariat, and the fetish of money and the size of a bank balance.

The defenses that form a person's character support a grand illusion, and when we grasp this we can understand the full drivenness of man. He is driven away from himself, from self-knowledge, self-reflection. He is driven toward things that support the lie of his character, his automatic equanimity. But he is also drawn precisely toward those things that make him anxious, as a way of skirting them masterfully, testing himself against them, controlling them by defying them. As Kierkegaard taught us, anxiety lures us on, becomes the spur to much of our energetic activity: we flirt with our own growth, but also dishonestly. This explains much of the friction in our lives. We enter symbiotic relationships in order to get the security we need, in order to get relief from our anxieties, our aloneness and helplessness, but these relationships also bind us, they enslave us even further because they support the lie we have fashioned. So we strain against them in order to be more free. The irony is that we do this straining uncritically, in a struggle within our own armor, as it were; and so we increase our drivenness, the second-hand quality of our struggle for freedom. Even in our flirtations with anxiety we are unconscious of our motives. We seek stress, we push our own limits, but we do it with our *screen against despair* and not with despair itself. We do it with the stock market, with sports cars, with atomic missiles, with the success ladder in the corporation or the competition in the university. We do it in the prison of a dialogue with our own little family, by marrying against their wishes or choosing a way of life because they frown on it, and so on. Hence the complicated and second-hand quality of our entire drivenness. Even in our passions we are nursery children playing with toys that represent the real world. Even when these toys crash and cost us our lives or our sanity, we are cheated of the consolation that we were in the real world instead of the playpen of our fantasies. We still did not meet our doom on our own manly terms, in contest with objective reality. It is fateful and ironic how the lie we need in order to live dooms us to a life that is never really ours.

It was not until the working out of modern psychoanalysis that

we could understand something the poets and religious geniuses have long known: that the armor of character was so vital to us that to shed it meant to risk death and madness. It is not hard to reason out: If character is a neurotic defense against despair and you shed that defense, you admit the full flood of despair, the full realization of the true human condition, what men are really afraid of, what they struggle against, and are driven toward and away from. Freud summed it up beautifully when he somewhere remarked that psychoanalysis cured the neurotic misery in order to introduce the patient to the common misery of life. Neurosis is another word for describing a complicated technique for avoiding misery, but reality is the misery. That is why from earliest times sages have insisted that to see reality one must die and be reborn. The idea of death and rebirth was present in shamanistic times, in Zen thought, in Stoic thought, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, as well as in Judeo-Christian and modern existential thought. But it was not until scientific psychology that we could understand what was at stake in the death and rebirth: that man's character was a neurotic structure that went right to the heart of his humanness. As Frederick Perls put it, "To suffer one's death and to be reborn is not easy." And it is not easy precisely because so much of one has to die.

I like the way Perls conceived the neurotic structure as a thick edifice built up of four layers. The first two layers are the everyday layers, the tactics that the child learns to get along in society by the facile use of words to win ready approval and to placate others and move them along with him: these are the glib, empty talk, "cliche," and role-playing layers. Many people live out their lives never getting underneath them. The third layer is a stiff one to penetrate: it is the "impassé" that covers our feeling of being empty and lost, the very feeling that we try to banish in building up our character defenses. Underneath this layer is the fourth and most baffling one: the "death" or fear-of-death layer; and this, as we have seen, is the layer of our true and basic animal anxieties, the terror that we carry around in our secret heart. Only when we explode this fourth layer, says Perls, do we get to the layer of what we might call our "authentic self": what we really are without sham, without disguise, without defenses against fear.¹²

From this sketch of the complex rings of defense that compose

our character, our neurotic shield that protects our pulsating vitality from the dread of truth, we can get some idea of the difficult and excruciatingly painful, all-or-nothing process that psychological rebirth is. And when it is through psychologically, it only begins humanly: the worst is not the death, but the rebirth itself—there's the rub. What does it mean "to be born again" for man? It means *for the first time to be subjected* to the terrifying paradox of the human condition, since one must be born not as a god, but as a man, or as a god-worm, or a god who shits. Only this time without the neurotic shield that hides the full ambiguity of one's life. And so we know that every authentic rebirth is a real ejection from paradise, as the lives of Tolstoy, Péguy, and others attest. It takes men of granite, men who were automatically powerful, "secure in their drivenness" we might say, and it makes them tremble, makes them cry—as Péguy stood on the platforms of Parisian busses with hot tears rolling down his cheeks while he mumbled prayers.

It was Rank who very early admitted that anxiety could not all be overcome therapeutically, and this is what he meant: that it is impossible to stand up to the terror of one's condition without anxiety. It was Andras Angyal who got to the heart of the matter of psychotherapeutic rebirth when he said that the neurotic who has had therapy is like a member of Alcoholics Anonymous: he can never take his cure for granted, and the best sign of the genuineness of that cure is that he lives with *humility*.¹³

Full Humans and Part Humans

This discussion brings up a basic contradiction of the whole therapeutic enterprise that has not been aired widely enough; we are going to be dwelling on it at the close of this book, but this is the right place to introduce it. It is simply this: what sense does it make to talk about "enjoying one's full humanness"—as Maslow urges along with so many others—if "full humanness" means the primary *mis-adjustment* to the world? If you get rid of the four-layered neurotic shield, the armor that covers the characterological lie about life, how can you talk about "enjoying" this Pyrrhic

Human Character as a Vital Lie

victory? The person gives up something restricting and illusory, it is true, but only to come face to face with something even more awful: genuine despair. Full humanness means full fear and trembling, at least some of the waking day. When you get a person to emerge into life, away from his dependencies, his automatic safety in the cloak of someone else's power, what joy can you promise him with the burden of his aloneness? When you get a person to look at the sun as it bakes down on the daily carnage taking place on earth, the ridiculous accidents, the utter fragility of life, the powerlessness of those he thought most powerful—what comfort can you give him from a psychotherapeutic point of view? Luis Buñuel likes to introduce a mad dog into his films as counterpoint to the secure daily routine of repressed living. The meaning of his symbolism is that no matter what men pretend, they are only one accidental bite away from utter fallibility. The artist disguises the incongruity that is the pulse-beat of madness but he is aware of it. What would the average man do with a full consciousness of absurdity? He has fashioned his character for the precise purpose of putting it between himself and the facts of life; it is his special *tour-de-force* that allows him to ignore incongruities, to nourish himself on impossibilities, to thrive on blindness. He accomplishes thereby a peculiarly human victory: the ability to be smug about terror. Sartre has called man a "useless passion" because he is so hopelessly bungled, so deluded about his true condition. He wants to be a god with only the equipment of an animal, and so he thrives on fantasies. As Ortega so well put it in the epigraph we have used for this chapter, man uses his ideas for the defense of his existence, to frighten away reality. This is a serious game, the defense of one's existence—how take it away from people and leave them joyous?

Maslow talks very convincingly about "self-actualization" and the ecstasy of "peak experiences" wherein a person comes to see the world in all its awe and splendor and senses his own free inner expansion and the miracle of his being. Maslow calls this state "being cognition," the openness of perception to the truth of the world, a truth concealed by the neurotic distortions and illusions that protect one against overwhelming experiences. This idea is fine and correct, this enjoiner to develop the capacity for "being cognition" in order to break out of the one-dimensionality of our lives,

the cave of our imprisoning security. But like most things human it is a very paradoxical kind of triumph. This was already clearly seen by Maslow, when he talked about the "dangers of being-cognition."¹⁴ Maslow was too broad-minded and sober to imagine that being-cognition did not have an underside; but he didn't go far enough toward pointing out what a dangerous underside it was—that it could undermine one's whole position in the world. It can't be overstressed, one final time, that to see the world as it really is is devastating and terrifying. It achieves the very result that the child has painfully built his character over the years in order to avoid: it *makes routine, automatic, secure, self-confident activity impossible*. It makes thoughtless living in the world of men an impossibility. It places a trembling animal at the mercy of the entire cosmos and the problem of the meaning of it.

Let us digress here for a moment in order to show that this view of character is not one put forth by morbid existentialists but instead represents the now-agreed merger of Freudian and post-Freudian psychology. A subtle but very profound change has come over our understanding of the early development of the child. It is a change that can be summed up briefly in the shifts from Freudian to post-Freudian psychology and now back again to a sobered Freudianism. Freud saw the child as an antagonist of his world, as someone who had drives of aggression and sexuality that he wanted to work on the world. But as he could not work them out as a child, he had to suffer frustration and develop substitute satisfactions. The thwarting of these drives in childhood led to such a residue of bitterness and antisociality that the world would always be peopled by a type of animal that resented what it had done to him, what it had deprived him of. He would be a mean animal, deep down, one who felt cheated, one who harbored choked-up feelings and desires. He might on the surface be pleasant enough, responsible, creative; but underneath it all was a residue of trashiness that threatened to burst out and that in any event would somehow work itself out on others or on himself.

Freud's theory of innate instincts was undermined very early in social-psychological quarters and very late within psychoanalysis itself, and a new view of the child came into vogue. It tended to see the child as neutral, instinct-free, basically malleable; apart from some unknown factors of hereditary constitution and temperament,

the child was looked upon wholly as a creature shaped by his environment. In this view the parents were thought to be responsible for the child's repressions, for the character defenses that he developed, and for the kind of person he turned out to be, as they had provided him with an environment and molded him to it. Even more than that, as the parents had opposed the child's natural energetic and free expansion and had demanded his surrender to their world, they could be considered in some fundamental way as guilty for whatever warpings his character had. If the child had no instincts he at least had plenty of free energy and a natural innocence of the body. He sought continual activity and diversion, wanted to move about his world in its entirety, to bend it to his use and delight as much as possible. He sought to express himself spontaneously, feel the most satisfaction in his bodily processes, derive the most comfort, thrill, and pleasure from others. But as this kind of limitless expansion is not possible in the world, the child has to be checked for his own good; and the parents were the checkers of his activity. Whatever attitudes the child had toward himself, his body, and his world were considered to have been implanted by his experience with his trainers and with his immediate environment.

This was the post-Freudian view of character development, the reaction against Freud's instinctivism. Actually it is pre-Freudian, dating from the Enlightenment and Rousseau and Marx. In recent years the most biting and carefully thought-out critique of this view was given by Norman O. Brown.¹⁵ The epithets he used against Fromm and the neo-Freudians were bitter indeed for a book that called us all back to Eros. But the gravamen of Brown's critique was a serious one that had been overlooked by many in recent decades: that the situation of the child was an impossible one and that he had to fashion his own defenses against the world, had to find a way of surviving in it. As we saw in Chapter Three, the child's own existential dilemmas gave him his task quite independently of the parents: his "attitudes" came to him from his need to adapt to the whole desperate human condition, not merely to attune himself to the whims of his parents.

The student of ideas is entitled to wonder what kind of book Brown would have fashioned out of his brilliance if he had digested Adler and Rank with the thoroughness with which he studied Freud.

It was Adler and Rank, after all, who understood the desperate situation of the child, without falling either into the Freudian trap of inner instincts or that of easy environmentalism. As Rank put it once and for all, for all future psychoanalysts and students of man:

every human being is . . . equally unfree, that is, *we* . . . create out of freedom, a prison. . . .¹⁶

Rank was criticizing Rousseau's vision of man as born free and then put into chains by training and by society. Rank understood that in the face of the overwhelmingness of the world the child could not out of himself muster the stamina and the authority necessary to live in full expansiveness with limitless horizons of perception and experience.

We have arrived at a unique stage in the development of psychoanalytic thought. By fully incorporating the work of Adler and Rank on an equal level with Freud, modern psychoanalysis has been able to keep the roundness and soberness of the master without the errors, extreme formulations, and dogma of strict Freudianism. As I see it, Brown's book represents a declaration that the circle has been closed fully between the psychoanalysis of the founders and the most recent theoretical and clinical work, without anything essential being lost. Even on the syndrome that in truth could most justifiably accuse the parents of failing to fashion an adequate human being—that of schizophrenia—there has been a marked change of emphasis, a new consciousness of the tragic dimensions of human life. No one has summed this up better than Harold Searles, and I would like to quote at length his sensitive and authoritative personal statement, which I think is a very important one historically:

At Chestnut Lodge, the twice-weekly, hour-long case presentations usually have to do with schizophrenic patients. . . . When the author went there, nearly 12 years ago, the therapists—including the author—presenting these cases often tended to paint a totally, or almost totally, black picture of the patient's childhood family relationships; the feeling-atmosphere of the presentation was one of blame of the parents more than anything else. As the years have gone on, the author has found that the presentations have come to convey less and less of such blame, and

to convey more and more of the tragedy of the patients' lives—tragedy which is so much of a piece with the tragedy of life for all of us that the presentation is often a profoundly grief-laden experience for both the presenter and the listeners. One feels that the staff-presentation now gives a truer picture of a patient's life, but a picture which is much more deeply shaking than was the blame-colored picture previously often seen.¹⁷

The tragedy of life that Searles is referring to is the one we have been discussing: man's finitude, his dread of death and of the overwhelmingness of life. The schizophrenic feels these more than anyone else because he has not been able to build the confident defenses that a person normally uses to deny them. The schizophrenic's misfortune is that he has been burdened with extra anxieties, extra guilt, extra helplessness, an even more unpredictable and unsupportive environment. He is not surely seated in his body, has no secure base from which to negotiate a defiance of and a denial of the real nature of the world. The parents have made him massively inept as an organism. He has to contrive extra-ingenious and extra-desperate ways of living in the world that will keep him from being torn apart by experience, since he is already almost apart. We see again confirmed the point of view that a person's character is a defense against despair, an attempt to avoid insanity because of the *real* nature of the world. Searles looks at schizophrenia precisely as the result of the inability to shut out terror, as a desperate style of living with terror. Frankly I don't know anything more cogent that needs to be said about this syndrome: it is a failure in humanization, which means a failure to *confidently deny* man's real situation on this planet. Schizophrenia is the limiting case for the theory of character and reality that we have been expounding here: the failure to build dependable character defenses allows the true nature of reality to appear to man. It is scientifically apodictic. The creativity of people on the schizophrenic end of the human continuum is a creativity that springs from the inability to accept the standardized cultural denials of the real nature of experience. And the price of this kind of almost "extra human" creativity is to live on the brink of madness, as men have long known. The schizophrenic is supremely creative in an almost extra-human sense because he is furthest from the animal: he lacks the secure

instinctive programming of lower organisms; and he lacks the secure cultural programming of average men. No wonder he appears to average men as "crazy": he is not in anything's world.†

Conclusion

Let us close our long discussion of the function of character by juxtaposing two great pieces of poetic writing and insight, separated by almost three centuries. The first, by Thomas Traherne, gives a beautiful description of the world as it appears to the perceptions of the child before he has been able to fashion automatic reactions. Traherne describes the pristine perceptions of the child:

All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. . . . The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold; the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal Cherubins! And young men glittering and sparkling Angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls tumbling in the street, and playing, were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die. . . . The city seemed to stand in Eden. . . .

We might call this the paradise of prerepression. But then, Traherne goes on to describe his fall from Eden; the development of cultural perceptions and denials of the pristine character of reality; and like a modern psychoanalyst in the early days of, say, Chestnut Lodge, he accuses the parents of this fall, makes his whole case against them:

Thoughts are the most present things to thoughts, and of the most powerful influence. My soul was only apt and disposed to great things; but souls to souls are like apples to apples, one being rotten rots another. When I began to speak and go, nothing began to be present to me, but

† For a fuller summing-up of the problem of schizophrenic failure see Chapter Ten.

what was present to me in their thoughts. Nor was anything present to me any other way, than it was so to them. . . . All things were absent which they talked not of. So I began among my play-fellows to prize a drum, a fine coat, a penny, a gilded book, & c., . . . As for the Heavens and the Sun and Stars they disappeared, and were no more unto me than the bare walls. So that the strange riches of man's invention quite overcame the riches of Nature, being learned more laboriously and in the second place.¹⁸

What is missing in this splendid portrayal of the child's fall from natural perception into the artificialities of the cultural world? Nothing less than what we have cited as the great post-Freudian merger on the human personality: Traherne's own complicity in the process, his need to fall from grace in order to grow, move about without anxiety, protect himself *against* the Sun, the Stars, the Heavens. Traherne doesn't record his other pristine reactions, say, to the piercing screams of his "play-fellows" as they cut their hands or smashed their noses and mouths and splashed him with globs of weird, warm red that sent terror into his bowels. He says that he knew not that they should die, that all seemed immortal—but did his parents introduce death into the world? This was the deep-lying rot that rubbed into his soul, and it rubbed in not from the parents but from the world, from the "riches of nature." In some complex ways death edged itself as a symbol into his perceptions and chilled his soul, and to banish the *facts* of life Traherne had to remold his paradise, even to lying about it in his memory as we all do. True, the earth was the place of mystical beauty that he painted it and that Carlyle later agreed to be "a mystic temple"; but it was at the same time "a hall of doom" that Traherne chose to deny in his memory of childhood.

The totality of the human condition is the thing that is so hard for man to recapture. He wants his world safe for delight, wants to blame others for his fate. Compare to Traherne a modern poet's consciousness of the full roundness of the human condition. Marcia Lee Anderson tells us with penetrating brilliance how we have to live in a hall of doom, what we need to do to protect ourselves:

We multiply diseases for delight,
Invent a horrid want, a shameful doubt,
Luxuriate in license, feed on night,

Make inward bedlam—and will not come out.
Why should we? Stripped of subtle complications,
Who could regard the sun except with fear?

This is our shelter against contemplation,
Our only refuge from the plain and clear.

Who would crawl out from under the obscure
To stand defenseless in the sunny air?

No terror of obliquity so sure
As the most shining terror of despair

To know how simple is our deepest need,
How sharp, and how impossible to feed.¹⁹

The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive. Marcia Lee Anderson draws the circle not only on Traherne, but on Maslow, on humanistic psychoanalysis, and even on Freudian Norman O. Brown himself. What exactly would it mean on this earth to be wholly unrepressed, to live in full bodily and psychic expansiveness? It can only mean to be reborn into madness. Brown warns us of the full radicalness of his reading of Freud by stressing that he resolutely follows Ferenczi's insight that "Character-traits are, so to speak, secret psychoses."²⁰ This is shaking scientific truth, and we have also subscribed to it with Brown. If it has seemed hard for men to get agreement on such a truth during the age of Freud, one day it will be secure.

But the chilling reality behind this truth is even more upsetting, and there doesn't seem to be much that we can do with it or will ever be able to do with it: I mean that *without* character-traits there has to be full and open psychosis. At the very end of this book I want to sum up the basic contradictions of Brown's argument for new men without character defenses, his hope for a rebirth of mankind into a "second innocence." For now, it is enough to invoke Marcia Lee Anderson's complete scientific formula: "Stripped of subtle complications [i.e., of all the character defenses—repression, denial, misperception of reality], who could regard the sun except with fear?"