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# Review of My Life Among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority, by P. Rieff

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Before his death last year, Philip Rieff published *My Life among the Deathworks* (hereafter *Deathworks*) as the first in a projected three-volume series investigating the relationship between sacred and social orders. One of his former students, Kenneth Piver, edited this volume and, I understand, is hoping to see the remaining two volumes through to publication. *Deathworks* has clearly been in the works for decades, and, apparently, its publication was suggested at least 15 years ago. Given this, it is not surprising that the book does not contradict Rieff's earlier investigations of Western cultural development. Rather, it offers a complementary conceptual framework for his analysis of culture and a wealth of examples drawn mainly the history of art but also from European and American history.

The outline of the sociological theory of culture embedded in *Deathworks* was present in Rieff's first three major books. At the end of his first book, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (University of Chicago Press, 1959), Rieff had anticipated the rise of "psychological man." This was an ideal-type of a person who questioned everything, believed nothing, and was determined not to be deceived. Perhaps Rieff's psychological man was not very different from Goffman's dramaturgical actor—another creation from the mid-to-late 1950s. In *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), his second book, Rieff expressed this idea differently, suggesting that we now live in "negative communities" that can only inform, rather than transform, individuals. The promise of salvation that was central to all "positive communities" has been lost—and so therapy is all that is left. In his third book, *Fellow Teachers* (Harper & Row, 1973) Rieff appeared resigned to life in a negative community and even spoke of his own "second death"; that is, the death of his sacred self.

The resignation so evident in *Fellow Teachers* left Rieff unwilling to publish significant work for the next 30 years. When *Deathworks* appeared last year, it reiterated his earlier lamentations, but without the tone of defeat. Instead, the book opens with a punning call to arms in Rieff's typically idiosyncratic culture wars. Rieff is now at war with our present profane culture. Not God-fearing or even God-knowing, this profane cul-

ture is endlessly transitional: it has no memory and hence does not respect (or even recognize) authority figures. Rieff's battle is waged against three value-laden ideal-types of the history of Western culture. In his view, our lost classical culture was ruled by fate (or perhaps the Fates), our fading culture was ruled by the Abrahamic faith that emerged out of the religious traditions of Jerusalem, and our emerging culture—an anticulture—is ruled by fiction. In one of his less subtle puns, these three ideal-types are referred to as the first, second, and third worlds. This means that European, technologically advanced societies constitute the “third world” in his view. Rieff's ideal-types are value laden, because he is an intellectually militant advocate for second-world culture and a hostile critic of third-world culture. This is Rieff's Kulturkampf.

In prosecuting this case, Rieff develops a new conceptual framework that clarifies his earlier theory of culture. Rieff is critical of the present “pop” culture that glories in the “primacies of possibility” and prefers “both/and” to “either/or.” There is no third-world life on the “via”—the “vertical in authority”—that teaches us our place as we assent to and ascend on via's ladder. The “deathworks” highlighted in the book's title are affirmations of third-world culture that sever the link to the second world of faith. By severing this link, deathworks murder the second self before the first self has died of natural causes. In *Fellow Teachers*, Rieff wrote about this despondently; now he writes about it movingly, emphasizing that the Nazis ruthlessly killed the social and sacred self, while our “remissive elites” merely endorse attacks on the possibility of sacred life.

Rieff's “bricolage” of third-world deathworks is intentionally indifferent to aesthetic merit. Great works of art by da Vinci and Picasso can separate us from sacred order as easily as can mediocre “deathworks” by Mapplethorpe, Serrano, Duchamp, or Manzoni. Remissive third-world theorists, such as Derrida, Foucault, and, perhaps most significantly, Nietzsche, can dissect, justify, and ultimately celebrate this fictional third-world aesthetic, making sure that any remnant second-world “sacred messengers” are parodied and undermined. Such was the fate, in Rieff's view, of the sacred message of Abraham Lincoln.

Rieff detected in Weber's sociology a decisive break with theology. However, in those last few moving pages of Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, there is a profound sense of regret, even remorse, over what he had “accomplished.” In *Deathworks*, Rieff reunites sociology and theology in a desperate effort to turn back the clock. And yet there is something dissatisfying about his presentation. Despite Rieff's dislike of ambivalence, his own beliefs and faith are not apparent to me. In this regard he is quite different from the man with whom he is often compared, Alasdair MacIntyre. Perhaps Rieff cannot escape the fictional third world himself.