

Pieties of Silence

In his waning years, Philip Rieff positioned himself as a “remembrancer” in silent protest of modernity’s deathworks.

By Jeremy Beer

BY THE TIME HE DIED on July 1 at the age of 83, Philip Rieff had, quite intentionally, slipped into obscurity. His seminal *Triumph of the Therapeutic* had appeared 40 years earlier, the epistolary *Fellow Teachers* in 1973. Little had been heard from him since. Rieff published just seven articles and reviews in the entirety of the 1980s, and, until the first volume of his three-volume magnum opus was released just a few months before his death, no additional books (if one excepts the fine collection of essays, *The Feeling Intellect*, edited by his former student Jonathan Imber, which came out in 1990). A famously prickly man, he spent his last years in his Philadelphia townhouse, venturing out rarely, seeing few visitors, fiddling with his unfinished manuscripts. He was one of those whose obituary prompts one to exclaim: was *he* still alive?

Yes, he was. And his withdrawal from public life was pregnant with meaning. Rieff could easily have spent his last three decades collecting the usual emoluments and honors of academia, cultivating a school of disciples, perhaps retiring into a position as a well-heeled senior fellow at a prominent think tank. But dropping out was Rieff’s counter-counter-cultural strategy. Whatever else its motivations, it was a singularly honest decision. In *Fellow Teachers*, he noted that Kierkegaard knew that “the one thing” that “would be unambiguously superior to any and all published workings-through” was “a piety of silences.” Not wanting to be “played in

the ideas market,” Rieff wondered whether the “best we can do is to practice the art of silence, specially in this period of over-publication and shouting controversialists.” The rest of his life provided his answer.

It didn’t have to be that way. From his days as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, Rieff had traced a brilliant path of academic stardom. After returning to campus from the Army Air Force, for which he had volunteered in 1943, he was offered a position on the faculty by his tutor, sociologist Edward Shils—even though Rieff had not yet even completed his bachelor’s degree. He took care of that in short order and completed his master’s degree the following year. Now a faculty instructor, he began work on his dissertation, which was to center on the reception of Freud’s ideas in America.

In 1954, Rieff completed his dissertation, which a postdoctoral grant allowed him to restructure into his first book, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer*, in 1959. By that time, Rieff had scarcely had time to catch his breath; the previous nine years had been a romantic and professional whirlwind. He had become embroiled in a semi-scamandalous courtship with a student, Susan Sontag, in 1950, when the 17-year-old sophomore sat in on one of his courses. Actually, the courtship was hardly long enough to be scandalous: all of ten days passed before the two were married. Nine years later, they were divorced, with Sontag taking their son David with her to New

York. In the meantime, for Rieff there had been an assistant professorship at Brandeis, a visiting professorship at Harvard, a Fulbright professorship at the University of Munich, and an associate professorship at Berkeley.

The whirl calmed in 1961, when Rieff joined the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania as a full professor. But his meteoric academic rise continued. Just two years after arriving at Penn, Rieff was given a special chair as University Professor. And in 1967, he was installed as the Benjamin Franklin Professor of Sociology. At the age of 44, he was a celebrated full professor at an Ivy League university. In terms of his career, all was well and only promised to get better.

Then came 1968 and all that. To the author of *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, who knew well how hollow were the walls of the old culture, the cultural earthquake might have been foreseeable. Still, its force was apparently greater than he had expected. The academic game now came with a new set of rules and expectations. In fact, now it really was only a game—and not one Rieff would consent to play.

At least one former student has said that Rieff underwent an “inner conversion” during this period. That is not hard to believe. His first post-1968 work, *Fellow Teachers*, putatively presented as a 218-page letter—no chapters, no sub-headings even—to two Skidmore College professors, is radically different in form, style, and tone from Rieff’s previous works. Whereas his prose had once

been exceptionally lucid but scholarly, *Fellow Teachers* is oracular, ironic, shifting, and surprisingly personal. It is an exceptionally dense and aphoristic work, every paragraph an essay unto itself. It is also one of the deepest readings of modernity ever produced by an American writer.

Most importantly for understanding the later thrust of Rieff's thought, *Fellow Teachers* demonstrates that Rieff's conversion had been spiritual as much as intellectual. In this book, Rieff emerges as a self-consciously Jewish thinker, both in the form and in the content of his ideas. For this grandson of an Auschwitz survivor, the countercultural fetish of transgressiveness connoted, distantly but clearly, the Shoah. Indeed, Rieff scholar Antonius Zondervan reports that later in his life, Rieff had written in a grant application, "If I travel, my journey will be to Auschwitz." He did not get the grant, but it was in light of his own growing horror of the triumph of the therapeutic ideology of the gas chambers that Rieff chose to practice, at the expense of his reputation and pocket-book, what he had so recently preached about the art of silence.

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At first, the relationship of Freudian ideas to the breakdown of cultural authority was not entirely clear to Philip Rieff; or at least, he was not entirely clear about the import of that relationship. His first book, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer*, presents Freud as a heroic realist, author of "the masterwork of the century" whose teaching derived "lessons on the right conduct of life from the misery of living it." We are no longer accustomed to hearing Freud spoken of in such grand, world-historical terms. To cite him today as an authority would be considered eccentric, almost as strange as regarding him as the brilliantly malevolent enemy of all that is sacred. (When

I was doing my doctoral work in psychology in the late nineties, Freud's name was scarcely mentioned, not out of hatred, but indifference. At most he served as a warning against the fruitlessness of "unscientific" theorizing.) But in the intellectual atmosphere of the 1940s and '50s, especially at a place like the University of Chicago, Freud was as omnipresent as Marx.

Originally, Rieff had been more attracted to the latter. A youthful dal-

1959 he could judge it "a good omen" that Freud is "being treated as a culture hero." He even went so far as to commend psychoanalysis for being a "highly moral intellectual movement" intended "to scrape clean the encrusted moral intelligence of Western culture."

Of all modern theorists, wrote Rieff, Freud is "the least confused ... because he has no message." Freud offers no false hope, including no false hope for the "sexual revolution with which some

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liance with a group of Trotskyists brought him to the attention of American intelligence agents, who ensured that as someone suspected of having communist sympathies he was stationed stateside during the war (as an assistant to a brigadier general). But when he returned to Chicago, Rieff decided that Freud was the more insightful cultural theorist, in part because he had the mind of a diplomat, not a preacher. "Unlike Marx," wrote Rieff with approbation, "Freud did not have a religious temperament. He looked forward to no salvations. He was more a statesman of the inner life, aiming at shrewd compromises with the human condition, not at its basic transformation."

This is the Freud of Rieff's first book, in which Freud is praised for offering "truths" but no "truth," for understanding that neither philosophy nor religion offers real consolation, for refusing to be an ideologue in an age of ideology. Decades later, in his last book, Rieff would come to think of Freud as having constructed one of the great "deathworks" against Western culture. But in

misinformed people have linked his name." He is the opposite of the progressive, optimistic Dewey, to whom Rieff compares him invidiously. Freud knew that instinct posed an eternal barrier to liberal dreams of human perfectibility, that no amount of social reorganization could ever alter human nature. His theory of the unconscious also posed a threat to liberal doctrine, for it implied that no man ever really owns himself, complete self-mastery being beyond the capacity of nearly everyone. "We do not find Freud's sense of inevitability congenial," Rieff remarked dryly. "The myth of democratic culture is one of self-confidence and consolation; it is only by accident, we believe, that we are prevented from realizing our fullest selves."

This Freud is essentially a conservative of the skeptical school. But that was not how Freud was usually interpreted by his American followers—which, to Rieff, was precisely the problem. The American neo-Freudians did not share Freud's "conservative respect for culture; they are all too ready to tinker with its machinery of repression in the name of individual fulfillment."

Yet doubts even about the implications of Freud's doctrine rightly understood began to creep up as Rieff's study came to a conclusion. "How much does the decline of prudery invalidate Freud's critique?" Rieff asked, directing his question perhaps to himself as much as his readers. "From what now can Freud liberate us?" Freud's successors were answering that already: we ought to be freed from any and all cultural authorities, any and all hierarchies of aspirations or "morals," any and all constraints, including the constraints of a stable identity. Rieff could foresee a psychotherapeutic tyranny, where everyone is sick and everyone is a doctor. "The hospital is succeeding the church and the parliament as the archetypal institution of Western culture," he observed. Still, he seemed not much bothered by the emergence of what he described as a new, Freud-inspired personality type. "Psychological man," he marveled, was "intent upon the conquest of his inner life," the attainment of "salvation through self-contemplative manipulation." Freud had taught psychological man that reason, faith, and even the idea of progress were inadequate and untrustworthy guides for conduct. This was his great achievement.

Rieff evinces more concern about the "triumph of the therapeutic" in his famous book of that name published in 1966. That work opens with the text of Yeats's "Second Coming"—a sure sign that what follows will not be painted in the sunny colors of American progressivism. Rieff now worried that, though Christian culture had been all but entirely shattered, nothing had succeeded it; there were therefore no extant authoritative institutions whose demands and remissions (the culturally regulated relaxation of those demands) could be internalized, thereby acting to "bind and loose men in the conduct of their affairs." This failure of succession

was no accident but rather the explicit program of the "modern cultural revolution," which was deliberately being undertaken "not in the name of any new order of communal purpose" but for the "permanent disestablishment of any deeply internalized moral demands."

This revolution posed an unprecedented problem, for at the heart of Rieff's theory of culture lies the insight that all cultures consist precisely in a "symbolic order of controls and remissions." Lacking such an order, one gets not a new culture but rather a kind of anti-culture. For that reason, in Rieff's view, therapeutic ideology rather than communism represented the revolutionary movement of the age. Communism inverts religion but accepts, at least in theory, the idea of a social order that embodies certain moral commitments; therapeutic society, on the other hand, stands both against all religions and for all religions. That is, it refuses to engage religious claims on their own terms, to take them seriously as a "compelling symbolic of self-integrating communal purpose." It represents the absolute privatization of religious doctrines, absorbing them as potentially useful therapies for individuals. "Psychological man," remarks Rieff, "will be a hedger against his own bets, a user of any faith that lends itself to therapeutic use."

Indeed, compared to the emergent Western rejection of all "moral demand systems," Rieff notes that communism was, in a certain sense, conservative. Americans, on the other hand, had been released by the anti-cultural doctrine of the therapeutic to be "morally less self-demanding," aiming instead to enjoy "all that money can buy, technology can make, and science can conceive." (This comparison helps explain why self-publicists such as Christopher Hitchens have been able so easily to "switch sides" in our culture wars; their fundamental allegiance is to the globalization

of therapeutic remissiveness, and they realize that that goal is now best served by Western secular liberalism.)

The loss of "corporate ideals," of any communally recognized symbols of authority or guides to conduct, as well as "the systematic hunting down of all settled convictions," began to trouble Rieff, who knew that such an anti-culture had never before existed and was likely not even possible. Still, at this point Rieff was willing to entertain the notion that this attempt to build civilization on the foundation of psychic well-being rather than a system of moral demands (which he would later call "interdicts") and their circumstantial remissions might work. He even concludes his book with the claim that "the new releasing insights deserve only a little less respect than the old controlling ones." It is not clear whether he is being coy.

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Fellow Teachers is ironic, but it is not coy. Despite its occasional claims to neutrality with regard to the rise of psychological man, it is passionately subversive of the therapeutic order, especially as that order and its ultimate concern for power was undermining the possibility of genuine teaching.

Rieff's teaching was that the teacher must never take sides in the struggle for power. "We cannot be advertising men for any movement," he writes. "Herald nothing." The vogue for "politically engaged scholarship" was a sham. (Just last year, in an interview with the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Rieff was recommending to scholars that they "become inactivists. They'll do less damage that way. Inactivism is the ticket.") Rieff knew that education and politics—the fighting and analytic modes—are incompatible. School must be kept at arm's length from society, he argued, and knowledge from becoming

a public object for as long as possible, lest it be brutally simplified. "The rhythms of teaching and learning are slow and unpredictable; the progress we teachers achieve is hard to couple with the advance of any social movement."

Rieff's deeper task was to reverse criticism, to reveal its game, to show how it depended for its success on that which it sought to destroy. In calling into question all authority, in refusing to take up "the teaching of our inherited interdicts" and substituting instead "the preaching of endless remissions," the teacher-as-critic makes men "free to become what they are not. That freedom is deadly."

The hopefulness that marked *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer*, even the chastened hopefulness of *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, is completely absent from *Fellow Teachers*. Rieff blanched in the face of a new personality type that was "radically contemporaneous.... This is the uniquely modern achievement. Barbarians have never before existed. At the end of this tremendous cultural development, we moderns shall arrive at barbarism. Barbarians are people without historical memory. Barbarism is the real meaning of radical contemporaneity. Released from all authoritative pasts, we progress towards barbarism, not away from it."

Rieff also saw that both the corporate and technological elites and the cultural radicals were united as partisans of the therapeutic. "The propertied classes, their lawyers and editorial writers, are self-interested, which is not the same as conservative," he scoffed. "Modern culture is constituted by its endless transitionality; the people at the top have learned to want it that way." Furthermore, Rieff wrote, "The destruction of the family is the key regimen of technological innovation and moral 'deviancy.' In particular, it is through hostility to the cultural conservatism of the working-class family that corporate ad-mass cap-

italism and psych-revolutionary socialism are working out the terms of their limited liability, joint enterprise. . . . [P]reserve our hard-hats from the affects of the higher re-education." It is not hard to see why Christopher Lasch claimed Rieff as an influential teacher.

So, then, what to do? In *Fellow Teachers*, Rieff provides only half-serious answers. He calls for the "abolition of the fashion industry." He speculates that severely retributive laws might revive culture. He muses that the question of censorship ought to be revisited. He claims that fear ought to be instilled in the powerful; "fear is not a bad teacher of certain elemental lessons. Love comes after law. Positive acts are prepared by negative commandments."

In such statements we glimpse an author in the process of rediscovering the profound wisdom of Judaism's norms and forms. Rieff conceives of teaching as consisting in the interpretive repetition of sacred texts—is this not an essentially rabbinical conception of education? Then, too, at times the book seems addressed, at least primarily, to Rieff's fellow "Jews of culture," a phrase he employs at least once.

Finally, in *Fellow Teachers* Rieff occasionally reveals an intense disgust with Christianity. Rieff insists that he is no friend of Christian civilization, for which "dead" order he professes "not the slightest affection," precisely because he is Jewish. In fact, one could characterize Rieff's project as wanting to get behind Christianity—not in order to recover Hellenism or paganism but precisely Judaism. For Christian love, he argued, is inherently anti-cultural. "The Christian mystery-cult evolved into the most terrible rationalizing of transgressiveness ever to curse our culture," he fumed. "Nietzsche knew that Christendom's love was a covert form of making war on culture in any form, an expression of the most terrible hatred, envy,

revenge." Later: "Faith in Christ—and the organization of that faith—is ineluctably anti-Jewish."

No cant about "Judeo-Christian values" for Philip Rieff! And no reassuring talk about "Athens and Jerusalem," either. Rieff might have been the greatest partisan of Hebraic civilization America has ever had; he was certainly the most daring in pressing its claims. One can respect him for that. One can also respect his list of the first two interdicts that must be re-cognized (as he would write it) in order to reconstruct our culture: 1.) We "must remain under the authority of death"; and 2.) We must stand "against the re-creation of life in the laboratory and the taking of life in the abortion clinic." This was 1973.

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Aside from occasional essays, *Fellow Teachers* was Rieff's last sustained work of cultural theory until *My Life among the Deathworks* was published in March of this year. No less than *Fellow Teachers*, this work is challenging; but it is also astonishingly direct.

Rieff develops a typology of three "worlds" or cultures that is also a chronology. The first world is essentially that of pagan antiquity; it is no longer psychologically or sociologically available except in pastiche form as a consumer item, and its leitmotif is fate. The second world is essentially rooted in Jerusalem but—Rieff concedes, so far as it is inclusive of the form of Judaic law—also includes Christianity. Its leitmotif is faith. The third world is that which is now being born; it is the anti-culture of the therapeutic, which has come into being through the "deathworks" mounted against second-world interdicts by such third-world figures as Freud, Joyce, Duchamp, and a host of others. Its leitmotif is fiction.

Hitler, too, is a third-world figure, a proponent of the anti-cultural "clean

sweep, the brush aimed first and foremost at the kingdom of priests and holy nation, however members in that kingdom may rebel against their membership." Media notices of *My Life among the Deathworks* have, predictably, focused on Rieff's scorn for multiculturalism, feminism, and "homosexualists." But what is most striking is the extent to which Judaism, Hitler, the Shoah, and the author's Auschwitz-surviving grandfather occupy the almost too visible foreground. The price of therapeutic freedom, Rieff suggests, insofar as it consists in the removal of all authoritative interdicts, those delicately constructed checks against human evil, has already been incalculable.

"My grandfather told me, in Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago, that he wanted to go to Svat, Israel, the town of his great teacher, Isaac Luria, to die. America was to him a land without grace, and he could not die amid such gracelessness," recalls Rieff near the end of the book. "My grandfather saw this de-created world coming; he thought that Hitler had won in some way. The evidence surrounded him: the gross sexuality of the young, the aestheticization of my father's Judaism..." Has Hitler really "won in some way"? Perhaps the question is not as insane as it sounds.

"The commanding truths are Nots," Rieff reminds us, one last time. "As my grandfathers well knew, before permission there must be prohibition." These are the fruits of Philip Rieff's decades-long pieties of silence: to become a "remembrancer," in his terms, of the past, one man's lifework against the deathworks mounted by modernity against all sacred orders. ■

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The Pentagon continues to develop a series of contingency plans to respond to the likely scenarios that the U.S. will face in the event the president orders direct military action against Iran after the November elections. The following scenario, based on intelligence analysis, suggests a rapidly escalating conflict that might only be concluded through the use of nuclear weapons:

If the U.S. conducted an air assault against Iran, the Persian Gulf island of Bahrain, which has a majority Shi'a population that has been strongly influenced by Tehran in the past, would become a prime Iranian target, particularly since the U.S. Navy has a major base there. The Joint Chiefs expect that Iran's national TV would begin calling for an uprising on the island and that U.S. F-16s belonging to Bahrain's air force and military communications centers could easily be taken out through sabotage, making the government isolated and vulnerable. An uprising of fifth columnists in Manama would be able to overwhelm security forces and seize control of government and media centers. The U.S. Fifth Fleet is based at the tip of Bahrain, but if the government became unstable, there isn't much the U.S. could do to prop it up. Manama would become a battlefield and Iran would probably be able to make successful strikes against Bahrain's air defenses, eliminating any ability to resist. Control of Bahrain would give Iran the key to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf by way of the strategic King Fahd Causeway, whose possession would provide Iran with a land bridge into the region.

Iran's Kilo-class subs, purchased from Russia, would be able to patrol the waters of the Gulf and disrupt key shipping lanes. Since Iran has underground missile batteries for HY-2 Silkworm and Scud C missiles on the southwest tip of Abu Musa Island, it could also hit any point in the Gulf, forcing the U.S. to take those batteries out. Iran would then probably opt to make devastating strikes on the tiny oil-rich emirates lining the Gulf, including the UAE, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai, and could also begin to attack Saudi Arabia with a series of car bombs, using high-quality hexogene and the plastic explosive pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PTN). Major terrorist bombings of Saudi targets would begin and could include all major cities and oil-producing centers. Surviving Iranian missiles and small suicide craft would be used to try to close the Straits of Hormuz. By then the U.S. would be forced to broaden the scope of its attacks, striking Tehran as well as all of Iran's other major cities and ports, densely populated areas that would produce thousands of civilian casualties. Another concern is that the Iranians would activate their Hezbollah cells that are presumed to have entered the United States via Mexico since 1984. Such cells, if present, might attack soft targets in the continental United States, to include trains, subways, malls, and sports stadiums. If Iran were to unleash its terrorist surrogates, the U.S. military would probably argue for the use of tactical nuclear weapons to end the conflict.

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