THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DEATH IN FANTASY AND HISTORY
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To Byrne Piven
Actor, Poet, Father, and Uncle
Who faced death with rarest courage
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Introduction:
Approaching Death

Jerry S. Piven

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments.
—Percy Bysshe Shelley (1821), Adonais, stanza 52

The articles in this volume seek a psychological understanding of death in fantasy and history. Studies of history are rarely psychological, and accounts of death most often chronicle what people consciously stated without questioning whether such statements truly reflected the depths of their emotions and fantasies. One can read countless narrations of medieval deathbed scenes. Do we assume that the dying individuals merely accepted death quietly, or may we question this appearance, discern the inspiration of faith in salvation, explore the language and imagery further to learn just how one might have conceived of death, the inevitability of decomposition, the thought that a beautiful bride might be consumed by maggots, or rot in Hell? If we read Victorian poets limning sexual intercourse with corpses, do we dismiss it as fashionable trope, banal necrophilic perversion, histrionic dramatics, or perhaps, wonder why someone might be sexually aroused by death and rotting women? When members of numerous cults bask in apocalyptic imagery and bathe in the joyful thought of being reborn in a purified world, does it not behoove us to delve into their psyches?
This being said, even psychoanalytic interpretations of history virtually ignore the impact of death, the fear of mortality, nonbeing, and decay. For the most part psychoanalysis disdains the idea that the fear of death plays a central role in our emotions, both reducing death to a displacement of castration or guilt, and adhering to the notion that the fear of death is a symptom of a psychological problem (cf. Piven, in press-a, in press-b). However, this volume follows in the wake of an emerging tradition that sees death as a critical motivation for the genesis of belief systems, fantasies, delusions, and numerous psychopathological syndromes. The psychoanalytic denial of death does not preclude us from interpreting death psychoanalytically and psychohistorically. Below I illustrate how death is a deeply intricate, elusive, crucial, and ubiquitous influence on human psychology and history, thus intimating the spectrum of issues examined in this anthology.

POINT OF DEPARTURE: THE PSYCHOANALYSIS OF CULTURE AND HISTORY

From a psychoanalytic and psychohistorical perspective, a significant portion of history can be interpreted in terms of childhood conflict and trauma, the repetition and projection of infantile fantasies into religion, social order, and cosmos. How a culture or individual envisions god(s), worship, the worth of humanity, good and evil, derives from the complex matrix of conflict, compromise, rage, terror, and love. God may be vengeful or compassionate. Human beings may be sinful, shameful, and filthy, or they may partake of the cosmic divinity of the gods themselves. Cultural worldviews, religion, and even politics may be understood as transferences: repetitions of past relations and images which not only distort the present and imbue it with imperceptible fantasy, but also serve as defenses against present reality. From a Freudian perspective, religion is a neurotic repetition of the past and a pathological evasion of reality. History can be read as the genesis of particular mental illnesses and the symbolism of their corresponding delusional fantasies on a social scale (Freud, 1907, 1913, 1927, 1930, 1939).

Psychoanalytic research into childhood discovered how the provision of contact, comfort, and security, not just bodily satiation, are imperative for healthy growth (cf. Eagle, 1984; Fairbairn, 1941; Mitchell & Black, 1995). For the infant there is either pleasure and security or terrifying helplessness and agitation. The child learns to differentiate himself from his mother and emerge from her protection slowly, with much trepidation, and so vulnerably, that disturbances in psychological development centering on object relations and identity formation can lead to critical deficiencies and pathologies.
Cadences of childhood pain and conflict are manifested in beliefs, fantasies, and the sacred. For instance, one might recognize the longing for an afterlife or salvation, the erection of a church, burial mound, omphalos, or pyramid, as symbolic fantasies of reunion with the mother of infancy. The symbolism of these structures is elusive, and they mean many things at the same time. Egyptian pyramids are not merely massive tombs; they emerged from archaic images of the god being born as a flower from a mound of earth, gradually increasing in majesty and magical immortality for individual pharaohs. A pyramid is a denial of death and disappearance, a testament to narcissistic grandiosity, an alchemical sanctum suspending the mummified corpse while its soul is transported to the afterlife. And the rebirth of the god from the earth is still manifested in its holy symmetry, a womb from which the pharaoh is regestated and reborn. His coffin is a neb ankh, a house or lord of life, inside which the image of the goddess Nut is depicted so that the deceased may pass through her body in rebirth. We can always find fantasies of surrogate wombs, protecting and sheltering architecture, substitutes for the lost body of mother. This matrix is also highly conflicted, which is why the feminine also contains a terrifying and evil aspect beside the nurturing one. In addition to the sheltering womb we find innumerable images of the murderous goddess or siren, all derived from the infantile terror of maternal cannibalism, punishment, and rage. History must also be seen in terms of the male reaction to the feminine, to his fear of her anger, her power to give life, and her sexuality. How a culture conceives and derogates the feminine reflects its conflicts and trauma, how terrified, resentful, or loving toward its maternal origins. In sum, cosmos is psyche symbolized (Ricoeur, 1967).

TERROR, DEVELOPMENT, FANTASY, AND HISTORY

It is these intricacies of development and their concomitant terrors that circumscribe history. Amidst these psychosexual tribulations, the terrors of violent injury, abandonment, helplessness, and disintegration saturate the emotional life of the child and lead to defensive responses and derangements. The substratum of psychopathology is the dread of annihilation and death, whether these terms imply a conceptual understanding of death or inchoate and even pre-categorical images or feelings of being killed. The anxiety impelling defense and pathology is ultimately an overwhelming terror, a threat which scares the human organism into fearing for its life, whether it knows death as a concept or not.

The impact and defensive management of these terrors evolve into the conscious and unconscious imagery of death: beliefs and concep-
tions about the end of life, and the fantasies which contain the terror, expiate its danger, arrest its conscious awareness, deny its permanent reality. It is this horror of death which generates fantasy, illusion, and history. Within the matrix of conflict and illusion, the terror of death always holds sway as impulsion for religious fantasies, and the psychological investigation of history must contend with the horrific facts of human frailty, transience, and putrefaction. Culture itself may be understood as the innumerable ways societies defend themselves against helplessness and annihilation, how they mould and recreate the world in accordance with their wishes and anxieties, the social mechanisms employed to deny annihilation and death.

Whether one speaks of the construction of massive burial tombs, magical transformations of death into eternal life, or afterlives and resurrections, the need to cope with death and deny its awesome terror and affect are the sine qua non of religion, culture, ideology, and belief systems in general. These are imagined in order to palliate the terror of death, decay, and annihilation. For some this should be obvious. Can one explore the history of religion without perpetually being struck by the sheer terror of death motivating the invention of afterlives, necromancies, and mortuary cults?

Robert Jay Lifton (1970) arrives at similar conclusions with his concept of "symbolic immortality," where societies transform their belief systems in accordance with their changing needs in order to defend themselves against the threat of annihilation and impending mortality. Ernest Becker (1973) describes death as "the worm at the core" of human fantasies of importance and significance. The belief system must enable the society to feel as though it were protected and had a place in the continuity of life and the divine. The sacred must be able to instill a cohesive conviction of the meaning and significance of life, that individuals may find some measure of immortality in the belief system.

Indeed it is because these beliefs and practices deny death, the threat of annihilation, and insure symbolic immortality that they are sacred. As such the sacred often becomes the impetus for mass movements and revolutions, which provide feelings of moral victory, personal meaningfulness, and transcendence through the ceremony, ideology, and fervor driving them. Lifton (1970) calls this "revolutionary immortality," the "shared sense of participating in revolutionary ferment, and of transcending individual death by 'living on' indefinitely within this continuing revolution" (p. 34).

Symbolic immortality can take a variety of forms, all of which are reflected in the sacred and transcendent, whether ideological, revolutionary, religious, even secular and occupational. One can live symbolically through works of art or literature:
Now stands my task accomplished, such a work
As not the wrath of Jove, nor fire nor sword
Nor the devouring ages can destroy.
Let, when it will, that day, that has no claim
But to my mortal body, end the span
Of my uncertain years. Yet I’ll be borne,
The finer part of me, above the stars,
Immortal, and my name shall never die. (Ovid, 8 c.e., p. 379)

One can live through the continuance of nature: “The state may col­
lapse but the mountains and rivers remain” (Lifton, 1979, p. 22). Or
one can live through one’s children, in the comfort that part of one
will survive.

However, as mentioned, social ideologies, religious beliefs and prac­
tices, may be viewed as transference phenomena, imbued with conflict,
fantasy, and denials of reality. In sum, this unites the developmental
complexity and fantasy-life of individuals with group semiotics and
the sacred. This is a framework in which we can view cultural devel­
opment and change as transference dynamics, regression, restitution,
and the projection of defense mechanisms and compromise formations
into new modes of belief and practice which insure symbolic immor­
tality. Lifton (1970) states aptly “the shifting modes of immortality mark
the great turning points in history” (p. 38).

The analysis of religion in history should demonstrate the univer­
sality of death terror, and numerous empirical studies support the
proposition that death anxiety is a general phenomenon, not an aber­
ration or anomalous case. If infinite fantasies on death emerge from
development, death anxiety cannot be reduced to childhood conflict or
trauma because death anxiety is universal and exerts its influence on
the psyche regardless of upbringing, trauma, or abuse. The particular
problems of infancy will impact on the severity and particular evolu­
tion of death anxiety in the individual. Thus the gradual expansion of
consciousness and self-awareness will include its own burgeoning of
terror management or disorder.

In recent decades, researchers have been exploring the manner in
which childhood development and character disorder reflects the
management of death anxiety. James McCarthy’s (1980) analysis of clini­
cal findings indicated that death anxiety correlates with depression and
separation-individuation phenomena. Irvin Yalom (1980) also did exten­
sive studies of children and their relation to conception and imagery of
death, arguing further that death pervades our fundamental emotions,
fantasies, and occupations. Noel Walsh (1996) explored how death anxie­
ty impacted on development and the stratification of neurosis. While
empirical studies seem to indicate the universality of death anxiety,
terror management depends on both cultural and individual factors.
Recently Leifer (1997) and Loy (1996) have deftly elucidated Buddhist wisdom on death and its importance for psychology. One of the most radical perspectives on death anxiety comes from Langs (1997, in press-a, in press-b), who asserts that there is a fundamental, defensively motivated flaw in the basic psychoanalytic focus on intrapsychic processes like unconscious memories, needs, fantasies, relational patterns, and narcissistic needs. Langs points out that biological organisms have evolved and are designed to adapt first and foremost to environmental conditions, especially those that are traumatic and life threatening. Inherent to the appreciation of the role played by external dangers in emotional life is the recognition of the fundamental role played by death and death anxieties in the vicissitudes of both emotional health and maladaptations. Indeed, according to Langs, the very core of psychoanalytic thinking is, in part, constructed as a defense against the experience and processing of the death anxieties that humans acquired when they evolved language capabilities and which, to this very day, plague us all even as they fuel our most creative moments in life.

AWAKENING TO DEATH

How is this useful for psychoanalytic or psychohistorical inquiry? This dimension has been thus far both neglected and resisted in a true psychoanalytic sense. Death anxiety and mortal terror have been salient and driving forces which have shaped history and culture. One can barely examine the Egyptian mortuary cult, its obsession with disrupting decay, with demanding eternity and denying evanescence, without incorporating an understanding of the symbology and psychological complexity of death anxiety.

Weary, weary are the members of Osiris! They shall not be weary, they shall not putrefy, they shall not decay, they shall not swell up! May it be done to me in like manner, for I am Osiris. (The Egyptian Book of the Dead, chapter 45)⁹

Here the pharaoh recites the incantation which catalyzes his godhood and denies the corruptibility and putrescence of his mortal flesh. It is a magical act of denial and undoing, a hallucinatory act of narcissistic inflation which transforms the reality of death into the fulfillment of the wish for transcendence and immortality.

Nor can one grasp the complexity of Christianity and Buddhism without recognizing the horrific disgust with the flesh, with that which decays, with the noisome feminine, and the obsessive fantasy of purification and rebirth.¹⁰ St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) echoes Augustinian disgust: “Man is nothing else than fetid sperm, a sack of
dung, the food for worms. . . . You have never seen a viler dunghill” (Seldes, 1985, p. 41). Consider Gautama’s thoughts after encountering the sufferings outside his castle, as written in the Digha Nikaya, xiv [the Mahapadana suttanta]: “Shame verily be upon this thing called birth, since to one born the decay of life, since disease, since death shows itself like that!” (Eliade, 1967, pp. 472–475). We read in the Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification):

When this being is born in the mother’s womb, it is not born inside a blue or red or white lotus, etc., but on the contrary, like a worm in rotting fish, rotting dough, cess-pools, etc., he is born in the belly in a position that is below the receptacle for undigested food (rectum), between the belly-lining and the backbone, which is very cramped, quite dark, pervaded with very fetid draughts redolent of various smells of ordure, and exceptionally loathsome. And on being reborn there, for ten months he undergoes excessive suffering, being cooked like a pudding in a bag by the heat produced in the mother’s womb. . . . (Faure, 2003, pp. 80–81)

In the Bhikkhunisamyutta, a Buddhist nun laments: “I am repelled and humiliated by this foul, putrid body” (Bodhi, 2000, p. 224). Such sentiments are not anomalous but comprise recurring strains of Buddhism and Christianity and are ripe for psychological analysis of death, disgust, and misogyny.

Finally, an examination of fanatical and ecstatic violence remains elusive without recognizing the terror of death, helplessness, and nothingness which suffuse fantasies of eternal reichs and leaders. What an abyss of insignificance, non-being, vulnerability, and incipient decay is decimated by ecstatically crushing and slaughtering an enemy!

On my right was mounted a heavy machine gun. The gunner (normally the cook) was firing away with what I can only describe as a beatific smile on his face. He was exhilarated by the squeezing of the trigger, the hammering of the gun, and the flight of his tracers rushing out into the dark shore. It struck me then (and was confirmed by him and many others later) that squeezing the trigger—releasing a hail of bullets—gives enormous pleasure and satisfaction. These are the pleasures of combat, not in terms of the intellectual planning—of the tactical and strategic chess game—but of the primal aggression, the release, and the orgasmic discharge. (Grossman, 1995, p. 136)

I secured a direct hit on an enemy encampment, saw bodies or parts of bodies go up in the air, and heard the desperate yelling of the wounded or the runaways. I had to confess to myself that it was one of the happiest moments of my life. (Bourke, 1999, p. 19)

Death is never death plain and simple. As I have attempted to explain, the manifest imagery of death is intricate and overdetermined,
elusive, stratified, displaced, and repressed. Thus this volume is an intimation of how the complex nature of death anxiety may be incorporated into further researches by capable psychoanalysts and psychohistorians who can determine the specifics of how the imagery and conceptuality of death were formulated, nurtured, and inculcated in a particular culture or individual, how that culture symbolized death, and defended itself against the terror of annihilation and decay. In what manner did a people experience trauma, strife, catastrophe, bliss, or conquest such that they would conceive death in their own way? With what imagery did they deny death and proclaim their eternity, immortality, or aplomb in the face of impending disintegration and putrescence? What was conscious and unconscious about death?

The purpose of this introduction was to introduce a set of salient propositions into the extant corpus of psychoanalytic and psychohistorical theory. I have argued that the complex fear of death pervades the psychic life of the human organism and is inextricably bound with the matrix of psychopathology, fantasy, and illusion. If indeed we evade and deny death anxiety, even resist awareness of its significance in human motivation, then incorporating this awareness will complicate any analysis of culture or history. It will complicate the manner in which inquiry is conducted in the first place, if we are excluding death from our own cognitive processes.

I hope that this volume may influence readers to ponder these ideas, as it seems essential to the history of the psyche that death has always lingered as an immanent source of terror and despair.

NOTES

This introduction contains elements previously published in The Journal of Psychohistory 29 (2), 143–158, and later expanded into “Death, Fantasy, and History” (unpublished manuscript).

1. It should of course be stated that the pathological elements do not comprise all worldviews, or all religion. One might even suggest with Jung and Campbell that religion is a defense against the experience of God. The imagination and the depths of the unconscious are only pathological when externalized and taken literally as concrete realities. It is this pathology which I am analyzing here. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that some theology is iconoclastic and illusion demolishing rather than idolatrous and illusion creating. The religion which dispels illusion will have to be treated elsewhere, as it is beyond the scope of this introduction.


3. Omphalos literally means “navel” in Greek. It is white stone ovoid, hemisphere, or pillar which is thought to be a navel, womb, or egg (occasionally a clitoris has been suggested), representing a symbolic world center from which life emanates.
4. There are also several works on the psychology of male reactions toward women worth examining. I cite as just a few examples, Bettelheim (1954); Burke (1998); Rheingold (1967); Horney (1967); Lederer (1968); Monick (1991); Neumann (1994).

5. One may object that this argument blames women for all the violence toward children and ensuing psychopathology in history. Nothing could be farther from the argument of this paper. I am proposing that children are born into a world where their own helpless neoteny renders them susceptible to severe physical and emotional injury. Both the mother and father contribute toward guiding a child into mature and healthy adulthood or arresting them in traumatized and deranged infancy. What I was emphasizing here is that, in addition to what Freud said about oedipal trauma and conflict, pre-oedipal injury is also significant and engenders significant fear, loathing, and envy of women. It should also be noted that these feelings toward women are not found only among men.

6. Semiotics is the study of signs, that is, the study of significations of meaning, how language refers to phenomena by attributing meaning.

7. See also Lifton (1973), p. 277.

8. In the past decade, a host of studies undertaken by the team of Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski have aptly demonstrated the salience of death anxiety in normal individuals. The authors describe the transformation of death anxiety into security-inducing fantasies as “Terror Management.” For a concise summary of their work, see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski (in press). Hurvich (in press) has also demonstrated the ubiquity of annihilation anxiety and realistic (rather than unrealistic, or neurotic) death anxiety.

9. This is the “Chapter for Not Putrefying in the God’s Domain.” It should be noted here that the pharaoh is saying the prayer and becomes the undecaying God through the liturgy.

10. One must of course examine the specific Christianity or Buddhism in question, since these theologies and philosophies were complex, variegated, and diverse enough to have sects which opposed one another dramatically. One must always ask “which Buddhism?” and “which Christianity?”

REFERENCES