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THE BROKEN CONNECTION

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PSYCHOBIRDS

# THE BROKEN CONNECTION

*On Death and the Continuity of Life*

Robert Jay Lifton

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# ONE

## *Approaches and Modes*

UNTIL RECENTLY, psychiatrists have mostly looked upon explorations of death and immortality either as forms of religious superstition or as matters of private belief separate from professional concern. While the denial of death is universal, the inner life-experience of a sense of immortality, rather than reflecting such denial, may well be the most authentic psychological alternative to that denial.

Conceptually speaking, psychoanalytic psychiatry's problems and possibilities in this area, as in so many others, begin with Freud.

Consider his celebrated statement about death and immortality:

It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death: and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psychoanalytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.<sup>1</sup>

For Freud death is unimaginable, psychically unavailable. And belief in immortality is compensatory and illusory. Elsewhere, Freud speaks of the inner pretense that one will not die as a "cultural and conventional attitude" fostered by the defense mechanism of "denial of death." Freud traces that denial to what he believes to be its prehistoric origins. Primeval man, he tells us, had two opposing unconscious attitudes toward death: "the one which acknowledges it as the annihilation of life and the other which denies it as unreal." Modern man, he goes on to say, has embraced only the denial, and at severe psychological

cost. But Freud's implication is that the denial itself is rooted in instinct, which, in turn, derives from primeval sources and is the basis for fundamental unconscious attitudes ("in the unconscious everyone of us is convinced of his own immortality").

In the face of this overwhelming pattern of denial, Freud characteristically calls for a rallying of reason to combat unreason. Writing under the impetus of the general death immersion of World War I, he makes an eloquent plea for greater honesty and psychological integrity in relationship to living and dying:

Should we not confess that in our civilized attitude towards death we are once again living psychologically beyond our means, and should we not rather turn back and recognize the truth? Would it not be better to give death a place in reality and in our thoughts which is its due, and to give a little more prominence to the unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed? . . .

We recall the old saying: *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. If you want to preserve peace, arm for war.

It would be in keeping with the times, to alter it: *Si vis vitam, para mortem*. If you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death.<sup>2</sup>

For Freud giving death its due meant surrendering all doctrines that deny the "significance of annihilation"—all images of an afterlife or of "immortality of the human soul." These images, he insists, are *nothing but* the denial of that annihilation, and therefore denial of death itself. We may characterize Freud's position as *rationalist-iconoclastic*.

Carl Jung takes the opposite position. He looks to the mythologies of the world, and stresses that all of them contain beliefs about life after death. These mythologies, he insists, hold hidden maps of our own psychic terrain—important "hints sent to us from the unconscious." He also refers to dreams, his own and others', and to experiments in extrasensory perception, from which he concludes that "at least a part of our psychic existence is characterized by a relativity of space and time . . . [which] seems to increase, in proportion to the distance from consciousness, to an absolute condition of timelessness and spacelessness."<sup>3</sup> What he seems to be saying is that we cannot quite know whether there is some form of life beyond what we call death—there are mysteries about the nature and scope of the mind's perceptions—but that in the absence of certainty either way, he is favorably inclined toward such a belief. When near the end of his own life, he reasserted that inclination toward such a "personal myth," because it was psychically hopeful and enriching, and because it kept one in touch with the most fundamental kind of instinctual image-structure or "archetype."

Yet death is an important interest, especially to an aging person. A categorical question is being put to him, and he is under an obligation to answer it. To this end he ought to have a myth about death, for reason shows him nothing but the dark pit into which he is descending. Myth, however, can conjure up other images for him, helpful and enriching pictures of life in the land of the dead. If he believes in them, or greets them with some measure of credence, he is being just as right or just as wrong as someone who does not believe in them. But while the man who despairs marches toward nothingness, the one who has placed his faith in the archetype follows the tracks of life and lives right into his death. Both, to be sure, remain in uncertainty. But the one lives against his instincts, the other with them. Mythological and religious imagery of life beyond death, that is, constitutes an "archetype," a primordial, inherited, instinctual structure that is worthy of one's "faith."<sup>3</sup>

In defending the idea of life beyond death, Jung moved back and forth throughout his work between a "hygienic" principle—

As a physician I am convinced that it is hygienic to discover in death a goal toward which one can strive; and that shrinking away from it is something unhealthy and abnormal which robs the second half of life of its purpose. I therefore consider the religious teaching of a life hereafter consonant with the standpoint of psychic hygiene. When I live in a house that I know will fall about my head within the next two weeks, all my vital functions will be impaired by this thought; but if, on the contrary, I feel myself to be safe, I can dwell there in a normal comfortable way.<sup>4</sup>

and a more powerful insistence upon the psychic truth of ancient, archetypal images:

. . . beyond [the intellect] there is a thinking in primordial images—in symbols that are older than historical man; which have been ingrained in him from earliest times, and, eternally living, outlasting all generations, still make up the groundwork of the human psyche. It is possible to live the fullest life only when we are in harmony with these symbols; wisdom is a return to them. It is a question neither of belief nor knowledge, but of the agreement of our thinking with the primordial images of the unconscious. They are the source of all our conscious thoughts, and one of these primordial images is the idea of life after death.

Death's annihilation, in Jung's view, is less significant than the enriching (hygienic) value and awesome primordial (mythical) persistence of symbolism of life after death. We may therefore characterize Jung's position as *mythic-hygienic*.

The differences and similarities between these two great stubborn figures are nowhere more evident. Freud, the patriarchal, secular Jew, carries the torch for

the Enlightenment and for an assumption upon which modern, post-theocratic reason must rest: that of death as absolute annihilation of the human organism. He links that insistence with his revolutionary psychology in his plea for greater awareness of death and with his focus on the cost of continuing denial. Above all, he brings to bear his fierce rationalism on what he considers antiscientific self-deception around the idea of immortality. In this way he affirms nobly what his life and work stand for, and also (but not incidentally) lays to rest (or almost to rest) the troubling personal questions of the wilder, less science-bound, more magical and mystical borders of his own psyche. We can hardly blame him for ignoring, in the process, not only the *symbolic* significance of universal imagery of immortality but also the *prospective* importance of individual imagery concerning death and continuity.

For whether or not we imagine our own death as a specific event, we do anticipate the end of the self—its annihilation, cessation (stasis), and total separation (from the world). And Freud was by no means immune from the crucial, prospective question concerning the extent to which that anticipated end of the self is viewed as the end of *everything*. I have written elsewhere of his transformation of an early fear of death to impressive mastery of that fear over sixteen years of extremely painful and humiliating symptoms of, and treatment for, mouth cancer. As his work developed, what concerned him much more than death was the prospective issue of the fate of his theories. Of one disciple and patient he asked anxiously, "What will they do with my theory after my death? Will it still resemble my basic thoughts?"<sup>5</sup> And as early as 1894, at the age of thirty-eight, when ill with what may or may not have been a genuine cardiac episode and fearful of the outcome, he wrote:

Among the gloomy thoughts of the past few months there is one that is in second place, right after wife and children—namely, that I shall not be able to prove the sexual thesis anymore. After all one does not want to die either immediately or completely. . . .

. . . They look upon me as pretty much of a monomaniac, while I have the distinct feeling that I have touched upon one of the great secrets of nature.<sup>6</sup>

Freud was, in other words, less a postdeath spectator than a deeply involved predeath participant in the endless symbolizations of his own magnificent mental products—with as much concern with this kind of symbolic immortality as anyone else, and indeed more reason than most for such concern.

Jung, the Protestant visionary, brings his tough-minded, obscurantist, medieval imagination and distrust of secular pieties to a reassertion of immortality that combines a modern therapeutic ethos with premodern Christian hope. Listening to his insistence that we hearken to the message of a "beyond," we recall Jung's very early conflict with Freud over a similar issue of symbolization—Jung's stress on "the spiritual significance of incest as a symbol" as opposed to Freud's clinging "to the literal interpretation of it" as "a personal complication."

So Jung does take us toward a symbolizing perspective. But he hedges and mystifies when he advocates that one "place . . . his faith in the archetype." The archetype itself, as an inherited-instinctual image, becomes a suprahistorical truth, which we are unquestioningly to pursue. We are asked specifically to recover and reexperience the archetype of immortality. But in all this Jung fails to distinguish—or at least distinguishes inadequately—between the symbolic truth of the imagery and the literal idea of an "afterlife" or "immortal soul." This combination of premodern "mythicism" and modern "therapism" takes us outside the realm of natural history—and negates, rather than broadens, psychology's relationship to the scientific tradition.

The similarity we also feel in the two men has to do not only with their stubbornness and stature but their nineteenth-century instinctualism (which we will return to when we talk about Freud's death instinct). Within that instinctualism and what we would now consider its explanatory limitations, the two men shared a heroic sensibility to death and immortality as an ultimate matter for psychological man.

There is a third position, a *formative-symbolizing* perspective. We may accept both Freud's insistence on confronting death as the annihilation of the self, and Jung's insistence on the psychological importance of mythic imagery of immortality. But I would focus more specifically on the symbolizing process around death and immortality as the individual's experience of participation in some form of collective life-continuity. To be sure our knowledge that we die pervades all such larger perceptions of life's endings and beginnings. And our resistance to that knowledge, our denial of death, is indeed formidable, as Freud and the others have emphasized. But that denial can never be total; we are never fully ignorant of the fact that we die. Rather we go about life with a kind of "middle knowledge" of death,\* a partial awareness of it side by side with expressions and actions that belie that awareness. Our resistance to the fact that we die—the numbed side of our middle knowledge—interferes considerably with our symbolizing process. We, in fact, require symbolization of continuity—imaginative forms of transcending death—in order to confront genuinely the fact that we die.

A *sense* of immortality, then, is by no means mere denial of death, though denial and numbing are rarely absent. Rather it is a corollary of the knowledge of death itself, and reflects a compelling and universal inner quest for continuous symbolic relationship to what has gone before and what will continue after our finite individual lives. That quest is central to the human project, to man as cultural animal and to his creation of culture and history. The struggle toward, or experience of, a sense of immortality is in itself neither compensatory nor "irrational," but an appropriate symbolization of our biological and historical connectedness.

\*The term "middle knowledge" was first used in connection with patients who were actually dying,<sup>7</sup> but it applies equally to the rest of us, who differ from dying patients mainly in relationship to the timing of our deaths.

This view is influenced by Rank's concept of man's perpetual struggle for "an assurance of eternal survival for himself," and his further assertion that "man creates culture by changing natural conditions in order to maintain his spiritual self."<sup>3</sup> But in seeing the whole process as part of man's fundamental "irrationality," Rank placed the whole matter in a realm of religious aspirations that are "beyond psychology." We may instead place a version of this principle at the center of a psychology, and view the struggle for symbolic immortality as neither rational nor irrational but as a psychic expression of man's existential and organismic state. We need not then trace it back to an unchanging "archetype," but can view it instead as a core area of the self—one in which central motivating issues around life-continuity and threats to it are experienced.

In terms of biological connectedness, August Weismann spoke nearly a century ago of the principle of literal cellular immortality—"the immortality of unicellular beings and of the reproductive cells of multicellular organisms." But that literal cellular immortality is just one aspect of our general biological (species) continuity. The psychological power of that biological continuity is expressed by such terms as "ties of blood" and "my people," and by the limitless images of origin and life-source, including that of "my mother's womb." We must wonder at the neglect of these primal emotions in depth-psychological theory, as at the neglect of equally powerful historical feelings—based not so much on specific knowledge of national or cultural past as on a more inchoate involvement in the transmission, over many generations, of images, ideas, and practices that inform or bedevil our lives. We require a psychological language—our own system of professional symbolization—to express a sense of endless biohistorical continuity.

Death does indeed bring about biological and psychic annihilation. But life includes symbolic perceptions of connections that precede and outlast that annihilation.

*Note* The sense of immortality may be expressed in five general modes: the biological, theological, creative (through "works"), natural, and the special mode of experiential transcendence. Awareness of our involvement in these modes can vary enormously, and cannot necessarily be equated with the power a particular mode, or combination of modes, holds for us.

*①* The biological mode of immortality is epitomized by family continuity, living on through—psychologically speaking, *in*—one's sons and daughters and their sons and daughters, with imagery of an endless chain of biological attachment. This has been the most fundamental and universal of all modes. A classical expression was in premodern East Asian cultures, especially in the traditional Chinese family system, and in somewhat lesser and modified form in the Japanese family system as well. It was philosophically elaborated in Confucianism, particularly in the mystique (near-religion) of filial piety. Thus

Mencius, Confucius's great disciple, could say: "There are three unfilial acts, and of these, lack of posterity is the greatest."

In Japan, even today, very many homes retain the mortuary tablets (*ihhai*) for deceased family members kept in the Buddhist household shrine (*butsudan*). The practice is a remnant of the longstanding Japanese combination of original Shinto reverence toward nature and ancestors and later Buddhist influence. This ritual has never been associated with the structured belief system characteristic of Western religion, and has undoubtedly lost much of its psychological force in modern and postmodern Japan. Yet it remains important to Japanese cultural experience, and can be especially reawakened in crises. Many Hiroshima survivors, for instance, told me of the special solace they felt when literally talking to family members killed in the bomb and enshrined in their household altars. What they conveyed was much less a sense of religiosity than of ritualized effort to hold onto at least some part of those relationships and to maintain an unbroken sense of family continuity.

These sentiments are in no way unique, and one encounters related practices in Western cultures. The early Roman "paterfamilias" was both family monarch and priest of the family ancestor cult, and his authority and property were legally transmitted down the male family line. Much of the Roman system was maintained in the secular and canon law of Western Europe until the nineteenth century, and its influences are still present in contemporary life.

Because man is the "cultural animal," the biological mode can never remain purely biological. The family itself is always symbolized at least partly in social terms. An example is the Japanese family practice, still active, of "adopting" adult male heirs where none (or in some cases, merely none with adequate talent) are available in that biological generation.\* The biosocial mode of immortality can be extended outward from family to tribe, organization, subculture, people, nation, or even species. That extension can be associated with varying ethical principles.†

\* Another example is the stress on "family honor." In Japan, the principle of "clearing one's name"—wiping out stains on one's reputation, repaying social and economic debts, avenging insults—has never been a purely individual matter but has always been subsumed to the "family name" that has defined so much of the individual's moral as well as biological existence.

† In premodern Japan, the biosocial mode extended from family to feudal lord, and then in varying ways at different times to the larger clan, clan groups, *shogunate* (the system of military government under which Japan was ruled from the late twelfth to late nineteenth centuries), and the emperor (in whose name the shogun ruled). Then the Meiji restoration of 1868 was followed by a revitalization of the emperor system that combined its mythology (of unbroken descent from the sun goddess) with more modern expressions of nationalism, so that World War II could be fought around a sacred constellation of family, feudal past, emperor, and nation. While the Japanese case has unique features, some such constellation always characterizes modern nationalism. The individual is energized by merging with what can be called an "immortal biocultural substance" for which he may willingly give his life, and even more willingly take the lives of others.

It is precisely because of the psychic force of the biosocial mode that there is such a fine line between love of country and people on the one hand, and hate-filled, violent nationalism on the other. Nor have we made more than the smallest beginnings toward extending the mode beyond that immortal bi-cultural substance usually associated with nations. That kind of extension has been advocated by evolutionary theorists such as Julian Huxley and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the latter movingly but precariously combining evolutionary theory with elements of Christian mysticism. Our restless search for life on other planets could also be viewed as a struggle toward extension of the mode still further. An encompassing vision of biosocial immortality—and we have at least glimmerings of such a vision—would provide each individual anticipating death with the image: “I live on in humankind.”

A second expression of symbolic immortality—the one that comes most readily to mind when the word is used—is the theological or religious mode. It may include a specific concept of a life after death, not only as a form of “survival” but even as a release from the profane burdens of life into a higher plane of existence. A related concept is that of the “immortal soul,” which Freud saw as man’s characteristic expression of denial of death.

But the theological mode need not rely on a literal vision of immortal soul or afterlife. No such vision occurs in most Jewish and Buddhist belief. And even in the case of Christianity it is probably less fundamental than the quality of spiritual achievement symbolized in the Christ story.\* The common thread in all great religions is the spiritual quest and realization of the hero-founder that enables him to confront and transcend death and to provide a model for generations of believers to do the same. Thus the lives of Buddha, Moses, Christ, and Mohammed came to encompass various combinations of spirituality, revelation, and ultimate ethical principles that could, for themselves and their followers, divest death of its “sting” of annihilation. The basic spiritual principle, with or without a concept of afterlife or immortal soul, is the ancient mythological theme of death and rebirth. One is offered the opportunity to be reborn into a timeless realm of ultimate, death-transcending truths. In that realm one can share the immortality of the deity, obtain membership in a sacred community or a “covenant with God.” Or that ultimate realm might take on the more concrete imagery of a “heaven,” or of the negative immortality (unending suffering) of hell.

Whatever the imagery, there is at the heart of religion a sense of spiritual power.† That power may be understood in a number of ways—dedication, capacity to love, moral energy—but its final meaning is life-power and

\* Paul Tillich, in personal conversation, once contrasted what he called the “vulgar theology” of afterlife imagery, usually for the “common people,” with more symbolized and sensitive “higher theologies” around spiritual attainment. But the Christ story does differ from those of other spiritual heroes in its more specific focus upon individual death and resurrection.

power over death. There are specific words to suggest that power. In Japan, for instance, the word *kami*, while often translated as “god,” “gods,” or “spirit,” has the more general meaning of “a thing or person . . . felt to possess some superior quality or power.” The word, in fact, resembles the Polynesian term *mana* and the Roman idea of *numen*<sup>10</sup>—to which one could add the Eskimo concept of *tungnic*, the Greek idea of *areté*, and the Christian image of grace. All of these convey a quality of spiritual power derived from a more-than-natural source. The state of possessing (or of living under the protection of) this power, rather than the concrete idea of afterlife, is the more universal to religious experience.

Claims by priests to possess this power, and their political institutionalization of it, converts theology to theocracy. Monarchies in particular, both western and eastern, tend to derive from these theocratic routes.\*

The third mode of symbolic immortality is the creative—whether through great works of art, literature, or science, or through more humble influences on people around us: The artist has long been recognized as participating in this mode of immortality—either in his prophetic function or, as Malraux believed, through “the continuity of artistic creation” by means of which “not the individual, but man, human continuity, reveals itself,” so that “more than any other activity, art escapes death.”<sup>11</sup>

Similarly each scientific investigator becomes part of an enterprise larger than himself, limitless in its past and future continuity. Whatever his additional motivations—the need to know and the quest for personal glory and reward—he operates within a framework of larger connectedness. Hence the concern of the individual scientist for the lasting quality of the tradition within which he works—all the more so when he himself is the originator of a tradition whose future must be considered uncertain (as mentioned above in Freud’s case).†

\* The Japanese emperor system has been particularly striking as a modern theocratic phenomenon. In stressing the absolute divinity of the emperor—his descent from the sun goddess—Meiji reformers (late nineteenth century) managed to build around the emperor not only the imagery of biosocial immortality already mentioned but a compelling theological mode as well. Those governing in his name could take on quite readily the totalist claim to the dispensation of truth and of existence itself. To serve and revere the emperor-centered state could then permit one to share in an especially vivid sense of immortality derived from experiencing the entire nation as a “sacred community” with unlimited spiritual power.

† Gerald Holton has gone further in demonstrating how themes addressed by physical science reflect specific struggles of a particular century with ultimate questions. The Greek idea of the atom, for instance, expressed a powerful impulse to “keep back the void,” an impulse by no means absent today in physicists’ use of ever more extensive technology to demonstrate ever more minuscule particles, even as their very physicality comes into doubt.<sup>12</sup>

The great historical transition from religion to science refers to a major shift in the imagery through which large numbers of people in general (not just scientists or theologians) experience the continuity of human existence. Our psychological relationship to each of these world views lies not so much in the virtues of the one or the other as in the extent to which the vitality of either gives way to a dogmatic literalism that limits feeling and suppresses imagination. Everyone in this age participates in a sense of immortality derived from the interlocking human projects we call science and technology.

At more concrete levels of individual encounter, any kind of service or care can enter into this mode of continuity. Physicians and psychotherapists, for instance, associate their therapeutic efforts with beneficent influences that carry forward indefinitely in the lives of patients and clients and *their* children or posterity. Consequently, any sense on the part of care-givers that those efforts are ineffective can set off in them deep anxieties about ultimate personal questions.\*

These issues are germane to more humble everyday offerings of nurturing or even kindness—in relationships of love, friendship, and at times even anonymous encounter. Indeed, any form of acting upon others contains important perceptions of timeless consequences.

4 The fourth mode of symbolic immortality is that associated with nature itself: the perception that the natural environment around us, limitless in space and time, will remain. This mode has been especially vivid in traditional Japanese culture, steeped as it was in a great variety of nature symbolism.† In early Shinto belief, as in much animistic religion, supernatural gods emerge from, and eventually retire to, the trees, mountains, and rivers, where they are joined by immortal human souls. No wonder that survivors of Hiroshima, struggling to absorb their holocaust and to reestablish their own sense of continuity, so often quoted the ancient Japanese (originally Chinese) saying: "The state may collapse but the mountains and rivers remain."

\*Leslie Farber has described the experience of "therapeutic despair"<sup>13</sup> as an occupational hazard of those psychiatrists who devote major energies over long periods of time to treating severely withdrawn schizophrenic patients. Farber attributes that state to the unacceptable perception that nothing of significance is really happening in the therapy. What might really be at stake, however (and this is perfectly compatible with Farber's views), is the therapist's larger relationship to the creative or professional—in this case, therapeutic—mode of immortality in which he has invested so much of his life energies. Hence, he engages in the little games of self-deceit Farber so vividly describes, illusions that exchanges between the patient and himself, understood by no one else, signify progress in the therapy and, by implication, confirmation of his own sense of meaningful work.

†Sansom thus locates the earliest and most persistent object of Japanese religious feelings in "the forces of nature in their divine embodiments as gods of mountain and valley, field and stream; fire and water, rain and wind."<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, immediately after the bomb fell, the most terrifying rumor among the many that swept the city was that trees, grass, and flowers would never again grow in Hiroshima. The image contained in that rumor was of nature drying up altogether, life being extinguished at its source, an ultimate form of desolation that not only encompassed human death but went beyond it. The persistence and continuing growth of wild "railroad grass" (which, in fact, had to serve as food for many during immediate postbomb days) was perceived as a source of strength. And the subsequent appearance of early spring buds, especially those of the March cherry blossoms, symbolized the detoxification of the city and (in the words of its then mayor) "a new feeling of relief and hope."\*

The assaults on the natural mode by advanced industrial society both threaten our relationship to it and awaken image-hungry within us (as expressed in widespread American return-to-nature impulses, organized and informal, during the 1960s and 1970s). However our perceptions of nature change—to include outer space, the moon, other planets—we continue to seek in those perceptions an ultimate aspect of our existence.

\*Consider such expressions of the natural mode of immortality as the ideology of nineteenth-century European romanticism, carried over into twentieth-century "return-to-nature" expressions of German youth movements (some of which were all too readily absorbed by the murderous romanticism of Hitlerism); the American cult of the "great outdoors," with its roots both in Europe and in transcendent perceptions of the natural dimensions of the New World and of the American frontier; and the longstanding Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with vigorously confronting the infinite dimensions of nature and with "cultivating one's garden." In that last image, the idea of nurturing and communing with one's own small plot of land becomes a metaphor for tending to one's own realm, whether of domestic national policy or the individual psyche. *note*

## TWO

*The Experience of Transcendence*

note! THE FIFTH MODE of symbolized immortality, that of experiential transcendence, is of a different order from the others. It depends entirely on a psychic state—one so intense and all-encompassing that time and death disappear. This state is the classical mode of the mystic. But it turns out to have significance far beyond that, to be, in fact, the indicator of the other four modes as well.

Ruth Benedict suggested that whole cultures could be classified according to the Nietzschean duality of Apollonian stress upon measure, control and moderation; and the Dionysian embrace of excess, of "annihilation of ordinary bonds and limits of existence" in the struggle to "break through into another order of experience."<sup>1</sup>\* In a more recent study of ecstasy, Marghanita Laski speaks similarly of a psychic breakthrough and of a quality of experience "extraordinary to the point of seeming as if derived from a praeternatural source." She identifies this state in places we would expect to find it—in mysticism, religious and secular, and in various premodern cultural rites where it may be brought about with the aid of drugs, starvation, sleep deprivation, or some other form of imposed ordeal. But she also locates it in less obvious places, in more familiar activities, such as song, dance, battle, sexual love,

\* Nietzsche's distinction was actually much more subtle. He viewed the Apollonian as itself dream and illusion, a "deep and happy sense of the necessity of dream experiences expressed by the Greeks in the image of Apollo," and spoke of the "fair [Apollonian] illusion of the dream sphere . . . [as] a precondition not only of all plastic art, but even . . . of a wide range of poetry." In this Apollonian mode, he went on, "we enjoy an immediate apprehension of form, all shapes speak to us directly, nothing seems indifferent or redundant."<sup>2</sup>

childbirth, athletic effort, mechanical flight, contemplation of the past, and artistic or intellectual creation.<sup>3</sup>

Characteristic of the ecstatic state in all of these activities is a sense of extraordinary psychic unity, and perceptual intensity, and of ineffable illumination and insight. note

The list suggests a continuum from extraordinary Dionysian "excess" (sexual orgy or absolute union with God) to relatively "ordinary excess" (sexual intercourse, athletics) to much quieter, indeed, Apollonian moments (contemplation of the past or any kind of beauty). The crucial requirement for feeling ecstatic—"outside of oneself"—would seem to be not so much excess per se as the breakout from prosaic psychic complexities into a state of pure focus, of inner unity and harmony. What excess or Dionysian drama does provide is a vivid psychological model which helps us to understand more muted expressions of that model at the quieter, softer end of the continuum. ✓

From that standpoint we may reconsider the widespread contemporary form of ecstasy accompanying the use of LSD, a synthetic drug variously described as "psychedelic" (mind-manifesting), "consciousness-expanding," "mysticomimetic," or "psychotomimetic." As these names suggest, the psychic state produced can take the form of expanded mental capacities on the one hand, or psychotic dissociation on the other. Psychic explorers have emphasized the former possibility; psychiatrists have tended to stress the latter danger. All have come to recognize that much depends on the setting in which the drug is used, on what is expected by the person taking it, and by those around him who administer the drug or in one way or another set the tone of the experience. Even while granting the dangers, some psychiatrists have emphasized the drug's usefulness to the therapeutic process—its stimulation of a "transcendental reaction . . . a temporary loss of differentiation of the self and the outer world . . . (which) may lead to a lessening of alienation, to a rediscovery of the self, to a new set of values, to the finding of new potential for growth and development, and to a new beginning."<sup>4</sup>

These descriptions—by sober research scientists no less than radical young seekers—suggest an inner experience of "uncentering" or breaking down of existing psychic forms followed immediately by a vivid sense of reintegration and recentering. The specific psychic experience has to do with what Freud called the "Oceanic feeling," or the 'sensation of eternity,' . . . of something limitless, unbounded." Freud attributed this sense of "oneness with the universe" to a return to the unity characteristic of early childhood prior to the separation of ego from outer world. He called this a "restoration of limitless narcissism."<sup>5</sup> He would undoubtedly have said the same of Sir Thomas Browne's characterization of the Christian mystical experience. ✓

And if any have been so happy as truly to understand Christian annihilation, ecstasies, exaltation, liquification, transformation, the kiss of the spouse,



gustation of God, and ingression into the Divine shadow, they have already had a handsome anticipation of heaven; the glory of the world is surely over, and the earth in ashes unto them.

Freud is certainly right to insist that such experiences be examined as *psychic states*. But we must reject his characterization of them as merely regressive phenomena, as no more than residua from early childhood. Let's assume that the ecstatic experience, like all experience, takes place only in the present, and is indeed characterized by extraordinary immediacy and "presentness." We can speak of psychic models of inner unity as being established in early childhood, prior to life's differentiations and ambiguities, and prior to the adult loss of much of the capacity to harmonize passion and idea. But in this psychic state there is a rediscovery of that harmony in a specifically *adult* experience, a sense of strong inner coherence within the originally symbolized adult psychic universe.

The self feels uniquely alive—connected, in movement, integrated—which is why we can say that this state provides at least a temporary sense of eliminating time and death. What it eliminates is the destructive side of the death symbol—proximate imagery of separation, stasis, and disintegration, as well as ultimate imagery of meaninglessness and impaired symbolic immortality. This kind of psychic experience can (as Laski suggests) lead to significant inner change:

It is generally agreed that ecstatic experiences are to be valued not only for the delight they give—which is great—but for their beneficial results. These results may be generally expressed as improved mental organization, whether this takes the form of replacing uneasiness and dissatisfaction with ease and satisfaction, or of appearing to confirm a sought belief, or of inspiring to moral action or of enabling the expression of a new mental creation.<sup>6</sup>

One never "returns" to exactly the same inner structure of the self. Having once broken old forms, one senses that they can be broken again, or at least extended beyond earlier limitations. In addition an important memory remains, a still active image-feeling of intense inner unity. A personal model is thus constructed for the symbolic reordering necessary to psychological change. The process is reminiscent of William James's classical descriptions of religious conversion. But whether taking the form of that high drama, or of a quieter ecstasy, what is crucial is the moment of perfect centering—of ideal blending of immediate and ultimate involvements.\*

\*By centering I mean ordering of the experience of the self along the various dimensions that must be dealt with at any given moment—temporal, spatial, and emotional. On the temporal plain centering consists of bringing to bear on any immediate encounter older images and forms in ways that can anticipate future encounters. On the spatial plane, centering involves unifying immediate (proximate) exposure of the body and mind with ultimate ("immortalizing," "abstract," or "distant")

That whole sequence can be regularized in cultural ritual, as in the use of peyote (a natural, mescaline substance whose action resembles that of LSD) by certain groups of American Indians in the past:

Peyote gave them faith in a new power and a new road that they might follow from the path that was still in their hearts and minds to a feared and little understood future. The meeting of compelling forces, conscious and unconscious, of racial memories, the loss of tribal security and religious beliefs, added to the . . . creative urge to make live, in form and color, the spirit of the Indian.<sup>7\*</sup>

Ecstatic transcendence here overcomes the confusions associated with the passage of time, and blends all in transtemporal harmony. This form of symbolic reordering is central to various kinds of individual and collective revitalization. But it requires a reservoir of shared cultural imagery—usually religious or at least cosmological, almost always touching upon issues of life and death—imagery that can be communally evoked under structured ritual conditions. Even if a person seeks the experience alone, he must call forth symbolizations of immortality available to his people, symbolizations that provide not only energy for the ecstatic experience but order and form within which it can be immediately understood and later absorbed. Through such traditional symbolizations of life-continuity and ultimate meaning, the moment of ecstasy is given a firm context within which it can connect with prior and subsequent experience of a more prosaic kind.

Precisely these conditions have been lacking for contemporary non-Indian

meanings. A third aspect of centering has to do with discriminations in emotional valence between our most impassioned images and those less important to the structure and function of the self.

The self can maintain this centering only to the degree it has the capacity for decentering, for sufficient detachment from involvements to permit it to make judgments upon events and principles beyond itself. The absence of decentering renders the self static, devoid of new content, while absence of centering is associated with inability to connect new experience with viable inner forms.

Both centering and decentering depend in turn upon grounding, which is the relationship of the self to its own history, individual and collective, as well as to its biology. Where grounding is precarious, decentering is likely to be replaced by *uncentering*, the breakdown of the ordering or centering process. The significance of grounding can be seen in the contrast between the imaginative qualities of the schizophrenic person and those of the genuine innovator. The former can have many original ideas and images, but they are "ungrounded" (insufficiently anchored in experience).

The latter's capacity to innovate stems from a more grounded imagination, imagery includes contradictions and paradox—and may even be quite "wild"—but nonetheless has roots in developed psychic forms.<sup>8</sup>

\*Thus the experiences Carlos Castaneda brought back to us had old and broad cultural roots—though Castaneda's mentor, Don Juan, apparently initiated him into an esoteric version of such tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Belonging: active - receptive

seekers of similar goals and visions via LSD. With rare exceptions, the seekers have had no specific cultural reservoir of imagery, and have had to improvise—sometimes sensitively but often chaotically—missing communal and ritual elements. This improvised ecstasy undoubtedly has a lot to do with the “bad trips” and drug-induced psychoses observed in relation to the use of LSD. No doubt American Indians, too, had bad trips in the past, but it is quite likely that they occur much more frequently in the absence of cultural symbolization of immortality. Present-day drug users expose themselves to the “death dimension” of the ecstatic experience—the further disruption of immediate and ultimate ties—in the absence of reliable cultural symbolization for supporting, guiding, and sustaining the experience of “rebirth.”

Japanese culture has emphasized quiet forms of experiential transcendence in spiritual and physical disciplines. In both Zen itself, as well as in jūdō, karate, kendō (fencing), and archery, all of which call upon Zen-related principles, there is a stress upon freeing the mind of extraneous thoughts to reach a “pure state.” That state permits one to achieve a quality of effortless concentration—what has been called “alert passivity.”\* This can then be applied to a particular skill. So stressed is the element of consciousness that we may view these disciplines as motor forms of meditation.

In Zen itself, the enlightenment (*satori*) is said to be sudden and absolute, but the feelings experienced may be either those of ecstatic breakthrough or calm awareness. In either case spiritual achievement is associated with an exquisite moment of centering: the harmonious merging of immediate and ultimate experience (self and world), past and prospective imagery, and of the varying emotional shadings that ordinarily complicate psychic life.

In contrast to the disciplined exclusions of the Zen experience is the same culture's feeling-tone of “sad beauty” or “suchness” of existence (*mono no aware*). The feeling is often used to express one's involvement in and, in a sense, passive acceptance of the slow, sad truths of life and nature. The feeling borders on what we would call the sentimental, and is often expressed in popular culture in the shallowest forms. Yet it has profound Buddhist associations, and has been called forth over decades and centuries in Japanese art, literature, film, and psychological and cultural life in general. The acceptance of and even pleasure in sadness—the sadness of change, loss, and death—has to do with one's sense of being part of the cosmic and the eternal. Death-tinged sadness—lovers parting, life ending, cherry blossoms falling—is inseparable from and an evocation of the larger life process as manifested by beauty. Beauty and loss become a single constellation which, in unending

\*Significantly, the term “alert passivity” applies equally to these adult spiritual-physical disciplines and to the stance of the infant (as Peter Wolff tells us) anticipating its next interaction. This does not mean that the state is a form of “regression,” but it does suggest that the capacity for inner harmony and near-perfect centering does have very early experiential roots.

cycles and variations, provides a means of psychologically realizing death while affirming an aesthetically dominated culture's imagery of continuing life.

Contemporary American meditators and seekers tend to enter these realms as cultural outsiders. They are fully capable of intense psychic experience, but lack the connecting imagery of transcendence that cultures can provide. So they seek that imagery (along with techniques of meditation) elsewhere, often from Japanese or Indian tradition. They can then make use of fragments of alien traditions for their own struggles around awareness and centering, around beauty, death, and continuity. By conducting these struggles as they do, outside of any framework provided in their own culture, many experience the process as a continuing Protean search. Even the “high” is likely to have an ad hoc quality, however intense the inner harmony experienced. One “comes down” to old confusions, or, at best, partially reordered disharmonies. That absence of content—of images of symbolic immortality—is the key to the fallacy of spiritual cure via experiential transcendence alone. Dedicated meditators and seekers construct, over time, the beginnings of new versions of immortalizing imagery, attempting to combine image-fragments into more enduring constellations. But the more pervasive tendency is a very American form of technicizing the spiritual—of converting quest into technique, transcendence into “feeling good.” The ecstatic or meditative experience then takes on the near-absolute irony of furthering the very focus on the technical and prosaic it was originally called forth to transcend.

Yet there are still places where relatively intact rituals of transcendence can be found within a cultural matrix of shared imagery and belief. I have in mind a modern version of the ancient phenomenon of the “festival,” deriving from early fertility rites in agricultural societies, here represented by Octavio Paz's evocation of some of the meanings in the orgiastic features of the Mexican fiesta.\*

The plunge into chaos (disintegration, death) includes wildness and spontaneity but is culturally stylized. The “experiment in disorder” is controlled—in the sense that it takes place within ordered ritual and imagery, within an ordered cosmos. Each participant, even when in the midst of “drowning,” anticipates personal and communal revitalization—that anticipation based on generations

\*The fiesta is not only an excess, a ritual squandering of the goods painfully accumulated during the rest of the year; it is also a revolt, a sudden immersion in the formless, in pure being. . . . In the confusion that it generates, society is dissolved, is drowned insofar as it is an organism ruled according to certain laws and principles. But it drowns in itself, in its own original chaos or liberty. Everything is united: good and evil, day and night, the sacred and the profane. Everything merges, loses shape and individuality, and returns to the primordial mass. The fiesta is a cosmic experiment, an experiment in disorder, reinitiating contradictory elements in order to bring about a renaissance of life. Ritual death promotes a rebirth; vomiting increases the appetite; the orgy, sterile in itself, renews the fertility of the mother or of the earth. . . . we shrug our shoulders at death, as at life, confronting it in silence or with a contemptuous smile.<sup>10</sup>

of transmission of the appropriate imagery of renewal. The sense of play pervading the ritual drama, though childlike in its quality of make-believe, is at the same time very adult precisely because of this mature cosmological commitment to the sacred and profane cultural principles that lie behind the mock-demonic plunge into formlessness.

The festival is thus a very old game that makes one new, a means of transcending prosaic existence in order to be able to live in it most of the time, a shared ecstasy that subverts in order to integrate, unites the sacred and profane.\*

But to explore the human hunger for the ecstatic we need not limit ourselves to the exotic. We can turn to the more immediate and constant adult quest for sexual pleasure and experience of sexual union. Here we have much to learn about the mysterious blending of sex and death that has so long haunted our literary and psychological imaginations.

Freud viewed sex and death as "the great instinctual adversaries." Within his ingenious dualism, these adversaries do battle at all levels. They contend for control of each individual psyche and for the fate of the human species. Yet in Freud's view of everyday (or proximate) experience, death has no place. To be sure, aggression and destructiveness and even guilt derive from the "death instinct." But that instinct is as vague as it is cosmic. Only the other of the adversaries, sexuality, provides the image-content and texture of individual psychological development. Even in Freud's later work, with its greater emphasis upon aggression, death remains, psychologically or at least *conceptually* speaking, absent from ordinary life. Sexuality, from the beginning, provides the imagery and energy that keeps life going.

Ernest Becker, in contrast, provides a death-centered view, within which sexuality seems much less important. Becker stresses man's inexorable conflict between the body and the self—the body a perpetual reminder that we die, the self always striving toward "cosmic specialness" or a form of "heroism" that is "first and foremost a reflection of the terror of death." Life itself becomes an existential entrapment. And sexuality, through its association with death, epitomizes that entrapment: "[Sex] reminds [man] that he is nothing himself but a link in the chain of being, exchangeable with any other and completely expendable in himself." And, "From the very beginning . . . the sexual act represents a double negation: by physical death and of distinctive personal gifts."<sup>12</sup> The sexual energies Freud associated with life-power now become little

\* In Eliade's terms one moves out of "historical [linear] time" into a realm of sacred or "mythic" timelessness. Eliade sees these festivals as reactualizing a sacred event of the mythical past, one that took place "in the beginning," and which "can be homologized to eternity." What he calls the "continuous present," then, is a kind of absolute temporal harmony.<sup>11</sup> That form of exquisite centering in relationship to time—with imagery reaching back to earliest beginnings and extending indefinitely forward toward the eternal—probably enters into all forms of experiential transcendence.

more than provokers of death-terror. That terror subsumes all else and provides most of the content and texture of existence.

This view reverses Freud's experiential precedence of sex over death, but it seems to me to retain both the dualism (self versus body instead of eros versus death) and the monolithic causation within that dualism (death-terror instead of sexuality) that have so bedeviled Freudian theory.

We need a different perspective. And to that purpose the sex act can prod the mind no less than the body toward a view that is dialectic rather than dualistic, formative rather than monocausal, and centered on direct experience. The sex act is unique in its combination of intense physical pleasure with total psychic immersion and boundlessness. The ideal of the sex act, then, is a double merging—of the physical and psychological into a unique blend of feeling, and of two individuals into something like a single, transcendent entity. That ideal—let us call it the heterosexual vision—haunts and stirs the adult psyche throughout its small triumphs, failures, and absurdities. When the ideal is approached, the self is both nonexistent and most alive.

Consider the expressions of that vision in two literary men separated by three hundred and fifty years (and by just about everything else), John Donne and Norman Mailer. In Donne's poem, "The Ecstasy," sexual union is the ultimate source of wisdom no less than pleasure. Two souls that "spake the same," Donne tells us, "a new concoction take" that enables the lover to "part far purer than he came." Donne connects this special "knowledge" with both immediate encounters and ultimate human images:

This ecstasy doth unperplex  
(We said) and tell us what we love,  
We see by this, it was not sex,  
We see, we saw not what did move. . . .

A single violet transplant,  
The strength, the colour, and the size,  
(All which before was poor and scant)  
Redoubles still, and multiplies. . . .

We then, who are this new soul, know  
Of what we are composed, and made. . . .

So soul into the soul may flow,  
Though it to body first repair. . . .

Because such fingers need to knit  
That subtle knot, which makes us man. . . .

To our bodies turn we then, that so  
 Weak men on love revealed may look;  
 Love's mysteries in souls do grow,  
 But yet the body is his book.

And if some lover, such as we,  
 Have heard this dialogue of one,  
 Let him still mark us, he shall see  
 Small change, when we're two bodies gone.<sup>13</sup>

As a metaphysical poet, Donne's ultimate concept is that of the soul. But he also gives the body its due, as "book" or text of the soul's ecstasy. Ecstatic knowledge emerges from being "moved" and from recognizing what most moves us, what enables us to feel most alive. The answer for Donne lies beyond sex itself in the special *experience* of the expanded and exquisitely connected soul or self. One leaves the ecstatic encounter renewed, infused by its indelible image. The self has been purified and vitalized, is now closer to wholeness and integrity. The loving sexual union, that is, is man's ultimate source of awareness and form.

Norman Mailer's voice seems at first to come from a different planet, but is what he says (taking off from the work of Henry Miller) much different?

He [Miller] has slipped the clue across . . . a clue to the lust that drives a man to scour his balls and his back until he is ready to die from the cannonading he has given his organs, the deaths through which he has dragged some features of his soul, it is a clue which all but says that somewhere in the insane passions of all men is a huge desire to drive forward into that seat of creation, grab some part of that creation in the hands, sink the cock to the hilt, sink it into as many hilts as will hold it; for man is alienated from the nature which brought him forth, he is not like woman in possession of an inner space which gives her link to the future, so he must drive to possess it, he must if necessary come close to blowing his head off that he may possess it. [In Miller's words] "Perhaps a cunt, smelly though it may be, is one of the prime symbols for the connection between all things."<sup>14</sup>

Mailer's heterosexual vision is no less lyrical—no less romantic—than Donne's. There is a direct echo of Donne in the Mailer-Miller principle of the "cunt [as] one of the prime symbols for the connection between all things," the contrast in language rendering the similarity all the more impressive.\*

Mailer goes on to become more explicit about the male quest for immortality via the encounter with the female and her "seat of creation." He speaks of

\*The main difference may be in the Mailer-Miller location of the ultimate "connection" in a specific bodily place as opposed to Donne's in the total experience of sexual union. But even that difference seems minimal, since either "place" is important only as a kind of metaphor or symbol of transcendence.

"man's sense of awe before woman, his dread of her position one step closer to eternity," as the cause of his tendency to "detest women, defile them, humiliate them, defecate symbolically upon them, do everything to reduce them so that one might dare to enter them and take pleasure of them." Hence, men "go through the years of their sex with women in some compound detachment of lust which will enable them to be as fierce as any female awash in the great ocean of fuck, for as it can appear to the man, great forces beyond his measure seem to be calling to the woman then." Man's envy of woman, Mailer is telling us, is the ultimate kind—a life-creating envy, an immortality envy. And out of that envy he degrades her. Now a number of psychological writers, from Horney to Bettelheim, have discussed male envy of woman's capacity to become pregnant and give birth. But more fundamental is the image of woman as source, possessor, and guardian of the life process itself; and of sexual union as an absolute expression of centering in which the immediate blends with the ultimate and the present with a sense of timelessness.

The experience of awe and dread, then, extends beyond male imagery of women—or woman's imagery of herself, or for that matter female imagery of men.\* Awe and dread on the part of both sexes has to do with the special psychic investment that we human beings, death-aware creatures that we are, make in the sex act. That act seems to have to do more for us than for other creatures. We depend upon it for reproducing and maintaining the life of our species (here we are no different from other animals). But we also rely upon it—pursue it quietly or flamboyantly, calmly or desperately—as our most primal and consistent source of immediate and ultimate connectedness, vitality, and (for many) integrity. Much of our terror of the sex act has to do with the gap between what we demand and what we can receive from it. Sexual ecstasy is real but tantalizingly transient; its "pure" and centered pleasure contrasts painfully with our more enduring mind-body confusions and pervasive death equivalents. Yet the sex act seems not only to evoke these death-centered contrasts but to require them. We can experience the transcendent only because we know too well the prosaic. Our capacity for symbolizing and *feeling* in the sex act dimensions beyond our finiteness is inseparable from our fearful awareness of death, separation, disintegration. I do not mean that this experience of intense vitality is merely compensatory, or that sexual transcendence in itself is no more than a denial of death. Rather, sexual transcendence and death awareness are part of the dialectic bequeathed in human evolution, a dialectic that, perpetually unresolved, lives at the heart of human energies.

\*"Penis envy" may well be related to female envy of immortalizing male power. Girls perceive very early that the organ seems to be associated with a variety of adult attitudes encouraging its possessor to be assertive and to share various skills and forms of authority that can later be equated with the kinds of ultimate symbolization of life-continuity (around work and works, for instance) that we have discussed under the concept of symbolic immortality.

Our sense of the gap between demand and actuality is painfully heightened when the experience itself grants us no more than a glimmer of routinized or ambivalent pleasure, or when we judge our "performance" to be a failure. Unrealized transcendence, in the face of our hunger for it, renders us newly vulnerable to waves of our own death imagery. We cannot understand this dialectic of sex and death as merely the one representing a vital force and the other lifelessness—for death can be vitalizing and sex deadening. What the dialectic contains most fundamentally is the human struggle to combine awareness of death, loss, and terror with the capacity to feel, love, transcend, and become whole.

We are now in a better position to understand that the special state of experiential transcendence is the indicator of the other four modes of symbolic immortality—that, wildly or gently, one must psychologically travel outside oneself in order to feel one's participation in the larger human process. The claim assumes that a quality of *experience* (that of transcendence) must connect with significant *content* (grounded relationship to any of the other four modes) to vitalize that sense of participation. There seem to be various translations between experience and content, involving all five modes. Profound awareness of loving connection to the continuing human nexus through one's children and theirs can evoke moments of felt transcendence; and ecstatic experience of sexual love—or of intense beauty—can evoke the sense of those endless biological ties. Our feelings move in and out of the various modes, and the ecstatic message may be no more than a momentary sense of pleasure or wholeness. But even then our principle (and I refer to a strictly psychological principle) prevails: ecstasy when grounded and full is our source of awareness of larger connection.

The psychological key to the principle is the state of near-perfect centering. With inner forms in harmony, psychic action is intense and focused, and there is a free flow of psychic and bodily energy—all in the "continuous present." Whether the initiating event seems primarily psychic (as in contemplation or meditation) or physical (as in the sex act), or is some combination of these, the resulting awareness and energy flow are in the truest sense psychosomatic.

Would it not be better to speak of a "sense of continuity" rather than a "sense of immortality" to convey these ideas? One cannot deny the extensive baggage—philosophical, emotional, religious—carried by the word immortality.

The feelings described here include a sense of continuity, but they also extend to the order of experience Kenneth Rexroth has called "the ecology of infinity." Infinity means unbounded—whether in space, time, or (as the dictionary adds) "quality." An aspect of the quality of infinity, then, is the idea of eternity, which means everlastingness. Immortality as "endless life" can also be placed within this ecology. Finally there is transcendence, a state beyond the

self's immediate involvements. These words describe specific experiences that can be examined within the broad realm of natural history. Psychological science should enter the domain it has tended either to ignore, further mystify, or else misrepresent by nervously and reductively invoking its own clinical terms instead of examining the phenomenology of man's experience of his larger connectedness. Depth psychology is capable of returning to an area it has mostly abandoned to the theologians. The formative, life-continuity paradigm provides a framework for addressing this domain of "ultimate concern" and charting some of the ecology of infinity.

None of this is meant to imply that the sense of immortality is inevitably constructive or healthy. The ecstatic component of that sense can be pursued all too easily by means of murder and terror, no less than by love and creative works. While this study is devoted to making psychological distinctions between the two, it rests on the assumption that, whatever the consequences, the quest for symbolic immortality is an aspect of being human.