

Unrealized Selves: Philip Rieff on Family, Individuality, and the Nature of Violence

James Poulos

Georgetown University

In this paper I will consider the problem of violence in the tension between the family and the individual. Rene Girard and Philip Rieff both argue that the family is the locus of imitation and desire. Further, Girard and Rieff suggest that the continuing destruction of the authority of the family is best understood in terms of the widening scope and the deepening pathology of mimetic desire among individuals. This paper will explore that scope and pathology by focusing on the significance, in Rieff's work, of the overthrow of the ontology of the irreducible individual by the phenomenology of the fullness of individuality.

For Girard, mimetic desire aspires to the being achieved by another; but this being, under scrutiny, is an experience of fullness. For Rieff, the establishment of the singularity of the second person, you, in the image of the singular first person, God, places individual being far higher in sacred order than the experience of individuality. The experience of individuality, as Rieff shows through Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud, is always a pluralistic, *not* individualistic, phenomenon—one which can violently deconstruct both the ontological singularity of the individual and the authority of the family as established in Jewish and Christian sacred order. Rieff's analysis of *Hamlet* is key to understanding how this violence dramatizes a stark choice: to affirm or negate one's irreducible individual being.

This paper will close by briefly considering the extent to which the authority of the family may be renovated in a way which does a minimum of violence both to the family and the singular individual.

I. Family violence

Rene Girard's understanding of family, violence, and the individual helps us apprehend Rieff's own. For Girard (as for Rieff) the family is the locus of imitation and desire—though “the pathology of desire does not have its basis in the family. It is mimetic.” Girard cautions that the family not only can “become pathological,” but “very often does in the conditions of our world.”

The more pathological the family becomes, the further it deviates from what it is when it functions normally. Relationships within the family then become similar to what they are outside the family; they become characterized either by total indifference or by the type of morbid attention that accompanies mimetic desire wherever it flourishes, within the family or outside it.¹

Girard maintains that the Oedipus complex deceives us about the pathological family, which expresses its pathology through violence between or among individual family members.² Likewise Harold Bloom holds that the Oedipus complex is really a Hamlet complex—which he defines as “thinking not too much but much too well”.³ Bloom believes Freud to have suppressed Hamlet to preserve his individual distinctiveness as a scientist. For Girard, more intriguingly, Freud “saw the path of mimetic desire stretching

¹ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* 354.

² See Matthew Schneider, “Rene Girard and Harold Bloom contra the ‘School of Resentment’,” *Anthropoetics* II, no. 1 (June 1996), which this paragraph follows closely.

³ Bloom, *Western Canon* 377.

out before him and deliberately turned aside” because embracing mimesis would destroy the theoretical foundation of psychoanalysis—the unconscious.⁴

Hamlet is also central to Rieff’s understanding of family, violence, and the individual. While Oedipus is nearly absent from Rieff’s critical exegeses, Hamlet appears again and again in the first volume of *Sacred Order/Social Order* and receives the attention of an entire chapter in the second.⁵ Rieff began writing seriously about Hamlet in 1981.⁶ In his epilogue to the third edition of *Freud: the Mind of the Moralists* (1979), Rieff telegraphs his analysis of Hamlet with a critique of Freud that hits a mark Girard only gestures toward. Rieff observes Freud’s concession that

A part of the ego [...] undoubtedly is *Ucs.* [unconscious]. And this *Ucs.* belonging to the ego is not latent like the *Pcs.* [preconscious]; for if it were, it could not be activated without becoming *Cs.* [conscious], and the process of making it conscious would not encounter such great difficulties. When we find ourselves thus confronted by the necessity of postulating a third *Ucs.*, which is not repressed, we must admit that the characteristic of being unconscious begins to lose significance for us. It becomes a quality which can have many meanings, a quality which we are unable to make, as we should have hoped to do, the basis of far-reaching and inevitable conclusions. Nevertheless, we must beware of ignoring this characteristic, for the property of being conscious or not is, in the last resort, our beacon-light in the darkness of depth-psychology.⁷

Rather than mimesis, Rieff identifies Freud’s “momentarily perceived paradox, of the unrepressed repressive,” as the existential threat to psychoanalysis and the culture grown

⁴ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 171.

⁵ Rieff, *My Life Among the Deathworks: Vol. I, Sacred Order/Social Order*, passim; *The Crisis of the Officer Class: Vol. II, Sacred Order/Social Order*, Ch. 2.

⁶ Rieff, “By What Authority?” reprinted in *The Feeling Intellect*, 330-351.

⁷ Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, quoted in Rieff, *The Mind of the Moralists*, Epilogue, “One Step Further,” 3d edition, 368.

out of its claims. “Being conscious or Not: the ground of Freud’s truth split beneath him. In fear, Freud retreated immediately from the third unconscious, his commanding truth. He withdrew into his inveterate talent for repressing the repressive, lest this characteristic of being take over the life of his work.”⁸ Freud, Rieff explains, repressed the devastating insight that some repression was aboriginal. Beneath the primacy of possibility contained in the instincts, there was a deeper primacy of impossibility—and of “incompossibility, what cannot be true together.”⁹ The allusion to Hamlet is transparent: Freud’s binary—to Be conscious or Not to be—imposes a therapeutic artifice of its (*instincts or id*) and I (*ego*) upon Hamlet’s more primal (and, in its very asking, transgressive) query. Hamlet, Rieff wants to say, asks not what relation obtains between his being and his instincts, but between his being and God.

The profundity of that query, and its attack on the ontology of the individual, will be taken up shortly. First, recall that Hamlet is essential to Freud, Girard, and Bloom in understanding the violence individuals inflict upon one another other in the pathological family. Now consider Rieff’s exegesis of Hamlet’s confrontation of Gertrude:

The key line is when his mother asks him why he seems to take his father’s death so hard. She, seeing nothing, asks him why he hasn’t accepted the death of her husband and his father as she has. After all, we know that death is common, that all lives must die.¹⁰

⁸ Id.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Rieff, *The Crisis of the Officer Class* 43.

Thus Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, justifies her physically seamless transition from dead King Hamlet's bed to that of Claudius, the brother who killed him. Hamlet rejects this:

“Seems, madam? Nay, it is; I know not ‘seems’.”¹¹

Yet Hamlet himself thinks himself a nothing, and this nothingness that he feels and sees and thinks is the world of faithlessness which he shares with his mother. That is what horrifies him. He has an imagination which he himself cannot control, of which he is not master, and it is unmastered. That line about his mother is reflexively about himself, for the evil he knows as well as the good seems to him and is identical.¹²

Here is family pathology almost, but crucially not, as Girard describes it: instead of *either* “total indifference” or “the type of morbid attention that accompanies mimetic desire wherever it flourishes, within the family or outside it,” Hamlet and Gertrude display *both/and*—violating the law of impossibility.¹³

Hamlet's and Gertrude's failure to acknowledge the “repressive imperative” from which Freud fearfully retreated are just two violations in *Hamlet's* seething cauldron of familial impossibilities.¹⁴ There is no need to rehearse them, or Rieff's gloss on them, here. They are familiar and Rieff's interpretations illustrate the central point: the violence of the pathological family is not simply visited by certain individuals upon others, or even reciprocally; in addition, it both originates within individuals and violates what Rieff calls their irreducibly individual being. “The common truth is that one's identity is

¹¹ *Hamlet* 1.2.74-76.

¹² *Crisis* 43.

¹³ “‘Desire not the night,’ the angel Elihu warns. Humans have always desired the night. That desire sleeps in what Freud renamed the ‘unconscious.’ In their nightlives, humans take the royal road to the satisfaction of their transgressive impulses. Nietzsche wrongly pre-named Freud's unconscious, where the *either/or* gives way to the *both/and*, by a Buddhist and Europeanized term: ‘Nihilism.’” Rieff, “For the Last Time Psychology,” reprinted in *The Feeling Intellect*, 351-365 at 359.

¹⁴ Rieff, *Deathworks* 54.

unalterable. Romanticism understands this Irreducible I.”¹⁵ For Rieff, an individual who recognizes his own being as irreducible to that of anybody or of nobody shall not, and so will not, pose Hamlet’s fatal question—to be or not to be. But, for human beings, that is the only question, and the only answer is to be.

II. The irreducible individual

Rieff’s analysis of Hamlet is clear that the family incarnates sacred authority. [Parent question.] Since it is an *elementary* unit (to use Girard’s term) of social order, it is an elementary unit of sacred order. But because social order can only approximate sacred order, the familial relation is not authoritatively absolute, as is the relation between the irreducible individual and God.

That latter relation is revealed in the foundations of the biblical creed. Genesis 1:26-27 is the “key” to understanding in what sense the self is an irreducible individual.¹⁶ “[E]very human being is unique. One God and one you; no other such figure—even if there may be all sorts of people with the same name and similar class. Identity means unprecedented and unrepeateable.”¹⁷ One’s only and true identity is not even that of one’s family, but of *imago Dei*. In sacred order, individual and family exist in insurmountable tension; but that tension is vertical and hierarchical, not horizontal and equal. Family, even insofar as it incarnates sacred authority, is subsidiary to the insurmountable authority of one’s sacred relation to God. One’s identity as a second person—

¹⁵ *Crisis* 7.

¹⁶ Rieff, “Medical College of Pennsylvania, Fourth Lecture, 9th December, 1993,” unpublished transcription, 15. See further Genesis 2:24-25.

¹⁷ Rieff, “Medical College of Pennsylvania, Third Lecture, 2nd December, 1993,” unpublished transcription, 17-18.

grammatically, as a ‘you’—is defined only and truly by God’s identity as the first person—the ‘I.’ Rieff cites Galatians 2:20: “Not I, but Christ in me.” This “larger self [...] is not simply yourself, but is in fact the second person of God[.]”¹⁸

Recognizing one’s irreducible identity requires the recognition of God’s presiding presence. “Such a presiding presence is *there*; you no more ask of yourself whether it is or is not than you ask yourself whether you are or not. Indeed, to ask the question ‘to be or not to be’ refers to a crisis of presiding presence.”¹⁹ Within this crisis, one is ‘beyond’ good and evil in an evil way. “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so,” says Hamlet; just so, there is no one sane or insane, but variably forthright about the difference between a hawk and a hacksaw.²⁰ “Madness is not Hamlet’s cover for some deeper design. It is the deep alternative to any competing design.”²¹ Such designs require either the recognition or the denial of God’s presiding presence. To do neither—to only “in part believe it”—is to live in crisis and without identity, as an individual who has been reduced to a surfeit of contending, fictive individualities.²²

III. The fullness of individuality

Rieff distinguishes sharply between the identity of the irreducible individual and the identitylessness of individuality in its reductive fullness. In so doing he puts himself at odds with many a theorist of the individual and of individuality—and with our received common sense, which naively presumes that individuality can hardly be corrosive to the

¹⁸ Rieff, “Medical College of Pennsylvania, Second Lecture, 11th November, 1993,” unpublished transcription, 18.

¹⁹ Rieff, *Crisis* 40.

²⁰ *Hamlet* 2.2.249-50; Rieff, *Crisis* 57.

²¹ *Id.* 63.

²² *Hamlet* 1.1.144-46.

individual. The truth is otherwise, as Rieff argues against not only Freud but Nietzsche and Emerson.

Rieff does not take up J.S. Mill, the great theorist and partisan of individuality. But a brief look at Mill's central remarks on individuality will prepare us for what is to follow from Emerson and Nietzsche. For Mill, a "variety of situations" affords the experience of novelty. To unify novel experience in the experience of the eternal human good is to partake of "originality."²³ To be original is to have original "qualities," a "distinctive endowment."²⁴ So an individual's character is caused by his qualities. A human being grows and develops, further, "according to the tendency" of "inward forces" or "strong impulses."²⁵ These are "but another name for energy," so an individual "whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a character."²⁶ By this turn of argument, Mill reduces the individual to the "individuality of desires and impulses."²⁷ 'Individual' becomes the honorific bestowed on people fully experiencing individuality.

Revealing the full implications of Mill's view, Emerson "mythologizes man into successive, divisive parts, particular selves within Chinese boxes of selves: all within an imperturbable universal and impersonal primacy of possibility."²⁸ Relationships between 'individuals' of this kind tend, as Girard recognized, are characterized by successive and violently divisive episodes of "reciprocal indifference"²⁹ and reciprocal obsession.

²³ Mill, *On Liberty* 64.

²⁴ Id. 65.

²⁵ Id. 66.

²⁶ Id. 67.

²⁷ Id.

²⁸ Rieff, *Crisis* 91.

²⁹ Id.

Emerson's serene conviction is that peace will prevail in the eternal games we can play with our individuality and that of others. "Even boredom, repetition, can be made surprising to those relentless enough in their pursuit of surprise."³⁰ Nietzsche, whose view of individuality is so much like that of Emerson, shakes any such Emersonian faith.

Nietzsche knew and undid Emerson's new-world naïvete. "Emerson could generalize as complacently as any who lived before the historic fracture of the Shoa," promising placidly that "If evil is good in the making [...], if calamities, oppositions, and weights are wings and means,—we are reconciled."³¹ Nietzsche did not live to see the Holocaust but, predicting many holocausts, dared to ask what Emerson would not in celebrating how "man moves in all modes"—"What follows this transgressive catholicity of taste in movements that challenge the narrower truth of disgust?"³² Nietzsche revealed the barbarism beneath "Emerson's civilized contention that 'culture implies all which gives the mind possession of its own powers.' Precisely that possession has produced the possessed of Dostoyevskian grotesquerie in apparently cultivated and humane America."³³ In both Nietzsche's "Dionysian man and in Hamlet, a fictive fusion has occurred. They are both incapable of separating themselves from the primacy of possibility that is part of them."³⁴ In place of an irreducibly individual identity, they have been reduced to ever-changing, ever-contending fragments of individuality. In Rieff's analysis, 'Individual' is not at all the honorific we bestow on those most individualistic; rather, 'individuality' is the curse self-negating individuals bestow upon themselves.

³⁰ Id. 94.

³¹ Id. 85.

³² Id. 84.

³³ Id. 85-6.

³⁴ Id. 45.

Rieff emphasizes that Nietzsche also knew how families suffered from “a world of becoming” that supersedes “the individuating principle of identification”.³⁵ Hamlet’s madness was very unlike the Dionysian madness of *The Bacchae* that figured centrally into Nietzsche’s philosophy, from *The Birth of Tragedy* through to *The Antichrist*. But both insanities came at violent cost to family. “The mother of King Pentheus, Agave, is totally unaware that the blood-dripping lion’s head she thinks she has sacrificed in the ritual murder of the lion to the god Dionysus is in fact [...] the head of her beloved son”.³⁶ And Hamlet becomes all too aware that he will not kill Claudius unless he can see his entire Danish royal family dead, self included. He “becomes a scourge out of his own panic and dread at being a minister” or what Rieff also calls a “sacred messenger”.³⁷ For Rieff, a sacred messenger “carries a message from highest authority and speaks that message with one voice. That one voice is the voice of the sacred self, the *I* that is predicated by the *I* of highest authority.”³⁸ Rieff defines a scourge not as “a minister of sacred order” but “a rebel against it who emerges to punish, unjustly perhaps, social order.”³⁹ But scourges “are what they represent: wounds to the social organs which are themselves deeply disordered.”⁴⁰ Hamlet’s mimetic relationship with his uncle and mother, the King and Queen, was that of a scourge that their rotten order brought upon itself. Hamlet “is wild in the sense that he is between authority and having to take authority himself. But he can neither endure authority nor take it for himself.”⁴¹ Rieff

³⁵ Id. 18.

³⁶ Id. 19.

³⁷ Rieff, *Deathworks* 170.

³⁸ Id. 169.

³⁹ Id. 170.

⁴⁰ Id.

⁴¹ Rieff, *Crisis* 62.

remarks that “Nietzsche understood Hamlet’s loss of spiritual life quite completely, having suffered that loss himself.”⁴² Nietzsche replaced it as did Hamlet—with a “kind of clever total irresponsibility” between the authority of the God whose death he proclaims and the authority of the irreducible individual he refuses to be.⁴³ Such virtuosos of individuality have no place in families of true individuals. They bring scourging violence upon such families, and upon the individuals within them.

IV. The future of family authority

Rieff’s *Hamlet* leaves us in an uncomfortable position. The family is both a sacred and a social institution. But the sacred, identity-creating relationship is not between biological parents and children but between the divine first person and the human second person:

Concealed as it is revealed, behind his manifest question of parents, was Hamlet’s latent parent question: whether or not he belonged to sacred order. Concealed as it is revealed behind that parent question is another even more ancient: whether sacred order is or not. That last is the question of being or not being, which is one and the same as belonging or not belonging to sacred order.⁴⁴ Knowledge of that membership constitutes good faith. Stripped of good faith, the many enemy selves of Hamlet were poised and unpoised against his true self [...].⁴⁵

⁴² Id. 44.

⁴³ Id. 62.

⁴⁴ Hamlet’s “celebrated half madness expresses the modern anxiety about the closure of belonging in, and to, sacred order. Hamlet’s not-belonging makes more sense said in German: *Zu sein oder nicht zu sein*. *Zein* has two meanings: being and belonging in, and to, the order of life under the highest authority. Not-to-be is not to belong in, and to, sacred order. Instead, Hamlet became a master-actor, in love with his fate, a Nietzsche ahead of nihilism.” Rieff, *Deathworks* 118.

⁴⁵ Rieff, “For the Last Time Psychology,” *The Feeling Intellect* 363.

How, today, is any authority of the family to be restored, if its social order depends upon a sacred order nullified by self-negating individuals? One possibility is by scourging; in the bloody aftermath, what witnesses remain—as Horatio remained to testify to Fortinbras—may put the memory of negation to positive use. Another possibility is the restoration of sacred order. But this is a daunting task. Indeed, Rieff suggests that it is a superhuman task. Sacred messengers themselves merely testify. Sacred order, to the extent it is restored at all, comes in its good time, not our own.

What, then? Hamlet himself, in one of his better moments, may provide an answer:

*O, throw away the worsser part of it,
And live the purer with the other half.
Good night: but go not to mine uncle's bed;
Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery,
That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence: the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either master the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency.⁴⁶*

⁴⁶ *Hamlet* 3.4.157-70.