

# Narcissus

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# Necrophile

**THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS.** By Erich Fromm. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 521 pp. \$10.95

By ANTHONY STORR

THIS IS A MAJOR BOOK from the pen of a major writer. Over the years, Erich Fromm has been enormously productive; and his linkage of psychoanalysis with politics and sociology has been a fruitful and stimulating contribution to modern thought. This new book examines the whole question of human destructiveness; and, although I cannot agree with everything he writes on the topic, I gratefully acknowledge his erudition, his skill as a writer and his never-failing humanity.

Fromm begins by taking Konrad Lorenz and B. F. Skinner as representing two opposite poles in theory; and disagrees with both. For Skinner, all of man's aggression is the product of environmental conditioning; for Lorenz, aggression is built-in, instinctive and ineradicable, or so Fromm alleges. Fromm maintains that there is indeed built-in, "defensive ag-

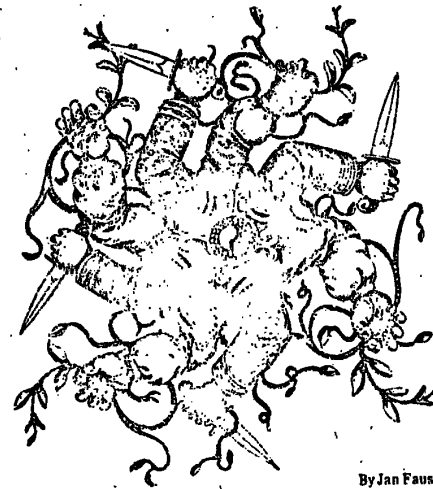
ANTHONY STORR is the author of *Human Aggression* and *Human Destructiveness*, among other books.

gression," which protects human, as it does other animals, when vital interests are threatened. He distinguishes this from "malignant aggression," a variety peculiar to man, which leads to man's extraordinary destructiveness and cruelty towards his own species. This, Fromm believes, is not derived from instinctual sources, but is the product of the interaction of various social conditions with man's existential needs." Thus, modern capitalism leads many people to feel bored, powerless and futile. "Being condemned to ineffectiveness . . . is one of the most powerful and almost intolerable experiences which man will do almost anything to overcome, from drug and work addiction to cruelty and murder."

In addition, Fromm delineates a character type which he names "necrophilous," a term which he takes over from the Spanish philosopher Unamuno. Naturally enough, Hitler is the supreme example of this type; and Fromm gives us an extensive case history and character study of him. There have, of course, been several such studies in the past; but Fromm's acute awareness of sociological, as well as family influences upon the growth of character adds a dimension often missing from psychobiography. Who can doubt that Hitler's repeated defeats in his early years in Vienna, his feeling of being an outcast from society, interacted powerfully with his narcissistic and paranoid character structure to make him the revengeful monster he later became? He was indeed "necrophilous"; that is, possessing a "passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction; the exclusive interest in all that is purely mechanical."

In Fromm's view, Hitler and those like him have failed to develop any warm attachment to the mother in infancy and early childhood, with the consequence that they not only fail to achieve warm affectionate ties with others in later life, but remain fixated upon a fantasy mother

whose embrace is death. Thus, death itself is conceived as a kind of union which will at last overcome the intolerable loneliness of narcissism. World-destructive fantasies, so characteristic of both schizophrenics and alienated characters like Hitler, are ultimately derived from a "malignant incestuous" attachment and, at one level, represent a striving after death by drowning or reabsorption into the mother who was never really loved as a warm and separate person. Without further exposition, this may sound fantastic, until one recalls Swinburne's paean to death, "The Garden of Proserpine,"



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where "even the weariest river, Winds somewhere safe to sea," and adds to this the fact that Swinburne was an acknowledged sado-masochistic pervert. Whether we really need a new clinical term "necrophilous" in addition to all the other jargon analysts have provided seems doubtful; but Fromm's understanding and depiction of cold, cruel, power-riding characters is certainly valuable.

Fromm, intent on demonstrating that malignant, destructive aggression is not innate, brings evidence from anthropol-

ogy which supports the idea that some cultures are much more hate-provoking than others. No one, I believe, has any doubt of this; but small societies are hard to compare with big; and to my mind Fromm plays down the human tendency to form dominance-submission hierarchies. In line with this is Fromm's attitude to the famous experiments on obedience by Stanley Milgram, which so many of us have quoted. Milgram demonstrated that normal volunteers consented to give painful, dangerous electric shocks to a subject when told to do so by an experimenter as part of a learning experiment. Fromm is the only writer I know to regard Milgram's findings as hopeful, in that a good many of those who were obediently cruel showed some evidence of conflict and conscience about their harmful acts. Fromm is unfair to Lorenz, who, as I understand him, does not regard "malignant aggression" as innate, but as a distortion of what is innate. Both Lorenz and many other writers, including myself, think there is much more of a continuum between "malignant aggression" and "defensive aggression" than Fromm admits. Unfortunately, very many human beings seem capable of "malignant aggression." In my own book on *Human Destructiveness* (1972) I make the same kind of distinction between the positive and negative aspects of human aggression as Fromm does; but take the more pessimistic view that, however benign their early rearing, men carry into adult life memories of being for so long helpless in the hands of those more powerful than themselves that the exercise of power over others is unfortunately attractive. And the supreme power over others is the power of life or death. The truth is that we understand human destructiveness so little that there is still plenty of room for debate. Fromm has made a notable, weighty contribution to the subject which no one concerned with it must overlook. This is a rich and provocative book which deserves all the success it will undoubtedly achieve.