

Three Men With Ideas

THE LYRICAL EXISTENTIALISTS. By Thomas Hanna. 299 pp. New York: Atheneum. \$5.

By WALTER KAUFMANN

IF the reviewer of a scholarly book is no expert on the subject, his review is, of course, suspect. If he is an expert, but has not been mentioned in the book, some will suspect him of prejudice against it. And if his work is discussed in the book, favorably or not, some will also suppose that he is partial. But any scholar worth his salt should be capable of fairness in judging works in his field, whether they refer to his own efforts or not.

In "The Lyrical Existentialists," a book on Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Camus, no previous interpretation of any of these three is mentioned except my book, "Nietzsche," which is discussed in a long footnote. But for that note, Thomas Hanna's conception of Nietzsche is exceedingly similar to mine. In a short review, criticism of one lengthy note—its misrepresentations and reliance on incomplete quotations—would be out of place. What is of more interest is the thesis of the book and its general character.

Mr. Hanna, of the philosophy faculty at Hollins College, came to his subject by way of Camus. Four years ago he gave us a short book on Camus in which he summarized the plots of six of his literary works, relating them to his philosophic efforts. In the new book, the same six works are discussed again to illustrate Camus' philosophy, but only after the first two parts of the book have dealt with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. In the final chapter, Mr. Hanna concludes: "In the wake of these three extensive essays, there should be little, if any, room for doubt in the Reader's

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Mr. Kaufmann, who teaches at Princeton, wrote "From Shakespeare to Existentialism."

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mind as to the basic identity of these thinkers." Throughout, the author is concerned "lest the Reader come to perplexity about the basic identity of Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's views" and "lest the Reader should understand too little or too much in what is said."

Kierkegaard's central concern with Christianity is discounted and his insistence on authority and his opposition to liberalism are ignored. He is presented as a humanist and, like Nietzsche, assimilated to Camus.

A reader who has begun by admiring Camus and then turns to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard might well be struck by the number of his ideas that were not new. But this only shows that Camus, though far more engaging, was much less original than his two predecessors. While they were "untimely" and "born posthumously," as Nietzsche himself put it, Camus crystallized the aspirations of millions of his contemporaries, and he owed his instant success to his exceptional timeliness.

MR. HANNA confuses Camus' "aloofness" with Nietzsche's "pathos of distance" (a notion closely related to Nietzsche's insistence on an "order of rank"), and he ignores the fact that in juxtaposing religion and science, Kierkegaard always took sides against science and Nietzsche for it. The Dane wanted above all to be a Christian, the German wished to be the Antichrist. And though "lyrical" passages can be found in the writings of both, it is their wonderful fusion of ultimate seriousness and penetrating wit and their deliberate effort to be offensive that sets them apart—also from Camus, who was much more charming and less sarcastic. In sum, while there are many parallels, there are also crucial differences, and talk of a "basic identity" goes much too far.

The copious quotations are marred by mistranslations and the omission, without indication of whole sentences. Appalling lapses in scholarship, logic and style abound. "Kierkegaard does not stand alone in his unique use of the word ethical" and "The difficulty is not that Kierkegaard's term 'ethical' is ambiguous but rather that it has a double meaning" are typical lapses.

In the end, we are told that the three heroes of the book "discovered * * * a sense of irony" and that this "sets them against the main stream of modern thought." We are assured that "irony has nothing to do with the comic" but is rather the awareness that man is finite and yet free. The Greeks and Christians allegedly never realized this, and the three "lyrical Existentialists" are "out of key with Western culture," and their views are considered "largely identical with the insights of orthodox Hinduism" and Zen. These conclusions, of course, are not supported. They could not be.

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