



SUICIDE

A Social and Historical Study

by

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When these nineteenth-century writers and artists do take their lives the old specific troubles, the concrete causes, have usually nagged at their elbow with greater insistence than any ideal weariness. Though Maupassant had always emotionally flirted with death, it took disease to lead him to the altar, and Beddoes, familiar as he was with the idea of his own skeleton, only put off flesh when nearing fifty, poor, and disregarded. Poverty, illness, and a woman finished off Gérard de Nerval. Much the same did for Kleist; while embittered and neglected, Haydon and Gros laid their deaths at the door of the public. Yet these literary and artistic suicides of the nineteenth century, who gathered corpse by corpse would make a fairly impressive total, probably gained some consolation in their last moments by the romantic conception of suicide which many of them shared. One hopes so. It is easier to suffer when life ends on a fine note. A dagger, driven home because the earth in no way tallied with the mind's ideal conception, would slip in more gently than if thrust from a twisted heart and empty purse.

III. THE FUTURE

The inhabitants of Dublin in 1901, the contemporaries of Bloom, had, as we have seen, no clear idea upon what their anti-suicide prejudices were based. Had they attempted to account reasonably for these prejudices they would have found it very hard to do so. We to-day should find it no less difficult.

Four arguments, which are familiar in these pages, have always been used to condemn suicide: of these three are illogical or founded upon false premises, while the fourth rests upon faith. It will be well to recapitulate them and to show finally that, for the average man, they are not strong enough to prove suicide either a crime or an evil.

The first argument, current from Aquinas to Leopardi, and adequately disposed of by Hume, attempts to prove that suicide is unnatural, because it runs contrary to the instinct of self-preservation. So, however, do motor-racing, tightrope-walking, and soldiering, professions of the greatest respectability. Again, we are told that sex is the fundamental instinct complementary to self-preservation. The monk denies sex, the suicide disregards self-preservation: both should be equally guilty, yet one is a saint and the other a sinner. Further, the term *unnatural* itself represents no real or constant value. In practice it is impossible to define logically unless one accepts Thomas Huxley's definition of the natural, which will include suicide. He says: "Nature means neither more nor less than that which is; the sum of phenomena presented to our experience; the totality of events past, present, and to come." Usually, however, the term *unnatural* as used in argument does not even attempt to approach logicity. On inspection it often turns out to mean "unusual", or merely "something I don't like". It has been applied at different times to smoking, the steam-engine, vaccination, and anaesthetics. As a criticism of suicide it carries no weight, and one could as justly apply the term to the arbitrary interference with "nature" which we call cooking.

Secondly, Aristotle stated, and it has been repeated ever since, that suicide is cowardly. Sir Thomas Browne said: "When life is more terrible than death, it is the truest valour to live." However, for most of us suicide demands more bravery than we can muster. The number of those who have wished to die is innumerable; only the isolated individual has the courage to put his wish into execution. Colton wrote with truth in his *Lacon*: "As many live because they are afraid to die, as die, because they are afraid to live." The courage or cowardice of suicide will always be disputed; yet supposing it did invariably take more bravery to live than to

die, this constitutes no proof of the wrongness of suicide. The more unpleasant of two alternatives is not necessarily the right one, and to adopt so illogical a principle as a basis for action would lead to fantastic results. Thus, though suicide may be cowardly, it is not for that reason necessarily wrong. The easier action may often be the wiser one.

Again it has been immemorially argued that suicide constitutes a danger to society and is therefore anti-social. This idea is only valid if one takes a purely artificial view of society. In practice the abstract entity "society" is nothing but the striving individuals which compose it. When such of these individuals as are misfits voluntarily remove themselves and their misery by suicide, society directly benefits by their actions. Suicide thus appears as a process by which society rids itself of elements of misery and dissatisfaction. Though society is the poorer for the loss of people like Romilly, Kleist, Chatterton, and Gérard de Nerval, such examples are exceptions. More often the end of a suicide is the gain of the living. Finally, in all those cases where suicide merely forestalls the processes of disease and old age, to speak of society's loss or gain is beside the point. A man has done his work, and reason simply anticipates death.

That suicide may be harmful to a certain section of society, the friends and relatives of the dead man, is sometimes true. As often as not, however, the suicide of the business man saves his family, and that of the melancholy neurotic comes as a secret relief to those around him. Moreover, those who have others dependent on them do not often kill themselves. Responsibility interposes. Suicide is the act of the solitary.

We cannot, in fact, say that suicide is a danger to society, we can only say that sometimes (like marriage, or anything else) it may be irresponsible, ill-timed, and thus anti-social. Usually suicide will turn out to be a natural prophylaxis beneficial to society, but each case must be examined on its

own merits. Mill said that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness". This is the only legitimate criterion that we can apply to suicide. We shall discover that it separates fairly clearly the social from the anti-social suicides: those that reduce the misery in the world from those that reduce its happiness.

Lastly, there come the religious arguments against suicide, and these, for the orthodox Christian, are incontrovertible. The Church has time and again denounced suicide as a major sin, and faith must accept the rulings of the Church. Given the Christian premises the Church's attitude is logical enough. A Christian can find no holes to pick in arguments that have been handed down from the time of Saint Augustine. Lamartine could feel the special force of the Christian argument, and he was thinking quite straight when he said, "Had I been of Cato's religion, I should have died a thousand times the death of Cato." If this world is merely the prelude to another, if agony and misery are the purging fires of God's providence that, well borne, prepare the sufferer for paradise, if the brevity of pain here contrasts with the eternity of punishment beyond, suicide is not only sinful, but extremely foolish and short-sighted. Many people, however, are unable to accept the starting-point of the Christian argument. For them faith and passion, whether religious or secular, do not seem practical or appropriate means for conducting complicated human affairs. Belief without reason is distasteful to them, and thus they find that the whole Christian attack on suicide is without foundation.

To people with a tendency towards mysticism the Quietist attitude, which in relation to suicide we have seen put forward by Plotinus and Schopenhauer, is probably more sympathetic to-day than that of the Church. All desire is a perturbation of the mind, and to wish inordinately for death is as bad as to long overmuch for life. This attitude has

certain affinities with Christianity, and for many people will possess similar disadvantages, in that it estimates states of mind without regard to their context, and gives them value not in relation to this world, which we know, but in relation to some mystical abstract (the equivalent of "another world"), to which most of us cannot attain.

Though to-day all the important arguments that try and prove suicide wrong, with the special exception of the Christian one, can be put out of court by reason, it is not easy to forecast the future status of suicide. In England the attitude of the public certainly is, and has been for some time, growing more tolerant. Yet since reason is so little a predominating factor in behaviour, and man is so capricious and so constantly allows his emotions to act against his best interests, one is unable to tell whether opinion may not swing back to the old antagonisms and primitive fears. Historically we have seen that the tolerance of suicide goes hand in hand with development of personal values and personal culture. Thus it should not be difficult to predict the status of suicide in Marxist or corporate Fascist states as they are developing to-day. Not only a disregard of personal values, but the magical and primitive element in Fascism (particularly strong in Germany), should lead to a revulsion of feeling. There is therefore every reason to expect the absolute condemnation of suicide in such states. Already German and Italian newspapers, acting on orders, but surely in sympathy with general sentiment, repress all accounts of suicide. As far as the public are concerned people do not kill themselves in authoritarian states. One must not, of course, overlook the simple propaganda behind the repression of suicide-news: the impression to be conveyed is that no one under a benevolent Fascist government could possibly wish to kill himself. It is interesting to look back and find a similar tendency at work in France during the imperial expansion of Napoleon. An anonymous petition protested

against the publication of suicides. Napoleon handed on the petition to the chief of police with the observation that journalists should be told to replace suicides by events "which would excite the courage and humanity of the French and honour the national character". Apart from the use of the term *humanity*, his orders have a perfect twentieth-century ring.

There remains to discuss, not the future attitude of society, but the future of suicide itself. Owing to the break-up of ancient cadres and the naked exposure of man to life, suicide increased considerably, alarmingly, throughout the nineteenth century. For the first time in two thousand years man peeped out from behind the shelters of faith, realized his own responsibility, and was thoroughly frightened. Without retreats and bolt-holes the problem of coping with life drove people more and more frequently to suicide. The point at which life becomes unbearable depends upon the meaning which life assumes and the degree of protection available. Thus it alters from generation to generation. Comedy at one place and time is death at another. The new meaning that life began to present to the average educated man in the later nineteenth century, and the new effort that it demanded, were most disturbing. The sharp upward curve of suicide statistics made people wonder whether the whole of civilized society, like those long-persecuted communities of Jews in the Middle Ages, might not kill itself in desperate distaste at existence.

This seemed not altogether fantastic, since it was found that as national, geographic, and religious protections were broken down by internationalism and the exchange of ideas, those countries which previously had enjoyed a certain immunity from suicide began to increase their rate. Throughout Europe, as culture became more general and less national, all suicide figures tended to converge at a high level, and the suicide rate in places like Italy, was seen to be

rapidly overhauling the rate in the classic countries of suicide. It seemed that soon all Europe would be headed for suicide at the same break-neck speed.

As statistics piled up over a length of years, however, and time carried investigation well into the twentieth century, a reassuring fact was observed. In districts where the greatest number of suicides occurred (for instance, Denmark) the rate of increase had slowed down and finally stopped. The numbers of suicides annually were either stabilized at a high figure or even began to decrease slightly. The era of steadily increasing suicide seemed to be drawing to a close.

For two reasons common sense leads one to suppose that this is actually the case. First, and least important, new cadres are growing up in certain sections of the population to replace the religious, and supplement the family, frameworks. The ideas of socialism, its practical unions and purely recreative associations, not to mention a feeling of solidarity among many workmen, are all antidotes to isolation, shelters from reality, and combatants against silence and fear. They are the new sodalities in which many people can lose the sense of their loneliness and inevitable ending.

Such groupings, in so far as they replace the consolation of churches and guilds, are merely palliative however. They may be said to delay effectively, until in the process of time they themselves break up, the number of suicides which are demanded from men by the evolution of individuality and the final acquisition of the power to stand alone. Such associations—one is, of course, not speaking of their practical and political programme, but of their emotional aspect—in a long view put the clock back. They retard the comparative emotional independence—*Unabhängigkeit* seems to be the precise word—which civilization may at last achieve for the individual. Suicide is indeed a sort of tragic growing pain, a proof of the stress and strain of the weaning, testimony to the difficulty which we yet find of standing

on our feet with the old supports gone and the leading strings snapped.

The second explanation which common sense puts forward to account for the fact that suicide seems in certain places to have reached a saturation point, is that the individual has survived the shock of finding himself alone. Though no longer hedged round with its old defences, personality has come through safely. Man is going to preserve his equilibrium; he will walk without leading strings. This is a conclusion full of hopeful promise, and if true it means that suicide, once the present period of transition is over, will tend to grow rarer. An inverse motion will set in. Statistics seem to show that we are successfully turning a difficult corner in the development of the individual. We turn it, however, in spite of ourselves. Perhaps the strongest motive in world reaction to-day, which so absolutely masks itself behind political and economic events, is the fear of facing the new landscape which lies beyond, rare and extensive but undoubtedly lonely. People naturally are afraid of leaving even the wreckage of old ideological shelters for, what is at yet, no-man's-land. Marx is the official bogey; but the secret enemy is the horror of a world without God and the old confraternities, the horror of a landscape where people will find themselves standing in an unaccustomed space and silence, where nothing but the individual throws a shadow down the perspective from birth to the grave. The inevitability of death then becomes only less unescapable than the personal responsibility of living.

Meanwhile, suicide is the price paid by many to view the unfamiliar new landscape. The transition to self-sufficiency has often lain for the weak, the unfortunate, and the misplaced, via self-destruction. Such deaths, which have been multiplying for a hundred years, are one of the oddly distributed taxes that are levied against gigantic change. Yet this tax falls on us coincidentally with an alleviating consolation.

The past centuries had no such need of suicide, and, fearing hades, they had no such trust in it. For this century, without the hope of paradise, there always remains free access to the reliable panacea of death. It is one of the gentle compensations created by, and for, the complex difficulty of the time. Such a compensation, however, should grow more and more unnecessary as individuals accustom themselves to the new lie of the land. When the number of those who are giddy standing alone grows less, then time will reduce the number of suicides also. As certainly as those beliefs are passing whose dying agonies cause the numberless self-destructions on which we look, the crisis in suicide will itself die away.