

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE only thing one cannot do about suicide is moralize. The end and intention condition every action and general judgments are here irrelevant. St. Augustine finds the act "utterly damnable"; but Diogenes Laertes counselled it to the wise and the brave. Cato chose this exit. Evidently one must tread warily. It is, however, both possible and important to discover the elusive boundaries of suicide, to detect where it masquerades under strange shapes, and where it appears as martyrdom, or bobs up as self-sacrifice. The universality of the phenomenon is certain, but its categories and types are diverse and hardly classified. The Indian widow officially dying on her husband's pyre is not to be linked with the lonely individual strung up in his garret, nor may Cato fairly be compared with Miss Moyes who first popularized the Monument as a place of suicide and started a London epidemic. What, too, of the poet Young, living as it were within pleasant touch of death, his study darkened, and a skull upon his lamp-lit table? And Donne, who, clothed in a white sheet upon an urn, sat for his own mortuary monument and kept the finished work by his bed until he died? And the leicophiliasts? These do not harmonize with the reluctant magnate whom Wall Street fluctuations push out of the world. Again, soldiers resolutely marching to a certain death are from one aspect suicidal. But the same cannot be said of the lemmings, the Gadarene swine of science, who march in their thousands to drown themselves

off the Norwegian coast; since they apparently have no just idea of the outcome of their migration. Zeno, that great Stoic, took his life from sheer ennui at having cut his finger, and St. Jerome and the Venerable Bede reverently place even Christ among the suicides.

It is interesting that until the nineteenth century there should have been no attempt to account for the recurrence of this phenomenon, to study its causes, and to give it laws. Discussion of suicide there was in plenty, but usually of an irrelevant sort. The subject was treated from a religious or moral point of view, and only the highly debatable question of its "rightness" or "wrongness" was taken into consideration. As a result few of the early writers on suicide are now of much interest. Moral judgments, being hopelessly relative to time and place, pass so soon out of date. Among the Massegetae it was customary and decent behaviour to eat one's friends as they grew old; similar action would be impossible in London. From centuries of useless polemic we can to-day gain none of the figures and very little of the data on suicide which we should like. The isolated incidents and stories handed down one must dig out of a mass of prejudice and rusty argument. Here and there an exception stands out, but then it is not so much for the scope of the matter that one will praise it as for the mind of the man who wrote it or for his style. Such exceptions are St. Augustine on one side and Hume on the other; with Donne's *Biathanatos* lying somewhere between the two. All these works, however, concern themselves only with the rightness or wrongness of the act; their problem is to fit it into the particular moral or religious framework which they happen to fancy. They are not interested in getting a close-up of the thing in itself.

At all times and in all places there has been suicide. A certain number of individuals have continuously found this act the most efficient and satisfactory response to circum-

stances which they did not choose to put up with, or to which, in their poverty, they could find no other reply. Everywhere there appears not only a diversity of type and motive, but also of the social interpretation that follows the act. It is with the latter that this book is chiefly concerned. It sets out the history of people's attitudes to suicide. In so doing it throws light on suicide itself and introduces some sort of order into its curious variety.

One whole province must regretfully be left untouched. Though wild-fowlers assert that the canvas-backed duck, that most delectable bird, takes its own life, and though, in the British Isles, terriers pine away on the deaths of their masters, the question of animal suicide is doubtful. We must remember that extinction is a concept which animals do not have, and that death which is the result of the cessation of a voluntary action (for instance feeding) is not necessarily volitional. Like the five dogs of Daphnis, the originator of pastoral poetry, which starved upon his tomb, animal suicides seem always to occur in a conveniently legendary past. Among the classic stories, however, even Boswell's scorpion must give pride of place to Aristotle's horse. The latter having refused to mount his dam was induced to do so by the expedient of veiling her. On discovering his mistake he jumped intentionally from a cliff and was killed by the fall, thus showing an antique moral discrimination unknown to his descendants.¹ On the other hand, monkeys, notably

¹ Athenaeus in the *Deipnosophists*, a fascinating collection of anecdote, scandal, and gastronomic wisdom of the third century A.D., retails another animal suicide springing from an even nicer and more easily outraged moral sense. "A bird called the porphyrio [probably *Fulica porphyrio*, of the same family as the Common Coot], when it is kept in a house, watches those women who have husbands very closely; and has such instantaneous perception of anyone who commits adultery, that, when it perceives it, it gives notice of it to the master of the house, taking its own life by hanging itself."

devoid of principle, have cut their throats with razors; yet this, due to the imitation of men shaving, seems simply to have been an unfortunate death. The llama's self-destruction, the death of Donne's pelicans, and the conflagrations of the storks, are equally strange stories, but, like the abortive suicide of the Phoenix accomplished every three thousand years, they escape certainty.

In a purely personal way the study of suicide will bring writer and reader a certain reassurance. Sir Thomas Browne says that "The long habit of living indisposeth us for dying." This statement is disproved by figures, and we find self-destruction becomes more tempting with age. This is a legitimate consolation; for one rightly is afraid that as one grows older and passes the 'literary' period of suicide in the early twenties, when to most people it seems possible to detach themselves with grace and even *éclat* from the business of living, one will come to cling more piteously and tenaciously to a life one may either fear or dislike. Facts, if they do nothing else, dispel this apprehension that life will become more and more indispensable. The universality of suicide and its increase with age give one the assurance that the door remains always open; a certain claustrophobia is relieved and one sees gratefully that one may perhaps continue to be able to refuse to 'play', if refusal seems the wisest course. This belief in the possibility of suicide though it may be flattering—since circumstances intervene and theory does not easily become practice—is certainly helpful. It lends a certain dignity, an illusion of free will, to one's progress. It is the life-belt the Stoics clutched. "As I choose the ship in which I will sail, and the house I will inhabit, so I will choose the death by which I will leave life. . . . The lot of man is happy because no one continues wretched but by his own fault." The Roman consolation is available for us.

And yet even as one embarks on a study of social attitudes

towards suicide, a sense of proportion and fairness forces one to bear in mind the relative unimportance of death viewed as a single event in any one life, whether that death is suicide, a scaffold, bed or battlefield. The time occupied by death is usually little, and one must be grateful for this; the last twenty-four hours of a man's life, how he makes his end, are in average circumstances not likely to be much more significant or important than any other similar period of time. The day on which you die is probably less important than that on which you are married, read Plato, climb a mountain, see Florence or Vienna. As schoolboys we pity and regret the character that dies on the scaffold, and our forbears crossed themselves by the grave of a suicide. And yet these facts represent a small fragment in the course of long lives. How these lives were lived over years of time, how fully, and how from moment to moment, is the real question. There is something very niggard, very middle-class, very non-conformist, in judging a life by its exodus. Johnson's reply to Boswell answers perfectly the false accent laid by society on death and the hasty estimation of a man merely by his ending: "No, sir, let it alone! It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance; it lasts so short a time." The usual Johnsonian exaggeration overlooks the fact that we are very conscious of death all our lives. But there is an essential grain of truth in his dictum, for it is not our death itself but our previous knowledge of its inevitable arrival that is important.

Whether or not the general importance of suicide has been exaggerated in summarizing the history or value of a life, it is certain that its horror, its macabre and unpleasant side, have been distorted and given unnatural prominence. A popular and primitive taboo revulsion, aided to-day by a popular and sensational press, have helped to bring this about. Suicide has become unsavoury in a way

that would have been incomprehensible to the Romans; one's sole approach is now via the gas ovens of the Sunday Press, and it has acquired a flavour of vice and furtiveness that is unnatural. Its better elements have been obscured. A certain humanism and dignity in the step as practised by the ancients, and by no means absent to-day, is lost to view: often suicide is not the unwilling act of a harassed sufferer but an individual's voluntary and precise assertion of his own freedom. Even in romantic suicide these positive features are not absent. The suicide pact, and the death of the man for whom the world is inadequate, can both be praised in their own way. Lessing longed that one spring nature might be red and not an everlasting green: the feeling of the frightful repetitiveness of experience and the conviction that natural and scientific laws present no adequate possibilities for the particular life a man happens to want, are not unworthy reasons for suicide.

Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Axel* epitomizes in an extreme nineteenth-century form, the type of aspiration and idealism which can make even romantic suicide a dignified and positive action. Axel, after a varied odyssey, finds the woman for whom he has been long searching. Suddenly he has everything and the world is at his feet. He is alone with a love which he has not yet possessed, and dawn approaches. Together they envisage the life that lies before them; there is nothing they cannot see, nothing they cannot obtain. Their life and love stretch out in an infinite perspective; in imagination they visit all the countries, and enjoy all the beauty, of the world.

“Come, let's leave at once,” she cries; “throw on your coat. Outside, the carriage horses are already pawing the morning dew. They'll take us past scented orange groves, and out on the roads people will soon be about. We shall pass villages and towns. . . . Beyond, there will be more towns waking in the sunlight, the

whole world will be waking. We can at last give reality to all our dreams."

As she speaks dawn breaks. She lifts the curtain at the window.

"Leave it alone," Axel says. "What do you want with the sun? Our dreams are too rare to be realized in the daylight."

At first she does not understand him.

"But look," she cries, "there is the world! Let's live!"

"No," Axel answers. "Our existence is complete; our cup is now full. We've already exhausted the future. No clock can count the hours of this night—and what will the realities of tomorrow be worth compared to these visions that we've seen? Why try to turn into current coin—as all the rest do—our drachma of gold, stamped with the authority of dreams? At this moment we hold the obol of the Styx in our triumphant hands!"

"Do you think such desires as ours will put up with the earth from day to day? Don't you see that the earth, this drop of congealed filth, has become the illusion? Don't you see that in our hearts we've done away with the love of life? It's in *reality* that we've exchanged our souls. We owe it to ourselves not to accept this substitute—life. . . . Let's leave the banquet, forever satisfied with this our moment. The poor fools, who can only measure reality by sensation, can have the pleasure of picking up the crumbs."

So the woman is at last persuaded and takes the cup of poison: "Since only the infinite tells the truth, we will go, forgetful of human speech, into our own infinity." They have both turned away from life, which they know is unequal to their demands. As they lie dead, the sun breaks in upon them; from outside the rustle of a country wind, the murmur of a waking plain, and the long buzz of life, hum and play across their bodies, and are unable to disturb their silence.