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The Savage God

A Study of Suicide



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A man was hanged who had cut his throat, but who had been brought back to life. They hanged him for suicide. The doctor had warned them that it was impossible to hang him as the throat would burst open and he would breathe through the aperture. They did not listen to his advice and hanged their man. The wound in the neck immediately opened and the man came back to life again although he was hanged. It took time to convoke the aldermen to decide the question of what was to be done. At length aldermen assembled and bound up the neck below the wound *until he died*. Oh my Mary, what a crazy society and what a stupid civilization.¹

So Nicholas Ogarev writing to his mistress Mary Sutherland around 1860, with news from the London papers. Ogarev was an alcoholic Russian exile of mildly revolutionary politics, the son of a wealthy landowner and close friend of Alexander Herzen; his mistress was a good-natured prostitute whom he had reformed and was slowly educating. I suspect that it took two complete outsiders, one of them an enlightened and political foreigner, to notice the barbarity of a situation which the newspaper had reported simply as an unexpected twist to a public execution, odd enough to be newsworthy but not otherwise sufficiently shocking or remarkable to require comment.

Yet by pursuing their poor suicide with such weird vindictiveness – condemning a man to death for the crime of having condemned himself to death – the London aldermen were acting according to a venerable tradition sanctified by

both Church and State. The history of suicide in Christian Europe is the history of official outrage and unofficial despair. Both can be measured by the dry, matter-of-fact tone in which the accepted enormities were described. Writing in 1601, the Elizabethan lawyer Fulbecke says that the suicide 'is drawn by a horse to the place of the punishment and shame, where he is hanged on a gibbet, and none may take the body down but by the authority of a magistrate'. In other words, the suicide was as low as the lowest criminal. Later another great legal authority, Blackstone, wrote that the burial was 'in the highway, with a stake driven through the body',² as though there was no difference between a suicide and a vampire. The chosen site was usually a cross-roads, which was also the place of public execution, and a stone was placed over the dead man's face; like the stake, it would prevent him rising as a ghost to haunt the living. Apparently, the terror of suicides lasted longer than the fear of vampires and witches: the last recorded degradation of the corpse of a suicide in England took place in 1823, when a man called Griffiths was buried at the intersection of Grosvenor Place and the King's Road, Chelsea. But even then self-murderers were not left in peace: for the next fifty years the bodies of unclaimed and destitute suicides went to the schools of anatomy for dissection.

With variations, similar degradations were used all through Europe. In France, varying with local ground rules, the corpse was hanged by the feet, dragged through the street on a hurdle, burned, thrown on the public garbage heap. At Metz, each suicide was put in a barrel and floated down the Moselle away from the places he might wish to haunt. In Danzig, the corpse was not allowed to leave by the door; instead it was lowered by pulleys from the win-

dow; the window-frame was subsequently burnt. Even in the civilized Athens of Plato, the suicide was buried outside the city and away from other graves; his self-murdering hand was cut off and buried apart. So, too, with minor variations, in Thebes and Cyprus. Sparta, true to form, was so severe in its ruling that Aristodemus was punished posthumously for deliberately seeking death in the battle of Plataea.³

In Europe these primitive revenges were duly dignified and made economically profitable to the State by law. As late as 1670 *le roi soleil* himself incorporated into the official legal code all the most brutal practices concerning the degradation of the corpse of a suicide, adding that his name was to be defamed *ad perpetuam rei memoriam*; nobles lost their nobility and were declared commoners; their escutcheons were broken, their woods cut, their castles demolished. In England a suicide was declared a felon (*felo de se*). In both countries his property reverted to the crown. In practice, Voltaire sourly noted, this meant: '*On donne son bien au Roi qui en accorde presque toujours la moitié à la première fille de l'opéra qui le fait demander par un de ses amants; l'autre moitié appartient de droit à Messieurs les Fermiers généraux.*'⁴

In France, despite the derision of Voltaire and Montesquieu, these laws lasted at least until 1770 and, indeed, were twice reinforced in the eighteenth century. The confiscation of the suicide's property and defamation of his memory finally disappeared with the Revolution; suicide is not mentioned in the new penal code of 1791.⁵ Not so in England, where the laws concerning the confiscation of property were

⁴ 'His goods are given to the King who almost always grants half of them to the leading lady of the Opera who prevails on one of her lovers to ask for it; the other half belongs by law to the Inland Revenue.'

not changed until 1870, and an unsuccessful suicide could still be sent to prison as late as 1961.* Thus the phrase 'suicide while the balance of his mind was disturbed' was evolved by lawyers as a protection against the inanities of the law, since a verdict of *felo de se* would deprive the dead man of a religious burial and his inheritors of his estate. An eighteenth century satirist put it this way :

From reading the public prints a foreigner might naturally be led to imagine, that we are the most lunatic people in the world. Almost every day informs us, that the coroner's inquest has sate on the body of some miserable suicide and brought in their verdict lunacy. But it is very well known, that the inquiry has not been made into the state of mind of the deceased, but into his fortune and family. The law has indeed provided, that the deliberate self-murderer should be treated like a brute and denied the rites of burial. But of hundreds of lunatics by purchase, I never knew this sentence executed but on one poor cobbler, who hanged himself in his own stall. A penniless poor dog, who has not left enough money to defray the funeral charges, may perhaps be excluded the church-yard; but self-murder by a pistol genteelly mounted, or the Paris-hilted sword, qualifies the polite owner for a sudden death, and entitles him to a pompous burial and a monument setting forth his virtues in Westminster-Abbey.⁸

Whence Professor Joad's aphorism that in England you must not commit suicide, on pain of being regarded as a criminal if you fail and a lunatic if you succeed.

These official, legal idiocies were, mercifully, the last pale flourishing of prejudices which had once been infinitely more virulent and profound. Since the savagery of any punishment is proportional to the fear of the act, why should a gesture so essentially private inspire such primitive terror and superstition? Fedden produces evidence to

**Plus ça change . . .* In 1969 an Isle of Man court ordered a teenager to be birched for attempting suicide.

suggest that Christian revenges repeat, with suitable modifications, the taboos and purification rituals of the most primitive tribes. The learned jurists who decreed that a suicide should be buried at a crossroads had at least that prejudice in common with the witch-doctors of Baganda.⁷ They were also harking back to a pre-Christian Europe where victims were sacrificed on altars at these same crossroads. Like the stake and the stone, the site had been chosen in the hope that the constant traffic above would prevent the restless spirit from rising; should that fail the number of roads would, hopefully, confuse the ghost and so hinder his return home. After the introduction of Christianity, the cross formed by the roads became a symbol which would disperse the evil energy concentrated in the dead body.⁸ It was a question, in short, of an archaic fear of blood wrongly spilt crying out for revenge. That is, it was a question of that peculiarly baffled terror which is produced by guilt. Freud's early theory that suicide is transposed murder, an act of hostility turned away from the object back on to the self, seems to be borne out by Christian superstition and law.

In primitive societies, the mechanics of revenge are simple: either the suicide's ghost will destroy his persecutor for him, or his act will force his relatives to carry out the task, or the iron laws of the tribe will compel the suicide's enemy to kill himself in the same manner. It depends on the customs of the country. In any case, suicide under these conditions is curiously unreal; it is as though it were committed in the certain belief that the suicide himself would not really die. Instead, he is performing a magical act which will initiate a complex but equally magic ritual ending in the death of his enemy.*

*The same magical thinking still prevails in some modern political suicides. In January 1969, Jan Palach burned himself to death in the

The primitive horror of suicide, which survived so long in Europe, was then a horror of blood evilly spilt and unappeased. In practice, this meant that suicide was equated with murder. Hence, presumably, the custom of punishing the body of a suicide as though he were guilty of a capital crime, by hanging it from a gibbet. Hence, too, the terminology of the act. 'Suicide', which is a Latinate and relatively abstract word, appeared late. The OED dates the first use as 1651; I found the word a little earlier in Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, written in 1635, published in 1642.† But it was still sufficiently rare not to appear in the 1755 edition of Dr Johnson's Dictionary. Instead, the phrases used were 'self-murder', 'self destruction', 'self-killing', 'self-homicide', 'self-slaughter' – all expressions reflecting the associations with murder.

They also reflect the difficulty the Church had in ration-

desperate belief that nothing less than his own self-immolation could effectively protest against the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. About a year later, when the first anniversary of Palach's death coincided with the end of the Biafran affair, seven people took their own lives in France in the space of ten days, mostly in the same terrible way. The second victim, a nineteen-year-old student from Lille, left a message saying he was 'against war, violence, and the destructive folly of men. . . . If I die, do not weep. I have done it because I could not adapt myself to this world. I did it as a protest against violence and to draw the attention of the world of which a very small part is dealt with here. Death is a form of protest on condition that it is desired by a human being for himself. One can very well refuse it.' Behind these horrors, and behind the boy's confusion of altruism and egoism, is a certain residue of primitive magic: it is as though the suicide believes, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that he will finally have his posthumous way, provided his death is sufficiently terrible.

There seems to me to be nothing to justify such optimism.

† 'Herein are they in extremes, that can allow a man to be his own assassin, and so highly extol the end and suicide of Cato.' (*Religio Medici*, Sect. XLV.)

alizing its ban on suicide, since neither the Old nor New Testament directly prohibits it. There are four suicides recorded in the Old Testament – Samson, Saul, Abimelech and Achitophel – and none of them earns adverse comment. In fact, they are scarcely commented on at all. In the New Testament, the suicide of even the greatest criminal, Judas Iscariot, is recorded as blankly; instead of being added to his crimes, it seems a measure of his repentance. Only much later did the theologians reverse the implicit judgement of St Matthew and suggest that Judas was more damned by his suicide than by his betrayal of Christ. In the first years of the Church, suicide was such a neutral subject that even the death of Jesus was regarded by Tertullian, one of the most fiery of the Early Fathers, as a kind of suicide. He pointed out, and Origen agreed, that He voluntarily gave up the ghost, since it was unthinkable that the Godhead should be at the mercy of the flesh. Whence John Donne's comment in *Biathanatos*, the first formal defence of suicide in English: 'Our blessed Saviour . . . chose that way for our Redemption to sacrifice his life, and profuse his blood.'¹⁸

The idea of suicide as a crime comes late in Christian doctrine and as an afterthought. It was not until the sixth century AD that the Church finally legislated against it, and then the only biblical authority was a special interpretation of the sixth commandment: 'Thou shalt not kill.' The bishops were urged into action by St Augustine; but he, as Rousseau remarked, took his arguments from Plato's *Phaedo*, not from the Bible. Augustine's arguments were sharpened by the suicide-mania which was, above all, the distinguishing mark of the early Christians. I will return to this. But ultimately his reasons were impeccably moral. Christianity was founded on the belief that each human body is the vehicle of an immortal soul which will be judged not in this world but the next. And because each

soul is immortal, every life is equally valuable. Since life itself is the gift of God, to reject it is to reject Him and to frustrate His will; to kill His image is to kill Him – which means a one-way ticket to eternal damnation.

The Christian ban on suicide, like its ban on infanticide and abortion, was, then, founded on a respect for life utterly foreign to the indifference and casual murderousness of the Romans. But there is a paradox involved: as David Hume pointed out, monotheism is the only form of religion that can be taken seriously, because only monotheism treats the universe as a single, systematic, intelligible whole; yet its consequences are dogmatism, fanaticism and persecution; whereas polytheism, which is intellectually absurd and a positive obstacle to scientific understanding, produces tolerance, a respect for individual freedom, a civilized breathing space. So with suicide: when the bishops decided it was a crime, they were in some way emphasizing the moral distance travelled from pagan Rome, where the act was habitual and even honoured. Yet what began as moral tenderness and enlightenment finished as the legalized and sanctified atrocities by which the body of the suicide was degraded, his memory defamed, his family persecuted. So although the idea of suicide as a crime was a late, relatively sophisticated invention of Christianity, more or less foreign to the Judeo-Hellenic tradition, it spread like a fog across Europe because its strength came from primitive fears, prejudices and superstitions which had survived despite Christianity, Judaism and Hellenism. Given the barbarity of the Dark Ages and early Middle Ages, it was no doubt inevitable that the savage mind should once again have its day. The process was much the same as that by which the Christian calendar took over the pagan festivals, and the first Spanish missionaries in Mexico invented saints to whom they could dedicate

the churches they built on the altar of each Aztec and Mayan god. In the modern business world this process is called 'buying the goodwill' of a defunct firm. As far as suicide is concerned, Christianity bought up the pagan badwill.

Yet there is evidence that, even to the savage mind, the horror of suicide did not always come naturally. The primitive fear of the dead may have been overpowering, particularly the terror of the spirits of those who had died unnaturally and wilfully, murdered or by their own hand. It was largely as a protection against these restless and unappeased ghosts that the whole ornate complex of taboos was elaborated.¹¹ But to be afraid of the vengeful dead is something rather different from being afraid of death itself.*

*We should beware of projecting our own anxieties on to other periods. The idea of death as an unmentionable, almost unnatural, subject is a peculiarly twentieth-century invention. What was once public, simple and commonplace has now become private, abstract and shocking, a fact almost as furtive and secret as sex once was to the Victorians. Yet we are constantly told that the violence of our societies is preternatural and is augmented by the violence served up, continually and inescapably, to entertain our leisure on film, on television, in pulp fiction, even on the news. Perhaps. But I wonder if all this is not now remote and antiseptic compared with habits not long passed. A Roman holiday involved the slaughter of, literally, thousands in gladiatorial shows. After Spartacus' uprising, the crucified bodies of six thousand slaves lined the road from Rome to Capua like lamp-posts. In Christian Europe executions replaced the Roman circuses. Criminals were beheaded publicly, they were hanged, cut down while still alive, their intestines drawn out and their bodies quartered; they were guillotined and elaborately tortured in front of festive crowds; their severed heads were exposed on pikes, their bodies hung in chains from gibbets. The public was amused, excited, more delighted than shocked. An execution was like a funfair, and for the more spectacular occasions even apprentices got the day off. This casual bloodthirstiness continued long after the last suicide had been buried at the crossroads. Executions were public

Thus in some warrior societies, whose gods were those of violence and whose ideal was bravery, suicide was often looked on as a great good. For example, the paradise of the Vikings was Valhalla, 'the Hall of those who died by violence', where the Feast of Heroes was presided over by the god Odin. Only those who had died violently could enter and partake of the banquet. The greatest honour and the surest qualification was death in battle; next best was suicide. Those who died peacefully in their beds, of old age or disease, were excluded from Valhalla through all eternity. Odin himself was the supreme God of War, but, according to Frazer, he was also called the Lord of the Gallows or the God of the Hanged, and men and animals were hanged in his honour from the sacred trees of the holy grove at Upsala. The weird, beautiful lines of the *Havamal* suggest that the god also died in the same ritual, as a sacrifice to himself:

I know that I hung in the windy tree
For nine whole nights,
Wounded with the spear, dedicated to Odin,
Myself to myself.¹³

in England until 1868. In Paris the Morgue was a tourist attraction where the corpses were displayed like the waxworks at Madame Tussaud's; it was even rebuilt to improve the facilities in 1865 and was not closed to the public until the 1920s. In wars, hand-to-hand fighting with swords, daggers, axes and primitive guns left battlefields looking like butchers' shops. Our own massacres may be infinitely greater but they often take place by remote control and at a distance; in comparison with the great pitched battles of the past, they seem almost abstract. Of course, there is a difference. Unlike our ancestors who, at best, read about them later, we actually see the results. But in the eye of television, as in the eye of God, all things are equal; a real atrocity on the screen in our own home seems neither more nor less genuine than some fantasy acted out in a studio for our amusement. In these circumstances, death is a kind of pornography, at once exciting and unreal: 'Death is something that we fear/But it titillates the ear.'

According to another tradition, Odin wounded himself with his sword before being ritually burnt.¹⁴ Either way, he was a suicide and his worshippers acted according to his divine example. Similarly, there was a Druid maxim promoting suicide as a religious principle: 'There is another world, and they who kill themselves to accompany their friends thither, will live with them there.'¹⁴ That, in turn, links with the custom common among African tribes: that the warriors and slaves put themselves to death when their king dies, in order to live with him in Paradise. Whence, with more sophistication, Hindu *suttee*. The ritual in which the bereaved wife burnt herself to death on the funeral pyre of her husband.

Elsewhere, tribes as far apart as the Iglulik Eskimos and the inhabitants of the Marquesas Islands believed that a violent death was a passport to Paradise, which the Iglulik called the Land of Day. In contrast, those who died peacefully from natural causes were consigned to eternal claustrophobia in the Narrow Land. In the Marquesas they went to the lower depths of Hawaiki.¹⁵ Even the victims of the terrible Aztec rites, the youths who became gods for a period on the understanding that they would eventually have their living hearts cut out, went to the altar with a kind of perverse optimism.

Obviously, to promote the idea of violent death as glorious was an efficient way of preserving a properly warlike spirit; the Americans might have been spared some of their embarrassment in Vietnam had they been able to instil into their conscripts the same primitive virtues. Thus the ancient Scythians regarded it as the greatest honour to take their own lives when they became too old for their nomadic way of life; thereby saving the younger members of the tribe both the trouble and the guilt of killing them. Quintus Curtius described them graphically:

Among them exists a sort of wild and bestial men to whom they give the name of sages. The anticipation of the time of death is a glory in their eyes, and they have themselves burned alive as soon as age or sickness begins to trouble them. According to them, death, passively awaited, is a dishonour to life; thus no honours are rendered those bodies which old age has destroyed. Fire would be contaminated if it did not receive the human sacrifice still breathing.¹⁶

Durkheim called this style of suicide 'altruistic'; one of the supreme examples is Captain Oates, who walked out to his death in the Antarctic snow in order to help Scott and his other doomed companions. But where the whole of a tribe's morality and mythology made it seem that suicide was a way to a better life, the motives of those who took their own lives were evidently not altogether pure and self-sacrificing. They were, instead, intensely narcissistic: '... dedicated to Odin,/Myself to myself.' 'Through the primitive act of suicide,' writes Gregory Zilboorg, 'man achieved a *fantasied* immortality, i.e. uninterrupted fulfilment of the hedonistic ideal through mere fantasy and not through actual living.'¹⁷ Since death was both inevitable and relatively unimportant, suicide ultimately became more a matter of pleasure than of principle: one sacrificed a few days or years on this earth in order to feast with the gods eternally in the next. It was, essentially, a frivolous act.

In contrast, a serious suicide is an act of choice, the terms of which are entirely those of this world; a man dies by his own hand because he thinks the life he has not worth living. Suicides of this kind are usually thought to be an index of high civilization – as who should say, tell me your suicide-rate and I will tell you your cultural sophistication – for the simple reason that the act goes against the most basic of instincts, that of self-preservation. But it is not necessarily so. For example, the Tasmanian aborigines died

out not just because they were hunted like kangaroos for an afternoon's sport, but also because a world in which this could happen was intolerable to them; so they committed suicide as a race by refusing to breed. Ironically perhaps, and as though to confirm the aborigines' judgement, the mummified remains of the old lady who was the last to survive have been preserved by the Australian Government as a museum curiosity. Similarly, hundreds of Jews put themselves to death at Masada, rather than submit to the Roman legions. More extreme still, the history of the Spanish conquest of the New World is one of deliberate genocide in which the native inhabitants themselves co-operated. Their treatment at the hands of the Spaniards was so cruel that the Indians killed themselves by the thousand rather than endure it. Of forty natives from the Gulf of Mexico who were brought to work in a mine of the Emperor Charles V, thirty-nine starved themselves to death. A whole cargo of slaves contrived to strangle themselves in the hold of a Spanish galleon, although the head room was so limited by the heavy ballast of stones that they were forced to hang themselves in a squatting or kneeling position. In the West Indies, according to the Spanish historian, Girolamo Benzoni, four thousand men and countless women and children died by jumping from cliffs or by killing each other. He adds that, out of the two million original inhabitants of Haiti, less than 150 survived as a result of the suicides and slaughter.¹⁸ In the end the Spaniards, faced with an embarrassing labour shortage, put a stop to the epidemic of suicides by persuading the Indians that they, too, would kill themselves in order to pursue them in the next world with even harsher cruelties.

The despair which ends with racial suicide is a peculiarly pure phenomenon and proportionately rare. Only under the most extreme conditions does the psychic mechanism of

self-preservation go into reverse for a whole nation, un-sanctioned by morality or belief and unswayed by zealotry. In a less pure, more complex culture, where death is accepted casually but beliefs are no longer simple and morality fluctuates, within limits, according to the individual, the question of suicide becomes urgent in another way. The supreme example is that of the Romans who turned the ancient world's toleration of suicide into a high fashion.

The toleration began with the Greeks. The taboos against the act which obtained even in Athens – the corpse buried outside the city, its hand cut off and buried separately – were linked with the more profound Greek horror of killing one's own kin. By inference, suicide was an extreme case of this, and the language barely distinguishes between self-murder and murder of kindred. Yet in literature and philosophy the act passes more or less without comment, certainly without blame. The first of all literary suicides, that of Oedipus's mother Jocasta, is made to seem praiseworthy, an honourable way out of an insufferable situation. Homer records self-murder without comment, as something natural and usually heroic. The legends bear him out. Aegeus threw himself into the sea – which thereafter bore his name – when he mistakenly thought his son Theseus had been slain by the Minotaur. Erigone hanged herself from grief when she discovered the murdered body of her father Ikarios – thereby, incidentally, causing an epidemic of suicide by hanging among the Athenian women, which lasted until the blood was wiped out by the institution of the Aiora festival in honour of Erigone. Leukakas jumped off a rock in order to avoid being raped by Apollo. When the Delphic oracle announced that the Lacedaemonians would capture Athens if they did not kill the Athenian king, the reigning monarch Codrus entered the enemy

camp in disguise, picked a quarrel with a soldier and allowed himself to be slaughtered. Charondas, the law-giver of Catana, a Greek colony in Sicily, took his life when he broke one of his own laws. Another law-giver, Lycurgus of Sparta, extracted an oath from his people that they would keep his laws until he returned from Delphi, where he went to consult the oracle about his new legal code. The oracle gave a favourable answer, which he sent back in writing. He then starved himself to death so that the Spartans should never be absolved from their oath. And so on.¹⁹ They all had one quality in common: a certain nobility of motive. So far as the records go, the ancient Greeks took their own lives only for the best possible reasons: grief, high patriotic principle or to avoid dishonour.

Their philosophical discussion of the subject is proportionately detached and balanced. The keys were moderation and high principle. Suicide was not to be tolerated if it seemed like an act of wanton disrespect to the gods. For this reason, the Pythagoreans rejected suicide out of hand since, for them as for the later Christians, life itself was the discipline of the gods. In the *Phaedo*, Plato made Socrates repeat this Orphic doctrine approvingly before he drank the hemlock. He used the simile – often to be repeated later – of the soldier on guard duty who must not desert his post, and also that of man as the property of the gods, who are as angry at our suicide as we would be if our chattels destroyed themselves. Aristotle used much the same argument, though in a more austere way: suicide was 'an offence against the State' because, on religious grounds, it polluted the city and, economically, weakened it by destroying a useful citizen. It was an act, that is, of social irresponsibility. Logically, this is no doubt impeccable. But it also seems curiously irrelevant to the act of suicide. It is not, I mean, a style of argument likely to impinge on the

state of mind of a man about to take his own life. The fact that it was considered to be so cogent – Aristotle's huge authority apart – implies a curiously cool and detached attitude to the problem of suicide.

In contrast, Plato's arguments are less simple, more subtle. Socrates' sweetly reasonable tone repudiates suicide, yet at the same time he makes death seem infinitely desirable; it is the entry to the world of ideal presences of which earthly reality is a mere shadow. In the end, Socrates drinks the hemlock so cheerfully and has argued so eloquently for the benefits of death that he has set an example to others to come. The Greek philosopher Cleombrotus is said to have been inspired by the *Phaedo* to drown himself, and Cato read the book through twice the night before he fell on his own sword.

Plato also allowed for moderation in the other sense. He suggested that if life itself became immoderate, then suicide became a rational, justifiable act. Painful disease or intolerable constraint were sufficient reasons to depart. And this, when the religious superstitions faded, was philosophical justification enough. Within a hundred years of Socrates' death, the Stoics had made suicide into the most reasonable and desirable of all ways out. Both they and the Epicureans claimed to be as indifferent to death as to life. For the Epicureans the principle was pleasure; whatever promoted that was good, whatever produced pain was evil. For the Stoics the ideal was vaguer, more dignified: that of life in accordance with nature. When it no longer seemed to be so, then death came as a rational choice befitting a rational nature. Thus Zeno, the founder of the school, is said to have hanged himself out of sheer irritation when he stumbled and wrenched his finger; he was ninety-eight at the time. His successor Cleanthes died with equally philosophical aplomb. As a cure for a gumboil he was ordered to starve

himself. Within two days the gumboil was better and his doctor put him back on to an ordinary diet. But Cleanthes refused, 'as he had advanced so far on his journey towards death, he would not now retreat'; he duly starved himself to death.

Classical Greek suicide, then, was dictated by a calm, though slightly excessive, reasonableness. In Athens, as in the Greek colonies of Marseilles and Ceos, where hemlock was developed and whose customs inspired Montaigne to his eloquent defence of noble suicide, the magistrates kept a supply of poison for those who wished to die. All that was required was that they should first plead their cause before the senate and obtain official permission. The precepts were clear:

Whoever no longer wishes to live shall state his reasons to the Senate, and after having received permission shall abandon life. If your existence is hateful to you, die; if you are overwhelmed by fate, drink the hemlock. If you are bowed with grief, abandon life. Let the unhappy man recount his misfortune, let the magistrate supply him with the remedy, and his wretchedness will come to an end.²⁹

These early Stoics brought to the subject of their own death the same degree of nicety that Henry James reserved for morals. And this was appropriate since the question of how they died became for them the final measure of discrimination. Plato had justified suicide when external circumstances became intolerable. The Greek Stoics developed and rationalized this attitude according to their ideal of life in accordance with nature. The advanced Stoicism of the later Roman Empire was a further development of Plato; the argument was essentially the same but now the circumstances were internalized. When the inner compulsion became intolerable the question was no longer whether or not one should kill oneself but how to do so with the greatest

dignity, bravery and style. To put it another way, it was an achievement of the Greeks to empty suicide of all the primitive horrors and then gradually to discuss the subject more or less rationally, as though it were not invested with much feeling, one way or another. The Romans, on the other hand, reinvested it with emotion but, in doing so, turned the emotions upside down. In their eyes suicide was no longer morally evil; on the contrary, one's manner of going became a practical test of excellence and virtue. On the night the Emperor Antoninus Pius died, the password, by his command, was '*aequanimitas*'.²¹

I mentioned the belief that the more sophisticated and rational a society becomes, the further it travels from superstitious fears and the more easily suicide is tolerated. Roman Stoicism would seem to be the ultimate example of this. Stoic writing is full of exhortations to suicide, all of which embroider more or less elegantly on those Athenian precepts quoted above from Libanius. The most famous is Seneca's:

Foolish man, what do you bemoan, and what do you fear? Wherever you look there is an end of evils. You see that yawning precipice? It leads to liberty. You see that flood, that river, that well? Liberty houses within them. You see that stunted, parched, and sorry tree? From each branch liberty hangs. Your neck, your throat, your heart are all so many ways of escape from slavery . . . Do you enquire the road to freedom? You shall find it in every vein of your body.

It is a beautiful and cadenced piece of rhetoric. But where most rhetoric is a protection from reality, a verbal armour the writer puts between himself and the world, Seneca finally practised his precepts: he stabbed himself to avoid the vengeance of Nero, who had once been his pupil. His wife Paulina, no less Stoic, attempted to die with him in the same way, but was saved.

One other example is enough to set the tone of the times. It is the advice of Seneca's ascetic friend Attalus to one Marcellinus, who was suffering from an incurable disease and was contemplating suicide:

Be not tormented, my Marcellinus, as if you were deliberating any great matter. Life is a thing of no dignity or importance. Your very slaves, your animals, possess it in common with yourself: but it is a great thing to die honourably, prudently, bravely. Think how long you have been engaged in the same dull course: eating, sleeping, and indulging your appetites. This has been the circle. Not only a prudent, brave, or a wretched man may wish to die, but even a fastidious one.²²

Again there is no gap between rhetoric and reality. Marcellinus took his friend's advice and starved himself to death, a 'fastidious' answer to the wild indulgence of Tiberius's Rome.

In doing so, he also joined the company of the most distinguished men of the ancient world. I have already mentioned Socrates, Codrus, Charondas, Lycurgus, Cleombrotus, Cato, Zeno, Cleanthes, Seneca and Paulina. Among many others were the Greek orators Isocrates and Demosthenes; the Roman poets Lucretius, Lucan and Labienus, the dramatist Terence, the critic Aristarchus, and Petronius Arbiter, who was the most fastidious of them all; Hannibal, Boadicea, Brutus, Cassius, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, Cocceius Nerva, Statius, Nero, Otho, King Ptolemy of Cyprus and King Sardanapalus of Persia. There was also Mithridates who, to protect himself from his enemies, had immunized himself by years of swallowing small doses of poison. As a result, when he finally tried to take his own life by poison he failed. And so on. John Donne's list of notable suicides of the classical world runs to three pages, including witty comments; Montaigne produced a host of

others. Both chose more or less at random from many hundreds of possibilities; and these, in turn, were only a fraction of those who died in the Roman fashion.

The evidence is, then, that the Romans looked on suicide neither with fear nor revulsion, but as a carefully considered and chosen validation of the way they had lived and the principles they had lived by. The supreme, and supremely perverse, example is that of Corellius Rufus, a nobleman who, according to Fedden, 'put off committing suicide throughout the reign of Domitian, saying that he did not wish to die under a tyrant. Once this powerful Emperor was dead he took his own life with an easy mind, and as a free Roman.'²³ To live nobly also meant to die nobly and at the right moment. Everything depended on the dominant will and a rational choice.

This attitude was reinforced by Roman law. There were no revenges, no degradation, no evidence of fear or horror. Instead, the law was the law – practical. According to Justinian's *Digest*, suicide of a private citizen was not punishable if it was caused by 'impatience of pain or sickness, or by another cause', or by 'weariness of life . . . lunacy, or fear of dishonour'. Since this covered every rational cause, all that was left was the utterly irrational suicide 'without cause', and that was punishable on the grounds that 'whoever does not spare himself would much less spare another'.²⁴ In other words, it was punished because it was irrational, not because it was a crime. There were other exceptions but they were even more strictly practical: it was a crime for a slave to kill himself for the simple reason that he represented to his master a certain capital investment. Like a car, a slave was guaranteed against faults: hidden physical blemishes, a suicidal or criminal nature. If he killed himself, or attempted to, within six months of his purchase he could be returned – alive or dead – to his old

master and the deal was declared invalid.²⁵ In the same way, a soldier was considered to be the property of the State and his suicide was tantamount to desertion. Roman law, that is, took literally the two similes – the soldier and the chattel – which Socrates had used so eloquently. Finally, it was also an offence for a criminal to take his own life in order to avoid trial for a crime for which the punishment would be forfeiture of his estate. In this case, a suicide was declared to be without legal heirs. The relatives, however, were allowed to defend the accused as though he were still alive; if he were found innocent, they then retained their inheritance; if not, it went to the State. In short, in Roman law the crime of suicide was strictly economic. It was an offence neither against morality nor religion, only against the capital investments of the slave-owning class or the treasury of the State.

The icy heroism of all this is admirable, even enviable, but it also seems, at least from our perspective, curiously unreal. It seems impossible that life and behaviour could ever be quite so rational and the will, at the moment of crisis, quite so dependable. That the Romans were able to act as though they were indicates an extraordinary inner discipline – a discipline of the soul they did not believe in. But it also says something about the monstrous civilization of which they were part. I suggested earlier that only comparatively recently has death ceased to be casual and public. In Imperial Rome this casualness reached that point of lunacy where the crowd, for its entertainment, would be satisfied with nothing less than death. Donne quotes a learned source who says that in one month thirty thousand men died in gladiatorial shows.²⁶ Frazer says that at one time people would offer themselves for execution to amuse the public at five *minae* a time (about £120), the money to be paid to their heirs; he adds that the market was so

competitive that the candidates would offer to be beaten to death rather than beheaded, since that was slower, more painful and so more spectacular.*²⁷ Perhaps, then, Stoic dignity was a last defence against the murderous squalor of Rome itself. When those calm heroes looked around them they saw a life so unspeakable, cruel, wanton, corrupt and apparently unvalued, that they clung to their ideals of reason much as the Christian poor used to cling to their belief in Paradise and the goodness of God despite, or because of, the misery of their lives on this earth. Stoicism, in short, was a philosophy of despair. It was not for nothing that Seneca, who was its most powerful and influential spokesman, was also the teacher of the most vicious of all Roman emperors, Nero.

Perhaps this is why Stoic calm was so easily assimilated to the religious hysteria of the early Christians. Rational suicide was a kind of aristocratic corollary of vulgar bloodlust. Christianity, which began as a religion for the poor and rejected, took that bloodlust, combined it with the habit of suicide, and transferred both into a lust for martyrdom. The Romans may have fed Christians to the lions for sport, but they were not prepared for the fact that the Christians welcomed the animals as instruments of glory and salvation. 'Let me enjoy those beasts,' said Ignatius, 'whom I wish much more cruell than they are; and if they will not attempt me, I will provoke and draw them by force.'²⁸ The persecution of the early Christians

*There is a case in the late eighteenth century of a man who advertised that he would commit suicide publicly in Covent Garden in order to raise money for his poverty-stricken family – provided he could find enough spectators willing to pay one pound each. By this time brutal amusement was qualified by an even stronger taste for 'the Pathetick'. Nowadays, someone making a similar offer would qualify only for the nearest psychiatric ward, or as a suitable case for treatment in the Theatre of the Absurd.

was less religious and political than a perversion of their own seeking. For the sophisticated Roman magistrates Christian obstinacy was mostly an embarrassment: as when the Christians refused to make the token gestures towards established religion which would save their lives or, failing that, refused to avail themselves of the convenient pause between judgement and execution in which to escape. Embarrassment moved into irritation when the would-be martyrs, student revolutionary tacticians before their day, responded to clemency with provocation. And it finished with boredom: an African proconsul surrounded by a mob of Christians baying for martyrdom shouted to them: 'Goe hang and drown your selves and ease the Magistrate.'²⁹ Others, no less bored, were less forbearing. The glorious company of martyrs came to number thousands of men, women and children who were beheaded, burned alive, flung from cliffs, roasted on gridirons and hacked to pieces – all more or less gratuitously, of their own free will, as so many deliberate acts of provocation. Martyrdom was a Christian creation as much as a Roman persecution.

Just as the early Christians took over the Roman religious festivals, so they also took over the Roman attitudes to death and suicide, and in doing so magnified them theologically, distorted them and finally turned them upside-down. To the Romans of every class death itself was unimportant. But the way of dying – decently, rationally, with dignity and at the right time – mattered intensely. Their way of death, that is, it was the measure of their final value of life. The early Christians showed this same indifference to death but changed the perspective. Viewed from the Christian Heaven, life itself was at best unimportant, at worst, evil: the fuller the life the greater the temptation to sin. Death, therefore, was a release awaited

or sought out with impatience. In other words, the more powerfully the Church instilled in believers the idea that this world was a vale of tears and sin and temptation, where they waited uneasily until death released them into eternal glory, the more irresistible the temptation to suicide became. Even the most stoical Romans committed suicide only as a last resort; they at least waited until their lives had become intolerable. But for the primitive Church life was intolerable whatever its conditions. Why, then, live unredeemed when heavenly bliss is only a knife stroke away? Christian teaching was at first a powerful incitement to suicide.

The early Fathers had another inducement, almost as powerful as heavenly bliss. They offered posthumous glory: the martyrs' names celebrated annually in the Church calendar, their passing officially recorded, their relics worshipped. Tertullian, the most bloodthirsty of the Fathers, who explicitly forbade his flock even to attempt to escape persecution, also proffered them the sweetest of recompenses, revenge: 'No City escaped the punishment, which had shed Christian blood.'²⁰ The martyrs would peer down from Paradise and see their enemies tortured eternally in Hell.

But above all, martyrdom afforded certain redemption. Just as baptism purged away original sin, so martyrdom wiped out all subsequent transgressions. It was as much a guarantee of Paradise to the Christians as violent death was to the Vikings and the Iglukik Eskimos. The only difference was that the martyrs died not as warriors but as passive victims; the war they fought was not of this world and all their victories were Pyrrhic. We are back, by another route, with frivolous suicide.

Theologically, the argument was irresistible, but to respond to it required a zealotry which touched on madness.

Donne remarked, unwillingly and with some embarrassment, 'that those times were affected with a disease of this naturall desire of such a death. . . . For that age was growne so hungry and ravenous of it [martyrdom], that many were baptized onely because they would be burnt, and children taught to vexe and provoke Executioners, that they might be thrown into the fire.'²¹ It culminated in the genuine lunacy of the Donatists, whose lust for martyrdom was so extreme that the Church eventually declared them heretics. Gibbon elegantly described their weird and ambiguous glory:

The rage of the Donatists was enflamed by a phrensy of a very extraordinary kind: and which, if it really prevailed among them in so extravagant a degree, cannot surely be paralleled in any country or in any age. Many of these fanatics were possessed with the horror of life and the desire of martyrdom; and they deemed it of little moment by what means or by what hands they perished, if their conduct was sanctified by the intention of devoting themselves to the glory of the true faith and the hope of eternal happiness. Sometimes they rudely disturbed the festivals and profaned the temples of paganism with the design of exciting the most zealous of the idolators to revenge the insulted honour of their Gods. They sometimes forced their way into the courts of justice and compelled the affrighted judge to give orders for their execution. They frequently stopped travellers on the public highways and obliged them to inflict the stroke of martyrdom by promise of a reward, if they consented - and by the threat of instant death, if they refused to grant so very singular a favour. When they were disappointed of every other resource, they announced the day on which, in the presence of their friends and brethren, they should cast themselves headlong from some lofty rock; and many precipices were shown, which had acquired fame by the number of these religious suicides.²²

The Donatists flourished – if that is the word – in the fourth and fifth centuries AD and inspired their contemporary, St Augustine, to comment, ‘to kill themselves out of respect for martyrdom is their daily sport’. But Augustine also recognized the logical dilemma of Christian teaching: if suicide were allowed in order to avoid sin, then it became the logical course for all those fresh from baptism. That sophistry, combined with the suicide mania of the martyrs, provoked him into arguments to prove suicide to be ‘a detestable and damnable wickedness’, a mortal sin greater than any that could be committed between baptism and a divinely ordained death. I have already mentioned that the first of the arguments he used was derived from the sixth commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill’. Thus the man who killed himself broke this commandment and became a murderer.* Moreover, if a man killed himself to atone for his sins, he was usurping the function of the State and the Church; and if he died innocent in order to avoid sin, then he had his own innocent blood on his hands – a worse sin than any he might commit, since it was impossible for him to repent. Finally, Augustine took over Plato’s and the Pythagoreans’ argument that life is the gift of God and our sufferings, being divinely ordained, are not to be foreshortened by our own actions; to bear them patiently is a measure of

*It was this argument which was assimilated into civil law: ‘Up to this day, we do not know what crime suicide constituted, whether a crime *sui generis* or a particular instance of murder, the better view being that it was the latter. Another interesting feature of that crime is the manner in which it was formulated. In the case of all other offenses, the common law defines the crime itself (“larceny is the felonious taking”; “murder is the unlawful killing”). But in suicide, not the crime but the criminal is defined: “*felo de se* is he who kills”. Obviously, as was Christian doctrine, so was the common law struggling with the dilemma of a crime in which the aggressor and the object of aggression are united in one person.’¹³

one’s greatness of soul. Thus to take one’s own life proved only that one did not accept the divine will.

Augustine’s large authority and the excesses of the presumptive martyrs finally swung opinion against suicide. In AD 533 the Council of Orleans denied funeral rites to anyone who killed himself while accused of a crime. And in doing so, they were not merely following Roman law which had been formulated to safeguard the State’s rights to the suicide’s inheritance. Instead, they were condemning suicide both as a crime in itself and also a crime more serious than others, since ordinary criminals were still allowed a properly Christian burial. Thirty years later this seriousness was recognized without qualification by Canon Law. In 562 at the Council of Braga funeral rites were refused to *all* suicides regardless of social position, reason or method. The final step was taken in 693 by the Council of Toledo, which ordained that even the attempted suicide should be excommunicated.

The door had slammed shut. The decent alternative of the Romans, the key to paradise of the early Christians, had become the most deadly of mortal sins. Where St Matthew recorded the suicide of Judas Iscariot without comment – implying by his silence that it in some way atoned for his other crimes – later theologians asserted that he was more damned for killing himself than for betraying Christ. St Bruno, in the eleventh century, called suicides ‘martyrs for Satan’ and two centuries later St Thomas Aquinas sealed up the whole question in the *Summa*: suicide, he said, is a mortal sin against God who has given life; it is also a sin against justice and against charity. Yet even there, in what was to be the centre of Christian doctrine, Aquinas takes his arguments from non-Christian sources. The sin against God derives ultimately, like Augustine’s similar argument, from Plato. The sin against justice – by which he means the

individual's responsibilities to his community – harks back to Aristotle. As for the sin against charity, Aquinas means that instinctive charity each man bears towards himself – that is, the instinct of self-preservation which man has in common with the lower animals; to go against that is a mortal sin since it is to go against nature.* That reason was first used by the Hebrew general Josephus to dissuade his soldiers from killing themselves after they had been defeated by the Romans. (He also used Plato's argument.)

But however un-Christian the sources of the arguments, suicide became, in the long, superstitious centuries between Augustine and Aquinas, the most mortal of Christian sins. Augustine had attacked suicide as a preventive measure: the cult of martyrdom had got out of hand and was, anyway, no longer relevant to the situation of the Church in the fourth century AD. Moreover, it was an offence against that respect for life as the vehicle of the soul which was the essence of Christ's teaching; to love one's neighbour as oneself makes no sense if to kill oneself is also permitted. Yet the fact remained that suicide, thinly disguised as martyrdom, was the rock on which the Church had first been founded. So perhaps the absoluteness with which the sin was condemned and the horrors of the vengeance visited on the dead bodies of the suicides were directly proportional to the power the act exerted on the Christian imagination, and to the lingering temptation to escape the snares of the flesh by the shortest, most certain way. Thus when the Albigensians, in the early thirteenth century, followed

* It isn't. Glanville Williams quotes a learned source to show that dogs sometimes commit suicide, 'usually by drowning or by refusing food, for a number of reasons – generally when the animal is cast out from the household, but also from regret or remorse or even from sheer ennui. Animal suicide of these kinds is capable of being regarded as a manifestation of intelligence.'²⁴

the example of the early saints and suicidally sought martyrdom, they were thought only to have compounded the damnation their other heresies had already earned them. In doing so, they justified the terrible savagery with which they were butchered.

Fedden believes that Augustine's teaching and Canon Law acted together as a catalyst which released all those primitive terrors of suicide which are repressed in more rational periods. Perhaps. But what also occurred was somehow more profound: what began as a preventive measure finished as a kind of universal character-change. An act which, during the first flowering of western civilization, had been tolerated, later admired, and later still sought as the supreme mark of zealotry, became finally the object of intense moral revulsion. When, in the late Renaissance, the question of the individual's right to take his own life once more arose, it seemed to be challenging the whole structure of Christian belief and morals. Hence the deviousness with which men like John Donne began once again to argue the case for suicide after a gap of more than a thousand years. Hence, too, the note of hoarse moral rectitude of their detractors, that earnest certainty which could dispense with argument because it had behind it the whole massive weight of the Church's authority. The increasingly outspoken and rational arguments of the philosophers – Voltaire, Hume, Schopenhauer – did more or less nothing to shake this moral certainty, although as time went on the pious denunciations became shriller, less assured, more outraged.

It took the counter-revolution of science to change all this. Henry Morselli, an Italian professor of psychological medicine and Durkheim's most distinguished predecessor in the use of statistics to analyse the problem of suicide, wrote in 1879: 'The old philosophy of individualism had given to

suicide the character of liberty and spontaneity, but now it became necessary to study it no longer as the expression of individual and independent faculties, but certainly as a social phenomenon allied with all the other racial forces.¹⁵

The shift is from the individual to society, from morals to problems. Socially, the gains were enormous: the legal penalties gradually dropped away; the families of successful suicides no longer found themselves disinherited and tainted with the suspicion of inherited insanity; they could bury their dead and grieve for them in much the same way as any other bereaved. As for the unsuccessful suicide, he faced neither the gallows nor prison but, at worst, a period of observation in a psychiatric ward; more often, he faced nothing more piercing than his own continuing depression.

Existentially, however, there were also losses. The Church's condemnation of self-murder, however brutal, was based at least on concern for the suicide's soul. In contrast, a great deal of modern scientific tolerance appears to be founded on human indifference. The act is removed from the realm of damnation only at the price of being transformed into an interesting but purely intellectual problem, beyond obloquy but also beyond tragedy and morality. There seems to me remarkably little gap between the idea of death as a fascinating, slightly erotic happening on a television screen and that of suicide as an abstract sociological problem. Despite all the talk of prevention, it may be that the suicide is rejected by the social scientist as utterly as he was by the most dogmatic Christian theologians. Thus even the author of the entry on suicide in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* writes, with unconcealed relief: 'Perhaps the greatest contribution of modern times to the rational treatment of the matter is the consideration ... that many suicides are non-moral and entirely

the affair of the specialist in mental diseases.' The implication is clear: modern suicide has been removed from the vulnerable, volatile world of human beings and hidden safely away in the isolation wards of science. I doubt if Ogarev and his prostitute mistress would have found much in the change to be grateful for.