FREEDOM TURNED AGAINST ITSELF:

Studies in the Literature of Suicide

by

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Abstract

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By the late eighteenth century, with the growing emphasis on the self, suicide had become a widespread topic of literary and philosophical debate in Europe. Not since antiquity had references to self-death occurred with such frequency and commanded such serious intellectual attention. Major Enlightenment figures such as Hume, Kant, Mill, Rousseau, and Voltaire contributed to a budding discussion of suicide and personal freedom which led to a variety of literary stances over the next three centuries in the works of Schiller, Goethe, Hölderlin, Ibsen, Camus, and Sartre. Each of these authors approached suicide within the context of various forms of individual freedom – moral, social, spiritual, and existential.

This dissertation examines the major philosophical arguments for and against suicide (including those of Hume, Kant, Mill, and Schopenhauer) as well as some of the most significant literary responses to these arguments. Ultimately, it argues that, while the philosophical arguments treated the issue with absolute decisiveness, the literary responses have handled it with an openness that recognizes the complex and multifaceted nature of the problem. Indeed, these literary stances suggest that the problem of suicide and individual freedom is ultimately irresolvable.

The dissertation concludes with a reflection on how suicide is treated today. It argues that there is now relatively little debate, and that one's decision to kill oneself is hardly ever considered within the context of individual freedom. Instead, it is approached as a pathological condition. While there are certainly legitimate sociological justifications for this approach, the dissertation suggests that we must be careful not to sideline the complex problems that Schiller, Goethe, Hölderlin, Ibsen, Sartre, and Camus recognized – fundamental problems regarding individual freedom that may not have definitive solutions. To reduce the issue to a seemingly incontestable philosophical argument, or to assume it is merely an indication of pathology, offers artificial closure to a problem that refuses to subside.

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INTRODUCTION

By the late eighteenth century, with the growing emphasis on the self, suicide had become a widespread topic of literary and philosophical debate in Europe. Not since classical antiquity had references to self-death occurred with such frequency and commanded such serious intellectual attention. Suicide had certainly been a topic of debate in the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and in the salons of the seventeenth century, but never had so much been written on the various aspects of the phenomenon. In France between 1751-1785 there were hundreds of treatises and encyclopedia articles written on suicide. In England, between 1650-1849, there were over a thousand articles published; discussion was animated, encouraged, and punctuated by notorious cases.[1]

Issues of terminology, causation, deterrence, and punishment were the most prevalent topics of discussion, yet a significant philosophical discussion and literary reaction emerged that centered on self-death and various forms of individual liberty. Overall, the message of the eighteenth century *philosophes* was that humans are generally eager "to be" but that the decision "not to be" is one that should be based on individual liberty. The authorities – the religious ones in particular – held that liberty of that sort was impossible and a violation of the notion that life is a gift, a loan from God. However, major Enlightenment figures contributed to a budding discussion of suicide and personal freedom which led to a variety of literary stances over the next three centuries in

[1] For a general account of the history of suicide in Europe see Georges Minoit, History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture, trans. Lydia D. Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

the works of Schiller, Goethe, Hölderlin, Shopenhauer, Ibsen, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

This dissertation begins with an overview of some of the most prominent arguments for and against suicide from antiquity to the eighteenth century. Overall, these arguments were framed in terms of the individual's relationship to God, the State, and/or Nature, and proclaimed explicitly that we are not proprietors of our own lives, that we cannot desert the post God and the State have assigned to us, and that nature requires of us that we love life.[2] All these arguments were fiercely against even the suggestion that any notion of personal liberty is involved in the decision to take one's life, and many did not broach the issue at all. Undoubtedly some of this thinking persisted into the late eighteenth century, but by the end of the eighteenth century there was a general evolution from outright condemnation of suicide as a violation of our relationship to external authority to a discussion of the relationship between self-death and various forms of individual freedom. Montesquieu, Hume, Mill, Voltaire, Holbach, and Rousseau, for example, consider personal freedom essentially within a social contractarian framework. Each argues that the individual possesses an inherent freedom to break this contract under certain circumstances in order to end his life. By the end of the eighteenth century with Kant, the debate progresses further from a focus on individual liberty within the context of the social contract to one which connects suicide to a specific form of individual freedom conceived as moral freedom.

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[2] Zedler's Universal-Lexikon captures the religious attitudes towards suicide which persisted in the eighteenth century. It defines suicide as an act contrary to the law of nature, because it supposedly refutes man's instinct to live. See Johann Heinrich Zedler, "Selbst-Mord," Universal-Lexikon, 1731-1754. 1595 – 1614 (Online. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München. 3 Apr. 2009.

In Chapter One I explore the ways in which Kant's philosophical exposition on suicide and moral freedom compares with its literary depiction in Schiller and Goethe. For Kant, the freedom to commit suicide could not in any manner be erected into a principle, since doing so would fail to satisfy the demands of the universal imperative to duty. Kant reasoned that suicide was motivated by the sentiment of self-love, and there would be a contradiction in destroying one's life in the name of a sentiment whose function is precisely to favor life.

After elucidating Kant's notion of moral freedom within the context of his ethics, I examine Schiller's The Bride of Messina (Die Braut von Messina, 1803). Contrary to Kant, Schiller associates suicide with the Kantian notion of moral freedom in order to save freedom from blind necessity. While Kant explicitly condemns suicide as a violation of the moral law and an affront to the freedom on which it depends, Schiller depicts suicide in The Bride of Messina as an outward manifestation of man's assertion of freedom from the forces of nature (or, in Schiller's terminology, "Naturkräfte") which, in this tragedy, take the form of fate and inclination. Ultimately, Schiller's overall tragic project is meant to awaken in the spectator a consciousness of moral freedom, and suicide is used an effective vehicle for such an awakening.

In Chapter Two I investigate an ambiguous and unsettling portrayal of suicide and its relationship to moral freedom. Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther (Die leiden des jungen Werther, 1774, 1787) offers a variation on the relationship between moral freedom and suicide in its portrayal of a young man governed by feelings who is intent on using them to achieve freedom from the world of rationalist morality and social conventions. Werther seeks unity with infinity by transcending moral and social limits

through his attempts to express himself artistically, connect to nature, and attain Lotte. However, these endeavors and the feelings that motivate them are radically undercut when moral and social limits impinge upon him. Werther encounters his polar opposite in Albert, an upright man firmly grounded in the rational morality and social convention Werther so vehemently rejects. A chance discussion about suicide establishes their moral lines. Eventually, when Werther realizes he will never attain Lotte and that his feelings have no other way to be expressed he commits suicide. Werther's suicide, then, can be seen as the ultimate expression of feeling as the essence of life, and a declaration of freedom from the moral and social constraints that have militated against him. Most notably, the novel leaves Werther's suicide an open question. While Werther is presented sympathetically throughout the novel, the novel resists making a definitive judgment on whether his final act allows him to achieve his desired moral freedom. After all, the suicide itself is botched (it takes twelve hours for Werther to die and he is found with his brain protruding), the report of the suicide by the "editor" ("Herausgeber") is cold, and only Werther's steward and sons attend the funeral procession. Therefore, unlike Kant, who argues that suicide is a cancelling out of moral freedom, and unlike Schiller who uses suicide dramatically as a manifestation of moral freedom through resistance to forces of nature and moral duty, Goethe refuses to take a definitive position on suicide's relationship to moral freedom.

Chapter Three examines Hölderlin's Death of Empedocles (Der Tod des Empedokles), a fragmentary tragedy written in three parts between 1798 and 1799 which deals with the suicide of the fifth century B.C. philosopher-prophet who was reported to have jumped into the crater of Mount Etna. Hölderlin's evolving thoughts on suicide

suggest a tension between egoistic and altruistic suicide – a tension implicit in many of the texts discussed thus far and one that has significant implications for the relationship between suicide and spiritual freedom. In the first two versions, Hölderlin emphasizes Empedocles' guilt resulting from his disrespect for the gods. In the first version, Empedocles' suicidal motivation is clear: he means to bring about his own spiritual freedom. He is selfishly motivated; he seeks death for personal reasons and has no thought of saving others. The second version, however, presents the issue with much more ambiguity. Rather than ending the fragment with Empedocles' suicide, it ends with an ambiguous discussion of his motivations. The third fragment, however, is more definitive: Empedocles commits suicide with complete disregard for himself. He devotes himself to proclaiming a vision for others resulting in the return of the gods, in harmony and accord with all living things and, most importantly, in spiritual freedom from a one-sided, fragmented existence.

Chapter Four is an excursus focusing on Schopenhauer's inquiry into the possibility of achieving freedom from suffering through the denial of the individual will-to-life. Ultimately, Schopenhauer argues that although one certainly has the *right* to commit suicide, killing oneself can never bring about the freedom from suffering it seeks because it is an act of aggression – an act of will that confirms, rather than denies, the will-to-life. Suicide is a kind of contradiction in that it involves the individual will's willfully seeking to exterminate itself as a way of escaping the wretchedness of willing.

Chapter Five focuses on a suicide that is, like Werther's, treated ambiguously. In the case of Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler (1890) suicide is used a device for achieving freedom from social restrictions. Ibsen depicts the eponymous character as out of synch

with the mindless strictures of her social situation who uses suicide as a device to break through the frozen surface of her world. Hedda's suicide foregrounds a significant tension merely hinted at in the frameworks of suicide previously examined – that between individual freedom and social responsibility.

Chapter Six examines the twentieth-century paradigm of existential freedom by focusing on the connections between suicide and individual freedom in Albert Camus' Myth of Sisyphus (Le Mythe de Sisyphe, 1942) as well as in Jean Paul Sartre's The Reprieve (Le Sursis, 1947) and Nauseau (La Nauseé, 1938**)**. Camus comes out against suicide since he sees it as an escape from, rather than resistance to, the reality of absurdity. He argues that the fact of death destroys the possibility of arriving at "the freedom to *be*, which alone can serve as the basis for a truth."[3] At the same time, the recognition of absurdity releases "the absurd man" from the hope of a higher freedom, from the constraint of thinking that there might be some meaning that will shape a person's life and that must be taken seriously. In The Reprieve, Sartre's character Mathieu contemplates throwing himself off a bridge because he has come to a realization about his personal freedom. He had, he says, "sought it far away," but now he recognizes that it is so near to him that he cannot even tough it out: "it is, in fact, myself."[4] Mathieu imagines freedom as an alienation and exile from that which surrounds him; it is the realization that he is accountable to no one, devoid of any purpose, and that no act

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[3] Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Penguin, 1975) 56.

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, The Reprieve, trans. Eric Sutton (New York: Penguin, 1963) 308-09.

besides risking his life can "call his freedom into play."[5] For Sartre, the awareness and potential to commit suicide (rather than the act itself) evokes freedom.

Chapter Seven focuses on Ludwig Binswanger's "The Case of Ellen West." This case study marks a shift in the way that suicide has previously been presented. Rather than framing suicide in terms of individual freedom, "The Case of Ellen West" takes precisely the opposite stance. It points toward an emerging paradigm in which the drive to kill oneself is treated as a pathological character flaw that makes suicide all but inevitable. West was a woman who had suffered from deteriorating depression and a severe chronic eating disorder for thirteen years before she was released from the Kreuzlingen Sanatorium when Binswanger and consultants concluded that she could not be cured. As expected, she poisoned herself and died. Binswanger treats her death as the logical, coherent, and inevitable end of her life. His defensive case study thus attempts to convince the reader (and himself) that, although he did his best to prevent her death, neither he nor his patient had any control over the outcome. Far from an act of freedom, her suicide is treated as deterministic act driven by her irresolvable pathology.

Chapter Eight presents a brief examination of Louis Malle's 1963 film, Le feu follet **(**alternately translated as Will-o'-the-Wisp and The Fire Within), which, like Binswanger's "Case of Ellen West" presents a perspective on suicide that differs from most of the stances previously examined. Like Binswanger, Malle depicts his protagonist's suicide as a manifestation of a pathological character fault – in this case an obsessive drive to enact revenge against others to whom he has lost connections. Far

[5] Ibid.

from being an act of freedom, his suicide is treated as the culmination of a deep-rooted pathology – one which, like Ellen West's, ultimately resists treatment.

The Conclusion offers a brief reflection on the general debate regarding suicide and individual freedom from the late eighteenth century to the present day. Indeed, there is now relatively little debate; suicide is hardly ever considered within the context of individual freedom. Instead, it is approached largely as a manifestation of a pathological condition that must be treated and cured. While there are certainly legitimate sociological justifications for this approach, we must be careful not to sideline the complex, perhaps even irresolvable problems that Schiller, Goethe, Hölderlin, Ibsen, Sartre, and Camus recognized – fundamental problems regarding individual freedom that may not necessarily have definitive solutions. Indeed, it will be suggested that these literary approaches are more sensitive to the complexity of the problem than the much more sharply-drawn philosophical treatments explored in this dissertation. As the literary stances on suicide and individual freedom outlined in this dissertation suggest, the problem is not so simple. Indeed, it is multidimensional and irresolvable. To reduce the issue to a seemingly incontestable philosophical argument, or to assume it is merely an indication of pathology, offers artificial closure to a problem that refuses to subside.

Suicide: Terminological History and Debate

The complicated philosophical debate surrounding the definition of "suicide" necessitates providing some historical background and terminological clarification. The term itself was coined in the seventeenth century, which itself suggests evolving opinion and an increasing amount of debate on the topic. The appearance of the term reflected a need to distinguish between homicide of oneself and killing another, and it is in its Latin form that the term was used in Sir Thomas Browne's Religio medici (The Religion of a Doctor), a work written around 1636 but not published until 1672. In this work Browne took care to distinguish Christian "self-killing," an act that merits total condemnation, from the pagan "suicidium" of Cato. The term, founded on the Latin "sui" (of oneself) and "caedes" (murder), also appeared independently in the works of the casuists.[6] During the 1650s the neologism spread to English with the works of the lexicographer Thomas Blount and those of Walter Charleton. The term was widespread enough by 1658 for Edward Phillips, John Milton's nephew, to place it in his New World of English Words, or A General Dictionary, although with a fantastic etymology that expressed his own negative opinion: "*Suicide* . . . should be derived from *Sus*, a Sow, [rather] then from the pronoun *Sui* . . . as it were a Swinish part of a man to kill himself."[7]

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[6] Casuistry takes a relentlessly practical approach to morality. Rather than using theories as starting points, casuistry begins with an examination of cases. By drawing parallels between paradigms, so called "pure cases," and the case at hand, a casuist tries to determine a moral response appropriate to a particular case. Western casuistry dates from Aristotle 384–322 B.C. yet the zenith of casuistry was from 1550-1650, when the Jesuit religious order extensively used casuistry, particularly in practicing the private, Roman Catholic confession. For more information, see Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen E. Toulmin, The Abuse of Casuistry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[7] Edward Phillips, The New World of English Words, or A General Dictionary (London, 1658) C2r-v.

The term "suicide" first appears in French in 1734, when it was used by Abbé Prévost, who was in England at the time and was writing for his review Le Pour et le Contre.[8] However, the term was not commonly used until the mid-eighteenth century and the verb "se suicider," was always either redundant or a pleonasm, which shows that the idea of a crime against oneself persisted. The most logical verb construction, *je suicide*, was never used in French. English has no verb at all: "suicide" is a noun, and it needs to be attached to an active verb, i.e. "to commit suicide." Other languages use a double form or a paraphrase as well. German, for example, uses "sich den Tod geben," or "sich töten." It was also during the eighteenth century that the English term "suicide" passed into Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese.[9] In all these languages, however, there is no simple way to express the act of taking one's life. This alone indicates something of the problem.

For the purposes of this dissertation I utilize the most basic definition proposed by Emile Durkheim, who asserts that an "unambiguous" suicide is *any* act of intentional self-renunciation: the martyr dying for faith, the mother sacrificing herself for her child, and comparable acts are acts of suicide because "at the moment of acting the victim knows the certain result of his conduct."[10] Therefore, under this reading of the term, Hedda Gabler who shoots herself in the head, is no more or less a suicide than Hüon and

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[8] Abbé Prévost. Le Pour et le contre: no. 1-60. Ed. Steve Larkin. 2 vols. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, 1993).

[9] David Danube, "The Linguistics of Suicide," Philosophy and Public Affairs I, no. 4. (1972) 387-437.

[10] This description of Durkheim's position is presented by Roy Holland's article "Suicide" in Talk of God, ed. Gan Vesey (London: Macmillan, 1969) 73.

Amanda in Wieland's Oberon, who willingly accept their death sentence.[11] What results is a complex vision in which self-death is committed or permitted as a means towards the expression or actualization of a form of personal freedom – forms which, I argue, are best described as moral, spiritual, social, and existential. Therefore, the literary examples of Schiller, Goethe, Hölderlin, Ibsen, Camus, and Sartre suggest that death itself is much less significant than the actual act of committing such a death, and that the act of committing such a death is even less important than the freedom which is thereby actualized and/or expressed.[12] Binswanger's and Malle's treatments of suicide, however, depict suicide from an almost diametrically opposed perspective – one in which individual freedom is wholly absent.

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[11] Although I realize that this use of the term ignores an interesting and relevant philosophical debate, it allows for the exploration of the main argument of this dissertation.

[12] There are other examples that fall into this paradigm of suicide but are too lengthy to explore in this dissertation. These examples include the martyr dying for faith and the Japanese ritual suicide Seppuku, better known as Hara-kiri, which was (in addition to being a punishment) a mode of honorable self-assertion and self-vindication in which every move in the ritual disemboweling and self-slaughter was significant. In The Faith of Japan, Tasuku Harrada writes: "It was not mere suicide. It was an institution, legal and ceremonial . . . by which warriors could expiate their friends or prove their sincerity" See The Faith of Japan (New York: Macmillan, 1914) 129. Norman Farberow also discusses some other forms of suicide practiced in Japan in Suicide in Different Cultures (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1975).

Suicide and Individual Freedom: A Brief History of the Debate

In 1746, David Hume (1711-1776) witnessed the suicide of Major Alexander Forbes who had slit his arteries. Later that year Hume wrote to his brother that he had found Forbes still alive but wallowing in his own blood. As Hume bandaged his wounds and called for a physician, he spoke with Forbes. In his Letters, Hume reports to his brother:

> Never a man exprest a more steady Contempt for Life nor more determined philosophical Principles, suitable to his Exit. He beg'd for me to unloosen his Bandage & hasten his Death, as the last Act of Friendship I coud show him: But alas! we live not in Greek and Roman times.[13]

Although Hume is writing from a much later perspective, his reference to "Greek and Roman times" merits attention. Hume recognized that the decision to take one's life had moved from the realm of individual freedom in the Classical period to condemnation based on external factors, i.e. the individual in relation to justice, the state, and God. In making this connection, Hume was also drawing attention to the ever growing question which was gradually emerging in the Enlightenment and continued long after: What relationship did suicide have to Enlightenment notions of personal freedom? What relationship did suicide have to the individual as an individual?

Admittedly, Hume's reference to individual liberty in Classical times is a bit simplistic and reductive. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle famously saw man as reasoning not in terms of personal freedom but in terms of the duties they owed to the divinity that

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[13] David Hume, Letters and Speeches, ed. and trans. Evert Sprinchorn, 2 vols. (New York: Hill, 1964) 1:97.

placed them in their positions in society or the city where they had a specific role to play.[14] Plato's laws condemn the action "for its total lack of manliness (*andreia*)."[15]

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[14] Indeed, the question of whether Socrates himself committed suicide has been fiercely debated. In Phaedo, during the conversations that precede his death, Socrates makes it clear that he regards what he is about to do as suicide and that he holds suicide to be wrong "until God sends some compulsion like the one we are facing now." He also speaks of a philosopher's attitude toward death, saying that it is "natural that a man who has really devoted his life to philosophy should be cheerful in the face of death and confident of finding the greatest blessing in the next world…those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death." When he asks for the poison to be brought at an earlier hour than necessary and when Crito tries to restrain him, Socrates replies "I believe that I should gain nothing by drinking the poison a little later – I should only make myself ridiculous in my own eyes if I clung to life and hugged it when it had no more to offer" See Plato, Phaedo, in The Last Days of Socrates, ed. H. Tredennick (New York: Penguin, 1969) 105-107, 61c-62d. This passage has inspired as great deal of philosophical controversy. R.G. Frey in "Did Socrates Commit Suicide?" [Philosophy 53 (1978): 106 – 08] maintains that the conclusion that Socrates did commit suicide is unavoidable because Socrates wanted to die and intended to drink the hemlock, that he wanted to drink it either as an end in itself or as a means to some further end, that he knew what the consequences would be, that he need not have died by his own hand, and that he could have refused to drink the hemlock so that his jailer would have had to force him to take it. Yet some scholars have argued that Socrates does *not* commit suicide because he did not *choose* to commit suicide, but was simply acting as a virtuous and honorable citizen. This line of thought is often developed by considering Socrates' intentions. Holland maintains that Socrates' being prepared for death does not mean that he intended to die, and that Plato's account in the Phaedo nowhere suggests that Socrates was a man wishing to die or who was simply seizing the opportunity of his trial to arrange that he did so in a dramatic and moving way: "Socrates had a wish for death and thought it his business as a philosopher to 'practice dying' but not to practice suicide, which he said should be committed by no one." [See "Suicide," in Talk of God ed. Gan Vesey (London: Macmillan, 1969) 74-75.] While the controversy over the death of Socrates' death is not the subject of this dissertation, it has interesting implications for individual liberty.

[15] Plato, Republic, trans. Francis Cornford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) IX 873c 5-6. In his essay "On Suicide" published in 1646, Hume responds directly to the Socratic objection that one is placed by Providence like a sentinel at a particular station and should not desert it. He asks ". . . why do you conclude that providence has placed me in this station? For my part I owe my birth to a long chain of causes, of which many depended on the voluntary actions of man" He argues that if it is Providence that has guided all these causes so that there is nothing in the universe that happens without its consent, then: "neither does my death, however voluntary, happen without its consent;

However, Plato was not categorical: he recognized extenuating circumstances and the possibility of release from an intolerable life. Ajax, for example, had no choice but to take his own life as the ignominy he suffered was so great as to strip him of his identity as a courageous man. Moreover, many schools of Greek philosophy including the Cyrenaics, the Cynics, the Epicureans, and the Stoics all recognized the supreme worth of the individual whose liberty resided in the ability to choose whether to live or die and that suicide was certainly preferable to living a dissatisfying life (however that dissatisfaction was measured). The Cyrenaics, who pushed individual liberty to an extreme, were pessimists, and one of their masters, Hegesias, is reported to have been expelled from Alexandria for having induced several people to commit suicide. Diogenes, a Cynic, argued that people should not hesitate to kill themselves if they cannot live reasonably.[16] According to the Epicureans, wisdom dictates that when life becomes intolerable one should commit suicide without fuss. The Stoics also recommended suicide after careful reflection showing it to be the worthiest way. Diogenes Laertius summarizes Stoic thought on suicide: "The wise man can with reason give his life for his country and his friends, or he can kill himself if he suffers serious pain, if he has lost a limb, or if he has

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and whenever pain or sorrow so far overcome my patience, as to make me tired of life, I may conclude that I am recalled from my station in the clearest and most express terms. 'Tis Providence surely that has placed me at this present moment in this chamber: but may I not leave it when I think proper, without being liable to the imputation of having deserted my post or station?" See David Hume, "On Suicide," Applied Ethics. ed. P. Singer. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1986) 25.

[16] Diogenes Laertes attributed to Diogenes the Cynic many statements, such as these: "Why then do you live, if you do not care to live well?" (2:67); "When someone declared that life is an evil, he corrected him: 'Not life itself, but living ill'" (2:57). He ceaselessly repeated that one must confront life with a healthy mind or hang oneself, and "when Antisthenes cried out, 'Who will release me from these pains?' replied, 'This,' showing him the dagger. 'I said,' quoth the other, 'from my pains, not from life'" (2:21).

an incurable illness."[17] Despite these positions in favor of self-death as an expression of individual freedom, it was never socially acceptable to take one's life. While merciful by later Christian standards, punishments in the Greek world included burying the suicide anonymously in an isolated site without a marker and occasionally cutting off the right hand so that no future crimes could be committed.

The Roman world, like its Greek counterpart, was far from unanimous in its attitude toward suicide.[18] Roman society was divided between hostility toward an antisocial act for which egregious punishments were leveled and admiration for self-death as a manifestation of individual freedom. There was no legal or religious prohibition of suicide for free men in Rome.[19] Life was not considered a gift of the gods, a sacred breath, or a right. Cato's suicide, for example, was a model of total individual liberty, because in killing himself when his life was not threatened he placed himself on a higher plane than fate. Immanuel Kant – himself vehemently against suicide – gives a lucid account of Cato's story:

> Cato knew that the entire Roman nation relied upon him in their resistance to Caesar, but he found that he could not prevent himself from falling into Caesar's hands. What was he to do? If he, the champion of freedom, submitted, everyone would say 'If Cato himself admits, what else can we

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[17] Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Loeb Classical Library. 2 vols. trans. R.D. Hicks (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925) 2:141.

[18] A complete survey of Roman suicide and a copious bibliography is provided in Yolande Grisé, Le suicide dans la Rome antique (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1982) 34-53.

[19] While this is true of free men in ancient Rome, suicide was forbidden to slaves and soldiers for obvious economic and patriotic reasons. The suicide of slaves was considered an affront to private property (a notion that was later essential in medieval serfdom); the army had specific penalties for soldiers who survived an attempted suicide.

> do?' If, on the other hand, he killed himself, his death might spur the Romans to fight to the bitter end in defense of their freedom. So he killed himself. He thought that it was necessary for him to die. He thought that if he could not go on living as Cato, he could not go on living at all. It must certainly be admitted that in a case such as this, where suicide is a virtue, appearances are in its favor.[20]

From its inception, Christianity's view on suicide was complicated not least by the fact that its founding event was a suicide, and the writings of Jesus' disciples glorified giving up one's life.[21] Moreover, the Old Testament contains six instances of suicide (none of which is unequivocally condemned and two of which are praised). In the New Testament there is one suicide, that of Judas Iscariot who hanged himself after betraying Jesus, and one attempted suicide – that of Paul's jailor, who tried to kill himself for fear of the punishment he would receive when his prisoners escaped. The example of Christ was followed in the first four centuries by many willing martyrs to the point that the Church fathers became concerned and debated the question, hoping to arrive at a unified position condemning the act. Moreover, beginning in the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine, the Roman state was undergoing a serious economic and demographic crisis

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[20] Immanuel Kant, Lectures on Ethics, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963) 148-50.

[21] The complications of early Christianity were recalled by Holbach in his The System of Nature, or Laws of the Moral and Physical World where he writes, "Christianity, and the civil laws of Christians, are very inconsistent in censuring *suicide* . . . The *Messiah*, or the son of the Christians' God, if it be true that he died of his own accord, was evidently a *suicide*. The same may be said of those penitents who have made it a merit of gradually destroying themselves" See Baron d'Paul Henri Thiry Holbach, The System of Nature, or Laws of the Moral and Physical World, (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche, 2001) 137n.

and was being transformed into a totalitarian system in which individuals lost all right to dispose of their persons. As a result of these civil and religious problems (which were quite obviously linked), there was a general transition from treating suicide as an act of individual liberty to a conception of suicide as an act against God and the State.

In the fifth century, St. Augustine (354-430 C.E.) provided a theological response that remained basically unchanged for at least the next millennium. St. Augustine interpreted the sixth commandment, "thou shalt not kill" to include suicide. In Book I of City of God, Augustine also argued that life is a sacred gift from God and that only God can take it away. Stripping people of their essential right to dispose of themselves worked to the benefit of the Church and the lords. In 533 C.E. the second Council of Orleans denied funeral rites to suicides who were also criminals. In 563 C.E. the Council of Barga forbade the Christian burial of suicides, and in 590 C.E. the Council of Antisidor forbade the Church from accepting offerings for the souls of suicides.

In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) endorsed Augustine's views. In the Summa Theologica (part II-II, q. 64, art. 5) St. Thomas Aquinas expanded on Augustine's condemnation by arguing that suicide is absolutely forbidden for three reasons: (1) it is an offense against nature and against charity because it contradicts both the natural inclination to live and our duty to love ourselves; (2) it is an attack on society because we belong to a community in which we have a role to play, and (3) it is an offense of God who is the proprietor of our lives. Despite Augustine's fifth-century position on suicide and Aquinas' thirteenth-century elaboration, the founding Christian texts were not explicit on the question of voluntary death, and the Church only gradually

elaborated a coherent position.[22] While the highly fragmentary nature of the sources hinders a thorough understanding of the practice in the Medieval period, it seems that from the eleventh to the fifteenth century civil and religious opposition to suicide gradually became systematized. Existing notions were given a rational and juridical framework in the great scholastic syntheses and in treatises on canon and civil law, thus helping to turn what had been a transitory adaptation to a specific historical situation into an absolute concept with an intangible value of its own. The result was the extremely durable notion that suicide brought infamy. The sense of shame that medieval theologians, jurists, and moralists erected around suicide made challenge difficult. Until the seventeenth century, virtually all discussion of self-death focused on arguments condemning it, and these arguments were overwhelmingly framed in terms of the individual's responsibility – not to himself – but to outside forms of authority.

John Donne (1572-1631) – an Anglican chaplain to the King who held a doctorate in divinity from Cambridge University – was one of the earliest figures who initiated a framework for the justification of voluntary self-death. By 1608, when Donne wrote (but did not publish) Biathanatos, the debate on suicide was in full swing.[23] Biathanatos argues against the view that suicide is a sin against nature, reason, and God. Donne does not go so far as to claim that suicide is a matter of personal freedom, but he does offer a

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[22] The following sources contain more information about historical Catholic and Protestant views on suicide: J.D. Douglas, The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1974) and William L. Reese, The Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanistic Press, 1980).

[23] Samuel Ernest Sprott writes in his study of the suicide controversy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that Biathanatos is"a tract for the times that treated a subject of emerging public, not perversely personal interest." See The English Debate on Suicide from Donne to Hume, (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1961) 25.

paradigm for the justification of suicide that suggests a step closer to this Enlightenment idea. In short, Donne refutes the Augustinian and Thomistic arguments.

The main charge he considers is that suicide is against nature in that it violates the natural law that commands self-preservation.[24] He meets this charge by declaring that all the precepts of natural law are contained in the abjuration to "Fly Evil, seeke Good" and that in the case of human beings this means we must "Do according to Reason," since reason is natural to human beings.[25] Self-preservation, he continues, is certainly part of the Law of Nature, but so is liberty, and just as one may reason that in order to take his life if taken prisoner, so one may, under similar circumstances, reason that self-homicide would be the great good and that neither of these courses of action is against the general Law of Nature that commends a person to "Fly Evil, seeke Good." Donne's mention of (individual) liberty is the first in the history of the modern debate on suicide. Finally, Donne argues that people have killed themselves in all places and in all ages, and this indicates that such an act is not contrary to natural inclination. He writes that "in all Ages, in all places, upon all occasions, men of all conditions have affected it, and [were] inclined to do it" (49). He cites numerous examples of such suicides:

> *Aristarchus,* when he saw that he was 72 years, nor the corrupt and malignant disease of being a severe Critique could wear him out, starved himself . . . *Home,* who had written a thousand things, which no man else understood, is said to have hanged himself because he understood not the

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[24] While this is the Donne's main concern, he also argues against the position that suicide is against reason and God. The former argument can be found in Biathanatos on pp. 68-84; the latter argument can be found on pp. 115-128.

[25] John Donne, Biathanatos, ed. E.W. Sullivan II (University of Delaware Press: 1984) 46.

> fisherman's riddle . . . *Portia*, *Cato's* daughter . . . died by swallowing burning coals . . .Poor *Terrence,* because he lost his 108, translated Comedies, drowned himself . . . and Zeno, before whom scarce any is preferred, because he stumbled and hurt his finger against the ground, interpreted that as a summons from the earth and hanged himself, being then almost 100 years old. (50)

Furthermore, suicide is not contrary to God's law because, Donne argues, Christ's own death was undoubtedly voluntary. Donne's most daring and original contribution to the discussion of suicide is his positive treatment of it *within* the framework of Christian thought, while also suggesting that suicide is a matter of, at the very least, personal concern.

A little over a century after Biathanotos, Charles de Montesquieu (1689-1755) published Persian Letters (1721), which moved the discussion of suicide even closer to the issue of personal liberty. Montesquieu's work was a prelude to the late eighteenth-century debate proper. Like many of his contemporaries, he argued that life was preferable to death, yet he suggested that the decision to commit suicide ultimately rested with the individual. In the seventy-sixth letter he writes: "If I am laden with sorrow, misery, and contempt, why should anyone want to prevent me from putting an end to my cares and cruelly deprive me of a remedy which lies in my hands."[26] Montesquieu attempts to show that suicide neither harms society nor hinders Providence. Society, he says, is founded on mutual advantage, and if one no longer gains any advantage from that contract, he is free to withdraw. Montesquieu lacks a systematic and explicit position on

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[26] Baron de Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, The Persian Letters, trans. R. Healy. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964) 129-30.

personal freedom, but he reflects a growing trend towards this freedom as a focal point of debate.

Montesquieu's focus on the individual in a social context is echoed and developed by David Hume, who took the next significant step towards an explicit discussion of suicide and personal freedom in his Essays on Suicide and the Immortality of the Soul. Written in 1755, the Essays were first published in France in 1770 and in England posthumously in 1777. Hume's twenty-two page essay argues that we have duties to God, our fellow humans (society), and ourselves, but that suicide does no harm to any of these. Individual freedom is the common foundation for each defense; Hume's goal is "to restore men to their native liberty by examining all the common arguments against suicide."[27] With regard to the argument that suicide is an offense and rescinding of our duties Hume writes that:

> …[men] may employ every faculty with which they are endowed, in order to provide for their ease, happiness, or preservation. What is the meaning then of that principle, that a man who tired of life, and haunted by pain and misery, bravely overcomes all the natural terrors of death, and makes his escape from this cruel scene: that such a man I say, has incurred the indignation of his Creator by encroaching on the office of divine providence, and disturbing the order of the universe? (8-9)

Hume suggests an interesting framework for conceptualizing suicide by arguing implicitly that individual freedom is the factor which justifies it. He argues that all

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[27] David Hume, Essays on Suicide and the Immortality of the Soul, ed. John Vladimir Price (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1992) 8.

created beings have received the power, authorization, and freedom to change the natural course of things in order to guarantee their well-being. However, this does not mean that we should think of ourselves with such grandeur that our actions will be an offense to God or nature. Indeed, this would amount to blasphemy. Besides, Hume argues, even the smallest of our actions changes the course of nature, and killing oneself does not change it any more than any other voluntary act: "If I turn aside a stone which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature" (11). Hume continues his argument against the idea that self-death is an encroachment on God's providence with a somewhat ironic claim: "…were the disposal of human life so much received as the peculiar providence of the Almighty, that it were an encroachment on his right, for men to dispose of their own lives; it would be equally criminal to act for the preservation of life as for its destruction" (11). Since acting to preserve our own life causes no offense to the right of God, acting to end life is no different, and our freedom either to dispose of or maintain life remains intact.

With regard to the argument that suicide harms society, Hume also focuses his defensive argument around the concept of personal freedom and reciprocity. Since Hume is typical of many of his other eighteenth-century colleagues in his social contractarianism, he argues that we owe society only as much as we receive from it, and vice-versa. It goes without saying that if one withdraws from society entirely by ending his life, he ceases to receive benefits and has no obligation to reciprocate. Pleasure and harm must be exchanged equally; it is no more just for the individual to receive the benefits of society and not promote its interests than it is for society to receive benefits from the individual and not promote his interests. In both cases, the freedom to commit

suicide remains open. If an individual contributes to society but causes himself extreme misery in doing so (i.e. if society does not honor its part of the social contract), he is free to break the societal covenant and end his life:

> All our obligations to do good to society seem to imply something reciprocal. I receive the benefits of society, and therefore ought to promote its interests . . . I am not obliged to do a small good to society at the expense of a great harm to myself; why then should I prolong a miserable existence because of some frivolous advantage which the public may perhaps receive from me? Indeed, if one cannot keep his obligation to promote the interests of society – if he is a societal "burden" even to the extent that "my life hinders some person from being much more useful" – his suicide is then not only blameless but "laudable" (18-19).

A contemporary of Hume, Voltaire (1694-1778) argued explicitly that the decision to commit suicide is simply a question of individual freedom. In his The Huron, Huron asks Gordon if the he thinks anyone has the power to prevent another from taking his life. To this, Voltaire tells us:

> Gordon took care to avoid making a parade of those commonplace declamations and arguments which are relied upon to prove that we are not allowed to exercise our liberty in ceasing to be when we can no longer remain in it; that a man is like a soldier at his post; as if it were signified to the Being of beings whether the conjunction of the particles of matter were in one spot or another. Impotent reasons, to which a firm and

> concentrated despair disdains to listen, and to which Cato replied only with the use of a poniard! [28]

Voltaire also follows Hume in his argument that suicide does not harm society. His argues that if it did, voluntary legal homicides committed in wartime would be even more harmful to society.[29]

Published in the same year that Hume's Essays on Suicide and Immortality of the Soul was published in France, Baron d'Holbach's System of Nature (1770) also argues that suicide in no way harms society, because we are linked to society by a pact that supposes mutual advantages between contracting parties. Holbach (1723-1789) writes, "The citizen cannot be bound to his country, his associates, but by the bounds of happiness. Are these bonds cut asunder? He is restored to liberty"[30] Holbach finds no more validity in the objection that suicide is an act against nature. People say that nature inscribes in us a love of life, but Holbach wonders whether nature, for one reason or another, inspires in us distaste for the same life:

> If the same power that obliges all intelligent beings to cherish their existence renders that of man so painful and so cruel that he finds it insupportable, he quits his species; order is destroyed for him, and he accomplishes a decree of nature that wills he shall no longer exist. This

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[28] Voltaire, The Complete Works of Voltaire, ed. Theodore Besterman. 126 vols.(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968) 3:160.

[29] It should be noted that the influence of Montesquieu, Diderot, and Voltaire had the effect of decriminalizing suicide in France by 1790. See Lester G. Crocker, "The Discussion of Suicide in the Eighteenth Century," Journal of the History of Ideas 13 (1952): 47-72 and Samuel Ernest Sprott, The English Debate on Suicide from Donne to Hume (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1961).

[30] Holbach, The System of Nature, or Laws of the Moral and Physical World, (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche, 2001) 137.

> nature has laboured during thousands of years to form in the bowels of the earth the iron that must number his days. (136)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) in Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps (Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse, 1761) lays out a similar argument in Saint-Preux's letter addressed to Milord Edouard, while the latter responds with arguments against suicide. In the first of these letters, Saint-Preux declares that he is tired of living and expects nothing more from life, that all are free to put an end to existence if life is a burden and they are a charge on others, and that we have the right to sacrifice our arm to save our bodies and our bodies to save our happiness. God has given us reason, thanks to which we can discern when the moment has come to leave life.

While Montesquieu, Hume, Voltaire, Holbach, and Rousseau explore self-death and individual freedom exclusively within the framework of the social contract, Kant (1724-1804) examines individual freedom in terms of "moral freedom" – i.e. freedom in relation to oneself as a morally self-legislating, hence, autonomous being. The topic is virtually absent in Kant's pre-critical works, but it began to occupy him seriously in the mid-1770s, and received explicit treatment in all his major ethical writings thereafter because of how it affected his claims about the centrality of the individual person ethically and metaphysically. It is likely that Kant read Rousseau's Julie, or the New Heloise and that he was aware of Goethe's much different treatment of the issue in The Sorrows of Young Werther.[31]

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[31] For Rousseau's influence on Kant, see Ernst Cassirer, "Kant and Rousseau," in Rousseau, Kant, Goethe: Two Essays, trans. James Gutmann, P. O. Kristeller, and J. H. Randall, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) 1-18.

In the Lectures on Ethics (1775-1780), an early transitional text, Kant was still attempting to refine his critical stance and refers to traditional scholastic arguments based on natural law:

> What constitutes suicide is the intention to destroy oneself…We shrink in horror from suicide because all nature seeks its own self-preservation; an injured tree, a living body, an animal does so; how then could man make his freedom, which is the acme of life and constitutes his worth, a principle for his own destruction? [32]

However, in the Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals **(**Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten**)** of 1785 and in the Critique of Practical Reason (Kritik der praktischen Venunft**)** of 1788 he transformed the weaker, more hypothetical argumentation about natural law into a stronger individualism focusing on personal freedom as the autonomous source of morality. Kant's arguments against suicide mark a transition in the debate that refocuses the issue strictly in terms of one's relationship to the self as a moral agent, outside of the confines of religion, nature, or even the social contract. Kant views suicide as a violation of one's own moral duty to preserve his life. In so far as one violates this self-legislated duty, he abuses his moral freedom. Verena Lenzen writes:

> die Selbsttötung wird nicht nur metaphysisch oder physich als Widerspruch zum Naturgesetz der Selbsterhaltung, sondern auch anthropologisch-moralisch als Verstoss gegen die soziale

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[32] Immanuel Kant, Lectures on Ethics. trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963) 150-51.

> Selbsterhaltungspflicht des Individuums, gegen das allgemeine Sittengesetz, verurteilt.[33]

Each individual has the moral responsibility to guard the dignity and freedom of man's existence, and this is accomplished primarily by fulfilling one's duty to oneself; duties to others are, Kant argues, secondary to and actually founded on duties to one self.

Kant stands as the lone rationalist who spoke so vehemently against suicide, and who did so in terms of his belief that suicide was an absolute repudiation of moral freedom. In the Lectures, Kant states that since self-death was such an affront to moral freedom, he is "horrified at the very thought of suicide; by it man sinks lower than the beasts…he is no longer a human being" (151). It is Kant's conception of moral freedom which leads to his (perhaps exaggerated) denunciation of one who takes his own life; the suicide makes oneself a *thing*, and, having discarded one's humanity, one cannot expect that others should respect it. Apart from any of its effects, then, suicide is intrinsically wrong: it fails to respect the individual's moral freedom, a freedom which makes moral duty and dignity possible. Kant's connection between moral freedom and suicide marks a significant departure from previous conceptualizations of the relationship in that he moves the discussion into the domain of a wholly individual, in this case moral, freedom.

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[33] Verena Lenzen, Selbsttötung: Ein philosophisch-theologischer Diskurs mit einer Fallstudie über Cesare Pavese. (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1987) 170. ["Suicide is not only condemned metaphysically or physically as a contradiction to the natural law of survival, but also anthropologically-morally as a break against the social responsibility for survival of individuals, a break against the general law of ethics." My translation.]

CHAPTER ONE

Suicide and Moral Freedom:

Kant and Schiller

The idea of moral freedom in the 18th century originated with Immanuel Kant. Although Kant alludes to it in his 1781 Critique of Pure Reason (Kritik der reinen Vernunft), it is his 1788 Critique of Practical Reason (Kritik der praktischen Venunft) that he thoroughly and explicitly lays out the concept.[34] To approach Kant's idea of moral freedom, it is necessary to begin with his distinction between the "phenomenal" and "noumenal" worlds: the former is a world of necessity determined by mechanistic causality while the latter world is one of human freedom, a world of "things as they are."

Kant's first conception of freedom is negative in the sense that it is freedom *from* the mechanistic laws of nature. As a creature of nature man is subject to causality, but as a being of the noumenal world he may transcend it. Kant's challenge is to save freedom by arguing that human actions are not subject to the temporal determinations which apply to appearance or things-in-themselves. Kant's concept of moral freedom, then, may be considered as freedom from natural causality. He attacks the illusory assumption of the absolute reality of appearances which confuses reason and excludes freedom.

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[34] The importance of freedom to Kant is demonstrated by his statement in the "Transcendental Dialectic" of the Critique of Pure Reason where he writes: "If appearances are things-in-themselves, freedom cannot be saved." See Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason. trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965) 27. Within the context of the Crtique of Pure Reason, this statement shows the very real and close connection between his theory of knowledge in the latter and his theory of moral freedom presented in the Critique of Practical Reason.

Belief in freedom (like belief in God and immortality) is justified because it is metaphysically necessary. Michael Seidler argues that, contrary to other conceptions of freedom like that of the Stoics, Kant's freedom is neither practical nor functional (i.e. purely "phenomenal").[35] Rather, Kant argues for the metaphysical centrality of freedom. In the Preface to the Critique of Practical Reason, he writes:

> Now the concept of freedom, insofar as its reality is proved by an apodeictic law of practical reason, forms the *keystone* of the whole edifice of a system of pure reason, even of speculative reason.[36] All other concepts (those of God and immortality) that, as mere ideas, remain unsupported in speculative reason now attach themselves to the concept of freedom and acquire, with it and through it, stability and objective reality. I.e., their *possibility* is *proved* by freedom's being actual, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law. All other concepts (those of God and immortality) that, as mere ideas, remain unsupported in speculative reason now attach themselves to the concept of freedom and acquire, with it and

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[35] Michael J. Seidler, "Kant and the Stoics on Suicide." Journal of the History of Ideas. 44 (1983): 429-453.

[36] "Apodictic" or "apodeictic" (Ancient Greek: "□ποδεικτικός," "capable of demonstration") is an adjectival expression from Aristotelean logic that refers to propositions that are demonstrable, that are necessarily or self-evidently the case or that, conversely, are impossible. Apodictic propositions contrast with "assertoric" propositions, which merely assert that something is (or is not) the case, and with problematic propositions, which assert only the possibility of something being true. For instance, "Two plus two equals four" is apodictic. Kant contrasts "apodictic" with "problematic" and "assertoric" in the Critique of Pure Reason. See "Apodictic" Dictionary of Philosophy, ed. Anthony Flew, Rev. 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979) 28.

> through it, stability and objective reality. I.e., their *possibility* is *proved* by freedom's being actual, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law.[37]

Kant argues in a footnote that freedom is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law and the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, i.e. freedom is the "reason for the being" of the moral law and the moral law is the "reason for the cognizing" of freedom. If freedom did not exist, there could be no moral law since (according to Kant's principle of autonomy) human freedom allows man to create laws of his own and apply those laws to himself (5).[38] Although he admits that we cannot be immediately conscious of freedom, we can be conscious of the moral law, and the two ideas are so close that they are practically inseparable: "Thus freedom and unconditional practical law reciprocally refer to each other" (43).[39] Moreover, just as freedom is the metaphysical basis of moral law, the moral law is the epistemological basis of freedom. We cannot assume the existence of freedom if we are unaware of the moral law, but if freedom did not exist there would be no moral law of which to be aware. Most importantly, without freedom and the moral law it makes possible, we are subject to pure inclination. We would then be wholly

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[37] Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, trans. Werner S. Pluhar. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002) 5.

[38] The relation between freedom and moral law in Kant is actually somewhat more ambiguous. We are free by virtue of the moral law which our reason has itself produced, and yet because of a certain duality which underlies our existence, because we are as much creatures of the natural world as of the rational, we cannot "freely" follow the moral law, but can only obey it at the expense of our freedom. In some passages of the 1785 Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten), Kant represents moral law as the guarantee of human freedom, in others he emphasizes "compulsion" ("Zwang") which is inseparable from obedience to moral law, and sometimes both aspects are seen. Equivocal as some passages may be, however, the element of compulsion is unmistakable.

[39] i.e., they – more accurately, their concepts are interchangeable.

susceptible to the determinism of the phenomenal world (what Schiller refers to as "Naturkräfte" – the forces of nature, whether they take the form of instincts and emotions or the more external form of physical necessity or fate). Belief in a transcendental freedom prevents this and maintains our dignity as human beings.

One can trace Kant's evolution from a more negative conception of freedom to a more positive conception – from a conception of freedom *from* the deterministic natural world to a conception of the self-legislating moral individual in the noumenal world. Indeed, he takes great pains to stress that the moral law (the "noumenal") is fundamentally different from natural law (the "phenomenal"). First, laws of nature simply describe what *is*, whereas moral laws state what ought to be. Second, moral laws are categorical, not hypothetical. The moral law teaches us how to act – not instrumentally in order to achieve a certain "end" – but absolutely and unconditionally.[40] This categorical character of moral laws is lacking in nature; indeed, the moral imperative expresses a sort of necessary and causal relation which is unknown in the whole of nature. In the section entitled "Critical Examination of the Analytic of Pure Practical Reason" in the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant explains that the legislation of and submission to moral laws contains an element of elevation made possible through transcendental moral freedom:

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[40] Kant's famous "categorical imperative" expresses this idea. The categorical imperative as expressed in the Groundwork has three versions, all conveying the absolute, unconditional nature of the moral law: (1) One should act only on that maxim through which he can at the same time will that it become a universal law, (2) One should act as though the maxim of his action were by his will to become a universal law of nature, and (3) One should act in such a way that he always treat humanity ...[his or another person's]... never merely as a means but always at the same time as an end.

> Solely the concept of freedom permits us to find the unconditioned and intelligible for the conditioned and sensible without needing to go outside ourselves. For it is our reason itself which cognizes itself through the supreme and unconditioned practical law and cognizes the being – the being which is conscious of this law (our own person) – as belonging to the pure world of understanding, and in so doing even determines that way in which, as such, this being can be active. (134)

For Kant, freedom from natural necessity, even from man's own physical nature, would not even be possible without this positive principle of freedom that enables it to defy the dangers which imperil its existence. It is within this context that Kant develops an explicit position regarding the relationship between individual freedom and suicide.

Since our rational wills are the source of our moral duty, and our moral duty is itself the manifestation of moral freedom, Kant sees it as a practical contradiction to suppose that the will can destroy itself. Given the distinctive worth of an autonomous rational will, suicide is an attack on the very source of moral authority and, by extension, an attack on moral freedom and the dignity of human life. In the 1797 Metaphysics of Morals (Die Metaphysik der Sitten) Kant writes that:

> To annihilate the subject of morality in one's person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world as far as one can, even though morality is an end in itself. Consequently, disposing of oneself as a mere means to some discretionary end is debasing humanity in one's person

> (*homo noumenon*), to which man (*homo phenomenon*) was nevertheless entrusted for preservation.[41]

Suicide involves the self-contradiction of moral freedom in that the act of self-death involves freely choosing to eliminate one's freedom from the world. Kant argues that the morally free human being comprises the core of his ultimate value. Human dignity consists not in the pursuit of moral ends but in the generation of them. As the rational and free source of morality to which all other values are subordinated, the individual is the touchstone of value in the world. Suicide becomes a critical issue for Kant precisely because it undermines the whole moral order insofar as it is rooted in one's self.[42] This position on suicide's relationship to moral freedom will be treated much differently by Schiller who modifies the role that moral law plays in moral freedom through the introduction of the concept of the will.

Schiller is of two minds with regard to moral law: on the one hand, like Kant, he is attracted to moral law because of the support it gives to freedom. He thinks that Kant is fundamentally right to think that we are autonomous moral agents who are only obligated only by those laws that we will as rational beings. Furthermore, he also accepts that an action is moral only to the extent that it is done for the sake of duty. Nevertheless, he thinks that Kant's account of moral freedom cannot provide a complete analysis of

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[41] Immanuel Kant, Metaphysics of Morals, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 177.

[42] On Kant's treatment of suicide, see H.J. de Vléeschauwer, "La doctrine du suicide dans l'éthique de Kant, Kant-Studien, 57 (1966), 251-65; David Novak Suicide and Morality: The Theories of Plato, Aquinas, and Kant and Their Relevance for Suicidology (New York: Scholars Studies Press, 1975) 83-113; Mary J. Gregor, Laws of Freedom: A Study of Kant's Method of Applying the Categorical Imperative in the *Metaphysik der Sitten* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963) 128-47.

freedom. In short, Schiller rejects the moral law when it takes a form inimical to freedom. In the imperative form of the moral law as promulgated by Kant, Schiller considers that mankind has the potential to be degraded, and, paradoxically, that the most sublime testament to human greatness also bears witness to human weakness. In Schiller's 1793 essay On Grace and Dignity (Über Anmut und Würde), Schiller writes:

> How were the *children of the house* at fault, if he was only concerned about the servants? Must an unselfish emotion in the noblest of breasts come under suspicion just because impure inclinations often usurp the name of virtue? Just because the moral weakling would like to introduce a certain *laxity* into the law of reason, to make it a toy for his own convenience, does this mean that a *rigidity* has to set in, transforming the most powerful expression of moral freedom into merely an honorable kind of servitude? Does the truly ethical human have a freer choice between self-regard and self-reproach than the slave of the senses between pleasure and pain? Is there perhaps less pressure on a pure will than on a depraved one? Does mankind have to be accused and humiliated simply by the *imperative* form of the moral law, and does the most sublime document of its greatness have to be a certification of its frailty? Could one indeed, in this imperative form, have avoided a situation where a prescription given by humans to themselves as rational beings and therefore binding only on them and compatible only with their feeling of freedom took on the appearance of an unfamiliar and positive law – an appearance that could

> be reduced only with difficulty, because of their *radical* tendency (of which they stand accused) to work against it? [43]

In contrast to Kant, then, Schiller holds that the moral law can be as much of a threat to freedom as that from which the moral law is meant to save him. Schiller makes it clear that the moral law may be just as dangerous to freedom as necessity (or, in his word, "Naturkräfte" – forces of nature):

> In Kant's moral philosophy, the idea of *duty* is presented with a severity that repels all graces and might tempt a weak intellect to seek moral perfection by taking the path to a somber and monkish asceticism. However much this great philosopher tried to defend himself against this misinterpretation, which, to the serene and free spirit has to be the most outrageous one, he himself, it seems to me, has provided strong grounds for it (although, for his purpose, this was unavoidable), in his strict and harsh opposition of the two principles that have an effect on the human will. (150)

Whereas instincts and outer circumstances impose necessity in the form of physical "needs" and causally related events, and whereas moral law implies necessity in the form of moral "constraint," the human will is not subject to necessity in either of these two forms; instead it is unconditionally free. Since freedom is of paramount importance to Schiller, everything else – even the moral law derived from reason – is subordinated to it.

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[43] Friedrich Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," trans. Jane V. Curran. Schiller's "On Grade and Dignity" in its Cultural Context. Ed. Jane V. Curran and Christopher Fricker. (New York: Camden House, 2005) 151.

Due to the critical importance of the will in Schiller's metaphysics, even acts which conflict with the moral law have the potential to demonstrate and evoke moral freedom.

In conclusion, while Kant views suicide in direct opposition to moral freedom – a self-contradiction or "cancelling out" of the morality which is the basis of individual autonomy – Schiller uses suicide to highlight the disharmony between the forces of nature ("Natürkrafte") and moral freedom. The disharmony inevitably results in the triumph of the latter over the former through the exertion of the will (even when this triumph occurs at the expense of subordinating the moral law to the will). Although Schiller nowhere comes close to Kant in offering an explicit articulation of the relationship of self-death to moral freedom, his theoretical writings on tragedy suggest an interesting comparative framework. His treatment of this issue marks a significant, and heretofore unrecognized, argument for a positive relationship between suicide and moral freedom.

Schiller on Tragedy and Moral Freedom

In his February 18, 1793 letter to Christian Gottfreid Körner, Schiller writes, "Surely, no mortal has spoken greater words than these Kantian ones, which are the content of his whole philosophy: Be self-determining!"[44] In his study of Kant in the early 1790s, he learned the crucial lesson that in order to "save freedom," resistance to the forces of nature is necessary. The idea of moral freedom, in the background if not in the foreground, is a permanent feature of Schiller's landscape.[45] Schiller gave the concept of freedom many meanings which changed throughout the course of his life. One of the most important periods for his thinking about freedom came with his study of Kant in the early 1790s, a period which also happened to coincide with his most important writings on tragedy – many of which had important implications for his implicit stance on suicide and moral freedom. It is in the writings on tragedy that that he

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[44] Friedrich Schiller, Briefwechsel mit Körner von 1784 bis Tode Schillers. Dritter Theil. 1793-1796 (Leipzig: Verlag von Veit & Co., 1859) 33. My translation.

[45] On January 18, 1827 Goethe explained to his biographer, J.P. Eckermann, that the basic idea behind all of Schiller's works is freedom, and that while in his early years he was interested in physical freedom, he became in his later years more concerned with "ideal" or moral freedom: "The idea of freedom assumed a different form as Schiller advanced in his own development and became a different man. In his youth it was physical freedom that preoccupied him and that found its way into his works; in later life it was moral freedom" See Johann Peter Eckermann, Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens (Frankfurt: Insel, 2006) 171. For all its importance, Schiller's idea of freedom remains relatively understudied in the vast corpus of secondary literature. There are only a few articles and monographs that address the subject in specifically philosophical terms: Bruno Bauch, "Schiller und die Idee der Freiheit." Kant-Studien 10 (1905): 346-72; Ernst Cassirer, Freiheit und Form (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1916) 269-302; and Kate Hamburger, "Schiller und Sartre." Philosophie der Dichter (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1966) 129-77.

incorporates the related Kantian ideas of the principle of autonomy, the freedom of the will, and the power of reason to liberate man from his own sensuous nature.[46]

Schiller regards tragedy as the highest form of theater and the supreme form of art because – above all – it allows the spectator to exercise his own freedom of will through the experience of a form of pleasure arising from displeasure. In Schiller's 1791 essay "Of the Cause of the Pleasure We Derive from Tragic Objects" he discusses this in Kantian terms as "Zweckmässigkeit" [lit. "purposefulness"] arising out of "Zweckwidrigkeit" [lit. "unpurposefulness"]. The experience of pleasure in disturbing events is possible only because of our rational/intellectual powers. This form of pleasure is "free" because it engages our intellectual or rational side more than our sensuous side ("sensuous" being driven by "necessity"). "Free" pleasure is produced by "Vorstellung" ("representation") rather than being subjugated to "blinden Notwendigkeit" ("blind necessity"):

> I call a free pleasure that which brings into play the spiritual forces – reason and imagination – and which awakens in us a sentiment by the representation of an idea, in contradistinction to physical or sensuous pleasure, which places our soul under the dependence of the blind forces

[46] Schiller's ultimate adoption of Kant's ethics resulted from a skeptical crisis of sorts: by the early 1780s Schiller had become much more skeptical about moral doctrines based on a theistic metaphysics. This metaphysics had been the foundation for his early ethics which sought to harmonize self-interest and morality as well as connect pleasure and perfection. Schiller realized that he would then not have any defense against materialism – a dangerous position because it would destroy freedom by making human action a necessary product of matter in motion. Kant came to Schiller's rescue by upholding moral freedom against the dangers of materialism. The net effect of Schiller's reading of Kant in the early 1790s was nothing less then a revolution in his ethical thinking which made plain that he followed Kant in making duty the fundamental motive for ethical action, and in seeing reason alone as the chief source of moral obligations.

> of nature, and where sensation is immediately awakened in us by a physical cause.[47]

Schiller, like Kant, subscribes to a dualistic view of human nature: we are inspired by events which, if activating only our sensuous side, we would experience merely as painful. In other words, our rationality allows us a more complex experience of tragic events so that we can resist our more immediate instinctual and emotional responses. Schiller refers to the "spontaneous activity" of reason, as contrasted with the passive nature of suffering:

> This moral propriety is never more vividly recognized than when it is found in conflict with another propriety, and still keeps the upper hand; then only the moral law awakens in full power, when we find it struggling against all the other forces of nature, and when all those forces lose in its presence their empire over a human soul. By these words, "the other forces of nature," we must understand all that is not moral force, all that is not subject to the supreme legislation of reason: that is to say, feelings, affections, instincts, passions, as well as physical necessity and destiny. The more redoubtable the adversary, the more glorious the victory; resistance alone brings out the strength of the force and renders it visible. It follows that the highest degree of moral consciousness can only exist in strife, and the highest moral pleasure is always accompanied by pain. (373)

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[47] Friedrich Schiller, "Of the Cause of the Pleasure We Derive from Tragic Objects" in Aesthetical & Philosophical Essays, trans. Unknown (Harvard, 1895) 369.

Rather than the spectator simply becoming overwhelmed by emotion, he is inspired to utilize his rationality in the struggle against this faculty in order that he may actualize his moral freedom. In the ideal tragic experience, our rational natures are constantly occupied in asserting freedom from emotion and other "Naturkräfte." The pity which we experience in the suffering of the tragic hero is the means by which we can begin to achieve victory over the compulsive powers of nature.

Schiller makes it a point to stress, however, that the spectator's experience of pity in the hero's suffering should have its limits. Pity must be kept in check so that there may be room for wonder and admiration at the character's moral faculty upon which our freedom is based. While we should have sympathy for characters and their situations, we should not succumb to emotion, but should transform feelings of displeasure into an awareness of the moral faculty within the tragic character and, by extension, within us. In the end, tragedy should result in the experience of "Rührung" ("aroused emotion") for the spectator: the experience of pleasure arising out of displeasurable events by means of an awareness of the moral faculty and potential for moral freedom:

> Aroused emotion ["Rührung"], in its proper sense, designates this mixed sensation, into which enters at the same time suffering and the pleasure that we find in suffering. Thus we can only feel this kind of emotion in the case of a personal misfortune, only when the grief that we feel is sufficiently tempered to leave some place for that impression of pleasure that would be felt by a compassionate spectator. The feeble man is always the prey of his grief; the hero and the sage, whatever the misfortune that strikes them, never experience more than emotion. (365)

The spectator can feel "Rührung" in a character's misfortune when the former's suffering is moderate enough to allow room for the sort of pleasure that a sympathetic spectator would feel. In "On the Art of Tragedy" ("Über die tragische Kunst), an essay that originated in a lecture in the summer of 1790 and was completed in the winter of 1791 and appeared in the second part of Schiller's periodical, Neue Thalia, he states that suffering is a means to the end of raising consciousness of our freedom as moral beings. The assault on our sensuous nature is the first and necessary condition for stimulating our reason: "…the very assault on our sensuous life is the condition for igniting that power of mind, whose activity produces the pleasure that we take in sympathetic suffering. Now, this power is none other than our reason." [48] Once this rational power is ignited, it struggles against the compulsive power of nature until it is victorious:

> This faculty must be ceaselessly at work maintaining its freedom against coercion by sensuousness, but it must not triumph before the end and even less may it succumb in the struggle. Otherwise, in the first case the suffering is done away with, in the second the activity, and only the union of the two genuinely arouses the emotion. The great secret of the art of tragedy consists precisely in the skillful management of this conflict; there the secret is revealed in its most brilliant light. (15)

This evocation of moral freedom through the spectator's experience of "Rührung" is made possible through a specific type of tragic situation which Schiller explains through two related criteria. First, the tragic situation should arise from compelling circumstances, rather than from the character's moral guilt alone:

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[48] Friedrich Schiller, "On the Art of Tragedy" Essays. ed. and trans. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993) 5.

> Our compassion is always diminished somewhat, if the unfortunate soul…fell to his ruin because of his own unforgiveable crimes, or if out of despondency and due to the infirmity of his intellect he does not know how to pull himself up from this mess, supposing that he still could do so. (7)

Second, Schiller stresses that tragedy should not reflect upon the individual but on the world the individual inhabits. Tragedy should depict a universal disharmony between the forces of nature and moral freedom such that an obvious disparity emerges between these two realms.

In "Of the Cause of the Pleasure We Derive from Tragic Objects" Schiller elaborates these criteria through a dramatic example from a contemporary tragedian, Christian Martin Wieland. He argues that Wieland's Oberon (1780) emphasizes moral freedom even when it poses a conflict with self-interest or when moral freedom does not incur the approbation of others. The characters Hüon and Amanda are tied to a stake and confronted with a choice: to freely accept a terrible death or commit infidelity in order to acquire power. They choose the former, and their virtue is rewarded only with suffering. However, it is precisely their willingness to act against "Naturkräfte" and to endure suffering that casts moral freedom into full relief:

> The more redoubtable the adversary, the more glorious the victory; resistance alone brings out the strength of the force and renders it visible. It follows that the highest degree of moral consciousness can only exist in strife, and the highest moral pleasure is always accompanied by pain. They demonstrate their moral freedom both by the indifference with which

> they face death and by their ability to overcome ambition; the suffering which is the price of their moral freedom serves only to reveal it in the clearest light. (274)

From the position of the spectator, Hüon and Amanda allow for the possibility of transforming "Zweckwidrigkeit" (something at odds with a purpose) into "Zweckmässigkeit" (purposiveness) in order to bring about a state of "Rührung" in the spectator. Watching their scenario unfold, we realize that we too can mount such a struggle against "Naturkräfte" and that the resultant suffering from this most extreme event is in direct proportion to our respect for the power of the will to free us from the forces of nature.

As with Hüon and Amanda, forces of necessity afflict Schiller's tragic heroes. Don Cesar in Schiller's 1803 tragedy The Bride of Messina (Die Braut von Messina), for example, is confronted with the "necessities" of fate and inclination and resists them through an exertion of his will. His suicide demonstrates the Schillerian concept of the will which foregrounds moral freedom. The following analysis of the play will (1) elucidate the unique role of fate and inclination as "Naturkräfte" and Don Cesar's successful resistance to these forces; (2) reveal Cesar's suicide as an exertion of the will which highlights his *capacity* to comply with the moral law rather the actuality of this capacity *per se*; (3) examine the reaction of the chorus to Cesar's act of suicide in order to suggest a paradigm for the experience of the tragic spectator, i.e. the transformation of "Zweckwidrigkeit" into "Zweckmässigkeit" resulting in "Rührung."

The Bride of Messina: Fate and Inclincation as "Naturkräfte"

Fate in The Bride of Messina is a central force of nature propelling the action of this play. Although the play is clearly modeled on Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, Schiller's sense of fate is not that of the ancient, ineluctable external sense.[49] In a nod to Kant, Schiller transforms Sophoclean external fate into fate which is permeable to human agency. Ultimately, Schiller fulfills Kant's urgent call to "save freedom." Indeed, through Don Cesar's suicide, he surpasses this call and establishes the unmistakable supremacy of moral freedom.

The idea of an external, deterministic Fate, familiar to the ancients as part of their mythology, drew the attention of eighteen and nineteenth-century philosophers and writers interested in the freedom of the will. Schiller implemented a novel concept of fate in The Bride of Messina – one which still posed a threat to freedom as it did with the ancients – but whose impetus was more internally driven and related to moral responsibility. In fact, partly because of this innovation, Schiller saw himself as introducing a new kind of fate-tragedy, and even speaks of himself as having engaged in "a little contest with the ancient tragedians." He even wondered whether he, too might have won the Olympic prize had he been born as a contemporary of Sophocles.[50]

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[49] In a letter to Goethe of 2 October 1797, Schiller states that The Bride of Messina was modeled on Sophocles' Oedipus Rex (Friedrich Schiller, Schillers Briefe: mit Einleitung und Kommentar, trans. and ed. Erwin Streitfeld and Viktor Zmegac (Koenigstein: Athenaum, 1983). The two have frequently been compared, for example, by Florian Prader in Schiller und Sophokles (Zurich: Antlantis, 1954. 56-96) and H. Weigand "Oedipus Tyrannos und Die Braut von Messina." Schiller 1759-1959: Commemorative American Studies, ed. J.R. Frey (Urbana, 1959) 171-202.

[50] See Schiller's letter to Humboldt, February 17, 1803 in Schillers Briefe: mit Einleitung und Kommentar, trans. and ed. Erwin Streitfeld and Viktor Zmegac (Koenigstein: Athenaum, 1983) 597-599.

Nevertheless, there are clear similarities between the plots of Sophocles' and Schiller's tragedies. For example, both provide a record of unnatural crimes (Oedipus's murder of his father and marriage to his mother is reflected in the hostile relationship of Schiller's two brothers, Don Manuel and Don Cesar, and in their love for their own sister, Beatrice), both depict a baby spared instead of killed, both show evidence of the influence of supernatural forces provided not only by hearsay but by the uncanny accuracy with which events are predicted. Since The Bride of Messina is one of Schiller's less familiar tragedies, a basic summary will be helpful.

The play is set in medieval Sicily, where the races and religions of the West mingle with those of the East. Although Christianity has become the dominant religion, the pagan mythology of the Greeks survives. A changing succession of conquerors has left their imprint on the island's checkered history, resulting in a lack of political and religious stability.[51] The mood and atmosphere of the play is feverish and oppressive: the radiant beauty of the South is overhung by the ever-present threat of sudden, unpredictable disaster, and is therefore an appropriate setting for a drama of passion, violence, and blood-guilt. The very first scene plunges the spectator into an atmosphere of uncertain apprehensiveness.

The ruling Prince of Messina, a hard, ruthless autocrat of Norman descent, has died. The bitter enmity that divides his sons, Don Manuel and Don Cesar, threatens to disrupt the state. In order to put an end to a war of rival factions, the widowed princess,

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[51] See the account of these conditions in Schiller's essay "Overview of the Most Astonishing Affair of State During the Reign of Emperor Friedrich I" in History of the Thirty Years' War: Those Parts of Books II, III, and IV which Treat of the Careers and Characters of Gustavus Adolphus and Wallenstein. trans. Arthur Hubbell Palmer (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1899).

Isabella, has persuaded her sons to call a truce and agree to a meeting in her presence. In the past the two young princes had stubbornly refused to accept their mother's mediation, but now their hearts are softened by the fact that they are both in love. Consequently the princes prove more amenable to Isabella's entreaties, and their meeting ends in a complete, and sincere, reconciliation. Isabella is overjoyed at the prospect of welcoming her sons' brides to their new home where all the members of the family can live peacefully together.

However, at this felicitous moment Isabella discloses the secret she has kept for many years: Don Manuel and Don Cesar will soon meet a sister of whose existence they had not been aware. When in the early years of her married life Isabella had given birth to a daughter, the old prince had ordered the infant to be killed, because a dream had warned him that she would cause the death of his sons and thus bring his dynasty to utter ruin. Isabella, however, accepting a more optimistic interpretation of a dream of her own, had contrived to save the child's life and had her brought up in the seclusion of a nearby nunnery in complete ignorance of her parents.

Isabella's joy at her sons' reconciliation is short-lived since Don Cesar, on finding the woman he loves in Don Manuel's arms, stabs his brother in a fit of jealous rage. The full horror of the situation is revealed when it becomes clear that the woman with whom both brothers had fallen in love was none other than their estranged sister Beatrice. When he realizes the heinousness of his deed, Don Cesar resolves of his own will to take his life. Isabella, in the first paroxysm of grief over Manuel's death, disowns and curses her younger son, but it is not long before she repents and tries to dissuade Don Cesar from his purpose. Although Beatrice joins her mother in pleading with him, Don Cesar

remains firm. Being the highest in the land, he cannot be called to account by anybody and, since he cannot live with the stigma of the crime upon him, he believes it his duty to come to terms with the situation through suicide. He executes his own sentence (an act which resonates with Kant's notion of self-created and self-legislated moral law) and exorcises, by a free sacrifice, the ancient curse upon his house:

> No judge lives on this earth to punish me,
> Hence I myself must wield the avenging sword.
> Dying I exorcise the ancient curse;
> Death self-imposed alone can break the chain of fate.[52]

Schiller's treatment of fate is similar to that of Sophocles' in at least three ways. First, fate in The Bride of Messina is activated by the curse of the grandfather, and there is the implication that a supernatural force is at work. Moreover, this force is particularly effective and malevolent, undertaking to punish those as yet unborn for the sin of the father who – for all we are told to the contrary – is allowed to die a natural death. Second, the introduction of dreams and interpretations may be seen to emphasize how effectively – and deceptively – the fatal force furthers its intentions, for in encouraging Isabella to keep Beatrice alive, it ensures that its aims shall be achieved to the letter. Thirdly, characters are sometimes unable to give any rational explanation for their actions; they behave in a manner explicable only in terms of supernatural influence.

However, in The Bride of Messina there are important differences from Sophocles' Oedipus – differences which allow fate to be seen as driven more by human

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[52] Friedrich Schiller, The Bride of Messina in The Works of Friedrich Schiller. trans. Martin Sawnwick Lodge, ed. Nathan Haskell Dole and Heinrich Düntzer. Vol. 4. (Boston: C.T., 1902) 212.

agency than by external, ineluctable forces, and which make it possible to see Don Cesar's suicide as an effective assertion of will demonstrating the power of moral freedom. First, Schiller's use of fate is activated by the curse of the grandfather, who is robbed of his bride Isabella by his own son, and who curses their marriage, threatening that Isabella will give birth to "hatred and strife." Therefore, "fate" or "necessity" seems to originate in human sin (the rape of Isabella) and consequently has moral implications.

Second, there is some degree of human interpretation or interpolation required for making sense of fate in this play: fate signals its intentions not through consistent and unambiguous oracles, but through ambiguous dreams. These are interpreted by human beings, and the interpretations seem to conflict; they require that humans decide how to react. The father's dream seems to suggest that if a daughter be born to Isabella, she will cause the deaths of both their sons, but Isabella's dream appears to predict that Beatrice will unite Cesar and Manuel in love.

Third, events seem to result as much from the characters of those involved – Cesar's impetuousness and the secrecy of Manuel and Beatrice – than from supernatural activity (as in Oedipus).

Finally, while the action of Oedipus is concerned with the revelation of past crimes, presenting a series of simple steps leading with relentless logic to the final realization, The Bride of Messina presents a more complex picture in which the developing situation is just as important, if not more so, than past events. Most significant in Oedipus is his discovery of the truth of the past, but in Schiller's play it is action in the present – Don Cesar's murder of his brother Manuel. Thus, while Oedipus is unable to escape crimes already committed in ignorance and his guilt seems to be

imposed on him from outside, Cesar's guilt occurs in the present and suggests that one's actions can determine one's fate.

Fate is surely no less powerful a force in The Bride of Messina than in Oedipus; however, Schiller's "internalizing" of fate in this play – his making fate more character-driven, therefore subject to transformation – draws attention to Don Cesar' suicide as an exercise of moral freedom. Instead of guilt imposed from without, followed by resignation and further agony, we see guilt incurred due to forces operating from within. Schiller makes fate a more human matter by emphasizing human responsibility which makes redemption possible. Don Cesar's suicide can then be seen as a positive, deliberate act of will that allows him to achieve triumph over the fate to which he contributed. Whereas Oedipus departs Thebes with resignation, defeated by the overwhelming power of fate and burdened with the consciousness of his appalling guilt, Cesar's suicide is presented as putting matters right. Whereas Oedipus's actions amount to an intensification of his agony, forcing him to look inwards upon his guilt for the remainder of his life, Cesar's attitude is positive. He refuses to live in a state of self-chastisement, and instead looks towards the heavens with joy:

> …Let him who can, drag on
> A weary life of penance and of pain
> To cleanse the spot of everlasting guilt; --
> I would not live the victim of despair;
> No! I must meet with beaming eye the smile
> Of happy ones, and breathe erect the air
> Of liberty and joy. (215)

Moreover, his suicide frees his family from the curse: “Death self-imposed alone / Can break the chain of fate!” (212), and makes a happier future possible for them “Tomorrow’s sun / Shall find this place cleansed of every stain, / And light a happier race” (211). It brings about a kind of closure to tragic events: after Cesar stabs himself, he falls dead at his sister’s feet; his sister then throws herself into her mother’s arms. Don Cesar’ decision to confront and transform fate reverberates symbolically from his self-inflicted mortal wound through his sister to his mother and, finally, to the victim of his crime, his brother: “I am content: my brother! I come!” (218).

Although fate is the primary “Naturkräfte” of the tragedy, the challenge it poses to Don Cesar’s freedom is underscored by his solemn resistance to another force of nature: inclination. This is well illustrated by Cesar’ rejection of his mother’s pleading to forgo suicide. Indeed, Isabella’s outpouring of emotion stands in contrast to the staunch resolution with which Don Cesar acts. He resists his mother’s pleading as well as his own innate inclination to live: “The pangs that rend my soul – / What I have suffered – what I feel – have left / No place for earthly thoughts!”(212). His suicide allows him to overcome even the possibility of living with the feelings of guilt to which he is susceptible. Cesar’s resistance to “Naturkräfte” in the form of inclination, then, is closely connected to his resistance to “Naturkräfte” as fate. Indeed, his ability to override inclination enables him to transform fate.

Finally, Cesar’s resistance to these forces of nature must be seen in the context of Schiller’s concept of the will. It is the will which, on the one hand, allows Cesar to exert independence from the forces of nature discussed above, and, on the other hand, frees him from outright subordination to the moral law. Since Cesar’s independence from fate

and inclination has been discussed above, it would be helpful to turn to a discussion of the will as that which frees him from the imperative form of the Kantian moral law. It is in this context that Don Cesar's suicide can be seen to demonstrate the paramount importance of freedom.

The Will

For Schiller, the will is that which makes resistance to forces of nature (necessity) possible, but it also allows for the possibility of saving human freedom from what he felt was Kant's insistence on a draconian subordination to the moral law. In On the Aesthetic of Man of 1795, Schiller writes: "But the will of man stands completely free between duty and inclination, and no physical compulsion can, or should, encroach upon its sovereign right of personality." [53] Cesar's act certainly resists external necessity, but it also offers a correction to Kant's notion of the absolute and unconditional obligation to subordinate one's actions to the moral law. Schiller's treatment of Cesar's suicide demonstrates his concern with the dangers posed by a despotic moral law which seeks to suppress man's will and, most dangerous of all, endanger freedom.[54]

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[53] Friedrich Schiller, Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Essays, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom. (New York: Continuum, 1993) 93.

[54] Although this discussion focuses on the defense of freedom against a tyrannical form of law within Schiller's theory of tragedy in general, The Bride of Messina is not confined to this: it is found in his conception of God as well as in his political philosophy and in his philosophy of history. In the twenty-fourth letter of the Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, Schiller writes: "Because in his experience the sense drive *precedes* the moral, he assigns to the law of necessity a beginning in time too, a *positive origin*, and through this most unfortunate of all errors makes the unchangeable and eternal in himself into an accidental product of the transient" (161).

In a departure from Kant, who held that outright submission to moral law is the only way to safeguard and respect freedom, Schiller holds that we must be careful not to allow the moral law to become as great a threat to man's freedom as the external forces of nature. For Schiller, the will is the essence of humanity; it is the means of achieving moral freedom through the moral laws it produces (and subsumes). Accordingly, Don Cesar's suicide demonstrates a rejection of a moral law which, in this case, poses a substantial threat to his moral freedom. In taking his own life, Cesar subordinates the moral law proscribing self-death to his will, i.e. the free decision to carry out the act. Ironically, the occasion of Cesar's suicide answers Kant's call to "save freedom," but does so in a complicated and novel way. Cesar's decision to confront and transform fate, to override inclination, and to reject the moral law proscribing suicide shows that his will is subject neither to natural nor moral law. The moral will thus allows Cesar through his suicide to escape from the bondage of the moral law, just as the moral law (in Kant) allows one to escape from the bondage of natural law. The moral will evinces the core principle of freedom.

Kant leaves us with an impression of the unchecked absolute character of reason. He explicitly rejects suicide as a violation of the moral law and would see Cesar's act (and all suicides) as an absolute cancellation of moral freedom and a debasing of humanity. In contrast, Schiller sees Kant's draconian position on the absolute, unchecked supremacy of the moral law as itself a danger to Cesar's moral freedom. He therefore attempts to achieve a compromise that leaves the proscription against suicide in place, but preserves the freedom of the will and the unconditional character of moral freedom. In On Grace and Dignity, Schiller speaks to this point:

> Nature's legislation extends to the will, where its legislation ends and the legislation of reason begins. The will stands between these two jurisdictions, and it alone decides which law to accept, but it does not stand in the same relation to them both. As a force of nature it is free in relation to the one as much as to the other; this means that it does not *have* to give an account to the one or to the other. It is not free as a moral force, however; in other words, it *should* be accountable to the law of reason. It is *bound* to neither but *indebted* to the law of reason, but it exercises it *unworthily*, because, despite its freedom, it remains *within nature* and does not add reality to the operation of pure instinct, since *to will* from *desire* is simply a more complicated way of saying to desire. (155-56)

Applied to Cesar's act, Schiller implies that the moral will allows Cesar to override inclination, but that it does not *oblige* him to comply with the rational, moral law.[55] In other words, Schiller implicitly agrees with Kant that suicide counteracts rationality (i.e. the moral law proscribing murder and commanding respect for life), but he suggests that what is most important about suicide is its demonstration of moral freedom.[56] If Cesar had decided not to take his life, he would have been in compliance with the moral law, but even in that case the agreement between his use of freedom and the moral law would

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[55] Fred Beiser, in Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-Examination (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), discusses Schiller's conception of the will and human freedom and emphasizes that "Schiller does not think that the freedom of a human being consists in its acting on the moral law independent of sensibility. Rather, Schiller explains its freedom in terms of its power to act *or* not act on the moral law. He states that the will stands between two domains: that of morality and that of nature. We use our freedom even when we follow the law contrary to reason…" (112)

[56] See the discussion of Wieland's Oberon, (above) where Schiller makes the same point.

warrant no more than approval. In Schiller's 1793 essay "On the Pathetic" ("Über das Pathetische"), Schiller writes: "But because the will is free, it is (physically) a contingent matter whether we actually do it. If we, then, actually do so, this agreement of contingency with the rational imperative in the exercise of freedom is approved or applauded…"[57]

Don Cesar's suicide is consistent with Schiller's stated goal of tragedy: the evocation of an awareness of moral freedom in the hero and, more importantly, in the spectator. Schiller has very little concern with moral judgment *per se* (i.e. whether or not the action complies with the moral law); instead he is interested in whether the hero's actions bear witness to personal freedom. Of course whether Cesar does his duty or not (and he clearly does not), depends upon the use to which he puts his freedom; what matters most, however, is that he is possessed of this freedom in the first place.

Schiller understands "aesthetic" judgment as that which is concerned with tragedy's ability to demonstrate the potential for freedom in its hero (in this context, unlike others, the term "aesthetic" refers not to beauty but to a form of art which foregrounds freedom.) Within the context of his tragic theory, this judgment is much more significant than *moral* judgment. Indeed, in "On the Pathetic" Schiller writes: "In aesthetic judgments we are interested, not in morality in itself, but simply in freedom, and morality can please our imagination only insofar as it makes freedom visible" (68). Cesar's suicide is significant not because it emphasizes an immoral act, but because it illustrates the human potential for moral freedom: "Simply from the standpoint of an aesthetic evaluation, a human being is already a sublime object if he demonstrates the

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[57] Friedrich Schiller, "On the Pathetic," Essays. ed. and trans. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993) 62.

dignity of the human vocation by means of his *condition*, even supposing that we are not to find this vocation realized in his *person*" (61).

Based upon Schiller's theory of tragedy, then, one can rightfully argue that Cesar's act makes for more effective tragedy than an act which resists "Naturkräfte" merely in order to comply with the moral law. His suicide creates a situation in which moral and aesthetic judgments are in disharmony, and this disharmony draws attention to the possibility of the absolute freedom of will. Schiller repeatedly confirms the importance of the "aesthetic" value of the act. To support the notion that the potential for moral freedom (hence the "aesthetic" value) is most important, Schiller gives us (again in "On the Pathetic") the example of Peregrine, who caused himself to be burned alive on a pyre.[58] Like Don Cesar, Peregrine resisted the instinct of self-preservation and took his life. His act is morally displeasing because it counteracts the moral law commanding respect for life, but it is aesthetically pleasing because it demonstrates moral freedom:

> Thus the aesthetic judgment leaves us free, it elevates and inspires us, because we find ourselves with an apparent advantage over our sensuousness, already by virtue of the mere capacity to will in an absolute way, in other words, by virtue of the mere capacity to will in an absolute way, in other words, by virtue of the mere propensity for morality, since the sheer possibility of refusing to be coerced by nature flatters our need to be free. (64)

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[58] St. Peregrine the martyr was an early Christian martyr who died because he and others refused to worship the Roman Emperor Commodus on his birthday.

Although Don Cesar's decision to commit suicide makes him morally problematic, it makes him no less suitable as a subject for tragedy. Schiller maintains that the tragedian, in constructing his hero, should make no distinction between a morally "good" or "bad" character. Even an outright villain may be a hero if he uses his moral will to illustrate moral freedom effectively:

> As far as *his* [the poet's] interest is concerned, it makes no difference if he intends to take his heroes from the class of pernicious or of good characters, since the very measure of power required for good can quite often…be demanded in something evil. (67-8)

He goes so far as to argue in "Of the Cause of the Pleasure We Derive from Tragic Objects" that Lovelace, the villain of Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady (1748), acts as more than a mere foil to the morally pure Clarissa. Lovelace, he contends, should even be given credit for conquering his moral feelings, since this shows a kind of "strength" in itself. If a rapist like Lovelace can demonstrate his moral freedom through his decision to die in a duel with Clarissa's cousin, it is clear that Don Cesar's suicide has at least as much if not more potential (since it counteracts both "Naturkräfte" and moral law) to demonstrate moral freedom. Indeed, Schiller writes that there is nothing more sublime than when a person suffering from a guilty conscience punishes himself with his own suicide.

Even a clearly immoral motive like Medea's murdering of her children as an act of revenge becomes "aesthetic" when we stop to consider what is at stake in her committing this act. There is proportionality between what is at stake or what one is forced to overcome ("Naturkräfte" and/or moral law) in committing an act and the degree

of moral freedom achieved through it. Compared to the above examples which Schiller cites as demonstrating moral freedom, Don Cesar's suicide demonstrates the tremendous power of the will to overcome forces external to it and, as a result, to achieve the greatest degree of moral freedom. However, the power of Don Cesar's will to demonstrate this freedom through his courageous act is merely a prerequisite for arriving at what Schiller claims is the ultimate goal of tragedy: the evocation of moral freedom in the spectator.

The Chorus & Spectator Response: Resisting Inclination, Realizing Freedom

> As the chorus gives life to the language – so also it gives repose to the action; but it is that beautiful and lofty repose which is the characteristic of a true work of art. For the mind of the spectator ought to maintain its freedom through the most impassioned scenes; it should not be the mere prey of impressions, but calmly and severely detach itself from the emotions which it suffers.[59]

The quotation above from Schiller's 1803 "On the Use of the Chorus in Tragedy" reveals Schiller's belief in the power of the chorus to facilitate our experience of freedom from the forces of nature ("the most impassioned scenes"). Since one of the most impassioned scenes in The Bride of Messina is Don Cesar's suicide, the chorus's reaction to this event is relevant. I suggest that the chorus's reaction to the suicide mirrors the spectator's reaction to tragedy as spelled out in Schiller's tragic theory, and that Don Cesar's suicide

[59] Friedrich Schiller, "On the Use of the Chorus in Tragedy," trans. Martin, Swanwick, Lodge, et al., The Works of Friedrich Schiller. Vol. 5. ed. Nathan Haskell Dole. (Boston: Wyman-Fogg, 1902) 212.

is the ideal event to bring about a response wherein the chorus and spectator become aware of the potential for moral freedom.

Unlike the ancient Greek chorus, Schiller's "modern" chorus is closely connected to the experience of the tragic character and spectator: "the chorus of the Greek drama, as I have employed it – the chorus, as a single ideal person, furthering and accompanying the whole plot – if of an entirely distinct character." Moreover, he concedes the well-known objection that his chorus shatters the illusion of the drama, but he argues that this is its greatest strength:

> The commonplace objection made to the chorus, that it disturbs the illusion, and blunts the edge of the feelings, is what constitutes its highest recommendation; for it is this blind force of the affections which the true artist deprecates – this illusion is what he disdains to excite. (231)

Beginning with the announcement of Don Cesar' decision to end his life in the final scene, the chorus offers a virtual blueprint for the intended response of the spectator which ultimately reflects an awareness of freedom on the part of both parties.

The chorus of The Bride of Messina is divided into two semi-choruses; the first formed by the followers of Don Manuel and the second by the followers of Don Cesar. When they are introduced in the first scene, Schiller indicates that they enter at opposite sides and that one consists of young knights, the other of older ones, each with its own costumes and ensigns. Although their physical entrance suggests opposition, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, by the end of the play, they stand more in agreement than disagreement. There is even a physical intermingling of the members of each chorus throughout the play: they alternate between acting as reflections of the moods and

passions of the leaders and, at others times, acting with calm detachment. Like the spectator, there is no consistent response: they reflect a somewhat irregular vacillation between resignation and resistance to "Naturkräfte" and moral law.[60]

These fluctuations also coincide with Schiller's theory of spectator response, and reflect the duality of human existence which as noted earlier, Schiller borrows from Kant: as a creature of reason, man is capable of being inspired by the very circumstances which as a creature of the senses he can associate only with suffering. For example, upon the announcement of Don Cesar's decision to commit suicide the chorus, led by Cajatan, expresses its displeasure and its sadness, at his fall from the heights of splendor:

> My heart is sad in the princely hall,
> When from the towering pride of state,
> I see with headlong ruin fall,
> How swift! the good and great!
> And he--from fortune's storm at rest
> Smiles, in the quiet haven laid
> Who, timely warned, has owned how blest
> The refuge of the cloistered shade,
> To honor's race has bade farewell. (209)

This indication of the chorus's temporary capitulation to the senses occurs immediately after Cesar announces to Beatrice that he will take his life and "be gone for ever"; the spectator notes that Beatrice "stands irresolute in a tumult of conflicting passions – then

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[60] This fluctuation of response is spelled out in "On The Tragic Art" where Schiller states that the great secret of tragic art lies in creating an interplay between stimulating and relaxing the sympathetic response of the spectator, leaving the most moving moments (in this case Cesar's suicide) for the climax.

tears herself from the spot" (209). One senses the depth of her sadness through her having to "tear" herself from the spot where she stands, suggestive of our eventual "tearing" away from "Naturkräfte" in order to realize a transcendent freedom. A few lines after Cajetan's chorus speaks the lines above, another choral faction (led by Berengar, Bohemund, and Manfred – a mixture of what had been end the "first" and "second" choruses of the play) indicates that Don Cesar' self-imposed death will enable him to transcend even the decay of the flesh to arrive at freedom: "On the mountains is freedom! The breath of decay / Never sullies the fresh flowing air" (210). Still later in the scene, when Cesar commands that his funeral rites be prepared quietly and without notice to "mortal eyes," Bohemund obeys immediately before being interrupted by Cajetan who suggests that Cesar's decision is one of "impious rash resolve" (210).

This fluctuation of response continues until the very end of the play, when Cajetan's faction arrives at an appreciation of Cesar's death as release from guilt. Although the proper external reaction confounds him, his internal realization is firmly in place. Through sacrificing his life, Don Cesar proves himself capable of moral freedom by using his moral will to counteract external forces of nature and the internal obligation to comply with moral duty. This throws into full relief the fundamental tension between nature and moral freedom, a tension mirrored in this play by the conflicted reactions of the chorus and the spectator.

The state of suffering arising from the chorus' (and our own) confrontation with Don Cesar' act of self-sacrifice (illuminated by the Cajetan's own reaction in the final lines of the play), is a feature of the play that – in an unlikely way – draws attention to the strength of Cesar's, and our own, moral natures – our potential to become aware of and

enact our moral freedom. Ultimately, the spectator (like the chorus) experiences suffering (fear, pity) as a means to the end of realizing this freedom. Moving beyond the Aristotlian end goal of tragedy as the arousal of fear and pity as a means to obtain *katharsis*, and parting company with the 18th century neo-classicists who wished to adhere more closely to Aristotle's normative dictums, Schiller demonstrates through the effects of Cesar's suicide in the Bride of Messina that the goal of tragedy is to arrive at a pleasure in the self-consciousness of our supersensible power of freedom, our capacity to act independently of the forces of the natural world, and even independently of duty itself. This experience of "Rührung" – which includes both aspects of the tragic experience (pleasure arising out of suffering, or "Zweckmässigkeit" arising out of "Zweckwidrigkeit") and aims at the realization of moral freedom – is exemplified for the spectator by the chorus's own reaction to Cesar's suicide and, moreover, illustrates Schiller's most important contribution to the theory of tragedy.[61]

[61] Schiller's mature theory of tragedy is the product of a careful negotiation of the mid-eighteenth century wherein the (mostly French) neoclassicists were at war with the *Sturm and Drang* who revolted against the Aristotelian poetics that inspired the latter. Ultimately, Schiller's writings on tragedy (as well as his mature tragedies of the 1790s) staked out a middle ground between these two positions. In short, although the progression of his ideas is very complicated, Schiller eventually decided that Aristotle's rules were simply statements about the necessary or most effective means to achieve the end of art – an end which, as noted above, Schiller argued was more than just the arousal of pity for its own sake, but was for the sake of arriving at a sense of pleasure in our realization of moral freedom. See Beisler (239-262) for an examination of the specific controversies at stake in the formulation of Schiller's theory of tragedy in the 1790s.

CHAPTER TWO

Suicide and Moral Freedom:

Goethe's Sorrows of Young Werther

Goethe's Sorrows of Young Werther illustrates a deeply ambiguous connection between suicide and moral freedom. The novel is full of unresolved questions and conflicts, not the least of which is the question of morality and its relationship to Werther's suicide. This moral ambiguity is reflected in the author's attitude and approach to the nature of the universe and human existence. Goethe made countless statements to this effect. In one instance he claimed to be a pantheist in science, a polytheist in poetry, and a monotheist in ethics; in another he described himself as an atheist in science and philosophy, a pagan in art, and a Christian by emotional inclination. In a brief account of his philosophical development, Goethe declared that he had no aptitude for philosophy as such.[62] In his Maximen und Reflexionen he remarks: "Theories are usually the over-hasty conclusions of an impatient understanding which is anxious to get rid of the phenomena and replace them with images, concepts, and often indeed only with words."[63] For Goethe, no one set of doctrines can do full justice to the complexity of the universe and of human existence, although all of them have their

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[62] H.B. Nesbet makes this point in "Religion and Philosophy," The Cambridge Companion to Goethe. ed. L. Sharpe. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 224.

[63] Maxim 548 in Goethes Werke (Hamburger Ausgabe. (Hamburg: C. Wegner, 1949-1960) XII, 440.) My translation.

distinct value if they are approached in a sympathetic and non-dogmatic spirit. Indeed, this is exactly how Goethe approaches Werther's moral life.

Goethe adopted various moral stances throughout the stages of his life, never positing one over another. To the extent that he has any cohesive moral philosophy at all, it can be seen in reaction to Kantian (and, to some extent, Schillerian) ethics. As Friedrich Paulsen notes regarding Goethe's ethics, "The Kantian moral philosophy with its sharply pointed antithesis of duty versus inclination . . . must have sounded to Goethe as empty and dead talk, yes even as presumptuous and wicked talk, as blasphemy against God and nature."[64] Goethe's morality, then, is an expression of the deepest human needs and impulses; he leans toward the heart, not the head, and his personal reflections on ethical matters are based in practical situations rather than abstract principles. The Sorrows of Young Werther is a prime example of a case study in moral ambiguity in general and of moral freedom in particular. Within the context of the novel, moral freedom refers to the use of feelings unbound by normative moral codes based on rationality and social conventions. Werther's suicide is the most adamant – yet wholly inconclusive – attempt to achieve this type of freedom.[65]

The novel tells of a young man who is governed by his feelings. Ultimately, he hopes to become one with the infinite by using these feelings to transcend the limitations

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[64] Friedrich Paulsen, Einleitung in die Philosophie (Berlin: W. Hertz, 1901) 132. My translation.

[65] C. S. Muenzer in Figures of Identity: Goethe's Novels and the Enigmatic Self (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984) explores "the role that failure plays in the evolving reflexivity of the aspiring mind and its culmination in an autonomous sense of self-worth" (n. 148). While Muenzer is right to point out the significance of failure in the novel, he argues that the letters ultimately allow Werther to achieve an autonomous sense of self-worth. However, he overlooks the sustained ambiguity of the novel. In the end, Werther's quest for self-worth – as well as his quest for moral freedom – remains unresolved.

of natural and social conventions including – crucially – the rationally driven morality expected of him. This motivates him to seek validation for his feeling-centered approach to life by projecting these feelings onto facets of external reality: nature, children, literature, art, religion, and, most importantly, Lotte – the engaged woman with whom he falls deeply in love. Although he is aware of the natural and social limits expected of him, he rejects them and becomes increasingly frustrated at the strong resistance that results from both. A chance discussion of suicide with Lotte's rationally-minded fiancé Albert clearly establishes their contrasting moral positions; when Lotte finally rejects Werther, the hypothetical discussion on suicide becomes a reality. As all avenues for the expression of his feelings are cut off, Werther spirals out of control. His decision to commit suicide is his final attempt to establish the centrality of feeling as a basis for action and, finally, to free himself from the suffocating moral and social world of which he has been part.

Goethe is of two minds about whether or not Werther's final act allows him to achieve the moral freedom he so desires. On the one hand, Goethe is fairly consistent in his sympathetic depiction of his protagonist, and Werther's final act is unarguably successful in freeing him from all outside limitations. On the other hand, the suicide itself is botched: Werther is found with his brain protruding, his lungs convulsing, and twelve hours pass before his death. The editor who is brought in to describe these events is at times cold, dispassionate, even clinical, but at other times sympathetic. It is as if we are simultaneously being urged to embrace Werther and to keep him at arm's length. In short, Werther's attempt at achieving moral freedom through a suicide motivated entirely by feeling is pitted, in the most urgent sense, against a rationally governed morality

enforced by social convention. However, the novel refuses to take a clear stance. In the end, the relationship between moral freedom and suicide is treated more as a riddle than a resolution.[66] The problem of moral freedom in relation to Werther's suicide is foreshadowed throughout the novel in his more subtle but no less ambiguous attempts to achieve connections with various aspects of external reality. Each of these attempts is carried out with the noblest intentions. However, Werther's rejection of natural limits leads to critical problems which the novel ultimately leaves unresolved.

From the beginning, Werther expresses a religion of nature consistent with the philosophical positions of pantheism and deism. The former position holds that the deity and cosmos are identical (i.e. the divine is imminent in all things) while the latter holds that God created the world in such a way that it is capable of existing and operating on its

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[66] The ambiguous and ultimately indeterminate position on the success or failure of Werther's attempt to achieve moral freedom through his suicide is even reflected in Goethe's writing two versions of the novel. The first, of 1774, is more passionate and immediate; the second, of 1787 (the version treated in this dissertation) is more withdrawn in tone, and is more sympathetic to the Albert figure. Goethe's attempt to redress the balance of sympathies makes matters more, rather than less, complex. Additionally, it is worth noting that this disquieting ambivalence is reflected in Goethe's uncomfortable relationship to the novel throughout his life: he never read from it in public, and his own responses to the Werther figure ranged from the censorious to the justificatory. Many critics overlook or refuse to accept the ambiguity so essential to Werther's portrayal. For example, in his preface to The Sorrows of Young Werther (New York: Vintage, 1973), W.H. Auden, who is of the opinion that Werther is an egocentric monster (and that Goethe intended us to see him that way) cites Werther's resignation as the preeminent example of his selfishness. Auden overlooks the complexity and ambiguity of Werther's portrayal: while he is sometimes depicted egocentrically he is just as often depicted as compassionate, even selfless. Just as the novel resists taking a firm position on the success or failure of Werther's assertion of feelings through his suicide, it resists taking a definitive position on Werther's character. As Martin Swales notes, even the name "Werther" is unusual as it implies a kind of "value" ("Wert"). Yet, as Martin Swales points out in "Goethe's Prose Fiction," "what this value might be is something that haunts the novel" (Martin Swales, The Cambridge Companion to Goethe. Ed. Lesley Sharpe. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 129-146.132). Indeed it ultimately remains unresolved.

own, which God then allows it to do. As a character whose essence is based in feeling, it is unsurprising that Werther would be drawn to such positions affording such an immediate and intense experience of the external world. The first explicit expression of Werther's religion of nature comes in the letter of May 10 where he posits the divinity in everything from sun in the sky to the worms in the ground: "…closer to the earth a thousand different blades of grass become astonishing to me; when I feel…the innumerable, unfathomable forms of the little worms, the tiny gnats, and feel the hovering presence of the Almighty…the breeze of the All-Loving One who hoveringly bears and preserves us in eternal bliss"[67]. The world around Werther radiates with energy much like his own. He perceives this energy as an implicit acceptance – even an encouragement – of that which governs his life. While the feelings he expresses here are internal, they motivate him to forge an external connection with nature.

In his letter of May 4 – the first epistle – Werther writes, "Every tree, every hedge, is a bouquet of blossoms, and one would like to be a mayfly drifting about in the sea of heady aromas, able to find in it all one's nourishment" (8). His fantasy of being nourished through physical contact with the natural world suggests an incipient desire to transgress the natural boundaries separating the human from the natural world. While this desire is presented sympathetically, there is the intimation of danger, the sense that Werther's energy of feeling will inevitably lead him to nature's more destructive side. The much later letter of August 18 anticipates the novel's conclusion as Werther finally casts nature as an incomprehensible and destructive force: "Monstrous mountains

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[67] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, The Sorrows of Young Werther trans. Burton Pike (New York: Modern Library, 2004). All quotations from the novel refer to this translation.

surrounded me, abysses lay before me, and torrents rushed downwards, rivers poured beneath me, and forests and mountains resounded" (58). Even before Werther realizes nature's destructive potential, however, the feelings he experiences toward nature interfere with his ability to maintain his connection to the expressive capability of art.

Werther's intense feelings of reciprocity with nature prevent him from using art to express his internal state. In one of the most ambiguous lines of the novel, Werther declares that he is so immersed in nature and the feelings it causes in him that his art suffers from it: "I couldn't draw now, not a line, but I have never been a greater painter than in these moments" (9). Werther seems to recognize his present inability to convey his internal state of feeling to the external world, but he also recognizes the storehouse of feeling within him as the essential prerequisite of a great painter. Indeed, in this sense he has never been a greater painter. Still, he is very much aware of the dangers his feelings pose for his ability to express his internal state: "Oh, could you express this, could you breathe onto paper what lives in you as fully and warmly that it would become the mirror of your soul, as your soul is the mirror of infinite God!" (9). Despite this admission, Werther maintains that feelings for nature – not adherence to abstract rules – is what forms the great artist: "A person who forms himself according to the rules will never produce anything tasteless or bad…but against all that, all rules, say what you will, destroy the genuine feeling for nature and its true expression!" (16). Werther is presented as a failed artist who is conflicted between his overwhelming desire to follow feeling and his realization that meaningful expression requires strict adherence to rules and limitations. Ultimately, the novel suggests a necessary balance between the two, but one

that Werther is unable to achieve: he is able only to produce the occasional sketch and grows increasingly frustrated at his inability to express his true inner feelings.[68]

His dilemma with expressing himself through art is also mirrored in his ability to love. At the end of the May 26 letter, Werther draws an analogy between a lover who is consumed by feeling for his beloved and one who follows the rules. He recognizes that the latter lover is "useful" but mocks this usefulness as "over and done with, and if he is an artist, his art as well" (17). Werther ends the letter with the image of feeling triumphing over reason, musing that the day will come when "comfortable gentlemen" are destroyed by the power of feeling which surges like a great flood, destroying everything in its path. The letter points toward his doomed relationship wherein Werther attempts to put into practical application his life of feeling.

Similar to the way in which he tries (but fails) to use art to express and validate his feelings is the way Werther attempts to seek validation of his feelings from children. He glorifies children for their unabashed expression of feeling, yet fails to recognize that children are not tied to the same limits as adults. He fails to recognize that a child's happiness is an unreasonable gauge of an adult's, and that their significance in his life is mediated rather than direct. He occasionally misinterprets the attention of children as genuine affection rather than childish self-centeredness. Moreover, as Burton Pike points out, there are subtle clues throughout the novel which suggest obstacles for Werther's

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[68] In his Introduction to his translation, Burton Pike notes an implicit contrast between Werther ("the weak artist") and Goethe ("the strong artist") in that Werther is unable to use art to bridge the gap between his self and the external world while Goethe is able to do so through the novel itself: "Goethe is very much in control of a novel about a character who spins increasingly out of control...The letters are constructed to make the feelings they present come alive" See Burton Pike, introduction, The Sorrows of Young Werther, By Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. (New York: Modern Library, 2004) x-xi.

attempt to project his feelings onto children (ix). While Werther is waiting for Lotte on his way to the ball, he watches her give bread to her brothers and sisters and notices that "the little ones were looking at me sideways from some distance off" (23). When he kisses her brother, he notices that he has a runny nose. In the July 6 letter, when he picks up Lotte's little sister Malchen, she screams and bursts into tears. In the end, however, the novel is ambiguous about the children's reaction to Werther and to the feeling-based approach to life he represents: when he dies, for example, the children react to his death with emotions similar to those they might have in reacting to the death of their own father (Pike viii).

Werther's relationship with literature is also problematic. In the same way that he attempts to use nature, art, and children to bridge the gap between his inner feelings and the outer world, Werther appropriates the Homeric vision through his reading of Homer's Odyssey, his constant companion throughout the first half of the novel. Werther likens himself to Odysseus in his sense of purpose, and also attempts (unsuccessfully) to use Homer's poem to establish a connection to a mythic, infinite realm. However, as Muenzer writes, ."..the seductive charms of his diminutive version of Homer's world can hardly belie his trimming of its ancient concepts to sizes more appropriate to his own situation" (Muenzer 19). Muenzer also points out that Werther's reading of Homer in the original Greek is analogous to his insistence on expressing his inner state in an awkwardly ancient idiom – one which, in fact, is not understood by the world around him.

In the second half of the novel, Werther becomes captivated by Ossian's "dim figures in a murky landscape who are swept away by the language of feeling" (Pike xi).

However, rather than seeking validation of his feelings through a connection to a world outside himself as he had sought in Homer, he recognizes precisely the opposite in Ossian. In the author's elegiac rhythms mourning the passing of an heroic age, Werther recognizes his own incompatibility with the world. Ossian recalls for him an irretrievable time of accomplishment, and Werther uses him to acknowledge the commemorative power of a song that praises effort. In Ossian's vanquished warrior on the Gaelic plain, Werther sees a semblance of himself. If he cannot be redeemed by the world around him, he can at least exert his will upon it. In this way, his reading of Ossian can be seen as a prefatory step in his suicide.[69]

Werther's attempts to connect with and obtain validation from nature, art, children, and literature are certainly significant with regard to his growing resistance against prevailing moral norms and social conventions, but his desire to achieve union with Lotte is undoubtedly the most dramatic attempt to reciprocate and validate his feelings. It is a clear illustration of his conflicted relationship with the external world, and is particularly relevant with regard to his eventual suicide. Werther's ultimate failure to achieve a connection with Lotte signifies for him the final rejection of his feelings as a basis for his life. In effect, Lotte's rejection leaves Werther with no alternatives for expressing his feelings. His suicide finally occurs, not as an attempt to achieve another

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[69] Of course, even Werther's empathy with Ossian is ambiguous: "The Songs of Ossian" which Goethe translated into German from English were a hoax. Goethe was aware of their questionable authenticity, which adds another level of ambiguity to Werther's use of Ossian to understand himself. In some sense, Werther's use of this literary work to celebrate his own failure to connect with the world – and to take reassurance in his failure – is predicated upon a work which is, in some sense, also illusory.

connection, but as a desperate assertion of his feelings against stifling moral norms and social conventions.

The letter of June 16th describes the night of the ball, Werther's first encounter with Lotte. From the moment Werther sees her, she appears to him as the archetype of feeling, and he experiences an immediate attraction.[70] However, Lotte is torn between two worlds. On the one hand, she identifies with Werther and demonstrates the importance of feelings in her own life. On the other hand, she is a product of the social world and accepts it. Werther seems not to recognize the latter; instead, he focuses squarely on her interest in feelings. On the ride to the ball, Lotte makes it clear that she is drawn to books that allow her to recognize her own comfortable world of social convention, but she does not deny that sentimental fiction like Oliver Goldsmith's The Vicar of Wakefield still occasionally enthralls her.[71] The reader gets the sense that Lotte has achieved a balance unobtainable to Werther. Yet he is unable to see and appreciate this. Instead he feels only the exhilaration of his reciprocity of feeling and indulges in activities, such as the dance, which manifest his long desired attempt to achieve wholeness. In describing the dance, he expresses a vision of the body and a

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[70] Lotte's unique circumstances – being the oldest child in her family, temperamentally suited to child-rearing, and having a mother who died and left her in charge – encourage Werther to idealize her as a virgin mother. She, like the Virgin Mary, plays an intercessional role in her community; the dying Frau M., for example, wants Lotte by her side while she dies.

[71] Goethe's "editor's" strange note about the omission of "several German authors" (presumably sentimental authors like Oliver Goldsmith, author of The Vicar of Wakefield) implies that those who share Lotte's taste do not need the names of the authors since they will "feel it in [their] hearts." "No one else," he claims, "needs to know it" (25). This suggests that he does not wish others who have not already encountered these sentimental novels to begin to read and be influenced by them. The editor's attitude toward feeling (and, by extension, towards Werther) is reflected later in the cold, clinical tone with which he narrates Werther's suicide.

consciousness in perfect union.[72] Not insignificantly, Werther interrupts his description of the dance with the promise that if he loses his connection with Lotte he will take his own life. This suggests that his need to achieve reciprocity of feeling with Lotte – validation for his own approach to life – is the most crucial connection of all.

The incident which Werther believes solidifies his connection with her occurs on the evening of the dance once the thunderstorm passes. As they watch the remnants of the rain and hear the distant thunder rumbling, Werther revels in Lotte's obvious expressions of feeling. As he sees her eyes fill with tears, she places her hand on his and exclaims "Klopstock!"[73] This reference to the eighteenth-century poet famous for expressing extreme states of feeling confirms, in Werther's mind, a successfully forged connection. However, in the days following the ball (after Werther moves to Wahlheim to be near Lotte) it becomes clear that her feelings for him are decidedly ambiguous. Lotte is obviously fond of Werther, but she does not abandon herself to him the way he does to her. The novel presents several hints suggesting that Werther's connection to

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[72] As many commentators have said, the image of the dancer as one with the dance constantly recurs in nineteenth-century European literature as the palpable expression of a desperately longed-for ontological wholeness: "We were delighted for a while with all the diverse interweaving of arms…To have the most charming person in my arms and fly around with her like lightning, so that everything around us vanished…" (26-7). The feeling of wholeness he experiences when he dances with Lotte (made possible by the reciprocity of feeling with her) is contrasted throughout the novel by the feeling of distance and fragmentation he feels when confronted with moral and social conventions. For example, he later writes of feeling like a spectator at a puppet theater: "I play along, or rather, I am played like a marionette and sometimes I grasp my neighbor by his wooden hand in recoil in horror" (53). Indeed, the trope of being "played" is helpful in thinking about Werther's suicide: it occurs at the moment when he neither can nor will be played no more.

[73] Lotte's invocation of Klopstock in response to the thunderstorm probably refers to his famous poem "Die Frühlingsfeyer" ("Spring Celebration") that contained admiration of a thunderstorm.

Lotte is less than ideal. For example, he attempts to commemorate his happiness by sketching her, but he is unable to produce the sketch and must settle for an image of her silhouette; when he berates Herr Schmidt for his gloomy moods, Lotte scolds him; Lotte sprinkles sand on her letters which gets into Werther's teeth when he raises them to his mouth.

In the letters leading up to August 12, Werther realizes that his feelings are inconsistent with external moral and social norms. Werther's morality of feeling becomes more starkly delineated. For example, when Albert returns, Werther says that no matter how well he knows what he should do ("Albert has arrived, and I shall leave." (46)), his heart will ultimately steer his course. In the August 8 letter, Werther reacts to Wilhelm's rationalistic "either-or" approach; while he admits that Wilhelm is basically correct and even grants him the basic truth of his argument, he tries to "steal [his] way between either and or" (48). In effect, Werther accepts Wilhelm's rational moral approach as a general (i.e. theoretical) proposition, but rejects it when it is applied to specific situations: "feelings and ways of acting are as variously shaded as gradations between a hawk nose and pug nose" (48). As if to foreshadow his ultimate dilemma, Werther draws an analogy between the rational "either-or" approach and the decision that a terminally ill person must make either to end his life or to continue to live it: "But can you ask the unfortunate person whose life is slowly, inexorably ebbing away in a creeping illness, can you desire of him that he should through a dagger stroke end his misery once and for all?" (49). In a move that foreshadows his own situation, Werther suggests here that the act of suicide is the ultimate revelation of the irrelevance of a

rational moral approach to the world. The choice to live or to die, he claims, is one that ultimately resides in the realm of feeling, and this is, after all, the most important choice.

The passing references to suicide in earlier sections become central on August 12 as Werther describes suicide as an example of an act in which reason has failed to satisfy the self, and passion must therefore take over. Of course, in his debate with Albert Werther is speaking on a very personal level. He is quite comfortable with his suicidal tendencies. In speaking in defense of suicide he is not upholding an abstract argument, but is defending himself. Werther's right to suicide has become, in many ways, the basis of his own being. The August 12 letter is significant for a number of reasons: First, it signifies that Werther himself is aware of the intense opposition to his way of life. Second, it establishes an explicit demarcation between his moral approach and that of Albert. Finally, the letter suggests that – now that Werther has been or is soon to be rejected by the external forces to which he attempts connection and validation – his self-inflicted death is the only viable means of expressing his feeling-based approach to the world. A closer look at the August 12 letter is useful for understanding Werther's ultimate act.

The letter describes a conversation Werther has had with Albert about suicide, and effectively highlights two opposed moral positions. The conversation begins with Werther noticing two pistols belonging to Albert hanging on the wall. Werther asks to borrow them, and Albert indicates that they are only hanging there unused. As Werther takes them down, Albert begins to tell how, when his servant once was polishing and loading them, one accidentally went off, shooting his maid in the thumb. Albert now acts "prudently" by keeping the pistols out of harm's way. As Albert begins to preach about

man's tendency to make exceptions to rules, and to justify his actions, "to limit modify, add, and subtract, until nothing remains of the matter" (51), Werther – in a whimsical action indicative of the fleeting nature of the feeling motivating him ("succumbed to a whim") – raises a pistol to his head in a gesture of suicide. This seemingly insignificant gesture leads to a discussion of the act that pits Albert's morality based on reason against Werther's morality based on feeling. When Albert declares that he cannot imagine how a person could be so foolish as to commit suicide and then expresses his repugnance at the thought, Werther reacts to Albert's harshness and lack of empathy, but he also raises an important question relevant to his morality of feeling. While Albert sees suicide as an abstract "thought," Werther sees it as a highly particularized action. His moral approach then requires his taking into account specific situations ("inner circumstances…the causes, why it happened, why it happened to happen") rather than passing judgment based on abstractions, rules, and generalizations. Werther's central contention is that there are always significant exceptions to rules and that this ultimately shows that rules are essentially useless. Albert expresses one of the dominant eighteenth-century views of suicide: non-religious intellectuals were inclined to regard suicide as irrational; "töricht" ("foolish") is Albert's word.

His argument with Albert in defense of man's right to commit suicide occurs in three distinct phases. Each phase moves closer to an explicit embrace of the individual's freedom to reject a rationally-based morality; his argument culminates in the claim that suicide is the paradigmatic action of moral freedom based on specific situations driven by feeling. In the first phase of the argument, Werther explains how certain extreme situations require extreme reactions, and that this is an expected result of the experience

of intense feeling. After reluctantly granting that certain actions may be "depraved," Werther offers two examples of crimes committed because of situations which incite extreme feeling: in the first case, a man steals food to avoid starving; in the second case, a man murders his wife and her lover after discovering their affair. Because these actions are motivated by intense feelings, Werther holds that they are exempt from rational law, moral condemnation, and even criminal prosecution. He goes so far as to refer to civil laws as "cold-blooded pedants" who, when confronted with the potency of feelings, would "let themselves be moved and suspend their punishment." (52). This comment reiterates two points Werther had made previously in the novel: laws (in this case, civil) are disconnected from human experience and are therefore irrelevant to morality and that, in any case, feelings ultimately have supremacy over rational laws. Albert indicates that a person motivated to commit robbery or murder due to extreme feelings is similar to a drunk or insane person whose rational faculties are completely overcome.[74]

Although Werther scoffs at Albert's elevation of reason over feeling and at his making an immediate moral judgment without studying the specifics of the situation, he does not offer an objection to Albert's analogy of the drunk and insane. Werther suggests that these states are similar to being overcome by feeling in that, as he himself has experienced, they too can free one from the artificially confining world of rational moral laws:

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[74] Albert's position on suicide is reminiscent of Kant's who, in the Lectures, writes that ." . . the mention of suicide makes us shudder . . . Suicide is the most abominable of the vices which inspire dread and hate . . ." See Lectures on Ethics. Trans. Louis Infield. (N.p.: Evanston, 1963) 124.

> O you reasonable people! I cried, smiling. Passion! Drunkenness! Madness! You stand there so calmly, so uninvolved, you moral people! You scold the drinker, loathe the weak-minded…I have been drunk more than once, my passions were never far from madness, and I don't regret either. (52)

Werther's point again is that an abstract moral rule cannot account for, much less judge, specific situations. Rules are cold, aloof, and lead only to the vilification of those who break them. Werther suggests that great deeds always circumvent the rules in that they are motivated by the vagaries of feeling and are "free, noble, [and] unexpected" (52). Much to Albert's disagreement, Werther suggests that suicide is just such a deed. Albert's response to Werther's implication is predictable: he claims that Werther exaggerates and that one cannot regard suicide as anything but a weakness since, he claims, it is easier to die than to endure a life of agony. However, Werther rebuts this claim by offering specific analogies to suicide in which feelings motivate resistance to external interference in order to achieve a degree of freedom: "A people that sighs under the unbreakable yoke of a tyrant, can you call that a weakness if they finally boil over and sunder their chains? A man who, gripped by horror when his house has caught fire, feels all his strength tense and easily carries away burdens that he could barely move when he is calm" (53). Far from being weak, Werther claims that the people who mount this sort of resistance are the epitome of strength. Albert's failure to see the relevance of these examples to suicide is especially striking: his abstract, theoretical style of argumentation trumps an argument comprised of concrete examples and situations. These respective styles of argumentation reflect the constitutive elements of their argument: Werther sees

suicide as a particular act, driven by feeling, which resists subordination under generalized moral rules while Albert can only see it as a transgression of these rules.[75]

In short, Werther and Albert each represent fundamentally contrasting moral paradigms. This realization leads Werther to enter a third phase of the argument, which utilizes generalizations rather than specific circumstances and examples. He begins by describing how human nature imposes limits on the feelings one can endure, and that once these limits are surpassed, one yearns for relief. As he has throughout the novel, Werther sees the world as a force field of feeling, and implies that just as feelings are the basis of all action, they too can result in overwhelming resistance from rational and social forces external to them. Werther means to convince Albert that the person who commits suicide is like one who dies of an illness, and that it is just as absurd to call the former a coward as the latter. When one is "sick" with overwhelming feelings of despair caused by failed connections to the external world, it is absurd to think that the "calm, rational person" is unable to do anything to save him. Not unexpectedly, however, this explanation does not convince Albert, and Werther moves on to the final phase of the argument.

It begins with the example of a young woman who commits suicide after having been spurned by her lover. The young woman had led a mundane life and "knew no pleasure beyond strolling around the town on Sunday" (54). She was an emotional person at her core, but it was not until she came across a man who evoked "an unknown feeling [which] drew her straight to the goal" (55) that she experienced the intensity of

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[75] Although Schiller is adamantly against feeling as a basis for moral action, he too argues that when freedom is at stake, we should resist subordinating our actions to abstract moral rules (moral duty). See Chapter 1.

feeling with which Werther himself is so familiar. The woman Werther described can be seen as a version of himself. As is the case for him, at the moment this woman feels the greatest hope of a connection to her beloved – as the woman "stretches out her arms to embrace all her desires" (55) – her lover deserts her and the connection disappears. She is then "driven to desperation by the horrible need in her heart, [and] jumps off in order to suffocate all her torments in an enveloping, embracing death." (55).

By suggesting to Albert that man is governed by feeling and that reason is an artificial human construct imposed on the individual, Werther presents a serious charge against the rational moral approach typical of the values of the Enlightenment. Albert's reaction to the example of the rejected girl is a case in point. He maintains that someone more experienced and more rational would behave differently. In an act of dismissal motivated by extreme frustration, Werther reaches for his hat, replying "…a person is a person, and the little bit of reason that one may have comes barely or not at all into play when passions rage and the limits of mankind press on one" (56). The language of feeling does not speak the language of reason, and Werther leaves.

The letter ends irresolutely with one paradigm pitted against the other. In light of the rejection Werther faces from the stifling moral and social worlds of which he is part, he has now set the stage for the use of his self-inflicted death as a means of achieving unity with cosmic nature through the expression of his feelings.

In the months to come, Werther's feelings grow more intense. On the one hand, Lotte seems to empathize with them, as shown by her being overtaken by feeling when Werther reads Ossian to her. She is pulled into his magnetic fervor and really seems to love him. On the other hand, when Werther kisses her she orders him out of her house,

never to see her again. As it turns out, this is the final act of resistance that drives Werther to the only outlet available for achieving freedom from the moral and social restrictions governing the external world.

In the final section of the novel, Werther's mood darkens and an "editor" ["der Herausgeber"] is brought in to give a semblance of order to Werther's often incoherent and undated final jottings. At one level this editor is a dispassionate onlooker, someone who, for example, gives an account of Werther's suicide and who reports events as facts occurring in a world of outward cause and effect. When the novel shifts from Werther's letters to the narrative of the editor; however, the effect is both shocking and liberating. At this level of structural statement, then, the text passes judgment on Werther as it moves from inwardness to outwardness. Yet it is important to stress that the editor's attitude is ambiguous: he is anything but a strident or censorious judge, but is rather deeply sympathetic to Werther. He is someone who has sympathy for the tumult and enthusiasm that Werther represents without letting that appreciation become emulation. In an epigraph before the novel, he introduces himself as an assiduous compiler of Werther's letters, thereby legitimizing both himself as documentary agent and the authenticity of the text that follows (i.e. the fiction is that these are genuinely the letters that Werther wrote). Yet, the documentary mode gives way to a more assertive one: we are told that we will be grateful to have this record of Werther's temperament because we will not be able to deny him our tears and admiration. Notably, the plural mode of address – "ihr" – then contracts to singular – "du" – as the individual reader is urged to make this little book his or her friend, although a note of warning is sounded about allowing the book to replace all other human contact. The "little book" is, as it were,

pressed into our hands, but it comes with a warning. We are urged both to identify with Werther and to keep him at arm's length. His feeling-based approach to the world is treated with simultaneous understanding and skepticism.

The suicide itself is carefully stage-managed by Werther, but botched. In contrast to the long, effusive letter Werther had written to Lotte a few hours earlier, the aftermath of his death is reported in spare, short sentences, utterly factual and unsentimental. The suicide is clearly motivated by Lotte's rejection, but the act itself is Werther's own rejection of the social and moral conventions that have stifled his approach to the world based on feeling. Whether Werther's suicide finally legitimizes his philosophy of life and achieves success in bringing about his desired freedom is unclear. His calmness is carefully staged – there is the single glass of wine and the open copy of Lessing's Emilia Galotti (1772).[76] However, in the end, Werther leaves the world in an utterly inelegant manner. His final Romantic gesture ends unromantically with his messy corpse:

> When the doctor came to the unfortunate man he found him on the floor, beyond help, his pulse still beating, all his limbs paralyzed. He had shot himself in the head above the right eye, the brain was protruding. Pointlessly, a vein was opened in his arm, the blood flowed, he was still gasping for breath. (148)

This ambiguous portrayal extends to the last sentences of the novel: he is embraced by the workmen who carry his coffin but no clergyman attends his funeral. As the actual

[76] The details of Werther's suicide, including the reference to Emilia Galotti, were taken wholesale from the suicide of Goethe's distant acquaintance Jerusalem. An explanation of its resonance would go far beyond the scope of this dissertation.

suicide suggests, the success of his final declaration of freedom from the stifling moral and social conventions that surround him is left an open question.

CHAPTER THREE

Suicide and Spiritual Freedom:

Hölderlin's The Death of Empedocles

Hölderlin's Death of Empedocles (Der Tod des Empedokles), a fragmentary tragedy written in three parts between 1798 and 1799, deals with the suicide of the fifth century B.C. philosopher-prophet who was reported to have jumped into the crater of Mount Etna.[77] Hölderlin's evolving thoughts on suicide suggest a tension between egoistic and altruistic suicide – a tension implicit in many of the texts discussed thus far and one that has significant implications for the relationship between suicide and freedom.[78]

The first fragment depicts Empedocles' suicide as the means by which he extinguishes his individual consciousness in order to achieve spiritual transformation and

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[77] Although Empedocles was – historically – a philosopher-prophet, and Hölderlin presents him as such in Empedocles, he can be seen as a substitute for the poet-prophet which is the subject of Hölderlin's greatest elegies, which were written immediately after the third fragment of Empedocles – Bread and Wine (Brod und Wein) of 1800-1801 and The Poet's Calling (die Himmlischen) of 1801. This connection will be discussed later when Empedocles, in the third fragment, becomes able to articulate in language that which is otherwise beyond the scope of human consciousness. By the end of the third fragment, his status as a philosopher-prophet becomes virtually interchangeable with that of the poet-prophet.

[78] Hölderlin had struggled with the sources on Empedocles but was ultimately unable to forge them into a unified form. By 1800 they were left in fragmentary drafts. The sources on Empedocles are similarly fragmentary. They are primarily the fragment (450 lines) of Emepdocles' philosophical works, the eulogy written by Lucretius, and the treatise written by Diogenes Laertius entitled The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers. All these sources are discussed in Walter Kranz, Empedocles, antike Gestalt und romantische Neuschöpfung. (Zurich: n.p., 1949); Uvo Hoelscher, Empedocles und Hölderlin (Frankfurt am Main: n.p., 1965); and Friedrich Beissner, "Hölderlins Trauerspiel Der Tod des Empedocles in seinen drei Fassungen" in Hölderlin: Reden und Aufsaetze (Weimer, n.p., 1961).

freedom through unity with divine nature. In the second fragment, there is the suggestion that Empedocles commits suicide at least partly for the benefit of others. By the third fragment, it becomes clear that Empedocles commits suicide so that others might achieve their own spiritual freedom through the release of his spirit upon them. In other words, Empedocles' suicide can be understood in terms a "transition from the subjective to the objective" [79] – from a focus on individual to collective freedom.

As Hölderlin's position with regard to Empedocles' suicide evolves, he introduces significant plot variations. In order to understand how these variations contribute to Hölderlin's thoughts on suicide, it is necessary to offer a detailed plot summary of the first fragment followed by a comparative discussion of the plot variations in the second and third drafts.

In Frankfurt during the summer of 1797, Hölderlin wrote notes (now known as the "Frankfurter Plan") before beginning the first draft of the play. In these notes he envisions Empedocles as an idealist and pantheist – someone who hates living in a civilization that requires him to spend his life focused on specific tasks and details. This kind of existence results in fragmentation and disconnection from other living things, i.e. an existence in which one is unable to experience the totality of life. He is separated from ultimate reality by the forms and modes which his mind imposes on experience, and remains restless and dissatisfied even in the best of circumstances just because they are *particular* circumstances; he longs to embrace the *whole* of life – in short, to obtain spiritual freedom from the "law of succession" in which eternal reality is broken up into

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[79] The phrase occurs in Hölderlin's outline for the third version of the play and is discussed in more detail in Lawrence Ryan's standard, brief introduction to the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Menzler, 1967) 59-60.

the successive states of our temporal existence.[80] Hölderlin envisions Empedocles as infected with the disease of modern civilization and longing for a way out – a way, Hölderlin writes, to live "like a god":

> Empedocles, through his feelings and his philosophy long disposed to cultural hatred, to contempt for all very definite activity, all interest directed at diverse objects, a deadly enemy of all one-sided existence, and therefore dissatisfied, restless, miserable even in really beautiful conditions, merely because they are specific conditions and [because such conditions would] wholly fulfill him only when he felt in the great accord of all living things, merely because he cannot live and love in [such conditions] with all-present heart, intensely like a god…, merely because, as soon as his heart and his thought embrace what is present, he is bound to the law of succession…(Major Poetry 49)[81]

Based on this characterization of Empedocles, Hölderlin began the first (and longest) draft of the play in 1798.

The first scene of the play has the character of a prologue. It is morning in Emedocles' garden. Panthea, daughter of Kritias (the ruler of Agrigentum) tells her

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[80] A somewhat similar view of time and eternity is expressed by Plato in the Timaeus, which Hölderlin is known to have read. There time is depicted as the moving image of eternity, itself immobile, indivisible, and immutable It is conceivable Hölderlin might also have been influenced by Rousseau's doctrine that modern civilization is a corruption of the state of nature, and by the 6th Letter of Schiller's On the Aesthetic Education of Man.

[81] I am indebted to Richard Unger's translations and interpretation of Hölderlin's Death of Empedocles in Hölderlin's Major Poetry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975) and in Friedrich Hölderlin (Boston: Twayne, 1984). Quotations from the former are noted as "Major Poetry" and from the latter as "Hölderlin" followed by page numbers.

friend Delia that Empedocles – regarded by the people of Agrigentum as an exalted, messianic figure with power over nature – saved her life when she was desperately ill, but has now isolated himself in his garden. The second scene introduces Empedocles' enemies Kritias and Hermocrates (respectively the secular and religious authorities of Agrigentum), who admit that they had previously felt threatened by Emepedocles since the gods had favored him and because he had caused a flouting of convention. Hermocrates declares, however, that Empedocles has now fallen from grace, and that he has been isolated since he had thought of himself as the gods' equal. Still, they believe he represents a danger, and they decide to lead the Agrigentines to Empedocles' garden so they can see the depth of his despair and helpessness, in the hope that this will end their admiration of him. He also plans to curse Empedocles and expel him from the city.

In Scene Three, Empedocles recounts his own version of the events leading up to his fall. In a soliloquy, he tells how he who was once the priest of Nature but has now been forsaken by the gods. The divine forces of life from the depths of the world had flowed together in him: spiritually wanting men had come to him for nourishment. He admits that he ignored the fact that the gods had given him this privilege because they loved him, but that he had abused their love and began to regard himself as master over them. Describing his own state of affairs, Empedocles proclaims: "When the genii of the world [i.e. the gods], full of love, forgot themselves in you, you thought of yourself and fancied, pitiable fool, that the benevolent ones were sold to you, the Heavenly, and served you like timid slaves!" (Major Poetry 55) Unger reports that from the beginning of the play Empedocles is a "kind of repentant Faust, chiefly interested in proclaiming his guilt

and finding some way to be reconciled with the deities he has offended" (Major Poetry 55). Indeed, he recognizes that he deserves the gods' harshest punishment.

In Scene Four, Empedocles is joined by his student Pausanius, who questions how he could have fallen from so high and attempts to confront him. Empedocles explicitly equates his disrespect of the gods with disrespect for the divinity of Nature: "The life of Nature, how should it still be holy to me as before! The gods had become serviceable to me, I alone was god and proclaimed it in insolent pride" (Hölderlin 42).

In Scene Five – perhaps the central scene of the first act – Kritias, Hermocrates, and a crowd of Agrigentines enter Empedocles' garden. Hermocrates calls them to witness that their great hero, whom they had supposed ascended into heaven, is still here on earth in a state of miserable weakness and despondency. Empedocles replies by bitterly denouncing Hermocrates, while Pausanias rebukes the crowd for taking sides with the priest. Seizing this favorable opportunity, Hermocrates pronounces a formal curse on Empedocles and banishes him from the city. Unwilling or unable to resist, Empedocles only asks that the curse and decree of banishment should not apply to his young friend Pausanias. However, this too is refused, and the people even threaten to become violent with him if he says another word. This is too much for Emepdokles; in anger, he in turn places a dreadful curse on the Agrigentines.

Scene Six begins with the Agrigentines withdrawing from Emepdokles' garden. As they do, Empedocles detains Kritias and advises him to let Panthea leave Sicily, as she would never find a worthy husband among such servile people. Kritias hesitates to accept this advice, but he is evidently doubtful of the justice of the penalty imposed on Empedocles, and it is with pity that he bids him go his way. In Scene Seven, Empedocles

gives a second soliloquy and says he will go *his* way – presumably meaning the way to death through suicide (the first reference to suicide in the fragment).

In Scene Eight, Empedocles' three slaves come to him requesting that they be allowed to continue in his service. However, Empedocles is unwilling to let them share the dreadful consequences of the curse pronounced on him, so he frees them. Just as the first act opened with the appearance of Panthea and Delia in what was virtually a prologue, the act ends – in scene nine – with their reappearance and a corresponding epilogue in which Panthea expresses despair at the loss of her hero, while Delia still hopes to save the situation by an appeal to Kritias.

Having resolved to jump into to the volcanic flames of Mount Etna, the Second Act opens with Pausanius and Empedocles on its slopes.[82] It is an afternoon of blazing sunshine and Empedocles is thirsty and footsore, but on the heights of the mountain his state of mind begins to improve. Somewhat encouraged, Pausanias asks for shelter in a peasant's hut. Then, in the next scene, the peasant who recognizes that Empedocles as the outlaw of Agrigentum refuses to help, but Pausanias will accept no refusal and threatens to burn down the peasant's hut if he should allow any harm to be done to Empedocles.

The third scene of Act Two is the turning point of the play. The scene begins with Pausanias bringing his master some clear, cool water from a mountain stream, which Empedocles drinks to the gods who had once befriended him, to Nature and to "his return" (his imminent suicide in Etna). He is immediately transfigured. His former

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[82] A considerable time must have passed since the first and second scenes – enough to allow Empedocles and Pausanias to travel on foot from Agrigrentum via Syracuse to the slopes of Etna.

divine inspiration is restored to him and he feels that he is about the experience something more significant than ever before.

The fourth scene of Act Two begins with Kritias and Hermocrates on the slopes of Mount Etna where, after informing Empedocles that he has been forgiven, they offer to make him king. In response, Empedocles chastises them (and especially the king), insisting that it is too late: the time for kings has passed, and the people should prepare for self-rule. He refuses to return home with them and declares his suicidal intention.[83] As consolation, however, he offers them a farewell message ("ein Heiligtum") – his holiest message, whose delivery he had long postponed. In it, he urges the townspeople to forget the conventions of society and direct their attention to divine Nature. This, he maintains, will allow them to be kindled with pantheistic rapture, join hands in brotherhood, and (re)construct their society in a spirit of peace of harmony: "So dare it! What you have inherited, what you have acquired, what your fathers' / mouths told and taught you, law and custom, the names of the old gods – forget / them boldly and, as if newborn raise your eyes up to divine Nature (Hölderlin 44). He then declares that his ostracism and humiliation was preordained by the gods in order to signify that the time of his purification had arrived. Now that he has delivered his long-awaited message, he must depart in order not to be a distraction to the Agrigentines. When they urge to reconsider, Empedocles states that his decision to commit suicide is final:

> You may live as long as you have breath, not I. He must betimes depart, through whom the spirit spoke. Divine Nature often reveals herself divinely through men. Yet once he mortal, whose heart she filled with her

[83] Empedocles' insistence on death seems timed so that it immediately follows his pardon by his antagonists, thus removing the impression of external compulsion.

> bliss, has proclaimed her, O let her then break the vessel, so that it might not serve for another use, and what is divine become a human work. (Major Poetry 56)

Empedocles' sermon certainly contains inspiring words for the townspeople. He hopes that they too will become infused with pantheistic rapture so that the divine presence in nature will lead them to peace and prosperity. However, Empedocles' true focus is on himself, and he makes it very clear that the townspeople will be left to their own devices. Since his individual consciousness had led him to the sin of pride against the gods, the only way to reunite with them is to extinguish this consciousness and return his body to divine nature. His individual spiritual freedom is at stake.

In the final moments of the play, Empedocles urges Pausanius to prepare a last supper of bread and wine so that they might offer a hymn of praise to the muses. The fragment ends with Empedocles' soliloquy of gratefulness to Jupiter, whom he prays will liberate him through his self-immolation at Etna.[84]

Hölderlin draws an important analogy between Empedocles and Christ. However, while there are many similarities between them (both are religious leaders with miraculous powers who freely submit to their deaths, are able to heal the sick, love children, control natural forces, etc.) there is a critical difference which illustrates Empedocles' suicidal motivation. Christ's death (arguably a suicide itself) serves to

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[84] There are two additional scenes that occur after Empedocles' final soliloquy but before his death. They consist of a conversation between Delia and Panthea and between Delia, Panthea, and Pausanias. In the first fragment of the play, these conversations have little significance. However, in the second fragment, they become more important because they express ambiguity about the nature and moral justification of Empedocles' suicide. It will be argued that this ambiguity suggests the possibility that Empedocles commits suicide not only for himself, but for the spiritual freedom of the people of Agrigentum.

redeem mankind from sin and restore it to grace, whereas Empedocles' suicide is meant to restore *him*. Empedocles' suicide is presented in the first fragment as a tool for achieving individual spiritual freedom. He is motivated by a desire to be reunited to the gods through self-destruction. By extinguishing his individual consciousness – which had led him to his sin of pride against the gods – he makes an offering to the gods by returning his body to the totality of nature.[85] He sacrifices himself in order to achieve ecstatic, divine immediacy. Unger notes that Empedocles' leap into Etna is not merely "symbolic"; instead, it is "the actual destructive merging of his mortal being in the infinite divine Being of Nature" (Major Poetry 57). His death is similarly conceived in the ode "Emepdocles," the first sketch of which probably dates from around the same time (1797) that Hölderlin wrote the Frankfurter Plan and the first fragment:

Das Leben suchst du, suchst, und es quillt und glänzt
Ein göttlich Feuer tief aus der Erde dir,
Und du in schauderndem Verlangen
Wirfst dich hinab, in des Aetna Flammen.

So schmelzt' im Weine Perlen der Übermuth
Der Königin; und mochte sie doch! hättst du
Nur deinen Reichtum nicht, o Dichter
Hin in den gährenden Kelch geopfert!

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[85] Emil Staiger has suggested that Empedocles' impulse to abandon himself to the divine fire resembles the passionate ardor of eighteenth-century Pietism with which Hölderlin was familiar. See "Der Opfertod von Hölderlins Empedocles," Hölderlin-Jahrbuch, 13. Bd., (1963-64) 2.

Doch heilig bist du mir, wie der Erde Macht,
Die dich hinwegnahm, kühner Getödteter!
Und folgen möcht' ich in die Tiefe,
Hielte die Liebe mich nicht, dem Helden.

You seek life, seek, and out of the earth
Flows and blazes forth a godly fire to you,
And you, in shuddering yearning,
Cast yourself down into Etna's flames.

Thus the queen melted pearls of haughtiness
In wine; let them melt! if only you
O poet, Had not sacrificed your riches
In the bubbling chalice!

Yet you are holy to me, as is the power of the earth,
That took you away, bold victim!
And gladly would I follow this hero into the depths,
If love did not hold me back.[86]

In the first fragment, Hölderlin makes very little connection between Empedocles' suicide and the collective freedom of the townspeople. The salvation of others is merely

[86] Friedrich Hölderlin, "Empedokles." Friedrich Hölderlin Sämtliche Werke und Briefe in drei Bänden, ed. Jochen Schmidt. (Frankfurt: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1994), 1:241. My translation.

an afterthought. Empedocles has no expectation that his suicide will have any effect on them except to leave them contemplating their own course of action on earth.

After abandoning the first fragment in 1799, Hölderlin apparently began the second fragment in the early summer of that year. In this version (even more fragmentary and less than half the length of the first), Hölderlin omitted many of the scenes he decided were inessential in order to shorten the play. The general plot and character of Empedocles, however, remain the same. In addition to the omission of some scenes, there are some important variations relevant for understanding the nature and motivation of Empedocles' suicide.

The most significant changes in this version occur in the first, fourth and fifth scenes.[87] Scene One contains the conversation between Hermocrates and the ruler of Agrigentum (now called Mekades). While the latter basically remains the same character, Hermocrates is significantly altered from a fearful and hateful character who expressed nothing but antipathy for Empedocles to a compassionate, wise character who understands and, to some degree, even sympathizes with Empedocles' plight. While the priest is somewhat sympathetic, however, he still feels justified in bringing about Empedocles' downfall and humiliation, since he believes that Empedocles acted sacrilegiously by revealing the mysteries of the gods to common people.

The fourth and fifth scenes of the second version are substantively different from the first version in that they include a discussion of the morality of Emepdocles' suicide.

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[87] There are only minor changes in the second and the third scenes: in the second scene of this fragment Empedocles recounts his fall in allegorical – rather than analytic, and in the third scene Empedocles' and Pausanias' render their speeches more clearly and concisely. While it has been considerably rewritten, the content remains essentially the same.

Panthea, in the fourth scene, is sympathetic to and approving of Empedocles' decision to commit suicide, while Delia expresses misgivings.[88] In the fifth scene, Pausanias appears to these women and declares that his teacher is destined to commit a suicide with "glory" – one which anyone else would only commit without being "cursed." Clearly, Pausanias is convinced that Empedocles' decision is the right one. Panthea ends the scene (and the second fragment) with the suggestion that Emepdocles' suicide might be *necessary* for the freedom of the people: "The Spirit and ripening Time will it thus, for we blind ones had need of a miracle" (Hölderlin 48). This ambiguous, even obscure, statement ends the second fragment.

The first fragment portrays Empedocles as disconnected from his people and unconcerned with their pleas to continue to guide and assist them. He is committed to taking his life, and the play ends definitively with his intention to do so. His motivation is clear: he wishes to be reunited with the gods through extinguishing his individual consciousness and returning his body to the totality of nature, thus obtaining freedom of the spirit. The second version, however, portrays Empedocles' suicidal motivation with a greater degree of ambiguity. This ambiguity and open-endedness might be taken as an indication of Hölderlin's shifting view of suicide, from an act which is committed selfishly (as in the first version) to one committed to the possibility of having other

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[88] Hölderlin's approach to Empedocles' death stands in sharp contrast to that of Arnold's approach in his Empedocles on Etna. Hölderlin's Empedocles approaches death not as existential cessation but as a mingling with the gods he had offended in order to achieve spiritual birth (whether for himself or, as the fragments progress, for his people.). Arnold's Empedocles, on the other hand, sees his death as a curse. He is fearful of having to return to an even worse fate – that he might have to endure "the sad probation once again." See Matthew Arnold, The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold. 12 vols. Ed. C.B. Tinker and H.F. Lowry. London: Macmillan, 1895. 2: 265).

people in mind, i.e. one directed towards the spiritual freedom of others.[89] Hölderlin abandoned this second version of the play sometime in the late summer of 1799.

Hölderlin began the third and last version of the play, Empedocles on Etna (Empedocles auf Aetna) in September 1799 – two years after the first version and only months after the second. This version marked a radical departure from the first and second.[90] It is the shortest of the three – only three scenes and 507 lines. Whereas the second version is best described as a revision of the first, the third version is completely different from the previous two. The plot has evolved, and there is a striking shift in emphasis. Here Empedocles' fall is deemphasized and his suicide becomes the focal point. Hölderlin has shifted attention from Empedocles' suicide as a means of achieving individual spiritual freedom in the first fragment to suicide as a means of achieving spiritual freedom for others by the third.

Before approaching the third fragment, however, it is useful to explore the "Grund zum Empedocles" ("Plan for Empedocles"), an essay written after Hölderlin abandoned the second version in the summer of 1799. The "Grund" is a theoretical investigation into the justification of Empedocles' suicide. That Hölderlin wrote this when he did

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[89] In contrast, the motivation of Arnold's Empedocles is much more conclusive. With regard to the latter, Fred L. Burwick writes, "His triumph is not for others, but for himself. His victory, as contrasted with Hölderlin's Empedokles, is the affirmation of self, not of being *per se*; he dies in the exaltation of life and joy, thus to escape the undesirable death of contamination…his triumph is that he has overcome the curse of weariness" See "Hölderlin and Arnold: Empedocles on Etna." Comparative Literature. 17.1. (Winter 1965) 40.

[90] The third draft is usually printed under the title "Empedocles on Etna" (the title under which it was originally published), but many critics refer to it as "The Death of Empedocles – III) because they see the first draft as a replacement of the second and the second as a replacement of the third. On the contrary, I argue that the fragments should be seen in terms of a holistic evolution of Hölderlin's ideas on many important topics, not least of which is the nature of Empedocles' suicide.

shows that his thinking had focused intently on the latter subject. The "Grund" clarifies the positions and goals of the third fragment.

The piece is written in abstruse prose and is conceptually dense. As Lawrence Ryan notes, the essay explores the two opposing principles of "organisch" (divine nature) and "aorgish" (consciousness and language) – a conflict which is, to some degree, always present in both individuals and societies.[91] The former principle refers to rational organization imposed by man. The latter principle refers to everything beyond the control of man – nature, the unconscious, the irrational, and the divine. Hölderlin writes that the forces of "organish" and "aorgish" are in intense, even violent, conflict in Agrigentum. Specifically, the townspeople have become overly rationalistic and disrespectful of the powers of nature and the divine.[92] They sought to subordinate "aorgish" rather than establish harmony with it. The result is an imbalance leading to impending disaster.

Through the demonstration and articulation of the divinity of nature, Empedocles achieves the all-important reconciliation between the "organisch" and "aorgish" that Agrigentum so badly needs. Hölderlin speaks of a mysterious interchange of powers in Empedocles – and interchange of "organisch" and "aorgisch," of thought and the unconscious – and declares this to be the true source of his power. Yet, in order to bring this about for the Agrigentines, he cannot be present. He must "depart" in order that not be idolized more than the gods and so that his spirit can be released upon and into the

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[91] Lawrence Ryan, Friedrich Hölderlin 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, 1967) 50-51.

[92] Within the context of Hölderlin's thinking in the last years of the eighteenth century, it is evident that he relates the Agrigentines to modern Europeans, whom he viewed as also seeking to subordinate nature by means of technological mastery.

souls of the people of Agrigentum. Thus, Empedocles' fall from grace is no longer seen in terms of personal culpability but in terms of historical necessity – he was destined to fall so that he might take his life in order to save others.[93] In the soon to be written third fragment, Hölderlin explains more specifically how this happens.

The third fragment carefully plays out the theoretical discussion of the "Grund." Empedocles is convinced more than ever of his importance and of the efficacy of suicide as a means of redeeming others. He faces religious and political opposition combined in one person – Strato – the king of Agrigrentum and Empedocles' own brother. Manes, Empedocles' former teacher, is introduced and offers a further challenge to Emepdocles' decision to commit suicide. The opposition to Empedocles thus becomes more intense, and will ultimately be instrumental in drawing attention to the courage and self consciousness required to carry out his suicide.

The most significant material of the third version takes place in the third scene.[94] Here, Empedocles encounters Manes, who has heard of his decision to commit suicide. He tells Empedocles that his suicide will only anger the gods because he is not the right person, nor is it the right time. Suicide is only justified when it is carried out by someone who is like a "grapevine" – born of darkness and light, part divine and part human. This person must also take his life at just the right moment. Moreover, his world must be in crisis – its people must be on the verge of overthrowing its underlying beliefs and

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[93] While the first fragment suggests that Empedocles is rather unlike Christ, the third fragment suggests some interesting similarities: like Empedocles, Christ had to die in order to release his spirit upon the people (thus leading them to spiritual freedom).

[94] The first two scenes of the third version are similar to previous versions: Empedocles articulates his desire to perish to Pausanius and commands the latter to leave him to his fate.

subordinating divinity to rationality. The gods will be so angry that they will use lightning to quell the ferment and to reaffirm their power. Yet, divine revenge will only aggravate the situation, causing further dissent, which then angers the gods even more. The environment described by Manes is one of perpetual, regenerative crisis:

> In this time it is right only for one, your black sin can ennoble only one man. He is a greater man than I! For as the vine bears witness to Earth and Heaven when, imbued by the high Sun, it emerges from the dark ground, so does he grow up, born of Light and Night. The world about him is in ferment, whatever is at all moveable and perishable in the bosom of mortals is stirred up from its foundation. The Lord of Time, anxious about his sovereignty, sits enthroned looking darkly over the insurrection. His day is extinguished, and his lightnings illuminate, yet what flames from above and what strives from below only inflames the wild dissension. (Major Poetry 101)

The world Manes describes above corresponds to the world Hölderlin describes in the "Grund" – one of violent conflict between "organish" and "aorganish." The only way this can be fixed is if the right person comes along who can first reconcile the conflict of the world within himself. The intense conflict is quelled – made "mild" – by means of the savior's internalization of it. Unger writes:

> The "conflict of the world" becomes "mild" in him, for he settles it completely within himself and in such a way that the microcosmic solution is universally valid. The all-unitive harmony attained in his own soul is, first vicariously, then actually – established in his renewal of

> harmony in the cosmos. However, he must die as an individual if such universal concord is to be perfectly effected. (Major Poetry 102)

Through his example, he can then disseminate a sense of peace and harmony – the "holy Spirit of Life" – over the people, thus reconciling the people of Agrigrentum to the gods they have alienated. Once this occurs, however, his death becomes necessary in order to prevent his countrymen from idolizing him. Manes here makes that same point to Empedocles that Hölderlin more theoretically in the "Grund":

> And so that, when he has appeared, the son not be Greater than the parents, and that the holy Spirit of Life not remain forgotten, enchained above him, the only one, therefore, he, the idol of his time, turns away, he himself, so that what is necessary might be done to the pure with a pure hand, shatters his own happiness, that is too happy for him, and gives what he possesses, again purified, back to the element that glorified him. (Major Poetry 103)

Manes concludes that the savior's self-sacrifice is commendable only under these circumstances. Of course, Empedocles believes that he is the savior that Manes describes. In the following response to Manes, Empedocles essentially repeats that which Hölderlin theorized about him in the "Grund."

Empedocles argues that he certainly does possess the qualifications Manes describes, and that he was destined to fall from grace in order that he be the savior of Agrigrentum. He focuses only on his positive characteristics; there is no mention of his hubris, and there is only passing reference to past suffering. The thrust of his speech focuses on his personal harmony with the gods – marked by his ability to bring the

"aorgisch" forces into the "organisch" realm of language. In short, he is now the precise opposite of the man Hölderlin described two years earlier in the "Frankfurter Plan" – no longer fragmented, dissatisfied, and restless. He has now obtained spiritual freedom which allows him to experience the world with immediacy, like a god.

An interesting comparison can be drawn between Empedocles the philosopher-prophet and Hölderlin's poet-prophet as the latter is portrayed in Bread and Wine (Brod und Wein), written just one year after the third fragment. The poem reveals more than the third fragment does about what led to Empedocles' current state of harmonious spiritual freedom. In his greatest elegy, Hölderlin announces that the presence of the gods ("die Himmlischen") is too blinding for even the poet to make sense of:

> Unperceived at first they come, and only the children
> Surge towards them, too bright, dazzling, this joy enters in
> So that men are afraid, a demigod hardly can tell yet
> Who they are, and name those who approach him with gifts.
> Yet their courage is great, his heart soon is full of their gladness
> And he hardly knows what's to be done with such wealth.
> Busily runs and wastes it, almost regarding as sacred
> Trash which his blessing hand foolishly, kindly has touched. [95]

He also relates in "The Poet's Calling" of 1801 that when the divine comes over the poet, he remains mute, limbs trembling. He must distance himself from the divine presence in order to put into words what has been made manifest to him. As Charles Larmore points

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[95] Friedrich Hölderlin, "Bread and Wine." trans. Michael Hamburger, Poems and Fragments (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1967) 151.

out, in order to articulate the presence of the divine, the poet's relation can only be one of "remembrance or anticipation":

> Only be recalling a past Coming (in *Brod und Wein,* Hölderlin refers to Dionysus and Chris) or by heralding a future Revelation yet to come…can the poet find his tongue and fulfill what's missing…In *Brod und Wein,* it is the image of "holy night" ("heilige Nacht") that expresses this essential situation, the pregnant absence of a divinity that "sonst dagewesen und kehrt in richtiger Zeit, that "once was there and will come again when it is time"…the poet's vision is necessarily decentered from the present, drawn along the lines of past and future.[96]

Therefore, the encapsulation of divine essence ("the aorgisch") in language ("the organisch") is, paradoxically, made possible by the poet's separation from that essence. If one sees Empedocles as something like the poet "demigod" described by Larmore, his obtaining reconciliation, harmony, and spiritual freedom is possible not least because of his ability to be, in Larmore's words, "decentered from the present." Like the poet-prophet of "Bread and Wine," Empedocles of the third fragment has presumably avoided two dangers: he neither stormed the divine presence, pretending that his poetic vision captured its very essence; nor was he so "captured by his brilliance that he [could] not muster the strength to back up and translate it into words" (Larmore 26). One imagines that Empedocles also discovered the mean between these extremes and that this discovery marked a turning point – the point at which at which he became aware of his unique role in bringing the gift of his spiritual freedom to others. Perhaps Empedocles temporal

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[96] Charles Larmore, The Romantic Legacy (Columbia University Press, 1996) 26.

"decentering" from the divine presence involved his looking forward to his role as spiritual savior for the Agrigentines, and, ultimately, to his suicide.

After his own transformation, Empedocles realized that the tumult that once traumatized him had emerged in Agrigentum and that he had the duty to quell it. He could not ignore the violent unrest resulting from the clash of rationalistic and transcendent forces within his countrymen. The situation in Agrigentum was dire: they had lost respect for the forces of nature and had even sought mastery over them. This had angered the presiding god of the nation so much that he threatened to leave altogether: "Then the meaning seized me, shuddering: it was the departing god of my nation. / Him I heard, and looked up to the silent stars from whence he had come, and to / atone him I went forth (Major Poetry 104). Yet, Empedocles succeeded in restoring the Agrigentine's intimacy with their presiding god (and with all the "living gods"), and they were grateful to him. However, he tells Manes that in order to complete the process he must bring about his "free death according to divine law." The Agrigentines' long-term spiritual freedom depends upon their wholehearted reverence for the gods, and the temptation to project this reverence onto Empedocles constitutes a grave danger.

As the scene ends, Manes remains skeptical, but Empedocles stands firm in his commitment. His destiny has come to pass:

> For when a country is to die,
> The Spirit chooses one more man for itself at last,
> Through whom its swan song, the last life, resounds.
> Indeed I suspected this, yet I served it willingly.
> It has happened. (Hölderlin 51)

He is absolutely sure of the efficacy and necessity of his suicide: his death will culminate simultaneously in the eruption of Etna and a violent thunderstorm.

Unfortunately, the fragment ends with the first scene. We are left only with the notes Hölderlin had appended to the "Grund" suggesting the plan for completing the third fragment. We know that in scene two he was to be welcomed back to Agrigentum by his countrymen and completely reconciled with them. After this, Hölderlin's intentions are murky: it does seem, however, that Empedocles was to have appeared for the last time at the end of the fourth act and that he would most certainly have taken his life by the end of the play. It is Hölderlin's notes on the once skeptical Manes that reveals the most about Hölderlin's final position with regard to the suicide. In the fifth act, Hölderlin writes that Manes finally comes around: he is convinced that Empedocles is who he claims to be, that he is "the chosen one who kills and gives life, in and through whom a world is at once dissolved and renewed" (Major Poetry 104).

Hölderlin's drafts for the play indicate an interesting evolution with regard to suicide.[97] In the first two versions, Hölderlin emphasizes Empedocles' guilt resulting from his disrespect for the gods. In the first version, Empedocles suicidal motivation is clear: he means to bring about his own spiritual freedom (freedom from the kind of dissatisfaction and misery described in the 1797 "Frankfurter Plan). He is selfishly motivated; he seeks death for personal reasons and has no thought of saving others. The second version presents the issue with much more ambiguity. Rather than ending the

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[97] This in no way implies that Hölderlin's concern is focused exclusively on suicide. As Richard Unger and Lawrence Ryan note, the drafts also demonstrate important developments in Hölderlin's thinking about the relationship between civilization and its destroyer-redeemer – both of which become more pronounced in Hölderlin's final hymns.

fragment with Empedocles' suicide, it ends with an ambiguous discussion of his motivations: it is not clear whether he intends his death to bring out his own spiritual freedom, the spiritual freedom of the Agrigentines.

The third fragment, however, is as definitive as the first but in quite the opposite way. Here, Empedocles commits suicide with complete disregard for himself. As Lawrence Ryan and other have noted, Hölderlin's position on Empedocles' death might best be described as it is in a mysterious note from Hölderlin's outline of the third version where he describes a transition from the "subjective to the objective" – from Empedocles' suicide as a means of achieving his own spiritual freedom to one which brings about the freedom of others (Ryan 59-60). Empedocles, like the poet-prophet in the soon to be written "Bread and Wine" and "The Poets Calling," devotes himself to proclaiming a vision for others resulting in the return of the gods, in harmony and accord with all living things and, most importantly, in spiritual freedom from a one-sided, fragmented existence.

CHAPTER FOUR

An Excursus:

Suicide and Freedom from Suffering in

Shopenhauer's World as Will and Representation

Schopenhauer's stance on suicide focuses on the possibility of achieving freedom from suffering through the denial of the individual will-to-life. Ultimately, Schopenhauer argues that suicide fails to achieve this freedom, primarily because it is an act of will that confirms, rather than denies, the will-to-life. Suicide is a kind of contradiction in that it involves the individual will's willfully seeking to exterminate itself as a way of escaping the wretchedness of willing.

His position seems paradoxical when placed within the context of his enlightened view of self-death. In fact, in a short essay on suicide first published in a volume of essays called Parega and Paralipomena (1851), he deplores the fact that suicide is often regarded as a crime, "whereas there is obviously nothing in the world over which every man has such an indisputable *right* as his own person and life."[98] In principle, Schopenhauer finds nothing morally objectionable in suicide. He falls far short of Kant's repudiation of suicide as a violation of the categorical imperative.[99] He reminds us that suicide was regarded by many Greeks and Romans as noble, and explicitly commends

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[98] Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Suicide" in Parega and Paralipomena,Vol. II. trans. E.F.J. Payne (Oxford University Press, 1974) 306.

[99] Indeed, he writes in On the Basis of Morality that "the . . . criticism of Kant's foundation of morals will be in particular the best preparation and guide – in fact the direct path – to my own foundation of morals, for opposites illustrate each other, and my foundation is, in essentials, diametrically opposed to Kant's." See Arthur Schopenhauer, On the Basis of Morality trans. E. F. J. Payne. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965) 34.

David Hume's essay on suicide as the most thorough refutation of the feeble arguments put forth by religion against the act.[100] He is particularly opposed to Christianity, which, he argues, has as its core the truth that the real purpose of life is suffering. Since suicide is an attempt to free oneself from suffering, Christianity rejects it. However, Schopenhauer argues that it is only natural to attempt to free oneself from suffering and that few, if any, persons would voluntarily choose to live their lives over again. He writes:

> But perhaps at the end of his life, no man, if he be sincere and at the same time in possessions of his faculties, will ever wish to go through it again. . . . Rather than this, he will much prefer to choose complete non-existence . . . Similarly, what has been said about the father of history (Herodotus) has not been refuted, namely that no person has existed who has not wished more than once that he had not to live through the following day. Accordingly, the shortness of life, so often lamented, may perhaps be the best thing about it. (I: 324-325)

Not surprisingly, Schopenhauer acknowledges that suicide would be worth carrying out if it were a means to achieving this goal. Dale Jacquette writes that "Schopenhauer maintains that suffering makes life so miserable that only the fear of death restrains the individual from self-destruction, while if life as a whole were enjoyable, the idea of death

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[100] As mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation, Hume put forward a framework for conceptualizing suicide by arguing implicitly that individual freedom is the factor which justifies suicide. He argued that all created beings have received the power, authorization, and freedom to change the natural course of things in order to guarantee their well-being.

as the culmination of life would be intolerable."[101] Unfortunately, for reasons explained below, Schopenhauer believes that suicide does not release one from suffering. In order to understand why Schopenhauer believes this is so, one must first look more closely into the nature of suffering and its relationship to the will-to-life.

The central concept of Schopenhauer's metaphysics is that of Will ("der Wille"). Will is the ultimate driving force and essence of the whole material world, including ourselves. It is not to be seen as the purposeful will of an individual person, but as the blind impulsion of each thing to realize its own nature. True understanding, then, consists in recognizing that, from a metaphysical standpoint, this is the way things *are*. In the same way that the world *is* the Will, the human body is an individual will and expresses itself within humanity as the will-to-life ("der Wille zum Leben"). However, this will-to-life and the physical body through which it is expressed is not merely *part* of the physical world which becomes "activated" or driven by some *separate* force which is Will. It is exceedingly difficult to explain the relationship between the Will and the will-to-life. Perhaps the simplest way to understand it is that the will-to-life is the force that expresses the Will at the level of the individual, i.e. it is an individual aspect of the greater Will. In this way, Schopenhauer seems to view the former as an instantiation of the latter. Still, Schopenhauer does not make this entirely clear. Instead, he writes that all of reality, including ourselves, *is* Will. Schopenhauer writes that once one truly understands this:

> [it] become[s] the key to the knowledge of the innermost being of the whole of nature . . . He will recognize that same will not only in those

[101] Dale Jacquette, "Schopenhauer on Death." Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 301.

> phenomena that are quite similar to his own, in men and animals, but continued reflection will lead him to recognize the force that shoots and vegetates in the plant . . . by which the crystal is formed . . . that turns the magnet to the North Pole . . . all these he will recognize as different only in the phenomenon, but the same according to their inner nature. [102]

Since an individual is essentially composed of this blind, relentless, striving (the will-to-life), he is destined – for reasons given below – to dissatisfaction, disappointment, and frustration. Indeed, Schopenhauer maintains that "ineliminable" suffering is so great a part of our lives that it is essential to our existence: "suffering is essential to life, and therefore does not flow in upon us from outside, but everyone carries around within himself its perennial source" (World as Will 1: 318)

There are three major ways in which Schopenhauer believes the will-to-life is intertwined with suffering. First, he argues that as material, living creatures, our ordinary existence is such that we must strive towards ends. Schopenhauer points out that a being who strives and is conscious of whether his ends are fulfilled is a being who suffers. Each of us must strive in order to exist, and conflicts of ends will inevitably occur: "Awakened to the life out of the night of consciousness, the will finds itself as an individual in an endless and boundless world, among innumerable individuals, all striving, suffering, and erring" (World as Will 2: 573).

Second, Schopenhauer argues that suffering is connected to the will-to-life, since the latter springs not from a state of contentment but from some sort of lack or

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[102] Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, 2 vols. trans. E. F. J. Payne. (New York: Dover, 1969) 5.

deficiency; in other words, the experience of a lack or deficiency is, in itself, a form of suffering. When one fails to achieve some of the ends for which one strives, the lack or deficiency is prolonged – "together with the consciousness of not achieving one's end" – and this furthers suffering.[103] Moreover, he holds that even if one *does* achieve the end toward which one strives and experiences satisfaction, the latter state is only positive relative to the deficiency it removes. According to Schopenhauer, satisfaction is "negative" while pain is "positive," since "pain is something which we feel, but satisfaction is an absence; to be satisfied is simply to return to neutral by wiping out a felt deficiency." Therefore, having no deficiency and having nothing to strive for has, according to Schopenhauer, no value in its own terms. Schopenhauer puts this point nicely in On the Basis of Morality:

> The reason for this is that pain, suffering that includes all want, privation, need, in fact every wish or desire, is *that which is positive and directly felt or experienced.* On the other hand, the nature of satisfaction, enjoyment, and happiness consists solely in the removal of a privation, the still of a pain; and so these have a *negative* effect. Therefore, need and desire are the condition of every pleasure or enjoyment. Plato recognized this . . . Voltaire also says: "There are no true pleasures without true needs. Thus pain is something *positive* that automatically makes itself known; satisfaction and pleasures are something *negative,* the mere elimination of the former. (On the Basis of Morality 146)

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[103] Christopher Janoway, Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy (Clarendon Press, 1989) 105.

Schopenhauer also reflects on this point in more concrete terms using examples as wide-ranging as that of taking a sip of water to contemplating the Sistine Chapel. No matter the case, he holds that gratification (even mere satisfaction) occurs only because of a reduction or temporary suspension of willing; to be gratified or satisfied is merely to return to a "neutral" state, but returning to "neutral" (without deficiency) means having nothing to strive for and, according to Schopenhauer, this has no positive value on its own terms. Indeed, if such a state continues for any period of time, it wipes out one's essential being (willing) and leads to what Schopenhauer calls "boredom" which he argues is a state of suffering itself.

Finally, the attainment of ends never makes striving – and suffering – cease altogether. Even when our striving is successful, we will soon strive for other ends and suffer further. Every satisfied desire gives birth to a new one and "no possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its craving, set a final goal to its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart" (World as Will 2: 573). Whenever our striving is successful, it is not long before we continue to strive for something else, and to suffer further. The will-to-life is like an unquenchable thirst: we can have momentary satisfaction and relief, but there is quite literally nothing that we can *do* that will stop us from willing or suffering. Schopenhauer captures all of three of these points succinctly:

> Awakened to life out of the night of consciousness, the will finds itself as an individual in an endless and boundless world, among innumerable individuals, all striving, suffering, and erring; and, as if through a troubled dream, it hurries back to the old unconsciousness. Yet till then its desires are unlimited, its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire gives

> birth to a new one. No possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its craving, set a final goal it its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart. (World as Will 2: 573)

Indeed, suffering arising from the striving of the will-to-life makes life so miserable that only the fear of death stops from self-destruction. For many, this fear is greater than one's desire to eliminate suffering:

> If life itself were a precious blessing, and decidedly preferable to non-existence, the exit from it would not need to be guarded by such fearful watchmen as death and its terrors. But who would go on living life as it is, if death were less terrible? And who could bear even the mere thought of death, if life were pleasure? But the former still always has the good point of being the end of life, and we console ourselves with death in regard to the sufferings of life, and with the sufferings of life in regard to death. (World as Will 2: 578-9)

While this fear of death is virtually universal, Schopenhauer holds that there are no rational reasons for it. He explores several familiar arguments for the fear of death – all of which he believes are irrational. First, we might fear dying if dying involved pain, but then the object of fear would be pain, rather than death itself. Second, he argues that we did not exist for an infinite time before birth and that this is a matter of indifference to us, so we should rationally regard our not existing in the future with the same indifference. Third, he reiterates Epicurus' argument that since death is non-existence, it should not be feared. To something or someone that does not exist, it should not (and cannot) matter. Therefore, it would seem that *if* living necessarily entails suffering, and *if* we need not

fear death, we may as well destroy ourselves in order to escape the suffering caused by the will-to-life. However, he maintains that this is impossible.

Essentially, there are two reasons why suicide fails to free us from suffering. The first reason does not focus on suicide in particular, but on death in general. Schopenhauer's position lies in between those who maintain that death either leads to absolute annihilation or immortality – both of which he regards as "equally false" (World as Will 2: 464). In order to understand his "higher standpoint" on death, he utilizes the Kantian distinction between the thing-in-itself and the phenomenon. Each individual exists as part of the world of phenomena which occupies space and time in the physical world and then, at some point, ceases to exist. From this point of view, death is certain and absolute annihilation. However, Schopenhauer makes it clear that the self is much more than this. The individual is also something in itself outside of time and space, beyond change, not susceptible to death.[104] Schopenhauer writes that my phenomenal self is actually an infinitesimal part of who I truly am:

> the greatest equivocation really lies in the word "I" . . .According as I understand this word, I can say: "Death is my entire end"; or else: "This my personal phenomenal appearance is just as infinitely small a part of my true inner self as I am of the world. (World as Will 2: 491)

One exists partly in the phenomenal world, but more fully in the world *itself* – a world beyond space and time, unsusceptible to individuation. In fact, Schopenhauer claims that

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[104] A detailed explanation of Schopenhauer's complex treatment of the self exceeds the bounds of this dissertation. In short, he sees the self in at least four ways which seem, at times, to struggle for dominance: as a subject of experience and knowledge, a subject of will and action, a bodily manifestation of the will to life, and a pure mirror of timeless reality. The first three might best describe the phenomenal self, while the last seems closest to the true self.

individuality is not only a source of torment, but a kind of illusion. Since this is the case, one's death cannot be true annihilation.

What Schopenhauer means by "my true inner nature" is the same thing as the world in itself (Will) which is not subject to individuation. With regard to Schopenhauer's distinction between true reality and our individual, ephemeral existence in the phenomenal world, Janoway writes that "reality in itself is eternal in the sense of timelessness. I have my 'now', and every other phenomenon that was or will be has its time, which for it is equally a 'now' (107-108). Reality *in itself*, of which I am, is something permanent, not subject to annihilation. The idea is that the world manifests itself as the phenomenal "me" (in the here and now), but that once that "me" ceases to exist, the same world will manifest itself in other individuals who will each refer to themselves as "I" just as I have, pursue their ends, experience suffering, etc. Therefore, death does not afford freedom from suffering. It is merely a phenomenal episode in the world of appearance which has no bearing on the Will or the will-to-life; that individuals die is not a fact about reality itself. Bryan Magee expresses this point nicely:

> what is phenomenal about him would have died anyway, and what is noumenal about him cannot cease to exist. To adapt one of Schopenhauer's earlier metaphors, he is like a man who tries to remove the rainbow from a waterfall by scooping out the water with a bucket.[105]

One would imagine that Schopenhauer's position on death would suffice as an argument against the possibility of achieving freedom from suffering, but he takes it a step further by focusing specifically on suicide. Aside from the fact that death in general fails to

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[105] Bryan Magee, The Philosophy of Schopenhauer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) 223.

achieve freedom from suffering for the reasons described above, suicide possess a further characteristic which makes it, more than death in general, especially powerless to bring about freedom from suffering.

For Schopenhauer, suicide is an instance of the will-to-life acting against itself.[106] It is an outright contradiction, successful only at destroying the individual phenomenon rather than the Will itself. Individual consciousness is indeed destroyed through suicide, but man's inner nature, identical with the Will and entailing the experience of suffering, can never be destroyed. Schopenhauer describes suicide as:

> … the arbitrary doing away with the individual phenomenon, [which] differs from the denial of the will-to-life, which is the only act of its freedom to appear in the phenomenon… Far from being a denial of the will, suicide is a phenomenon of the will's strong affirmation. For denial has its essential nature in the fact that the sorrows of life, not its sorrows, are shunned. The suicide wills life, and is dissatisfied merely with the conditions on which it has come to him. Therefore he gives up by no means the will-to-life, but merely life, since he destroys the individual phenomenon. (W1, 398)

The individual simply cannot willfully exterminate himself as a way of escaping the suffering resulting from willing. Suicide ends life, but as the result of a willful decision

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[106] Here there is an important similarity to suicide in Hedda Gabler and The Sorrows of Young Werther: both Werther's and Hedda's suicides are acts of aggression, acts of will against others and, arguably, against themselves. None of these suicides is an act of resignation. However, their outcomes are much more ambiguous than they are in Schopenhauer: the latter argues that suicide – as an instance of the will acting against itself – is an overt contradiction. Goethe and Ibsen, however, treat the "success" of the act (the attaining of moral freedom and social freedom, respectively) with much more ambiguity.

in the service of the individual will-to-live, it cannot by its very nature transcend willing.[107] As Jacquette notes, freedom *from* suffering – the denial of the will-to-life through an act of will against oneself – lacks logical coherence within Schopenhauer's system:

> The only logically coherent freedom to be sought from the sufferings of the will is not to will death and willfully destroy the self, but to continue to live while quieting the will, in an ultra-ascetic submissive attitude of sublime indifference to both life and death. (307)[108]

Herein lies the problem of freedom as it relates to Schopenhauer's position on suicide: while he states explicitly in "On Suicide" that one possesses the individual right to commit suicide in order to attempt to obtain freedom from suffering, and even admits that he can understand why one would attempt to do so, he then denies that there is any possibility that this freedom may be actualized. To take one's life indicates a lack of awareness (or an unwillingness to become aware) of the futility of the individual will and the experience of the wholeness and totality of will-in-itself. One has the freedom *to* destroy oneself, but one's freedom to free oneself *from* suffering is an illusion.

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[107] Christopher Janoway in Schopenhauer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) writes: "The question whether Schopenhauer's higher view of death would be consoling is a difficult one. He tries to inculcate the thought that one's own death has no great significance in the order of things. But if one accepted his reasons for taking this attitude, ought one not to think that one's life has just as little significance? And is that a consoling thought? Schopenhauer appears to think so . . ." (89).

[108] Schopenhauer makes one very interesting exception to his position on suicide and its failure to achieve freedom from suffering. It is the case of the ascetic who commits suicide by starvation. Far from being a manifestation of the will-to-life, the ascetic ceases to live because he ceases to will. Only this exceptional type of suicide has the capacity to free one from suicide: Thus [the ascetic] resorts to fasting, and even to self-castigation and self-torture, in order that, by constant privation and suffering, he may more and more break down and kill the will that he recognizes and abhors as the source of his own suffering and of the world's." (1: 382)

> …whoever is oppressed by the burdens of life, whoever loves life and affirms it, but abhors its torments, and in particular can no longer endure the hard lot that has fallen to just him, cannot hope from deliverance from death, and cannot save himself through suicide. Only by a false illusion does the cool shade of Orcus allure him as a haven of rest. The earth rolls on from day into night; the individual dies; but the sun itself burns without intermission, an eternal noon. Life is certain to the will-to-live; the form of life is the endless present; it matters not how individuals, the phenomena of the Idea, arise and pass away in time, like fleeting dreams. Therefore, suicide already appears to us a vain and therefore foolish action. (1: 280-81)

Therefore, Schopenhauer's position on suicide brings to the forefront an important tension with regard to individual freedom – a tension that is present in virtually all post-Enlightenment discussions of suicide and individual freedom. One wonders what value there might be in having the right to take one's life if that right will never achieve the freedom toward which it is directed. Schopenhauer leaves this tension unresolved.

CHAPTER FIVE

Suicide and Social Freedom:

Ibsen's Hedda Gabler

From its earliest reviews, many critical appraisals of Hedda Gabler failed to come to terms with the protagonist. Approaching the play as a pinnacle of Realism (as most still do), critics were unable to make sense of how a character like Hedda could exist. As a result, her character was almost unanimously rejected. For example, Oswald Crawford, in England's Fortnightly Review, regarded Hedda as an "impossible" woman.[109] The New York Times reviewer of the first American production believed that Ibsen must have intended Hedda as a pathological case like those "in the pages of the Journal of Mental Science."[110] John Lahr reports that "August Strindberg, who saw himself as the model for Eilert Lövborg …spat spiders at the play and its author, whom he called 'a decrepit old troll' and, after attending a rehearsal of the play at the Moscow Art Theater in 1899, Anton Chekhov exclaimed, 'Look here, Ibsen is not a playwright.'[111]

Recent critics have taken similar attitudes. Jens Arup writes that "every utterance and every action is packed with meaning in its application to the situation of the play itself," but that Ibsen did not provide a "set of categories" with which to judge Hedda as a character. Perhaps most notable of all, Arup saw the play as "too realistic to have any

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[109] Oswald Crawford, "The Ibsen Question," Rev. of Hedda Gabler, by Henrik Ibsen Fortnightly Review 55 (1891): 737-738.

[110] Rev. of Hedda Gabler, by Henirk Ibsen. New York Times (April 21, 1891).

[111] John Lahr, "Hedda, Get Your Gun." Rev. of Hedda Gabler, by Henrik Ibsen. Roundabout Theater Company., New York. New Yorker (February 9 & 16, 2009) 110.

meaning whatsoever."[112] Muriel Bradbrook makes a similar point: Hedda is "a study in a vacuum" and the spectator is given "no frame, no comment" to judge her.[113] Finally, Weigand comments that this "coldest, most impersonal" drama is, in the end, "simply a spectacle of life from which we retire with shock"[114]

These comments illustrate a fundamental misunderstanding of Ibsen and the whole of his dramatic project, and Hedda Gabler in particular. To approach Hedda Gabler simply as an exemplar of Realism is to overlook one of the most significant aspects of the play: In fact, Ibsen is not concerned with realism at all. Rather, he creates in Hedda Gabler – in its setting and even in its main character – a larger than life, even grotesque quality, a projection of his own inner violent energy. Hedda Gabler herself is not a realistic character but a tool through which Ibsen expresses the violence percolating below and irrupting through a staid, repressive, social surface. As Ibsen writes in his commentary to the play, it is "about the 'insuperable,' the aspiration to and striving after something which goes against convention…" (Oxford Ibsen 7: 481)[115] Hedda is the device through which this aspiration and striving occurs.

In The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, Rainer Maria Rilke has a most remarkable insight about Ibsen's *oeuvre* – one that can be applied directly to Hedda Gabler. Rilke writes that Ibsen "struggled with the unparalleled violence of [his] work"

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[112] Jens Arup, "On Hedda Gabler" (Orbis Litterarum 12, 1957) 7.

[113] M.C. Bradbrook, Ibsen the Norwegian (London: Chatto, 1966) 117.

[114] Hermann Weigand, The Modern Ibsen. (New York: Holt, 1925) 242; 244.

[115] Henrik Ibsen, The Oxford Ibsen. trans. McFarlane et. al. ed. James Walter McFarlane and Graham Orton 8 vols (Oxford University Press, 1960-1977).

and sought dramatic means for the outward expression of this violence.[116] In Hedda Gabler Ibsen utilizes at least two significant devices to express this: the grotesquely exaggerated stage setting and Hedda Gabler herself – a social misfit who maintains a peculiar distance from her tightly restricted environment but whose underlying violent energy frequently irrupts through its staid surface. Errol Durbach writes:

> Her desparate need to break free of her repressions finds expression in acts of violence and fantasies of destruction: the threat of setting fire to the hair of her rival for Lövborg's soul, her demonic ripping and burning of their 'child', her firing of pistols at moments of terrible tension, her bursts of wild dance music on the piano.[117]

Noticeably absent from Durbach's list is Hedda's suicide – the play's most extreme and most significant irruption of violence. Like all Hedda's irrational, impulsive behavior, her suicide occurs without introspection, and Ibsen's presentation of the act is fraught with ambiguity. While Hedda undoubtedly achieves release from the repressive world of convention, Ibsen ultimately suggests that the cost of this freedom is far too great.

Rilke's insight into Ibsen's construction of a grotesque, larger than life drama is notable, since it provides a counterpoint to the conventional view of Ibsen as a dramatist steeped in nineteenth century Realism. Moreover, it allows one to appreciate the ways in which Ibsen projects a violent interior state on the outer world. Rilke comments on Ibsen's other plays, but Hedda Gabler fits the pattern perfectly:

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[116] Rainer Maria Rilke, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, trans. Burton Pike (Champaign, IL: Dalkey, 2008) 61.

[117] Errol Durbach, Ibsen the Romantic: Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays. (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1982) 41.

> There was a rabbit, an attic, a hall in which someone passes up and down. There was the tinkle of glasses in the adjoining room, a fire outside the windows, there was the sun. There was a church and a rocky valley that was like a church. But that wasn't enough; finally towers had to be brought in and whole mountain ranges, and avalanches that bury landscapes: inundated stages overloaded with graspable things for the sake of the ungraspable. (61)

It might be understandable why critics have treated the play as a realistic case study. Playwrights who are commonly regarded to have favored realism (and Ibsen is virtually always cited as a key figure) rejected the concept of the well-made play with its mechanical artifices and strict plotting. While this is also true of Ibsen, it must be pointed out that he did not conform to another important criterion of realist drama – the rejection of exaggerated theatrics. Ibsen's stage directions in Hedda Gabler are as exaggerated as they are precise; they dictate the placement and appearance of each object in exhaustive, larger-than-life detail. The stage directions for Act One are a case in point. The profusion of objects conveys a monstrous overabundance: "All around the reception room there are numerous branches of flowers arranged in cases and glasses. More lie on the tables. The floors of both rooms are covered with thick carpets." (167).[118] A sense of heaviness and profusion pulsates against the calm, cold surface. This is even carried into Ibsen's exaggerated character descriptions, such as that of Judge Brack who, as a personification of social convention, is described as "stocky, but-well built and elastic in his movements…his face roundish, with a good profile" (192). Thea Elvsted with her

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[118] All page citations from Hedda Gabler are from Henrik Ibsen's Five Major Plays, trans. James McFarlane and Jens Arup (Oxford University Press, 1981).

"large, round, and somewhat protruding eyes" (181) conveys a similar sense of the grotesque. These visible details connect to the inwardly ungraspable, an energy whose power can only be detected through its subtle (and not so subtle) outward manifestations.

Indeed, Hedda Gabler herself is Ibsen's primary device for the outward manifestation of this violence. Joan Templeton points out that Hedda's volatile character may be the zenith of two Ibsen patterns, the strong-minded "unwomanly" woman whose prototype is Furia in Catalina (1891), and the frustrated wife in a marriage of convenience whose prototype is Margit of The Feast at Solhoug (1866). According to Templeton, the two patterns merge in The Viking of Helgeland's (1857) protagonist Hjørdis – "an eagle in a cage…a Brynhild shut up in a parlor" – with whom Hedda is often compared.[119]

Ibsen creates in Hedda an otherworldly creature with a dangerous force brewing inside her. Indeed, the use of "creature" to describe Hedda is not an overstatement: she is a social misfit, completely out of touch with the world around her. Ibsen emphasizes this by presenting two of the most incompatible characters in Ibsen's entire *oeuvre.* It takes only a few minutes for the extent of that incompatibility to become clear. At first there is the sense of pleasant satisfaction: Jörgen Tesman has every prospect of becoming a university professor: he has apparently triumphed over his previous rival Eilert Lövborg, has bought his dream house, and has recently returned with his bride from their honeymoon. However, from the very beginning of the scene there are clear indications marking the tension between Hedda and the world she inhabits: Berthe worries that she won't suit her "ever so particular" new mistress (168), and there is

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[119] Joan Templeton, Ibsen's Women (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 224.

unease about money, due to the extravagance of the honeymoon and the expense of appeasing a lady of aristocratic background.

Ibsen's stage directions also emphasize the physical distance between Hedda and her surroundings. The first impression of the drawing room itself is one of contrast between a dark, artificial interior, and a bright (though autumnal) exterior. Hedda's complexion is described in terms similar to those used for the lampshade in the inner room: the lamp is "mat, mælkefarvet," "dull, milk-colored" and Hedda's complexion is of a "mat bleghed," a "dull pallor" (175). Even before she appears, she is assigned a distinct place in relation to the interior: in the centre of the wall of the inner room hangs the portrait of General Gabler, one of the only three objects Hedda inherits and brings to the Tesman home.[120] The portrait suggests Hedda's misplacement – an indication of her past affiliation with the aristocracy that points toward her incompatibility with her new environment. Moreover, the entire house is a relic of the past. Hedda points out that the house has an old maids' aroma of lavender and potpourri, which Judge Brack says is the scent of its previous owner, Lady Falk, the widow of a cabinet minister now consigned to history. Hedda's disgust at the household is palpable. One senses that it is only a matter of time before she is no longer able to endure its claustrophobic dustiness.

Hedda's physical appearance suggests aloofness.[121] Her eyes are described as "steel grey, and cold, clear, and dispassionate" (175). Miss Tesman remembers her riding

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[120] The other two objects are her piano and General Gabler's pistols, both tools for the expression of her violent energy that none of the other characters are able understand and for which Hedda has no rational explanation.

[121] Rilke's insight into Ibsen's aloofness and standoffishness might be applied to Hedda as a character: "Who could understand that at the end you did not want to leave the window…You wanted to see the passerby; for the thought came to you that perhaps one day you could make something of them…" (62)

along with the General in a long black habit with a feather in her hat. Her distinction is reinforced further by her refusal to bring herself to use the familiar form of address ("du") to Miss Tesman (Jörgen Tesman's aunt). She addresses her husband by his surname (except when she needs to appeal to his affection in order to manipulate him). Moreover, while Hedda is linked to the interior of the Tesman home by means of her cold detachment, the first three characters to appear – Jörgen Tesman, Miss Tesman, and Berthe – are together connected to the exterior. In fact, in a letter written on January 14, 1891, Ibsen remarks:

> Jörgen Tesman, his old aunts and their faithful servant Berte, together form a picture of complete and indissoluble unity. They have a common mode of thought, common memories, a common outlook on life. For Hedda they represent a power hostile and contrary to her fundamental nature. And so they must represent a mutual harmony in presentation. (Oxford Ibsen 7:505)

Hedda's third statement in the play reinforces her connection to the interior: "Ugh…the maid's been and opened the veranda door. The place is flooded with sunlight" (176). The aversion to the sun sums up the division between the two parties. Hedda dislikes the direct impact of the outer world and does whatever she can to separate herself from it in order to move closer to an interior world distinctly her own. In addition, Hedda's reaction to Miss Tesman's hat illustrates her shameless demand to be set apart: she acts as if she thinks the aunt's hat belongs to Berte, although both women know that this is impossible.

While Hedda remains aloof, her violent energy frequently breaks through the surface. For example, when Judge Brack presses her to explain why she behaved so

rudely to Aunt Juliane, Hedda flings herself down in a chair near the stove and openly admits that she is unable to control or even to understand her own actions: "…these things just suddenly come over me. And then I can't resist them. Oh, I don't know myself how to explain it" (206). One is also reminded that right after Hedda had insulted Aunt Juliane she "walks about the room, raises her arms and clenches her fists as though in a frenzy" (179). She flings back the curtains and stares through the glass doors of her prison. "Calm and collected," she insinuates her misery to Tesman: "I'm just looking at the leaves on the trees. They're so yellow. And so withered" (179). Hedda's hesitancy about stating the actual month suggests her dread of those months to come. Templeton remarks that Hedda is "trapped for life in the stultifying world of the Tesmans, pregnant by a boy/man [who is] entranced by his slippers" (Templeton 214).

In another example, during Hedda's conversation with Mrs. Elvsted, the latter reveals that Hedda used to pull her hair and that she once threatened to burn it off. While some might see Thea Elvsted's hair as a manifestation of her femininity and a symbol of those female instincts which Hedda either does not possess or refuses to acknowledge, it is more likely that the image of Thea's hair on fire is attractive to Hedda because it is the most violent one she can imagine. Hedda's preoccupation with fire and burning is yet another outward manifestation of her inner volcanism. Ibsen reinforces this through stage directions that often place her in close proximity to the stove in the drawing room of the Tesman home. There is the suggestion of pyromania, triggered whenever Hedda is confronted with reminders that her life is circumscribed by convention, and it is not long before Hedda's seething violence becomes much more dangerous. At the end of Act One, for example, when she learns that Tesman is unable to provide her with the social

life she was promised, Hedda replies that she has only one thing left she can use to pass the time:

> TESMAN [*ecstatic*]. Oh, thank the good Lord for that! And what might that be, Hedda, Eh?
>
> HEDDA [*at the centre doorway, looking at him with concealed contempt*]. My pistols . . . Jorgen.
>
> TESMAN [*alarmed*]. Pistols!
>
> HEDDA [*with cold eyes*]. General Gabler's pistols. (198)

Clearly, her husband does not understand this submerged violence. From his perspective – as from that of virtually all Ibsen's characters (including Hedda herself) – it arises mysteriously and unpredictably. Lövborg, however, has had some previous experience with it and is, therefore, at least aware of its existence. When Hedda and Lövborg sit in the drawing room while Tesman and Judge Brack chat, drink, and smoke in the inner room, she and Lövborg discuss past conversations that had taken place at General Gabler's home, in which – responding to Hedda's "indirect" questioning – Lövborg came clean about his licentious behavior:

> LÖVBORG. Yes, Hedda . . . and then when I used to confess to you . . . Told you things about myself that none of the others knew at that time. Sat there and admired that I'd been out on the razzle for whole days and nights. For days on end. Oh, Hedda . . . what power was it in you that forced me to reveal all those things?
>
> HEDDA. Do you think it was a power in me?
>
> LÖVBORG. Well, how else can I explain it? And all those . . .

those roundabout questions you put to me . . .

HEDDA. And which you were so quick to understand . . .

LÖVBORG. That you could sit and ask like that! Quite confidently!

HEDDA. Roundabout questions, if you please . . .

LÖVBORG. Yes, but confidently all the same. Cross-examine me . . about all those things!

HEDDA. And that you could answer, Mr. Lövborg. (218-19)

There are at least two points worth noting here: first, Lövborg was susceptible to Hedda's "power" to pose "roundabout" questions, even if neither character was able to explain the nature or source of this energy. However, Hedda's use of circumlocutory speech suggests that she circumvented the potentially devastating force of her violent energy by avoiding direct contact with it. Perhaps this may be because Hedda herself – to the extent that she has *any* awareness of what lies within her – somehow sensed the power of her own interior state. Second, and more importantly, her interest in him was seemingly motivated by her desire to act as Lövborg did at the time – unscrupulously, irrationally, and excessively – in a world "that she isn't supposed to know anything about" wherein one is "out on the razzle for whole days and nights" (218-219). Hedda is caught in conventional limitations on her liberty, and sought the release of her violent energy by indulging vicariously in this world, but, ultimately lacking the confidence to do so, became fearful that "the game would become a reality" (219). As Ibsen writes in his commentary to the play, "Lövborg leans over towards 'Bohemianism.' Hedda is drawn in the same direction, but doesn't take the plunge." (Oxford Ibsen 482). Once again Hedda demonstrates her erratic, unpredictable conduct motivated by the shifting volcanic

magma within her. John Lahr notes that "Hedda's contradictory desires both compel and conceal…foreshadowing Freud's notion of the unconscious" (110). Indeed, Freud is said to have learned Norwegian in order to read Ibsen's work.

Ultimately, Hedda's impulse not to join Lövborg interceded; the latter eventually sought refuge and a new partner in Thea Elvsted. Lövborg admits that he and Thea now trust each other completely and talk in full confidence, and Hedda begins to see that Mrs. Elvsted has a control over him that she never had. She perceives Lövborg's adoption of Thea's values as a narrow-minded limitation of his engagement in life, a limitation that corrupts her idealized image of what he once was (and of what he might still become). While he once shared a bond with Hedda, Lövborg has now been "rehabilitated." Thea's major achievement, then, has been to convert the Bohemian into a respectable academic, stifling his vitality in the process (Durbach 45).[122] Having earned Mrs. Elvsted's confidence in Act One, Hedda now believes she has the confidence to set Lövborg against her, inducing him to relapse into drinking after two years of sobriety.

On the spot and without any warning to Mrs. Elvsted (or the spectator or the reader) Hedda conceives of a fantasy in which Lövborg's reintroduction into a world of drunken energy will result in his returning from Brack's party with "vine leaves in his hair" – ecstatic, unrestrained energy made manifest. Thea reacts with bland affirmation:

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[122] The violent burning of Lövborg and Mrs. Tesman's manuscript – their "child" – draws attention to Hedda's invincible impulse to seek revenge and to reestablish an unmediated connection to the former, a connection she hopes to use to control him. It also illustrates the extent to which Hedda will go to get what she wants. It is a relatively innocuous "killing" – one that leads to a progressive increase in violence culminating in Hedda's suicide.

> HEDDA. Ten o'clock . . . and back he'll come. I can just see him. With vine leaves in his hair, flushed and confident.
>
> MRS. ELVSTED. Yes, oh I do so hope it's like that.

Understandably, Thea is unable to make sense of Hedda's vision, nor its motivation; all that matters to her is that Lövborg returns sober and at a decent hour. At first, she even construes Hedda's fantasy as consistent with her own wishes. Just a few lines later, however, Hedda's volatility prompts Thea to realize that this is not the case: with no obvious provocation, Hedda "passionately grips" Thea in her arms and states that she "*thinks* she will burn" her hair off [my emphasis]. As always, Hedda acts impulsively, without warning or introspection. With regard to Hedda's "condition," Ibsen writes: "Can't understand it. Ridiculous! Ridiculous!" (Oxford Ibsen 7:483).

Thea Elvsted is not alone in her inability to understand the reference to Lövborg returning with vine leaves in his hair. In fact, no one (including Hedda herself) understands it, Judge Brack least of all: ("HEDDA: He didn't have vine leaves in his hair. BRACK: Vine leaves, my lady?" (238)). Ibsen makes Brack's incomprehension more explicit than that of any other character: he is the personification of convention, of a legalistic, conformist, repressive world. Nevertheless, the reader recalls that grape leaves are a traditional symbol of rejoicing, of allowing one's desires rather than convention to be the arbiter of behavior.[123] In her irrational fantasy, Hedda invests Lövborg with the iconographic attribute of Dionysus and tempts him to a bacchanalian communion through drink, sending him off to Judge Brack's stag party. Although Ibsen

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[123] The fact that in Classical iconography grape leaves also represent a ripe maturity with a sense that decay will soon follow foreshadows Lövborg's (and, by extension, Hedda's) end.

treats the image ambiguously, it undoubtedly suggests frenzied, irrational energy. Errol Durbach confirms this, writing that the image conveys "a sensation of ecstatic release like a pistol fired in the soul, a burst of light, an epiphany of beauty" (Durbach 40). She speaks ecstatically of her fantasy of controlling Lövborg and becomes at least momentarily connected to the idea of his becoming a "free man" – a man free from social convention – through an outpouring of violent energy. One might reasonably imagine that Hedda also yearns for something like this freedom, although, rationally speaking, her connection to the fantasy remains unclear. When it fails to materialize, Hedda's violent energy is redirected toward another mysterious goal – the "beautiful" suicide of Lövborg.

The details of Lövborg's suicide are reminiscent of Werther's. Indeed, Charles Lyons points out several inescapable similarities.[124] There is the ritualized, ceremonial aspect, the return to the town, and the use of the pistols borrowed from his love-interest. According to Lyons, all this suggests that Ibsen uses details from Werther "to shape Hedda's sense of the potentially aesthetic nature of Lövborg's act (89)." Undoubtedly, both suicides share an aesthetic dimension, yet Hedda's constantly shifting fantasy life makes it impossible to capture its precise significance – assuming there is any significance at all:

> LÖVBORG: Just put an end to it all. The sooner the better.
>
> HEDDA: (*takes a step closer to him*) Lövborg. . . listen to me . . . Could you let it happen . . . beautifully?
>
> LÖVBORG: Beautifully? [*Smiles*.] Crowned with vine leaves, as you used to imagine?

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[124] Charles R Lyons, Hedda Gabler: Gender, Role, and World (Boston: Twayne, 1991) 88.

> HEDDA: Oh no. I don't believe in those vine leaves any more. But beautifully all the same! Just for this once!. . .Goodbye. You must go now. And never come home again. (246)

Perhaps one might recognize something like an Apollonian impulse emerging. The Apollonian has manifested itself in various restrictive forms throughout the play so far (most conspicuously through an environment of restrictive morality and gender differentiation, the latter of which is made clear by General Gabler's brooding presence). Inexplicably, this seems to have become the means through which Hedda imagines the successful expression of violent energy after the failure of her Dionysian fantasy. Like the latter fantasy, however, the dream of the Apollonian is irrational. It makes no real sense why Hedda has shifted her focus from Dionysian frenzy to Apollonian noble order embodied by Lövborg's "beautiful" death – a self-inflicted bullet to the head.

By Act Four, the violent tension has grown to such a degree that it can hardly be contained. Hedda paces in a near-frenzied state, intermittently playing piano chords heard from the background. When Brack returns to report the news of Lövborg's fatal wound, Hedda, believing that his suicide was successful, announces: "At last . . . a really courageous act! . . . Lövborg . . . Lövborg has settled accounts with himself. He must have done what he did in a fit of madness." (256). Furthermore, because Lövborg used her pistol, Hedda feels that she has participated in his death and that she has managed to bring about an irruption of irrational energy – one that results incontrovertibly in a "release":

> HEDDA [*softly*]. Ah, Mr. Brack . . . what a sense of release it gives, this affair of Lövborg.
>
> BRACK. Release, my lady? Well, of course, for him it's a release.
>
> HEDDA. I mean, for me. It's a liberation to know that an act of spontaneous courage is yet possible in this world. An act that has something of a unconditional beauty. (258)

However, Judge Brack's description of the true circumstances of the shooting disabuses Hedda of any "beauty" related to his death. It quickly surfaces that Lövborg neither shot himself in the head nor in the heart, but in the abdomen, accidentally rather than intentionally.[125] Although one can never be sure of Hedda's thinking, it seems that she regards suicide (especially through a gunshot to the head) as the most violent irruption – one that results in the absolute freedom of the individual from social repression. However, Ibsen, via Judge Brack, suggests that this is an illusion:

> BRACK. It pains me, my lady . . . but I am compelled to disabuse you of a beautiful illusion.
>
> HEDDA. Illusion?
>
> BRACK. Which you would in any case have been deprived of fairly soon.
>
> HEDDA. And what that might be?
>
> BRACK. He didn't shoot himself . . . intentionally.

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[125] In a note on his translation of Hedda Gabler (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1961), Michael Meyer writes: "When Judge Brack tells Hedda where Lövborg has shot himself, he must make it clear to her that the bullet has destroyed his sexual organs, otherwise Hedda's reaction makes no sense." Hedda's reactions, however, never "make sense" (117).

> HEDDA. Not intentionally...Everything I touch seems to turn into something mean and farcical. (258-259)

Of course, Hedda's "illusion" is irrational, thus incomprehensible. Judge Brack at least realizes that its failure to materialize is a blow to Hedda's dream of breaking out of the world he symbolizes. As the embodiment of law and social propriety, his eagerness to assist in Hedda's downfall is significant: Hedda's energy is in a state of constant confrontation with the opposing, oppressive forces of the world around her; one senses the inevitability and imminence of a major irruption.

Before long, Hedda confronts Brack's blackmail; Hedda, after all, had provided Lövborg with the pistols used to end his life, and Brack insists on a "triangular arrangement" in order to keep quiet, further entrapping and oppressing Hedda: "Well, fortunately there is nothing to fear as long as I keep quiet" (262). For Hedda, the offer to be subject to his will is too horrible to contemplate; indeed, it is the final confirmation that freedom is, for her, out of the question. This realization, combined with her husband and Thea's reconstruction of Lövborg's manuscript, incites her seething energy to rise to the surface for her final, and most extreme, act of violence: "No longer free! [*She gets up violently.*] No! That's a thought that I'll never endure!" (262). Spontaneously, and with no warning whatsoever, Hedda prepares for the only act drastic enough to free herself from her insufferable life. Retiring to the inner chamber, her wild energy erupts as a frenzied dance tune on her piano, and Hedda is chastised by her husband for disrupting the propriety of preserving a calm, mournful atmosphere following the deaths of Aunt Rina and Lövborg. Sticking her head out between the curtains after his protests that she be quiet, Hedda announces with a sense of finality that she will indeed be quiet:

"And Aunt Julie. And of all the rest of them . . . I shall be silent in future" (263). Drawing the curtains together again, Hedda once again retires to her inner chamber, a micro-parlor that contains her only belongings – the portrait of her father and her old piano. On the latter she plays the overture to her suicide – a wild dance melody. Seconds later, with no warning, she shoots herself in the temple, channeling all of her repressed energy into a single, momentous irruption.

Ibsen presents Hedda's suicide with great ambiguity. It occurs with almost unnatural speed, with less preparation and less introspection than all of her other irruptions thus far.[126] Moreover, Ibsen keeps the act offstage: a shot is heard and we witness the personifications of convention (Tesman, Mrs. Elvsted, and Brack) rise to their feet as if they have finally been awakened. Hedda kills herself in exactly the same way as she had dreamed Lövborg would. The ambiguity of that fantasy carries over into the reality of this one: it is a shocking, unexpected, radically transgressive act, incomprehensible to those who witness it.[127] Tesman and Brack are shocked, not at the loss of Hedda herself, but at her violation of social decorum:

> TESMAN [*yelling at Brack*]. Shot herself! Shot herself in the temple!
>
> Think of that!

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[126] The speed with which Hedda's commits suicide stands out within Ibsen's dramaturgy. There is not even the brief discussion as there is in The Wild Duck (1884), where Relling predicts that Hedvig's suicide will be transformed into the emphatic story that Hjalmar will tell.

[127] Lyons, like many critics, misses a crucial point with regard to Hedda's suicide: it is an irrational irruption – it makes "no sense" rationally. Lyons, however, attempts to explain it in various rational ways: as an alternative to a loss of control, as one demanded by Ibsen's sexual paradigm, as an erotic "marriage," as an aesthetic object, as a renunciation of the erotic female, as a romanticized version of reality, and so on. The multiplicity of explanations alone suggest that there is no explanation for her act.

> BRACK [*half prostrate in the armchair*]. But, good God almighty. . . people don't do such things! (264)

Like all of Hedda's violent acts, Ibsen portrays Hedda's suicide as excessive and irrational. John Lahr notes that "Hedda's own suicide, when it comes, is not an act of contrition but an act of will, the only gesture of freedom left to her. It is intended as a perverse transcendence, a form of negative creation" (111).

Undoubtedly, Hedda achieves "release," but Ibsen's attitude towards Hedda's release for the sake of social freedom (like Goethe's attitude towards Werther's suicide done for the sake of moral freedom) remains inconclusive. Indeed, the aftermath of each suicide raises more questions than answers. Although Hedda's suicide is not botched in the way Werther's was, the received effect is surely not what either one had envisioned. One concludes that if Ibsen meant Hedda's suicide to be received as an absolute triumph over social convention – a conclusive break with what restricted her – he might not have ended the scene (and the play) with Brack's shocked response, "…people don't do such things!" Indeed, perhaps people *don't* do such things, but Hedda has, and Ibsen resists definitive judgment on her act.

Rilke's words about Ibsen might once again apply, now specifically to Hedda's suicide: "The two ends that you had bent together sprang apart; your insane energy escaped from the elastic rod, and your work was undone" (61). Ibsen presents Hedda's suicide – her quest for social freedom – as, more than anything else, this "undoing."

CHAPTER SIX

Suicide and Existential Freedom:

Camus and Sartre

Existentialism marks a radical shift from an emphasis on religious and social authority to a focus on the individual. Questions of life and death, freedom, and personal responsibility become key issues. It is only natural, then, that suicide would be a major concern. Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre explore suicide in detail; although both see it as a reaction to the "absurdity" of life, they have different understandings of absurdity and reach separate conclusions about suicide's relationship to individual freedom.

For Camus, absurdity arises from the yearning to find ultimate meaning, and the realization that there is none. To accept this absurdity and to refuse suicide leads to a joyous freedom. It is to live in full knowledge of the pointlessness of the human situation, and to engage with and even enjoy the freedom he faces. For Sartre, however, suicide is used to illuminate a different, less joyous, experience of freedom. Sartre argues that suicide is a necessary test and exercise of the freedom that results from one's awareness of exile from an absurd world – a world of contingency in which the existence of each and every thing is inexplicable and meaningless. Indeed, suicide is the ultimate test of freedom for Sartre because there is no reason why one should kill oneself and no reason why one should not. One must choose on the basis of nothing.

During the Second World War, Albert Camus wrote an essay entitled "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) which opens with the now famous words: "There is but one truly

serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (11).[128] Suicide is the most important philosophical issue for Camus because it raises the question of how one should react to the realization of life's fundamental "absurdity." For Camus, absurdity comes into being as the result of a *confrontation* between "a bare fact and a certain reality" – the bare fact that human beings yearn to find ultimate meaning, and the reality is that there is none (33). Camus notes that even science is, in the end, "metaphor and poetry"; although he admits that science permits us to "seize phenomena and enumerate them" it does not enable us to "apprehend the world," and that reason is "enough to make a decent man laugh" (21). Moreover, although the self is something one is sure of, he holds that "if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers" (24).

Camus notes three ways in which the sense of the absurd is invoked. In the first, Camus points to a situation in which one is asked what he is thinking, realizes that he is thinking "nothing," and expresses this nothingness to his questioner. In doing so, the absurd is invoked by articulating the void within him:

> Great works are often born on a street-corner or in a restaurant's revolving door. So it is with absurdity . . . In certain situations, replying "nothing" when asked what one is thinking about may be pretense in a man. Those who are loved are well aware of this. But if that reply is sincere, if it symbolizes that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks

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[128] Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Penguin, 1975) 11.

> the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity. (19)

In the second case, the absurd is evoked through the strange "density" of the physical universe:

> The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millenia. For a second we cease to understand it because for centuries we have understood in it solely the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. The world evades us because it becomes itself again . . . that denseness and that strangeness of the universe is the absurd. (20)

Finally, Camus also notes that the realization of the nullity of death invokes the absurd. We experience the absurd when we become aware of the total absence of consciousness from a dead body:

> . . . in reality there is no experience of death . . . it is barely possible to speak of the experience of others' deaths. It is a substitute, an illusion, and it never quite convinces us . . . From this inert body on which a slap makes no mark the soul has disappeared. This elementary and definitive aspect of the adventure constitutes the absurd feeling. Under the fatal lightning of that density, its uselessness becomes evident. (21)

Camus draws attention to the experience of absurdity in order to consider whether life is worth living. He is inviting reflection not so much on one's particular life as on life itself, on the way in which human beings relate to and exist in the world. The issue becomes one of determining if "the absurd dictates[s] death" and whether "there is a logic

to the point of death" (16). Put simply, Camus holds that if one finds that life is not worth living, committing suicide is justified. He wants to know "whether or not one can live *without appeal*" (16) – whether or not it is possible to live in full awareness of the pointlessness of existence or whether the reasonable consequence of confronting absurdity might be to end one's life.

He addresses this question through the familiar story of Sisyphus. Having defied the gods and attempted to cheat death, Sisyphus was condemned to spend his time ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain only to have the rock fall and having to roll it up again. Camus sees Sisyphus as the epitome of the hero in the perspective of the absurd and focuses on his hero's consciousness of the situation during his downward journey to retrieve the stone:

> [O]ne sees . . . the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over . . . At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments towards that lower world whence he will have to push it up again towards the summit. (108)

On his way back down the hill, Sisyphus is conscious of the absurd meaninglessness of his situation but he embraces, rather than denies, this meaninglessness. Despite his plight, he lives to the fullest, refusing both unjustified hope and the temptation to commit suicide: "If the descent is . . . sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy" (109). He lives in full knowledge of the pointlessness of the situation, engages with

it, even "throws himself" against it.[129] Since our earthly life is all that we have, and if the truth of human existence is its absurdity, the only way we can live that life fully is by retaining a perpetual consciousness of that truth.

Most importantly, Sisyphus' decision to accept the truth of absurdity and to reject suicide frees him "to *be*, which alone can serve as basis for a truth" (56). If the absurd experience is truly the realization that the universe is fundamentally devoid of absolutes, then we as individuals are truly free. "To live without appeal" as he puts it, is a philosophical move that begins to define absolutes and universals subjectively, rather than objectively. Thus, the freedom of man is established by his natural ability and opportunity to create his own meaning and purpose – to decide for himself. The ultimate solipsism of the existential is that the individual becomes the most precious unit of existence and represents a set of unique ideals that can be characterized as an entire universe by itself: "Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death, and I refuse suicide." (109) While the question of human freedom in the metaphysical sense loses interest to the absurd man, refusing suicide allows him to gain freedom in a very concrete sense: "he enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules" (109).

Camus makes a significant, if ambiguous, exception to his general stance on suicide. In his analysis of Dostoyevsky's The Possessed, he writes that the character Kirilov believes that God does not and cannot exist and regards this alone as a sufficient

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[129] Somewhat strangely, Camus uses the word "rebellion" to describe the proper response to freedom. Of this rebellion Camus remarks: "It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it." (54)

reason to commit suicide. He sees his suicide as an assertion of his rebellion and newfound liberty. According to Camus, Kirilov maintains that "If God does not exist, I am god" (98). Of course, Kirilov does not mean that if God does not exist he would then become an immortal and all-powerful deity; rather, he means that if it is the case that God does not exist, he then has dominion over his own life since there is no absolute morality which he is commanded to discover and obey.

Camus seems to accept Kirilov's suicide as an appropriate response to his situation even though he condemns suicide in general. Given his stance on Sisyphus, however, his explanation is confusing, if not outright contradictory. Kirilov, he points out, recognizes that his liberty should really lead to a celebration of life. Kirilov states: "If you feel *that* [meaning the freedom he has now recognized], you are a Czar and, far from killing yourself, you will live covered with glory" (98). However, Kirilov *does* kill himself, and Camus (like Hölderlin with regard to Empedocles) justifies his suicide because "he feels he must show his brothers a royal and difficult path on which he will be the first" (99).[130] The "royal and difficult path" to which Camus refers is Kirilov's realization of absolute freedom and his obligation to use it. Camus' unexpected reaction to Kirilov's suicide, then, suggests that the relationship between freedom and suicide is more complicated than he has presented it. It is not clear whether it should be seen in addition to or instead of the situation he describes with regard to Sisyphus.

With Sisyphus, Camus holds that that the refusal to commit suicide amounts to an embrace of the absurdity of life, and that to live this absurdity is to experience the

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[130] Camus makes this point even though Kirilov makes it clear that he does not wish others to follow him by killing themselves but by becoming enlightened, so that "this earth will be peopled with Czars and lighted up with human glory (99).

freedom of living in full knowledge of the pointlessness of the human situation and to engage with and even enjoy what is before him. His reaction to Kirilov's situation, however, suggests that his authentic realization of freedom presents him with the choice to commit suicide, and that this choice presents the ultimate challenge to (and awareness of) one's freedom. The question then becomes not *what* Kirilov does or does not do, but that *whatever* he does is the outcome of his free choice and is undertaken in awareness of what his freedom means. Suicide is thus seen as a way of calling freedom into play.

Like Camus, Sartre focuses on life's absurdity and the temptation to commit suicide resulting from both the awareness of this absurdity as well as from an awareness of the unbridgeable gap between self and world. Sartre's notion of absurdity is quite different from that of Camus. For Sartre, absurdity is contingency: the inexplicable existence of each and every thing, the ridiculousness of the world being there. Sartre notes how his concept of absurdity is different from that of Camus. For Camus the absurd arises from the relation between man and the world, between man's rational demands and the world's irrationality. Sartre's absurd is something very different: the absurdity is the given, unjustifiable, primordial quality of existence.

Sartre's concept of the absurd is demonstrated most vividly in Nausea (La Nausée). The novel's protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, becomes fearfully aware of the overwhelming presence and density of physical objects and of the strangely dislocated nature of his own existence. Standing on the seashore, he picks up a pebble and is sickened and horrified by its stubborn and overwhelming existence. Later, in reflecting on the incident, he says:

> Objects out not to *touch* . . . But they touch me, it's unbearable . . . Now I see, I remember better what I felt the other day at the sea-shore, when I was holding that pebble. It was a sort of sweet disgust. How unpleasant it was . . . a sort of nausea in the hands.[131]

The feeling of dislocation and alienation persists. Sitting in a tramcar, Roquentin is overcome by the brute existence of the seat opposite him:

> I murmur: "It's a seat," rather like an exorcism. But the word remains on my lips, it refuses to settle on the thing . . . Things have broken free from their names. They are there, grotesque, stubborn, gigantic, and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or anything at all about them. (180)

Roquentin's anguish culminates in an overwhelming experience when, while sitting in the park, his consciousness is invaded by the wordless and pressing existence of the roots of a chestnut tree. Thinking about this, afterwards he realizes that we do not normally confront actual existence. We usually deal in appearances, classifying things by means of words, giving them significance through the uses we make of them. Roquentin can find no reason that explains the brute existence of things. He reflects that if one tried to define "existence," the essential thing one would have to say is that it means something just *happens* to be there: there is nothing that precedes existence which is a reason for existence and so gives it meaning. Later, when Roquentin writes about his experience in the park he says: "The word Absurdity is now born beneath my pen . . . I, a little while ago, experiences the absolute, the absolute of the absurd" (185). The absurdity he has

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[131] Sartre, Jean-Paul, Nausea, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 22.

recognized is the absurdity of contingency: the inexplicable existence of each and every thing, the ridiculousness of the world's being there.

In The Reprieve (Le sursis, 1947), the second part in the trilogy The Roads to Freedom (Les chemins de la liberté**)** which concerns life in France during the eight days before the signing of the Munich Agreement and the subsequent takeover of Czechoslovakia in September 1938, the character Mathieu experiences both the absurdity of existence as well as the unbridgeable chasm between himself and the world. This combination results in anguish, since he realizes that human freedom is total but meaningless, and that there is nothing one can rely upon to determine one's choices. Ultimately, it is the realization of this radical freedom that leads him to contemplate suicide as a way to "call his freedom into play."[132] Mathieu's consideration of suicide does not follow from a despair caused by any particular life circumstances. Instead, it arises from a realization that his freedom is so close that it is untouchable. He had "sought it far away," but realizes that his freedom *is* actually him – "it is, in fact, myself" (309).

An example helps to elucidate this idea. In the novel, Mathieu puts his hands on the parapet of Pont-Neuf, and becomes vividly aware of them as simply bits of matter, meaningless objects belonging to everything that is "outside." He feels that his hands are somehow not parts of *him*. Only when he closes his eyes do his hands seem to belong to him again. That central "him" that feels the presence of the bridge and sees the hands on the parapet seems unable to make contact with anything: "He longed to clutch that stone, and melt into it, to fill himself with its density and repose. But there was no help in it: it

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[132] Jean-Paul Sartre, The Reprieve, trans. Eric Sutton (New York: Penguin, 1963) 309.

was outside and forever." His freedom, then, is constituted by his exclusion from the absurd world of contingency.[133] Freedom, he says, is "exile" and the resulting alienation he feels renders him accountable to no one. Mathieu is devoid of any purpose, and although he might still go to the train station, run away, or stay where he is, these actions are incapable of truly calling this freedom into play. He must exercise his freedom, and since his freedom is equivalent to his own existence, he can exercise it only be risking his life. He realizes that he is free even to kill himself if he chooses to and feels terrified because there is no reason why he should kill himself and no reason why he should not: he has to choose what he will do on the basis of nothing.[134]

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[133] In Being and Nothingness, Sartre describes the unbridgeable gap between "Being-in-itself" and "Being-for-Itself." In the context of the situation described above, Mathieu is the mode of existence of consciousness ("Being-for-itself"), while the stone and his hands ("Being-in-itself") are the mode of existence of objects or things. Mathieu feels alienated from the stone and his hands by his consciousness of them. Sartre describes the existence of Being-in-itself as "opaque to itself . . . because it is filled with itself." A thing has no consciousness of itself; it just exists and is, therefore, absurd. In contrast, Being-for-itself has no such fullness of existence. In this sense, it is *no*-thing. In being conscious it never regards itself as a thing but only as not that thing of which it is conscious; it is forever separated. It is precisely this separation from the absurd (contingent) world that leads to Mathieu's realization of radical freedom. Here, there are obvious parallels to Husserl and Heidegger: from Husserl, Sartre takes the view of consciousness as intentional (a consciousness of something other than itself). From Heidegger, Sartre takes the basic distinction between the world of conscious being and the world of things.

[134] Sartre makes a related point in War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phoney War, November 1939-March 1940, trans. Quintin Hoare (London, Verso, 1984) where he uses the example of negotiating a path that runs along the edge of a precipice. In spite of all the care taken in such a situation, the foresight and calculation of the difficulties, and one's cautious and controlled movements, there is still the possibility not simply of the occurrence of mishap or accident, but of one's choosing to be reckless or wild, of choosing suddenly to jump over the edge. Although there may be nothing conducive to doing this, although there is no reason for such a choice, although the prospect is horrifying, one might just choose to kill oneself. He writes: "I am in anguish precisely because any conduct on my part is only possible, and this means that while constituting a totality of motives for pushing away that situation, I at the same moment apprehend these motives as not sufficiently effective. At the very moment when I apprehend my being as

What is most important for Mathieu is that having understood the nature of his freedom he is required to exercise it.[135] His deep concern is not about *what* he will do but that whatever he does shall be the outcome of his free choice.[136] Suicide does not present itself to him as something intrinsically good or bad, nor as something that might have good or bad consequences. He does not think about it in relation to its effect on other people or with respect to duties, responsibilities, moral or religious codes, nor even in terms of some intrinsic human values. Rather, Mathieu's freedom is absolute, and the way in which he uses this freedom gives meaning to his life.[137] His thought that if he did

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horror of the precipice, I am conscious of the horror as not determinant in relation to my possible conduct. In one sense that horror calls for prudent conduct, and it is in itself a pre-outline of that conduct; in another sense, it posits the final developments of that conduct only as possible, precisely because I do not apprehend it as the cause of these final developments. . ." (31)

[135] Mathieu must exercise his freedom despite the anguish it provokes because not to do so would result in "bad faith" – the evasion of existential anguish. To evade anguish is to evade ourselves since, Sartre writes, "It is certain that we cannot overcome anguish for we are anguish." However, we do try to evade it in many ways, often by positing a determinism through which we think of ourselves as objects driven by forces other than ourselves such that we not obliged to choose what we shall be and not responsible for what we are.

[136] Therefore, there is no reason why suicide cannot be undertaken in good faith: one acts in "good faith" if what one does (i.e. whether he commits suicide or not) results from the awareness and exercise of one's freedom. Mathieu thus acts in good faith.

[137] It is somewhat ironic that Sartre holds that the act of suicide at once abolishes the possibility of giving future meanings to one's life. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre writes that death is never that which gives life its meanings and death by suicide is not more meaningful than a natural death. All that the act of suicide means is that ." . . in attempting to get rid of my life I affirm that I live and I assume that life is bad." See Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology. trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Methuen, 1957) 543. Moreover, in another Sartrean twist, one's death turns one into an object for other people, so that he can only have meanings they assign to him: death ends one's subjectivity but it leaves one's "exterior" in the hands of others: So long as I live I can escape what I am for the Other by revealing to myself by my freely posited ends that I am nothing and that I make myself what I am; so long as I live, I can give the lie to what others discover in me . . . Thus ceaselessly I

kill himself his suicide would be "an absolute, a law, a choice and a morality" reminds us that what counts from an existentialist point of view is the recognition, in the face of total freedom, of one's responsibility for all one's actions and the development of that recognition into an authentic choice.[138] Thus, to reject suicide on the grounds that it might cause more unhappiness than happiness, or is contrary to a particular set of beliefs would be, for the existentialist, more reprehensible than actually choosing to commit suicide in the first place. For the existentialist, morality is "a personal structure of human reality" and a freely-chosen suicide is a choice of oneself as "a suicide": "suicide, in fact, is a choice and affirmation – of being" (War Diaries 108, 479). The emphasis is entirely on the individual person as the source of values and meanings. This is a vivid illustration of how far apart existentialism stands from more socially-oriented views of suicide.

From a societal standpoint suicide is often diagnosed as the action of someone who has become utterly estranged or dislocated from ordinary life within society. Indeed, there is a fairly widespread belief that a great many suicides would not have occurred if only the persons concerned would have preserved meaning in their lives through maintaining just one or two significant personal relationships. Existentialism contrasts sharply with this.

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escape my outside and ceaselessly I am re-apprehended by the Other . . . the fact of death . . . gives the final victory to the point of view of the Other . . .to die is to exist only through the Other, and to owe him one's meaning . . . (Being and Nothingness 544)

[138] In "Mallarmé: The Poetry of Suicide" in Between Existentialism and Marxism, trans. John Matthews (London: Verso, 2008), Sartre takes makes this point much more dramatically. With reference to the poet, Sartre writes that "Mallarmé never doubted for a minute that had he killed himself, the human species would have died with him. His suicide would have been genocide – at once sacrifice and genocide, affirmation and negation of man – would reproduce the throw of the dice…" (174).

In the first place, existentialism does not regard a sense of alienation, dislocation, and anguish as pathological or to be avoided; rather, it these are regarded as prerequisites for realizing and exercising one's freedom. In the second place, the existentialist view of suicide – unlike socially-oriented views – stresses that the choice of action is also a choice of oneself in that one chooses, through one's actions, the way in which one will exist in the world. Thus, if I choose to kill myself, what is significant is that I have chosen to be a suicide, to exist as "the person who killed himself." We cannot choose our existence, for existence is "given" in the sense that we just do find ourselves existing (Sartre's definition of absurdity). However, we may choose our essence, i.e. our particular *ways* of existing in the world. This marks a sharp contrast to socially-oriented views of suicide which assume that one's essence is determined by forces outside oneself, and that one's essence precedes and controls one's existence.

It is, perhaps, one of the greatest merits of existentialism that it invites and provides the conditions for consideration of particular individuals and particular cases even though such considerations have no relation to external norms or concerns. Existentialism is unconcerned with moral freedom (unlike Schiller's Bride of Messina and Goethe's Werther), social freedom (unlike Ibsen's Hedda Gabler), spiritual freedom (unlike Hölderlin's Empedocles), and it pays no heed to achieving freedom from suffering (unlike Schopenhauer). Instead, it provides a kind of non-normative, descriptive morality consisting of an openness and uncertainty of judgment, and a requirement to commit oneself to a view or an attitude based in the last resort on a personal conviction. Nowhere are such characteristics more clearly revealed than in judgments and reflections concerning suicide.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Suicide as Pathological Inevitability:

Ludwig Binswanger's "Case of Ellen West"

Ludwig Binswanger's "Case Study of Ellen West: An Anthropological-Clinical Study" was published in 1944. It is a fascinating account of a woman, who, at the end of her life, was treated by Binswanger for schizophrenia and a severe chronic eating disorder. West was released from the Kreuzlingen Sanatorium outside of Zurich, Switzerland after Binswanger decided that she was incurable. As he expected, West took a dose of poison and died after three days.

Binswanger treats West's suicide as the logical, coherent, and inevitable end of her life. Her actions and circumstances are presented as part of a causal chain leading to her suicide. Therefore, the issue of individual freedom – prominent in other works discussed so far – is missing in Binswanger's case study. The case study (constructed from records given to Binswanger by previous clinicians) and the analysis that follows it attempt to convince the reader (and himself) that neither he nor his patient had any control over the outcome.[139]

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[139] Binswanger (1881-1966) was one of the founding fathers of existential analysis – a form of psychoanalysis which applied the principles of existential phenomenology, especially as expressed by Martin Heidegger, to psychotherapy. Diagnosing certain psychic abnormalities to be the effect of the patient's distorted self-image and his inadequate relation to the world, he developed a form of psychoanalysis to establish the patient's consciousness of self as a total person, uniquely existing in and communicating with the concrete world as it is. In contrast to Freudian analysis in which there is little attempt to understand how a patient views the world, the existential analyst purposely violates his professional distance – sometimes even living with the patient – in order to feel what the patient feels. Direct experience of the patient's world is the primary therapeutic tool.

One way to understand the genre of this case study is to view it as an attempt by an author (the analyst) to exert control the narrative of the subject (the patient). In order to harness this control, the author/analyst imposes a clearly defined linear structure such that the success or failure of curing the patient is implied from the beginning and revealed as an inevitable fulfillment of expectations by the end. Binswanger makes deft use of this narrative form in order to emphasize the inevitability of its content. In his view, Ellen West "had become ripe for death, in other words that death, this death, was the necessary fulfillment of the life-meaning of this existence.[140]

Binswanger's case study resurrects the classic philosophical problem of freedom, determinism, and personal responsibility. Here, the issue hinges on the way in which we understand West's suicide as it is filtered through Binswanger's narrative. Indeed, one might justifiably argue that "The Case of Ellen West" is only partially about Ellen West. Binswanger himself recognizes the obvious fact that the "conception or picture" of West's life and death is dependent upon, and reveals much about, the person who makes it:

> True, we say in ordinary life that on the basis of a report or narrative we form an approximate "conception" or construct a more or less vivid "picture" of a human individuality; however, this conception or picture, as is well known, depends upon the varying standpoint and viewpoint of the person or group making it. (268)

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[140] Ludwig Binswanger, "The Case of Ellen West," in Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology, ed. May, Angel, and Ellenberger (New York: Basic Books: 1958) 237-364.

Even so, he seems unaware of just how much he reveals about himself. His case study and the "existential analysis" that follows suggest that he wishes to justify his actions and deflect responsibility for what occurred. There is even the suggestion that he should be recognized for the way that he dealt with such an "impossible" situation.

The case study begins with a description of West's heredity. The message is subtle, but clear: if virtually all of her familial relations have suffered from mental illness, her fate can be no different. Heredity is insurmountable, and no mental health professional (no matter how skilled) can save her from the curse of her genetic inheritance. He describes West as an outsider, a "non-Swiss," the daughter of a Jewish father who was "very soft and sensitive and suffering from nocturnal depressions" (237). Although she had a healthy brother four years older, he is described as "dark." Her younger brother was "nervous, soft, a womanly aesthete" and was committed to a psychiatric clinic for some weeks at the age of seventeen because of suicidal thoughts (237). With clinical distance and objectivity, he continues a litany of these afflictions:

> A sister of the father became mentally ill on her wedding day. Of the father's five brothers, one shot himself between the ages of twenty and thirty…a second likewise committed suicide during a period of melancholy, and a third is severely ascetic…Two brothers fell ill with dementia arteriosclerosis and later each died of a stroke. (238)

Then comes a description of Ellen's birth and life history. She was born "overseas" (presumably in North America), and moved with her family to Europe when she was ten. She was a "headstrong and violent child" who refused milk after nine months and had difficulty feeding. Even at a young age she "had days when everything seemed empty to

her," was a good student but a perfectionist (her motto was: "aut Caesar aut nihil!"), preferred boys' games and clothes and wanted to be a boy, and was a "thumbsucker" until she was sixteen (239).

Binswanger writes that at seventeen, a year "which cut deeply into her existence," there were two profound developments in West's life (272). First, she read J.P. Jacobsen's Niels Lyhne (1880), a stark, melancholic novel about a disillusioned artist who commits suicide. The novel transformed West from a "deeply religious person" -- one with faith in god and the afterlife -- into a "complete atheist" (239). He claims that the work's individualism and religious nihilism captivated many young people and strengthened their faith, but that it had the opposite effect on West – she identified closely with the suicidal protagonist: "Feeling no longer any trust in, or obligation to a deity…in the words of Niels Lyhne, [she is] entirely a "solitary individual" (239). During the same year, she began to write poems which she kept in a diary.

He describes these early poems as reminiscent of Niels Lyhne. As he begins his description and analysis, the distanced voice of the clinician echoes a lyrical, poetic one that describes West's uncontrollable urge for freedom:

> ...now her [West's] heart beats with exultant joy, now the sky is darkened, the winds blow weirdly, and the ship of life sails on unguided, not knowing whither to direct its keel…the wind is rushing about her ears, and she wants it to cool her burning brow; when she runs against it blindly, careless of custom or propriety, it is as if she were stepping out of a confining tomb, as if she were flying through the air in an uncontrollable urge to freedom, and as if she must achieve something great and mighty;

> then her gaze falls back into the world again and the saying comes to her mind: 'Man, in small things make your world'; she cries to her soul, 'Fight on.' (239)

Binswanger then interjects a terse transitional sentence ("Still other poems from her seventeenth year are available"), and then quickly reverts to another lyrical account of West's poem called "Kiss Me Dead," which was written when she was seventeen. Coming from the perspective of a supposedly objective clinician, Binswanger's treatment of West's poetry is unusual by any estimation. Indeed, if one did not know otherwise, these descriptions could themselves be read as if they are Binswanger's own prose poems *about* her. There is a sense of empathy, almost as if her sentiments are his:

> the sun sinks into the ocean like a ball of fire, a dripping mist drops over sea and beach, and a pain comes over her: 'Is there no rescue anymore?' She calls upon the grim Sea-King to come to her, take her into his arms in ardent love-lust, and kiss her to death (239).

This absence of "professional distance" is significant. It is the mark of existential analysis to violate the traditional doctor-patient relationship in order to feel what the patient feels. The existential analyst believed that direct, empathic experience of the patient's world (not his training, nor his diagnostic formulation, nor his attentive ears, nor his readiness to grasp hidden connections) was the primary therapeutic tool. For Binswanger, a true empathic relationship required the therapist to establish rapport with the "sick" as well as the healthy aspects of the patient. He believed that it was only in this way that he could bring the sick parts back into the patient's sense of a "whole" self. However, there is internal evidence suggesting that his considerable empathic skills failed

him, that he intellectualized his experience with West in a way that ran contrary to his own existential method, and that, adhering to her own sense of inevitability, he failed to forestall her suicide. As more details of her condition and treatment emerge, it becomes clear that his narrative (presumably written as a treatise on existential analysis) is actually a thinly-veiled apologia designed as a clinical case study.[141]

After these unusual descriptions, he reports that West also writes about the "blessing of work" (240). Binswanger claims that she fantasized that work could free her from feeling that the world is falling apart and that all pleasure in life has disappeared. Without work, West imagines that many more would take their lives:

> 'What would we be without work, what would become of us? I think they would soon have to enlarge the cemeteries for those who went to death of their own accord. Work is the opiate for suffering and grief' – "When all the joints of the world threaten to break apart, when the light of our happiness is extinguished and our pleasure in life lies wilting, only one thing saves us from madness: work. Then we throw ourselves into a sea of duties as into Lethe, and the roar of its waves is to drown out the death-knell pealing in our heart…Smother the murmuring voices in work! Fill up your life with duties'. (240)

He quickly reports, however, that work fails to alleviate her distress. Binswanger notes that after a day of work "the old pictures return" (240). Nothing seems able to ameliorate her anguish:

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[141] It is worth noting that most of Freud's case studies (including perhaps his most famous case study "Dora") also deal with the problematic of a failed case study that still reveals much about the author's own psychology.

> When the day is done with its haste and unrest, and we sit by the window in the growing twilight, the book will fall from our hand, we stare into the distance, into the setting sun, and old pictures rise up before us. The old plans and hopes, none of which have been realized, the boundless barrenness of the world and our infinite minuteness stand before our tired soul. Then the old question crowds to our lips, "What for – why all this? Why do we strive and live, forgotten after a short span of time, only to molder in the cold earth?...and when you have worked and toiled, what have you accomplished? What prevails around us and below us is still so much of boundless distress." (240)

The illustrates another one of Binswanger's strategies. While he admits that West sometimes experiences extended happiness, he does this only to show that even her most idyllic moments are wedded to moments of intense distress. For example, he writes that at eighteen her diary "praises with the greatest enthusiasm everything new and beautiful that she experiences in Paris on a trip with her parents" (240). However, he then remarks that her poems indicate "contradictoriness in her mood" (240) and implies that suicidal tendencies now lurk behind even her happiest thoughts and experiences:

> One [poem] sings of sunshine and the smiling spring, of radiant blue skies over a free, wide land of pleasure and blissfulness; in another she wishes that the greening and blooming of the springtime world, the murmuring and the rustling of the woods, might be her dirge; in a third the only longing left to her eyes is that for the darkness "where the glaring sun of

> life does not shine': 'If thou still rulest behind clouds, Father, then I beseech thee, take me back to thee!' (240-41)

While the conditions vary, Binswanger makes clear that no environmental factor could have helped West. Neither "the blessing of work," sentimental love affairs, nor journeys abroad with her parents have any effect on her mental state.

When she was twenty, West made her second voyage to North America – this time to nurse her older brother, who also suffered from mental illness.[142] On her way back to Switzerland she stopped in Sicily. Binswanger states bluntly: "The first weeks in Sicily are the last of her happiness in life" and that "already" her diary reports "shadows of doubt and of dread" (242).[143] The most obvious manifestation of this doubt and dread is Ellen's fear of getting fat. Binswanger claims that this is "a definite dread" and "something new." Spells of overeating and weight gain were followed by fasts, and strenuous exercise, and laxative abuse. He describes her fasts and immoderate hikes as attempts to "mortify" herself. Her behavior now becomes increasingly obsessive. On a hike with her friends, who had apparently been teasing her about being overweight,

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[142] Binswanger writes that she took her first trip to North America when she was eighteen. During this trip she experienced "the happiest and most harmless time" of her life, yet she could never be away from her parents and begs her parents to call her back to them whenever she visits friends (241). This is another illustration of Binswanger's tendency to temper revelations of West's happiness and seeming mental health with those of intense despair and mental disturbance.

[143] While Binswanger claims that this time marks "the last of [West's] happiness in life," he remarks just a few pages later that "during the summer semester of her twenty-third year and the winter semester of the beginning of the beginning of her twenty-fourth year she studies in the town of X" and that "this period is one of the happiest of her life" (246). This inconsistency (repeated several more times throughout the case study) draws attention to a certain degree of narrative unreliability driven, perhaps, by Binswanger's overzealous insistence on the inevitability of West's deterioration and eventual suicide.

things went so far that when her companions stopped at a lookout spot West kept "circling about them" (242). With authority and conviction, Binswanger argues that at this moment her "existential possibilities" became severely limited, if not completely annihilated. All attempts to break out of her present condition and control her future were bound to fail; she is on a deadly crash-course with the inevitable. Here it is worth quoting Binswanger's analysis at length:

> The dread of becoming fat, which appears in her twentieth year in Sicily, and with which the true illness in the psychiatric sense manifests itself, has thus to be seen anthropologically not as a beginning but as an end. It is the "end" of the encirclement process of its entire existence, so that it is no longer open for existential possibilities… As Ellen West's own expressions and descriptions so clearly show, existence now gets hemmed in more and more, confined to a steadily diminishing circle of narrowly defined possibilities, for which the wish to be thin and the dread of getting fat represent merely the definitive (psychophysical) garb… The preponderance of the future is now replaced by the supremacy of the past… All that remains are the fruitless attempts at escaping from this circle, from the ever more clearly experienced and described existential incarceration and imprisonment… That the direction of Ellen West's life history no longer points to the future, but is ruled by the past, and therefore empty, is dramatically expressed in her truly symbolic act in which she keeps circling around her girl friends who have stopped at a scenic point… she walks – that is, moves – "as if" she were striding

> forward and yet keeps going in a circle all the same…She offers the picture of a lioness imprisoned in a cage, circling along the bars, vainly looking for an exit. If in place of this picture we want to set down its existential expression, it must read – hell. (281)

The notion that West's life history is closed off to the future and ruled by the past deserves closer attention. Binswanger maintains that West has crossed a threshold which is marked superficially by her wish to be thin and her dread of getting fat. She is now "hemmed in" by mental illness. Her future has become "empty" because now she lacks the freedom to control it. She will move on through life, but the movement will be circular, constrained by her affliction. She becomes a prisoner of her illness, imprisoned in a cage. Perhaps even more interesting is Binswanger's repeated insinuations that there can be no chance of his altering the course of her life so that she might have been saved from her progressively debilitating mental illness and suicide. He cannot possibly be held responsible for the result of events that had long been set in motion.

Indeed, after West's trip to Sicily, Binswanger describes her life as one of steady decline. At twenty-one, she sees her body and soul as united on a path to mutual destruction driven by a relentless desire to be thin. She is on "the lowest rung of the ladder" and it is only a matter of time before she surrenders to death (242). He reports that her suicidal thoughts have become much more frequent – indeed, that she feels that death welcomes her as a "friend":

> In a poem, grim distress sits at her grave, ashy pale – sits and stares, does not flinch nor budge; the birds grow mute and flee, the flowers wilt before its ice-cold breath. Now death no longer appears to her as terrible; death

> is not a man with the scythe but 'a glorious woman, white asters in her dark hair, large eyes, dream-deep and gray.' The only thing that still lures her is dying… 'If he makes me wait much longer, this great friend, death, then I shall set out and seek him…Only the certainty that sooner or later the end must come consoles me a little.' (242-243)

After quoting West's words, he interjects a brief, but telling, comment revealing his defensive stance. Her indicates that her wish never to have children is sensible because nothing awaits them in the world. Binswanger then refers to West's description of her diary as a "safety valve." Quoting West, who had apparently not written in her diary for months, he writes:

> '. . . today I must take my notebook in hand; for in me there is such turmoil and ferment that I must open a safety valve to avoid bursting out in wild excesses. It is really sad that I must translate all this force and urge to action into unheard words instead of powerful deeds . . . It is a pity of my young life, a sin to waste my sound mind. For what purpose did nature give me health and ambition? Surely not to stifle it and hold it down and let it languish in the chains of humdrum living, but to serve wretched humanity' (243).

West uses her diary to express, and thereby diffuse, the overwhelming frustration arising from her inability to translate "unheard words" into "deeds" in the service of "wretched humanity." She fantasizes about both the "liberation of [her] soul" and "the real tangible liberation of the people from the chains of their oppressors . . . a revolution, a great uprising to spread over the entire world and overthrow the whole social order" (243).

Similarly, one senses Binswanger's frustration at his own inability to save her, i.e. at his inability to "serve humanity" in his capacity as a psychiatrist. Like West, he is "in chains" – unable to act, relegated to the words of defensive this narrative. In language of crushing despair – perhaps mirroring his own state – he quotes her as follows:

> '…[the chains] hold me down, hold me back from a tempestuous revival, from the comp lete absorption and sacrifice for which my whole soul is longing. O God, dread is driving me! Dread which is almost certainty! The consciousness that ultimately I shall lose everything: all courage, all rebelliousness, all drive for doing … we have no right to close our eyes to the cry of misery…' (243)

Binswanger tries to diffuse the ambivalence arising from his intense involvement in the last years of West's life. His case study is to him what West's diary is to her: an attempt to control a life narrative. Yet this control is frequently difficult to maintain. In addition to the narrative inconsistency regarding the "last of [West's] happiness" (noted above) there are other clues that Binswanger has a difficult time controlling his narrative: he often becomes so involved he needs distance from it. He restrains the narrative, reminding himself that he should "again proceed historically" (275). He tries to keep the reader on track, emphasizing (perhaps embellishing) certain details of West's diary in order to preempt the charge that he bears any responsibility for her eventual suicide. He uses information and direct quotations from the diary in order to establish that she was on a path toward destruction long before he became involved with her; he repeatedly implies that he could not have possibly prevented her death. Indeed, as a physician who has taken the Hippocratic Oath swearing that he will never do harm or advise suicide, he is

caught in a burdensome gesture in that he is forced to administer treatment when it is already too late.

His defensiveness only increases after reporting that at twenty-three Ellen "breaks down" (245). After calmly noting how she went to a seaside resort to recover, he exclaims, "She does everything to get just as thin as possible, takes long hikes, and daily swallows thirty-six to forty-eight thyroid tablets!" (246). Then, he notes that two years later, during her third trip abroad, West received her first official diagnosis, "Basedow syndrome" (Graves' disease, a form of hyperthyroidism). Six weeks of bed rest was ordered. She gained weight rapidly. Her psychological state continued to deteriorate. Although she has not yet actually attempted to kill herself, suicidal thoughts were pervasive:

> 'Woe's me, woe's me!
>
> The earth bears grain,
>
> But I
>
> Am unfruitful,
>
> Am discarded shell,
>
> Cracked, unusable,
>
> Worthless husk,
>
> Creator, Creator
>
> Take me back!
>
> Create me a second time
>
> And create me better!' (267)

Once she returns to Europe, her cousin Karl began to woo her. After two years she married him, although she felt quite ambivalent about doing so. Shortly after the marriage West became pregnant, then miscarried. Her eating obsession became much worse and she began using strong laxatives: "she had again taken thyroid periodically and gone on tremendous hikes. In her later twenties she beat herself with her fists" (247). The following spring she stopped menstruating and, on her twenty-ninth birthday, while on a hike with her husband, she has a "severe abdominal hemorrhage" (248).

Two years later, at thirty-one, she experienced frequent high fevers and began to go out in the streets hoping to catch pneumonia. By the time she turned thirty-two, her physical condition deteriorated still further and she felt that "all real life" has stopped. However, while she moved closer to suicide, she had not yet arrived:

> Her use of laxatives increases beyond measure. Every evening she takes sixty to seventy tablets of a vegetable laxative, with the result that she suffers tortured vomiting at night and violent diarrhea by day, often accompanied by weakness of the heart. Now she no longer eats fish, has thinned down to a skeleton, and weighs only 92 pounds. Ellen becomes more and more debilitated, goes back to bed in the afternoon, and is terribly tortured by the feeling that 'her instincts are stronger than her reason,' that 'all inner development, all real life has stopped,' and that she is completely dominated by her 'overpowering idea, long since recognized as senseless.' (248)

The reader notes Binswanger's references to West's myriad "declines" from the very beginning. By this point, one would expect that she could decline no further – that her

death is imminent. However, whenever it seems that this is so Binswanger interjects that there is a further, even more precipitous, decline. Thus, the reader is put in a constant state of anticipation (if not frustration) during which, perhaps unconsciously, he becomes complicit in Binswanger's narrative of inevitability.

At thirty-two, West tries psychoanalysis for the first time. Although at first she experiences marked improvement (she "regains hope, again attends lectures, the theater, and concerts, and goes on excursions"), she soon regards the analysis as useless (249). Binswanger quotes a letter to her husband: "'My thoughts are exclusively concerned with my body, my eating, my laxatives'." She struggles with the desire to be healthy, but will not (or cannot) pay the price for it (250). Once again, Binswanger conveys the hopelessness of the situation: 'In despair I leave my analyst and go home with the certainty: he can give me discernment, but not healing' (250). After six months, the analysis came to an end due to what Binswanger describes somewhat mysteriously as "external reasons" (252).[144]

A month or so later, contrary to her husband's wishes, Ellen West began a second analysis. Two days after her analyst requested that her husband leave town, Ellen made her first serious suicide attempt by overdosing on sleeping pills. The analyst continued desperately to help her, even permitting her husband to rejoin her. Still, there was no improvement. Ellen walked aimlessly and tearfully through the streets between sessions and soon made a second suicide attempt by swallowing a large dose of barbiturates. She told her husband and the analyst that she would take her life the moment their guard was

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[144] Although the reasons for ending treatment are not clear, a possible interpretation is that these reasons were "external" because they had nothing to do with the psychoanalysis itself. Instead, Binswanger implies that her reasons for ending analysis were due to an inexorable drive toward self-destruction.

down. She then made further attempts to kill herself by throwing herself in front of moving cars, and once even tried to jump from the analyst's window. Morbidly preoccupied with food, abusing laxatives, agitated, filled with feelings of horror and dread, she felt more and more cut off from others. In her diary, West writes:

> 'I see people through a glass wall, their voices come to me muffled. I have an unutterable longing to get to them. I scream, but they do not hear me. I stretch out my arms toward them but my hands merely beat against the walls of my glass ball . . . This compulsion [always to think of eating] has become the curse of my life, it pursues me waking and sleeping, it stands beside everything I do like an evil spirit, and never and nowhere can I escape it. It pursues me like the Furies pursue a murderer, it makes the world a caricature and my life a hell . . . the torture of having each day to tilt anew against the windmill and a mass of absurd, base, contemptible thoughts, the torment spoils my life.' (256)

In the next two pages Binswanger stresses that West no longer wished for anything but death and believed that only death could have save her from her misery. At the end of November, Binswanger reports yet again that "the curve takes a serious drop," prompting her to consult Dr. Emil Kraepelin, who diagnosed "melancholia."[145] A disagreement broke out between West's analyst, the consultant (Kraepelin), and her internist. Ellen lost faith in her analyst and became even more suicidal. She continued to live only out of a sense of duty to her relatives. Once again, Binswanger notes that, pleading with her

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[145] One of the most influential psychiatrists of his time, Emil Kraepelin (1856-1956) was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud but, unlike Freud, argued for a biological cause of psychiatric diseases.

husband to allow her to die (or perhaps even to kill her), she moved closer to death. In her diary on December 19, she wrote:

> 'Life has no further lure for me. There is nothing, no matter where I look, which holds me. Everything is gray and without joy. Since I have buried myself in myself and can can no longer love, existence is only torture. Every hour is torture. What formerly gave me joy is now a task, an intrinsically senseless something contrived to help me pass the hours. What formerly seemed to me a goal in life, all the learning, all the striving, all the accomplishment, is now a dark, heavy nightmare of which I am afraid… I long as ardently for death as the poor soldier in Siberia longs for his homeland . . . Karl, if you love me, grant me death.' (258)

Her internist insisted in January 1944 that she cease analysis and be transferred immediately to Kreuzlingen to be treated by Binswanger.

After reporting the contents of the internist's referral note and the second analyst's report, Binswanger offers "extracts" from the case record – his own diary – during the two and a half months West was under his care. These entries read like an abridged version of the overall case study – a final rehearsal before the last act. Binswanger's description of the nearly three months he spent with West reinforces the arc of the three decades already covered by the case study. It follows the pattern we now expect. On January 21 she was hopeless and despairing. Longing for death, she felt physically empty and dead. Her agitation was intermittent but severe. She felt like a "corpse among people," and reported many dreams about committing suicide. On February 26 she offered a farmer a large sum of money if he would shoot her. In early

March she experienced six days of building agitation, then asked to be transferred to a locked ward for her own safety. By then she was adamantly suicidal and asked Binswanger for permission to take her life. She attempted to convince her husband and Binswanger that taking her life was the right thing to do. They mounted counterarguments, but she rejected them. In terse fragments, Binswanger writes:

> Her visit to the locked wards has had a rather unfavorable effect. 'I would want to smash in the solid pains immediately.' Feels gluttony again 'as when a wild child throws itself on its food.' Full of reproaches for having eaten too much. Wants permission from the doctor to take her own life. Attempts obstinately to convince her husband and doctor of the correctness of this trend of thought, rejects every counterargument. (264)

Binswanger brings the reader ever closer to West's suicide. However, he makes a final digression about his patient's life-long preoccupation with it. This digression is important for two reasons. First, Binswanger claims that he has acquired this information from West's husband Karl. This suggests a certain degree of "collaboration" between the two. Second, the reported information is entirely new. One wonders why it has not been mentioned earlier in the case study:

> In response to my request her husband gathers together the following material on the theme of suicide. The wish to die runs through her entire life. Even as a child she thinks it "interesting" to have a fatal accident – for example, to break through the ice while skating. During her riding period (at nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one) she performs foolhardly tricks, has a fall and breaks her clavicle, and thinks it too bad that she does

> not have a fatal accident; on the next day she mounts her horse again and continues to carry on in the same manner. When sick as a young girl, she is disappointed each time the fever subsides and the sickness leaves her. When she studies the *Matura* (at twenty-two), she wants her tutor to repeat this sentence over and over again: those whom the gods love die young. The teacher is annoyed by this and finally refuses to do this again and again. When she hears of the death of girl friends, she envies them and her eyes shine at the death announcement. While working in the Foundling Home, despite the warnings of the supervisor, she visits children who have scarlet fever and kisses them that she, too, will catch it. Attempted also to get sick by standing naked on the balcony after a hot bath, putting her feet into ice cold water, or standing in the front of the street car when there is an east wind and she has a fever of 102 degrees. The first analyst at the first consultation in late December – calls her behavior "slow attempt at suicide." (265)

The pace of narration increases even further. Binswanger reports that he did not feel comfortable moving West to the locked ward against her will without the approval of her husband. Her husband would consent to a locked ward only if Binswanger would promise that her condition would improve significantly. However, Binswanger did not feel he could offer the husband any hope. Binswanger believed that West suffered from progressive schizophrenia and that the case was hopeless. He calls his former mentor,

Professor Eugen Bleuler, and another (unnamed) psychiatrist to offer second opinions.[146] Desperately, Binswanger asked West to delay her suicide until after the March 24 consultation. She agreed.

However, upon examining West, neither consultant thought her condition would improve. Bleuler agreed with Binswanger that West had a deteriorating schizophrenic illness, even though she was not deluded, nor did she exhibit other cognitive defects. They did not believe that she had an obsessive neurosis (which the second psychoanalyst believed), nor that she had manic-depressive disease. The unnamed psychiatrist did not believe that West was schizophrenic, but agreed with the others that her condition was unlikely to improve.

Then, in what is perhaps the most unusual (yet by this time unsurprising) statement in the case history, Binswanger declares that: "[there was] no definitely reliable therapy possible…we therefore resolved to give in to the patient's demand for discharge" (266). On March 30, after two and a half months in Binswanger's care – having spent twelve of the last thirteen months in therapy with three different analysts – he reports that West "was visibly relieved by the result of the consultation [and] declared that she would now take her life into her own hands" (266). Although she left Bellevue Sanatorium with her husband in a tense, agitated state, Binswanger reports that on the third day she was home her mood became exceptionally festive. This last paragraph of the case study (simply entitled "Her Death") is Binswanger's final attempt to convince the reader (and himself) that his decision to release West was the right one: there was no hope for a cure. Despite

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[146] Eugen Bleuler (18578-1939) is most notable for having named schizophrenia. Until recently, a diagnosis of schizophrenia was a diagnosis of inevitable deterioration. Even today, the possibility of a cure remains controversial.

his previous statements about West's inability to experience happiness, he now states that her last moments were some of her most lighthearted. Binswanger's tone conveys a similar excitement:

> On the third day of being home she is as if transformed. At breakfast she eats butter and sugar, at noon she eats so much that –for the first time in thirteen years! – she is satisfied by her food and gets really full. At afternoon coffee she eats chocolate creams and Easter eggs. She takes a walk with her husband, reads poems by Rilke, Storm, Goethe, and Tennyson, is amused by the first chapter of Mark Twain's "Christian Science," is in a positively festive mood, and all heaviness seem to have fallen away from her. She writes letters, the last one a letter to a fellow patient here to whom she had become so attached. In the evening she takes a lethal dose of poison, and on the following morning she is dead. 'She looked as she had never looked in life – calm and happy and peaceful.' (267)

The closing section is most peculiar. After he has related West's life in minute detail for some thirty pages, Binswanger renders her suicide in just a few words. Strangely, he raises no questions about where West might have acquired the lethal poison. Perhaps her husband or even Binswanger himself supplied it in order to expedite her "inevitable" extinction.[147] Whatever the situation, Binswanger ends with a quotation (of unknown

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[147] David Lester suggests that her husband supplied West with drugs, even with her fatal overdose, and that he otherwise promoted her illness in other ways. Though this might have been so, there is no evidence for it in Binswanger's published case. See David Lester, "Ellen West's Suicide as a Case of Psychic Homicide," Psychoanalytic Review 58 (1971): 251-63)

origin) which leaves the reader with his most critical point: his decision to release West so that she could commit suicide was not only the correct one, but the only one. She has achieved her destiny.

It has been suggested thus far that Binswanger's case study is a narrative imposed on West's life, a narrative that attempts to convince the reader (and perhaps himself) that the suicide was simply an act driven by her deep-rooted pathology and that, contrary being held responsible, he should be respected – even admired – for recognizing the situation and acting the way he did. As if the case study alone were not enough to make this point, he follows it with an "existential analysis" that reinforces it:

> From the standpoint of existential analysis the suicide of Ellen West was an "arbitrary act" as well as a "necessary event." Both statements are based on the fact that the existence in the case of Ellen West had become ripe for its death, that the death, this death, was the necessary fulfillment of the life-meaning of this existence. (295)

Binswanger regards West's death as an act that should – but could not be – prevented. This illustrates a relatively recent shift in the portrayal of suicide. Far from portraying West's suicide as an instantiation of freedom, Binswanger presents it as an inevitable culmination of a deep-rooted pathological state – one which should (but in this case could not be) treated and cured.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Suicide as Pathological Revenge Sacrifice:

Louis Malle's Le feu follet

Like Binswanger's "Case of Ellen West," Louis Malle's 1963 film Le feu Follet presents a perspective on suicide differing from those presented thus far. Like Binswanger, Malle presents suicide as a pathological character fault. In this case, that fault consists of the protagonist's need to seek revenge against a world that he has rejected and that he feels has rejected him.

Malle was inspired to undertake the project that became Le feu Follet by a friend who had recently bade farewell, left town, retreated alone to a room, and shot himself.[148] The director devised an original scenario loosely based on this event, in which a young Parisian alcoholic spends one endless evening in Paris, and – depressed and debauched – puts a bullet through his chest after the sun rises. The project, alternately called "Assez de champagne" and "Trente ans ce soir," had come to a standstill when a friend handed Malle a copy of of Le feu follet, by the controversial fascist writer Pierre-Eugène Drieu La Rochelle who had published a fictionalized account of the life and suicide of Dadaist poet Jacques Rigaut (Malle 39).

Rigaut killed himself in 1929 at the age of thirty, using a ruler to make sure the bullet would pass through his heart.[149] He was an arrogant, solitary, nihilistic dandy who

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[148] Louis Malle, Malle on Malle, ed. Philip French. London: (Faber & Faber, 1996) 38-39.

[149] Steve Watson, Rev. of 4 Dada Suicides: Selected Texts of Arthur Cravan, Jacques Rigaut, Julien Torma and Jacques Vaché, by Arthur Cravan, Roger Conover, T.J. Hale, Paul Lenti, Iain White, Art in America (November 1995).

was close to the surrealistic group in the 1920s and who inspired Andre Breton and his friends. Rigaut published only a few poems and aphorisms, and destroyed almost everything he wrote as soon as he finished it. According to Alberto Alvarez, he was "an empty suitcase" (231), who regarded suicide as a "vocation." In La Révolution Surréaliste, Drieu La Rochelle wrote that Rigaut regarded suicide as: "… [a] ridiculous act, not absurd (too big a word), but flat, indifferent, this is how it becomes possible. 'Going to bed one morning, instead of pressing the electric light switch, without paying attention, I make a mistake. I pull the trigger."[150]

Malle was inspired by Rigaut and crafted an adaptation of La Rochelle's work. He condensed the time frame from one long night in Paris to the last forty-eight hours in the life of thirty-year old Alain Leroy after his release from a Versailles sanitarium, where he spent four months under treatment for alcoholism. Michael Ciment describes some of Malle's other modifications:

> Malle resorts to first-person voice-over only at the beginning of the film, using a few of Drieu's sentences, so that we see the world through Alain's eyes, allowing the audience if not an identification then at least an empathy with the protagonist. Malle makes him more sympathetic, feeling, as he later expressed, that Drieu despises his character, and it is not possible to build a film on a marginal, useless, uninteresting protagonist.' At the same time, he does not soften Alain's harsh predicament: his life is a failure, like that of his model Jacques Rigaut,

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[150] Drieu La Rochelle. La Révolution surréaliste. no. 12 (December 1929). My translation.

> who stated, 'Try if you can to be a man who travels with his suicide hanging on his buttonhole.'[151]

Like Rigaut, Malle's protagonist, Alain Leroy, move through the last twenty-four hours of his life wearing suicide "on his buttonhole" – a tool that he holds close to him and can inflict upon the world at will.

The film opens a moment as Alain and his mistress, Lydia, lie in bed. There is silence except for the voiceover: "Once again the feeling had eluded him, like a snake between stones." Although some of the details are ambiguous, it is clear that Alain's marriage has failed and he has returned to France where – for the past four months – he has been living in a sanatorium undergoing treatment for alcoholism. Not surprisingly, his alcoholism is a symptom of a much more significant problem. Up to this point, he has refused to confront his alienation – his inability to connect with the world, and the feeling that the world has left him behind.

As Alain and Lydia dress in separate rooms, she tells him that she is in a hurry to catch a flight to New York; when she reenters the room and he wraps his arms around her, she immediately pulls away. She admits that she has come to visit only because she has been sent by his estranged wife to check-up on him. While Lydia clearly has affection for him, it has an odd quality. When he asks her not to mention anything of their affair to his wife, she replies: "She has other things on her mind," then goes on to suggest that Dorothy would welcome the news of their affair because it would give her an excuse to divorce Alain. As they leave the hotel room, Lydia criticizes his wife who

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[151] Michel Ciment, "The Fire Within: Day of the Dead." Rev. of Fire Within (Le feu Follet). Dir. Louis Malle. Criterion. 13 May 2008. Online. 4 Apr. 2009.

remains in New York, and, pays for Alain's rehabilitation at a Versailles sanatorium, but has not spoken to him for six months and does not respond to his telegrams: "You need a woman who won't let you out of her sight. Otherwise you get depressed and act foolishly." Although she offers to marry him, Alain does not accept. Without alcohol to anesthetize him, he must now confront his feelings of estrangement. These feelings stir feelings of anger and motivate his revenge. By the end of the scene, he makes a subtle (but obvious) gesture indicating that his revenge is underway. As he and Lydia reach the bottom of the stairwell, Alain removes his wristwatch and discreetly tips the charwoman with it.

As the two walk together, Alain tells Lydia that he cannot take her to the airport because he must return to the sanatorium. Lydia casually remarks: "In any case, Alain, we will see each other soon." Unresponsive, Alain turns his head in the opposite direction. They stop at a café before they go their separate ways, and Alain begins to tell her of his decision to commit suicide ("Lydia…I wanted you to know"), but he hesitates – perhaps because he still has second thoughts. She insists on writing him a check as repayment for a four-year-old gambling debt. While this might at seem like Lydia's attempt to sever whatever bond is left between the two, a certain ambiguity remains in light of her obvious concern for him (and his concern for her). Indeed, this ambiguity persists throughout the film and is ultimately irresolvable.

In the taxi to the clinic, Lydia stares out the window admiring Versailles as Alain sits apart from her, increasingly agitated. She wonders aloud how it could be that in such a beautiful city he would choose to remain in "that strange clinic." Alain's only response is that the clinic functions as a refuge where "a patient's life is ordered and simple."

Once again she asks him to marry her and move to New York, but he knows that this would be no solution to his problems and declines the offer. They arrive at the sanitarium and, in a clear instance of the complicated relationship between the world's rejection of his and his rejection of it, Alain slams the car door behind him; Lydia calls out, but he does not turn around.

Alain retires to his bedroom, but is soon summoned to lunch. As he leaves his room, the camera focuses on the film's most explicit indication of his impending suicide – "July 23" scribbled across a mirror. It has now become clear that it is only a matter of time before Alain takes his life; a sense of inevitability emerges. At lunch, as the patients carry on a stiff, pedantic conversation, Alain withdraws to an outside balcony where he leans against the railing, staring into the distance. There is the gentle overlay of Satie's "Gnossienne #2" atop the lyrical, elegiac images, as he glimpses the outside world. Children play ball on the lawn, a woman shakes out the laundry. Clearly, Alain's feelings of disconnection from the rhythm of life become even clearer. He stands nearby, watching a world that he feels has rejected him and that he will now reject in return.

When he returns to his room, the camera once again pans to the date written on the mirror, and then roams aimlessly, focusing on bric-a-brac. Without his connections to others, his existence has become pointless. He pops the head off of a tiny doll. He fidgets with a miniature American flag. He adjusts a proof sheet of Dorothy attached to his bedroom wall. He toys with a tiny hat. He rips out newspaper articles about death and suicide. The camera focuses again on the mirror as we see Alain pacing in front of it. He can no longer bear the hour-by-hour tedium of his life. Alain remarks, "What a

shame. What a crying shame." He doodles with a marker beside his journal, crossing out words indiscriminately, almost as quickly as he writes them. He fondles a Lugar.

Dr. La Barbinais, the head psychiatrist, enters without knocking, prompting Alain to hide his gun. He has come to tell him that he is "cured" and that he can no longer allow him to stay. La Barbinais' decision comes as no surprise. The doctor's decision is based upon Alain's having solved his alcoholism – a symptom of his pathology, rather than the deep-rooted pathology itself. He does not seem to grasp the seriousness of Alain's condition. He insists that if Alain would continue to reach out to Dorothy, she would eventually respond, and all of his problems would end. He matter-of-factly reminds Alain to telegram Dorothy and to wait patiently for her response. In a key moment, Alain remarks: "I am patient. I've done nothing but wait…Waiting… for something to happen." He cannot wait any longer. Although he once found refuge in this protective environment, it is clearly no longer an option. He assures La Barbinais that he will "be gone by the end of the week, come what may." The doctor does not acknowledge the implications of this threat. He simply responds: "life is good." Once he leaves, Alain fondles the gun, pointing it at himself. He gets in bed and makes a firm affirmation: "Tomorrow I will kill myself."

When he next opens his eyes, it is July 24, his "deadline." An elderly maid clearly concerned for Alain, awakens him by gently caressing his hair. When he realizes what is going on, he becomes alarmed – unable to respond to this simple attempt at human connection – and practically jumps out of the bed. He orders her to get his bathrobe so that he can leave for Paris ("city of orgies which [he] left for good"). Curiously, as he shaves, staring directly in the mirror at the date he has written, she is

silent. She seems not even to notice, or at least does not say anything. On the way out she reminds him of the doctor's request that he send Dorothy a telegram. Although he agrees, the telegram he composes will not be what the doctor intended. He paces his bedroom searching for clothes to wear for his journey. Clearly, Alain is hopelessly out of sync with the world. Speaking out loud, agitated, flitting around the room, and shifting between consolation, resignation, sarcasm, and rage, he considers possible messages:

> Telegram. 'Await your letter with impatience…with patience. With patience and hope.' Stop. More blunt. 'Thank you for your silence.' Stop. 'You have a lover in Versailles.' Stop. Why not shake her up a bit? 'Send reply." Stop. 'Need you.' Stop. 'Minutes count.' Stop. No, reassure her. 'Disregard this letter.' Stop. 'Worries over.' Stop. 'Be happy. Worries over. Be happy.' 'My letter? Throw it away…it is meaningless now. Sure, I have plans….No, I won't come to New York. Don't worry. Yes, I'm cured. Lydia must have told you. She told you everything? That's fine.'

After all this, he takes a few seconds to scribble something, the precise content of which is withheld (from her and from us) until after his death. He gives the telegram to a maid on his way out. Its arrival in New York within the next twenty-four hours will clearly coincide with his end.

Alain emerges from the sanatorium boldly, as if on a mission. He cuts through traffic as if he were on his way to a battle. He arrives at a cigarette shop and has a tense exchange with the merchant:

ALAIN. Give me Sweet Aftons, please.

MERCHANT. What's that?

ALAIN. Irish cigarettes.

MERCHANT. We don't stock them.

ALAIN. You should.

MERCHANT. Not enough demand.

ALAIN. I'm demanding.

MERCHANT. One's not enough. The entire stock would perish.

This brief exchange illustrates a distinct shift in Alain's disposition: "I'm demanding." He will no longer stand on the sideline. He is now prepared to make his impact on the world. He convinces two truck drivers to take him to Paris. On the way, one of the drivers looks curiously at Alain, seemingly unable to make sense of him. The driver questions him, but his responses seem only to confuse him further:

DRIVER. You work in Versailles?

ALAIN. I don't work.

DRIVER. Private income?

ALAIN. No…I'm sick.

DRIVER. So that's why you look so pale. What's the problem?

ALAIN. My heart.

They drop him off on a busy street in Paris. The image is significant: Alain stands in the middle of a busy street, traffic whirling all around him. He appears fearless. He leaps to one side of street and enters a bank where he will cash the check that Lydia gave him. He is – quite literally – "cashing in." He will goes to a bank to cash the check and uses the

money to aid him in carrying out his revenge. His interaction with the teller is silent and tense. The latter eyes him suspiciously almost as if he were a potential criminal or sociopath. There is the distinct sense of imminent volatility, of brewing hostility – violent, pathological energy about to erupt.

Alain then begins his visits to former friends – friends with whom he once shared close connections but who have now assumed identities that give them reason to live. Each of Alain's visits represents a particular type of rejection – a rejection of specific life choices and an acknowledgment of a broken bond. His first stop is the Hôtel u Quai Voltaire, his former residence. As he enters the building, two female workers warmly greet him – showering him with questions and compliments about how well he looks. Alain seems appreciative, but is conflicted. His feelings of disconnection and anger are too deep and he is unable to respond as one would expect. He inquires whether his friend, Bernard, still lives in the hotel. When he finds out that this friend has moved on, his expression quickly changes: it seems that everyone except for the hotel help has moved away. The hotel bartender is delighted to see him, makes him a drink (which Alain does not take), and updates him on all of his former drinking friends who have (also) given up alcohol, but who have moved on to successful careers and families. Alain sits expressionless, on the phone, going down his list, trying to reach those he will visit. When he informs the bartender that he will be "leaving tomorrow," he asks if he means that he will be leaving to New York. Alain simply responds, "No." The topic of conversation quickly changes. As Alain drives away in a taxi, the bartender comments on Alain's lingering depression.

He arrives at the home of Dubourg who lives in a comfortable bourgeois flat with his maid, wife, and young daughters. “Comrade” Dubourg was Alain’s closest friend, but he has become smug and complacent. He is now a respected, self important, Egyptologist in the midst of writing a book and planning a trip to the country where “people have the sun inside them.” Alain cannot hide is disdain: at one point he accuses him of “playing Daddy” and “full of mediocre certainties.” Yet, Alain’s scorn does not seem – at least at first – to be reciprocated: Dubourg had tried to maintain his friendship with Alain. He wrote and called him at the sanitarium but he never responded. In Alain’s mind, the bond had been severed long ago and there was no point in pretending. His visit only makes this more explicit. Over lunch with Dubourg’s wife and children, Alain declares: “Young people today are hopeless. Good-looking, elegant, well-fed. They’re all alike. Like California oranges.” Even though the tone is lighthearted, there is a clear undercurrent of tension.

This tension comes to the surface in the next scene. Following lunch, Alain and Dubourg sit alone. Alain admits that he “feels empty…with some atrocious moments.” He then reveals his plan matter-of-factly: “It’s all over for me. I’m leaving. Don’t you understand?” Alain’s announcement successfully elicits his anger. As Alain sits comfortably, Dubourg paces the room offering the expected speech: “Life still has things to offer. You must have a sense of your life. That sense can’t perish…A man’s got to show what he’s made of!” Alain sarcastically encourages him to continue so as “not to spoil [his] pleasure.” Pointing to an Egyptian statue, Dubourg pretentiously reflects on how passion produces greatness. This is too much for Alain. He jumps up and shakes him – gesturing around the apartment: “Where do you see passions here?” Dubourg

insists that his friend not be deceived by appearances. Although he seems like a resigned bourgeois, he claims that his life has never been so intense; he claims to derive inspiration from his studies of Egypt and confidently claims that he will one day publish a book that will be something "others will learn from'. Alain's response: "Let's take a walk, prophet."

During their walk, Alain admits that he has not only lost his connections with his friends, but that he is unable to maintain intimate relationships with women. In his words: "I never had them. I don't have them now." He admits that Dorothy, his greatest loss, rejected him because he could not please her sexually, and this has left a permanent mark on him. Dubourg's responds by making light of matters: "Funny lives we lead, clinging to women." When a beautiful woman passes them, Dubourg notes that "she makes you want to touch her" and that life is the same. Alain finds this intolerable and practically leaps in front of oncoming traffic to escape.

He then visits Jeanne, who initially treats Alain with great tenderness and affection which he reciprocates. Jeanne is a painter who has lost her partner in an automobile accident and escapes from pain by anesthetizing herself with drugs and surrounding herself with snobbish poets. At first, it seems that have retained their connection due to their mutual dislike of former friends. In fact, Jeanne is so disgusted with Dubourg that she chastises Alain for having gone to visit him: "You go to see Dubourg again. That deadbeat Dubourg." She finds the insincerity of their former friends repugnant: "Yes we have wonderful friends. They think time changes them. So they run around like mad not knowing what they're doing. Having children, making deals, writing books...the bastards talk about sincerity then go about their grubby lives."

Unlike Dubourg and the others Alain visits, she admits to feeling "abandoned, ruined…utterly devastated." She too has lost her most important relationship and feels that life is absurd. When Alain informs her of his decision to commit suicide, her only response is "You too?"

Although they have quite a bit in common, Alain cannot accept how Jeanne deals with her situation. Instead of accepting her situation as he has, she chooses to surround herself with decadent poets. As Jeanne reclines surrounded by these poets, Alain paces the room, as repulsed by Jeanne as he is by these fakes. Alain loses his patience: "Nice system you have for putting your mind at rest…All you risk is deadening your mind." With these words, Alain storms out.

Alain then meet the Minville brothers in a café. They have become OAS domestic terrorists and plant bombs throughout Paris in order to protest French involvement in Algeria. Apparently, Alain was once a part of their mission, but realized that their "plans were doomed from the start" and then cut them off. They now look down upon Alain as a coward who has no political conscience. Alain finds it unbelievable that the brothers plan to continue their political mission. He tells them point-blank that carrying on with their plot now is "grotesque and stupid" and that they are nothing more than "boy scouts." Not surprisingly, the brothers tell him that he does not know what he is talking about, and they quickly walk off.

The scene that follows is one of the most poignant in the film. Alain sits in the café, watching those walking by – men and women, gay and straight. Some stare back, but Alain is glued to his seat, frozen, unable to express emotion. For the first time in four months, Alain takes a drink, ensuring his downfall. He has found that his confrontation

with the world is just too much to bear. He must make the final visit. Intoxicated, he stumbles through the streets and at one point comes close to being hit by a car. He is clearly breaking down.

He makes his final visit to Solange, his ex-girlfriend and former lover. Solange has married an aristocrat, Cyrille, and they entertain rich, indifferent, right-wing intellectuals. His disgust for these people (and their disgust for him) is clearly exacerbated by his drunkenness. Not surprisingly Alain is repulsed by Solange and her coterie of materialistic snobs for their artificial "peace of mind." Solange and Cyrille's friend, Brancion, is particularly repulsive and antagonizes Alain every chance he gets. Referring to a joke Brancion made about him over dinner, Alain lashes out: "I admire what you do because you don't believe in it…I just want to say, sir…that like you, I don't find it funny to sleep on a tomb…when it's so easy to open it and sleep inside." Then, in one of the most articulate explanation of his crisis, he states:

> I can't reach out with my hands. I can't touch things. And when I do touch things…I feel nothing...You don't know what it's like being unable to touch anything. I'm incapable of wanting. I can't even desire. The women here tonight…I can't desire them. They scare me. Scare me! Take Solange, for example. Five minutes with her and I'd feel like an insect. Five minutes with her and I'd disappear.

He then reveals that because he cannot "touch" others in life, he will "try death." Promising to return for lunch the next day (but knowing he will not), he heads back to Versailles to carry out his suicide.

The next morning, Alain awakens in his clinic bedroom with a hangover. Solange phones to remind him of their lunch engagement, but he cuts her off, and hangs-up. The maid stops in to tell him lunch is ready, but he gives her a wad of money and asks her not to disturb him until noon. He finishes reading Great Gatsby, pulls out his gun, points the barrel to his heart, and pulls the trigger. With this, the screen goes blank. His final telegram to Dorothy is heard in voice-over: "I'll kill myself because I did not love you, because you did not love me. The bonds between us were loose; I'll kill myself to tighten them. I leave a stain on you, an indelible stain."

The message above is the key to making sense of Alain's suicide. While it is undoubtedly directed at his estranged wife, Dorothy, it is also directed at all of the people he has lost. If this has not yet been made clear, Alain's message makes it so. Ultimately, Malle presents Alain's suicide as the mark of pathological character flaw which, on the one hand, he uses to seek revenge upon those who he feels have abandoned him, and, on the other hand, to reestablish – through death – the bonds he has lost in life.

CONCLUSION:

FREEDOM TURNED AGAINST ITSELF

By the end of the eighteenth century, there was a general evolution from outright condemnation of suicide as a violation of our relationship to external authority to a discussion of the relationship between self-death and individual freedom. For reasons previously discussed, philosophical luminaries such as Hume, Mill, Voltaire, and Rousseau insisted that one possesses inherent freedom to commit suicide. Moreover, philosophical arguments *against* suicide (such as those of Kant and Schopenhauer) treated the issue with a similar resolve. However, not all responses were as uncompromising. The literary and dramatic approaches discussed in this dissertation suggest that the problem of suicide and individual freedom be treated with a degree of openness that is wholly absent from the philosophical arguments (pro or con) noted above.

Kant is a case in point. He argued as fervidly *against* one's freedom to commit suicide as the Enlightenment *philosophes* argued for it. One recalls Kant's insistence on suicide as a practical contradiction: since our rational wills are the source of our moral duty, and our moral duty is itself the manifestation of moral freedom, he insists that it is a contradiction to hold that the will can destroy itself. Given the distinctive worth of an autonomous rational will, he insists that suicide is an attack on the very source of moral authority and, by extension, an attack on moral freedom and the dignity of human life. Suicide undermines the whole moral order insofar as it is rooted in one's self.

Rather than approaching the issue from a purely philosophical perspective as Kant does, Schiller approaches it from a dramatic perspective, and the result is a great deal

more subtle and open– ended. Schiller is concerned that Kant's draconian moral law may pose a threat to man's freedom. Accordingly, in the The Bride of Messina, Don Cesar's suicide demonstrates a rejection of the moral law which poses a substantial threat to his moral freedom. In taking his own life, Cesar subordinates the moral law proscribing self-death to his will, i.e. the free decision to carry out the act. Schiller's dramatic approach implies that Kant's draconian philosophical position on the absolute, unchecked supremacy of the moral law is itself a danger to Cesar's moral freedom. He, therefore, attempts to achieve a compromise that leaves the proscription against suicide in place, but preserves the freedom of the will and the unconditional character of moral freedom. This compromise yields a scenario in which suicide must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Hölderlin's fragmentary Death of Empedocles treats the problem with a similar openness. The first fragment suggests that Empedocles' suicide is the means by which he extinguishes his individual consciousness in order to achieve spiritual transformation and freedom through unity with divine nature. In the second fragment, there is the suggestion that Empedocles commits suicide at least partly for the benefit of others. By the third fragment, it seems that Empedocles dies so that others might achieve their own spiritual freedom through the release of his spirit upon them. What is most notable about Hölderlin's treatment of the problem is the suggestion that suicide be evaluated based on Empedocles' intentions: suicide for egoistic reasons is suspect, but suicide for altruistic reasons is held in esteem. Once again, this adds a level of subtlety that is uncharacteristic of the philosophical arguments which categorically support or refute one's freedom to commit suicide.

Goethe's Sorrows of Young Werther also treats suicide as an unresolved problem full of ambiguities. The suicide itself is carefully stage-managed by Werther, but botched. In contrast to the long, effusive letter Werther had written to Lotte a few hours before his death, the aftermath of his death is reported in spare, short sentences, utterly factual and unsentimental. His suicide is clearly motivated by Lotte's rejection, but the act itself is Werther's own rejection of the social and moral conventions that have stifled his approach to the world based on feeling. Whether Werther's suicide finally legitimizes his philosophy of life and achieves success in bringing about his desired freedom is unclear. This ambiguous portrayal extends to the last sentences of the novel: he is embraced by the workmen who carry his coffin but no clergyman attends his funeral. As the actual suicide suggests, the success of his final declaration of freedom from the stifling moral and social conventions that surround him is left an open question.

Like Goethe's attitude towards Werther's suicide, Ibsen's attitude towards Hedda Gabler's death remains inconclusive. Indeed, the aftermath of each suicide raises more questions than answers. Although Hedda's suicide is not botched in the way of Werther's, the received effect is surely not what either one had envisioned. One concludes that if Ibsen meant Hedda's suicide to be received as an absolute triumph over social convention – a conclusive break with that which restricted her – he might not have ended the scene (and the play) with Brack's shocked response that people "don't do such things." Perhaps people don't do such things, but Hedda has, and Ibsen resists definitive judgment on her act.

Camus and Sartre also approach suicide and individual freedom within a literary context. Although they clearly hold that the individual possesses the freedom to commit

suicide (and that it is the ideal evocation of that freedom), whether one should actually exercise that freedom by taking one's life is treated with necessary ambiguity. For example, Camus suggests in "The Myth of Sisyphus" that embracing life in the face of absurdity leads to a true experience of freedom, but in his analysis of Dostoyevsky's The Possessed, he justifies Kirilov's suicide because "he feels he must show his brothers a royal and difficult path on which he will be the first" (Camus 99). Likewise, Mathieu in Sartre's The Reprieve realizes that he is free to kill himself if he chooses, and feels terrified because there is no reason why he should and no reason why he should not: he has to choose what he will do on the basis of nothing. Thus, for Camus and Sartre, the decision to take one's life must be left entirely to the individual and cannot be based on any prescribed code of behavior.

As noted above, these literary and dramatic examples stand in stark contrast to the philosophical positions that leave much less (if any) room for debate. Schopenhauer, for example, takes as a decisive a stand against suicide as Kant. While he admits that the individual has the right to commit suicide in order to attempt to obtain freedom from suffering, and while he even sympathizes with one who tries to do so, Schopenhauer denies that there is any possibility that this freedom may be actualized. To take one's life indicates a lack of awareness (or an unwillingness to become aware) of the futility of the individual will and the experience of the wholeness and totality of will-in-itself. One has the freedom to destroy oneself, but one's freedom to free oneself from suffering is an illusion.

The incontrovertibility with which philosophical argumentation has treated the question of suicide and individual freedom (whether pro or con) is analogous to the way

the problem is treated in Binswanger's "Case of Ellen West" and Malle's Le feu follet. In the former, Binswanger treats West's suicide as the logical, coherent, and inevitable end of her life. Her actions and circumstances are presented as part of a causal chain leading to her suicide. The case study and the analysis that follows it attempt to convince the reader (and himself) that neither he nor his patient had any control over the outcome. He regards West's death as an act that should – but could not be – prevented. Far from portraying West's suicide as an instantiation of freedom, it is presented it as an inevitable culmination of a deep-rooted pathological state – one which should (but in this case could not be) treated and cured. Likewise, Malle's Le feu Follet presents Alain's suicide as the mark of pathological character flaw which, on the one hand, he uses to seek revenge upon those who he feels have abandoned him, and, on the other hand, to reestablish – through death – the bonds he has lost in life.

Binswanger's and Malle's treatment of suicide and individual freedom reflect how the issue continues to be treated. Suicide is now regarded almost exclusively as a pathological character flaw. This position has far-reaching implications, the most important of which is the assumption that killing oneself is categorically unjustifiable and must be prevented at all costs. The decision to kill oneself has been reduced to a condition – a disease. If one is "suicidal," he must be treated and cured. While one might rightfully argue that there is a sociological necessity for this, it is important to recognize the potential consequences arising from such a "practical" approach. As the literary stances on suicide and individual freedom outlined in this dissertation suggest, the problem is not so simple. Indeed, it is multidimensional and irresolvable. To reduce

the issue to a seemingly incontestable philosophical argument, or to assume it is merely an indication of pathology, offers artificial closure to a problem that refuses to subside.

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