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Regarding Their No

The trope of suicide in Donald Justice's "For the Suicides of 1962" and Frank Bidart's "The Sacrifice"

1.

Suicide, like other matters fraught with moral and political energies, presents difficulties to the poet other than those which are mainly compositional or aesthetic. Unlike other tropes¹, it places the poet in a moral territory whose gravity makes a subject of the trope. In the thick of the trope, the poet, it would seem, becomes compelled to take a moral stand—a duty that counters the obligation to challenge one's judgments through art.

To a certain extent, the word "suicide" predetermines one's position, so inextricable it is from the negative connotations supplied in part by the suffix "-cide." (Think, for instance, of "pesticide.") According to David Daube, the term suicide "came about as a way to avoid the accusing references to 'murder'²," suggesting that if suicide is murder, then it is so only in the litigious language game of the accusation. To put the question so simply as to ask "Is suicide wrong?" would merely invite opinion, not so much because we who are alive have no idea of what suicide is but because all we have of suicide is an idea.

Poems about suicide are poems about death, but death in suicide is premised on a decision. Its agent is not the body but belief. The great poet Fanny Howe writes that "suicide is usually a reaction to one's own idea of a future"³—a sober and tolerant way to look at it. But to be less forgiving and political about the issue: if

¹ OED: a trope is "a figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression." The word was coined in the 16th century, via Latin, from Greek, meaning "way."

² In addition: The term appeared in 1651. Thomas Szasz: "The appearance of the noun 'suicide,' like the term 'mind' as a noun, is a seventeenth-century Western invention. Both terms reflect a major cultural-perceptual shift: from perceiving voluntary death as an act for which the actor is responsible, to perceiving it as a (perhaps) happening for which he may not be responsible; and from seeing persons as possessing souls and free will, to seeing them as possessing minds that may become 'unbalanced,' resulting in the loss of free will.... The transformation of soul into mind and self-murder into suicide marks the beginning of the great ideological transformation from religion to medicine." *Fatal Freedom: The Ethics and Politics of Suicide* (Praeger Publishers, CT, 1999).

³ Howe's essay, "Au Hasard Suicide," appeared in 2003 in *Brick*, a journal published in Canada.

we think that an infinite number of responses can precede a single reaction, then suicide would be a moment in which a reaction is also a decision. When we flip that equivalence, we would see that through suicide, death acquires a semantic value. When it enters the historical language of poetry, the elegy, which by convention must end celebratorily, becomes oddly inappropriate to the task of response. Is suicide an event, a crime, an idea, a conclusion, a sin, the impatience of despair? Is it a word? Is it a trope?

Suicide's ontological ambiguity lays bare a characteristic feature of suicide as it occurs in the circuit of our fictions, in the life we live as characters. Often, one "hears of" suicide—we receive it as information, and when the word is used in conversation, we are invited to imagine it while simultaneously being asked to doubt the claims of our imagination. Any articulation of suicide is mocked by the fact that our claims can neither be proved nor ratified. "Whereof one cannot speak," Wittgenstein cautioned, "thereof one must be silent." Frank Bidart's "The Sacrifice" and Donald Justice's "For the Suicides of 1962" are two poems of a great number of poems that offer a way to speak against our ignorance of those who have chosen to die.

2.

The title of Justice's poem and its dedicatory note ("*In Memory: J & G*") make the reader anticipate specific details about suicide and the figures it involves. But the poem has no interest in biographical detail; it throws a veil of anonymity over the speaker and the suicides. The poem is an address, a kind of speech, in which the poet chooses to identify himself by using the collective pronoun "we," a move in diction that allows concern to detach from the personal while retaining tonal intimacy occasioned by the tender phrase "your voices."

Donald Justice's "we" also produces a disembodied speaker located in the act of speech. As a collective term, the word "we" sounds the note of social interaction just as it exposes the frustration produced by the impossibility of the address; the "we," referring to the living, emphasizes the distance between the addresser and the addressee (a distance bridged by language), further emphasized by the stress that the word "here" receives, placed at the beginning of the fourth line where it functions as the first syllable of a trochee divided by a comma. The poignancy of distance and absence are the thematic heart of this section,

and the complex configuration of the action of memory makes the poignancy smart: the speaker “recalls” (suggesting that the action is exclusive to him), and when he does, he finds what he recalls to be “drift[ing] back.”

And yet, all is conjectural as the sentence is premised on “if.” The speaker knows that at least to himself, he is speaking to a void. Donald Justice’s speaker attempts to fill the void with recollections too faint to invoke presence or “cast much light on / The page ripped from the tablet.”

From section to section in “For the Suicides of 1962,” suicide undergoes metaphoric reconfiguration, suggesting various aspects of suicide. From the imagery associated with nature and doomed attempt at communication in the first section, we move to the second section where the speaker, permitted perhaps by the addressee’s inability to rebuke his imaginings, “stand[s], now, at the threshold” of the “labyrinth” that the suicides are imagined to have entered. Here, the language of the poem engages with suicide with words that lie between structure and cognition (“labyrinth,” “reasons,” “peering in,” “passage,” “obscure”) as the speaker is puzzled by the act and whose determinate statement in the second line (“You were safe from your reasons”) is undermined by emotion evoked by the bodily image in the end: “the passage, / For us, remains obscure; the / Corridors are still bloody.” Note how ironic the use of the word “passage” is: the word functions in the sense of a path and a section of a text; suicide to the speaker remains incomprehensible, he cannot ‘follow,’ but because of the terms imposed on him by the suicide, what he is meant to follow cannot be followed: it is lost in the “labyrinth,” as though death were a labyrinth.

The third and largest section of the poem shifts the poem toward conclusion and accusation meant for both parties: “What you meant to prove you have / Proved: we did not care for you / Nearly enough.” The speaker’s admission of his own deficiency compels him to imagine where the addressees shifted their attentions to; the poet imagines suicide in this section as an erotic act of self-fulfillment, and as such, suggests that there is nothing that he could have done to keep the suicides from turning away toward their “dark inclinations.”

Suicide in Donald Justice's poem is treated as a matter of fate, subject to an individual psyche. The references become recklessly dream-like, moving speedily from a "bay" metamorphosing into an "adequate female," to "the pistol...slowly learning to flower" to "the black forest of childhood." Rhythmically, too, the poem changes. While retaining the syllabic count, the regularity of three-stresses in the previous sections is dropped for an agitated, varied musical texture as iambs give way to trochees, anapests and dactyls, creating a vigorous, unpredictable movement, speeded up by lines of two stresses, moments where two stresses are jammed together in rapid succession, the awkward enjambment of the third line, and the five-stanza drape of a single sentence.

Emblematic images of movement, metamorphoses and romance comprise the imagery of the third section, which underscores the psychological aspect of suicide and its willful character. The addressee is configured as a traveler approaching the bay he set out for, which makes of the bay a figure for death, and then transforms death and the bay into a complicit lover. "Under your care the pistol / Was slowly learning to flower" clearly implies the intentional character of suicidal thought and how that thought manipulates objects to serve functions they do not ordinarily serve. Ultimately, the speaker regards suicide as both unnatural and natural—a contradiction rather than a paradox—a potential of human nature, which could be described as both.

In the fourth section the speaker enters the question of who the suicides are and whether he knew them as they were. The idea of duplicity is brought into the poem by the word "masks" and is cemented by the last tercet: "At the end of your shadow / There sat another, waiting, / Whose back was always to us." But the charge of duplicity is emotionally and intellectually complicated, not only because the word "waiting" allows tonal ambiguity to course through the section there, but because the poem registers the deep privacy maintained by the suicides, who "turned to [themselves] to confide." In a gesture of compassionate self-extension, the speaker spies in the suicides' solitude their becoming unreal to themselves, which happens as disappearance when they turned to themselves for friendship. Masterfully, and perhaps cleverly, Justice casts the two violent verbs "torn" and "stripped" in the passive tense, suggesting that suicide is an action 'without actors.'

In the final section, the poem turns to paradox, and uses it to clear a space in language through which the “you” can be folded back (as the two quatrains with their palindromic rhyme scheme enact) into the collective “we,” which receives the final indictment, if only by default.

I have gone at length in the exegesis of Justice’s poem to demonstrate his main strategy of constantly varying the trope of suicide. Also, the poem, I think, warrants it, in that the seriality of the poem behaves like a series of chords. If the sequence of these chords were rearranged, the poem instantly loses the great variation in tone masked by the convivially somber start. Read in the sequence in which Justice set the poem, what becomes most audible is the poem’s plain-spokenness, made literary because of the full consciousness of its effects. To read this plain speech with the knowledge of its constructedness would be to see, as Justice must have, the subtle means by which ‘everyday language’ judges us and others. Remark, for instance, the pronouns that Justice used for addresser and addressee: “we” and “you.” Justice’s poem is aware of the dynamic of alienation; whether he collaborates with it or not is open to debate.

3.

In Frank Bidart’s “The Sacrifice,” suicides are specified and juxtaposed. If in the Justice poem we are positioned outside the “labyrinth,” Bidart, by theatricalizing the page into a battlefield of mutually contextualizing shapes, ushers us into it by full use of the fictive without alternative. The poem begins with an imaginary (rhetorical) situation followed by the formal entrance of “Miss Mary Kenwood,” the flourish crumpling into the brutality of her act:

When Judas writes the history of SOLITUDE,—
... let him celebrate

Miss Mary Kenwood; who, without
help, placed her head in a plastic bag,

then locked herself
in a refrigerator.

Unlike Justice’s poem, there is no imagistic metonymy in Bidart’s poem; this is the voice bereft of company, the mind in the midst of its actions, produced on the page by the juxtaposition of language that

paraphrase will obscure. This art requires us to fully engage with its stern, artificial language—including the hesitations, the lyric doubts, made legible by punctuation—in order to experience the steep void through which the tectonic lines fall horizontally. Through the fault line produced by the clash between Christianity and the Lifestyle Network, the poem constructs the curtain it parts to expose the narrative of Mary Kenwood, abridged to its skeletal clarities:

—Six months earlier, after thirty years
teaching piano, she had watched

her mother slowly die of throat cancer.
Watched her *want* to die...

What once had given Mary life
in the end didn't want it.

Awake, her mother screamed for help to die.
—She felt

GUILTY... She knew that all men in these situations felt
innocent—; helpless—; yet guilty.

Suicide in “The Sacrifice” is seen through the lens of tragedy, the self in a situation characterized by moral deadlock. Embedded there, it is unable to tell itself apart from its context even as it does. In the specific stagecraft of this poem, the situation is the emotion of guilt which is a conviction cruelly without correlative in the external, empirical world. To particularize this guilt as “survivor’s guilt” is not merely reductive psychologizing; it would be mistaken, as what Bidart’s intelligence rescues from the rabble of moralist discourse is that guilt is fundamentally derived from the experience of another as an other; the person becomes the idea of a person and becomes perceived as such. As a derivative, guilt replicates nothing of that which bore it, and from its perspective, understands itself as a negation of its source.

Christ knew the Secret. Betrayal
is necessary; as is woe for the betrayer.

*The solution, Mary realized at last,
must be brought out of my own body.*

Wiping away our sins, Christ stained us with his blood—;
to offer yourself, yet need betrayal, by Judas, before SHOULDERING

THE GUILT OF THE WORLD—;
... *Give me the courage not to need Judas.*

Bidart complicates suicide (Mary Kenwood's, Christ's and Judas') by situating it in a chain of sacrifices and betrayals: God betraying Christ, Judas betraying Christ, Christ betraying Judas (and all Christians, who betray Christianity), the mother's body betraying her, the mother betraying Mary, Mary (at least to herself) betraying her mother—and Mary who then uses suicide to free herself from guilt by offering herself to the chain, betraying her self. Mary's suicide becomes a sacrifice that confines the action of betrayal to her person: she kills herself “without / help,” without “*need[ing] Judas,*” in an attempt to end the chain of betrayals by giving birth to her innocence. It is no accident then that the name “Mary” in this section no longer refers exclusively to Kenwood—the ‘Virgin’ Mother is invoked, Christianity's figure of human purity. Suicide in this poem, then, is paradoxically creative and destructive. The individual, in suicide, creates its integrity through the negation of its presence in the world.

In the last section of the poem, we come to a refrain of the first section, stripped now of its typographical, aural effects. The tone is no less grave, but its voice is no longer insistent. Because negation at this point in the poem has become a presence, the mind I think permits the last line where “death” is personified as an oddly benevolent character playing its role ambivalently. Another character is introduced, the “friend” who opens the refrigerator, perhaps looking for something to eat, and sees Mary who offers herself as food, her head wrapped in a plastic bag, illuminated by a cold bulb:

When Judas writes the history of solitude,
let him record

that to the friend who opened
the refrigerator, it seemed

death fought; before giving in.

The trope of suicide varies tremendously between the two poems. To use Justice's figure, suicide is a labyrinth into which Donald Justice looks and peers, and within which Bidart's voice enters and apprehends. Justice, writing in the steady cadence of syllabics, tercets and quatrains, works toward the production of a sociable, companionable voice that supports identification and unradical engagement;

Bidart, in couplets, makes a poetry of intense, bottomline presences that prevent identification, but whose stubborn, idiosyncratic form promotes the possibility of the unsentimental, imaginative witnessing of the unbearable.

What truly interests me in these poems, though, is how suicide becomes apprehensible outside systems of judgment that can affirm only what has already been affirmed. Despite the differences, “For the Suicides of 1962” and “The Sacrifice” are variations of a similar response—a resistance to the reductive fictionalizing of the life and death of another by suicide. Through poetry, suicide becomes approachable as the unseen-real that it is—a thing made of nothing that no other kind of language is equipped to address because suicide is primarily an action through which the person accepts his or her own otherness on his or her own, refusing and rejecting all categories, including the means by which the refusal and rejection were done. Through suicide, death enters language just as language enters death. If suicide makes a proposition out of death, poetry understands that this proposition does not exist. Yet poetry can follow because it regards suicide as a trope. In other words, in poetry, you can try suicide, and then move on to something more original.

Donald Justice
FOR THE SUICIDES OF 1962

If we recall your voices
As softer now, it's only
That they must have drifted back

A long way to have reached us
Here, and upon such a wind
As crosses the high passes.

Nor does the blue of your eyes
(Remembered) cast much light on
The page ripped from the tablet.

* * *

Once there in the labyrinth,
You were safe from your reasons.
We stand, now, at the threshold,

Peering in, but the passage,
For us, remains obscure; the
Corridors are still bloody.

* * *

What you meant to prove you have
Proved: we did not care for you
Nearly enough. Meanwhile the

Bay was preparing herself
To receive you, the for once
Wholly adequate female

To your dark inclinations;
Under your care the pistol
Was slowly learning to flower

In the desired explosion,
Disturbing the careful part
And the briefly recovered

Fixed smile of a forgotten
Triumph; deep within the black
Forest of childhood that tree

Was already rising which,
With the length of your body,
Would cast the double shadow.

* * *

The masks by which we knew you

Have been torn from you. Even
Those mirrors, to which always

You must have turned to confide,
Cannot have recognized you,
Stripped, as you were, finally.

At the end of your shadow
There sat another, waiting,
Whose back was always to us.

* * *

When the last door had been closed,
You watched, inwardly raging,
For the first glimpse of your selves
Approaching, jangling their keys.

Musicians of the black keys,
At last you compose yourselves.
We hear the music raging
Under the lids we have closed.

Frank Bidart
THE SACRIFICE

When Judas writes the history of SOLITUDE,—
... let him celebrate

Miss Mary Kenwood; who, without
help, placed her head in a plastic bag,

then locked herself
in a refrigerator.

*

—Six months earlier, after thirty years
teaching piano, she had watched

her mother slowly die of throat cancer.
Watched her *want* to die...

What once had given Mary life
in the end didn't want it.

Awake, her mother screamed for help to die.
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