

**“Some Safe Way of Dying”:
A Literary Study of Suicide in 1940s Britain**

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DECLARATION

I, William Brady, declare that this thesis has not previously been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and that it is entirely my own work.

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THESIS SUMMARY

In their efforts to negotiate the acute socio-political and cultural turmoil of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath, British authors of the period increasingly turned to the concept of suicide. My exploration of this hitherto critically unaddressed aspect of 1940s literature reveals the ways in which these fantasies of self-annihilation aided the articulation of otherwise inexpressible wartime and post-war experiences. Drawing on recent and established scholarship in 1940s literary studies and the emergent field of literary suicidology, this thesis delves into a broad corpus to investigate the role of suicidal fantasy in imaginatively mediating collapsing boundaries between public and private life, individual and collective identities and mind and body.

Structured around the four typologies of suicide formulated by the sociologist Émile Durkheim (egoistic, altruistic, fatalistic and anomic), this study examines the relationship between literary suicidality and language, heroism, genre and societal norms. The argument commences with a dissection of suicide's relation to the public hegemonies of the war and post-war as illustrated in the fictions of Virginia Woolf and Stevie Smith. Through the language of self-destruction, both authors point to how the powerless object of a violently misogynistic and militaristic social order might strive to survive, transcend and critique her social milieu. Following on from this opening chapter, my analysis develops to scrutinise representations of the ways in which war's production of militaristic male heroism is itself readable as an engine of suicidality. A close reading of the figures of the aerial combatant and the political and religious martyr as constituted in the writing of Roald Dahl, Richard Hillary, Graham Greene and Arthur Koestler uncovers a zone of uncertainty at the heart of 1940s understandings of

socially mandated acts of self-slaughter. Out of such uncertainty, this chapter concludes, arises a porous kinship between heroism and suicide. The effects of such category-destabilisation are palpable not only in the shifting literary conceptualisation of military and domestic life, but also, as my third chapter suggests, in the uprooting of the structural underpinnings of genre fiction. Here I assess the extent to which the prevalence of suicidal tropes in 1940s crime writing is legible as a self-reflexive commentary on the identity crisis of a genre in flux. Finally, I explore how suicide as a discursively constructed phenomenon was mobilised by popular culture of the post-war to espouse a return to traditional gender norms. I assert that these constructions of transgressive femininity as inherently suicidal are interrogated and to varying degrees subverted in the work of Dorothy Whipple, Terence Rattigan and Elizabeth Taylor.

Within the context of what Elaine Scarry defines as the “most radically embodying” arena of war, the quintessentially disembodied act of suicide carries a unique symbolic potency. Throughout this thesis I emphasise the ways in which authors deploy suicide’s protean representational capacities to either bolster or undermine dominant wartime discourses. Such readings highlight the potential of literary suicide to not only challenge social orthodoxies but to interrogate many of the presuppositions upon which those orthodoxies are founded. Researching fictional representations of suicide in wartime contributes to and expands critical discussion about the response of authors to the unprecedented challenges of this much-mythologised decade.

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Introduction: Some Safe Way of Dying

Here again is terrible evidence of the difference in savagery between the Europe of 1939 and 1914. For here in 1939 were five ordinary intelligent people in England, coolly and prudently supplying themselves with means for committing suicide in order to avoid the tortures which almost certainly awaited them if the Germans ever got hold of them. It is inconceivable that anyone in England in 1914 would have dreamt of committing suicide if the Kaiser's armies had invaded England.¹

– Leonard Woolf (1969)

This thesis argues that suicide constitutes a pivotal cultural and imaginative trope in 1940s Britain, one whose influence is palpable across a range of literature during this period. Responding to the ordeal of living within a climate of “total war” and its aftermath, many writers of the forties drew on the concept of self-annihilation as a source of consolation, of social critique and as a means of articulating the otherwise inexpressible crises of wartime and post-war sensibility. Moreover, the concept of suicide may be observed as performing a normative regulatory function within certain strands of 1940s writing, demarcating and defining narratives of courage, cowardice, duty and transgression. My investigation of how this body of writing both fixates on and actively utilises suicide and suicidality ultimately lends itself to an analysis of how and why the destabilisation of public and private spheres, the anomie and ennui of post-war life and the experience of the collective regimentation of body and mind all find

¹ Leonard Woolf, *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters: An Autobiography of the Years 1939-1969* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1973), 15. The five people to whom Leonard directly refers as having deliberately obtained the means to end their lives are himself, Virginia Woolf, Harold Nicholson, Vita Sackville-West and Adrian Stephen.

expression through a language of self-destruction. Building on established and recent cultural scholarship of Britain in the Second World War and immediate post-war period and drawing on the still emerging field of literary suicidology, I examine how the suicidal obsession of the 1940s British imagination is manifested across a range of literary genres and how it operates to elucidate, bolster and disrupt hegemonic discourses of the period.²

This thesis builds on recent scholarship in two key branches of literary academic inquiry: literary suicidology and the cultural study of 1940s Britain. My analytical approach is rooted in a tradition of close reading, one that enables me to discern and evaluate patterns and continuities across a diverse range of literary texts and genres. Unlike many of the scholarly works to which this study is indebted, I have not restricted or deliberately categorised my field of research in accordance with either chronology (indeed, such an approach would prove challenging to cohesively navigate in light of the numerous anomalies created by the disruption of the publishing industry during the war) or intellectual or political leaning. The heterogenous corpus here assembled includes works variously defined as modernist, inter-modernist, middlebrow, popular, reactionary and progressive, all bound by a common thematic and imaginative disposition towards suicide. Taken collectively, this selection of voices forms a picture of a suicidal imagination which, though heavily inflected by issues of class, gender and ideology, also in many ways transcends these factors. The following introductory chapter expounds upon the theoretical and structural models to be utilised over the course of the thesis, the core research questions addressed and the current critical backdrop against which these analyses are executed. It makes the case for bringing

² Avoiding pedantic numerical debate over whether a “decade” begins and ends with a 0 or a 1, I allow myself a modicum of latitude in defining chronological parameters. In practice, the majority of primary texts discussed here were first published or were verifiably or substantially composed between the years 1940-1949.

together the disparate disciplines of literary suicidology and 1940s literary studies, identifying unstable discourses of mind/body and public/private as areas of common concern in both fields. It then turns to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of deploying a sociological model, elaborating on the four-part conceptualisation of the topic developed by Émile Durkheim in his seminal study, *Suicide* (1897), which I will discuss in detail later in my introduction.

This establishing section is followed by an introduction to the suicidal body as a site of cultural meaning using two poems from 1940 by William Plomer, “Mews Flat Mona: A Memory of the Twenties” and “The Prisoner”, as well as Evelyn Waugh’s post-war novella, *The Loved One* (1948) as exemplary points of reference. In my analysis of Plomer and Waugh I introduce several thematic points of my argument that shall prove pertinent at later stages of the thesis. These include the gendering of suicide, the hierarchies of grievability accorded to suicidal bodies by institutional structures charged with the formation of truths around suicide, and the interpretive tensions between the construction of suicide as an act originating in the mind and that of suicide as an inherently embodied performance.

Following on from this introductory chapter, I embark on a four-part examination of the literary construction of suicide in 1940s Britain. For reasons I shall elaborate later in this section, I have chosen to present my findings over four thematically defined chapters, each one loosely linked to one of the four typologies of suicide – egoistic, altruistic, fatalistic and anomic – outlined by Durkheim. The first chapter focuses on suicide’s literary role as an instrument of consolation and self-expression amid a climate of isolation and alienation. The inexpressible trauma of the

war and its aftermath engendered a collective fragmentation,³ undermining confidence in the power and legitimacy of communal apparatuses. The sense that war robs one of the words and cultural signifiers through which to articulate its very ordeals proved a prominent source of intellectual and philosophical turmoil for many writers of the period. My analysis of this question focuses predominantly on the final novels of Virginia Woolf and Stevie Smith: *Between the Acts* (1941) and *The Holiday* (1949) respectively. Both novels chart the struggles and limitations involved in cultivating a shared linguistic medium through which the human anxieties of a world poised for or recovering from the chaos of war might be made expressible and therefore comprehensible. It is, I argue, through a common language of death and self-destruction that both texts partially and fleetingly achieve this aim. The secret yearning for suicide's promise of release and empowerment is thus constructed as a point of common understanding through which the anxieties of war are rendered communicable while suicide itself constitutes a liberation from the interpellations of a violent society.

Chapter two explores the zone of ambiguity in 1940s literary representations of heroic self-sacrifice and martyrdom, a phenomenon Émile Durkheim terms "altruistic suicide". Focusing on two broad manifestations of this trope: the figure of the RAF airman and political or religious martyrs, I identify within the writing of the Second World War a tendency to imbue such figures and the narratives that envelope them with an aura of suicidality. Such narratives, I argue, subvert the hierarchical moral distinction between personally motivated (egoistic) suicides and deaths which arise out

³ The loquacity with which many writers during this period profess their own muteness in the face of war and its traumas is a much-debated point that invites further investigation beyond the scope of the approach taken here. Kate McLoughlin, for example, observes across a range of war literature the pervasiveness of *adynaton* (a digressive rhetorical tactic whereby war writing makes "not-writing its very subject"). McLoughlin's work highlights the complexities involved in distinguishing between instances of genuine inarticulability and those where such protestations serve as a form of sensationalism. In Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 150-153.

of publicly lauded motivations rooted in patriotic, religious or ideological fervour. Furthermore, by endowing such acts of ostensibly disinterested valour with an individualistic quality, these texts constitute a rebuke to militaristic myths of universal solidarity and collective impetus. In the figure of the airman lies the masculinist fantasy of bodily transcendence into a realm of pure thought, an attribute, I maintain, that lends itself readily to discourses that posit suicide as a portal to self-actualisation. I shall investigate how this myth of the airman as an autonomous and self-destructive entity operates through literature, focusing in detail on the construction of corporeal self-effacement in two short stories by Roald Dahl, “Death of an Old Old Man” and “They Shall Not Grow Old”. I shall also apply this frame of analysis to Richard Hillary’s autobiographical novel, *The Last Enemy* (1942) as well as the interpretations and literary responses of figures such as Arthur Koestler to Hillary’s life and death.

The second section of this chapter is devoted to the question of martyrdom in a religious or political context. Focusing primarily on two novels published in 1940, Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* and Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, I analyse the relationship between physical pain, suicidal ideation and the figure of the martyr, drawing also on the well-documented fantasies of self-annihilation that informed both writers’ philosophical and political outlooks.

Chapter three embarks on a genre analysis of British detective fiction and its radical reinventions throughout the 1940s. These modulations, I contend, may be understood within the context of a growing literary disposition towards suicidal themes, a shift that disrupts the structural and ideological orthodoxies of the form as it was fashioned during the interwar period. This chapter is the most speculative of the thesis, drawing on Alastair Fowler’s scholarship on the evolution of literary genre as well as contemporaneous and recent analyses of the meanings and significances of the

structural underpinnings of the “whodunit”. Examining the centrality of self-annihilating acts both to the plot and the sub-textual genre operations of works by authors such as Agatha Christie, J.B. Priestley, Georgette Heyer and Patrick Hamilton, I analyse the ways in which a genre that is stereotypically defined by its exposure of hidden networks of societal connectivity and complicity proved an ideal vehicle for the dissection of the public/private duality of suicide.

Finally, chapter four appraises the deployment of suicide as a normative cultural force that operated to regulate desire, punish socially transgressive behaviour and bolster the case for a return to pre-war structures of gender and family. I show how certain authors interrogate the mechanisms through which myriad discursive practices of medicine, law, religion and sociology are brought to bear in the construction of suicide as the inevitable outcome of the subject’s rejection of societal norms. Drawing on aspects of Foucauldian theory as well as recent feminist criticism of the underlying assumptions of the Durkheimian construction of suicide by Jennifer Lehman and Katrina Jaworski, I explore how 1940s popular culture (and in particular cinematic culture) exploited narratives of female suicide to counter-act the dramatic shifts in gender roles, marriage and sexual morality that the decade witnessed. I examine these themes and their literary subversion as they are confronted in Dorothy Whipple’s novel, *They Were Sisters* (1943), Terence Rattigan’s *The Deep Blue Sea* (first staged in 1952), and Elizabeth Taylor’s *A Wreath of Roses* (1949).

*

The development of literary suicidology as a scholarly field has been a sparse and sporadic affair since the publication of Al Alvarez’s initial book-length study, *The*

Savage God in 1971. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the emotive and intimate nature of the subject in question, it has not been uncommon for studies in this area to intermingle the personal and the academic, a trend instigated by Alvarez himself in his consecration of *The Savage God* as an act of mourning for his close friend, Sylvia Plath. While a number of monographs and unpublished doctoral theses since the 1990s have offered critical literary insights on suicide within the context of isolated authors or intellectual movements of the twentieth century, analyses that substantially focus on the Second World War and its immediate aftermath are virtually non-existent.⁴ Given this surprising paucity of direct exploration of the subject, the novelty of my work lies partly in its effort to rectify this critical lacuna. In doing so, however, I also aim to build on existing scholarly research of the 1940s, engaging in particular with literary studies of anxiety, including those by Lyndsey Stonebridge and Paul K. Saint-Amour, with investigations of the gendered dimensions of wartime experience by, among others, Gill Plain and Alison Light, and with the often torturous disjunct between private imagination and public myth examined in the work of Adam Piette. Furthermore, in contributing to the field of “literary suicidology” (a term inaugurated as recently as Andrew Bennett’s 2017 work, *Suicide Century*) I seek to expand critical awareness of the role of suicide as an imaginative trope within this hitherto neglected cultural context. “More perhaps than any other human action,” writes the sociologist and historian, Marzio Barbagli, “suicide depends on a vast number of psychosocial, cultural, political and even biological causes and must be analysed from different points of

⁴ I refer here to the exploration of suicide in British literature. For recent literary examination of suicide in Germany during this period, see Robert Blankenship, *Suicide in East German Literature* (New York: Camden House, 2017).

view.”⁵ In concurrence with this outlook, I aim to enhance the literary perspective on suicide, while recognising its cultural construction through a plurality of viewpoints.

The eponymous quotation for this study originates in a reflection by the pacifist writer and Bloomsbury Group affiliate, Frances Partridge. In her diary entry of 15th May 1940, Partridge reports hearing the news of Holland’s surrender to Nazi German forces over the wireless at her home in Wiltshire. She describes a conversation with her husband, Ralph, in which both parties express a yearning to reclaim a modicum of sovereignty over their own mortality and selfhood amid the chaos and anxiety of war. Partridge writes:

in no time – days even – we may all be enduring the same horrors as Holland and Belgium. We talked about suicide. I thought with envy of Ray,⁶ and longed to have some safe way of dying within my power. [Ralph] said we could easily gas ourselves in the car, all three of us. We were still thinking of this as we went along to the bath, and of how happy our lives have been, and so has Burgo’s though there has been so little of it.⁷

For the Partridges, it is significantly the “way of dying” that absorbs the majority of their attentions as opposed to the pivotal question of voluntary death itself. For those in their artistic circle and beyond who had remained in Britain during the war, the knowledge that one could end one’s life at will provided a meagre yet bracing consolation amid the uncertainties, anxieties and ennui of war. The spectre of aerial

⁵ Marzio Barbagli, *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide*, Translated by Lucinda Byatt (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2015), 7.

⁶ Ray (Rachel) Garnett (née Marshall), Frances’ sister, died from cancer ten days after the above diary entry was composed and, at the time of writing was being treated with heroin for her pain (presumably the reason for Frances’ professed envy). Frances was subsequently distraught to learn that Ray had begged in vain for her husband, David Garnett, to help her to die, declaring it a “barbarous cruelty to keep the poor creature alive.” Quoted in Anne Chisholm, *Frances Partridge: The Biography* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson: London, 2009), 183.

⁷ Frances Partridge, *A Pacifist’s War: Diaries 1939-1945* (London: Phoenix, 2009), 40.

bombardment, which, as Sarah Cole notes, had stoked a collective dread of invasion since the 1930s, intensified this sense of urgency to procure a final means of escape in the event of a catastrophe that seemed increasingly inevitable.⁸ In her diary entry of June 8 1940, Virginia Woolf struggles to reconcile a sense of morbid futility with a stoic determination to persevere with life and writing. She writes that

every night the Germans fly over England; it comes closer to this house daily. If we are beaten then—however we solve that problem, and one solution is apparently suicide (so it was decided three nights ago in London among us) book writing becomes doubtful. But I wish to go on, not to settle down in that dismal puddle.⁹

As Leonard Woolf attests in the quotation that begins this chapter, such a mode of existence cannot be dismissed as an inevitable consequence of any war, but must be viewed in terms of the specific climate of total war that was visited upon Britain of the 1940s.¹⁰ The fact that suicidality occupied such a frank position within the casual discourse and writing of the 1940s, particularly in comparison to that of the years 1914-1918, Woolf attributes not only to the intensified sense of invasion's imminence but to the unprecedented ruthless savagery of Nazism and its destruction of the normative expectations of humanity. The sense that the genocidal atrocities witnessed throughout the war constituted a watershed in human identity and that victory over totalitarianism would itself demand the suspension of deeply held values and tenets of self-perception, was a central theme in the cultural imagining of the war. The Powell and Pressburger

⁸ Cole writes that “by the middle of the 1930s, the fear of an air war became all but ubiquitous,” transforming the aeroplane from a glamorous fetish to a monstrous harbinger of depersonalised destruction. In Sarah Cole, *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 208.

⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 100.

¹⁰ The negotiation of Stephen Spender's suicide pact with Leonard Woolf in the event of an invasion was similarly centred on the question of methodology; the former advocated cyanide while the latter believed carbon monoxide poisoning to be more suitable. See John Sutherland, *Stephen Spender: A Literary Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 251.

film, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) dramatises the painful renunciation of past chivalric constructions of warfare in favour of a tactical model based in the imperatives of realpolitik. Over the course of Partridge's war diaries, in which she conveys her feelings of desperation and morbidity and details her own endeavours to procure a reliable poison for her and her family in the event of a German invasion, this thematic intertwining of suicide and safety recurs on multiple occasions. In such cases, the topic of self-annihilation is broached with neither gravity nor flippancy but with an air of resigned pragmatism that juxtaposes sharply with the idyllic refuge of Ham Spray farmhouse, where Frances and her family passed the war years.¹¹ Indeed, as Frances herself acknowledges,

few people passed a more sheltered war than we did at Ham Spray, and this may be considered a disqualification, though we were not ostriches: we thought, felt and talked about [the war] endlessly.¹²

It is arguably all the more striking then that even at this physical remove from the material destruction of urban bombardment, sheltered "among the exuberant pink roses and tall valerian on the verandah", suicidal temptations are conjured and discussed openly. A visit from Raymond Mortimer on June 7th 1940 precipitates a conversation that once more aligns self-destruction with safety when Mortimer recounts the experiences of a doctor acquaintance who "has been asked by almost all his patients for a safe poison, generally by means of hints."¹³ Suicide represents, for Partridge and her immediate social circle, a logical response to the vicissitudes and unbearable

¹¹ The Partridges had lived at Ham Spray since 1924, originally sharing the house with Lytton Strachey and Dora Carrington. A distraught Carrington committed suicide in 1932, two months after the death of Strachey from stomach cancer.

¹² Frances Partridge, *A Pacifist's War*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid*, 44. Raymond Mortimer, a friend of the Partridges, had worked during the interwar years on an unfinished historical study of suicide. In his own published work on the subject, Henry Romilly Fedden (whose studies in this area are discussed in this thesis) thanks Mortimer for allowing him access to this incomplete manuscript. Henry Romilly Fedden, *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study* (London: Peter Davies Ltd. 1938), 347.

foreboding of wartime existence; not merely an avoidance strategy to escape future suffering, it constitutes the promise of autonomy, self-empowerment and in a moral and philosophical sense, self-preservation.

It may also be that the collective literary disposition towards self-annihilating fantasy originates in part in the stymying sense of *déjà vu* embedded in the experience of the Second World War. While the poets of the First World War famously strove, as Paul Fussell writes, to channel the visceral horrors of the trenches “towards myth, towards a revival of the cultic, the mystical, the sacrificial, the prophetic, the sacramental, and the individually significant,”¹⁴ 1940s literature was defined by many for its apparent inability to develop a cohesive artistic response. While Peter Conrad’s suggestion that “this was a war to which literature conscientiously objected”¹⁵ has been greatly undermined by several studies including those by Mark Rawlinson, Adam Piette, Marina MacKay and Gill Plain, much of 1940s literature exhibits a self-consciousness of its own inhibition in comparison with its more loquacious predecessor. It may however be understood that while the literature of the First World War succeeded in confronting, transforming and mythologising the experience of trench warfare, the writing of the Second World War expresses a collective impulse to withdraw from its violent horrors through the obliteration of consciousness. Conrad’s evocation of conscientious objection does, however, articulate and account for something of this reticence. “There is a profound complicity between art and war: both turn death into a spectator sport,”¹⁶ writes Samuel Weber (1997). An awareness of this principle of complicity permeates the combatant literature of the war and its aftermath in its efforts to reclaim the soldier and pilot from the voyeuristic and ennobling gaze of

¹⁴ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 131.

¹⁵ Peter Conrad, “Tones of Fear,” *New Statesman*, July 28 1978.

¹⁶ Samuel Weber, “Wartime,” in *Violence, Identity and Self-Determination*, eds. Hent De Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 99.

collective art. Such a repudiation is palpable in the language of understatement that saturated the RAF writing and patois – a communicative medium designed to place the matter of the flier’s life and death back in his own hands.

The tenor of much of this literature, as Lyndsey Stonebridge observes, is shaped by a sense of intolerable anxiety in the face of insurmountable political and historical turmoil, an experience that

tilts us towards the hammerlike blows; as breathlessly paralysed as we might be in the face of a history that seems incomprehensible, anxiety is also the affective register of a form of historical anticipation.¹⁷

The anxiety of the 1940s is not simply limited to the fear of an inscrutable future but extends also to the sense of being unmoored from a coherent understanding of one’s own history and an increasing awareness of the collective past as a discursively fashioned narrative (seen, for example, in the rural pageant at the centre of Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*). The theme of temporal derailment, which is an integral component of my analysis of suicide’s relationship to the erosion of historical and cultural certainties, is prevalent across multiple texts of the period, undermining the bonds of horizontal communities forged through collectively held unexamined understandings of class, empire and gender expectations. Estranged from the historical certainties of the past, disoriented by an unfamiliar present and incapable of conceptualising a future untainted by an undercurrent of dread, many writers and readers of the 1940s sought imaginative refuge and relief in other time periods or in fantasy locales unburdened by the immediate political complications and doubts of the present. The popular regency romance novels of writers such as Georgette Heyer and

¹⁷ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), 4.

the otherworldly adventures of C.S. Lewis' *Space Trilogy* and *Chronicles of Narnia* exhibit this desire for distance in their coherent remaking and re-fashioning of history along intelligible lines. While such works provided escape, they were often by no means totally insulated from wartime reality, offering instead the benefit of distance and perspective in addition to diversion. As Plain writes in reference to historical fiction, such narratives "occupy a complex double space: both of their time and resistant to it, escapist yet critically engaged".¹⁸

Other writers sought to directly engage with the everyday strangeness of living under conditions of total war by imbuing their narratives with a gothic sensibility. For much of the war, Mengham writes,

the threat of invasion was not limited to the dread of seeing German troops on British soil, but touched off various kinds of alarm over the increasing frequency with which people and objects were transposed from familiar to unfamiliar surroundings, often with a sense of being uprooted, out of place, and sometimes made to feel, or look, unwelcome or intrusive in their new setting.¹⁹

This uncanny sensibility extended to the sphere of the military and in particular the experience of the RAF pilot, whose work literally entailed a slippage between the realms of consciousness and unconsciousness as a matter of course, as increasingly powerful aircraft made "blacking out" a commonplace feature of missions. The array of supernatural entities that populate the wartime short fiction of Roald Dahl (from mischievous "gremlins" to sentient flying machines) may be read within the context of this climate of uncanny displacement. The constant intrusions of the uncanny and the

¹⁸ Gill Plain, *Literature of the 1940s War, Postwar and 'Peace'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 149.

¹⁹ Rod Mengham, "British Fiction of the War," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32.

interpenetration of the violence of the battlefield with the security of the home-front found articulation through a distinctly gothic mode in works such Elizabeth Bowen's "The Demon Lover" (1945), Henry Greene's *Back* (1946) and in the sepulchral civilisation of Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan* (1946).²⁰ Such novels and short stories draw on an atmosphere of the war's lived experience, its uncanny returns and displacements and its disturbing interpenetration of life and death to present an environment in which boundaries between self and other, life and death and past and present are rendered unstable. Bowen famously conveys this haunting sense of death's ubiquity in the following passage from *The Heat of the Day* (1949):

Most of all the dead, from mortuaries, from under cataracts of rubble, made their anonymous presence – not as today's dead but as yesterday's living – felt throughout London ...not knowing who the dead were you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning, or at which street corner the news vendor missed a face, or which trains and buses in the home going rush were this evening lighter by at least one passenger.²¹

Somewhat paradoxically, while the phantom presence of the dead amid the exhaustion and routine of life provokes a sensation of the *unheimlich*, the actual prospect of death in itself and particularly self-appointed death, represents a welcoming stability. "Home is the dead one, home on the bier," muses the narrator of Stevie Smith's *The Holiday*, a novel whose convoluted publication history (discussed in the next chapter) situates it in an anomalous twilight between war and post-war. Frances Partridge, moreover, perceives this proclivity towards self-destructive fantasy to be a

²⁰ For a detailed study of the role of the Gothic within 1940s literature, see Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).

²¹ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London: Vintage, 1998), 91. In Bowen's spy narrative, the death of the double-agent, Robert Kelway, is ambiguously presented as either misadventure or suicide.

national condition that is by no means confined to her own pacifist coterie; rather, it is a ubiquitous state that manifests differently according to political persuasion. She interprets the spiritedly defiant Churchillian rhetoric of *The Times* letters pages to be simply “all saying in their different ways, ‘just see me die, how dashing I’ll do it’” while she equally recoils from “the balderdash uttered by politicians. Lord M says ‘if we must die let’s die gaily and Lord C that we must do it On Our Toes’.”²² The implicit equivalency that Partridge draws between the self-annihilations of introverted despair and those advertised in declarations of warlike brio finds articulation across a multitude of 1940s narratives of military endeavour and political martyrdom (as shall be discussed at greater length in Chapter Two). The subversive potential of such a correlation of individualistic suicide with heroic death serves to fragment the myth of wartime military endeavour as an enterprise of unified consciousness, suggesting the army’s true purpose to be, as George Granville Barker writes, “the individual death in a ditch or a plane”; “the single/ Death without purpose and without understanding ... perfect sacrifice to nothing.”²³

It should now be evident that suicide is deployed within the literature of 1940s Britain as more than a mere mirror of the material real-world phenomenon and that my approach to this subject is primarily concerned with how suicide serves as a symbolic force in which a myriad of concerns, fears and desires are absorbed and then given voice. As Jeffrey Berman notes, “those who refuse to romanticise suicide in life often do so in literature”.²⁴ This, I believe, does not automatically suggest that literature necessarily renders suicide in terms that are more honest than are articulable in daily discourse but that when presented in symbolic terms, suicide may constitute a focal

²² Frances Partridge, *A Pacifist’s War*, 49.

²³ George Barker, “Seven Pacific Sonnets: Sonnet VI,” *Horizon* 2, no. 11 (1940): 222-225.

²⁴ Jeffrey Berman, *Surviving Literary Suicide* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 40.

point for a myriad of desires, yearnings and fantasies of autonomy. Whereas the suicide of daily life is bound up and sheathed by a framework of psychiatric and psychological discourses, literary suicide demands to be considered on its own terms, terms that invoke the sentiments of Camus' declaration that "what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying."²⁵ Given the diversity of symbolic burdens placed upon suicide during the 1940s it would be untenable to suggest that the trope in itself offers an empirical guide for a sociological or psychological investigation. It is, nonetheless, necessary to ask certain questions of this literature's relationship to the statistical readings and shifting medical responses to suicide in the 1940s. How, in the first instance, does one reconcile the expansive vividness of the suicidal literary imagination of the 1940s with the actuality of a marked decrease in the suicide rate during the war years? "It is not without reason that suicide has been described as our most baffling social disease," concludes an article in the *British Medical Journal* of 20th December 1947. Among several shifts in suicidal demographics and statistics, the article reported a marked overall decline in the suicide rate during the war years, from 5,263 in 1938 to 3,651 in 1944 and increasing slightly to 3,818 in 1945.²⁶ While the article in question makes no conjecture as to the reason for such a marked decline, many subsequent critical studies have read this trend within the embedded Durkheimian position that suicide rates typically decline during war because of an increased sense of collective purpose engendered by the strengthening of social ties through conscription, shared experiences of adversity and volunteer work. Such a hypothesis is complemented by the enduring myth of the Blitz and the People's War that continues to

²⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, translated by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1979), 12.

²⁶ "Suicide in Peace and War," *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 4537 (1947): 1005.

define representations of Britain during the Second World War as a unique moment of solidarity. As Jose Harris writes,

The war is widely regarded as perhaps the only period in the whole of British history during which the British people came together as a metaphysical entity which transcended the divisions of class, sect, self-interest and libertarian individualism that normally constitute the highly pluralistic and fragmented structure of British society.²⁷

Angus Calder, writing in 1969, concurred with this vision, attributing the decline in the suicide rate to the idea that “the existence of a common goal to achieve which meant, increasingly, sharing and sharing alike, gave many people, young and old, a proud and even gay motive for existence.”²⁸ This powerful myth of the psychological healing properties of wartime communitarianism, or at least of war’s capacity to inoculate the individual psyche against its numerous burdens, was bolstered by the surprisingly low rate of mental trauma reported during the Blitz. The expectation in the opening months of the war that Britain would be overrun by mass hysteria and that civilians would fall prey to “shell shock” as had the soldiers of the First World War was largely unmet, at least insofar as the official investigators for Mass Observation could discern.²⁹ Before attempting to bridge the apparent gulf between this official account of life during the war and the proliferation of suicidal imagery and narrative tropes found within the literature of the period, it is worth first interrogating this construction of wartime Britain as a site of unanimous resolve and stoicism. The assumption within analyses

²⁷ Jose Harris, “War and Social History: Britain and the Home Front during the Second World War,” *Contemporary European History* 1, no.1 (1992): 17.

²⁸ Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 2008), 357.

²⁹ A notable exception is the case of the heavy bombing of the town of Coventry on November 14th where “there were more open signs of hysteria, terror, neurosis, observed in one evening than during the whole of the past two months together in all areas. Women were seen to cry, to scream, to tremble all over, to faint in the street, to attack a fireman, and so on...” Mass-Observation Archive. “The Effects of Bombing in Coventry,” File 495. Quoted in Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain During the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 77.

such as Angus Calder's of the synonymousness of public and private wartime consciousness risks contributing to the fallacy identified by the psychoanalyst Edward Glover when he complained in 1942 that the "Mass Neurosis Myth" that circulated in the lead-up to war had been replaced by an equally unsubstantiated "No Neuroses Myth".³⁰ Moreover, the extent to which official suicide statistics during wartime may be relied upon is itself subject to question, not only because of the enhanced stigma attached to acts of perceived self-absorption within a discursive hegemony of altruistic self-sacrifice, but also because war itself affords a multitude of opportunities for the suicidally inclined to disguise or redirect such energies into a socially mandated death. George Simpson's introduction to Durkheim highlights how the ubiquity of killing and dying in wartime renders questions of individual intent opaque.³¹ He writes that:

In the midst of a shooting war, suicide-rates tend to decline; so the statistics say. But a shooting war offers for those in battle optimum opportunity for suicide to be committed without anyone being aware of it. What looks like courage may be suicidal proclivity; and anyway one may not contemplate suicide if the chances are greater that life may soon be over.³²

An acceptance of the inherent unreliability of official suicide statistics, particularly during war, combined with an observation of the dominant role of suicidal fantasy in

³⁰ Edward Glover, "Notes on the Psychological Effects of War Conditions on the Civilian Population," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 23 (1942), 36/37. In this article, Glover also complained of the omission of any psychoanalytic perspectives or approaches from these official statistics and inquiries.

³¹ The impact of war on how a suicidal body may be readily disavowed within official discourses is exemplified in the circumstances of the death of Welsh poet and short-story writer, Alun Lewis. Lewis died by a self-inflicted gunshot wound while on active duty in Burma in 1944. Despite the highly indicative position in which the body was discovered and the assertion of many of Lewis' comrades to the contrary, the death was officially ruled to have been accidental. In John Pikoulis, *Alun Lewis: A Life* (London: Seren Books, 1992), 265-266.

³² Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, xxx.

the literature of both the war and post-war period serves to undercut the myth of ubiquitous harmony.

Beneath what Bowen describes as the “war-warmed impulse of a people to be *a* people ... the curious animal psychic oneness, the human lava-flow” lies the anxiety, shame and alienation of those who inwardly or outwardly fail to authentically merge with the collective body.³³ Such a hegemony of stoicism and understated good humour may in fact have instituted a regime of emotional self-policing which placed the private imagination under unacknowledged and inarticulable stress. Sara Wasson cites the case of an ambulance driver whose feelings of fear and despair at the progress of the war inspired yet another layer of even greater guilt at her failure to truthfully mimic the public mood of resilient camaraderie, and suggests that those “whose wartime experience did not match the [dominant] myth could see themselves as sick or deviant.”³⁴ The fear of exile or estrangement from the newly concretised body politic is also addressed in Adam Piette’s *Imagination at War* (1995), which explores in depth the implications of this subordination of private emotion, imagination and desire to the machinery of war. Piette identifies in 1940s culture a burden of relentless performativity arising from the fact that

wartime culture, with its big propaganda machines, its fabricated communal feelings and military regimentation, aimed at transforming private imagination into public spirit, turning its soldiers into actors-out of its historical drama.³⁵

Individuals, particularly women, who deliberately flouted such normative models of behaviour and spirit were routinely represented as self-destructive beings, inevitably

³³ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, 275.

³⁴ Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War*, 19.

³⁵ Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (London: Papermac, 1995), 2.

arriving at lonely and violent ends through their own actions, whether deliberately or indirectly. Such tensions, both imaginative and real, did not automatically abate with the ostensible arrival of peace in 1945. This notion of self-reinforcing myths as a source of internal alienation and covert psychological exile is equally applicable to the post-war experiences of those whose memories of military or civilian life failed to conform to the dominant narrative, a concept Victoria Stewart confronts in *Narratives of Memory* (2006). Stewart notes the tension between the mythologies of war that were already contemporaneously evolving in post-war years and the discordant recollections of private memory, suggesting that where individual memory fails to incorporate the subject into the official harmonising vision of war and post-war experience, the effects range from catastrophic violence to melodramatic self-annihilation. In Nigel Balchin's novel, *Mine Own Executioner* (1945) Felix Milne, a psychoanalyst without any formal medical qualifications, attempts to assist a psychologically scarred war veteran in resolving his war neurosis that manifests itself in murderous impulses towards his wife. In the inquest scene that closes the novel, the coroner, sceptical of Milne's psychoanalytical methods, makes the acerbic commentary: "All you know is that Mr Milne went up to make him see reason and he promptly shot himself."³⁶ Undercutting the derision of the utterance is the tacit textual implication that the suicide of Lucian was indeed the product of a rare moment of lucidity and reason.

Thus, while the self-mythologisation of the British character enacted through wartime propaganda and collective imaginative practices undoubtedly played a role in minimising psychological trauma, the wholesale acceptance of such a narrative elides the private experiences of loss, displacement and physical imperilment. A credible explanation for the decline in suicide rates, and a perspective that informs this thesis'

³⁶ Nigel Balchin, *Mine Own Executioner* (London: Collins, 1976), 234.

approach is Lyndsey Stonebridge's hypothesis that the dominant experience of the Second World War was anxiety – as opposed to trauma – and that this acute sense of dread and anticipation proved, as Freud suggests in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to be a prophylactic against longer term mental deterioration.³⁷ In this way, Stonebridge suggests, the experiencing of the shocks of war as something already rendered familiar through horrified anticipation and imaginative fretfulness results in a form of psychic “grounding”. This is because

When data shocks but fails to reverberate, there is no meaningful place for consciousness to go except, as it were, back into itself, in a movement that reconnects the subject to history precisely by marking its estrangement from it.³⁸

“Violence anticipated is violence already unleashed” writes Paul Saint-Amour,³⁹ and it is indeed the tired horror of foreclosed violence that pulses through what Stonebridge terms “the compelling strangeness of the 1940s novel.”⁴⁰ Adapting and incorporating Stonebridge's theory of anxiety-as-defence to purposes of this current study, then, I argue that 1940s culture engages with self-annihilating energies and impulses so comprehensively and vitally that it in effect neutralises frustrated suicidality; the affirmation that the subject is *capable* of ending his or her own life is consolation enough to restore a modicum of personal agency where all political agency is lacking.⁴¹ It is literature that affords the anxious subject the plurality of lives and deaths needed to

³⁷ Freud writes that “there is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neurosis.” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 18*, edited and translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 12.

³⁸ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety*, 3.

³⁹ Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopaedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

⁴¹ Having argued this, I am nonetheless wary of making expansive claims about the relationship between the discrete entities of literary suicide and its real-world counterpart; such a complex question demands an extensive multi-layered study in its own right and has already been broached in Jeffrey Berman's *Surviving Literary Suicide*.

reignite a sense of agency within the helpless reader.⁴² The function of literature within this paradigm as the expressive medium for such suicidal yearnings is suggested in an essay by Samuel Weber in which he considers the function of death within art. Drawing on Freud's "Thoughts for the Time on War and Death", Weber suggests that imaginative representation of death (and for the current purpose, suicide) works uncannily to diminish the subject's capacity to actualise these eventualities. He writes:

the paradox here lies in that to think of death as one normally thinks of other things, namely, by representing it, is to transform it into the spectacle and ourselves into spectators and thereby to miss precisely what is at stake in death: the cessation of our being in the world.

Imagining death thus becomes the opposite of what it seems: a way of ostensibly overcoming the threat of non-being, of no longer being there in the world.⁴³

Stonebridge is by no means alone in identifying the defining experience of war as that of anxious anticipation. Paul Saint-Amour's *Tense Future* (2015) also argues that the sheer "totality" of total war lay not only in its destruction of the safe dichotomy between homefront and battlefield, but its capacity to engulf the experience of temporality itself by inculcating in the civilian a fatalistic sense of the predetermination of catastrophic violence and thereby placing him in a constant state of anticipation. Where such violence is perceived to be the inexorable result of historical machinations, suicide presents itself as the antidote to such intolerable foreclosure. These previous examples are of use in conveying the ways in which literary suicide absorbs the dull

⁴² "We die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves; yet we survive him and are ready to die again just as safely with another hero." In Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Time on War and Death," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 14*, edited and translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 291.

⁴³ Samuel Weber, "Wartime," *Violence, Identity and Self-Determination*, eds. Hent De Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 97.

frustrations and nihilism of war and post-war life. My thesis is, however, concerned with the interplay between suicide as a contested terrain between public and private imaginations and must therefore consider the subject on the level of both individual and collective consciousnesses.

Whereas the work of Stonebridge and Saint-Amour emphasises the modernist tradition as the frame through which the destruction and psychological ramifications of the 1940s' upheavals are made manifest, the corpus I have assembled embraces a heterogeneity of register and style. To convey the sheer variety of 1940s British writing that incorporates suicidal themes, I examine a multiplicity of voices that span the gamut of high modernism (Virginia Woolf) to Inter-modernism (Stevie Smith), middlebrow fiction (Dorothy Whipple) and popular genres. In taking this approach, I am influenced by the far-ranging project of recovery and reappraisal undertaken by Gill Plain in *Literature of the 1940s: War, Post-war and 'Peace'* and the equally eclectic approach to the 1930s literary landscape taken by Valentine Cunningham in his wide-ranging 1988 study, *British Writers of the Thirties*. My research is also shaped by Plain's perspective on the porous temporality of the 1940s, a decade typically bisected in critical and historical discourses by the end of the war. For literature, however "1945 is an arbitrary caesura", made fluid by the interpenetrations of war and post-war consciousness. Plain divides the long decade into the three unstable epochs of "War", "Post-War" and "Peace" (the last of which is emphatically defined as a contingent concept, rendered disturbingly impalpable by the dawning threat of nuclear annihilation).⁴⁴

Aspects of my analyses have also been guided both directly and indirectly by the theories of Judith Butler in two key areas. Katrina Jaworski's model of inquiry, on which I shall expand in the next section and through which I re-examine the underlying

⁴⁴ Gill Plain, *Literature of the 1940s*, 14.

definitional assumptions of suicide in my fourth chapter, draws heavily on the underlying principles of Butler's writing on gender performativity and shows the ways such a perspective can work "to recast methodologically the way gender has been framed in suicide to show that understanding suicide is dependent on more than suicide itself".⁴⁵ Secondly, I am concerned with the differential hierarchies of meaning accorded to suicides and in my second and third chapters draw on Butler's writing on the differential allocation of grievability in the texts *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009). In the essay, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," Butler outlines the ways in which the act of public mourning implicitly delineates between those bodies which are worthy of grief and those which are unworthy. The dehumanising exclusion of certain individuals from the former category is evidence, Butler suggests, of the performative nature of mourning and its contingency on external norms related to kinship and gender. I argue that such hierarchies are in evidence in the way suicidal bodies are accorded disparate capacities to signify or inspire a response within a text. Under Butler's definition of mourning as an "identification with suffering itself", this disparity is applicable to the ways in which the suicidal body may appear either as a focus of empathy, guilt and self-reflection for the living or as a distant, unspeakable and unknowable entity.⁴⁶ Graham Greene's novel, *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), exposes this stratification of suicidal meaning in his dichotomous treatment of the suicide by hanging of a vapid and incompetent young man in debt and the philosophical and ecclesiastically profound self-destruction of his Catholic protagonist. Elsewhere, in my discussion of the detective novel of the 1940s, I explore the ways in which class and

⁴⁵ Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide*, 12.

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 30.

gender are brought to bear in J.B. Priestley's popular experiment in grievability, *An Inspector Calls* (1946).

Although a work of literary analysis, this thesis intersects structurally and thematically with multiple branches of suicide knowledge, chief among them the pioneering theories of Émile Durkheim, also known as "the father of sociology". Durkheim's essential contribution to this field lies in his postulation that, far from being an act of pure solipsism or individual neuroticism, suicide is inextricably bound up with broader societal configurations, and may therefore be observed to follow patterns of social causality in its trends and fluctuations. In his enduringly influential study, *Suicide* (1897), Durkheim anatomises acts of voluntary death to produce a phenomenological understanding that associates higher suicide rates with social groupings that subject the individual to extreme polarities of integration or regulation. Writing in response to the nineteenth century's dramatic shift from an agrarian tradition-oriented mode of social organisation to an industrialised, liberal and notionally individualistic society, Durkheim identified the key source of existential torment for modern man as the growing schism wrought between public and private life. As the Durkheim-influenced political theorists, Berger and Neuhaus explain:

For the individual in modern society, life is an ongoing migration between these two spheres, public and private. The megastructures [of private capitalist and state enterprise] are typically alienating, that is, they are not helpful in providing meaning and identity for individual existence. Meaning, fulfilment, and personal identity are to be realised in the private sphere. While the two spheres interact in many ways, in private life the individual is left very much to his own devices, and thus is uncertain and anxious. Where modern society is 'hard', as in the

megastructures, it is personally unsatisfactory; where it is ‘soft’, as in private life, it cannot be relied upon. Compare, for example, the social realities of employment with those of marriage.⁴⁷

This modern binary compartmentalisation of the domestic and the professional, the public and the private was thrown into disarray by the daily realities of the Second World War. Women, the symbolic guardians of hearth and home were enlisted into the public sphere of munitions manufacture, secretarial duties and agricultural labour, the mundane routines of private life from the preparation of food to style of dress to style and content of speech were corralled within the jurisdiction of the collective war effort, and the home itself was physically imperilled by nightly bombardments. Within such an unstable climate of change, uncertainty and normlessness, the concept of “for the duration” saw the private individual subjected to extreme regulation in certain areas of life (food, blackouts, conversations) and a striking loosening of mores in others (sexual liberation, the notional levelling of a “people’s war”). Each section of my thesis explores how these sharp fluctuations in the individual’s relationship to society influenced the suicidal imagination. I turn now to explore each unique manifestation of this relationship in turn.

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The manifestations of modern man’s crises of oppression or deracination are divided into four suicidal categories in Durkheim’s *Suicide*: egoistic, altruistic, fatalistic and anomic.⁴⁸ As previously mentioned, each of these Durkheimian models shall provide a loose thematic basis for my thesis chapters, a presentational strategy I have

⁴⁷ Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1996), 159.

⁴⁸ Durkheim’s gendering of this social pathology as a male phenomenon is a deliberate decision rooted in his belief that women, as inherently less social beings than men, are shielded from the brunt of modernity’s ill effects. In Chapter Four, I address the implications of these assumptions for the construction of suicide throughout the twentieth century.

adopted to convey the breadth as well as the depth of the suicidal imagination of this cultural milieu. Before embarking on further analysis of this context, however, it is worth establishing a definition of each of these typologies within their original sociological context.

Egoistic suicide arises from a breakdown in social cohesion. The individual, now unmoored and bereft of the social ties that once provided meaning (including family religion and national identity) is alienated and alone. Without a stable point of purposeful social intercourse, the subject typically gives himself over to introspective contemplations that are cumulatively liable to transform over time into a morbid thought process which can fix upon no external cause for which to continue living. While such a mode of being appears antithetical to the myth of the “People’s War”, writers such as Anna Kavan and Patrick Hamilton capture the experience of the outsider as one manifest most acutely during such periods of enforced proximity. Furthermore, the sudden dissipation of war’s communal purpose that heralds the era known as “post-war” may manifest in a period of exceptionally weak social bonding, as is expressed in Stevie Smith’s *The Holiday*. In contrast with egoistic suicide’s origins in the weakening of collective bonds, altruistic suicide arises from a surfeit of social integration, resulting in the subject’s total absorption into the group to the point that he is stripped of individuation and autonomous desire. Durkheim traces such dynamics of socially mandated suicide to primitive ritualistic customs such as the practice of suttee, but observes remnants of the phenomenon in the militaristic imagination that espouses mortal self-abnegation as the highest of all virtues. Fatalistic suicide, a form that Durkheim views as archaic and largely inconsequential within discourses of modernity, relates to the condition of living in an oppressively hyper-regulated society. It is linked to the experience of slavery, political tyranny and medical diagnoses that cause the

patient to relinquish personal agency to external forces. Durkheim devotes no more than a footnote to the elaboration of this form of suicide and subsequent sociological critics have afforded it similarly scant attention, occasionally ignoring it entirely. My chapter on crime fiction of the 1940s stresses it nonetheless, and shows how this form may operate through the literary imagination of a wartime and post-war populace that has learned to fatalistically apprehend violence as a foreclosed inevitability. Finally, anomic suicide is defined as a form that results from the loosening of social regulation and the attendant dissolution of the norms and expectations that define a person's social existence. It is associated with sharp economic fluctuations or rapid social reforms that disorient the subject and leave him without clearly defined horizons. The specific norms that Durkheim advocates in his foundational text amount largely to the policing of sexual morality, the exclusion of women from the public sphere insofar as is practicable, and the prohibition of divorce. In light of the unprecedentedly sharp rise in Britain's divorce rate seen in 1945, it is unsurprising that conversations about the effects of war's destabilisation of gender norms were a prominent feature of public discourse and the cautionary construction of suicide in popular culture. As may be expected, these four categories are in themselves a crude measure of a complex human phenomenon, and as Durkheim acknowledges, many suicides incorporate an element of hybridity across these typologies. The same conclusion naturally applies to the categorical groupings of the texts discussed here.

The Durkheimian construction of suicide accommodates a reading that is neither wholly personal nor reductive to the point that the suicidal body becomes the mere sum conglomeration of social forces, but rather sees voluntary death as "itself a new fact *sui generis*, with its own unity, individuality and consequently its own nature – a nature,

furthermore, dominantly social.”⁴⁹ In apportioning a large degree of culpability for suicidal behaviour to society itself, Durkheim presents a stark challenge to the accepted understanding of suicide as purely a matter of individual pathology. Since the publication of Jean Étienne Esquirol’s article on the subject in the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Medicales* in 1821, the secular formation of suicide knowledge had largely fallen under the jurisdiction of the medical profession, a fact which, as Hacking notes, mandated the right of doctors to “guard, control, treat and judge suicides.”⁵⁰ Despite this relocation of suicide from inner life to social existence, both medical and sociological discourses of suicide may be seen to produce in different ways an ambivalent portrait of personhood and agency. While the medical and psychiatric confinement of suicide to the dysfunction of a single mind constitutes a depoliticisation of the act by eroding the suicidal body’s capacity to signify anything beyond the immediately personal, Durkheim’s bestowal of suicidal meaning on cosmic social forces both external and incomprehensible to the suicidal actor proves similarly agency-denying. It is therefore necessary to recognise the latent duality of suicide in order to resolve this apparent contradiction in Durkheim’s allocation of suicide’s locus of meaning. As Broz and Münster write:

If a person is conceptualised as a unique individual and at the same time as a fluid individual, he or she is then easily conceivable as being and simultaneously not being the sole author of his or her death.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, xlv.

⁵⁰ Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 65.

⁵¹ Ludek Broz and Daniel Münster, “The Anthropology of Suicide: Ethnography and the Tension of Agency,” in *Suicide and Agency: Anthropological Perspectives on Self-Destruction, Personhood, and Power*, eds. Ludek Broz and Daniel Münster (London: Routledge, 2016), 16.

The unresolved nature of suicidal personhood is further complicated by a wartime discourse that presents suicide as a potentially understandable or even rational response to certain extreme conditions.

While Durkheim's declaration that "at each moment of its history ... each society has a definite aptitude for suicide" denotes the contingency of individual self-annihilation on concrete political and social factors,⁵² he implies here that the act is, in itself, a trans-historically and universally stable concept that apparently stands independent of culture or time. Given the stake-claiming innovativeness of his study and its primary objective in inaugurating and vindicating the sociological method, it is understandable that he should seek to avoid concessions to social constructionism or to the numerous competing truth formations of religion and epidemiology. Nonetheless, as Ian Hacking writes, "the meanings of suicide itself are so protean across time and space that it is not so clear that there is one thing, suicide."⁵³ It is thus a key aim of this study to ascertain not only *how* suicide is made to signify within the literature of the period in question but *what* it signifies in itself, how it is constituted and what elements make up the totality of its performance.

Durkheim's own definition of suicide, despite its aspirations towards concreteness and precision, cannot conceal the ultimate unknowability at the core of the act:

We may then say conclusively: the term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result. An attempt is an act thus defined but falling short of actual death.⁵⁴

⁵² Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, xlv.

⁵³ Ian Hacking, "The Suicide Weapon," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no.1 (2008): 1.

⁵⁴ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, xlii.

The question of intent proves the greatest obstacle to Durkhem's empirical project and proves to be an enduring mystery at the heart of any effort to anatomise or evaluate the phenomenon. As my earlier reference to George Simpson highlighted, The Second World War not only ignited an imaginative disposition towards suicidal fantasy, it provided the ideal context for shrouding, disguising and repackaging the suicidal impulse in a multiplicity of forms. This is shown in novels such as H.E. Bates' *The Purple Plain* (1945), in which the valiant recklessness of a bereaved fighter pilot is revealed to be a cover for his suicidal yearning to die in a manner that will spare his parents the shame and recrimination of a more transparent path to self-annihilation. Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) deepens this exploration into the ways in which the suicidal imagination is transfigured by foregrounding the utter unknowability of the heart of another. Such works embrace suicide as the supreme mystery that affirms mankind's individual loneliness. In placing the burden of suicidal meaning on the level of knowledge and, by implication, on the seriousness of the deceased's intent, Durkheim and the majority of theorists following in his wake rely on a source that is, by definition, absent. While his overall thesis is one of social causation, he is forced to appeal to the realm of individual subjectivity for his definition. In recognition of this conceptual instability, I draw at several points in this study on the theories of Ian Marsh and Katrina Jaworski. Jaworski, whose approach I shall introduce in practice in the section that follows, conceives of suicide as a performance whose genesis resides not primarily in the mind (as orthodox "intentional" constructions suggest) but in the embodied act itself.

There is admittedly some truth to Riley's assertion that "sociology and art have not spoken well to, or of, one another over the years, and sociological efforts to speak

of art have frequently fallen into banality or worse.”⁵⁵ The decision to incorporate Durkheim’s study as part of my theoretical arsenal does not necessarily constitute a deliberate interdisciplinary *détente* in this regard. My central inclusion of a sociological perspective is indicative of my wish to convey, not exclusively the idea of suicide within 1940s Britain as a manifestation of individual inner trauma or of a symptom of societal malaise, but to form a bridge between both perspectives. Durkheim’s writings on suicide and social causality are a cogent instrument for elaborating the ways in which suicide comes to act as a vehicle of the articulation of wartime and post-war disaffection, particularly with regard to the issues of societal regulation and integration.

Finally, before moving on to the second component of this introductory analysis, it is worth setting out how this broad (though by no means exhaustive) corpus of primary material was chosen. In my selection of primary texts I have given due attention to the problem of incorporating a range of literary registers with a view to highlighting the ubiquity of the suicide trope. I did not conceive of this project in the first instance as an endeavour in rescuing or recovering forgotten authors from obscurity, yet have found the shifts in trends and popularity to be revealing in themselves. In my final chapter, which is dedicated to the disorienting vicissitudes of shifting mores and expectations, I deliberately choose three authors whose considerable success and renown in the 1940s was followed by a swift fall from critical and commercial approval in the 1950s. Such a pursuit impressed upon me the value of abandoned voices in discerning the appearance of a fleeting *zeitgeist* that may either serve to exalt or diminish literary texts. My third chapter on detective genre fiction,

⁵⁵ Alexander Riley, “Introduction,” in *Durkheim, the Durkheimians and the Arts*, eds. A. Riley, W. Pickering and W. Miller (Oxford: Bergahn Books, 2013), 4. Here, Riley concedes that much of this *froideur* between both disciplines may be attributed to the earnest efforts of sociology’s founding practitioners to assert the scientific credentials of their method and that this residual strain of “lab coat envy” (2) persists in certain branches.

equally attempts to combine such dominant voices of the period as Agatha Christie and J.B. Priestley with less stereotypically crime-oriented personae such as Georgette Heyer. Additionally, while literary analysis is the unquestionable centre of this study, the influence of cinema has proved impossible to completely exclude in light of its role in transmitting the suicidal tropes discussed to a mass audience and its considerable influence over the literary realm. Although the only comprehensive critical and historical study of suicide on film, Stack and Bowman's *Suicide Movies: Social Patterns*, is almost exclusively centred on the American experience, I have found the Durkheim-inflected approach deployed within the text a useful guide to assessing patterns of suicide in relation to militarism and gender in British cinema.

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Reading the Suicidal Body: An Analysis of William Plomer and Evelyn Waugh.

Suicide may itself, as Margaret Higonnet writes, be perceived as an act of literary creation. Higonnet states that

suicide provokes narrative, both a narrative inscribed by the actor as subject, and those stories devised around the suicide as enigmatic object of interpretation. For the gesture of self-destruction makes a person into both subject and object of the action.⁵⁶

Higonnet's reading of the self-destructive act as a collaborative process between the deceased and the multitude of personal, legal, medical and social forces that retroactively assign or withhold meaning from the subject not only implicates more readily accepted forms of self-slaughter rooted in alienation or isolation but, as my

⁵⁶ Margaret Higonnet, "Frames of Female Suicide," *Studies in the Novel* 32, no.2 (2000): 229/230.

second chapter shall illustrate, also lays bare the processes through which heroic death and martyrdom are discursively produced. An often erased or neglected component of the cultural fashioning of these forms of death is the corporeality of suicide, an element that becomes integral to the suicide writing of the 1940s. Elaine Scarry identifies war as “the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate.”⁵⁷ In war, bodies are hardened, fragmented, targeted, concealed, obliterated and surgically reassembled. In the Second World War, this embodied flux was not confined to the active combatant. “The target of the bombardment was the individual corporeality,” notes Jörg Friedrich, writing within the context of the German experience of aerial warfare, adding “the war was not fought, it was absorbed.”⁵⁸ This notion of war’s permeation of the physical body via the psyche has provided for some historical analysts, an answer to the question of the previous section as to why there were so few reported cases of war neurosis during the Battle of Britain. Edgar Jones, for example, has argued that the psychological scars of the Second World War were manifested primarily through the body, citing the notable increase in cases of peptic ulcer during the 1940s as evidence of this.⁵⁹

But if this is indeed a war whose effects were physically absorbed, to what extent is the suicidal body subjected to the imaginative and truth forming practices that this implies? Furthermore, how is the self-injuring act of voluntary death configured within an arena whose “main purpose and outcome” as Scarry writes, “is injuring?”⁶⁰ In anticipation of a sustained consideration of these questions over the course of the

⁵⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 71.

⁵⁸ Jörg Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945*, translated by Allison Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 44.

⁵⁹ Edgar Jones, “The gut war’: Functional somatic disorders in the UK during the Second World War,” *History of the Human Sciences* 25, no. 5 (2012), accessed 19/06/2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5130149/>.

⁶⁰ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 63.

subsequent chapters, I shall elaborate the construction of the suicidal body within the context of two examples of war poetry by William Plomer and a post-war novella by Evelyn Waugh. Waugh, a novelist identified by Jennifer Sijnja as being peculiarly amenable to a Durkheimian frame of analysis,⁶¹ presents his suicidal figures chiefly as victims of external social forces. This is true of both suicides in *The Loved One*: the first, Sir Francis Hinsley's death by hanging is a straightforward reaction to the experience of exile and social isolation that conforms to the Durkheimian construct of egoistic suicide. The second, that of the young mortician Aimée Thanatogenos, is presented somewhat more ambivalently in relation to the broader social order, but within that framework sits comfortably within Durkheim's original formulation, which "situates men as possessing and women as lacking agency and rationality in the gendering of suicide."⁶² In his treatment of the suicidal body, however, Waugh indulges in a mischievous, almost carnivalesque upending of the rites and rituals of mourning and commemoration.

As a radically embodying event, war makes it increasingly difficult to deny suicide's corporeality. Constructions of suicide that frame the phenomenon within the context of motivation and intent often position suicide as a disembodied outcome of purely mental processes, ignoring the physical activity required to make manifest the self-destructive impulse. Such readings repress the mechanisms through which, as Grosz writes, the body is "marked, transformed and written upon" creating "an interior, an underlying depth" that indelibly proclaims the suicidal intent.⁶³

⁶¹ Jennifer Sijnja, "'Unfit for Consideration': The Meaning of Suicide in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*," *Evelyn Waugh Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015), 2.

⁶² Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide: Knowledge Production, Theory and Suicidology* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 57.

⁶³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), 33-34.

In “The Prisoner” , the male protagonist’s fragmented wartime existence precipitates a bitter schism between body and mind where the only prospect of an inner reconciliation lies in the destruction of both. During his early years in Japan, Plomer developed a fascination with socially mandated modes of suicide and the operations of such structures within the context of family honour, a subject he explored in his early collection of stories, *Paper Houses* (1929). His meditations on the subject took on yet a more directly personal quality in 1941 when he lost two friends to suicide: Virginia Woolf (his publisher at the Hogarth Press) and Anthony Butts. Butts, Plomer’s close companion, had been living in a nursing home while undergoing treatment for cancer. As the casualties of the Blitz gave rise to an ever increasing demand for hospital beds, he perceived it as his duty to remove himself from the system by ending his life. In May 1941, he threw himself from the fourth floor of a London hotel room, having addressed a suicide note to Plomer. The trauma of this loss found voice in several of Plomer’s works of the 1940s and 1950s, the first of which was the privately published poem written in October 1941, “In A Bombed House: An Elegy in Memory of Anthony Butts.”⁶⁴ While this tribute largely takes the form of a commemoration of his friend’s life, Plomer presents Butts’ final act as a triumph of spirit over body proving that “the soul is something separate after all.”⁶⁵ While Plomer, aged thirty-seven, composed “The Prisoner” a year before Butt’s suicide, this thematic fixation on the nobility of a self-destruction that casts the “body like a glove at panzer Fate” is in evidence (perhaps because Butts was reported to have spoken often of his intention to commit suicide in advance of the deed). Plomer wrote the poem while serving in a bureaucratic position between the “four walls of Roman thickness” of the Admiralty office, a situation which,

⁶⁴ Peter F. Alexander, *William Plomer: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 236.

⁶⁵ William Plomer, “In a Bombed House: An Elegy in Memory of Anthony Butts,” *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1960), 92. All subsequent references to the poem are from this edition.

though intermittently rewarding, proved creatively stifling and physically constricting. In an unpublished letter to John Lehmann, he wrote that he felt himself “virtually a prisoner. So far as lust and literature are considered, I am really a sort of Unexploded Bomb.”⁶⁶

“The Prisoner” is a poem that details, among other challenges, the pain of possessing political understanding without political agency amid a culture of death and killing. Plomer constructs the body as a repository of war’s authentic experiences, a document on which the privations and wounds of conflict are indelibly inscribed; it is, however, simultaneously forced to bear the corruptions and distortions that war inflicts upon language and meaning, thereby acting as a traitor unto itself. The poem opens with the body as an unwilling receptacle of such travesties of authentic feeling:

Every morning the prisoner hears
 Calls to action and words of warning
 They fall not on deaf but indifferent ears.

Free speech, fresh air are denied him now,
 Are not for one who is growing thin
 Between four walls of Roman thickness.
 From his cell he sees the meetings begin,
 The vehement look on the orator’s brow
 And the listeners warped by want and sickness.⁶⁷

The eponymous protagonist is shown to be alienated from his own body, or, more appositely, he is imprisoned within a politically inscribed body, which as a component

⁶⁶ William Plomer, “Unpublished Letter, 28th October 1940,” Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas, Austin. Quoted in Peter. F. Alexander, *William Plomer: A Biography*, 234.

⁶⁷ William Plomer, “The Prisoner,” *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1960), 88. All references to the poem are from this edition.

of the collective wartime body is condemned to perform the role of the stoic patriot. His is a body whose “indifferent ears” must assimilate and heed the propagandistic mutations of his lived experience, and a body whose voice he must mobilise to exude an optimism and vigour that runs contrary to the anxiety and pain he bears. The equation of the act of speech with that of breathing in the second stanza highlights the war’s practice of embodying not only mental anxiety but the intellect and its aspirations (indeed he can be seen to return the concept of “inspiration” to its etymological Late Latin root “to breathe” by demonstrating how the regimentation of both yields equivalent life-denying effects). The vividly imagined penitentiary of wartime existence, one that encases the body within a cell of “Roman thickness” evokes a sense of monastic religiosity, in which the devout listeners “warped by want and sickness” embrace a mortification of the flesh in hopes of salvation or curative intercession. Plomer, a man who throughout his life underwent fitful periods of devotion to and estrangement from the Anglicanism of his upbringing, channels his desire for bodily transcendence through the imagery of Christian martyrdom. The theme is carried forward into the next stanza, which emphasises the dual concepts of voluntary death and the promise of new life within Christianity:

... Trembling he awaits the ever-fruitful night
 For then dreams many-formed appear
 Teeming with truths that public lips ignore ...
 ... And words no orator utters are said
 Such as the wind through mouths of ivy forms
 Or snails with silver write upon the dead
 Bark of an ilex after April storms.

The dreamscape is saturated with imagery of Christian self-sacrifice, combined with a suspicion of the liability of public discourse to betray the dead. His dream of “words no orator utters” indicates, not only the unbridling of private thought but the ultimate fantasy of disembodied thought and speech.⁶⁸ It is only through death that such a capacity to “speak” may be achieved and it is the example of the Christian martyr, evoked through imagery of holly and ivy (ilex) that provides the citational touchstone through which this public/private yearning for destruction is made expressible. The opportunity to escape the body’s treachery is, however, only a fleeting one. After the “April storms” of the Easter crucifixion, it is the Judas Iscariot-like “snails with silver” who inscribe upon the bodies of the dead a narrative built on convenient falsehood and simplification.

Such a troubled awareness of the post-mortem vulnerability of the wartime body to overarching truth formations is also evident in Keith Douglas’s poem of Spring 1940, “Simplify Me When I’m Dead”. Unlike Douglas, however, Plomer refuses to engage with the horror of the abject corpse, escaping instead into an iambic pentameter that juxtaposes the defined realm of public death with the hazy private fantasies of liberation from the body, whose line endings become increasingly metrically chaotic until the final surrender to death:

While flights of bombers streak his patch of sky,
 While speakers rant and save the world with books,
 While at the front the first battalions die,
 Over the edge of thought itself he looks,
 Tiptoe along a knife-edge he slowly travels,

⁶⁸ This imaginative impetus towards the extraction of consciousness from the body proved a key literary legacy of the Second World War whose influence may be seen in works such as Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable* (1953). Such fantasies of disembodiment also inform the literary construction of the military flyer, as shall be discussed in Chapter Two.

Hears the storm roaring, the serpent hiss,
 And the frail rope he hangs by, twisting, unravels,
 As he steps so lightly over the abyss.

This final stanza omits entirely the physical consequences of suicide, ending at the moment the protagonist surrenders both mind and body to oblivion.

In “The Prisoner”, we can identify a heroically-portrayed spiritual struggle for liberation from the war-fashioned body and its absorbed anxieties. At the core of this struggle lies the paradox of suicidal agency articulated by Anne Nesbet. Nesbet writes of the textual dimension of suicide whereby the act may be regarded as a work of defiant self-authorship, which also inescapably “relinquishes all future control over everything, including future interpretations of his or her life-as-text.”⁶⁹ Despite the efforts of the poetic voice to repress such anxieties, confining them to the dream-consciousness of the suicidal actor and truncating its representation of the suicidal act to exclude the corporeal implications of self-destruction in favour of a purely cerebral presentation, the liberation achieved is only partial.

Notwithstanding its latent concerns surrounding the posthumous requisitioning of identity, “The Prisoner” is a poem that approaches suicide as an entity firmly entwined with the ordeal of human consciousness and its compulsion towards bringing about its own cessation. The corporeal dimension, while present, is represented as subordinate to the suicidal intention that drives the act itself. In contrast, Plomer’s darkly comic ballad, “Mews Flat Mona: A Memory of the Twenties”, foregrounds the embodied experiences both of war and of self-destruction. The extent to which this sharp contrast may be attributed to a broader tendency towards the gendering of suicide, particularly within the context of the 1940s, shall be explored here, and indeed the

⁶⁹ Anne Nesbet, “Suicide as Literary Fact in the 1920s,” *Slavic Review* 50, no.4 (1991), 827.

distinctive dialectic of female suicide that evolved during the war and post-war years forms the basis of Chapter Four of this thesis. More generally, however, suicide features within this poem as a fantastical release of the embodied anxieties of war to the point that the self-destructive actor is briefly transformed into the destructive entity she fears above all else – an airborne bomb. As with previous examples, this anxiety is presented as a temporally omniscient force that contaminates the past as well as the present and future. While Plomer does not dwell on the intent behind the heroine's suicidal act (focusing instead on the performativity of the action), he structures each stanza as a stark juxtaposition between the glamorous *then* of Mona's hedonistic existence as a "Bright Young Thing" of the 1920s and the intolerable *now* of war in all its privation, boredom and terror.

"Mews Flat Mona" stands alongside several of Plomer's literary ballads of the 1940s including "The Dorking Thigh", "A Self-Made Blonde" and "The Naiad of Ostend" that derive macabre glee from setting the violent deaths of young, attractive female protagonists against a jaunty meter and glib tone. Plomer defended the ghoulish sadism of such works by suggesting that "they reflect an age for which unpleasant would be a very mild term ... No more is being done than to offer instances of how men and women behave, or might easily behave, in or near our own lifetime."⁷⁰ While Plomer's literary proclivity in this regard may be attributed to his own personal struggles between masculine and feminine elements within his nature and sexuality, as his biographer Peter F. Alexander speculates, increasingly violent punishments meted out to literary embodiments of wayward or transgressive femininity may be observed across a range of writing of the period, including the best-selling novel of the war, a

⁷⁰ William Plomer, *Double Lives: An Autobiography* (Jonathan Cape: London, 1943), 383.

lurid pot-boiler *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (in which the eponymous heroine is subjected to abduction, rape and brainwashing before, herself, committing suicide).⁷¹

The tenor of the narration is deceptively equivocal, simultaneously suggesting that the work be approached as a grotesque cautionary tale of unchecked female desire and as a wistful fantasia of emancipation through death. Each stanza juxtaposes the lurid glamour of the past with the terror and drudgery of the London Blitz, ending with an italicised apostrophising of the heroine in, what may be read as a note of stoic superiority or yearning sympathy. By way of example, the opening stanza introduces the heroine thus:

She flourished in the ‘Twenties, ‘hectic’ days of Peace,
 ‘Twas good to be alive then, and to be a Baronet’s Niece
 Oh Mona! it’s not so good now!⁷²

The “*Oh Mona!*” refrain that rounds off each stanza serves in each case to emphasise the stripping away of each component of a generational archetype until nothing of it remains. As the poem progresses, Mona is divested of her luxurious existence by the privations of rationing, robbed of sexual and social mystique by the normless vacuum of war and utterly negated by each stanza’s affirmation that the world from which she has been fashioned has ceased to exist. As the thirteenth stanza, which ends, “*Oh Mona! You’re blacked out now!*” implies, she is not merely a victim of the blackouts and air raids, she has in fact been erased by them.

The penultimate stanza reads:

She stepped from the top of an Oxford street store;

⁷¹ Peter F. Alexander, *William Plomer: A Biography*, 225. My third and fourth chapters examine further this upsurge in literary representations of violent retribution (whether self-administered or externally inflicted) against women, particularly within the context of those post-war discourses which sought to re-establish a domestic pre-war model of femininity.

⁷² William Plomer, “Mews Flat Mona: A Memory of the Twenties,” *Selected Poems* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1946). All subsequent references are from this edition.

She might well have waited a split second more
 For she fell like a bomb on an elderly curate
 And his life was over before he could insure it
 Oh Mona! You're exploded now!

While Plomer's poem adopts the surface elements of a moralising narrative of punished female transgression, its representation of the suicide at its close transforms it into a work of suicidal self-fashioning. Mona's death resonates with Partridge's conceptual coalescing of suicide and safety as she becomes the very life-denying force that has thwarts her by falling "like a bomb" and thereby regaining the power to transcend and transgress societal and ecclesiastical boundaries (in the latter case literally).

"The Prisoner" omits entirely the physical consequences of suicide and, indeed, its performative nature, presenting the suicidal act instead as an outright rejection of performance whose essential execution unfolds when the mind ventures "over the edge of thought itself" and into oblivion. In contrast with the droll commentary he offers on the physiognomy of Mona's splattered mortal remains ("they found a big heart but no vestige of brains"), the male prisoner is suspended in time at the poem's denouement "as he steps so lightly over the abyss." Allowing even for the divergence in poetic modes here, the elision of the physicality of suicide in the latter poem and the sheer revelry in gory detail of the former resonates with broader gendered discourses of suicide outlined by Jaworski, who observes that suicidal discourse is conditioned "by the assumption that what it means to be a man materialises through the mind and what it means to be a woman materialises through the body."⁷³ Thus, while Mona's poetic sorcery transforms her into a bomb at the moment of self-destruction, her suicide does not bring her beyond the bounds of the physical. Whereas all consciousness and

⁷³ Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide*, 58.

subjectivity ends with The Prisoner's final step into eternity, Mona must defer to a coronial chorus to provide the final verdict (*Oh, Mona! that accounts for you now!*)

Despite their common thematic concern, these poems by William Plomer vary sharply in their identifications of suicidal impetus and agency. Allowing even for their tonal and stylistic difference a comparative analysis of both works highlights the divergent language of embodiment Plomer deploys between the cases of the earnest and cerebral male suicide in which the body is imagined to be absent, and the shallow, flighty Mona's corporeal detonation. Despite the sardonicism endemic in the portrayal of his heroine, it is worth noting that she attains, albeit grotesquely, the longed for transcendence of her body's societal and physical limitations in being transformed by her act. Taken together, these poems provide an insight into suicide's figurative capacity to articulate the opposing positions of men and women in relation to the public sphere. "Voluntary death" for the prisoner takes the form of a withdrawal from his place in the public sphere in an act that sees him renounce the hypocrisies and inhibitions imposed on him by his professional wartime existence. Mona's death, on the other hand, takes the form of a violent intrusion into the masculine public sphere in a suicide that proves literally and figuratively shattering. Both works exhibit an awareness of the dual nature of suicide as an act with both public and private face, that sets in motion a complex dynamic of empowerment and surrender that is inseparable from the overarching political discourses of war and violence. Plomer was to offer his most heartfelt meditation on the nobility of suicide in the 1941 poem, "In A Bombed House: An Elegy in Memory of Anthony Butts." Despite the more emphatically public purpose of this work as a conduit for public mourning, the poem shares with "The Prisoner" and "Mews Flat Mona" a marked preoccupation with suicide's provenance, locating the act at the centre of a battle between experiences of embodiment and

disembodiment. This is a theme that shall recur throughout this thesis, particularly within the militaristic context of my second chapter.

If suicide is indeed, as Higonnet and Nesbet have attested, a radical form of self-authorship, then it follows that any incursion by living agents claiming to speak for the dead or to hold explanatory knowledge of the act constitutes a form of plagiarism. This line of argument unfolds throughout Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*, a novel in which the concealment and remaking of the suicidal body is of central thematic and narrative importance. The protagonist, Dennis Barlow, is a young English poet living in Los Angeles, who gleefully plunders from the literary canon of his homeland to woo American clients and a prospective sweetheart. Over the course of the novel, this appetite for appropriation extends to the suicidal bodies of his own deceased "loved ones". These he remakes in an aesthetic image that will serve to consolidate his literary reputation at home, transforming the fleshy materiality of suicide into "the artist's load, a great, shapeless chunk of experience; bearing it home to his ancient and comfortless shore; to work on it hard and long, for God knew how long."⁷⁴ The world of the novella, meanwhile, casts the human body as an infinitely malleable artefact that bends to the commercial and artistic whims of two cultures unbounded by the archaic inhibitions of fidelity, nationhood or sacredness.

Oh his return from a trip to America to negotiate a possible film adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh expressed to Nancy Mitford (to whom *The Loved One* is dedicated) his unease with what he perceived to be the American capitalist psyche's denial of the cosmic and material implications of death. "What is unique and deplorable," he wrote, is "the theological vacuum, the assumption that the purpose of a

⁷⁴ Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One: An Anglo-American Tragedy* (London: Penguin Classics, 2011), 148-149.

funeral service is to console the bereaved not to pray for the soul of the dead".⁷⁵ It is this discomfort with the capacity of the living to craft the identity and persona of the deceased without regard for any sense of immutable truth or collective mortality that informs much of the novel's dark satire. While much critical attention has been directed at Waugh's acerbic portrayal of the American sanitisation of death and its connotations of corporeal decay, far less emphasis has been placed on the unique status accorded to the suicidal body within this paradigm. The morticians working at the Whispering Glades funeral home are renowned for their skill at concealing and repackaging death, indeed the mortuary hostess boasts that even the victim of an atomic bomb would present no great challenge to their craftsmanship.⁷⁶ This implied allusion to the Allied nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki of 1945 is significant. It suggests that war and its civilian casualties are sufficiently flexible in their conceptual make-up as to be rendered "presentable" under the sentimental and commercial definition furnished by Whispering Glades; however, even more notable is the implication that the suicidal body offers complications that transcend all possibilities of physical reconstruction. This is partly because suicide, as Jaworski notes, is linguistically and culturally defined in such a way that "the body is *interpellated as absent* so that suicide becomes the property of the disembodied mind, filled with agency to do the body's deliberate taking."⁷⁷ What is required then is not merely a physical but a cultural reassembly in order to render the body and memory of Barlow's friend and mentor, Sir Francis Hinsley "presentable". It is not sufficient therefore to expunge the lethal signs of violence from the corpse; one must also transform the invisible marks of intent encoded

⁷⁵ Evelyn Waugh, *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Amory (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 592.

⁷⁶ Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One*, 42.

⁷⁷ Katrina Jaworski, "Suicide, Agency and the Limits of Power," in *Suicide and Agency: Anthropological Perspectives on Self-Destruction, Personhood, and Power*, eds. Ludek Broz and Daniel Münster, 185.

within the body. Jaworski observes that historical prohibitions on suicide generally incorporated some element of expulsion for the body itself, typically in the proscription or restriction of burial rites, writing that such seemingly futile punishments arose because of the body's existence as "an inscriptive, signifying surface on which suicide, as a material act, was rendered intelligible."⁷⁸

That Waugh assigns this task of reassembly to a war poet is, in itself, highly suggestive, though not, perhaps, surprising given that the problematic "absent presence" Jaworski describes is mediated and constructed through language. While serving as a wingless officer in Transport command, Barlow achieved distinction among his peers for his ability to cogently articulate something of his experience through poetry that, arising "among the buzz-bombs and the jaunty, deeply depressing publications of His Majesty's Stationery Office, achieved undesignedly something of the effect of the resistance Press of occupied Europe."⁷⁹ In this feat of loquacity, Barlow sets himself apart from his literary peers during a period that, in the view of several literary magazines, had been forsaken by the poetic imagination. Keith Douglas, writing in May 1943, attributed the paucity of a cohesive response to the war among poets (in comparison with the Great War) to a combination of anxiety of influence and anomic disorientation. He writes that

Those who wrote of war looked back to the last even when they spoke of the next, which was a boggy to frighten children and electors with: the poets who were still at the height of their fame before this war, who were accustomed to teach politics and even supposed themselves, and were supposed, versed in the horrors of the current struggles in Spain, were

⁷⁸ Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide*, 66.

⁷⁹ Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One*, 20.

curiously unable to react to a war which began and continued in such a disconcerting way.⁸⁰

Adam Piette suggests that this imaginative paralysis that blighted the efforts of many poets to engage with the shifting landscape of the 1940s may be attributed to a general disillusionment with the notion of the writer as an agent of political conscience in the wake of the Spanish Civil War and the Nazi-Soviet Pact. In the figure of Dennis Barlow, however, for whom such crises of conscience fail to resonate, poetry is divested of its political and moral complexity and reduced to a form of taxidermy. A charlatan and an opportunist, he is cast within the text as a European analogue of the American frontiersman, setting forth in conquest, not of land, but of “that zone of insecurity in the mind where none but the artist dare trespass.”⁸¹ His self-perception as being “of a generation which enjoys a vicarious intimacy with death” proves the source of both his strength and amorality; indeed, as one who spent the war “fretted almost to death” in his noncombatant capacity, he is clearly legible as one of the aforementioned figures of anxiety described by Lyndsey Stonebridge for whom the shock of violence fails to reverberate. Thus, when at last he is forced to confront death in the form of the hanging body of Sir Francis Hinsley, his discomfiture is minimal and he is capable of assimilating the event into his view of “the established order.”

Others in gentler ages had had their lives changed by such a revelation; to Dennis it was the kind of thing to be expected in the world he knew and, as he drove to Whispering Glades, his conscious mind was pleasantly exhilarated and full of curiosity.⁸²

⁸⁰ Keith Douglas, “‘Appendix B,’ Poets in this War,” in *The Letters*, ed. Desmond Graham (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), 350-353.

⁸¹ Evelyn Waugh *The Loved One*, 72.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 34.

Barlow is of a generation for whom death and violence are objects of abstract fascination. His ghoulish appropriation of the scarred corpses of war and of suicide for artistic purposes are evocative of the charge levelled at Alun Lewis during the war by one of his instructors in 1943: “You think the war exists for you to write books about it.”⁸³

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Throughout this thesis I maintain that rather than acting as a mirror image of the phenomenon *per se*, suicidal fantasy serves as a literary medium through which the experiences, anxieties and desires of war and post-war Britain find a voice. My research brings to light the multifaceted role of suicidal fantasy within the public and private literary imaginations of 1940s Britain. I define the dominant truths of suicide during this period and assess the manner in which literary discourses may be seen to either challenge such hegemonies or harness them towards a myriad of socially normative ends. I maintain, moreover, that these suicidal imaginative tropes serve to bridge the fragmented public and private imagination of wartime and post-war experience. War “waylays our fantasies about ourselves as agents of history and culture”,⁸⁴ revealing us instead to be precarious and vulnerable.

The chapter that follows addresses how the phenomenon of isolation and alienation amid the enforced communality of war (a theme already alluded to within the context of Plomer’s “The Prisoner”) is articulated within a suicidal frame of reference in the writing of Virginia Woolf and Stevie Smith.

⁸³ Alun Lewis, *In the Green Tree: The Letters and Short Stories of Alun Lewis* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2006), 53.

⁸⁴ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety*, 13.

Chapter I

Egoistic Suicide:

Rumpelstiltskin's Children

Coupled with the astonishing courage which surrounds us, the emotion that Amelia Earhart called "the lived loneliness of fear" is also a universal experience.¹

– Vera Brittain (1941).

In 1938, the poet and travel writer Henry Romilly Fedden protested what he considered the bourgeois view of suicide as an indelible blemish on the life of the suicidal actor. "There is," he wrote, "something very niggard, very middle-class, very conformist, in judging a life by its exodus."² Fedden's interdisciplinary opus, *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study* (1938), is among several inter-war scholarly endeavours dedicated to demystifying and de-stigmatising the phenomenon of suicide. Such studies, as Holly A. Laird has noted, greatly informed literary modernism's approach to the subject of death.³ While the inter-war publications of sociologists such as Albert Bayet strove both to diminish the public "horror" of suicide and to analyse the cultural provenance of the socially ingrained abhorrence of the phenomenon,⁴ modernist writers struggled, Laird argues, to transcend the bounds of either academic discourse or literary archetypes in

¹ Vera Brittain, *England's Hour* (London: Continuum Books, 2005), 143.

² Henry Romilly Fedden, *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study* (London: Peter Davies Ltd., 1938), 13.

³ In "Between the (Disciplinary) Acts: Modernist Suicidology," *Modernism/Modernity*, 18.3, 2011, pp.525-50, Laird writes that, while the academic field of Suicidology was nameless until the 1960s, it existed in the interwar years as an inter-discipline, incorporating elements of philosophical, legal, sociological and psychological scholarship. Modernist writers, Laird asserts, relied on such professional discourses of suicide in their representations of the phenomenon.

⁴ See, for example, Bayet's *Le Suicide et la Morale*. Paris: Alcan, 1922 and Louis I. Dublin and Bessie Bunzel's *To Be or Not to Be: A Study of Suicide* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas), 1933.

confronting the issue. Laird articulates the anomalous position of suicide for literary modernists thus:

Lacking voice, [suicide] seems also to lack origin – a seedless birth. As such, it has functioned as a wild vortex of manifold writings.

Reminiscent of Foucault’s repressive hypothesis, suicide’s taboo status did not make it a topic on which writers were silent. Rather, like some northern cultures’ names for snow, ways of speaking it proliferated.⁵

The quality of voiceless-ness that Laird identifies as inherent in suicide positions it as both a site of abundance for linguistic euphemism and symbolic representation, but also as an entity situated beyond the bounds of language. I argue in this chapter that suicide’s liminal positioning between silence and locution made it, for certain writers, a suitable intellectual medium for negotiating the anxiety and trauma of a war that, like the one that had preceded it, left men and women “not richer, but poorer in communicable experience”.⁶

⁵ *Ibid*, p.527.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *The Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (London: The John Hopkins University Press), 77. Further evidence of the pervasive self-conscious inarticulability of vast swathes of wartime experience is detectable in the title short story of Elizabeth Berridge’s collection, *Tell it to a Stranger* (1947). In the story, Mrs Hatfield feels a perverse elation upon returning to her London residence three years into the war to discover that it has been ransacked by thieves during an Air Raid. She excitedly makes the return train journey to the country guesthouse where she has been living out the war, knowing that her news of the robbery will not only cause a sensation among her friends but also provide a concrete talking point through which they can stake a claim to “authentic” war experience. “The war,” she reflects, “had at last affected them personally; they were no longer grouped outside it, they shared in the general lawlessness”. She never gets the opportunity, however, to regale them with her embellished grievance; upon arriving back at the Belvedere Guesthouse, she finds the building bombed to rubble and her friends presumed dead. Rather than give voice to the true personal horror of this loss, Mrs Hatton is stunned into incoherence, incapable of expressing more than a stilted complaint about the loss of her wine glasses. This displacement of catastrophic loss by small, specific itemised damages signifies a broader strategic evasiveness in the way war is assimilated and processed. Gill Plain identifies in the woman’s experience a coping mechanism resorted to by many during the war; “recognising the risk of acknowledging the meaning of the war – they choose to preserve their sanity through a refusal of the truth, describing their losses in tones reminiscent of the ironic detachment of the documentary realists.” In Gill Plain, “Women Writers and the War” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 174.

In contrast with Durkheim's more methodologically nuanced four typologies of suicide, Fedden's study posits a binary view that foregrounds the manner in which suicidal acts are socially interpreted. Fedden distils the phenomenon of suicide into actions that are mandated by society ("institutional suicides" typified by religious rites of self-destruction) and those which constitute a repudiation of or rebellion against the social order ("personal suicides" which tend to incur some degree of social stigma). This dualistic model is, Fedden acknowledges, somewhat undermined by the fluidity of its categories, particularly during times of heightened social consciousness such as war which tend to destabilise the societal principles upon which the moral positioning of self-destructive actions rests. He observes that

the line of demarcation between institutional and personal suicide is not always easy to draw, particularly as recognised forms of institutional suicide are always being modified to suit changing ideas. To-day, the duty of the civilian to take up arms for his country, and the utility of the institutional suicide demanded from the conscript begin to be questioned. A series of wars to end war makes certain people suspect that this form of institutional suicide may be no more reasonable than that involved in the Indian suttee. It may equally derive authority from a false chain of argument.⁷

Moreover, while Durkheimian theory indicates that suicide rates tend to fall during wartime owing to a resurgent sense of communal purpose among citizens, it may equally be noted that such occasions endow extra-institutional acts of self-destruction with an increased aura of social prohibition. Personal suicides conducted in an environment of normalised institutional self-sacrifice signify a more acute form of

⁷ *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study*, 18.

rebellion, since the suicidal actor may be seen as not only rejecting the society she inhabits, but also implicitly renouncing the code of stoicism and common purpose through which the concept of death is understood and mediated. The poet and novelist Stevie Smith offers an insight into how such a collapse between publicly and privately motivated actions in wartime influenced the individual's self-perception as an inescapably politicised agent both in life and death. In the 1939 essay, "Mosaic", Smith writes:

For when war has broken out there is no existence of a private peace; you fight for your country or, refusing to fight, you yet fight, and directly for the enemy. That is perhaps the ultimate most horrible demand of war; the State must have your conscience.⁸

Both Smith and Fedden identify war as a point of collapse between the personal and institutional dimensions of suicide which threatens the structural integrity of society's moral separation of the two versions of self-annihilation. In the second chapter, I revisit this point from the militaristic perspective to show how the language of suicide results in a depoliticised and highly individualised vision of the aerial combatant. The present focus is on the inverse point of view, exploring the ways in which personal suicide is magnified and politically charged through the discourses of war.

The distinction between suicide and heroic self-sacrifice rests, Fedden suggests, on the perceived worthiness of the cause for which the subject chooses to die. In 1934, Storm Jameson described war as "the collective suicide of nations" but by 1941 (by which time it had been revealed that 28,959 civilians had so far been killed in bombing raids and 40,166 seriously injured) she had largely recanted her pacifist standpoint and

⁸ Smith, Stevie. "Mosaic." *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (eds.) London: Virago, 1981, pp.105-107, p.107.

had come to regard residual anti-war sentiment among intellectuals as indicative of a contemptibly self-destructive disposition. Jameson's pamphlet, *The End of This War* (1941) excoriates the cowardice of such literary figures as W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood who had escaped the fear and hardship of the Blitzkrieg by escaping to America.⁹ More vehement still, however, was the shift in her attitude towards her former friend and fellow-pacifist, Vera Brittain. In a letter from 1941, Jameson unreservedly deplores Brittain's moroseness and self-indulgence in the face of national adversity, complaining that

she is always talking about suicide now, and comes in from her lonely walks having sobbed her way round the lanes. I truly think she is what the people so usefully call 'mental'. I think she is almost despicable and yet has a kind of blindworm honesty, and is pathetic. And – this is something you would do, too – I recognise in her form of despicableness all my own worse faults.¹⁰

Brittain's suicidality is both comprehensible and utterly repugnant to Jameson, representing as it does a dangerously individualistic affront to the hegemonic imperative of national solidarity and the unwelcome exposure of a repressed facet of her own psyche.¹¹

⁹ While Auden's decision to remain in New York after the outbreak of war was excoriated by Evelyn Waugh among others as an act of desertion, such charges ignore the poet's actual involvement with Allied war effort. Auden wrote to the British embassy in Washington in 1939 indicating his willingness to return if required for war work. He was drafted by the United States army in 1942 but was rejected on medical grounds. He served in Germany in 1945 with the Morale Division of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey.

¹⁰ Quoted in Jennifer Burkett, *Margaret Storm Jameson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 198.

¹¹ Brittain's suicidal obsession is arguably rooted in her own unresolved familial issues originating in the First World War. In 1934, she received a communication from Colonel Hudson, the former commanding officer of her brother Edward (whose bravery in battle she had immortalised in *Testament of Youth* (1933)). Hudson informed Vera that the day before his death in combat her brother had discovered that he faced a court martial for involvement in homosexual activity. This disclosure raised the possibility that Edward had deliberately courted death to avoid an inevitable public disgrace. A year later, Brittain's father, who had himself never fully processed his son's death, committed suicide by drowning. See Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life* (London: Virago, 2001), 128-135.

Personal suicide, as defined by Fedden, “is a conscious revolt, a protest against either life or society; it is the most extreme act of individualism of which a man is capable.”¹² While virtually identical to Durkheim’s model of egoistic suicide, it differs subtly in emphasis; while Fedden focuses on the subject’s conscious rejection of society being manifested in self-annihilation, Durkheim’s view is fixed on suicide as an expression of the subject’s own feelings of exclusion from and rejection by a society that has failed to provide spiritual or interpersonal nourishment. Durkheim writes:

When, therefore, we have no other object than ourselves, we cannot avoid the thought that our efforts will finally end in nothingness, since we ourselves disappear. But annihilation terrifies us. Under these conditions, one would lose courage to live, that is, to act and struggle, since nothing will remain of our exertions. The state of egoism, in other words is supposed to be contradictory to human nature and, consequently, too uncertain to have chances of permanence.¹³

In certain circumstances (as my third chapter’s analysis of J.B. Priestley’s deployment of the suicide trope as a prophetic instrument in *An Inspector Calls* (1945) will discuss) such an extreme abnegation may be harnessed as a tool of social criticism, whereby the suicidal individual passes judgement on the society that has wronged her. In the midst of the most destructive period of the Battle of Britain, however, suicide was increasingly legible in the public psyche as a badge of anti-patriotic laxity or subversion, particularly when it arose among an already suspect intellectual class. The case of Virginia Woolf’s death and its aftermath is particularly illustrative suicide’s of

¹² *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study*, p.27.

¹³ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 169.

cultural capacity to bolster pre-existing biases and suspicions in wartime and is thus worthy of some consideration here.

Fedden's exhortation that suicide should not be made the defining act of an individual's life is pertinent to contemporary critical debates on the extent to which an author's death by suicide influences the reception of her work;¹⁴ however, by 1941, such considerations had been decisively over-ridden by the political hegemonies of war. The most vivid example of this can be seen in the unfolding developments in newspaper media following the news of Virginia Woolf's suicide by drowning. Sybil Oldfield, in her introduction to *Afterwords: Letters on the Death of Virginia Woolf* (2005) describes the climate of Anti-Bloomsbury sentiment in which news of the author's death by suicide on 28th March 1941 was received. In the weeks and months prior to Woolf's death by drowning in the River Ouse, publications such as Lord Elton's *Notebook in Wartime* (1941) had lambasted London's intelligentsia for its betrayal of "the [courage], unselfishness, discipline [and] endurance [of] the common man."¹⁵ An editorial in *The Times* on Tuesday 25th March 1941 endorsed Elton's opinion and celebrated the likelihood that

¹⁴ In her analysis of the writings of Woolf alongside those of Eleanor Marx, Sarah Kane, and Sylvia Plath, Olgaokan Okan notes the distinctly gendered framing of works by female writers whose lives ended by suicide. In the case of Woolf, she identifies an exception to Jaworski's theory of suicide as an act whose discursive construction is rooted in the body, noting that speculations and interpellations of the author had commenced prior to her body's recovery: "Woolf's suicide was thus already inscribed on the surfaces of her body despite its absence. In contrast to Jaworski's argument that the discovery of the body is necessary for the gendering of suicide, Woolf's case shows that the assumed presence of the body, when read together with other necessary citational gestures (such as writing a suicide note), had already initiated the process of gendering." One explanation not explored within her thesis is that the specific context of Woolf's death at the height of the Blitz, a time of acute collective awareness of corporeal vulnerability may have disrupted the archetypal understandings of embodied agency (or indeed supplemented the need for the physical presence of a body). See Olgaokan Okan, "Narrative Constructions of Female Identity After Suicide," (Phd Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2015), 104.

¹⁵ Lord Elton. *Notebook in Wartime* (London, Collins, 1941).

at least [this war] can hardly give rise to arts unintelligible outside a Bloomsbury drawing-room and completely at variance with those stoic virtues which the whole nation is now called upon to practice.¹⁶

Within this context of heavy wartime losses and popular antipathy towards aloof intellectuals, those who sought ammunition to corroborate the narrative of that demographic's innate lack of Elton's aforementioned common virtues, found it readily supplied by Virginia Woolf's suicide. In that particular instance, matters were exacerbated by the misquoting of her suicide note in *The Sunday Times* to the effect that it appeared her suicide was exclusively born of an incapacity to face the struggles and deprivations of the Battle of Britain (rather than her dread of her own impending mental deterioration, as was actually the stated case).¹⁷ For this apparent unwillingness to rise to the collective imperative of national morale, Woolf was denounced by Mrs Kathleen Hicks, wife of the Bishop of Lincoln in *The Sunday Times* of 27th April 1941. Hicks declared that any misplaced sympathy shown for Woolf's sensitivity of mind

belittles those who are hiding their agony of mind, suffering bravely and carrying on unselfishly for the sake of others. Many people, possibly even more 'sensitive', have lost their all and seen appalling happenings, yet they take their part nobly in this fight for God against the Devil.

Where are our ideals of love and faith? And where shall we all be if we listen to and sympathise with this sort of 'I cannot carry on'.¹⁸

¹⁶ "Eclipse of the Highbrow," *The Times*, March 25, 1941, 5.

¹⁷ While Woolf's *de facto* note began: "I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times," *The Sunday Times*' report on the coroner's inquest incorrectly printed the message as: "I have the feeling that I shall go mad and cannot go on any longer in these terrible times," making her appear, as Oldfield writes "like a feeble defeatist, deserting Britain's crucial struggle against Hitler – the very Battle of Britain". In Sybil Oldfield, *Afterwords: Letters on the Death of Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), xix.

¹⁸ Kathleen Hicks, Letters Page, *The Sunday Times*, April 27, 1941.

While this episode is rooted in a fundamental misreading of Woolf's action and her note explaining its motivations, it nonetheless demonstrates the politically charged nature of an act as fundamentally individualistic as suicide within the context of the national self-image of solidarity and stoicism, while corroborating Stevie Smith's conception of wartime as the supplanting of "private peace" by an inescapable public binary of loyalty and sedition.¹⁹ Even among those sympathetic to Woolf's pain and struggle, there was difficulty reading her ultimate demise in isolation from this political context. Ignoring the prominent role of suicidal ideation as a psychological and philosophical force in her life and writing, Lord David Cecil's epitaph codes Woolf as a passive victim of cruel historical forces. "And now war has killed her as it loves to kill what is precious and irreplaceable," he writes, transplanting all violent agency onto a personified Mars figure.²⁰

Stevie Smith is to be counted among the dissenting voices in this regard to this double bind (albeit one too marginalised from the modernist centre-ground to incite the same level of public opprobrium as a member of the Bloomsbury milieu). Smith's response to Woolf's demise was notably removed from the political and personal discourse playing out in national newspapers, as was her conclusion that the author was "just generally fed up all round I suppose."²¹ Such a relatively impassive reaction may be read as a refusal on Smith's part to engage in the polarised discourses that the death

¹⁹ I do not intend here to entirely dissociate Woolf's suicide from its wartime context or to perpetuate a biographical reading that "evacuates her life of political intelligence or social acumen", a charge Hermione Lee levelled against current popular imaginings of the author, in particular Nicole Kidman's portrayal in the 2002 Stephen Daldry film, *The Hours* (which almost entirely expunged the war from its account of Woolf's final weeks). It is, however, interesting to note the radical shift from a 1940s interpretive context which rendered Woolf's death as inextricable from the public crisis of war to a contemporary popular image that is almost entirely insulated from these concerns. See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 55

²⁰ Lord David Cecil, "A Note on Virginia Woolf," *Time and Tide*, May 17, 1941, 396.

²¹ Stevie Smith, *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, eds. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1981) 277.

had attracted or, alternatively, as a pithy articulation of empathy from one for whom the suicidal imagination had long exerted a potent agency.

Far from presenting suicide in apologetic terms, in her novel, *The Holiday* (1949), Smith puts forth a humanistic valorisation of mankind's capacity to evade suffering through death, while subverting the orthodoxies of Blitz-mythology.²² Celia Phoze, the novel's melancholic narrator, eschews the popular veneration of stoicism by presenting an alternative version of heroism rooted in self-determination:

People say people were heroic in the raids. They were certainly good humoured and plucky and uncomplaining, but is it heroism to endure the unavoidable? Is not heroism rather to seek an end through danger? There was no end thought of or sought.²³

This verbalisation of suicide's capacity to restore agency to the powerless resonates with Gandhi's pronouncement, recorded in George Orwell's 1949 "Reflections", that German Jews ought to have committed collective suicide, thereby enacting a profound rebuke which "would have aroused the world and the people of Germany to Hitler's violence."²⁴ Whether Smith shared her friend, George Orwell's pragmatic respect for the kind of reasoning advocated in this recommendation or if she truly believed in suicide as the ultimate individualistic antithesis to fascism's oppressive regimentation

²² The sacredness of the myth of unfailing British stoicism and the consequent dangers of disrupting such an orthodoxy is exemplified in the production history of Rodney Ackland's play, *The Pink Room*, which attempted a similarly revisionist reappraisal of London drinking life towards the end of the war. Despite the financial backing of Terence Rattigan and the direction of Frith Banbury, the hedonistic vision (described by the influential theatre manager Binkie Beaumont as "a libel on the British people") incurred widespread critical and public antipathy. The debacle virtually ended Ackland's playwriting career until *The Pink Room* resurfaced in revised form in the 1980s as *Absolute Hell*. See. Nicholas Dromgoole, "Introduction," *Absolute Hell* (London: Oberon, 2010), 10.

²³ Stevie Smith, *The Holiday* (London: Virago, 1979), 92. All subsequent in-text references are from this edition.

²⁴ Orwell asserts that "after the war he justified himself: the Jews had been killed anyway, and might as well have died significantly." Quoted in George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Volume IV (1945-1950)*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Limited, 1968), 468.

of the human spirit remains typically opaque. Smith's career as a poet and novelist is replete with mythology and imagery casting suicide in an empowering aspect. In a 1965 interview, she traced this imaginative trend to her experiences as a child suffering from tubercular peritonitis, remarking that:

I actually thought of suicide for the first time when I was eight. The thought cheered me up wonderfully and quite saved my life. For if one can remove oneself at any time from the world, why particularly now?²⁵

The ensuing analysis of Stevie Smith and Virginia Woolf's final novels, *The Holiday* (1948) and *Between the Acts* (1941) will examine how both works explore this tendency to turn in towards the self as a result of the traumas and pressures of a failing society. These texts offer a counter-narrative to the Durkheimian suggestion that the enhanced social cohesion attendant on wartime hegemony eliminates the individualised suicidal disposition. Woolf's diary entry of the fifteenth of April 1939 highlights the disorienting sense of oscillation between unity and isolation created by the Blitz:

What's odd ... is the severance that war seems to bring: everything becomes meaningless: can't plan: then there comes too the community feeling: all England thinking the same thing – this horror of war – at the same moment. Never felt it so strong before. Then the lull and one lapses again into private separation.²⁶

Neither Woolf nor Smith present themselves as wholly impervious to the morale-boosting sense of common purpose, brought on by the imperatives of the war; however, both prove themselves anxious to convey the experience of artistic, social and intellectual deracination created by war's disfigurement of the symbolic and linguistic

²⁵ Interview with John Horder, *The Guardian*, June 7, 1965.

²⁶ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume V: 1936–1941*, 215.

order of society. Woolf's novel ends with the inhabitants of Pointz Hall and its environs on the cusp of "the heart of darkness";²⁷ Smith meanwhile embeds the narrative of *The Holiday* in "the times of the black split heart." (143) Their mutual invocation of a Conradian image, denoting the devolution of social norms and structures highlights the gravity of their respective social visions. Both visions offer a modicum of hope within this dark context, constructing the universe as a continuum of decay and rejuvenation; however, they present divergent resolutions to the conundrum of the individual's place in society with Woolf seeking refuge in the primordial unity of ancient artistic forms and Smith deifying death as a welcome release.

Both of these novels exude a sense of deracination that arises, not solely from their subject-matter, but from the circumstances of their publication. To paraphrase Celia, the protagonist of Smith's work, these texts are "time-skidding" entities, (45) anomalous in relation to their creative origins. As shall be discussed in greater depth, Woolf began work on her final novel before the outbreak of war and subjected her initial text to several radical redrafts prior to its completion. *The Holiday*, meanwhile, despite its profound focus on the ennui and disaffection of post-war life, was composed during the war years. Smith failed to secure a publisher for her examination of wartime isolation and frustration until 1949, by which time, she believed her reading public would find the setting anachronistic.²⁸ In order to preserve the political and cultural immediacy of the text, Smith shifted the narrative setting from wartime to post-war by way of minimal alterations including the systematic insertion of "post-" in front of

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 157. All subsequent in-text citations are from this edition.

²⁸ *The Holiday* is the final volume in Smith's trilogy that also comprises *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) and *Over the Frontier* (1938). While recognising this disrupted continuity, the reading conducted in this chapter approaches the text primarily in relation to a supernatural short story published by Smith in 1947 that mirrors and elucidates many of the novel's underlying themes of death and the language of childhood.

every appearance of the word “war”. This process endows the text with its own distinctive language of negation (seen, for example, in Caz’s assertion that “I do not know ... that we can bear not to be at war” (8)). As a result of this “time skidding” the text presents a challenge to the literary critic with regard to its categorisation within either a wartime or post-war critical framework. Sanford Sternlicht, whose study of Smith is not favourably disposed towards her novelistic output in the first instance, implies that the time shift exacerbates an already disorienting and fragmented text which appears

to have served its author as a kind of daybook in which she could record passing opinions and memories, awkwardly linked with an ongoing ‘narrative’.²⁹

Sternlicht’s view of *The Holiday* as a daybook encourages an autobiographical reading of text within its original wartime context. Kristin Bluemel, however, reconciles both wartime and post-war perspectives by advocating readings of *The Holiday* as an Intermodernist work that transcends temporal and critical boundaries.³⁰ Ultimately, given that this chapter is devoted to the analysis of the alienation and dislocation that is born of the dissolution of such social structures, it is worth adopting Bluemel’s approach with the caveat that Smith’s “time-skidding” is the product of mistrust of such historical constructs as “post-war” rather than a solely liberating impulse. The novel is narrated by Celia Phoze, a young office worker in London who is relieved to temporarily escape the manifold complications of her urban post-war life to visit her Uncle Heber in the country. She is accompanied by her cousin (and possible half-brother) Caz, with whom she shares a passionate affinity, and her close friend,

²⁹ Sanford Sternlicht, *In Search of Stevie Smith* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 70.

³⁰ Kristin Bluemel, “Exemplary Intermodernists: Stevie Smith, Inez Holden, Betty Miller, and Naomi Mitchison,” in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1920-1945 Volume Eight*, ed. Maroula Joannou (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 45.

Tiny. Following in their wake is Tiny's venal and boorish twin, Clem, a man who carries with him all the unpleasantness of life. The narration is intercut with a myriad of observations and meditations concerning questions of nationhood, ideology, childhood and suicide. The text's convoluted extraction mirrors that of its protagonists, whose lives are blighted by disintegrated biological and political identities, while its palimpsestic quality, which maintains the phantom of wartime amid the daily struggles of the post-war affirms Celia's own assessment of her existence as one fashioned out of loss and negation:

It cannot be said that it is war, it cannot be said that it is peace, it can be said that it is post-war; this will probably go on for ten years ... The post-war works upon us, we are exasperated, we feel that we are doing nothing, we work long hours, but what is it, eh? (13)

The post-war exists only as a void within the text, a nothingness that "works upon" individuals who are themselves intellectually and spiritually frozen. The formulaic colloquialism ("but what is it, eh?") with which Celia ultimately brushes off her narratorial burden of assigning meaning to the historical void is mirrored later in her simultaneously dismissive and descriptive response to Harley's remark on the morbid quality of her poetry: "Oh, I said, that is nothing, that death feeling, it is absolutely nothing." (62)

In a manner that is both starkly honest, and immediately evasive of Harley's questioning, Celia acknowledges the impossibility of elaborating on a subject which is not (as she rebukes Tiny earlier on) "quite in the mood" (6) of communicable discourse, while emphasising the nature of her "death feeling" as vacuous. As Sternlicht writes:

Death is the nothing that supremely ends all bad things, and her language will bring a spectral life to what is usually a morbid turn of phrase... For

‘that death feeling’ is not only one’s feelings about death, but also there being no feeling once dead, and ‘absolutely nothing’ is not only a social soothing but ‘the vision of positive annihilation’ (in the words of Beckett). Absolutely, that is what death is: nothing.³¹

But, unlike the temporal void of the post-war which exists on a cyclical continuum of peace, regeneration and war, death is a perpetual nothingness that produces only nothingness, travelling in a linear pattern. The novel foregrounds its juxtaposition of cyclical and linear constructions of history through a series of vivid images related to travel, transportation and anticipation. As Caz declares:

Life is like a railway station ... the train of birth brings us in, the train of death will carry us away, and meanwhile we are cooling our heels upon the platform and waiting for the connection, and stamping up and down the platform, and passing the time of day with the other people who are also waiting. (155)

This conception of mortality as a personalised linear design that confounds the cyclical patterning of nature and civilisation (and by extension, of suicide as an expression of the individual’s power to impose such a design) is placed alongside competing philosophies, ranging from the Christian doctrine of resurrection, to the monolithic capacities of British educational establishments to inculcate and reproduce social and political consciousness through generations. Celia is, herself, accused in the latter stages of the novel of reneging on her original affiliation with perpetual death, when Caz accuses her of harbouring a romantic vision of death: “yes, he said, the train of death that you are waiting for is an excursion train, yes, that is what it is: All aboard for a day in the country”. (155)

³¹ Sanford Sternlicht, *In Search of Stevie Smith*. p.203.

For Stevie Smith suicide is neither the preserve of cowards nor of victims but is rather an instrument of self-defence against suffering and ennui, serving as a final court of appeal in safeguarding the subject's autonomy. Within the context of 1940s political hegemonies and the attendant colonisation of language for propagandistic purposes, Smith's rendering of suicidal themes is aligned closely with her distaste for monolithic constructions of life. Romana Huk has commented on how this disposition towards irresolution contributed to her liminal status amongst modernist poets. She suggests that:

It was believing oneself to be 'infinitely knowing' that Smith was, ironically enough, *critiquing* by drawing attention to her many incompatible, inculcated selves; but in the modernist-cum-Red Decade era of poet-prophets and revolutionaries, her damning suspicion of the possibility of 'real [unmediated] communication' would most probably have been unwelcome if perceived.³²

Self-appointed death is, within Smith's worldview, a singularly dependable domain against which the zealous rhetoric of political ideology pales into vain absurdity. Smith equates suicide with a kind of cosmic mastery that can nullify even the deepest existential despair and defuse the most arduous personal crises. Her work is infused with the consolatory affirmation that the prerogative of ending earthly suffering lies with the individual; indeed death, as she was to write in 1971, is "the only god who comes as a servant when he is called".³³ Moreover, this spirit of empowerment encompasses not only physical or psychic anguish but the entire realm of language itself through which these intolerable forces are understood and mediated. In *The*

³² Romana Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 5.

³³ Stevie Smith, "Come Death II," (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), 571.

Holiday, and more generally across Smith's *oeuvre* of the 1940s, self-annihilation appears as a linguistic triumph, a speech act that enables the powerless and voiceless subject to articulate herself and her anxieties amid a climate of post-war deracination and ennui. Before turning specifically to analyse that novel, therefore, it is necessary to consider this relationship between suicide and speech more closely.

The title poem from Smith's collection, *Harold's Leap* (1950), dwells on the interplay between empowerment and surrender that defines the author's conception of suicidal acts. More significantly, however, the poem also presents suicide as an act of radical self-authorship that allows the subject to conquer his ingrained horror by forcing it into the realm of speakability. The narrative is itself ambiguously presented: the eponymous protagonist appears to have overcome his dread of heights in order to commit suicide, daring to climb to the top of a steep promontory to throw himself off. The courage and resolve required of Harold to secure this permanent escape from life's terror is emphasised and lauded by the narrator, possibly as a tacit rebuke to the stereotypical bourgeois view of suicide as a cowardly solution. Smith extols Harold's leap into oblivion as a feat of triumphant will-power through which the conquering of personal fear eclipses any possible trace of shame or ignominy; it is, furthermore, a victory that is ultimately consecrated in language through the naming of the cliff that proved the site of Harold's fear and release. This posthumous tribute through which the site of death is named in honour of Harold exposes the crux of Smith's vision of suicide as an empowering speech-act. I have alluded already (within the context of William Plomer's poetry and the critical writing of Anne Nesbet) to the ways in which suicide is often perceptible as an extreme act of literary self-creation through which the life-as-text is brought decisively under the aegis of its protagonist. The opening of Smith's poem evokes this agentive duality as the narrator attempts futilely to rouse the

eponymous male protagonist from slumber to congratulate him on the nobility of his death.

Harold, are you asleep?

Harold, I remember your leap,

It may have killed you

But it was a brave thing to do.³⁴

The ambivalence evident in this address, which seeks to rouse the subject to respond even while affirming his mortal quiescence, highlights the paradoxical frame through which Smith explores the suicide's duality as immortal and extinct. Harold's end is simultaneously bathetic (indeed, as Smith writes, "he succeeded in doing nothing but die") and sublime. While the poem subsequently switches from this apostrophising of the dead subject to a contemplation of him in the third person, the intimacy of the narrative voice finely balances the perspectives of Harold as a passive object of curiosity and awe and the active self-fashioner who has dictated the terms upon which the text is to be read.

Two promontories ran high into the sky,

And fell to the sea's smother.

Harold was always afraid to climb high,

But something urged him on,

He felt he should try.

I would not say that he was wrong,

Although he succeeded in doing nothing but die.

Would you?

Ever after that steep

³⁴ Stevie Smith, "Harold's Leap," *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), 233.

Place was called Harold's Leap.

It was a brave thing to do.

Harold climbs high with the intention of falling to his death. His self-annihilation transcends public moral dichotomies of success and abject failure, pressing itself upon the narrator's imagination to the extent that the poet's eulogistic refrain, "It was a brave thing to do" is undercut by an inability to affix any more definitive judgement of rightness or wrongness. It is the personal victory, therefore, that dominates in Smith's account. The vain appeal to Harold that opened the poem is later supplanted by an appeal to an implied reader ("Would You?") signifying Harold's transition from suicidal agent to object of suicidal discourse. The suicide confounds the narrator's efforts at conventional moral categorisation (she "would not say that he was wrong" yet cannot make any more definitive pronouncement aside from extolling the bravery of the deed). Harold's personal triumph over horror is preserved through the linguistic act of naming ("Ever after that steep / Place was called Harold's Leap). Thus, through his death, Harold attains immortality through his mastery of language and imagination, claiming eternal ownership of the deathly abyss that once terrified him. William May has noted how the poem's title blurs the lines between topography and action; "Harold's Leap" may refer to the protagonist's suicidal deed or the posthumous mechanisms through which the act is imprinted upon the once-threatening landscape. Thus, it is the landscape that is ultimately rendered a passive object of Harold's suicidal agency; no longer a nameless void, it is forced into the realm of locution by his fatal act.

Smith's poem depicts suicide as a rebellion against fear through which the suicidal actor accomplishes a symbolic overcoming of dread through the speech act of naming. In her study of the dynamics of unspeakability within Stevie Smith's writing,

Ruth Baumert writes that “fear is aroused in the phobic by the failure of language to symbolize or name what s/he is afraid of – the void or lack.”³⁵ This void is powerfully evoked through the brutal landscape that terrifies Harold – the nothingness that separates the two promontories falling into the abyss of the “sea’s smother”. Harold’s leap into death may thus be read as an act of linguistic awakening, a conquering of existential fear through a speech act that is both fatal and liberating. This deployment of suicide (either enacted or imagined) as a talisman against the failure of language is a recurring element of Smith’s philosophy of coping with such fear and pain.

In *The Holiday*, Celia recognises her post-war existence as one in which the symbolic link between language and affect has been nullified. The social gatherings facilitated by Lopez only serve to heighten her awareness of the failure of “talk”.

The other talk, the history, the politics talk, is fine, too, but so often it falls down, because we are doing nothing, and so we wring our hands, the talk falls down, we are activists *manqués*, it is Edwin and Morcar the Earls of the North. It is all that, it is a desert. (14)

The intertextuality of Celia’s lament points to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), in which the history of Edwin and Morcar is recited by the Mouse as a peculiarly dry subject. Through this allusion, Celia discloses her poetic strategy of drawing on the linguistically assured realm of Victorian and Edwardian children’s literature to supply a means of naming her melancholy condition and broaching the void at the heart of her existence. It is a refuge she shares with Tiny at the beginning of the novel, when he compares an overworked dedicated colleague, Eleanor, to “the Saki lady who was in touch with all the Governments of Europe before breakfast...” (6) The character to whom he refers is Miss Langsham-Smith from the festive short story,

³⁵ Ruth Baumert, “Fear, Melancholy, and Loss in the Poetry of Stevie Smith,” 198.

“Reginald’s Christmas Revel.” In the story, Reginald plays a prank on the dully industrious Miss Smith by convincing the other house guests that she has committed suicide. Tiny’s intertextual reference is an allusion to the concept of obsessive work as a sublimation of the drive towards death, a condition Celia owns to herself later in the novel in her confession:

I am very happy when I am working, and so is Tiny, we work very cleverly and quickly. Then why do you not always work hard and so forget your beastly unhappiness? Oh well, that is just to say, I am happy when I am unconscious. (51)

Celia rebukes Tiny that his acknowledgement of the self-destructive longings that infuse their working environment is “not quite in the mood” (6), but is soon after assailed by another such intertextual imposition when Caz ominously alludes to the fairy-tale, “Rumpelstiltskin”, quoting from the Grimm Brothers’ collected version of the story. Having exhausted the formulaic “recitals” of their earlier conversation Caz becomes candid and invites Celia to share in his acknowledgement of the vapidness of the social scene they inhabit:

It is not much good, is it? Said Caz. ‘Something human,’ he said, ‘is dearer to me than the wealth of all the world.’

Oh yes, that is how it is.

But you remember, Celia, who said that, he was not human at all.

He lived in the black mountains, I said.

No need to cry about it, dear girl. (11)

It is significant that, while Celia and Caz conjure up a zone of mutuality that is triangulated through their nostalgic recollection of the children’s fairy-tale, neither ventures to name the text to which they allude; this is particularly noteworthy in light of

the centrality of the act of naming to the story of “Rumpelstiltskin.” In the fairy-tale, the eponymous supernatural being assists the miller’s daughter in evading the punishments of a wrathful king and ultimately winning his affections and hand in marriage by weaving threads of gold. In return for this supernatural assistance, the creature demands that the new Queen give him her first-born child. When this child is born, the imp is at first implacable to the royal couple’s offers of material wealth in place of the human prize (insisting that “something human is dearer to me than the wealth of all the world”), but eventually agrees to renounce his claim if the queen can guess his name within three days. When the queen does eventually discover Rumpelstiltskin’s name by chance, the imp is so enraged that he immediately commits suicide by tearing his body in half.

Jack Zipes describes the tale of Rumpelstiltskin as disturbing

not because we never really know the identity of the tiny mysterious creature who spins so miraculously, even when he is named by the queen, the former miller’s daughter. It is disturbing because the focus of folklorists, psychoanalysts, and literary critics has centred on Rumpelstiltskin’s name and *his* role in the tale despite the fact that the name is meaningless.³⁶

The fact that Celia’s intimacy with Caz (a figure critics have alternately viewed as either a signifier of death or a male doppelganger of the narrator) is first established in the text within the context of the “Rumpelstiltskin” tale indicates the type of neurosis that informs Celia’s suicidal impulse later in the novel. In a literal sense, Celia’s place in the world hinges on the suspension of the act of naming. She is in love with Caz but

³⁶ Jack Zipes “Spinning With Fate: Rumpelstiltskin and the Decline of Female Productivity,” *Western Folklore* 52, no. 1 (1993), 43.

cannot consummate her desire because of the long-standing but unconfirmed innuendo that they are brother and sister. For Caz to be decisively “named”, would produce a rupture whose consequences are suggested to be mortal for Celia. Unlike the miller’s daughter, who attains linguistic agency over the tormenting “Thing” to which she is bound, Celia lacks the naming power that would enable her either to decisively renounce her bond with Caz and thereby match with her more acceptable cousin, Tom, or to see out her deeply embedded desire for Caz to its conclusion. By using the Victorian and Edwardian children’s texts as surrogate repositories of meaning in the absence of a viable language through which to communicate her experience of abject alienation, Celia manages to communicate and symbolically discharge her melancholic urge towards death. The third chapter of *The Holiday* exhibits this morbid intertextuality most fully when it concludes with Celia’s imaginative reworking of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Requiem* poem as a paean to death: “Home is the dead one, home on the bier; the dead girl.” (31)

Celia’s relationship with melancholia is exhibited most fully in the novel’s treatment of its chief antagonist. Tiny’s boorish brother Clem is the embodiment of life itself, or at least its socially constructed reality in post-war Britain. A venal, unfeeling patriarch with shallow pretensions to socialism, he exudes a dogmatic certainty that Celia both craves and is repelled by. He is the symbolic reminder of the absent father that has cut Celia off from the symbolic order, rendered in an oppressively vivid authoritarian mode. Clem’s superficial air of geniality belies a sociopathic disposition that is ultimately corrosive to all social bonds. For this reason, he ignites the suicidal imagination in all those he encounters, including his young daughter who he, Lear-like, forces daily to feign an unfelt affection for him, insisting that “she must sit on his knee and pretend that she loved him dearly.” The outcome of this relentless burden of filial

performativity sees Selwyn convert her child's play into a form of deathly wish-fulfilment (a theme that is explored in greater depth in Smith's tangentially related short story, "Is There a Life Beyond the Gravy?" which also positions the childhood vernacular as the most adept at expressing the intricacies of the suicidal imagination). Selwyn lies prone and immobile on the floor, declaring "If I lie here for a time, then I shall be dead, that is what I wish". (48) She expresses her death-wish as a mimetic return to a state of antenatal quiescence. In contrast with Celia, whose isolation from the symbolic order is in part traceable to her experience of paternal rejection, Selwyn suffers within her enforced social position of subordination to the patriarch. Celia's consciousness of this burden foisted upon Selwyn contributes to her ambivalent attitude towards her own liminal status within society, scarred both by her sense of paternal abandonment yet fearful of the potential re-emergence of a patriarch within her life.³⁷

Clem is not only the antithesis of Tiny, but also his cyclical successor, representing reality as an inexorably encroaching force that supplants the survival-fantasies created by his brother. "He always comes," Tiny pronounces ominously, "He is very powerful." Celia, too, recognises the ultimate futility of her periodic escapes into holiday-consciousness as the spectre of Clem looms Nemesis-like over her countryside retreat:

Remember Clem – oh, if only one could forget him, but he is always there, this rich, cruel, crafty man, wrapped in affability; where Tiny is, there also is Clem, he is the shadow upon hope, he makes one hopeless.

(112)

³⁷ Stevie Smith's father, like Celia's in the novel, left the family when she was young to join the North Sea Patrol.

Celia's comparison of Tiny and Clem to the mythological brothers, Castor and Pollux elucidates many of the novel's structural and thematic approaches to death. According to Greco-Roman mythology, the sons of Leda were granted an alternating form of half-immortality that permitted one brother to live in splendour on Mount Olympus while the other took his place among the dead in Hades. Thus, Celia's "holiday" with Tiny in the Underworld retreat of Uncle Heber's country house is placed under the constant threat of Clem's arrival, which will demand for a return to the ordeal of life. In this way, Clem functions in the text as an inverted *memento mori*; he is an omniscient presence who heralds the immutable return of life. The psychological refuge Celia takes in her work and reveries of childhood is made to signify a far deeper drive towards death. The opening scene of the novel establishes Celia's bureaucratic office environment as a space in which cognitive dissonance is imperative. As Celia and Tiny attempt to cope with the knowledge of Clem's malevolent presence in the office next-door, they resolve that "as long as we *remember*, we can think of something else." (5) Memory facilitates the expulsion of Clem from the psyche as a voluntary act rather than one founded on psychological weakness. Huk writes that Smith's promotion of emotional fracture as a dubious coping mechanism "in what Auden and others have dubbed 'the age of anxiety' is essential to any understanding of *The Holiday*'s narrational form."³⁸ In this regard, Smith presents the dynamics of memory as potentially analogous to the workings of the suicidal imagination in that both facilitate the suspension of suffering through self-motivated action. Memory, like suicide, affords the subject a degree of agency in regard to how the trauma she faces can be processed and understood, whereas forgetting leaves one vulnerable to the shock of recognition when one is reunited with reality. Thus, Celia deploys the workings of memory as a

³⁸ Romana Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines*, 150.

psychological version of her suicidal agency, something she makes clear when she outlines her classical vision of death as a state in which the subject exerts total control over both memory and language:

I remember the other book where the shades must have blood to drink,
where the dead cannot speak, they are so old, they cannot speak, they
cannot think, they have no memory unless they lap the warm blood.

(151)

Celia's fantasy of death as a state in which the subject has total command over her deployment or renunciation of the forces of language and memory is indicative of the social rupture that exists between her and the symbolic realm. Kristeva discusses this form of melancholic dissociation within the context of suicidal individuals whose mistrust of words signifies a deeper rupture within the self. She writes:

In the best of cases, speaking beings and their language are like one: is not speech our 'second nature'? In contrast, the speech of the depressed is to them like an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue. They have lost the meaning-the value-of their mother tongue for want of losing the mother. The dead language they speak, which foreshadows their suicide, conceals a Thing buried alive.³⁹

Caz's glib rejoinder to Celia's vision of Hades is to remark that death is "nothing to write home about", a remark that inadvertently reinforces this notion of death as an escape from language by adding literary forms of utterance to his cousin's list.

Smith constructs her battle with life's unendurable ennui as an affair of both body and mind, entailing a regression into childhood consciousness, antenatal

³⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 53.

unconsciousness and, ultimately, physical self-annihilation. She displays this progression of coping mechanisms most succinctly in her 1947 short story, “Is There a Life Beyond the Gravy?”, a work which follows a similar narrative trajectory to *The Holiday* (albeit with a more overtly supernatural quality), retaining the namesakes of the central characters from the novel. The story begins in a similar fashion to the novel with the character of Celia dutifully carrying out her Ministry work as she prepares to join her cousins, Cas and Tiny at Uncle Heber’s country house. By the end, however, the trio has escaped both physically and intellectually into a childhood consciousness, which finds Celia’s literary prowess reduced to that of an infant:

Celia began to print a sentence in coloured chalks in her copy-book, there was a different chalk for each letter. Cas looked over her shoulder and read out what she had written: ‘Is there a life beyond the gravy?’⁴⁰

The infantile malapropism suggests an inability to conceptualise death on the part of Celia, and, indeed the story’s progression to an act of nursery-room murder indicates Smith’s vision of war as child’s play. Lyndsey Stonebridge’s assertion that war makes “infants of us all” through its normalisation of the surreal resonates strongly with the story’s increasingly ethereal final section.⁴¹ This last passage sees the return to the universal language of child’s play as an enterprise inextricable from the yearning to attain deathly quiescence. Wholeness is dependent within this realm on the total repudiation of life. As in *The Holiday*, this idyllic underworld retreat is threatened by the intrusion of a Clem-figure (here, called Augustus), who attempts to rupture the trio’s infantile unconsciousness:

⁴⁰ Stevie Smith, “Is There a Life Beyond the Gravy?” in *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, eds. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1981), 72.

⁴¹ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety*, 19.

‘Why, Celia, the ink is all over your dress. There’s no life here,’ he said;
‘you people simply don’t know you’re alive.’

It was Augustus.

Cas came over to him and stood threatening him with the heavy ruler he
had snatched from Celia’s desk.

‘*You* don’t know you’re dead,’ he said.

‘It’s better to know you’re dead,’ said Tiny.

‘Oh, much better,’ said Cas.

‘There’s no room here for anyone who doesn’t know he’s dead,’ said
Celia.

They took hands and closed round Augustus, driving him back towards
the window. He climbed onto the window-sill.

‘We’re all dead,’ cried the three children in a loud, shrill chorus that rose
like the wail of a siren. ‘We’re all dead, we’ve been dead *for ages*.’

Tiny rushed forward, breaking hands with the others, and gave Augustus
a great shove that sent him backwards out of the dark shadowed window.

‘We rather like it,’ he said, as Augustus disappeared from view.⁴²

According to a 1940 broadcast by the psychoanalyst, Edward Glover on the BBC,
observing the ways in which war’s iconography bore the nightmarish quality of a
macabre nursery rhyme, it was “small wonder that we are afraid lest in the face of a real
danger our first impulse should be to behave like little children.”⁴³ Smith, however, in
the above passage not only exalts the infantile imaginative response as a source of
liberation, she presents it as inextricable from the fantasy of self-destruction and the

⁴² *Ibid*, p.73.

⁴³ Edward Glover, *The Psychology of Fear and Courage* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940), 21/22.

decisive banishment of the dual imperatives of life and adulthood imposed by authoritarian interlopers. In Smith's short story, the Clem-figure is banished through a total embracement of death-consciousness by the three cousins. In contrast with this total expulsion of life's hardships from an infantile paradise, *The Holiday* ends, not with Clem's total exile but his indefinite deferment. In keeping with the mythological analogue of their relationship, Clem eventually arrives in the Hades-realm of Uncle Heber's house to retrieve his brother and explode the infantile death-fantasy that has provided a refuge for Celia and Caz. He is thwarted, however, by Tiny's earlier departure to London by train which deprives him of his pretext for imposing his presence on the remaining guests. Celia observes:

The expression on Clem's face is now a mixture of feebleness and ferocity. But he can do nothing. But he would like to do something. But it his brother he is after. He looks like he would say: I will come back for you another time. But there is nothing he can do, and the train goes in an hour and a half. So off he goes. (201)

Celia's victory over Clem's version of reality is temporary; she is merely a tourist in the land of death and, therefore must return to life in the near-future. When the prospect of remaining eternally in Hades is raised, Celia and Tiny concede that they cannot positively renounce life until life takes on a definite shape and form:

Well, we are not really ready yet, are we? said Tiny. Not ready, I mean, to stay any longer, not yet? This happy place, he said (with a large gesture through the window) is for people who are happy and resolved and calm and loving. (188)

This incapability of totally embracing the finality of death is attributed by Celia to her natural disposition towards “shiftiness” – a quality she believes derives from the English character:

We shall never budge, I thought, shift we may, on our own terms, but budge, never. And I thought again of Rome, that was taken captive, that had captured the world. And I thought: Happier the ancient world, with Rome for an adversary, the Rome that could be broken and done with; but the British are like water that shifts to its own course. (96/97)

While England, like Celia, must re-orientate its identity in a post-war world to accommodate the loss of colonies, its subordinate position in relation to the global Superpowers and mounting criticism of its imperialist history, Celia identifies a strain of cursed immortality that she shares with her nation. Suicide, she intimates, is inherently “un-English”, hence, in order to achieve her desired state of quiescence, she must imaginatively align herself with Germany (with whom she associates a Freudian “Death Wish”) and the classical world’s exaltation of self-destruction. By the end of the novel, however, it is the realm of the Victorian nursery that she has returned to, a consciousness that offers the requisite spiritual and political certainty to begin a journey into death. Thus, the novel ends with a distinctly Dickensian evocation of moral assurance that pointedly echoes the words of Tiny Tim while presenting an image of slumber that may portend either death or a rejuvenating slumber:

When Caz came back we spread the blankets on the hearthrug and lay down together. God bless you, Celia, said our uncle, and you too Caz, and my son Tom, God bless him. God bless us all, sire, said Caz, and took my hand in his. Amen, I said, and fell asleep. (202)

This ending is rendered all the more disturbing and unreliable by the climate of iconoclasm and ideological indecision that has preceded it. Huk writes that

Smith's cultural politics, like her poetics, might be best understood as involving such 'fac[ing up]' to not only the loss of belief structures, but also the loss of the sense that new ones can be innocently remade; in other words, hers became a strategy of ... 'resistance without belief'.⁴⁴

This rejection of existing orthodoxy and power structures is coupled with a scepticism of messianic revolutionary movements, leaving a sense of 'unmoored-ness' permeating her work. Such a cosmic degree of scepticism affords the individual complete freedom to dispose of her own life under Durkheimian theory. In *The Holiday*, Celia grapples with this sense of isolation and alienation as she becomes increasingly estranged from the structures that provide her life with context. The suicidal undercurrent of post-war life is, in this sense, rendered all the more potent for its invisibility. Church, state and family – the pillars of social cohesion according to Durkheimian theory – are integral components of Celia's daily existence. She attends Sunday worship and sings psalms, is directly involved in the political life of post-war Britain as a paid functionary of the state, and has close relationships with her sister, cousins, and aunt. While such a robust social network should theoretically enmesh the subject within the fabric of the body politic, the text empties these key supports of absolute meaning and of their capacity to engender spiritual, social and biological regeneration.

Celia emphatically refutes the desirability of such cyclically functioning apparatuses, refusing most notably to embrace the concept of Resurrection, central to Christianity, as either convincing or noble. The ninth chapter ends with Celia's assertion that life's ultimate promise is the comfort of death, surpassing even the

⁴⁴ Romana Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines*, 54.

Christian promise of heavenly renewal. In this spirit, she is unable to convincingly complete the liturgical cycle implied by the psalm she sings:

*'Ride on, ride on in majesty,
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain,
Then take, O Lord, Thy power and reign.'*

But I sing the last line under my breath, for I do not see Christ in Glory,
but only upon the Cross. (118)

Death is not, Celia finds, a portal to eternal glory, but rather a worthy expedient in itself, a panacea for all mortal suffering. The notion that death is not a means through which eternity may be accessed but rather the sum expression of mankind's power over its own suffering permeates Celia's post-war consciousness. This "death feeling" with which Celia imbues her poetry colours all aspects of her life to the point that she is accused of being "married to Death and Hades." (66)

The prospect of socio-political rejuvenation is equally alien to Celia; her work in the Ministry is arbitrary and menial and any attempt at political discourse among her network of friends is stymied by the debasement of language that has been wrought throughout the war years. The childhood locus of stability in which she takes imaginative refuge is also placed in jeopardy as her increasing awareness of Britain's colonial past threatens to taint her idyllic memories of a childhood spent with Caz in India. Cumulatively, these successive repudiations of cyclical life, death and rebirth in favour of a linear path towards oblivion drive Celia's retreat from past, present and future. Walking in nature, she endeavours unsuccessfully to socialise herself into an alternative realm of perpetual decay:

But how refreshing in certain moods are things in decay, and in the same mood how horrible when in the course of nature decay passes to change and life renews itself in brassy forms. (102)

Celia's cry of despair at the tyranny of life over death and her conviction that "there is not one thing in life to make it bearable" (102) induce her to identify the self as the sole source of deliverance. The manner in which Celia narrates her subsequent suicide attempt offers a microcosm of Smith's opaque approach to death. In the moment of her suicidal endeavour, Celia withdraws herself from even the reader's panoptical gaze in a bid for total autonomy, as the following excerpt shows:

I decided to go for a swim. I walked round the lake and above the lake where the river ran into it I found an old tree with its branches bent low upon the water. I took off my clothes, and crawling along a branch dropped into deep water. I swam straight out and turned on my back to let the current carry me down into the lake. Oh, God, I thought, we are not innocent, yet innocence is what one would wish for. The water was as cold as ice. I had a sleepy feeling that I was floating away from the Ministry, and the London parties, and Lopez, and the Indian problems, and going to have a fine long sleep and no dreams. (102/103)

Smith is, as William May writes, an author who "resists us, she blocks our gaze and in diverting our prying eyes, she writes the secret text undetected."⁴⁵ This scene combines subtle intertextuality with a highly euphemistic account of Celia's near-drowning, that serves to deny the reader the prerogative of naming the act and intention carried out. Earlier in the text, at Lopez's party, Celia quotes from Shakespeare's suicidal meditation, Sonnet Sixty-Six: "Tired with all these, for restful death I cry" (17),

⁴⁵ William May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

to convey her sense of suicidal isolation in the midst of a vibrant social setting. In recounting the incident at the lake, she also draws on Shakespearean influences to suggestively render an equivocal portrait of attempted suicide. The scene's ethereal presentation, combined with its initial foregrounding of the image of an old tree growing aslant a brook clearly evokes Gertrude's similarly guarded account of the death by drowning of Ophelia in *Hamlet*:

*There, on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like a while they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.⁴⁶*

Both Gertrude and Celia's narrations elide the suicidal motivations of their respective subjects' beatific surrender to death. In the case of *Hamlet*, Gertrude's ambivalent narration is rooted in an anxious desire to spare the deceased Ophelia the socio-religious opprobrium attached to suicide; for Celia, this withdrawal from language may

⁴⁶ Owing to the evasive character of Celia's narration, I have analysed this passage in relation to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. One might also trace the scene's imagery to John Everett Millais' 1852 painting of Ophelia's death (as Harold Bloom does in *British Modernist Fiction 1920-1945* (London: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 317). Smith also appears to draw on Millais' painting of Ophelia in her 1950 poem, "The River God".

be attributed to her aforementioned realisation that the post-war categories of life and death are insufficiently stable to make suicide a linguistically communicable act. Thus, upon being thwarted in her suicidal endeavour by the un-nameable Rumpelstiltskin figure of Caz, she attributes her failure to successfully inhabit either the realm of life or death as a personal failing, once again allied to her national identity's "shiftiness":

It is not that life is so awful, but I am, there is no end to the pain and fear, and to the general shiftiness of my character, I said, as it were to God, but actually to Caz. (103)

This reading aligns with J. Edward Mallot's broader analysis of drowning imagery across Smith's *oeuvre* as a symbol of voiceless-ness. Moreover, Mallot writes:

Even more frequently and more effectively than Smith's use of drowning imagery to reveal the gaps in communication that can develop between isolated individuals and the societies they inhabit (and the release that can occur in death), drowning provides a commentary on the difference between the position and power of men and women.⁴⁷

With this gendered reading in mind, Celia's aforementioned repudiation of the cyclical dimension of nature and history may equally be read as a rejection of femininity in both its biological form and its socially constructed position within the patriarchal nexus of a post-war hegemony that seeks to unravel the freedoms attained by women during the war by reasserting a pre-war domestically confined construction of femininity.

Drowning is, itself, a mode of death with strong gendered resonances that are traceable to a nineteenth century aesthetic sensibility. The Victorian fascination with female suicide by drowning is linked to a patriarchal ideology that, in Dijkstra's view, aligns

⁴⁷ J. Edward Mallot, "Not Drowning but Waving: Stevie Smith and the Language of the Lake," *Journal of Modern Literature* 27, no. 1 (2003), 186.

female suicide with passivity and invalidism,⁴⁸ the drowning woman who is slowly submerged in water may be viewed as an object of, rather than active participant in the event. While Celia's surrender to the current is, however, presented as an active choice – the decision to cease swimming – she is divested of this agency by her cousin's insistent gallantry in returning her to life. Upon pulling her away from the deathly seduction of the river, Caz, like a nineteenth century hero, places her upon an old steed named Noble (a character trait Celia repeatedly aligns with her nineteenth century forebears). This filtering of Celia's drowning and rescue through an archaic gendered imaginary is yet another of the author's strategies in highlighting the breakdown of language and intelligibility. In this regard, Smith's imagery marks a point of commonality with Virginia Woolf's water symbolism in *Between the Acts* where rivers, lakes and ponds figure as sites of matrimonial surrender and patriarchal violation, as this chapter shall discuss in its final section.

Turning from Smith's *The Holiday* to Virginia Woolf's final novel, it is evident that these works share a fascination with points of intermission where the sense of collective purpose fostered by war and national identity is temporarily displaced by an abyss devoid of meaning and purpose (a notion which is immediately conveyed in the titles of both texts). *Between the Acts*, like *The Holiday*, is a "time-skidding" novel, whose creative development was radically redirected by the social and political events of the 1940s, resulting in a work that exists simultaneously in an atmosphere of wartime and pre-war tensions. Gill Plain compares Woolf's novel with the popular "nostalgic pastoral" genre of storytelling that offered wartime readers an escape into a prelapsarian world of pre-war comfort. Woolf's novel is ambivalently placed within this category,

⁴⁸ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de Siècle Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 87.

Plain writes, because of its status as “a fiction that reaches for the past to escape from the present, while simultaneously interrogating that past for its role in bringing about the unbearable now”.⁴⁹

Between the Acts is a novel intimately concerned with the relationship between the individual and society and, as a work that retrospectively anticipates the coming of war, charts the displacement of the individual urge towards personal suicide by the institutionalised self-annihilating momentum of war. In his reading of the novel as a bridge between the collective anticipatory anxieties of the war and the personal psychological precariousness of the author, Paul Crosthwaite identifies within the text two conflicting strategic responses to the impending threat:

[either] to retreat into psychic isolation so as to preserve one’s autonomy in the face of potential annihilation, or to risk that autonomy in order to embrace the intimacy that a common fear of annihilation fosters.⁵⁰

Crosthwaite identifies within this dilemma an element of suicidality, but cannot discern which of the available options is most fully expressed in Woolf’s own suicide, since the self-destructive act may equally be read as an act of self-preservation amid relentless historical turmoil or as an expression of willing acceptance of dissolution. While Crosthwaite’s insistence on reading Woolf’s suicide almost exclusively within the public political framework of the war runs somewhat counter to the approach I have outlined earlier in this chapter, his recognition of the novel’s expressed yearning for a “telepathic” community of understanding and the centrality of Woolf’s own suicidal imagination in the rendering of this project offers a basis for deciphering the role of art within the text. I argue that the novel initiates its investigation by posing the

⁴⁹ Gill Plain, *Literature of the 1940s*, 160.

⁵⁰ Paul Crosthwaite, *Trauma, Postmodernism and the Aftermath of World War II* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 127.

fundamentally Durkheimian question of whether art in the modern age is capable of mediating between the private and public selves of its audience or if it is necessarily an agent of alienation, indelibly affiliated to the suicidal imagination. In probing this issue, Woolf contemplates the resurgence of a primitive and ritualised art-form that is essentially dissociated from the individuating forces of language. Like the patriarch of Pointz Hall, Bartholomew Oliver, the novel ponders the question: “Thoughts without words ... Can that be?” (40)

Woolf’s examination of art’s capacity to unite the disparate “scraps, orts and fragments” (136) of society, places her in confrontation with the orthodox Durkheimian position that regards art as deleterious to social cohesion and complicit in the forces of psychological introversion and social alienation that render individuals susceptible to suicidal ideation. The Durkheimian theorist, Alexander Riley, articulates the theoretical position thus:

In the primitive world, art (or, rather, the activity to which we apply that name, as primitives certainly did not have such a concept) represents the beliefs and values of an entire society in a relatively unproblematic way related to the deep unity of thought in such societies, and these beliefs are directly joined to practical action in the form of rituals and ceremonies seen as crucial to the very life of the society, while in modernity art has become a realm of representations produced and consumed only by a small minority, and a deviant, rebellious individualist minority at that, and these beliefs no longer have any tangible connection to collective ritual except perhaps on the rare

occasions of the emergence of coherent and cohesive artistic movements.⁵¹

Riley suggests that it is art's estrangement from the sacred in post-industrial culture that lies at the heart of its inability to channel the energies of primordial unity. "This is death, death, death ... when illusion fails," (129) remarks Miss La Trobe, distraught at the failure of her pageant to unearth the collective consciousness of the village community. It is only when her audience is beset by incidental aerial intrusions, first by a rain-shower and later by a squadron of low-flying aeroplanes (both foreshadowing the coming bombardment of the Blitz) that a sense of collective consciousness is achieved. The latter of these interruptions cuts through the Reverend Streatfield's attempt to derive a collective meaning from La Trobe's pageant by positioning it within the religious context of its pecuniary goal for the village church. The horde of war-machines thereby assert dominance over the linguistic realm of communal representation:

The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck came overhead. *That* was the music. The audience gaped; the audience gazed. Then zoom became drone. The planes had passed. (138/139)

War, the text suggests, has succeeded where modern art has failed, surpassing "the word" in both its ecclesiastical and aesthetic forms as a force that galvanises spirit of the populace. If, as Walter Pater's maxim asserts, music is the quintessential condition to which all art aspires, then it is the music of war-machines that Woolf identifies as the

⁵¹ Alexander Riley, "Introduction," In *Durkheim, the Durkheimians, and the Arts* eds. In A. Riley, W. Pickering, and W.W. Miller (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 5/6.

modern unification of subject and form that art must now strive to compete with.⁵² Such a declaration may be read as a tacit acknowledgement of the criticisms levelled at the Bloomsbury group by Lord Elton and *The Times*; however, Woolf and La Trobe both resolve throughout the text to persist in striving for an art-form that accesses a primitive plain of social bonding. The following analysis will demonstrate how Woolf sets up a dichotomy between the egoistic/personal suicidal impulse that exists as a hidden undercurrent within the lives of several of the figures at Pointz Hall and the institutional/altruistic suicides that are lauded by society and soon to be demanded by the impending outbreak of war and interrogates the role of art in sustaining both forms.

Between the Acts is set in a microcosmic community of Pointz Hall and its immediate environs and depicts the unfolding of a village pageant designed to explore the theme of national identity. The ritualistic dimension of life within this community is emphasised early on in the novel when Isa observes her father-in-law and his sister discuss the likely outcome of the pageant:

Then, for the seventh time in succession, they both looked out of the window. Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was--one or the other. (16)

The repetition of the number seven over the course of the novel (including the pageant's alternative venue of the old barn, which is seven hundred years old) may be read as an invocation of Dante's Seventh Circle of Hell, a realm populated by the deceased perpetrators of violence against neighbours (war) and violence against the self

⁵² The influence of Walter Pater as a symbolic father to Woolf has been explored by several critics, notably in Perry Meisel's study, *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

(suicide). This symbolic resonance is borne out later in the text as the tree beneath which Miss La Trobe shelters is assailed by a dense flock of starlings, recalling Dante's Forest of Suicides (in which the souls of those who have died by suicide are eternally knotted into the bark of trees and torn at by winged harpies). As La Trobe processes the failure of her art to connect her audience to the illusory realm, she is privy to a vigorous enactment of this hellish onslaught:

Then suddenly the starlings attacked the tree behind which she had hidden. In one flock they pelted it like so many winged stones. The whole tree hummed with the whizz they made, as if each bird plucked a wire. A whizz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabing discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree. Then up! Then off! (150)

In Dante's poem, the perpetrators of war, meanwhile, wallow eternally in boiling blood (a sensation Miss La Trobe also experiences as she watches her artistic vision brought to fruition and finds that "blood seemed to pour from her shoes.") (129) The combative Giles Oliver also carries the symbolic torments of war's afterlife on his blood-stained tennis-shoes,⁵³ but it is only Miss La Trobe, the artist figure of the text, who is burdened with the potentialities of both war and suicide. In addition to these classical invocations, the community possesses its own idiosyncratic mythology of

⁵³ The scene in which Giles stamps down on the "monstrous inversion" of a snake struggling to devour a frog is rooted in a real-life experience that Woolf records in her 1935 diary entry as one which evocative of suicidal imaginings; she wrote: "[the snake] had half the toad in, half out; gave a suck now and then. The toad slowly disappearing. [Leonard] poked its tail; the snake was sick of the crushed toad, & I dreamt of men committing suicide and cd. see the body shooting through the water." Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Four, 1931–1935* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 338.

suicide in the form of the lily pond which exerts a magnetic influence over several members of the community:

It was in that deep centre, in that black heart, that the lady had drowned herself. Ten years since the pool had been dredged and a thigh bone recovered. Alas, it was a sheep's, not a lady's. And sheep have no ghosts, for sheep have no souls. But, the servants insisted, they must have a ghost; the ghost must be a lady's; who had drowned herself for love. So none of them would walk by the lily pool at night, only now when the sun shone and the gentry still sat at table. (32)

Like Smith, therefore, Woolf deploys symbolic intertextuality to convey the otherwise incommunicable aura of despair and ennui that permeates her novel. In this sense, her approach resembles that of the character of Isa Oliver, who conceals her inner life as a poet within the folds of an account book and can foster an unspoken understanding with William Dodge through their mutual comprehension of suicidal literary references. Before embarking on a detailed study of Woolf's symbolic response to the issue of suicide and war, it is worth exploring the sociological underpinnings of her approach in this regard.

The extent to which Woolf directly engaged with Durkheim's writings over the course of her career is unclear; however, her close friendship with the pioneering classicist and archaeologist, Jane Ellen Harrison, indicates at the very least a familiarity with his theories and their applicability to various forms of ancient civilisation. Harrison is credited as among the first scholars to introduce Durkheimian theory into British anthropological studies—while several of her works, including *Ancient Art and*

Ritual (1913), which Woolf received as a Christmas gift in 1923,⁵⁴ focus on the role of art in either strengthening or undermining social bonds. In her preface to *Ancient Art and Ritual*, Harrison outlines her position on the relationship between art and the public sphere, asserting that

this connection has, I believe, an important bearing on questions vital today, as, for example, the question of the place of art in our modern civilisation, its relation to and its difference from religion and morality; in a word, on the whole enquiry as to what the nature of art is and how it can help or hinder spiritual life.⁵⁵

As a figure of intellectual and philosophical inspiration, Harrison's influence over Woolf extended long past the classicist's death in 1928, as is evidenced by a diary entry from September 1940 in which Woolf describes standing before Harrison's Blitz-damaged house and watching it smoulder.⁵⁶ It is noteworthy that Woolf should record herself reconnecting with the memory of her old friend and mentor at the same time as she was reshaping her early drafts of the then-titled *Pointz Hall* from an introspective study of marital disaffection and despair (described by Mitchell Leaska as "the longest suicide note in the history of the English language") into an anthropological anatomisation of social isolation and alienation within a community.⁵⁷ Leaska, while presenting an alternative interpretation of Woolf's redirection of her later drafts of the novel to incorporate both public and personal spheres to the reading offered in this study, observes of the novel's development that

⁵⁴ Stefan Collini, for example, writes in "Sociology and Idealism in Britain 1880-1920." *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 19 (1978): 35, that Harrison, among her fellow Cambridge Ritualists represents "the beginning of British anthropology's long affair with Durkheimianism".

⁵⁵ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), v.

⁵⁶ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume V: 1936-1941*, 316.

⁵⁷ Mitchell A. Leaska, "Afterword." *'Pointz Hall': The Earlier and Later Typescripts of 'Between the Acts'*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (New York: University Publications, 1983), 451.

the later typescript, from which many deep folds of anger had been smoothed, became in effect a bridge of compromise between the earlier and final typescripts. Virginia Woolf had indeed succeeded in suppressing the ferocity of her original plan. At what price, however, only she would finally know.⁵⁸

Psychobiographical studies of *Between the Acts* have inevitably endeavoured to discern within the text's gestation from 1938 and 1941 some evidence of the psychological disintegration that led to the author's suicide weeks after its completion. Alma Halbert Bond's 1989 study, *Who Killed Virginia Woolf?* posits the view that Woolf's original design, which foregrounded the matrimonial estrangement of Giles and Isa Oliver, is a sublimation of the author's feelings of rage and vulnerability at the betrayal (and possible sexual infidelity) of her husband Leonard.⁵⁹ Bond writes:

It is interesting that the first version is full of Isa's rage at her husband, Giles, a materialist who does not understand his wife. With each draft, Woolf deleted more and more of the rage, until the published version appears to be a different book.⁶⁰

While it is not the aim of this chapter to pursue a purely psychobiographical reading of the text, such commentaries serve to emphasise the extent to which Woolf refocused her project to incorporate both personal and institutional forms of self-destructive energies. Extrapolating from Bond's reading of the text, the notion that Woolf coped with her sense of deracination and vulnerability by turning once more to the intellectual

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁵⁹ In an early draft, for example, Isa's suicidal ideation is explicitly rendered as a reaction to Giles' affair with Mrs Manresa, whereby she redirects her destructive rage for her husband inwards. At one point in the early text, her sexual jealousy at seeing Giles enthralled by Mrs Manresa induces her to pick up a knife and indulge in a suicidal fantasy: "'Plunge blade!' she said. And struck. 'Faithless!' she cried. Knife, too! It broke. So too my heart'. In Mitchell A. Leaska, '*Pointz Hall*': *The Earlier and Later Typescripts of 'Between the Acts*', 112/113.

⁶⁰ Alma Halbert Bond, *Who Killed Virginia Woolf? A Psychobiography* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1989), 165.

milieu of her old mentor and support-figure, Jane Harrison, offers one explanation for the novel's turn from purely personal trauma to sociological analysis.

In order to understand Woolf's symbolic construction of suicide along personal and sociological lines, it is useful to draw, once again, on Fedden's model. Fedden's conception of personal suicide provides a metaphorical rendering of his theory that resonates strongly with Woolf's artistic vision. He writes that:

though statistics in their proper place must come in for what they are worth, the most effective way one can visualise this turning back to death is, as it were, in a mirror.⁶¹

Within the world of *Between the Acts*, the mirror emblematises this paradoxical notion of social rebellion as a violent withdrawal into the self. In this regard the mirror exists as a symbolic counterpoint to the text's window motif, which recurs as a portent of sympathy and solidarity that must be achieved through the institutional self-annihilation of war. Before embarking on an analysis of the interactions between these two symbolic forces, it is worth examining how Woolf situates the window and the mirror as metaphoric analogues to the concepts of institutional and personal suicide, respectively.

The window motif appears as a multifaceted symbolic entity across several of Woolf's literary productions. Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Rhoda in *The Waves* (1931) both commit suicide by jumping out of windows (as Woolf herself attempted to do in 1904). Elsewhere in Woolf's oeuvre, the window conversely signifies the spiritual sustenance afforded by social bonds and interpersonal sympathy. Writing on *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Martha C. Nussbaum positions the image of the window in opposition to that of the hermetically sealed hive, suggesting that windows

⁶¹ Henry Romilly Fedden, *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study*, 27.

represent a modicum of hope for the subject desirous of communality and mutual recognition. Nussbaum writes:

Woolf's image of the window suggests that people are not completely sealed to one another. There is an opening, one can see through or see in, even if one cannot enter.⁶²

For the community at Pointz Hall, the window is an indeterminate, floating signifier. The entire purpose of the pageant that serves as the focal point of the villagers' intersecting consciousness is to raise funds for the installation of electric lighting in the local church, something which in the mind of Mrs Mayhew, the colonel's wife, is vaguely encapsulated in the image of a window.

Army; Navy; Union Jack; and behind them perhaps — Mrs Mayhew sketched what she would have done had it been her pageant — the Church in cardboard. One window, looking east, brilliantly illuminated to symbolise — she could work that out when the time came.

Beneath the surface of Mrs Mayhew's fantasy deployment of stagecraft to bolster the organs of religious and political identity, lies an acknowledgement of the schism between art and the sacred. The fact that she is unable to assign a symbolic meaning to her "brilliantly illuminated" cardboard window carries stark implications for the actual pageant unfolding before her, given that its primary financial objective is, as the Reverend Streatfield announces, to facilitate "the illumination of our dear old church" through the installation of electric light. Mrs Mayhew's cardboard pageant, and by extension, Miss La Trobe's actual pageant are thus floating signifiers, both contingent on the future ascription of meaning to an electric illumination, which, as Gillian Beer

⁶² Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*." *New Literary History* 26, no.4 (1995): 743.

observes, Woolf's readers will recognise ironically as never coming to pass due to the commencement of wartime black-outs.⁶³ The pageant's meaning is therefore deferred, not only beyond the purview of the novel's close, but past the scope of the war (and, as it happens, the life of the text's author) and into an unknowable future when "illumination" will once more be permissible.

Just as the illumination of the village church window is deferred to an indeterminate point beyond the scope of the novel, so too is the radiance of semiotic clarity withheld from the transparent window-signifier. Unlike the looking glass, which offers the comfort of a determinate and familiar reflection, the window guides the gaze out to an unknowable terrain of fragmented social relations. This dual symbolism of windows as emblems of consciousness directed outwards and mirrors as representative of introspective detachment from society and the world is central to *Between the Acts*, serving as an analogue for the text's dualistic portrayal of the role of art as a means of either diminishing or heightening social alienation. Windows figure within Woolf's writings as portals towards epiphany but also as borders demarcating the limitations of what can be perceived. While the play-within-the-text culminates in a plethora of discomfiting mirror images, the macro-narrative begins and ends with the window as an augur of an uncertain future. In the novel's closing passages, the same drawing room window that at the start of the text opened out onto a garden teeming with vitality has transformed into a portent of the impending aerial bombardment.

The great square of the open window showed only sky now. It was drained of light, severe, stone cold. Shadows fell. Shadows crept over Bartholomew's high forehead; over his great nose. (157)

⁶³ Beer writes that Woolf's novel is "sprung on such contingent ironies. The blackout is nowhere mentioned but Woolf wrote in it, her readers read in it, and the work ends in 'the heart of darkness, the fields of night'. In Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground: Essays By Gillian Beer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 126.

In a manner reminiscent of Jane Harrison's detailed analysis of primitive mortality rites, Death is rendered as an entity which gains admittance to the domestic sphere via the window. In this instance, however, Death's shadow falls not only over the aged Bartholomew, whose "thread of life" has already stretched "so fine, so far", but upon the entire community. The window, as a site of interpenetration between the nature and society, therefore becomes a point of mortal weakness, which must be shrouded against Death.⁶⁴ The novel, thus, traces the progression from the mirror-consciousness of egoistic suicide to the integrated sacrificial hegemony of war-time, signified by the window.

For Isa Oliver, a woman whose sense of self is fractured by the ill-fitting socially defined categories of matrimony and maternity, the window exists as a troubling reminder of her failure to internally conform to her performed role as supremely self-sacrificing Angel in the House (an archetype Woolf had previously expounded on in her essays). As Isa sits in her bedroom contemplating the bifurcation of her identity between "inner love" and "outer love", her gaze is torn between her mirror-self and the window-realm of social relations:

But what feeling was it that stirred in her now when above the looking-glass, out of doors, she saw coming across the lawn the perambulator; two nurses; and her little boy George, lagging behind? She tapped on the window with her embossed hairbrush. They were too far off to hear. The drone of the trees was in their ears; the chirp of birds; other incidents of garden life, inaudible, invisible to her in the bedroom, absorbed them ...

She returned to her eyes in the looking glass. (10/11)

⁶⁴ In her diary, Woolf describes the blackouts as "far more murderous than the war", an observation that may be read both figuratively and, in light of the many fatalities caused during these periods of poor visibility, literally. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume V: 1936–1941*, 263.

Isa attempts to participate in the symbolic order of inter-war domestic femininity by employing her embossed hairbrush (a wedding present that signifies both her marital role in society and her position within the class structure, since it is a trinket she habitually uses to impress chambermaids) as a means of penetrating through to the social dimension of her maternal existence in attracting the attention of her infant son. While the window functions here in a similar fashion to its situation Nussbaum's reading of *To the Lighthouse*, the potential for interpersonal solace is explicitly and repeatedly negated. Upon failing to truthfully engage with either of her ordained social roles, Isa withdraws her gaze back to the looking glass, finding there a more reliable and discernible means of processing external reality. This sequence of abortive contact followed by a withdrawal into introspectiveness is repeated later in the novel when, in the company of her father-in-law and his sister, Isa breaks off a conversation on dining arrangements to offer a demonstration of maternal affection:

They were bringing up nets full of fish from the sea; but Isa was seeing – the garden, variable as the forecast said, in the light breeze. Again, the children passed, and she tapped on the window and blew them a kiss. In the drone of the garden it went unheeded. (21)

For Isa, the window-mirror dichotomy is analogous to Fedden's institutional-personal modelling of suicidal behaviour. The window signifies her dysfunctional relationship with her socially constructed self, a self that demands the abdication of her fundamental identity (she is pointedly referred to by both the narrator and other characters as Mrs Giles Oliver – an appellation that effaces all trace of her pre-marital self save her gender.) The circumstances of her initial acquaintance with Giles (turning on the serendipitous entanglement of their fishing lines) aligns her symbolically with the images of captured and decaying fish that recur throughout the text, such as for

example, in Mrs Swithin's method for ascertaining the freshness of fish: "You know if they're fresh because they have lice in their scales." (21)

Given the clarity of the symbolic correlation Woolf draws between matrimony and angling, the notion of Isa's "freshness" being gauged by her capacity to provide sustenance for parasitic external "lice" entities (an image that may be read once more as a signifier of both sexual desirability and of the capacity to bear children) carries stark implications for Isa, whose "faded peacocks" upon her dressing gown suggest a corresponding regression from the sphere of limited influence accorded her under patriarchal hegemony. It is also highly suggestive in light of Woolf's own biographical history that Mrs Swithin has, herself, attained this perspective through her experience, not in the first instance as a wife, but as a sister.⁶⁵ In her advancing years, Miss Swithin is still haunted by "the ghost" of a youthful episode involving her elder brother, an encounter that entailed the violation of her personal and possibly sexual being. Whereas Isa's personhood and name were appropriated by her husband upon her marriage, for Lucy Swithin (who bears the sobriquet of "Cindy") this liberty was taken in childhood by her brother. As the two siblings inwardly recall:

It was by this name that he had called her when they were children; when she had trotted after him as he fished, and had made the meadow flowers into tight little bunches, winding one long grass stalk round and round and round. Once, she remembered, he had made her take the fish off the hook herself. The blood had shocked her – 'Oh!' she had cried – for the gills were full of blood. And he had growled: 'Cindy!' The ghost of that morning in the meadow was in her mind as she replaced the hammer

⁶⁵ In her biography of Woolf Lyndall Gordon asserts that the childhood molestation Woolf suffered at the hands of her half-brothers blighted the rest of her life and contributed to her vehement resistance against authoritarian masculinity. See Lyndall Gordon, *Virginia Woolf, a Writer's Life* (New York: Norton, 1984), 119.

where it belonged on one shelf; and the nails where they belonged on another; and shut the cupboard about which, for he still kept his fishing tackle there, he was still so very particular. (15/16)

In contrast with the quasi-comical fishing mishap that legally and sexually united Giles and Isa, Lucy is forced to participate in this ritual of sexual initiation. “The blood” that shocked her (a possible coded reference to loss of virginity) signifies the initial instance whereby Lucy’s brother “struck a blow at her faith.” (19) This scene is remarkable for its juxtaposition of the elderly siblings’ divergent memories of childhood: for Bartholomew, an idyllic vision of sororal devotion, for Lucy the trauma of incestuous violence. Beneath the surface of their relationship lies the recollection of a shared childhood where “brother and sister, flesh and blood was not a barrier, but a mist.” (19) For Lucy Swithin, this traumatic destruction of childhood trust lingers in the form of a suicidal impulse that she keeps suppressed through her religious faith and community involvement. While she recognises that “it was always ‘my brother ... my brother’ who rose from the depths of her lily pool” (148) (referring to the imaginative association she draws between her memories of childhood abuse and the beacon of self-destructive energies at the heart of Pointz Hall), her position within the spiritual and cultural community offers her a means of survival. Towards the novel’s close, Mrs Swithin, bolstered by the role she has played in the pageant and her Christian faith, gazes into the lily pond and reclaims the traumatic symbol of the fish as one of liberation:

She gazed at the water. Perfunctorily she caressed her cross. But her eyes went water searching, looking for fish. The lilies were shutting; the red lily, the white lily, each on its plate of leaf. Above, the air rushed; beneath was water. She stood between two fluidities, caressing her cross. Faith required hours of kneeling in the early morning ... Then something

moved in the water; her favourite fantail. The golden orfe followed.

Then she had a glimpse of silver--the great carp himself, who came to the surface so very seldom. They slid on, in and out between the stalks, silver; pink; gold; splashed; streaked; pied.

‘Ourselves,’ she murmured. And retrieving some glint of faith from the grey waters, hopefully, without much help from reason, she followed the fish; the speckled, streaked, and blotched; seeing in that vision beauty, power, and glory in ourselves. (147)

Isa’s unconscious intuition of this dimension of Bartholomew and Lucy’s past is intimated in the manner in which her imagination fuses the newspaper article detailing the violent rape of a young girl with the figure of Mrs Swithin holding the hammer and nails: “The same chime followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: ‘The girls screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer.’” (16)

It is at this point of social exile that Isa turns amorously towards the deathly figure of the farmer, Rupert Haines. Patricia Maika’s close analysis of the novel’s myriad allusions to mythological antiquity perceives Haines as a Hades-figure who exerts an enduring fascination over Isa’s repressed artistic sensibility. Maika observes of the novel’s opening scene that

the air in the room is tense with emotion between Isa, the would-be poet struggling to express herself in verse, and Rupert Haines, the mysterious gentleman farmer to whom she is attracted without really knowing why. Haines’s ‘ravaged face,’ his passionate silence, his grey clothes make

him a death figure. He is a farmer, the reaper of the corn in the fields around the house.⁶⁶

Haines' construction as a Grim Reaper-figure is complicated by the fact that he does not stalk but rather is, himself stalked persistently by a transfixed Isa. During the pageant's interval, Isa's ruminations on Haines mysterious attraction comingle with her recollection of a half-remembered folk song prompted by the echoing refrain of the malfunctioning gramophone:

'Dispersed are we,' she murmured. And held her cup out to be filled. She took it. 'Let me turn away,' she murmured, turning, 'from the array'—she looked desolately round her—'of china faces, glazed and hard. Down the ride, that leads under the nut tree and the may tree, away, till I come to the wishing well, where the washerwoman's little boy—' she dropped sugar, two lumps, into her tea, 'dropped a pin. He got his horse, so they say. But what wish should I drop into the well?' She looked round. She could not see the man in grey, the gentleman farmer; nor anyone known to her. 'That the waters should cover me,' she added, 'of the wishing well.' (75)

La Trobe's pageant exhibits art's dual capacities to either engender communal consciousness and collective understanding or to heighten and exacerbate the atomisation and alienation of modernity. It is notably the unscripted and incidental moments of the performance that most fully bring forth these divergent capacities; whereas the ominous intrusion of the aircraft unites the audience in awe and wonder, it is the broken gramophone record with its interminable insistence on the notion of

⁶⁶ Patricia Maika, *Virginia Woolf's 'Between the Acts' and Jane Harrison's Con/spiracy* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987), 19.

dispersal that inspires Isa to drift into morbid reverie and fantasies of death by drowning. The sense of fragmentation implied by the refrain inspires in her a sense of un-moored-ness that craves expression and release in death. Her poetic reconstitution of the old song as a paean to death and Hades is conducted as a substitute for the appearance of the “man in grey”, himself.⁶⁷ The novel thus, differentiates Isa’s suicidal ideation, which transfixes on the “dispersed” quality of LaTrobe’s pageant from Lucy Swithin’s communality of spirit, which derives meaning from the notion of art as an expression of “ourselves”. In this way, Woolf acknowledges the dual potentialities of art to either deepen or diminish social alienation.

Kristeva writes in her study of melancholia and suicide that

for the speaking being life is a meaningful life; life is even the apogee of meaning. Hence if the meaning of life is lost, life can easily be lost: when meaning shatters, life no longer matters.⁶⁸

This chapter considers how two writers, both of whom were subject to suicidal ideation at multiple points in their lives, interacted with the dominant discourses of the wartime and post-war period, to render the introspective natures of egoistic/personal suicide intelligible within the public sphere. These richly symbolic texts moreover highlight how the suicidal imagination can form the basis for a framework of interpersonal restoration at a time of grave fragmentation and disillusionment. The language and imagery of suicide becomes not merely a means of escaping the challenges of wartime and post-war society but points the way towards a meaningful way of articulating them. Suicide combines intelligibility with a protean capacity to disrupt the frames through which it is read, making it a language of resistance whereby, “the subject who is

⁶⁷ Woolf also applied the moniker of “the man in grey” to the phantasmagorical appearances of Septimus Warren Smith’s deceased comrade, Evans, in *Mrs Dalloway*.

⁶⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 6.d

produced in and through discourse can act by articulating words in contexts that invest them with new meaning.”⁶⁹

In their last novels, Virginia Woolf and Stevie Smith explore the notion of egoistic suicide as an active critique of a nationalistic and misogynistic social order whose oppressive structures constitute, in themselves, a form of institutionalised suicide as they tend inevitably towards war. They associate this political rendering of suicide with the role of art more generally as a vehicle of both imaginative communality and of isolation. While Smith represents suicide as a triumphant escape that liberates the subject from society’s problematic interpellations by exiling her from the realm of language and ideology, Woolf juxtaposes the condition of loneliness and despair that produces personal suicide with the necessary communality of purpose that is ignited by war. Durkheim writes that:

When society is strongly integrated, it holds individuals under its control, considers them at its service and thus forbids them to dispose wilfully of themselves. Accordingly, it opposes their evading their duties to it through death.⁷⁰

The chapter that follows will progress the forgoing analysis of suicide’s literary construction as an expression of the individual’s relationship to society in 1940s Britain by examining texts that further destabilise the division between socially sanctioned and socially prohibited forms of voluntary death.

⁶⁹ K.D. Magnus, “The unaccountable subject: Judith Butler and the social conditions of intersubjective agency,” *Hypatia* 21, no.2 (2009): 83.

⁷⁰ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 168.

Chapter II

Altruistic Suicide:

Fraternities of the Dead

I accept death. It is not danger that I accept. It is not combat that I accept. It is death. I have learned a great truth. War is not the acceptance of danger. It is not the acceptance of combat. For the combatant it is at certain moments the pure and simple acceptance of death.¹

– Antoine Saint-Exupéry, *Flight to the Arras* (1942).

This chapter approaches altruistic suicide from two key perspectives: the soldier and the martyr.² Following an initial overview of socially mandated suicide and its pertinence to Second World War narratives of military and civilian self-sacrifice, I elaborate on how each figure constitutes a focal point for wartime anxieties of corporeality, autonomy and masculinity. The first section concerns the figure of the aerial combatant as constructed across several memoirs, short stories and fictionalised accounts of the Second World War. The distinctive suicidal mystique that attached to the airman in 1940s culture is traceable, I argue, to a network of discursive practices rooted in a biopolitical militarised masculinity that stressed the pilot's ambiguous status in relation

¹ Antoine Saint Exupéry, *Flight to the Arras*, translated by Lewis Galantière (Harcourt: Brace & Company, 1986), 89.

² The approach taken here is in recognition of the fact that literature on altruistic suicide tends to fall into two broad groupings, as identified by Stack and Bowman: military-oriented and civilian oriented. In Steven Stack and Barbara Bowman, *Suicide Movies: Social Patterns* (USA: Hogrefe Publishing, 2011), 199.

to binaries of agency and submission and embodiment and disembodiment.³ As the following textual analyses highlight, the pilot exists at a point of intersection between war's individualistic and collective formulations of selfhood. This cultural positioning complicates his relationship to his own mortality so that he is perpetually caught between public and private discourses of death. As shall be elaborated, such tensions are repeatedly expressed through the language and imagery of personal/egoistic versus institutional/altruistic modes of suicide. The second section of the chapter proposes that the construction of political and religious martyrdom in the novels of Arthur Koestler and Graham Greene is inextricably bound up with both authors' obsession with the political and spiritual implications of self-annihilation. From the analyses conducted in both sections there emerges an overarching sense that war exposes a zone of uncertainty between public duty and private desire such that the social and moral distinctions between personally motivated self-slaughter and heroic death are blurred.

The range of authors analysed here are preoccupied with the mechanisms through which the body of the deceased martyr/hero is inscribed by external political forces (an anxiety that is resonant across multiple forms of suicide, as demonstrated in the earlier analysis of Plomer's "The Prisoner"). While several of the texts dealt with address the concept of noble death with a self-consciously subversive mindset, these same concerns are also palpable in the more earnest popular memoirs of the period. Richard Lumford constructs his autobiography, *My Father's Son* (1949) as a didactic celebration of biopolitical self-negation wherein the hyper-regimentation of the militarised male body provides the basis for its narrator's enraptured fantasies of oblivion. While Lumford's memoir is unconventionally direct and effusive in its

³ I am influenced here by the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics as a form of power that through its authoritative apprehension of the body induces among subjects self-regulation and conformity to standards designated by experts. Such standards by necessity entail the stigmatisation of states of being and embodiment that lie outside the sanctioned ideal.

endorsement of suicidality as an official component of wartime masculinity, Roald Dahl utilises the uncanny to subvert this paradigm in his short stories, “They Shall Not Grow Old” and “Death of an Old Old Man”. Both stories, though written during the war, were withheld from publication until 1945 (appearing respectively in the March and September issues of *The Ladies Home Journal*) reportedly because of their disturbingly pessimistic outlook.⁴ In both stories Dahl explores the self-annihilating imagination of the fighter pilot in relation to the fantasies of disembodied agency ingrained within the experience of aerial combat. Following on from this, the first part of the chapter concludes with an analysis of Richard Hillary’s novelistic memoir, *The Last Enemy* (1942). I attempt not only to evaluate Hillary’s stridently individualistic portrayal of the so-called generation of “long-haired boys” (an elect group of whom he counted himself the last surviving member), but also to unravel the circumstances of the text’s pervasive mythical legacy throughout the 1940s. While this thesis makes no historical claim as to the circumstances of Hillary’s death months after the work’s publication and avoids perpetuating the theories of suicide that circulated in its aftermath, it does seek to trace the rapidity and forcefulness with which such speculations arose and bonded with the Hillary myth to the broader outline of the fighter pilot as an emblem of a self-destructive mythos. I ultimately move to examine the ways in such a mythos was mobilised during the 1940s to support a variety of political and philosophical causes.

The second part of this chapter carries forth this theme of altruistic suicide as a site of political inscription, noting within the case of martyrdom the uniquely visceral role of the body in this process. Set in a fictionalised analogue of Stalinist Russia,

⁴ Donald Sturrock, *Storyteller: The Authorised Biography of Roald Dahl* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 253.

Arthur Koestler's novel, *Darkness at Noon* (1940) confronts its protagonist, an imprisoned member of the revolutionary "old guard", with the problematic duality of revolutionary martyrdom as a personal as well as public act. The insoluble tension between both of these facets and the awakening of an individualistic consciousness in him precipitates the unravelling of the political zealot's philosophy and mirrors Koestler's own vision of the death of belief. Finally, Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940) marks a pivotal moment in the author's career-long dissection of the spiritual implications of self-annihilation. My reading of this novel explores the ways in which Greene attempts to decipher martyrdom's performative nature in addition to its higher spiritual import. As shall become apparent, altruistic suicide is a theoretical model *against* (rather than through) which these texts fashion the self-sacrificial act. Before elaborating further on this point, it is worth revisiting the core underpinnings of the concept itself as well as its contentious utility as a model that destabilises the moral and social categories of suicide and heroism.

As already evinced in the previous chapter's discussion of the publicity following Virginia Woolf's death, suicide in wartime carries an intensified burden of signification that typically overrides the act's private dimension. This stigma is not, however, uniformly allocated across all modalities of self-slaughter. While the war bolstered a hegemony that looked unfavourably on acts perceived as self-indulgent or solipsistic, it equally created ample context for suicides of obligation among its militarised subjects.⁵ The military sphere remains in Durkheim's estimation one of the few areas of modern life in which the essential conditions for altruistic suicide are still in place.⁶ In contrast with the alienation and fragmentation that ferments egoistic

⁵ In this chapter, I use the term "suicides of obligation" interchangeably in with "altruistic suicide" to emphasise the moral imperative that undergirds such acts.

⁶ Durkheim writes: "this is the suicide of lower societies in survival among us because military morality itself is in certain aspects a survival of primitive morality." *Suicide*, 198.

suicides, the altruistic model arises in social groupings where “the ego is not its own property, where it is not itself, [and] where the goal of conduct is exterior to itself.”⁷ Durkheim traces the phenomenon to hyper-integrated communities which afford the individual minimal opportunity to cultivate an autonomous persona or sense of self-worth; it has since been aligned with atavistic tribalism and orientalist visions of the other (with applications ranging from the study of Indian suttee to contemporary discussions of the suicide bomber).⁸

Altruistic suicide also represents a site of contention within the field of moral philosophy. In his consideration of the nature of Socrates’ death, R.G. Frey elucidates the revolutionary potential of reconciling the traditionally opposed categories of suicide and heroic self-sacrifice.

‘Socrates died a noble and dignified death and suicide is ignoble and undignified.’ On the contrary; the fact that Socrates died a noble and dignified death does not show that he did not commit suicide, but rather that suicide need not be ignoble and undignified.⁹

This elimination of the socially constructed membrane dividing what Broz and Münster, among others, have identified as the quintessential manifestation of “bad death”, and a form of voluntary death that is decreed valiant and laudable within the cultural hegemony is highly provocative in its intermingling of impure and pure categories of violence.¹⁰ If all forms of deliberate self-slaughter (whether personally or

⁷ *Ibid*, 179.

⁸ For an examination of the orientalist underpinnings of this typology, see Anisha Datta, “The ‘Other’ in Sociological Canons: Reading the Trinity through Critical Post-colonial Lens,” In *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 33, no.6, accessed February 3, 2018, DOI: [10.1080/07256868.2012.735108](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2012.735108) which reflects on the role of the concept of altruistic suicide in shaping western sociological understandings of Hindu suttee.

⁹ R. G. Frey, “Did Socrates Commit Suicide?” *Philosophy* 53, no.203 (1978): 108.

¹⁰ Broz and Münster write: “What makes most suicides ‘bad’ deaths seems to be the agentive decision to end one’s life, that is the will to die, or the act of giving in to the “death wish” as Freudians would call it.” As this chapter demonstrates, however, in the case of altruistic suicide this agentive element is crucial to the affirmation of the British militarised subject as a liberal, autonomous entity distinct from the

publicly motivated) are to be commonly identified as points along a spectrum of private and public suicidality, then the social hierarchies which condemn one variety of suicidal death as ignominious and another as heroic are undermined. This is particularly the case where the death in question appears to occupy an ambivalent space between altruism and egoism, or where the motivations of the suicidal actor are opaque (as shall be examined within the context of the fighter pilot). Durkheim anticipates the iconoclastic potential of his concept of altruistic suicide in his call for moral uniformity in the appraisal of all forms of self-destruction. To this end, he speculates that “every sort of suicide is then merely the exaggerated or deflected form of a virtue”.¹¹ The suicidal actor seeks to mitigate or end suffering through his death. While the egoistic suicide achieves this by removing himself from a world that is alien and distressing to him, the altruistic suicide uses his death to further a cause he believes to be just. For Durkheim, a critic of capitalist modernity and the cult of the individual, the sacrifice of one’s life to a communal or ideological purpose does not necessarily warrant greater moral standing than a death embraced for individualistic reasons. Indeed, he undermines altruistic suicide’s claim to moral superiority by indicating that the individual who sets no more value upon his life than that of another may be construed as incompatible with fundamental modern values of humanistic autonomy.

Durkheim appears to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of the distinction between various forms of voluntary death in his rhetorical demand: “When does a motive cease to be sufficiently praiseworthy for the act it determines to be called

soullessly portrayed Nazi enemy. A 2013 sociological study by Rottman, Keleman and Young confirmed that the enduring stigma surrounding suicide stems not from harm-based concerns pertaining to family or loved ones but rather the perception of suicide as “immoral to the extent that it is considered impure.” Significantly, this purity-based finding proved consistent among religious conservatives and non-religious liberals alike. Ludek Broz and Daniel Münster, “The Anthropology of Suicide: Ethnography and the Tension of Agency,” 6; Joshua Rottman, Deborah Keleman and Liane Young, “Tainting the soul: Purity Concerns Predict Moral Judgments of Suicide,” *Cognition* 130, no.2 (2014), 217.

¹¹ *Suicide*, 200.

suicide?”¹² Given that societies are wont to separate the opprobrious category of suicide from the publicly lauded self-abnegations of military heroes, the concept of altruistic suicide and its implicit call for moral uniformity in the appraisal of self-destructive behaviour is inevitably a site of controversy. This is partly due to suicide’s anomalous status within dyadic morality, which requires a violator and victim and comprehends external harm as the crux of moral psychology.¹³ The hero or martyr, in embracing and even welcoming mortal harm mediated through an external agency, challenges this paradigm but is nonetheless legible within Durkheim’s intention-based construction as a suicide.

This definition once again displays Durkheim’s elision of the performative and embodied dimensions of the suicidal act – in this instance the essential signifying element is located not in the mind of the suicidal actor but in an externalised and abstract principle of group impetus or ideological devotion. While certain authors discussed within this chapter unequivocally embrace this mindset of altruistic suicide as a de-individuated dissolution of the self (as in the case of Richard Lumford’s *My Father’s Son*), there is a more prevalent sense of dissonance among the other texts between the notion of the mortal self-sacrifice as heroic and an underlying undercurrent of personal self-destructive agency. Militarisation thus provided a social framework for the purification of suicidal impulses, a fact which is exploited by several authors of the 1940s who highlight the ease with which suicidal despair can masquerade as selfless gallantry or vice versa. In Graham Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) (discussed at greater length in the second part) a young police inspector in Sierra Leone, driven to

¹² *Ibid*, 199.

¹³ Kurt Gary, Adam Waltz and Liane Young, “The Moral Dyad: A Fundamental Template Unifying Moral Judgement, *Psychological Inquiry: An International Journal for the Advancement of Psychological Theory* 23, no.2 (2012), accessed June 24, 2015 url: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3396360/>.

suicide by debt and despair, writes a final note to his father apologetically lamenting that “it’s a pity I’m not in the army because then I might be killed.”¹⁴ Inspector Pemberton recognises here that his own act of suicide will be read as of a fundamentally different moral character to the death of a soldier on the battlefield or in an aeroplane, yet in drawing this implicit parallel that posits war as a sanctified substitute for suicide, he unwittingly interrogates the legitimacy of the framework that accords nobility to death in battle. If Pemberton can be spiritually exonerated of his suicide (as Greene contemplates within the novel) because of his callow ignorance of the complexities of both this world and the next, is this same doctrine of diminished responsibility applicable to the military men who sacrifice their lives ostensibly in the interests of nationhood and freedom, but whose inner motivation is ultimately and irrecoverably opaque? This same aura of interpretive ambivalence surrounding the concept of military self-sacrifice is evoked in H.E. Bates’ *The Purple Plain* (1947). The protagonist of this novel, suicidal widower Air Commander Forrester, shares with Greene’s Pemberton, a desire “not to give to his parents a more complicated pain” than necessary and thus determines to end his life under a guise of ostentatious valour in his capacity as a fighter pilot. With great irony, Bates reveals that Forrester’s incompetence as a would-be suicide is misread by his peers and superiors as a prodigious aptitude for war:

He seemed suddenly to have a kind of sinister charm about him. He became involved in a series of fantastic escapes until at the end it became inevitably construed in the proper quarters as bravery of a

¹⁴ Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1948), 98/99.

deliberate sort and they gave him a decoration with a magnificent citation declaiming his splendid valour and leadership over Havre.¹⁵

The subversive potential of altruistic suicide as a lens through which alternatively suicide may be morally neutralised or acts of publicly celebrated self-sacrifice demystified has been commented upon by several critics. Leenaars and Wenckstern conclude that “the difference [between these modes of self-annihilation] may not be a psychological difference, but a difference of social taxonomy (order).”¹⁶ Evaluative frameworks that preserve this ethical and ontological distinction between institutional self-sacrifice and individualistic self-slaughter elide by necessity the embodied performative reality of suicide (discussed in my Introductory Chapter) in favour of an intentionality-based categorisation that rests uneasily on the authority of the ultimately unknowable mind of the deceased. In this way, what is espoused as a self-evident distinction of self-destructive typologies is rooted in one of the many “realms of unspeakability” that shape suicide.¹⁷

As has already been alluded to in such real-life cases as the deaths of Alun Lewis, Richard Hillary and Edward Brittain, the soldier’s death may carry its own ambivalent or unspeakable recesses that resist total incorporation into a collective mythos.¹⁸ In the 1949 verse drama, *The Lady’s Not for Burning*, Christopher Fry explores the complexities of suicidal agency and militarised masculinity in a late

¹⁵ H.E. Bates, *The Purple Plain* (London: Methuen, 2006), 12/13. In 1942, Bates began work on another story concerning the mis-readings and slippages incurred by the militarised male body, that would eventually become the novella, *The Triple Echo*. The novella (which Bates did not complete until 1968 and publish until 1970) concerns a young army deserter who assumes a female persona to evade detection. When his ploy is unearthed, he is shot dead by his lover in an apparent mercy-killing.

¹⁶ Antoon A. Leenaars and Susanne Wenckstern. “Altruistic Suicides: Are they the Same or Different from Other Suicides?” *Archives of Suicide Research* 8 (2004), 135.

¹⁷ Ian Marsh furthers this rejection of suicide and its internal delineations as transhistorical and immutable by charting the concept’s varied genealogy from the venerated suicides of late Republican Rome in the first century AD to the gradual accrual of religious, psychiatric, legal and psychological understandings that shaped its development to the present day. In Ian Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth*, 7, 15.

¹⁸ See Introductory Chapter I, footnote 30 and Chapter I, footnote 93.

medieval context through the death-seeking soldier-protagonist, Thomas Mendip. Jaded and disillusioned after several years of fighting, Mendip considers himself a prisoner within his own fleshy carcass (“body’s hell”) and appears at the mayor’s townhouse demanding to be hanged. When challenged by the clerk that nobody could possibly wish such a death on himself, Mendip retorts with the accusation:

You don’t make any allowance for individuality.
How do you know that out there, in the day or night
According to latitude, the entire world
Isn’t wanting to be hanged?¹⁹

Mendip’s profound cosmic pessimism provokes a yearning for death, yet, in a thirteenth century analogue of the phenomenon of “suicide by cop”, the soldier demands that this corporeal release be delivered through the organs of punitive state brutality. The role of the state and its regimenting structures in inspiring and ultimately facilitating suicidality among its subjects is the play’s central theme; this is reinforced by the epigraph, a quote from a convicted convict who in 1947 falsely confessed to murder in the hope of being executed. The convict explained that “in the past I wanted to be hung. It was worthwhile being hung to be a hero, seeing that life was not really worth living.”²⁰

Fry’s setting of these suicidal themes against a backdrop of post-war medievalism offers intriguing points of cultural comparison, particularly in light of the fact that 1940s heroic iconography had been dominated by the “knight of the skies” in the form of the RAF pilot. In its literal presentation of a disaffected death-craving knight, the play examines from a historical remove contemporary issues of suicide and the militarised body. As the texts to be discussed attest, suicide was not only, as Emma

¹⁹ Christopher Fry, *The Lady’s Not for Burning: A Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.6

Newlands suggests, “the ultimate act of reclaiming one’s own body” for bored and disaffected recruits in the Second World War;²¹ it became for many the imaginative framework through which a soldier conceptualised his perilous occupation.

Altruistic suicide has maintained a steady identity throughout twentieth century popular culture as a male preserve.²² Within the context of the 1940s, the gendered allocation of this form of suicide is an integral component of the construction of hegemonic masculinities; as Stack and Bowman note, altruistic suicides “tend to have a heroic character. Hence the cultural message contained herein is that men are perceived to be more heroic than women.”²³ Henry Romilly Fedden’s speculation his 1938 study (discussed in the previous chapter), that the distinction between personal and institutional modes of suicide is hazily sustained by a system of social mores which themselves arguably derive “from a false chain of argument” resonates throughout the popular culture of the war. A rare example of female altruistic suicide occurs in the final act of the 1942 Alberto Cavalcanti film, *Went the Day Well?* Loosely based on the Graham Greene short story, “The Lieutenant Died Last” (1940), the film depicts the invasion of an idyllic rural English village by German forces, unleashing, in the final act, a violent uprising by a resident populace comprised chiefly of women, children and the elderly.²⁴ A scene in which an elderly postmistress bludgeons a young German soldier to death with an axe is particularly brutal in this regard, while the final siege of a country house depicts the young women of the village taking a sporting pleasure in shooting the enemy.

²¹ Emma Newlands, *Civilians into Soldiers: War, the Body and British Army Recruits, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 74.

²² Stack and Bowman observe a consistent trend throughout the twentieth century film whereby “male suicides are twice as likely to be portrayed as altruistic than female suicides”. This notable disparity is traced in their analysis to the large concentration of altruistic suicides within predominantly male-centred military narratives. In *Suicide Movies*, 218.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Went the Day Well?* DVD. Directed by Alberto Cavalcanti. Produced by Ealing Studios. Performed by Leslie Banks and Elizabeth Allan. 2006.

Aside from serving a propagandist function as a cautionary admonition for vigilance on the Home Front and an exaltation of British resilience in the face of adversity, *Went the Day Well?* is a vividly rendered fantasy of transgression. Cavalcanti's commitment to realism in his depiction of a village community's transformation from passivity to bloodthirsty valour eschews the privileging of individual narratives in favour of a communal focus. By taking this distant sociological perspective of the village and its inhabitants, the film can be seen to support Bataille's assertion that peace-time taboos derive their existence from the given instances wherein their enactment is deemed socially admissible and bolsters the notion of war as a purifying entity that reconstitutes what was once abominable as virtuous. While Bataille's theory indicates that war requires a contingent mandating of murder, transforming killing into a social endeavour worthy of commemoration and imitation, the film demonstrates that this theory is also applicable to the taboo of suicide, which, when correctly assimilated into the hegemonic war narrative, may be configured as selfless heroism. An understated scene amid the final siege sees the lady of the manor, Mrs Fraser (Marie Lohr) pick up a live hand-grenade and smother its explosion with her body to protect the children she has taken into her care, thereby, in the words of Simon Heffer, "redeeming her class."²⁵ Heffer's assessment of Mrs Fraser's act of self-destruction highlights the deliberate positioning of her death within the context of the collective war effort. Disturbing as her mechanical acceptance of death is, it is an act of altruistic suicide largely divested of its individualistic character and is consequently incorporated into the film's overarching mythology of group heroism with relative ease. In this sense, the film sidesteps the complexities of assimilating the individualised implications of altruistic suicide into its propagandistic narrative by attributing the act

²⁵ Simon Heffer, "Went the Day Well?" *British Cinema of the 40s*. BBC Radio 3, September 13, 2010.

to maternal motivations – something which exists independently of the symbolic order of nationhood.

Altruistic suicide is defined by moral ambivalence. Even more so than Durkheim's other typologies, it relies upon a set of citational social cues to accord it an accepted air of moral legitimacy and identity.²⁶ Furthermore, the concept, which has been critically utilised to encompass a plurality of scenarios from early Christian martyrdom to the practice of suttee to contemporary analysis of the suicide bomber, intersects with numerous forms of obligation. This multidimensionality is highlighted by Diego Gambetta in his definition of suicide missions as

belong[ing] to a family of actions in which people go to the extremes of self-sacrifice in the belief that by doing so they will best further the interests of a group or the cause they care about and identify with. This family of self-sacrificial actions has several members, among them religious martyrdom, self-immolation, hunger strikes, and war heroism – actions that humans have carried out since biblical times.²⁷

Gambetta's invocation of the concept of family is salient on several levels. First, it recognises altruistic suicide as equally (if not more so than more immediately understood forms of personal suicide) bound within a framework of performative citationality. By this, I mean that the performance of the suicide mission is conceptually dependent upon a pre-existing genealogy of embodied self-sacrificial acts. Jaworski's assertion that "in order to kill oneself, a person must draw on already existing meanings

²⁶ A stark example of the enduring contingency and contentiousness of altruistic suicide as a concept may be discerned in the central argument and vitriolic reception of Susan Sontag's essay following the suicide attack on the New York World Trade Center on September 11 2001. Sontag's assertion that "in the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards" suggests a Durkheimian determination to isolate the self-destructive act from the political and nationalistic discursive practices that shape its orthodox perception. In Susan Sontag, "The Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, September 24 (2001): 32.

²⁷ Diego Gambetta, "Can We Make Sense of Suicide Missions?" *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 270.

of suicide” is thus applicable to the cultural construction of heroic death.²⁸ In the case of the aerial combatant, as shall be seen, such citationality is detectable in the “knights of the sky” self-fashioning that views chivalric death as the disinterested surrender of one’s life to an arbitrary game in which luck plays the dominant role.²⁹ Gambetta’s linking of the plurality of altruistic suicides to a familial structure also has a more literal resonance in the frequent centrality of parental figures, whether literal or symbolic, in the shaping of suicides of obligation. Indeed, as has already been noted in the cases of Greene’s Pemberton and Bates’ Forrester, the fear of parental opprobrium and shame is frequently presented as a motivating factor for young men to transmute personal suicide into a form that is legible (within a citational framework of pre-existing exemplars) as heroic death and therefore more readily assimilable into a collective language of mourning. In Grinker and Spiegel’s 1945 study of war neuroses, the centrality of the father is deemed integral to the formation of an optimum military consciousness in which the soldier “seeks to recapitulate the father’s experience and perhaps outshine him.”³⁰ British propagandistic portrayals of self-sacrifice were, however, explicit in differentiating the essentially individualistic quality of this militaristic enthusiasm by localising it in literal parental figures (in contrast with the abject submission of Nazi troops to the abstraction of a “Fatherland”).³¹ The supplanting of the father by an ideological or state patriarch is presented as one of the essential components of fascist ideology. Rex Warner’s *The Aerodrome* (1941) presents a dystopian vision of a rural

²⁸ Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide*, 42.

²⁹ While lauding the courage and urbanity of young RAF pilots, C.S. Lewis lamented in 1940 that the seductive and superficial appropriation of chivalry’s iconography to present aerial combat as cleaner and more dignified than the trenches of the First World War was based on a “pernicious lie”; indeed, he makes clear that the chivalric codes were made necessary within medieval society to constrain the brutal bloodlust that had been unleashed on the battlefield. In C.S. Lewis, “The Necessity of Chivalry,” in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*, ed. Walter Hopper (London: Fount, 1986), 309/310.

³⁰ Roy R. Grinker and John P. Spiegel, *Men Under Stress* (Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1945), 41.

³¹ This dichotomy is illustrated at several points in *Went the Day Well?*, particularly in one scene in which a German soldier is shown to be incapable of conceptualising his own sons at home in terms other than as a proud source of fuel for the Nazi War machine.

England that has succumbed to such a doctrine through the unchecked spread of a militaristic sensibility. Here the symbolic father figure of the fascistic Vice Air Marshall demands the suicidal obedience of his pilots exhorting them to

please put [your parents and your homes] out of your minds directly. For good or evil you are yourselves, poised for a brief and dazzling flash of time between two annihilations. Reflect, please, that “parenthood”, “ownership”, “locality” are the words of those who stick in the mud of the past to form the fresh deposit of the future. And so is “marriage”. Those words are without wings. I do not care to hear an airman use them.³²

Self-sacrifice within the context of a paternal relationship in which a literal father or father-figure either inspires or takes upon himself the act of generative self-incurred violence is a key component of British literary constructions of heroic death.³³ Even the ubiquitous figure of the boyishly ebullient RAF fighter was comingled with a nuanced and self-aware recognition of the personal sacrifice and unfavourable odds of survival entailed by the office. As Bernhard Rieger notes:

These narratives established a powerful contrast between the ethos guiding British military aviators and the prevalent image of ‘German

³² Ironically, the Vice Air Marshall’s draconian reign is brought to an end and intergenerational harmony restored when he is exposed not simply as a notional patriarch but as the literal father of the novel’s protagonist. See Rex Warner, *The Aerodrome* (London: Vintage Classics, 2007), 178.

³³ This applies not only to novels of militaristic self-sacrifice but also to representations of ecclesiastical martyrdom; in Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*, discussed in the second part of this chapter, the priest’s illicit siring of a daughter, while blasphemous, offers a gateway to a true comprehension of mortal suffering and fear. In becoming a father in the lay sense of the word, he comes to more truthfully embody the official religious office under which he is called Father. Another powerful example of the notional father-figure as a springboard to self-sacrifice is seen in the David Lean naval film, *In Which We Serve* (1942). Early in the film, a fearful young stoker (played by Richard Attenborough) abandons his post during an attack. Rather than subjecting the boy to chastisement or a court martial, the fatherly Captain Kinross (played by Noël Coward) takes the blame upon himself and turns the incident into a lesson for the entire ship on the importance of cooperation. In the final act, the stoker redeems himself by sacrificing his life and is assured by Kinross in his final moments that his parents will be proud of his honourable death.

mass psychology'. In short, individuals with identifiable traits and complex emotions made up the British community of warriors, whereas uniformity and discipline dominated in German accounts.³⁴

It was this necessity to combine in the figure of the combatant a willingness to face death with an individualised persona and autonomous imagination that produced a self-imagining of the RAF pilot as a reckless maverick who accepted mortality with a rakish nonchalance. This morbid awareness manifests itself in radically diverse ways, including the macabre bonhomie of the anonymous author of the following rhyme paying tribute to the RAF's 102 (Ceylon) Bomber Squadron:

And when you come to 102
 And think that you will get right through
 There's many a fool who thought like you
 It's suicide but it's fun.³⁵

This glib articulation of a strategy of conquering death's terror by bringing it under one's own control emphatically set the British pilot apart from the cold and humourless resolve of the Nazi soldier as portrayed in propaganda, but it also subverted more explicit forms of military suicidality that had come to cultural prominence during the war, as shall now be considered.

It is untenable to discuss 1940s constructions of altruistic suicide without acknowledging that this period produced the most prolific and pervasive form of coordinated suicide attack in history. Between October 1944 and August 1945, over 3,000 Japanese army and navy pilots killed themselves by crashing their aircraft in the

³⁴ Bernhard Rieger, "From 'Duels in the Clouds' to 'Exterminating Attacks': Legitimising Aerial Warfare in Britain and Germany, 1914–45," in *Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Violence in Historical Perspective*, ed. Stuart Carroll (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 258.

³⁵ Quoted in Chris Goss, *It's Suicide But It's Fun: The Story of Number 102 (Ceylon) Squadron 1917-1956*, 1.

attempt to destroy Allied ships.³⁶ The cultural conception of the aeroplane as the consummate conduit for suicides of obligation may therefore be said to owe much to the iconic figure of the kamikaze. While Ian Hacking's suggestion that the social status of Japanese kamikaze pilots "was pretty much the same as the famed pilots in the Battle of Britain, a young and ... independent-minded elite from old families and the aristocracy with rather conventional loyalties to their nation and their social class,"³⁷ is a somewhat simplistic rendering that fails to take account of the intricate cultural, spiritual and political status of the kamikaze that makes him a figure of historical controversy to this day,³⁸ popular literary representations display a marked ambivalence. This combination of recognition and repudiation is evident within W.E. Johns' novel, *Biggles in the Orient* (1945), a work which on one hand appears to conform to standard imperialistic tropes of romantic literature (as discussed by Higonnet) whereby suicide is racialised and feminised in order to placate an implicitly middle-class, white readership through the purveyance of "a kind of fake 'otherness'," yet on the other hand tentatively acknowledges a degree of kinship between both camps. Higonnet suggests that

so long as suicide remains under a cloud of social or religious opprobrium, writers will displace the gesture to Persia, China, Peru or Kentucky in order to authorise a sympathetic narrative tone, corresponding to more liberal cultural attitudes.³⁹

This broad assertion of an Orientalist Western compulsion to displace the more explicit aspects of its suicidal imagination onto a cultural other offers a basis for reading literary

³⁶ Peter Hill, "Kamikaze, 1943-5," In *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta, 1.

³⁷ Ian Hacking, "The Suicide Weapon," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no.1 (2008), 18.

³⁸ An example of this enduring tension may be discerned in the heated debate in Japan that attended the release of the 2013 Takeshi Yamazaki film, *The Eternal Zero* (in which a man grapples with the historical legacy of his grandfather's service as a kamikaze pilot in the 1940s).

³⁹ Margaret Higonnet, "Frames of Female Suicide", 232.

representations of kamikaze pilots in 1940s British literature as sublimated visions that have much to reveal about the suicidal aura of the Allied fighter pilot. The thorough pursuit of such a project in all its intercultural complexity is a matter for future research beyond the scope of this thesis; however, the example of W.E. Johns' series of adventure stories targeted at adolescent males is indicative of how such covert mirroring can be deployed in the cultural fashioning of the RAF pilot. In *Biggles in the Orient*, the eponymous pilot hero is tasked with solving the mystery of why so many members of a squadron stationed in Burma are crashing out of the sky to their deaths. In the absence of any logical technical explanation for this trend, the intimation that a collective suicidal mania has seized the group is heavily mooted. At the novel's close, Biggles unravels the mystery by chance, discovering the "secret weapon" deployed by the Japanese to be bars of chocolate laced with a sleeping narcotic that each of the dead pilots had gratefully accepted prior to take-off. Upon Biggles' realisation of the truth, an enemy agent masquerading as a steward swiftly and automaton-like disembowels himself to evade interrogation. In this climactic scene, catharsis is achieved through the rational dispelling of the earlier invoked paranoia of ideological and psychological miscegenation. Turning to the Air Commodore, Biggles offers a reassuring intimation of the racialised otherness of the previously undetected enemy, declaring:

that settles any doubt about his nationality. Only a Jap would commit hara-kiri... He'd never dare to tell his boss that he'd failed. That would mean losing face, which is worse than death to a Jap. So he took a short cut to eternity.⁴⁰

This restitution of altruistic suicide as a culturally distanced typology distinct from the individualism of the British air corps is only partial. Towards the novel's close a

⁴⁰ W.E. Johns, *Biggles in the Orient* (London: Armada, 1945), 115/116.

surviving pilot, whose incompetence and hard-drinking set him apart from his fellows earlier in the narrative, is so enraged by the deaths of his comrades that he deliberately flies his aircraft into the enemy bomber, dying in unintended emulation of the kamikaze.

The suicidal mystique of the aerial combatant is traceable not only to the processes of myth-making in which he himself collaborated but also, in starker terms, to the dwindling odds of survival he knowingly embraced with each successive mission. Despite the simplicity and decorum of aerial combat as vaunted by Hillary and Saint-Exupéry (in contrast with the murk and degradation of the trenches of Flanders that had defined the ordeal of the Great War) this clarity of action confronted the pilot with the ever-approaching statistical near-certainty of his own demise. The sense over time that each pilot was simply waiting his “turn” to “go for a Burton” is borne out by Sebastian Faulks’ assertion that

it was not like being in the infantry where, even during the slaughters of the Western Front in 1914-1918, you had a better than even chance of surviving. If you flew more than a certain number of missions in 1940-1 you were not likely to come back.⁴¹

As Gambetta’s study sets out, the concept of the suicide mission extends to certain wartime situations where the overwhelmingly asymmetrical odds of a “David-versus-Goliath” confrontation renders the actor’s position analogous to suicide. This paradigm is certainly applicable to the situation of the RAF airman in the Second World War, for whom the sentence of death, though sometimes deferred, was widely perceived as inevitable. In Frances Partridge’s diary Rollo Woolley, a family friend and fighter pilot-in-training, confirms the prevalence of this self-annihilating sensibility among the

⁴¹ Sebastian Faulks, *The Fatal Englishman: Three Short Lives* (London: Vintage, 1997), 113.

“young men living in the present or the near future” who are fully aware of the “suicidal nature” of their occupation.⁴²

Through the writing of Dahl and Hillary, the balancing of agency and submission through the suicidal idiom will be explored in depth. This analysis begins, however with the somewhat anomalous case of Richard Lumford, a man for whom military service ostensibly provided a welcome pretext for the dissolution of body, mind and agency into the machinery of war.

Richard Lumford’s autobiography,⁴³ *My Father’s Son* takes the form of a redemptive fable of biopolitical militarism in which a defective body is purified and conditionally assimilated into the social symbolic order through the disembodying processes of mechanised warfare. The text’s rhetoric comprises a stark combination of Lumford’s evangelical zeal at his newfound validation within the sphere of heteropatriarchal force relations with a paternalistic introduction by Sir Harold Nicolson praising Lumford as an exemplar of the rehabilitative potential of the homosocial military sphere. Such flourishes may, to the modern eye, draw somewhat disquieting analogues with the contemporary language of so-called “conversion therapy”. The text and its introduction emphasise Lumford as a corporeal exile from the ideal order of masculinity. A physically frail homosexual aesthete prone to bouts of debilitating illness, he is plagued by self-loathing until enlistment in the RAF provides him with an opportunity “to sink my consciousness into the mass,” and enact an erasure of the problematic “I” through a process of dilution. While, as shall be seen in the

⁴² Rollo Woolley was himself killed during a Spitfire operation in December 1942. Frances’ diary response to the news of her friend’s death, recorded on the 11th January 1943, corroborates his death-bound construction of the pilot: “I felt no surprise, Rollo always seemed to have a doomed air, as if he knew himself not to be long for this earth.” *A Pacifist’s War: Diaries 1939-1945*, 65, 155.

⁴³ Lumford’s real name was Richard Rumbold; the pseudonym was adopted for the book’s publication. He trained and served as a bomber pilot until he was discharged in 1943 for recklessly flying under the Menai bridge as a stunt. He died, possibly by suicide, in 1961, falling from a balcony in Palermo. For a similarly oriented memoir of the RAF’s potential to incorporate marginalised bodies through a dialectic of dissolution, see Esmond Quinterley, *My Airman Days* (London: The Fortune Press, 1949).

writings of Richard Hillary among others, aerial combat provided some flyers with a portal to manhood and self-actualisation through an ethic of radical individualism, for Lumford, the man-making properties of war lay precisely in its opposite tendency to de-individualise the subject. He writes:

The multiplication of oneself into anonymity, the possessing of nothing of one's own... To forget oneself, to merge and sink oneself into the group – that was my ambition.⁴⁴

The joy of self-erasure that Lumford experiences throughout the memoir (experienced afresh with each new reminder, such as the identical beds and kit of the airmen), is coded within the text as the transition from a feminine form of suicidality to a masculine mode. Lumford's mother, who committed suicide when he was a child bears the brunt of the blame within the text for her son's physical and sexual difference to the hegemonic masculine norm, a perspective emphasised both by Nicolson's didactic commentary and Lumford's own recollection. Recalling the loss of his psychologically unstable mother to suicide, Lumford makes the bald assertion that "she is, perhaps always was, dead to me (and now, indeed, presumably as a consequence, so are women generally)". (33) The feminine maternal element is thus represented as threatening, while it is only through assimilation into a masculinised community and therefore a rejection of the feminine that the protagonist may purge himself of his perceived physical and sexual 'otherness'. "Masculinities," as Graham Dawson asserts in his cultural study of empire and adventure "are lived in the flesh, but fashioned in the imagination."⁴⁵ Lumford's memoir appears to support this view in its triumphalist depiction of the reparative effects of the notional camaraderie upon the subject. A 1949

⁴⁴ Richard Lumford, *My Father's Son* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958), 192. Subsequent in-text references are from this edition.

⁴⁵ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

review in *The Spectator* reserved particular praise for its author's willingness "to see himself throughout as a specimen, as the biological product of passive lunacy and selfish eccentricity."⁴⁶ By way of an *apologia* to the memoir, Sir Harold Nicolson's introduction offers a quasi-religious metanarrative wherein Lumford is absolved through his submission to the military family of the RAF. Nicolson writes of his subject:

He entered adolescence with no compass to guide his bewilderment, with the innocent and bisexual interests of a child, and in a turmoil engendered for fame and power and an inability to adjust himself to the external world.⁴⁷

Lumford's boyhood is presented as a period of masochistic anomie in which the subject's fixation on martyrdom (through a quasi-sexual obsession with the violent iconography of Christian self-sacrifice) provides a fleeting sense of imaginative release from his shame and disappointment. Through the discovery of a new symbolic family, however, Lumford achieves his craved-for sacrificial cause that enables him to displace the trauma of a turbulent family life with the validation of the group's collective purpose.

I felt it later on during my brief spell of operations, and sometimes indeed as we stepped into our aircraft we would signal it to one another with a shy smile, this sense that perhaps our individual destinies were, for a brief moment or two, being identified with a universal destiny. And that is something which, after all, one craves for: beside it nothing matters, not even death itself. We would all die peacefully and gaily if

⁴⁶ Archive, "Lumford," *The Spectator*, March 11, 1949, 30. Accessed July 28 2018 <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/11th-march-1949/30/lumford>

⁴⁷ Harold Nicolson, "Introduction," in Richard Lumford, *My Father's Son*, 20.

we could feel ourselves part of this whole. For our individualities would then cease to matter to us. (196)

It is highly unlikely, as Martin Francis observes, that Lumford's crew members would have concurred wholeheartedly with this sentiment; indeed, such an enthusiastic espousal of military de-individuation would have been an embarrassing affront to the myth of the fighter pilot as a distinct persona.⁴⁸ Partly an act of psychoanalytic self-diagnosis, part patriotic fable of masculine redemption, Lumford's memoir presents altruistic suicide as a means of both sublimating and atoning for the bodily impulses and frailties that exile its subject from the social and familial hegemonic structures of 1940s Britain. As an effeminate homosexual subject to extended bouts of physical debilitation, Lumford appears from early childhood to be irrevocably exiled from the hegemonic masculine body politic until the outbreak of war presents him with an opportunity for legitimation through imaginative extinction.

Lumford's eager self-erasure is facilitated not only by the homosocial camaraderie of the RAF but the technocratic nature of aerial combat. Francis highlights this dimension as a characteristic feature of military flying:

As warfare became more impersonal in the modern age, there was increasingly less emphasis on the attributes of the individual warrior. Instead, military psychologists insisted that the 'group personality' of the combat unit was now the critical source of martial prowess.⁴⁹

While Hillary's engagement with the myth-making forces of literature are directed outwards, Lumford's writings demonstrate the powerful impact of the military uniform on an individual flier's self-perception. The peculiar malleability of the combatant's

⁴⁸ Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 37.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 32.

physical and social identities arises in part from the sense of slippage between the lived experience of war and its mythological representation. Elaine Scarry accounts for this sense of dislocation between ideological and corporeal formation by observing that the soldier

dwells every day in the midst of determinate wounds and indeterminate meaning... As the soldier surveys the incontestable bullet-holes in his canteen, a colonel rides by and announces a French victory; the soldier swoons with elation; only later does he realise that the words he has heard do not have the same substance as the pain in his arm...⁵⁰

The existential distress the soldier suffers on account of the debasement of language and its reduced capacity to convey personal experience is comparable, Scarry argues, to what Freud considers the depressing effect of war's effective sanctioning of lies.⁵¹ A consequence of this turmoil can be seen in the idiomatic language of understatement that evolved among pilots, exhibited in combatant narratives such as Arthur Gwynne Browne's *Gone for a Burton* (1945) (the title of which is, itself, RAF slang for "presumed dead"). This bifurcation of day-to-day existence between a corporeal world of wounds and a public discourse of heroic sacrifice results in an unravelling of the combatant's understanding of his own body as discrete and whole. As has been seen in the case of Lumford, this unravelling offers opportunities for new formulations of the body. Turning now to Dahl, this potentiality takes on a more complex set of problems.

The cockpit is a threshold of unconsciousness and disembodiment signifying both man's power to transcend his corporeal limitations and his encroaching obsolescence in the face of impending technocracy. In "Death of an Old Old Man" and

⁵⁰ Elaine Scarry *The Body in Pain*, 135.

⁵¹ Sigmund Freud, "Reflections upon War and Death," in *Character and Culture*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1963), 112.

“They Shall Not Grow Old”, Roald Dahl exploits the uncanny potential of this liminal space to portray the pilot as a death-seeking figure. Central to Dahl’s exploration of mechanised self-negation is the phenomenon of blacking out – a temporary unconsciousness typically experienced by flyers on reaching speeds greater than 400 miles per hour – that had grown increasingly prevalent with interwar innovations in airpower. For several commentators blacking out signalled a decisive, even symbolic, shift in the relationship between body, mind and machine within the arena of warfare; no longer curtailed in his aspirations by the limitations of technological advances, the pilot’s sole remaining obstacle was his own body. A 1940 article in *The Times* addressing this “borderline of blackout” emphasised that the new era of warfare demanded more than ever the ability to liberate consciousness from the frailties of the body. The newspaper correspondent suggests that

this point in fighter design may be looked on as one of the most curious yet reached. The barrier to progress seems to be shifting; and the next steps in effective speeds may depend not upon the designs alone but upon [the pilot’s] collaboration with the physiologist. Means must be discovered, if possible for enabling a human being to retain his faculties while turning his aeroplane on a small radius at high speed.⁵²

This corporeal hindrance to the machinery of war was construed by the pacifist John Middleton Murry as a symbolic indictment of the unconscionable inhumanity of such “progress”. In an essay originally published in *The Adelphi* in the same year, he suggested that the denigration of the human body in service of mechanised warfare was symptomatic of a world that had “blacked out” in its obsessive quest for technocratic

⁵² “Air Speed and the Pilot,” *The Times*. March 30, 1940, accessed August 14, 2018, <http://find.galegroup.com/tda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=tcd&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS152909438&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>

ascendency at the expense of the human element. Challenging the romantic perception of aerial combat as a return to a mythical chivalric code of bygone decorum, he portrays the flyer not as a courtly knight but instead as an unnatural ogre of the sky.

... but in those [mediaeval] days, the headless ones were the monster, whom [the] dark hero fought and conquered. Now they are themselves the heroes: and the symbols of modern man.⁵³

The headless heroism of the pilot is in Murry's estimation inherently suspect in that it entails a troubling condescension to the antidemocratic and anti-humanist concepts of blind progress. His call for humanity to "resist blacking-out: simply by refusing to move at the diabolical and inhuman speed of the ubiquitous machine" is echoed in several literary texts of the war, most notably, Rex Warner's dark speculative novel, *The Aerodrome* (1941). In such works the endpoint of the quasi-fascistic worship of technological supremacy is not the all-conquering superman, but his total displacement by the advent of the autonomous drone.

Blacking out and its attendant connotations of diminished agency more broadly signified a rebuttal of the earlier ecstatic prophecies of Futurists such as the poet Marinetti, who in 1912 exalted war's metallisation of man as a triumph of dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metallisation of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the

⁵³ John Middleton Murry, "Blacking Out," in *Looking Before and After: A Collection of Essays*, ed. John Middleton Murry (London: Sheppard Press, 1948), 97.

colonnades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony.⁵⁴

The discussions that evolved through Marinetti's writings found literary expression in the Second World War through the writings of Dahl and Warner among others.

Furthermore, these ideas are linked to the subsequent advances in postmodern studies of the aesthetics of the militarised vanishing body.⁵⁵ In his discussion of the role of technology in disintegrating the personality of the warrior, Paul Virilio conceptualises the military pilot as an inert being,

Tied to his machine, imprisoned in the closed circuits of electronics, the war pilot is no more than a motor-handicapped person temporarily suffering from a kind of possession analogous to the hallucinatory states of primitive warfare.⁵⁶

War, through its legitimisation of homicide and its rationalised approach to violence, transforms men into killing machines; therefore, the advent of technological warfare signifies an expansion of masculine agency in this regard. It would be an oversimplification, however, to subscribe wholly to Marinetti's construction of mankind's relationship with the machinery of war as one of a master and servant. On the contrary, the writing of British pilots demonstrates that the interactions between the organic and inorganic apparatuses of war tend more towards a symbiotic union in this respect. Joanna Bourke argues that, far from creating a clinically detached form of warfare, the mechanisation of combat heralded by fighter pilots, introduced a personal

⁵⁴ Quoted in Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. London: Fontana, 1992, pp.297-306, p.306.

⁵⁵ The cyborg, N. Katherine Hayles argues, first emerged as a cultural artifact in the immediate wake of World War II and is fundamentally rooted in the understanding of the body as an object without intrinsic correlation to the self. In N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

⁵⁶ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, translated by Patrick Camiller (New York: Verso, 1989), 85.

element into the relationship between combatants triangulated through machinery. She writes:

Not only did mythical warriors kill identifiable individuals, they also personified their machines... When pilots who had just bombed a U-boat wondered whether they had 'killed him', they meant the boat. Warriors not only killed identifiable humans, they also slaughtered 'human' machines.⁵⁷

While writers such as Marinetti and Warner represent this development as an erasure of the human spirit through excessive conditioning by the language and physical demands of machinery, Roald Dahl's fantastical imagination portrays the machine as an extension of and expression of human personality. Similarly, the *modus operandi* of the fighter pilot entails a suspension of bodily agency to ensure minimal interference in the symbiotic relationship between mind and flying machine. Standing 6'6" tall, Roald Dahl offers a stark autobiographical insight into the physical incapacitation of the cockpit:

You are in a small metal cockpit where just about everything is made of riveted aluminium. There is a plexiglass hood over your head and a sloping bullet-proof windscreen in front of you. Your right hand is on the stick and your right thumb is on the brass firing-button on the top loop of the stick. Your left hand is on the throttle and your two feet are on the rudder-bar. Your body is attached by shoulder-straps and belt to the parachute you are sitting on, and a second pair of shoulder-straps and a belt are holding you rigidly in the cockpit. You can turn your head and you can move your arms and legs, but the rest of your body is strapped

⁵⁷ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 63/64.

so tightly into the tiny cockpit that you cannot move. Between your face and the windscreen, the round orange-red circle of the reflector-sight glows brightly.⁵⁸

This portrait of agency through immobilisation is legible as what Virilio terms a “suicide of the human body.”⁵⁹ The paradox between the physical and sensory inertia of the strapped down body in the cockpit and the monstrous power and speed of the machine in which that body is entombed is evoked in several of Dahl’s stories. Contrary to Marinetti’s zealous prediction, however, Dahl does not present the relationship between pilot and aircraft as one of triumphant male dominion, but rather one of symbiosis in which the machine element is largely in the ascendant. Across his war writing, Dahl frequently likens the cockpit to a womb, a space in which the “I” may be dispensed with and a pre-Oedipal quiescence obtained. Dahl constructs air combat as an erasure of individuation from the machine, producing a proto-posthumanist fiction in stories such as “Death of an Old Old Man” and “They Shall Not Grow Old.”

Dahl’s narrative strategy in “Death of an Old Old Man” combines displaced focalisation and anthropomorphism to highlight the self-negating force of aerial warfare. The story commences in a first-person confessional mode that discloses the paralysing corporeal insecurities of the narrator, Charlie, a fighter pilot who is blighted by an incipient inner voice – analogous in certain respects to Rubashov’s “grammatical fiction” in *Darkness at Noon* – that threatens to derail his assimilation into the collective body of the air force by bringing him to a consciousness of his individually embodied precariousness. This voice induces anxieties that are both mortal and corporeal, darkly invoking speculations as to

⁵⁸ Roald Dahl, *Going Solo* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), 89.

⁵⁹ Virginia Madsen, “Critical Mass: Interview with Paul Virilio,” *World Art* 1 (1995): 80. 78–82.

how your corpse will look when it is charred, how black it will be and how it will be twisted and brittle, with the face black and the fingers black and the shoes off the feet because the shoes always come off the feet when you die like that.⁶⁰

The emphasis here is not merely on Charlie's death but on the inscription of war's ruination upon the surface of the body that endures beyond death. This embodied aspect of military experience is typically elided in the disembodied discourses of aerial combat, arguably as a means of disavowing the emasculating symptoms of fear.

"Whatever a soldier's rank," Bourke notes, "fear was his persistent adversary and its effects upon the body were particularly evident in wartime."⁶¹

In constructing his likely fate in terms of suicide, the male pilot corrals the myriad potential bleak outcomes of his occupation within the confines of his own masculine agency. The pilot's adoption of the label "suicide" (as opposed to "self-mutilation" or "dismemberment" – two equally likely outcomes) also serves to elide the specific vulnerabilities of the body in this paradigm. It is not only "the conventions of strategic, military and political discussions of war" that are shaped "by a profound disavowal of this embodied nature and the bodily mutilation at its heart".⁶² This disavowal of war's propensity not only to end life but to lacerate the body extends to the self-construction of the Second World War combatant. In her study of British soldiers' attitudes towards wounding, Emma Newlands suggests that fear of the body's divestment of agency (particularly through blinding or castration) often outstripped the fear of death itself among soldiers, with several interviewees declaring an intent to

⁶⁰ Roald Dahl, *Over to You: Ten Stories of Flyers and Flying* (London: Penguin, 2010), 10. All subsequent in-text references are from this edition.

⁶¹ Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London: Virago, 2005), 199/200.

⁶² Kevin McSorley, *War and the Body: Militarisation, Practice and Experience* (London: Routledge, 2012), 3.

commit suicide rather countenance a future of bodily disfigurement.⁶³ Thus, as conceived via a culturally masculinist logos, the concept of suicide is consolatory insofar as it imaginatively brings the burden of the combatant's destiny away from the vulnerabilities of the body, and under the remit of the mind's intentionality. As the ultimate symbol of disembodied agency, the aeroplane is a crucial point of intersection for the imaginative processes of suicide and masculine agency, as is made apparent in the second movement of "Death of an Old Old Man".⁶⁴

Upon entering the cockpit of his aircraft, Charlie's corporeal "I" is suspended as the narration switches to the third person and the body is relegated to a functional apparatus of the aircraft, operating "slowly, mechanically, like clockwork." (15) Shedding his name (he is hereafter referred to only as "the pilot"), identity and humanity, the pilot's series of blackouts bring him towards a state of perfect symbiosis with his machine that facilitates a discarding of the corporeal self in favour of a metallised fantasy of total disembodied agency:

... the muscles of his arms and legs were in the wings and in the tail of the machine so that when he banked and turned and dived and climbed he was not moving his hands and his legs, but only the wings and the tail and the body of the aeroplane; for the body of the Spitfire was the body

⁶³ Newlands focuses in particular on the case of one soldier's fixation on the prospect of sustaining incapacitating leg wounds, in which eventuality he had determined to commit suicide. In Emma Newlands, "Man, Lunatic or Corpse?: Fear, Wounding and Death in the British Army, 1939-1945," in *Men, Masculinities and Male Culture in the Second World War*, eds. Linsey Robb and Juliette Pattinson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 50.

⁶⁴ Dahl's narration in this story bears a notable similarity to an account of near-death experience related in the anonymously authored popular 1941 memoir, *Fighter Pilot*. The flight-lieutenant narrator relates the moment of being shot down by enemy aircraft as one of total corporeal dissociation: "Inside the cockpit I had the most extraordinary sensation of my head being isolated from the rest of my body. I was perfectly conscious, and could hear the rushing hiss of the wind over the cockpit roof. I could see my body before me, and tried with all my strength to move my arms." In Anonymous (Flight-Lieutenant), *Fighter Pilot* (London: Batsford, 1941), 103/104.

of the pilot, and there was no difference between the one and the other.

(15)

The story's final movement takes on an even greater level of corporeal ambiguity as the narrative is now focalised through a euphoric aerial perspective that may either be the ghost of Charlie, looking down upon the plundering of his own corpse by a German pilot, or the anthropomorphised subjectivity of Charlie's now unmanned Spitfire. The morbid ambivalence of tone ghoulishly satirises the propagandistic efforts by several authors and poets of the 1940s to "pastoralise the war-machine."⁶⁵ The placid equanimity of the coasting machine as it surveys a scene of murder below resonates disturbingly with the perils of technocratic blackout raised in Middleton Murry's aforementioned essay.

Nothing will worry me now ... I think I'll go along the hedges and find
some primroses, and if I am lucky I may find some white violets. Then I
will go to sleep. I will go to sleep in the sun. (22/23)

"Death of an Old Old Man" perfectly exemplifies the uncertain fluidities of identity and unconsciousness that define the relationship between the fighter pilot and his aircraft. Through the fantastical transference of warrior-subjectivity from the human to the machine, Dahl furthers Middleton Murry's concept of the headless warrior in suggesting that the self-erasure is not only a by-product of technological progress but a development actively craved by the emotionally scarred combatant. Though not explicitly suicidal in the vein of Bates' Forrester or Fry's soldier, Charlie is nonetheless in quest of a "safe" way of dying via the total submersion of his consciousness into the

⁶⁵ Piette writes that this project produced numerous "heartbreakingly naïve and comic" endeavours to incorporate the machinery of war into an idealised English landscape, many of which deployed sentimental anthropomorphising techniques to cast the soldiers' armaments in a reassuring light. In this regard, Piette draws particular attention in this regard to the work of pastoral poets, Herbert Corby and Desmond Knox-Leet. In Adam Piette, *Imagination at War*, 223.

body of the machine. This paradigm is carried forward in a more overtly self-destructive light in Dahl's "They Shall Not Grow Old".

Dahl's short stories of the Second World War consistently root the pilot's existential horror, not in the certainty of death, but in the possibility of survival. Giving literary expression to Arthur Koestler's dictum that "the survivor is always a debtor",⁶⁶ his work juxtaposes the childlike simplicity of the young soldier's death with the inevitable jaded cynicism that accompanies the burden of embodying a generation's sacrifice.⁶⁷ Both Dahl texts discussed here foreground in their respective titles and shared themes a preoccupation with the incongruous idea of the pilot's post-war future simultaneously summoning up and negating the possibility of a post-war endurance into peaceful dotage. As has been seen in the suggestively acronymous "Death of an Old Old Man" the tantalising possibility of acquiring fifty years more of life carries with it an over-arching sense of doom and instability far more disturbing than mere death. "They Shall Not Grow Old" meanwhile sets up the context for his dark meditation on the dynamics of memory, disembodiment and youth through its intertextual association with Lawrence Binyon's Great War poem, "For the Fallen" (1914).⁶⁸

Embedded in the quasi supernatural military narrative of "They Shall Not Grow Old" is a story that grapples with the meaning of wartime love and fidelity. The central fighter pilot of the story, Fin, announces the night before his disappearance his intention to ask a cabaret performer named Nikki to marry him. The young man is inspired by the

⁶⁶ Arthur Koestler, "The Birth of a Myth: In Memory of Richard Hillary," *Horizon* 7, no. 40 (1943): 236.

⁶⁷ Dahl manifests the emotionally crippling effects of this survivor's burden in the short stories "Only This" and "The Soldier". The former concerns the tortured reminiscences of a bomber pilot who struggles to reconcile the expanding myths of the war with his own experiences of the sheer arbitrariness of the violence he inflicted. The latter details the psychotic breakdown of a former soldier manifested significantly in a loss of physical sensation.

⁶⁸ The title of Dahl's story is, in fact, a slight mis-quotation of Binyon's work; the original line reads: "They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn." The line in question is, itself, an oblique echo of Enobarbus' speech in Act II Scene ii of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Whether Dahl's misquoting of his source is intentional or otherwise is unclear.

girl's apparent steadfastness as evidenced in her ritualistic memorialisation of her former fiancé, an officer in the French Navy. According to Fin, upon learning through an offhand remark of her fiancé's preference for sleeping without a pillow, she immediately attempted to cultivate the habit herself. Even after the officer was himself killed, she is said despite great discomfort to have resolutely maintained the practice to preserve her dead lover's memory. (115) Like Michael Furey in James Joyce's "The Dead" (1914), Nikki's deceased lover commands a depth of feeling with which no conventional marital bond or physical presence can hope to compete. The fact that Nikki's fiancé was not killed in combat but run over by a truck is a source of tacit irony that is swiftly overwhelmed for Fin by the passionate force of the myth of exemplary female fidelity Nikki comes to embody ("it shows that she is a good girl"(115)). The attraction of such a romance for Fin and his fellow pilots lies in the ritualistic and embodied performance of female devotion to a disembodied yet symbolically present suitor; on Fin's disappearance in action the narrator ponders "what little thing Nikki would do in his memory." (16) Thus, the emphatically stressed corporeality of the feminine proves the means through which masculine fantasies of disembodiment are enacted. Through her nightly physical discomfort, Nikki maintains her unconsummated "marriage bed" and the incorporeal presence of her fiancé. Witz and Marshall identify the importance of the deeply embedded "ontology of difference" in the sociological rendering of male and female corporeality, affirming the masculine capacity to transcend the material conditions of the body through the "corporeal saturation" of the female in Durkheimian understandings of the social.⁶⁹ While for others (as for Gabriel in "The Dead") the phantom presence of an adored deceased lover might inspire

⁶⁹ Anne Witz and Barbara L. Marshall, "The Quality of Manhood: Masculinity and Embodiment in the Sociological Tradition. *Sociological Review* 51, no.3 (2003), 351.

impotent jealousy and melancholy, Fin is drawn to Nikki precisely because of this disposition towards embodied memory. She is, in effect a promising means through which the bodily transcendent experience of military masculinity and the collective body of the air corps may be exchanged for the privatised sexual body of matrimony. Such a transition, however, entails a temporary suspension of the fiction of masculine disembodiment (a concept made manifest in Dahl's story through the recurring vivid imagery of perspiration). Witz and Marshall write that

because the boundary between the natural and the social must be slippery and unstable, male bodies are abject as they disappear at the unstable boundary between 'the corporeal' and 'the social'. It is in that borderland, then, between female corporeality and male sociality that, for a fleeting conceptual moment, male bodies appear, only to effect their immediate disappearance through an implicit notion of male embodiment – an always, already mediate and approximate fleshiness, as distinct from the immediate, proximate fleshiness of female corporeality.⁷⁰

The story opens with a juxtaposition between man and machine that highlights the latter's superior capacity to perform the scripts of masculinity. While the idling aircraft parked on the tarmac, are personified as "patient, smug" impregnable creatures, their corresponding pilots waiting in the sun are defined by their leaky corporeality as they ooze physical discomfort and anticipatory anxiety:

... all the time the sweat seeped out from our skin, trickled down our necks, over our chests and down our stomachs. It collected just where

⁷⁰ Anne Witz and Barbara L. Marshall, "The Masculinity of the Social: Towards a Politics of Interrogation," in *Engendering the Social: Feminist Encounters with Sociological Theory*, eds. Anne Witz and Barbara L. Marshall (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2004), 28.

our belts were tight around the tops of our trousers and it filtered under the tightness of our belts where the wet was very uncomfortable.

Dahl's sweat imagery highlights the porous vulnerability of the male body at war. Like the breaching of a fortress, the sweat betrays a physical discomfort and emotional unease that the nonchalant patois of the squadron and its euphemistic displacement of death and injury strives to conceal. It is this corporeal saturation that makes Fin's extraordinary tale of the afterlife as a place devoid of physical yearnings or corporeal anxieties all the more troubling and enticing to his squadron peers. (125) The airman's paradise is a land of pure male disembodiment and an alluring refuge from the insecurities of war's heightened corporeality. Moreover, this fantasy realm preserves man's role as a social being while dispensing with his biological existence; travelling among a multitude of deceased pilots towards "their last flight, their last journey," Fin notes how the universal benignity among the dead transcends national and ideological affiliations ("they were all waving at each other, like children on a roller-coaster"(126)). It is this latter desire for a social existence liberated from biology that fuels the self-annihilating yearning in the text's latter stages. Writing on the Durkheimian sociological anatomy of the male as a simultaneously social and biological entity, Jaworski notes that "the emphasis on homo duplex [in classical masculinist formulations of suicide] conceals male corporeal vulnerability to disavow masculine abjection in suicide."⁷¹ The price for this transcendent homosociality is total submission to the aircraft. While casting off the political affectations of uniform and creed, the pilot's individuality is subordinate to his identity as a flyer. Fin's beatific vision may thus be read alongside the deathly philosophy of aeriality set forth by the influential French fighter pilot, Antoine Saint Exupéry (whose explicit alignment of

⁷¹ Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide*, 59.

flying with a self-annihilating yearning may be seen both in the passage from which this chapter takes its epigraph and, in a yet more ethereal and allegorical form, in the children's story, *The Little Prince* (1943)). Like Saint Exupéry's young prince, Fin is inhibited in his yearning to attain this final transcendent home-space by the "heaviness" of his body, a realisation that drives him into a suicidal rage:

When I saw that it was impossible [to join my dead comrades], I tried to kill myself. I really wanted to kill myself then. I tried to dive the aircraft into the ground, but it flew on straight. I tried to jump out of the cockpit, but there was a hand on my shoulder which held me down. I tried to bang my head against the sides of the cockpit, but it made no difference and I sat there fighting with my machine and with everything until suddenly I noticed that I was in a cloud. (127)

For Fin death is the most exquisite expression of military fraternity. While Nikki's fiancé attains the pure and eternal status of a disembodied lover through his death, Fin consecrates his own identity as a flyer, betrothed to death itself. The story closes with the young man having at last achieved his design when he refuses to bail out of his shot-down aircraft, impressing upon the narrator in his dying moments his euphoric sense of self-actualisation ("I'm a lucky bastard," he was saying. 'A lucky, lucky bastard.' (130))

This analysis of the airman-figure has thus far established the ways in which suicidal tropes and themes affirmed the flier in his political and racial identity while helping him to conceptualise his own highly precarious existence within an imaginative framework of personal autonomy. To link these two areas, I turn now to the role of suicide in the creation of the myth of the Second World War flier by examining the case of the legendary fighter pilot, Richard Hillary.

As a cultural icon, Richard Hillary epitomises the self-annihilating mystique of the fighter pilot; he is positioned at the centrepoint of altruistic suicide's zone of uncertainty between sacrifice and self-destruction. Hillary's legacy, both literary and mythical, contains, for several critics of the 1940s, the kernel of national war-time identity. For John Middleton Murry, writing in 1944, it was clear that "in Hillary ... the deep urge of contemporary society towards death is made visible."⁷² Mark Rawlinson, meanwhile has identified Hillary as "the meeting point of individualist and collectivist narratives" of the Second World War.⁷³ Reconciling these depictions, as well as the many other biographical sketches by writers such as Koestler, Faulks and Ross (in his biography of Hillary) involves a recognition that the suicidal mystique that clung to the figure of the fighter pilot throughout the 1940s and beyond endures *because*, not *in spite* of the hegemonic imperative of the decade. Hillary's polymorphous mythological quality transcends both the historical facts of his life and the events, real and fictitious, outlined in his "autobiographical novel" *The Last Enemy*. The legend of Hillary, the charismatic rake of the Oxford rowing team, the insouciant RAF pilot brutally disfigured when he was shot down by a German Messerschmitt, the "guinea pig" of pioneering plastic surgeon, Archibald McIndoe, the feted author, and finally the paragon of bullish national resilience whose quixotic insistence on returning to active service culminated in his death on 8th January 1943 at the age of twenty-three, carries a complex symbolic gravity within British wartime consciousness. That this symbolism should be imbued with suicidality is the outcome of several factors encoded in the Hillary mythos as well as the more obvious matter of the speculation surrounding the circumstances of his death.

⁷² John Middleton Murry, *Katherine Mansfield and Other Literary Portraits* (London: Peter Nevill Limited, 1949), 130.

⁷³ Mark Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 45.

“Myths,” Girard writes, “are the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them.”⁷⁴ Structurally, stylistically, and thematically Hillary’s myth-making intentions in writing *The Last Enemy* are plain. His repeated association of aerial combat with the chivalric tradition invites a comparison with the typical paradigm of the war memoir as outlined by Paul Fussell. In *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Fussell identifies structural similarities between the archetypal war memoir and Medieval Romance literature in its pattern of “training, combat, recovery” or “innocence, death, rebirth.”⁷⁵ Hillary’s memoir begins *in media res* with the symbolic death that results in his catastrophic disfigurement, before leaping backwards into Hillary’s pre-war Oxford days, the jaded cynicism of which could hardly be said to approximate to Fussell’s understanding of heroic innocence. As with the Romance paradigm, *The Last Enemy* concludes with a rebirth of sorts, but it is one that points towards death, as Hillary concludes with a vow to earn

at least in some measure, my right to fellowship with my dead, and to the friendship of those with courage and steadfastness who were still living and who would go on fighting until the ideas for which their comrades had died were stamped forever on the future of civilization.⁷⁶

Like his idol, Saint Exupèry, Hillary’s true battle is waged, not against mortal enemies but death itself. Thus, the symbolic death that opens the novel takes the form of a failure to meet with death, as the knight proves unworthy to join the fellowship. This representation of survival as a rejection from the mythical pantheon is emphasised

⁷⁴ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), 64.

⁷⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 128.

⁷⁶ Richard Hillary, *The Last Enemy* (London: Pimlico, 1997), 178

in the stanza from Verlaine's "*Je suis venu, calme orphelin*" with which Hillary ends the Proem.

Quoique sans patrie et sans roi

Et très brave ne l'étant guère

J'ai voulu mourir à la guerre

*La mort n'a pas voulu de moi*⁷⁷

The Proem depicts Hillary in a classical heroic mode, thwarted in his endeavour to gain access to Hades through a combination of providence and sheer coincidence. A faulty cockpit hood, a misdirected search party which chanced upon his drifting body, and a stubbornly life-preserving tangle of parachute cords all conspired to rob him of his noble death in war. Stranded and immobilised in the North Sea, Hillary chooses to view his miraculous survival as a cosmic joke played on him by the gods as a rebuke for his arrogant assumptions about the straightforward life-or-death nature of aerial combat. He declares:

There was something irresistibly comical in my grand gesture of suicide being so simply thwarted... Goethe once wrote that no one, unless he had led the full life and realised himself completely, had the right to take his own life.⁷⁸

Over the course of the text Hillary moves from an obsession with the philosophical right to suicide to an earnest desire for a right to the fellowship of his dead (a change that his mother unwittingly foreshadows in her suggestion that her son's disfigurement will help him to discover where his true friends lie). If *The Last Enemy* is to be read as a courtly Romance, then the quest at its heart is self-actualisation with a view to attaining

⁷⁷ In Martin Sorrel's translation from *Paul Verlaine: Selected Poems*. (Oxford University Press, 1999), 109, this reads as "Stateless un-kinged/ Brave coward / I went to war to die. / Death turned me down.

⁷⁸ *The Last Enemy*, 5.

what Goethe considers a “right” to die on one’s own terms. In the novel’s pre-epiphany portion, Hillary espouses aerial combat as the purest form of personal development in this regard. He writes:

In a fighter plane, I believe, we have found a way to return to war as it ought to be, war which is individual combat between two people, in which one either kills or is killed. It’s exciting, it’s individual, and it’s disinterested.⁷⁹

This is not, however, to suggest that Hillary’s courtly knight remains unaltered in his quest. By the end of the novel, this right has evolved into a right “to fellowship with my dead,” signalling the imaginative transition from egoistic to altruistic modes of self-destruction. *The Last Enemy* is essentially a narrative of the protagonist’s conversion from egoistic to altruistically motivated self-destruction, which offers the mythologically “pure” form of self-destruction articulated by Hillary in the Proem.

The Last Enemy constitutes only one half of the Hillary mythos that was to develop throughout the 1940s, however. After his death in 1943, Hillary’s process of mythologisation was consolidated by several cultural figures including Arthur Koestler. Koestler’s article, “The Birth of a Myth: In Memory of Richard Hillary” expands on the theme of the Grail-seeking knight, but also contributed to the persistent innuendoes surrounding the circumstances of Hillary’s death in its suggestive reading of Hillary’s moral transformation. For Koestler Hillary’s story is a myth about the power of myths themselves. Koestler takes the concept of Hillary as the architect of his own grand myth to paint the airman as a Faustian figure, incapable of containing the energies of his own making. “The fraternity of the dead,” he writes, “has its peculiar etiquette; one has not

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 15

only to live up to one's form, one has to die up to it."⁸⁰ Koestler's implication that Hillary was so compelled by the psychic power of his own story that he had no other option than to furnish it with the cathartic ending it demanded is arguably indicative less of Hillary's state of mind than of Koestler's own obsession with the concept of the dissolution of the self.

The theory that Hillary deliberately crashed to his death in 1943 has become an integral facet of the legend, fuelled in the immediate aftermath of the accident by the commentary of Arthur Koestler and John Middleton Murry. This version of events intimates murder as well as suicide since Hillary's observer, Sgt. Wilson Fison, also perished alongside him. Despite repeated vehement refutations of the suicidal construction of the Hillary myth by writers such as Sebastian Faulks and Michael Burn, both of whom attack Koestler and Middleton Murry as having exploited the deaths to further their own artistic ideas, the aura of self-annihilation has remained an inextricable component of the legend. Tony Gould, even in his call for the consignment of the suicide theory to oblivion, admits some sympathy for the view that Hillary "had written himself a script which required a final act."⁸¹ Whether or not one clings to the suicide theory in its literal sense (and it is not the object of this study to contribute to the overabundance of commentary and speculation in that regard) the concept of Hillary's being drawn into a self-destructive mythology of his own creation is borne out in the narrative arc constructed in *The Last Enemy* as well as several of his letters.

As has been discussed already, Richard Hillary's body lends itself aptly to the forces of national mythology, taking on an emblematic function as the destruction of

⁸⁰ Arthur Koestler, "The Birth of a Myth: In Memory of Richard Hillary," 238.

⁸¹ Tony Gould, "'Shaky Do': Review of *Mary and Richard: The Story of Richard Hillary and Mary Booker* by Michael Burn." *London Review of Books* 10, no. 9 (1988), 19.

youthful masculine beauty and a gauge of the war's impact on the figure of the hero. As Rawlinson writes:

As Hillary's self-figuring became public property, he found that in writing himself into the war he had not resolved but exacerbated the burden of symbolic conscription to the national enterprise.⁸²

Hillary's aim in writing *The Last Enemy* was, as he himself states, to oppose any attempts to incorporate his generation into a grand narrative of heroic self-sacrifice akin to the first world war and to situate the deaths of his friends as a self-aware and deliberate renunciation of life. He writes that

... I got so sick of all that sop about our 'island fortress' and 'The Knights of the Air' that I determined to write it anyway in the hope that the next generation might realise that while stupid, we were not that stupid, that we could remember only too well that all this had been seen in the last war, and that in spite of that and not because of it, we still thought this one worth fighting.⁸³

There is no small irony in the fact that in his repudiation of the forces of myth, Hillary and his generation succeeded in fashioning an equally robust myth of personal autonomy, boyish recklessness and rebellion, one that was articulated through a language of self-annihilation. The myth of the 1940s flier as a suicidal entity served to preserve his aura of heroic individualism in the face of unconquerable odds. It allowed him to be viewed, not merely as a victim of history, but as one consumed by the purest form of agency imaginable. How this personalised vision of self-destructive agency

⁸² Mark Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War*, 49.

⁸³ Quoted in John Middleton Murry, "Richard Hillary," in *Looking Before and After* (London: Sheppard Press, 1948), 171.

came to define the ambivalent character of the martyr in the literature of the 1940s is the subject of the analysis to follow.

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Suicide, Foucault states, is a stark expression of “the individual right to die at the borders and in the interstices of power that [is] exercised over life,” making it “one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power has assigned itself the task of administering life”.⁸⁴ As has been seen in the first part of this chapter, the Durkheimian concept of altruistic suicide complicates the standing of suicide in relation to political power. In the literary construction of the kamikaze (or, to a milder extent Richard Lumford’s presentation of self-sacrifice as a route towards social approbation for otherwise marginalised bodies), the individuating potential of self-slaughter is relinquished, sometimes unconsciously, as the feebly differentiated subject kills himself in compliance with an overwhelming societal obligation. The previous analyses have shown, however, that the rejection of pure altruism in the construction of the British flyer in favour of a portrayal that balances suicide’s personal and institutional dimensions preserves the essentially liberal character of the imagined militarised subject at war. The construction of the martyr in the literature of the 1940s presents additional complications with regard to the question of agency. Durkheim presents Christian martyrdom as a sub-category of altruistic suicide without drawing substantial distinction between the disparate power dynamics in both. Whereas the archetypal altruistic suicide operates under conditions of unexamined fidelity to the society or

⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, translated by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978), 139.

cause he has submersed himself into, the martyr frequently meets his end by operating against the dominant models of behaviour sanctioned by the society he inhabits.

Although Durkheim does not explicitly expand on this idea, such a concept is implicit in his brief commentary on the martyr:

All those neophytes who without killing themselves voluntarily allowed their own slaughter are really suicides. Though they did not kill themselves, they sought death with all their power and behaved so as to make it inevitable.⁸⁵

In *The Heart of the Matter*, Harry Scobie approaches this understanding of Christian martyrdom when, arriving at his own personal decision to end his life, he begins to conceptualise suicide as the ultimate form of generative violence from which the spiritual and philosophical foundations of Western civilisation emerge:

Christ had not been murdered: you couldn't murder God: Christ had killed himself: he had hanged himself on the Cross as surely as Pemberton from the picture rail.⁸⁶

Greene's theological argument identifies Christ as a suicidal actor by sheer necessity; since God is all-powerful, it follows in Scobie's reasoning that His death can only be brought about through self-will. The distinction between martyrdom and victimhood for Greene is thus one of power. In the production of the martyr-figure, the locus of power is almost entirely external to the self-sacrificing subject; however, the martyr is far from passive in the accomplishment of his own destruction. Jensen outlines this complex interplay of volition and surrender in his assertion that "just as noble suicide takes the initiative out of the hands of the enemy by an exercise of will, the martyr only dies

⁸⁵ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 185.

⁸⁶ *The Heart of the Matter*, 207.

because he or she finally wills it so”.⁸⁷ Bennett meanwhile recognises that “martyrdom, whether political or religious, can never be detached from a certain suicidality”.⁸⁸ Such analyses highlight suicide’s status as a rebuke to power that is nonetheless conducted and constituted through a separate, often counter-cultural form of ideological power. In contrast with the aerial combatants discussed in the first section, this mode of self-slaughter does not carry a promise of disembodied agency, indeed it is stridently corporeal in its constitution. As Sarah Cole notes in her discussion of the “doomed” anarcho-terrorist, the catechised rebel “feels an intimacy with death: he not only kills, but does so with his bare body, his ‘own hands’.”⁸⁹ The embodying event of martyrdom is consolidated in the posthumous afterlife of the subject, which is frequently mediated through the dispersal of physical relics of the corpse or theatrical re-enactments of the execution. Moreover, like the sacrificial dead of William Plomer’s “The Prisoner” (discussed in the Introductory Chapter), whose corpses are appropriated and inscribed by the Judas-like forces of politically expedient myth-making, the martyr delivers himself entirely into the hands of, what De Soucey *et al* term “reputational entrepreneurs”.⁹⁰ As shall become clear in this section’s analyses of Greene and Koestler’s writings of the forties, the making of a martyr is a collaborative enterprise that requires the synchronised participation of at least four parties: the martyr, the repressive state or sub-state power that exacts the martyr’s life, the reputational entrepreneur whose office it is to remake the circumstances of the death into a coherent

⁸⁷ Michael P. Jensen, *Martyrdom and Identity: The Self on Trial* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 139.

⁸⁸ Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century*, 44.

⁸⁹ Sarah Cole, *At the Violet Hour*, 97.

⁹⁰ De Soucey *et al* write, “It is the reputational entrepreneur, not the martyr, who transforms the bodily image into one powerful enough to break through the established social order. The body itself is a tool that serves as a marker of nationalism, religiosity, and cultural traditions that reflect deeper claims about social worlds”. In Michaela De Soucey et al., “Memory and Sacrifice: An Embodied Theory of Martyrdom,” *Cultural Sociology* 2, no.1 (2008) accessed July 20 2018, url: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1749975507086276>

narrative of resistance and perhaps most importantly the attentive public ready to be swayed towards pity, adoration or outrage by the visceral spectacle of the martyred body.

All of this serves to highlight the essential agentic paradox of martyrdom. In one sense the martyr is the apotheosis of the triumph of individual will; at the same time, however, in giving up his body to a higher cause, he may also be viewed as posing a stark challenge to modernity's cult of individualism. This duality proves central to the construction of revolutionary and ecclesiastical martyrdom in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* and Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, both of which, under this proposed course of reading, constitute the respective midpoints of trilogies concerned with deciphering the intricacies of voluntary death. Before delving into the suicidal construction of martyrdom in each novel, it is worth considering the lifelong struggles of both men with the ethical questions of suicide in both its political and personal manifestations.

In 1944, George Orwell declared:

It is the dream of a just society which seems to haunt the human imagination ineradicably and in all ages, whether it is called the Kingdom of Heaven or the classless society, or whether it is thought of as a Golden Age which once existed in the past and from which we have degenerated.⁹¹

Orwell makes this assertion of a common lineage between early Christians, Marxist revolutionaries and reactionary zealots specifically within the context of Arthur

⁹¹ George Orwell, "Arthur Koestler," In *Critical Essays*, 1946, http://www.george-orwell.org/Arthur_Koestler/index.html, accessed December 12 2016.

Koestler's body of work; however, its sentiment is evident across a range of religiously and politically inspired literature of the 1940s.⁹²

In both authors discussed here is discernible a vehement individualism that, counterposed with a yearning for a meaningful cause into which to submerge their consciousnesses, produces an anomalous ethic of countercultural fervour. Koestler, the Hungarian-born communist party member-turned anti-totalitarian conservative and Greene, the Catholic novelist whose literary output (particularly of the 1940s) incited stern denunciation from the Holy See, are both ambivalently placed in relation to the ideological frameworks from which they derive literary and moral inspiration. In both men can be seen the tension between conformity and dissidence that arises when pathological individualism attempts to operate within a collective utopian mindset. In the course of their initial acquaintance in 1943-1944, Koestler remarked of Greene that "his Catholicism is with lots of *grani salis*".⁹³ He might equally, however, have attributed this notion of ideological adulteration to his own struggle in subordinating himself to communist orthodoxy throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Furthermore, both men are notable, not only for having made multiple suicide attempts pre-1940, but for the frankness with which each took literary ownership of their self-destructive formative years during the immediate post-war years. A cynic may well (as several have) speculate upon the reasons for the effusiveness with which both men capitalised

⁹² See also C.S. Lewis' consideration of Christian martyrdom in his 1940 theodicy, *The Problem of Pain*. Lewis acknowledges the ancient genealogy of suicide while noting its integral role as a citational form of generative violence designed for imitation within the ecclesiastical tradition. He writes: "Hence, as suicide is the typical expression of the stoic spirit, and battle of the warrior spirit, martyrdom always remains the supreme enacting and perfection of Christianity. This great action has been initiated for us, done on our behalf, exemplified for our imitation and inconceivably communicated to all believers by Christ on Calvary". Lewis captured this generative vision of martyrdom with the death and resurrection of Aslan in his celebrated children's story, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) See C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins, 2012), 102.

⁹³ David Cesarini, *Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind* (London: Vintage, 1999), 218.

on these early suicidal experiences at this particular point in history; it is nevertheless worth first considering each case in isolation before drawing such conclusions.⁹⁴

Following on from several childhood attempts at suicide at his boarding school in Berkhamsted, which precipitated his early exposure to psychoanalytic therapy when his father sent him to be treated in London, the nineteen-year-old Greene became consumed with Russian Roulette, a lethal pursuit he relates in the 1946 autobiographical essay, “The Revolver in the Corner Cupboard”. A flirtation with death in the form of a “small ladylike object with six chambers” discovered among his older brother’s possessions becomes for the young Greene the conduit for a man-making ritual of conquest and a release from boyhood ennui. He writes:

Now with the revolver in my pocket I thought I had stumbled on the perfect cure. I was going to escape in one way or another... The revolver would be whipped behind my back, the chamber twisted, the muzzle quickly and surreptitiously inserted in my ear ... the trigger pulled.⁹⁵

Greene presents his six separate gambles with death, not as a purely solipsistic undertaking of personal despair but a necessary act of youthful rebellion waged in, what he terms “the war against boredom”. Acting as both soldier and dissident, Greene simultaneously expresses the desire to dissolve into oblivion by surrendering himself to the forces of chance while also asserting his autonomy in the process. Norman Sherry remarks upon the clinical detachment with which Greene appears to view himself as both acted *upon* and in control over the course of his dangerous game. He writes:

⁹⁴ According to his brother, Raymond, at six years old Graham Greene was part of a crowd that witnessed a man commit suicide by cutting his throat outside an alms house in Berkhamsted. Greene claimed in his autobiography to have no memory of the incident itself but, as Norman Sherry notes, nonetheless availed of the opportunity to harness the events grotesque potential on no less than five occasions in his writing life. See Graham Greene, *A Sort of Life* (London: Bodley Head, 1971), 16/17. See also Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene Volume 1: 1904-1939* (London: Viking, 1989), 10.

⁹⁵ Graham Greene, “The Revolver in the Corner Cupboard,” in *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1951), 175.

It is as if a third person were doing this to him, as if the revolver had a will of its own, exacting that penalty from this particular ear. Behind the deed lay a strong sense of despair and a desire for annihilation. Greene's attempt to shoot his head off was a necessary testing of himself – the uninspired weakling on the playing fields of Berkhamsted becomes the inspired adventurer off them, an example of his need to live on the dangerous edge of life, what he called 'life reinforced by the propinquity of death'.⁹⁶

Greene's appropriation of the language and imagery of warfare in documenting this exercise in self-slaughter has the bizarre effect of presenting him as an altruistic suicide, martyred to the cause of the self, which he presents as at once universal and personal.

Koestler's autobiographical writing of the early 1950s, meanwhile, intimates that he attempted suicide at least three times in the 1930s. In the second volume of his autobiography, *The Invisible Writing* (1954), Koestler presents an oblique account of the mindset that drove his despair, by drawing parallels between himself and the protagonist of his first abortive attempt at writing a novel: *Die Erlebnisse des Genossen Piepvogel und seinier Freunde in der Emigration*. This embryonic work presented the story of a young revolutionary, Ullrich, who finds himself incapable of subordinating himself to the constraints imposed by the Communist Party. Incapable of either resigning himself to a bourgeois life outside the Party or of surrendering his identity to the political imperatives of the movement, Ullrich attempts suicide. The thematic interplay between self-annihilating despair and the ardour of political zealotry was to develop as a motif throughout the writer's career, particularly throughout the 1940s.

⁹⁶ Sherry, Norman. *The Life of Graham Greene: Volume Two: 1939-1955* (London: Jonathan Cape), 1994.

While the despair and ennui that afflicted both men are not in doubt, the importance of these histories of suicidality to the subsequent literary productions of both men is worth considering in light of the frank self-reflexivity of both men on the subject. The centrality of this suicidal mystique to the self-mythologisation of Koestler and Greene in the post-war period has been insinuated by critics of both writers.

Cesarini approaches Koestler's three attempts at suicide with some scepticism in remarking that

...to fail to kill oneself once is misfortune, to fail to do so three times is suspicious. At this very time many other exiles and *émigrés* managed it with distressing efficiency. The fact that all the while Koestler kept a diary recording what he saw and experienced must suggest that he had an eye to writing it up one day and cast doubt on the seriousness of his intentions. His suicidal endeavours may have been more like gestures of despair, calculated to jolt him out of his despondency, for which purpose failure had to be built into the attempt.⁹⁷

Greene's biographer, Michael Shelden, goes beyond the charge of self-mythologisation and intimates that "The Revolver in the Corner Cupboard", published while Greene was working on his most explicit book dealing with the theme of suicide, *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) was a calculated embellishment of autobiographical fact designed to boost the publicity surrounding a novel which was to re-launch his career as a serious writer after the interruption of the war years.⁹⁸ Regardless of these more cynical interpretations of the motivations of Koestler and Greene in incorporating their early flirtations with death into their wider literary identities, both men in doing so display a

⁹⁷ David Cesarini, *Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind*, 164.

⁹⁸ Michael Shelden, *Graham Greene: The Man Within* (London: Heinemann, 1994), 8.

vivid awareness of the cultural centrality of suicide to the heroic mythos that was evolving throughout the 1940s. The remainder of this chapter shall examine how Koestler and Greene deploy the figure of the martyr as a means of destabilising the hegemonic binaries of individual and group psychology, religious and secular political activity and utopian philanthropy and dystopian terror.

The previous section alluded to the importance of intergenerational relationships in the symbolic and cultural conceptualisation of self-sacrifice. This is particularly true of the writing of Koestler and Greene, in which father figures prove both the objects and subjects of suicidal devotion. In his psychoanalytic reading of the sacrificial representation of boys in Western popular culture, Anthony Easthope draws a distinction between the archetypal “rebellious son” who usurps the father’s position and in so-doing replaces and becomes him, and the passive eternal son who does not rebel but rather offers his life as a vessel for the furtherance of the father’s aims. Easthope takes as his point of iconographic focus the figure of Jesus Christ, whose life signifies the quintessence of filial submission.⁹⁹

Jesus is the son who remains entirely subservient to the father and who accordingly shows only his femininity. Jesus does not marry and his interest in women in the New Testament is not sexual... Instead of challenging the father for the bride he passively endures the father’s aggression and is penetrated by thorns and nails. ‘Father ... not my will, but thine, be done’, *Luke 22, 42*. Jesus’ passivity follows from the

⁹⁹ Sarah Cole furthers this concept of the crucifixion as the foundational act of altruistic suicide, viewing it as the extreme end of a continuum of violence at whose opposite end lies the nihilistic vacuity of murderous totalitarianism “Thus, the ultimate story of magical transformation in Christian culture is the crucifixion/resurrection story, where unmerited, violent death yields nothing less than the promise of an afterlife and the salvation of mankind, while the ultimate expression of bleak emptiness comes in the extermination camp, where death is indiscriminate and the possibility of apotheosis foreclosed”. In Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, Rubashov experiences visions of both ends of this spectrum, a jarring cognitive experience that contributes to the awakening of an individualist sensibility within the old revolutionary. See Sarah Cole, *At the Violet Hour*, 39.

absence of the mother, the vacuum left by Mrs God. The Christian Father has no wife and therefore Jesus has no object to desire and to contest with the father. This is the most powerful myth in the whole Western tradition. Its version of masculinity celebrates the son's feminine love for his father and complete obedience to him.¹⁰⁰

The eternal son, as outlined by Easthope, surrenders personal ambition to displace or destroy the notional father, transforming himself instead into an organ through whom the parent's will may be enacted. Arthur Koestler, a writer whose post-1939 *oeuvre* dissects the personal implications of such spiritual self-effacement in service of a figurative ideological father, highlights the potency of such psychoanalytic readings in explicating the motivating animus behind political revolutions, while ultimately asserting their fundamental inadequacy in bridging the public and private dimensions of altruistic self-sacrifice.

Easthope's cultural theory of filial devotion also offers a persuasive interpretive framework for assessing Koestler's early ideological formation, a view David Cesarini appears to subscribe to with his suggestion that the author's exuberant pursuit of Zionist, communist and anti-communist causes stemmed from the fact that "Koestler was forever in search of his father, who had been so physically and emotionally absent in his youth."¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Koestler's novels and autobiographical writings endorse the notion of the revolutionary as a figure of psychoanalytic interest, while offering a rebuke to political writers who neglect the personal dimension of a subject's ideological development.¹⁰² In his 1952 autobiography he concedes that

¹⁰⁰ Antony Easthope, *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 25

¹⁰¹ David Cesarini, *Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind* (London: Vintage, 1999), 42.

¹⁰² In "The Novelist's Temptations", for example, Koestler takes to task the Marxist novelists of the Pink Decade for their almost exclusive focus on the intellectual and material externalities of revolutionary

All evidence tends to show that the political libido is basically as irrational as the sexual drive, and patterned, like the latter, by early, partly unconscious experiences.¹⁰³

Koestler presents revolution not, primarily, as an intellectual exercise, but as a dogged pursuit of what psychoanalytic theory terms “the oceanic feeling” via the death drive. Across his trio of novels which deal with the inherent suicidality of revolution: *The Gladiators* (1939), *Darkness at Noon* (1940) and *Arrival and Departure* (1943), the unifying feature of revolutions is that they are intrinsically unconsummable. In the first of these, the rebel slave Spartacus discovers that his utopian Sun State is doomed to failure unless he is prepared to replicate the brutal *realpolitik* of the old oppressors. In *Darkness at Noon*, Rubashov comes to realise that his revolutionary zeal and utter devotion to an abstraction of mankind has visited incalculable suffering upon the men and women he has coldly sacrificed for the sake of political expediency. The last of these novels, *Arrival and Departure*, represents Koestler’s most explicit dismantling of the concept of a revolutionary body politic. In this work, a Freudian psychoanalyst convinces a young resistance fighter that all courage is merely a symptom of repressed guilt and, in his case, the urge to make amends for his childhood attempt to blind his brother in a fit of sibling jealousy. While the revolutionary decides to persist in his cause, he is disabused of its objective rightness and acknowledges the unconscious processes motivating his inevitably mortal course of action. Thus, while all three protagonists die through acts of supposedly generative violence consecrated to the furtherance of a political cause, Koestler undermines the aura of idealism that might otherwise shroud such figures by presenting their deaths as disenchanting, highly

engagement to the detriment of a more individualistic and psychological analysis. In *The Yogi and the Commissar and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1945), 34.

¹⁰³ Arthur Koestler, *Arrow in the Blue* (London: Collins & Hamilton, 1954), 70.

personal events. In pathologising the utopian imagination, Koestler presents these men as alienated figures in quest of oblivion by means of ideology. The concept of utopia for Koestler is wedded to its literal etymological meaning of “no place”; both chimerical and beguiling it simultaneously offers the subject, to paraphrase Camus, a reason for living and an excellent reason for dying. To quest for utopia is to cast oneself into an abyss; it is a self-abnegating surrender that demands the subordination of will, conscience and life to an all-consuming void.

As constructed by Koestler, the revolutionary is a blunt instrument of history, devoid of agency, who deploys ideology as an empty vessel for his death drive. To prove this point, Koestler indicates in several of his narratives that, even when the revolutionary is utterly disabused of the justness of his cause, he will nonetheless pursue it to its mortal end. In *Arrival and Departure*, after the young communist, Peter Slavek, has arrived at the realisation through psychotherapy that his utopian zeal originates not in any intellectual or philanthropic commitment to mankind but in his individual repressed feelings of infantile guilt, he nonetheless chooses to reject a life of security and fulfilment in America to re-join the fray in full knowledge that his renewed endeavours will likely culminate in his death. Stripped of his old delusory target, Peter briefly becomes flesh once more before his mind constructs a new “invisible cross” which he must bear. Koestler’s project, more so than Greene’s, is the disenchantment of the figure of the revolutionary and his reduction to a suicidal typology. To set oneself consciously and deliberately against the world and to subordinate one’s mind and body to a particular understanding of history is, within Koestler’s trilogy an act to be read in terms of individual pathology rather than in the light of the ideology espoused by the subject. In this way, Koestler makes the case for assessing the martyr’s imagination, in isolation from its political or religious affiliations, as a form of self-destructive yearning

unto itself. When the twenty-two-year-old Slavek is subjected to the psychoanalyst's inquisition, he is forced to confront the inner dynamics that drive his political zeal. Out of this dialogic interchange emerges a demystified and depoliticised individual whose drive towards altruistic self-sacrifice is ultimately the sublimated expression of a deep-seated psychological need.

Thus, if one wanted to explain why Peter had behaved as he did, one had to discard from the beginning his so-called convictions and ethical beliefs. They were mere pretexts of the mind, phantoms of a more intimate reality. It did not matter whether he was a hero of the Proletariat or a martyr of the Catholic Church; the real clue was this suspect craving for martyrdom.¹⁰⁴

Like Greene's whiskey priest, who comes to the belated realisation that "there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint", Koestler puts forth a view of martyrdom as a manifestation of a personal desire to secure through death a degree of meaning that is inaccessible in life. Whereas Greene conceptualises this personal yearning within the terms of the individual's troubled relationship with God, Koestler's vision is one of total demystification. In the moments before his parachute jump into the abyss, Peter writes to his lover, expressing the conviction that "a new god is about to be born ... Praise to the unborn god, Odette."¹⁰⁵

Koestler's own metaphorical construction of the revolutionary's journey leans not on psychoanalysis, however, but rather draws on his adolescent fascination with mathematical theories. Of particular interest to him was Xeno's Paradox, which states that an arrow in flight which travels half the distance to its destination and then half of

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Koestler, *Arrival and Departure* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), 119.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 188.

that and so on *ad infinitum* will theoretically never pierce its target. In his autobiography, Koestler elaborates on the totemic significance of this image of perpetually deferred gratification in encapsulating his ideological process.

My obsession with the arrow was merely the first phase of the quest. When it proved sterile, the Infinite as a target was replaced by Utopias of one kind or another. It was the same quest and the same all-or-nothing mentality which drove me into the Promised Land and into the Communist Party. In other ages aspirations of this kind found their natural fulfilment in God. Since the end of the eighteenth century the place of God has been vacant in our civilization; but during the ensuing century and a half so many exciting things were happening that people were not aware of it. Now, however, after the shattering catastrophes which have brought the Age of Reason and Progress to a close, the void has made itself felt. The epoch in which I grew up was an age of disillusion and an age of longing.¹⁰⁶

For Koestler, the revolutionary's true focus is the abyss. He places his emphasis, not on the act of desiring or even the multifarious forms the love-object may take, but rather on the condition of being transformed into an inanimate object through which desire operates. This corporeal reverse-transubstantiation which sees the flesh and blood of the subject revert to an inert wooden arrow-state transfers agency to the notional archer who sets the missile on its perpetual course. Koestler, writing of his personal existence in relation to The Party in 1954 declares "I was part of it, as my hands and my guts were part of myself. It was not a relationship; it was an identity".¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 51/52.

¹⁰⁷ Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing* (London: Vintage, 2005), 127.

Set in a fictional allegory of Soviet Russia, *Darkness at Noon* (1940), a novel replete with filial betrayals and paternal displacement, explores the parallels between Christianity and Soviet orthodoxy with Lenin and Stalin implicitly taking on the roles of Holy Father and Son of the Revolution. Reflecting on the fate of his old comrades at the vanguard of the revolution, the incarcerated Nikolai Salmanovich Rubashov settles his thoughts on the single founding father whose name is perpetually immune to charges of subversion and treachery:

...the old man with the slanting Tartar eyes, the leader of yore, who had died in time. He was revered as God-the-Father, and No.1 as the Son; but it was whispered everywhere that he had forged the old man's will in order to come into the heritage.¹⁰⁸

Soviet communism, like Christianity, Koestler suggests, is a monotheistic creed and as such requires that any pretenders to political dominance must present themselves as submissive and eternal sons to its monolithic power structure. Unlike Christ, the apotheosis of filial fidelity, No.1 is the rebellious son masquerading as the immaculate vessel of the Father's vision. Rubashov, while presented as a symbolic patriarch of the revolution, is an intermediary for the ideological Father of The Party, demanding blood-tributes on its behalf of his own offspring, including Richard and Little Loewy. Over the course of the novel, Rubashov becomes increasingly susceptible to the moral influence of the sacrificial iconography of Christianity as he grapples with the dilemma of whether to obey the symbolic Father and submit his identity and legacy to the Party or to respond to a latent individualism awoken by his own sense of guilt.

Like Peter Slavek, Nikolai Rubashov pursues a path of altruistic self-destruction long after his belief in the credo of the Party (that "the ends justify the means") has

¹⁰⁸ Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*. London: Vintage, 2005, 54.

turned cold. In his 1943 assessment of the novel, Saul Bellow highlights the ethical vacuity of Rubashov's voluntary death, which serves neither as a boon to the movement he once stridently fought for nor as a meaningful protest against the totalitarian behemoth into which it has morphed. Bellow writes:

There was neither 'social utility' nor utility of any other sort in his dying, but to live in the state he had helped create was also impossible. And so, with regret and with cynicism and dread, he went. It was as much his devotion to a certain ideal of reason as the executioner's bullet that killed Rubashov.¹⁰⁹

Bellow recognises here the extreme disenchantment with which Koestler infuses Rubashov's unwilling performance of a traitor's martyrdom. Divorced from any ideological fervour yet mediated through the absolutist ideology of The Party, the old man's death is an anomaly – neither entirely altruistic suicide nor egoistic embracement of death. Koestler presents this scenario of the revolutionary pioneer's exclusion from the fruits of his labour not as an ironic catastrophe for Rubashov, but an inevitability ingrained in the revolutionary formula. In a novel replete with Christian symbolism, Koestler significantly invokes Judaism in Rubashov's final moments to imply the universality of this revolutionary trope.

What happened to these masses, to this people? For forty years it had been driven through the desert, with threats and promises, with imaginary terrors and imaginary rewards. But where was the Promised Land? Did there really exist any such goal for this wandering mankind? ... He, Nicolas Salmanovich Rubashov, had not been taken to the top of

¹⁰⁹ Saul Bellow, "A Revolutionist's Statement," *New York Times*, November 21, 1943, accessed August 21, 2018, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/01/02/specials/koestler-arrival.html>.

a mountain; and wherever his eye looked, he saw nothing but desert and the darkness of night.¹¹⁰

Rubashov dies an ideological agnostic, divested of any object besides the oceanic release of death. In his final moments he is utterly indifferent to the tribal motivations of his death, losing cognisance of all but the fact of his imminent absorption into a greater mass.

A shapeless figure bent over him, he smelt the fresh leather of the revolver belt; but what insignia did the figure wear on the sleeves and shoulder straps of its uniform – and in whose name did it raise the dark pistol barrel? ... Then all became quiet. There was the sea again with its sounds. A wave slowly lifted him up. It came from afar and travelled sedately on, a shrug of eternity.¹¹¹

In this retreat from political specificity in Rubashov's final moments, Koestler, ultimately reveals the core imagination of revolutionary activity as fundamentally suicidal and rooted in individual crises of mind or emotion. Slavoj Žižek observes a similar construction of the revolutionary in his dissection of the political life of Robespierre in *In Defence of Lost Causes* (2008), asserting that the act of “pre-emptive self-exclusion from the domain of the living” entailed in the revolutionary rejection of hegemonic cultural and political norms drives him to “search for a way to wander without mixing with the dead, and yet removed from the living”.¹¹²

In *The God that Failed* (1949), Koestler pursues this view by stating that all fervently held utopianism, whether religious or political

¹¹⁰ Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, 210-211.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹¹² Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 170.

... is uncompromising, radical, purist; hence the true traditionalist is always a revolutionary zealot in conflict with Pharisaian society, with the lukewarm corrupters of the creed.¹¹³

In this way, the revolutionary, a being perpetually at war with the society that produced him, embraces the expectation that the violent terror he unleashes will eventually consume him. Koestler implies that the purgation of a decadent society must necessarily culminate in the utopian's own self-removal from the world, lest his ingrained habits of his antebellum consciousness compromise the revolution's momentum. Failure to take this radical step is, according to Koestler, the hallmark of botched revolutions.

But if we survey history and compare the lofty aims, in the name of which revolutions were started, and the sorry end to which they came, we see again and again how a polluted civilisation pollutes its own revolutionary offspring.¹¹⁴

Koestler complicates this portrait of revolutionary selfhood further in *Darkness at Noon*, in his representation of the ways in which totalitarian principles constrict the means through which a subject may conceptualise life and death. The novel explores the personal and institutional consequences of consigning self-slaughter to the realm of the unthinkable. In 1936, the Soviet Union's Central Committee identified suicide as "a form of treason against the Party", a shift in political attitude that, by making the act legible exclusively in individualistic terms and equating it with class sabotage, also served to divest statistical assessments of suicide rates of their validity as a measure of societal well-being.¹¹⁵ This denial of suicide's phenomenological collective roots

¹¹³ From Richard Crossman (ed.) *The God that Failed* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1963), 16.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹⁵ Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, *Suicide: The Hidden Side of Modernity*, translated by David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 91/92. See also Fedden's speculations as to the relationship between suicide and authoritarian regimes in which he asserts the toleration and honest reporting of suicide to be a hallmark of a liberal and open society. He writes that "it should not be difficult to predict

rendered it intellectually incompatible with life within communist orthodoxy. An ardent advocate of euthanasia rights in his later years,¹¹⁶ Koestler presents suicide as conceptually impossible according to the logic of the totalitarian imaginary and intimates that the awakening of a suicidal consciousness is essential for the counter-revolutionary reclamation of the self. In a political regime that dismisses the “I” as a “grammatical fiction” there can be no such thing as self-destruction. Suicide, in both its personal and institutional manifestations, therefore becomes the crux of the novel’s battle between collective identity and individual morality; it is the defining paradox of an establishment that demands the martyrdom of its acolytes yet simultaneously disavows the conditions of individual autonomy necessary to produce the martyr-figure. Koestler sets out the double bind thus:

the Party denied the free will of the individual –and at the same time it exacted his willing self-sacrifice. It denied his capacity to choose between two alternatives – and at the same time it demanded that he should constantly choose the right one.

Significantly, this absolutist principle admits of no meaningful distinction between revolutionary martyrdom and personally motivated suicide since both forms equally imply an inadmissible level of self-governance. This is made clear in the early

the status of suicide in Marxist or corporate fascist states as they are developing to-day. Not only a disregard of personal values, but the magical and primitive element in fascism (particularly strong in Germany), should lead to a revulsion of feeling. There is therefore every reason to expect the absolute condemnation of suicide in such states. Already German and Italian newspapers, acting on orders, but surely in sympathy with general sentiment, repress all accounts of suicide. As far as the public are concerned people do not kill themselves in authoritarian states. One must not, of course, overlook the simple propaganda behind the repression of suicide-news: the impression to be conveyed is that no one under a benevolent fascist government could possibly wish to kill himself.” In Henry Romilly Fedden, *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study*, 285.

¹¹⁶ If anything, Koestler’s aura of controversy intensified in the years after his death with allegations of rape and the disquieting circumstances of his 1983 suicide pact with his much younger wife, Cynthia, casting a sinister light on the writer’s reputation. For a historical analysis of the competing viewpoints on Koestler’s suicide and the question of Cynthia’s agency within the pact, see Edward Saunders, *Arthur Koestler* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), 161.

philosophical exchanges between Rubashov and his old civil war commander, Ivanov. The relationship between both men in the past and present is predicated on the denial of self-destructive agency. In the early years of the revolution, Ivanov suffered a wound necessitating the amputation of his leg. Upon begging his friend to procure poison for him and arguing his right to end his own life in such circumstances, he was rebuffed by Rubashov who dismissed suicide as a bourgeois heresy, built on the artificial constructs of selfhood and personal agency. Under these intellectual conditions, however, Rubashov is himself curtailed in his own capacities as a political agent, since altruistic suicide is equally enmeshed with the insoluble problem of volition.

Ivanov's suicidal inspiration arises not from treasonous intellectual machinations but is rather evoked by the experience of bodily pain and disfigurement. This theme of embodied separation as a precursor to intellectual individuation is a motif throughout the novel. In Koestler's philosophy of radical disillusionment martyrdom is nothing more or less than wilful self-slaughter robed in the idiosyncratic respectability of a political or religious creed. Emotion, not ideology or intellect, is the primary drive that induces a man to submerge his entire identity and suspend all critical faculties in service of an external and often intangible credo.

“There is magic

in death,” writes Sarah Cole, “but there is also emptiness and finality”.¹¹⁷ For the figure of the martyr as represented in the writings of Graham Greene and Arthur Koestler, there exists a precarious distinction between enchantment and disenchantment with historical and spiritual vindication existing on one side of this border and suicidal loneliness on the other. Koestler and Greene both struggle to reconcile the dual facets of martyrdom as a form of enchanted and disenchanting violence (though Koestler

¹¹⁷ Sarah Cole, *At the Violet Hour*, 39.

ultimately emerges in his trilogy as a champion of disenchantment). The protagonists of *The Power and the Glory* and *Darkness at Noon* are presented in death as vessels through which the renewed transmission of a spiritual or ideological creed will be made possible, yet each novel stresses the private genesis of the self-annihilating enterprise of martyrdom.

The unnamed protagonist of *The Power and the Glory* is a hunted man. He is both a martyr and a failure. Overcome by pride as the last priest remaining in post-revolutionary Mexico, he has fallen into laxity, lust and intemperance. The bearing and dignity of clerical austerity, meanwhile, has been appropriated by the revolutionary left, embodied in the figure of the lieutenant who relentlessly pursues the priest. The lieutenant is, however, incapable of erasing his past and the lingering shards of childhood faith that shaped him. He faces the same crisis encountered by Koestler's Spartacus in *The Gladiators*: the knowledge that virtue and terror are not antithetical but rather mutually dependent ingredients for the formation of his secular communist utopia.

The lieutenant is a tragic figure, not because he is doomed to failure but because, unlike the priest, he has failed to incorporate the suicidal nature of his revolutionary ethic into his conception of the world.¹¹⁸ "In Greenland," notes Baldrige, "it is the hopeless causes that are the most worthy of allegiance, while the ones that succeed are almost always morally suspect by the very fact of their success."¹¹⁹ Despite his success in eradicating the outward signs of religiosity from the land of his childhood, supplanting the towering cathedral with the ominous spectacle of

¹¹⁸ Neil McEwan writes that despite his denunciation of communism as antithetical to the ideals of individual liberty, Greene nonetheless demonstrates in his work that he "respects communists as far as he can see them as idealists, more aware of social evil than are the complacent majority of people..." In Neil McEwan, *Modern Novelists: Graham Greene* (New York: St Martin's, 1988), 14.

¹¹⁹ Cates Baldrige, *Graham Greene's Fictions: The Virtues of Extremity* (London and Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 175.

a “cement playground up the hill near the cemetery where iron swings stood like gallows in the moony darkness,” (24) he is blind to the symbolic import of this image. Such augurs are not lost upon the whiskey priest, however, for whom abject failure is a way of life. Upon surveying a cemetery vandalized by the Redshirts he muses that

it was odd—this fury to deface, because, of course, you could never deface enough. If God had been like a toad, you could have rid the globe of toads, but when God was like yourself, it was no good being content with stone figures—you had to kill yourself among the graves. (102)

The extermination of God, even a man-made fictitious God is unachievable, the priest recognises, unless one is also prepared to battle the tendency in humanity that produces such deities, an intrinsically suicidal enterprise. The lieutenant, having managed to cleanse his territory of all but one priest, strives within the “monastic” space of his cell, to exterminate within himself the indelible traces of his childhood faith (“He wanted to destroy everything: to be alone without any memories at all. Life began five years ago.” (25)) Here the lieutenant aspires to be, like Koestler’s Gletkin, a man without an umbilical cord conjoining him to a loathed pre-revolutionary past. While the fate of the lieutenant remains opaque at the novel’s close, his eventual doom is foreshadowed in his failure to capture the hearts and imaginations of the younger generation (as evidenced by Luis’ spitting on the butt of his revolver) and the ominous dream in which he is imprisoned within the fortress of his own making, incapable of attaining a state of secular purity in life (“He couldn't remember afterwards anything of his dreams except laughter, laughter all the time, and a long passage in which he could find no door.”(207))

As Sunita Sinha's reading of *The Power and the Glory* implies, both Catholicism and Communism guarantee that their most faithful adherents will be denied the opportunity to reap the fruits of their endeavours in this life:

Catholicism imagines a heaven, as a world hereafter, a vision that can be actualized only after death. Communism dreams of a heaven on earth - a heaven that can be achieved here and now by rectifying the mistakes, aberrations and vices of the social order.¹²⁰

In light of the prodigious array of overt suicidal meditations manifest across Greene's oeuvre, *The Power and the Glory* may appear on initial inspection an unconventional point of focus for this study. The story of Greene's unnamed "whiskey priest" and his arduous journey towards escape, eventual capture and execution at the hands of a militantly atheistic communist regime displays little of the explicit thanatological anguish that defines works such as *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) or *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). Greene's fable-like examination of saintly martyrdom is, however, a pivotal point in the author's lifelong contemplation of the nature of suicide and its place within man's relation to God and his own existence. When considered within the context of Greene's evolutionary continuum of self-destructive practice that ranges from the diabolical suicide of the prideful sinner who believes himself beyond the reach of God's mercy to the venerable self-sacrifice of political and religious martyrs, the novel attains new resonances that highlight the author's role in exposing and subverting the practices that shape the suicidal body in political and religious discourse. Of particular support to such an analysis is the view expressed by R.W.B Lewis in an essay originally published in 1959, that the novel constitutes the mid-point of a trilogy (comprising *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the*

¹²⁰ Sunita Sinha, *Graham Greene: A Study of His Major Novels* (Delhi: Nice Printing Press, 2007), 26/27.

Glory and *The Heart of the Matter*), which “moves stealthily deeper into the darkness, moves through the annihilation of confidence in human knowledge to an awareness of the impenetrable mystery.”¹²¹ The centrality of suicidality to this voyage into darkness (explicitly delineated in the first and last volumes but no less palpable in the middle number) is worthy of exploration in situating Greene’s martyred whiskey priest as a benign though troubled counterbalance to the demonic suicide pact of *Brighton Rock* and Harry Scobie’s blasphemous self-annihilation at the close of *The Heart of the Matter*. In his epigraph to *The Heart of the Matter*, Greene underscores this thematic undercurrent with a quotation from the French essayist and poet, Charles Péguy:

*Le pécheur est au coeur même de chrétienne” ... Nul n’est aussi
compétent que le pécheur n’est aussi compétent que le pécheur en
matière de chrétienté. Nul, si ce n’est le saint.*

[The approximate translation intimates that the sinner is at the heart of Christian understanding and that there is nobody as competent in Christian matters as the sinner except for the saint.]

The thematic evolution of Greene’s suicide trilogy operates along a bifurcated line of progression based on an embedded spiritual hierarchy of meaning. In Greenland, the suicidal body is assessable, not in the Butlerian terms of grievability, but rather through an idiom of damn-ability. This is brought vividly to the fore with the death of Pemberton in *The Heart of the Matter*. The young commissioner from Bamba hangs himself from a picture rail in his lodgings because of an enormous debt, leaving behind only a pathetically prosaic note and a few relics of crass materialism (“a gaudy leather pouf of so-called native work, the marks of cigarette ends on the chairs”) and

¹²¹ R.W.B. Lewis, “The Trilogy” *Graham Greene: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 73.

some mass market colonial romances (“two Horlers, and spread-eagled on the settee, *Death Laughs at Locksmiths*”).¹²² The last of these objects, a popular “page-turner” whose spread-eagled positioning suggests that its reader did not bother to persevere until the end, carries a pathos of its own. Greene here implicitly mirrors the spectacle of this half-read work of formulaic ephemera with the banal truncation of a life equally devoid of imagination or higher consciousness. The paltry yields of this spiritual and intellectual inventory-taking lead Scobie to conclude that the Catholic doctrine that would see Pemberton consigned to eternal perdition could not possibly apply to such a case of “invincible ignorance.” Displaying a spiritual chauvinism not dissimilar from Charles Ryder’s disdain for Hooper in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Scobie dismisses the aggrieved Father Clay, as “a man without resources” and rejects the priest’s assertion that suicide “puts a man outside mercy.”¹²³ In so doing, Scobie erects a clear hierarchy of suicidal signification that distinguishes between a narrow catechised elite and the masses whose baseness precludes them from both the torments and delights of either true evil or good. Scobie admonishes the priest that “if you or I did it, it would be despair – I grant you anything with us. We’d be damned all right because we know, but he doesn’t know a thing.”¹²⁴

It is this same sense of spiritual aristocracy that shapes the consciences of Pinkie and Rose in *Brighton Rock* as they prepare (the former feignedly, the latter ardently) to consummate their suicide pact. Rose accedes to the terms of her husband’s entreaty because she believes it will bind them together in perpetual damnation, thereby setting them definitively apart from the humdrum realm of middle class secular morality. For her, “the evil act was the honest act, the bold and the faithful it was only lack of

¹²² Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter*, 97.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 95.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 99.

courage ... that spoke so virtuously.”¹²⁵ Within Greene’s trilogy, it is a mark of distinction, both ecclesiastical and intellectual to be capable of achieving damnation through self-annihilation (or, in the words of Rose’s confessor at the end of the novel, “a Catholic is more capable of evil than anyone. I think because we believe in him we are more in touch with the devil than other people”).¹²⁶ The stratification of suicide in these novels is, perhaps influenced by T.S. Eliot’s suggestion, quoted by Greene in a 1933 essay, that

if the glory of man is his salvation, it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation. The worst that can be said of most malefactors, from statesmen to thieves is that they are not men enough to be damned.¹²⁷

This central tenet within Greene’s writing that identifies mankind’s capacity for heavenly glory with an equal proclivity towards damnation (or, in the terms of *Brighton Rock*, the ability to inhabit a world not merely of “right and wrong” but one of “good and evil”) has, as its touchstone, the act of self-annihilation. Reading *The Power and the Glory* as an intermediary point in the development of this theme, the altruistic suicide of the whiskey priest at the hands of the draconian Mexican authorities becomes a reflection (albeit sympathetic) of the religiously informed suicidality of Rose and Scobie. Returning once more to Durkheim’s assertion that all suicide constitutes a refracted form of virtue within the mind of the suicidal actor, it is worth observing that *Brighton Rock* and *The Heart of the Matter* both present their suicidal subjects (attempted and accomplished) as exhibiting a perverted yearning for martyrdom.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), 350.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 357.

¹²⁷ Graham Greene, *Collected Essays* (London: Bodley Head, 1969), 50.

¹²⁸ See, in particular, the observation by Haber that the seven-part structure of *Brighton Rock* resembles “a saint’s life in reverse.” In Herbert R. Haber, “The Two Worlds of Graham Greene,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 3 (1957): 257.

While Rose passionately desires to cast off the innate virtue that separates her from her love by committing the ultimate sin (declaring “I don’t want absolution, I want to be like him damned”) and Scobie pridefully perceives his own self-negation as the sole compassionate path towards alleviating the pain of his wife and mistress while attaining for himself an eternal (if damned) peace, the whiskey priest attains grace through an acceptance of humility. Although he ultimately achieves a death that endows him with the quality of a saint, he dies in a manner analogous in many respects to his more overtly suicidal counterparts in the other novels.¹²⁹

In the other texts of the trilogy, Greene sets up a dichotomy between two forms of self-annihilation, one sacred and one profane, thereby inviting a hierarchical reading of suicide along ecclesiastical lines. *The Power and the Glory* intensifies this design by introducing multiple forms of martyr-figure. At the opening of the novel the dentist, Tench, makes the acquaintance of the mysterious protagonist who appears to be reading a salacious novel with “bits of an amorous scene stuck out, crudely coloured.” The novel is called *La Eterna Martyr* and it is only when the companion hurriedly departs that Tench discovers the book to have concealed within its pages the text of the Latin mass. Greene exploits this juxtaposition between the sacred and the lurid for more than mere comic incongruity; indeed, he suggests that the production of the martyr itself

¹²⁹ In *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie enacts his withdrawal both from earthly life and from God’s mercy by fabricating a heart ailment using a series of false diary entries. Having established this elaborate cover story, he ends his life with an overdose of pills. Interestingly, the 1953 film adaptation directed by George More O’Ferrall overcame the censorship issues involved in portraying a suicide onscreen by reworking the ending as a more conventional case of martyrdom. In the final version, Scobie is poised to shoot himself when he sees a boy being set upon by thugs. He intervenes and is shot (suggesting that God’s providence has delivered him from the spiritual consequences of his intended act). In several letters, Greene expresses the opinion that this ending missed the point of the book (though he, himself, had proposed a similar ending in which it is made explicit that Scobie deliberately courts death by entering the fray of a gang fight unarmed. Greene’s version also included the final scene from the book in which Louise discovers her husband’s true suicidal intent). These fraught negotiations display the extent to which *The Heart of the Matter*, like the other novels of the trilogy here discussed, blur conventional distinctions between heroic death and suicide. See Greene’s letter to Alexander Korda in Richard Greene (ed.), *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters* (London: Little Brown, 2007), 200.

relies on a quasi-pornographic human fascination with violence and the body. The unbridled carnality of the martyr's sacrifice stands in direct antithesis to the fantasies of masculine disembodiment explored in the first section evoking a carnivalesque abandonment of logic and order. In one of his nightmarish visions the priest bears witness to a luridly ostentatious *danse macabre* led by Christ, who "danced and postured with a bleeding painted face, up and down, up and down, grimacing like a prostitute, smiling and suggestive". (177) Luis, the young boy who at the novel's close becomes an ardent supporter of the underground ministry of persecuted priests, is unabashedly interested in his mother's didactic readings of saints' lives only for their inevitably gruesome denouements.¹³⁰ The innate theatricality of the martyr-figure in both his ideal and imperfect forms is highlighted throughout the text, first in the tales of young Juan's childhood pageantry in the role of Nero (a detail that appears to reinforce the mirrored-duality of tyrant and martyr Greene sets up in his vision of the priest and the lieutenant.) The most starkly intertextual intimation of the slippage between individualistic and ecclesiastical models of self-slaughter occurs, however, at the moment of the priest's decision to deliver himself up to the trap connived by the lieutenant and mestizo. The grimy piece of paper that constitutes the bait for the priest's return to danger in order to administer the last rites to a dying convict is torn from a child's exercise book, resulting in the accidental conjuring of the dual facets of suicide:

‘The Prince of Denmark is wondering whether he should kill himself or not, whether it is better to go on suffering all the doubts about his father, or by one blow...’

¹³⁰ The story of Juan appears to be based on the life of the Catholic martyr, Miguel Agustín Pro-Juárez, who was executed by firing squad in 1927 on a false charge of attempting to assassinate the Mexican president. Standing before his executioners, Father Pro is reported to have cried at the moment of his death "Viva el Cristo Rey" (Long Live Christ the King), and was thereafter venerated as a martyr. See Michael G. Brennan, *Graham Greene: Fictions, Faith and Authorship* (London: Continuum, 2010), 57.

‘Not that, father, on the other side. That's nothing.’

The priest turned the paper and read a single phrase written in English in blunt pencil: ‘For Christ's sake, father ...’ The mule, unbeaten, lapsed into a slow heavy walk: the priest made no attempt to urge it on: this piece of paper left no doubt whatever: he felt the trap close again, irrevocably. (179)

The suicidal despair of Hamlet and the triumphant death of the martyr are presented in this episode as being but two sides of the same grubby parchment; however, while Hamlet is dissuaded from embracing oblivion by his knowledge that the Almighty has “fix'd/ His Canon ‘gainst self-slaughter,” the priest is offered salvation through self-destruction, provided that it is undertaken “for Christ’s sake.”

The transformation occurs when the priest ceases his efforts to escape capture and execution and comes to willingly pursue it. The heavily symbolic final act sees the priest voluntarily leave his hard-won refuge of safety and sanctuary to be led by the Judas-like mestizo on a mission of mercy that he knows will serve as his own Golgotha (the dying convict from whom he intends to hear confession is significantly named James Calver). Like the version of Richard Hillary Koestler puts forward in his obituary, the priest has recognised himself as inexorably drawn like a moth to what A.A. DeVitis describes as “the precincts of myth.”¹³¹

Martyrdom entails the posthumous assembly of a coherent narrative out of the fragmented shards of the subject’s life. This ideological consistency comes at the expense of the wholeness of the individual however. Across his suicide trilogy, Greene equates self-slaughter with the cessation of personal meaning. Significantly, each of the

¹³¹ A.A. DeVitis, *Graham Greene: Revised Edition* (New York, London: Twayne Publishers and Prentice Hall International, 1986), 84.

texts of the suicide trilogy places focus on the final words of their respective protagonists and their unceremonious truncation, deferral or obscuring by external forces. In particular, the final words of Scobie and the priest are presented as open-ended fragments of meaning. In contrast with the storybook martyr, Juan's resounding pledge of allegiance to Christ the King and "smile of complete adoration and happiness", the priest is capable only of uttering a garbled and incomplete plea: "Excuse –". Scobie's last words, meanwhile take the form of an unfinished prayer ("Dear God, I love ...") robbed of its subject by the speaker's slipping out of consciousness. Vulcan suggests that Scobie is "like his God – offering love to anyone who may need it, to the whole world."¹³² Such a reading is however complicated by the essential individualism at the heart of Greene's ethic of martyrdom. As another of Greene's suicidal heroes, Arthur Rowe, says in *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) "One can't love humanity. One can only love people".¹³³

This chapter has shown that altruistic suicide figures prominently within the literature of 1940s Britain as a model *against* which the sacrificial heroism of the airman and martyr figure was constructed. The collapse of noble and heroic death into individual suicide is, I have argued, a defining feature of the construction of self-sacrifice in the literature of the period. The protagonists of the works discussed here are defined by their imperfection and the relative "impurity" of their deaths. This may be read in part within the broader context of a societal rejection of uncomplicated heroism in the interwar in favour of what Sonya Rose terms "temperate masculinity".¹³⁴ Overall,

¹³² Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, *Graham Greene's Childless Fathers* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 59.

¹³³ Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear* (London: Vintage, 2010) 184. Rowe's suicidal despair is fleeting yet powerfully conveyed within the text when Rowe contemplates with disturbing detachment the moral, aesthetic and theoretical implications of his act. Wracked by a profound guilt over his mercy-killing of his wife, he draws an essentially aesthetic distinction between suicide and euthanasia: "there were very few suicides which were not ugly. Murder was infinitely more graceful because it was the murderer's object not to shock – a murderer went to infinite pains to make death look quiet, peaceful, happy." 88.

¹³⁴ Sonya Rose, *Which People's War?*, 181.

however, the deployment of a covert language of suicide (understood within this context as an egoistic act of strident individualism) proved a useful means of self-defining military sacrifice in opposition to the Nazi enemy. The focus of this chapter, therefore, has rested not on the legitimacy or otherwise of Durkheim's altruistic suicide as a concept, but on the manner in which the literature of the 1940s presents self-sacrifice and suicide as interlocking socially defined categories, the dissolution of which threatens to destabilize hegemonic myths of purity, masculinity and martyrdom. Myth, as has been explored in relation to the flying memoirs of individuals such as Richard Hillary and Richard Lumford, serves as a means of vindicating self-destructive impulses while also acting to erase the subject's existence as a sentient being by crystallizing him within the discourse of public motivation. This chapter has deepened this exploration of suicidal self-erasure by examining the proto post-human imaginative disposition of writers such as Roald Dahl towards fusing soldier and machine in a mutually destructive union. Finally, the chapter considered the status of the martyr within 1940s literature as the embodiment of the purification of suicidality through social agency. This last facet of the study entailed an examination of narratives that subvert or interrogate the myth of altruistic suicide. Through the novels, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*, Graham Greene investigates the porous border between martyrdom and suicide, or, within the context of Greene's fervent Catholicism, saintliness and damnation. This section also examined the complex hybrid of altruism-fatalism that personifies the figure of the political martyr who embraces death in defiance of oppressive state tyranny. The Durkheimian question of suicide as a response to hyper-regulated repression will be explored in the next chapter, albeit in an oblique form that draws on the fundamental elements of the fatalistic model to conduct a genre study of British crime fiction of the forties.

Chapter III

Fatalistic Suicide:

Decline of the English Murder, Rise of the English Suicide

This chapter confronts the question of genre-suicide and its applicability to 1940s crime fiction. The fundamental principles of fatalistic suicide provide a framework for analysing the structural and ideological modulations of the so-called golden age detective story during the war and immediate post-war period.¹ It is argued that the inter-war detective novel, a highly self-aware and codified form defined by its self-conscious relationship to readerly expectations of narrative and style, responded to the new socio-political landscape of the 1940s through a variety of self-destructive practices carried out by several of its exponents. These practices may be read as the combined product of internal evolutions and experimentations within the detective genre itself and attempts by individual writers to explore the changing place of crime fiction within an altered socio-political context. Genre suicide is here used to describe the process through which a text ostensibly operating within the classic detective genre deliberately and self-consciously undermines and dismantles its own foundational principles to the point wherein the structures of understanding between reader and text are disintegrated. In the texts considered here, moreover, these deliberate acts of genre-suicide are typically mirrored in the foregrounding of suicidal themes and scenarios within the narratives. While it is not proposed that either suicidality or deviations from

¹ This study interprets “golden age”, a term first used by John Strachey in 1939, as primarily connoting novels and stories of the inter-war period that follow a clue-puzzle model of narration. It is a label I use interchangeably in this chapter with the terms “clue puzzle” crime fiction, “classic” detective fiction and the “whodunit” form. See John Strachey, “The golden age of English Detection,” *Saturday Review*, January 10, 1939, 12-14.

stereotypical genre-patterns are the exclusive preserve of the wartime and post-war detective story, it is argued that genre-suicide becomes a vehicle within the texts discussed here through which authors of the 1940s interrogate the status of the crime novel in wartime and post-war Britain.²

Pursuing this proposed line of argument entails, in unintentional keeping with the procedures of the archetypal whodunit, no small degree of expository framing. To establish and justify the core theoretical models integral to the wide-ranging textual analyses that follow, it is necessary first to outline the case and existing precedents for approaching the evolution of the detective genre (or indeed any genre) through the language of suicide. In terms of the textual analysis itself, this study focuses primarily on the work of five key practitioners within the crime genre: John Dickson Carr, Agatha Christie, J.B. Priestley, Georgette Heyer and Patrick Hamilton. The examples here selected are of interest, not solely because of the thematic foregrounding of suicide within their respective plots, but because such foregrounding figures as a symbolic expression of the breakdown of those stereotypical tenets that defined the form (in theory, if not consistently in practice) throughout its golden age: namely, the principle of ontological reasoning as a portal to truth and order, the capacity of bureaucratic institutions to safeguard harmony and the unexamined validity of middle class stratifications of class, gender and sexuality.

In John Dickson Carr's *The Case of the Constant Suicides* (1941), the detective figure is relegated to a point of peripheral obscurity for much of the novel, eventually appearing not as an agent of order and clarity but of dubious compromise and

² The alignment of unorthodox solutions with self-annihilation is not an exclusive product of wartime developments in the genre. At the height of the golden age, Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), arguably the most famous breach of readerly expectation in golden age crime fiction, ends with the narrator-killer contemplating a self-inflicted death by veronal, having been given leave to take his own life by Poirot.

deception. The suicidal body figures within this text as a rebuke to the concept of smooth retributive justice, emblematising the increasing strain on the genre's intrinsic processes of societal purgation and healing. Agatha Christie's wartime *oeuvre* offers a similarly problematised vision of the detective genre's capacity to deliver narrative catharsis. Written during the Blitz, her novel, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (1975) presents the suicide of her famous detective, Hercule Poirot, against a backdrop of metatextual decay wherein the categorisations, assumptions and structural divisions of the whodunit implode to produce a definitively anti-golden age text that constitutes a deliberate manifestation of genre-suicide. Christie's symbolically significant decision to return to the fictional setting of her first published mystery, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) emphasises the decadent decrepitude of the clue puzzle form in the face of historical change. Conversely, Georgette Heyer sets her own country house murder, *Penhallow* (1942), in the inter-war period and in doing so interrogates the foundational underpinnings of the form. Heyer, whose renown in the 1940s stemmed from her popular Regency Romance novels as well as her occasional forays into the mystery genre, sets forth a vision of rural England as an irredeemably corrupt wasteland held together only by collective culpability, self-interest and sordid power games. The murder mystery component is once again displaced in importance by a suicide which threatens to expose the artificiality of the social structures within the text and, by extension, of the genre upon which the narrative hangs. The analeptic mode is also utilised in J.B. Priestley's play, *An Inspector Calls* (1945). Set in 1912, the play presents the most comprehensive ideological reorientation of the detective genre out of all of the texts discussed. Appropriating the surface elements of the classic detective story for his own political purposes, Priestley constructs his socialist narrative by positioning at its heart the corpse, not of a murder victim, but of a suicide. The ensuing

ramifications of collective responsibility and intergenerational culpability serve to expose and invite the reshaping of a stereotypically bourgeois, individualism-affirming genre. Finally, Patrick Hamilton's psychological thriller, *Hangover Square* (1941), while not positioned within the golden age tradition, represents a blueprint for subsequent developments of the crime genre in Britain as it fell increasingly under the influence of the American urban hardboiled model typified by Chandler and Hammett. This novel's violent culmination in a double murder and the suicide of its schizophrenic anti-hero encapsulates an increasingly complicated perception of both crime and self-annihilation.

Endemic across all five of these specimens of 1940s crime fiction is a manifest awareness of the form's diminished capacity to present a coherent vision of justice or order. The symbolically insoluble mystery of suicide figures within these texts as an encapsulation of the kinds of questions that must be asked of a literary genre which, after two decades of formal experimentation and innovation, has entered a transitional phase.³ Suicide, the ultimate form of category-collapse in which the victim, culprit and sole possessor of knowledge are all one and the same person, becomes the act through which the genre's identity-crisis is incarnated. Before examining how such a shift is enacted in these works, it is necessary to establish precisely how and why this genre may be loosely understood within the terms of Durkheimian fatalism.

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³ While numerous critics have explored this shift in emphasis within the crime genre from clue-puzzle to hard-boiled inflected post-war models, it is difficult to delineate between the formal experimentations that have been a part of the inter-war detective genre almost since its inception and more overt examples of the genre's introspective reshaping. Examples such as Dorothy L. Sayers' *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), in which her detective-hero, Lord Peter Wimsey is tormented by remorse for his complicity in the executions of those he has helped bring to justice and the return of his shell-shock, indicate that this turn towards generic self-interrogation had certainly begun to take hold in the late-inter-war period.

Of the four strains of suicidality that comprise Durkheim's quartet, the fatalistic typology is by far the most empirically bereft. This critical neglect, which has persisted until relatively recently, originates with Durkheim himself. In *On Suicide*, Durkheim allots the concept no more than a footnote's worth of attention, introducing fatalism as the requisite counterbalance for his theory of anomie. As previously outlined, and as shall be explored further in the chapter that follows, anomic suicide occurs where the suicidal impulse arises from a state of normlessness, often the result of socioeconomic upheaval, which leaves the subject in a state of moral and social confusion. Anomie, therefore, emerges out of the experience of feeling adrift due to ill-defined horizons, life objectives and a dearth of regulation. As the binary counterbalance to anomie, fatalism conversely arises where the subject perceives herself to be irrevocably enslaved within a hyper-regulated environment. Durkheim's famously brief assessment of the phenomenon reads:

there is a type of suicide [which is] the opposite of anomic suicide, just as egoistic and altruistic suicides are opposites. It is the suicide deriving from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline. It is the suicide of very young husbands, of the married woman who is childless. So, for completeness' sake, we should set up a fourth suicidal type. But it has so little contemporary importance and examples are so hard to find aside from the cases just mentioned that it seems useless to dwell upon it. [...]⁴

Durkheim's view of fatalism as a concept of limited contemporaneous application, useful primarily in historical anthropological analyses of slavery or extreme despotism,

⁴ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 239.

is constructed as implicitly antithetical to the modern cult of the individual. Fatalistic suicide is the product of a hyperregulated environment that curtails personal freedom to the point at which life's gamut of choices is distilled to a simple dichotomy of total acceptance or total rejection, to be or not to be.⁵ For sociologists and cultural historians, the concept has had minimal usage in relation to Western society beyond occasional appearances within Marxist discourses. Gabriel Acevedo's (2005) assertion that "for some workers, capitalism may be a source of mental 'slavery': a condition where work is so monotonous and brutish, and the worker's 'futures pitilessly blocked' that the end result is a fatalistic outlook on life"⁶ resonates strongly with some post-war socialist narratives of working class oppression. In J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (discussed later through a different lens), one might view the suicide of the young girl at the centre of the narrative as the inexorable culmination of a life of economic exploitation at the hands of a parasitic industrialist ruling class. While such an analytic model might provide a strong basis for an analysis of later post-war writing (such as the work of the "Angry Young Men" generation of the 1950s and beyond) the high bar set by Durkheim for this model which states that the subject must not merely be restricted but utterly and irrevocably imprisoned by circumstance, appears to be at odds with the publicly espoused mood of the decade. While the numerous curtailments of personal freedom that defined the 1940s, from rationing to censorship to the enforced

⁵ The model has been deployed more recently in discussions of suicide rates among narrowly defined groups of culturally or medically vulnerable individuals. One such study, for example, suggests that while higher suicide rates in the West are associated with anomic social deregulation, "hyper-regulation is associated with higher suicide rates in Iran, at least for women." In Akbar Aliverdinia and William Alex Pridemore, "Women's Fatalistic Suicide in Iran: A Partial Test of Durkheim in an Islamic republic," *Violence Against Women* 15, no.1 (2009): 80. A 2001 study also deployed the concept of Durkheimian fatalism in the context of individuals living with HIV who felt themselves ineluctably trapped by their diagnosis. See G.J Treisman, A.F. Angelino and H.E. Hutton. "Psychiatric issues in the management of patients with HIV infection," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 286, no.22 (2001): 2857-2864.

⁶ Gabriel A. Acevedo, "Turning Anomie on its Head: Fatalism as Durkheim's Concealed and Multidimensional Alienation Theory." *Sociological Theory* 23, no.1 (2005): 80.

communality of air raid shelters, indubitably proved a source of frustration, the hegemonic self-definition of Britain in opposition to the brutality of Nazi despotism proved somewhat reassuring against the sacrifices represented by measures such as the May 1940 Emergency Powers (Defence) Act.⁷ John Middleton Murry expressed this mindset in 1939 in his prediction that while the war had indeed caused a severe retrenchment of individual liberty with respect to economic freedom and freedom of speech, it was possible to remain confident that Britain's democratic spirit would remain indomitable, proving that its people could "take the poison out of pure totalitarianism".⁸

Thus, while the imaginative materials for narratives of fatalistic suicide certainly exist within this period, their unique contextualisation make it difficult to locate a cohesive voice for such frustrations outside the bounds of genre writing.⁹ In electing to explore the 1940s crime genre through this lens of fatalistic suicide, it is not proposed that such a model is applicable to all genres that faced obsolescence during this period. Indeed, I suggest that the golden age detective story enjoys a heightened degree of self-conscious structuring that makes it uniquely suited to such a course of analysis. As Dennis Porter writes, "no other genre is more conscious of the models from which it

⁷ Marina Mackay presents a strong counter-argument to this view in her readings of Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome* (1941) and C.S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength* (1945), two works of speculative fiction that exude anxiety over the increased power of the state during the war years. See Marina Mackay, "Anti-State Fantasy and the Fiction of the 1940s," *Literature and History* 24, no.2 (2015).

⁸ John Middleton Murry, "The Drive to Totalitarianism," *The Listener* 22, no.570 (1939): 1170. The relatively liberal climate (given the circumstances) was also remarked upon by George Orwell who in 1940 expressed astonishment that "newspapers abusing the Government ... are being sold in the streets, almost without interference." In George Orwell, "The Lion and the Unicorn," in *Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 149.

⁹ Another potential application for this fatalistic model (unexplored in this thesis because so many of its examples lie just beyond the temporal frame of my argument) may be found in the speculative narratives of dystopian and apocalyptic despair that followed in the wake of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. See, for example, Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) in which the Australian government issues citizens with free suicide pills and injections to spare them the horrific nuclear devastation of a Third World War.

knowingly departs.”¹⁰ Porter suggests here that the pleasure of reading detective stories lies largely in the reader’s recognition of a set of genre norms from which the author may artfully deviate. Thus, while golden age crime fiction abounds with examples of exceptional digressions from the archetypal formula (from Margaret Mitchell’s *Speedy Death* (1929) in which the psychoanalyst detective, Mrs Bradley commits and gets away with murder, to the elaborately engineered solutions of works such as Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) in which the entire cast of suspects is revealed to have collaborated in the murder) such ingenious modifications of form are registerable as such precisely *because* of their deviations from an understood norm. This ingrained self-consciousness supports a view of the golden age detective story as the literary form most analogous to the condition of the fatalistic society, a governance (if not quite tyranny) of form which, I contend, becomes increasingly difficult to balance with war’s obliteration of the old certainties and consensuses that supported the genre from its post-First World War inception. Within texts such as Christie’s *Curtain*, there is a sense that the playful orthodoxies of the classic detective novel are not merely being flaunted; they are being confronted with their own extinction.

It remains to be established however, on what basis a literary genre may be spoken of in the anthropomorphised terms of life and death. In his 1985 study of the minor literary genre of the school story (a form which fell casualty to the sociohistorical shifts of the 1940s),¹¹ P.W. Musgrave describes the concept of genre in terms of a pattern which is brought into being to solve a particular social or imaginative need. When such a pattern either ceases to assuage the need it originally evolved to address or

¹⁰ Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 54.

¹¹ I draw here on Musgrave’s study because of its direct pertinence to the cases of genre-obsolescence seen in the 1940s, while recognizing that the work of Franco Moretti on the evolutions and interplay of popular and literary genres constitutes a more generally direct and obvious point of comparison.

when that need mutates or vanishes entirely, a genre must either adapt or face an inevitable decline and extinction.¹² Musgrave moreover outlines this “life-cycle” of genre in terms of birth, maturation and death, a concept prevalent across several studies of literary genre.

Alastair Fowler’s post-Saussurean writings offer a particularly robust precedent for viewing the development of genres as being, in certain respects, analogous to that of living organisms. “It would be strange,” he writes “if literature, life’s image, contained no correlative of the evolution of biological forms.”¹³ Genre, under Fowler’s definition, consists of the body of readerly expectations that make literary expression possible. While all literature requires “highly wrought codes” as referential points from which meaning can be derived through either adherence or departure, a text does not exist passively within genre but rather actively modulates it – indeed, this is held to be true of each new work which, in Fowler’s estimation, cannot help but to alter the generic terrain from which it grows.¹⁴ It is through these modifications of genre, however subtle, that individual texts convey meaning. While Fowler’s reading of genre is primarily directed towards highbrow, historical and poetic forms (and expresses a somewhat sceptical posture with regard to the value of the study of what he terms *Trivalliteratur*), he nonetheless recognises the uniqueness of the detective story as a form that advertises its own hermeneutic processes to the extent that the reader is tacitly invited to participate in them by trying to guess the plot’s outcome before it is revealed.¹⁵ While other popular modes such as the spy thriller or historical romance similarly deploy familiar tropes, conventions and stylistic idioms, the golden age (also

¹² P.W. Musgrave, *From Brown to Bunter: The Life and Death of the School Story* (London: Routledge, 2015), 241.

¹³ Alastair Fowler, “The Life and Death of Literary Forms,” *New Literary History* 2, no.2 (1971): 207.

¹⁴ Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 72. See also Frank Kermode, “Novel and Narrative,” *The Theory of the Novel: New Essays*, ed. John Halperin (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

termed the clue-puzzle form) *is* in effect its conventions, deriving its very existence from readerly awareness of its tightly governed structure. This self-consciousness, which defined the form most acutely in its inter-war incarnation as golden age crime fiction, is coupled, moreover, with an emphasis on the contractual relationship between author and reader that binds the form to an understood schema of plot and character in the name of “fair play”. While the reasons for the emergence and consolidation of such a heavily and self-referentially codified genre in the inter-war years is attributable to the cultural trauma of the Great War it evolved to channel and sublimate, Christopher Pittard, in another utilisation of the terminology of hereditary development, describes the detective story’s scrupulous self-awareness as tantamount to a “eugenics of genre”.

In applying the concept of eugenics to his analysis of the style and substance of the detective novel, Pittard attempts to present the literary form’s evolution in the 19th century as a mirror of *fin de siècle* anxieties concerning breeding, class and the body. Pittard identifies within this drive towards regulation, echoes of the evangelical social purity movements of Victorianism combined with the physiognomic writings of Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso. Such a reading of the detective genre as an expression of hereditary paranoia and the reactionary principles of “good breeding” accounts in part for the detective novel’s externalisation of its own constructs and conventions. As Pittard writes,

no other popular genre was subject to this level of codification among its practitioners because no other genre was so closely concerned thematically with policing boundaries, or dealing with ‘matter out of place’ by putting it into an interpretive order.¹⁶

¹⁶ Christopher Pittard, *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 214/215.

Pittard suggests that the desire to re-establish an intelligible framework of class, racial and moral identity amid the religious, economic and scientific upheavals of the nineteenth century produced the consolatory figure of the detective as a scientific arbiter of truth. By making the body legible and classifiable once more, the Holmesian system of deduction placated the anxieties of a time when the material signifiers of class, breeding and social standing had become increasingly unreliable owing to the industrial revolution's expansion of social mobility. Pittard's "eugenics of genre" thus perceives the 19th century crime story as a mirroring of reactionary ideology and policing of form whereby the threatening "other" represented by the degenerate or criminal element of society is made knowable and detectable. His equation of formal purity with the presence and discussion of eugenicist themes offers a provocative perspective on the interactions between genre and society. While it is not proposed here that the inter-war crime novel with its repeated flirtations with the breaching of formal convention, necessarily replicates such a schema, Pittard's approach demonstrates one way through which the heightened relationship between crime fiction and readerly expectation opens the genre up to detailed thematic and ideological readings. Moreover, the ideological policing of class-based boundaries does, indeed, remain a key thematic element throughout the golden age crime novel, particularly with regard to the allocation of grievability and culpability within these texts.¹⁷ Alison Light has outlined the key function of the golden age detective story as a "literature of convalescence"¹⁸ that evolved to cater to the needs of a reading public still processing the cultural trauma

¹⁷ There remains, however, a strong thematic emphasis on the language and ideology of eugenics in the inter-war writings of Christie, Sayers and Allingham, among others, as Samantha Walton outlines in her 2015 study of psy-discourses within the crime genre. Samantha Walton, *Guilty but Insane: Mind and Law in golden age Detective Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

¹⁸ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.69.

of the First World War.¹⁹ Light's positioning of the detective novel as a form designed to provide a tranquillised encounter with violence and social instability within the safe confines of a puzzle has been carried forth by several critics. Rowland notes that the detective novel's conspicuous and self-conscious advertisement of its artifice serves a quasi-religious consolatory function by parodying death; in the golden age detective novel, death and violence are emphatically presented as the exception as opposed to the rule, "a mendable tear in the social fabric."²⁰ Plain has argued for the centrality of the body within this paradigm, perceiving the clue-puzzle formula, through its ritualistic cycles of societal rupture and restoration as a symbolic means of reasserting the sanctity of individual life and death in the wake of the Great War's chaos. She writes that in confronting the ubiquity of death and the obliteration of the individual grievable corpse that characterised the conflict, the detective novel crafts a world

in which the meticulous investigation of a single death is not only possible, but central to the narrative ... Thus the fragmented, inexplicable and even unattributable corpses of war are replaced by the whole, over-explained, completely known bodies of detection. The detective reassembles that which war had exploded, and the over-invested signifier of the corpse becomes a ritual, 'grievable' body reassuring society with both its integrity and its explicability.²¹

¹⁹ In the essay, "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma" Jeffrey C. Alexander explores the means by which members of a community collectively process and assimilate horrendous events into their shared identity. Based on the assumption that "trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society", Alexander posits a psychoanalytic view whereby "truth can be recovered and psychological equanimity restored, only, as the Holocaust historian Saul Friedlander once put it, 'when memory comes'." Memory, in the wake of the First World War proved a slow process; it was not until the mid 1920s onwards that memoirs of the war such as Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* (1928) and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) began to emerge. See Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1,5.

²⁰ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2001), 26.

²¹ Gill Plain, *Literature of the 1940s*, 233/234.

These “grievable bodies” of the inter-war detective story are not, however, endowed with this quality indiscriminately; indeed, the conventional golden age crime novel affirms and consolidates a hierarchical model of grievability and precarity based primarily on class. The automatic disqualification of certain bodies from credibly participating in the whodunit game has stark implications for the form’s broader construction of grievability and precarity. As Judith Butler writes,

if certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in a full sense.²²

The isolation of servants and other working class figures from the machinations of this convalescent form is made manifest in the typical profiles of the individuals presented as precarious entities within the texts, namely victims and killers. Within the realm of the inter-war murder mystery, at least two lives must be precarious: the life of the corpse and that of the killer for whom exposure will inevitably lead to hanging. As Van Dine’s eleventh rule for writing detective fiction dictates, however,

A servant must not be chosen by the author as the culprit. This is begging a noble question. It is a too easy solution. The culprit must be a decidedly worth-while person — one that wouldn’t ordinarily come under suspicion.²³

The inter-war detective story typically fails to apprehend the lives of those beyond its middle class nexus of vulnerability or suspicion as precarious entities, thereby exiling

²² Judith Butler, *Frames of War*, 1.

²³ S.S. Van Dine, “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories.” *The American Magazine*, September 1928, 129-131. While Van Dine’s rules are observational and tongue-in-cheek rather than prescriptive in nature, they nonetheless serve as a useful indicator of the kinds of self-conscious processes that informed crime writers of the period.

working class figures from its framework of grievability.²⁴ In circumstances where a working class individual falls prey to the killer, it invariably takes the form of a tangential offshoot of the main “grievable corpse” that forms the ritualistic centre of the novel.²⁵ Where a working class figure is exposed as the murderer, this revelation is typically accompanied by the simultaneous unearthing of a hitherto concealed hereditary or familial link that legitimates his presence within the puzzle.²⁶ As my subsequent analysis shall show, the central role of the Butlerian concept of “grievability” within the golden age detective novel’s originating function is destabilised with the onset of war. As the cultural mood switches from one of convalescence and mourning to one of anxiety and anticipation (as Stonebridge’s writings highlight), the *raison d’être* of the detective genre is equally disrupted and undermined. This imaginative shift from the retroactive processing of violence to its apprehension is palpable across all five texts here discussed, two of which (*An Inspector Calls* and *Curtain*) see the detective figure engaged in the anticipation and prevention of a crime as opposed to solving one, while three (*An Inspector Calls*, *Penhallow* and *Hangover Square*) are situated pre-war while heavily foreshadowing the violent political events to follow.

The inter-war golden age detective story is, thus, a form which above any other genre is spiritually bound by “the ineluctable and inflexible nature of a rule against

²⁴ This policing of eligible participants within the clue puzzle game extends to detective figures; as Symons notes, “it would have been unthinkable ... [for a golden age writer] to create a Jewish detective, or a working-class one aggressively conscious of his origins, for such figures would have seemed to them quite incongruous.” In Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Penguin, 1992), 108.

²⁵ For example, in *Death on the Nile* (1937), the maid, Louise Bourget (whose name perhaps mimics the bourgeois comfort she attempts illicitly to secure for herself) is murdered because of her attempts to blackmail the killer with information about the “central” murder of an heiress.

²⁶ See, for example, Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Gaudy Night* (1935), in which the killer, a college servant, is revealed to be the vengeful widow of a disgraced prominent academic who has committed suicide. See also *Hercule Poirot’s Christmas* (1938), in which the working-class murderer is revealed to be the unacknowledged offspring of a multi-millionaire diamond magnate.

which there is no appeal.”²⁷ In direct contrast with the states of anomic disorientation discussed in the next chapter, the genre is tailored to offer the reassuring vision of social stability and the clinical purgation of disorder through a process of methodical reasoning; such a vision, however, is rendered increasingly strained through the attrition of the societal bedrock of inter-war trauma and its displacement by the concerns of total war and collective precarity. It is unsurprising that a form whose genesis and evolution were enterprises of highly conspicuous self-reflexivity should undergo a similarly self-ordained death. This analysis deals, therefore, not with the decline of the English murder but with its suicide. The following textual studies explore the ways in which this “literature of reassurance and conformism”²⁸ confronted the prospect of its own demise in the 1940s through a variety of self-reflexively self-annihilating practices.

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John Dickson Carr’s aptly named *The Case of the Constant Suicides* confronts the prospect of the detective genre’s self-destruction as its codes and mores come under increasing strain. Born in Pennsylvania, Dickson Carr relocated and settled in England in the early 1930s where he achieved popular acclaim as a mystery writer with a particular talent for the “locked room” form of the whodunit. In one of the few lengthy critical appraisals of his work, S.T. Joshi asserts that Carr, despite reaching the zenith of his popularity during the 1940s, deliberately suppressed any meaningful engagement with the socio-political environment in which he wrote; recognising that his finely tuned plots were simply untranslatable within a war context, he took the expedient of

²⁷ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 239.

²⁸ Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*, 220.

“avoiding the conflict while it was occurring and pretending it never occurred once it was over.”²⁹ Such a reading, however, fails to take account of the deliberate conspicuousness with which Carr advertises his displacement of wartime concerns; indeed, far from covertly eliding the political realities of the conflict, Carr draws attention to the sheer impossibility of his formula within the context of war.³⁰ In the opening of *The Case of the Constant Suicides*, he goes so far as to directly address the reader, drawing on an implicit bond forged through common experience of aerial bombardment. “We were young in those days” he declares; the novel is set early in the war, prior to heavy bombardment of cities, a time when “an air raid alert meant merely an inconvenience.”³¹ In spite of his novel’s aim of redirecting readerly attention away from the mass-scale killing and dying of war in favour of an individualised mystery narrative of murder (or apparent suicide), Carr recognises that he must invoke the war in order to compartmentalise it. The anxieties of aerial destruction appear ominously in the novel’s opening sections, threatening to overwhelm and render obsolete the individualised concerns of the central plot. As the two protagonists gaze out into the night from their train compartment, Carr presents the reader with a portentous visual representation of war’s counter mythos, undercutting and undermining the urgency of the immediate mystery:

They were rushing through a dead world, pitch-black except where,
along a purple horizon, moved a maze of searchlights. Jack’s beanstalk

²⁹ S.T. Joshi, *John Dickson Carr: A Critical Study* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 95.

³⁰ Even among his peers of the golden age, Carr’s inter-war novels are notable for a self-consciousness of form that occasionally erupts into explicit meta-theatricality. One such work from 1935 incorporates a lengthy discussion of the rules of the locked room formula by the academic and detective Gideon Fell who remarks: “we’re in a detective story, and we don’t fool the reader by pretending we’re not... Let’s candidly glory in the noblest pursuits.” In John Dickson Carr, *The Three Coffins* (New York: Award Books, 1974), 160.

³¹ John Dickson Carr, *The Case of the Constant Suicides* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1941), 5. Subsequent in-text citations are from this edition.

went no higher than these white beams. The white lines shuttled back and forth, in unison, like dancers. They heard no noise except the click of the wheels: not even the waspish, coughing drone of *war-war, war-war*, which marks the cruising bomber. (19)

The hermetically sealed realm of the murder mystery cannot entirely guard itself against the encroachments of a “dead world” in which killing ceases to be remarkable or unexpected. Several texts of the period 1938-1940, as Mellor observes, deploy the language and imagery of aeriality to reconstitute and reconceptualise the diminished status of the individual within the context of bombardment. Such imagery, Mellor attests, carries within it an implied fatalism, a fatalism which in this context competes with and threatens to over-ride the in-built fatalism of the crime narrative (that a murder will be committed, solved and social harmony restored by the ordering detective-figure). Mellor suggests that

realism about the effects of bombing – non-cataclysmic and yet pervasive – is matched by a fatalism that emerges and challenges narrative form in a variety of ways still relatively untheorised or analysed – either by contemporary writers or by subsequent critics.³²

In the case of the detective story, a form which foregrounds its artificiality, the incursion of war is a destabilising force that risks obliterating the social, philosophical and moral categories that sustain the genre. In the locked room format is found a microcosmic distillation of an intrinsic component of the golden age novel, namely a sense of impregnability. While the locked room represents an intensification of this quality, by reducing the list of credible suspects who might have access to commit the murder to zero, the clue-puzzle mode as a whole relies on a similarly restricted cast of

³² Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, 32.

characters in order to maintain the structural and ideological integrity of the game.

W.H. Auden, a self-confessed obsessive devotee of the detective genre, cites this element of “a closed society” as imperative. The ostensibly sealed-off communities of cruise ships, trains or isolated rural villages that characterise these enclosed social spheres not only provide a practical arena in which a cast of suspects can be arraigned and examined, they also serve to showcase the drama of social harmony restored.

Auden writes that the conventional mystery must unfold within

a society in a state of grace, i.e. a society where there is no need of the law, no contradiction between the aesthetic individual and the ethical universal, and where murder, therefore, is the unheard-of act which precipitates a crisis (for it reveals that some member has fallen and is no longer in a state of grace).³³

Auden’s overarching portrayal of the classic detective fiction as a prelapsarian vision of a society, temporarily compromised, but ultimately restored to perfect virtue is not, in fact, borne out by the reality of inter-war crime fiction, in which a more cynical view of mankind routinely dominates. His alignment of the golden age crime novel with an innocent paradise is arguably indicative of the author’s nostalgic figuring of the inter-war period via the detective form than any deep-set analysis. Auden’s perception of the ideal detective-story milieu as an unspoilt Eden which is once more perfectable through the identification and expulsion of the “fallen one” does, nevertheless, serve to highlight the form’s structural contingency on containment.³⁴ Bartell suggests that the closed society permits the form to present murder as a “momentary expression of the

³³ W.H. Auden, “The Guilty Vicarage,” in *The Dyer’s Hand* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 108.

³⁴ Auden’s construction of the form may be further undermined by the recognition that the clue puzzle form is intrinsically dependent on the existence on an entire community of plausible murder suspects; indeed, if anything, the form may be viewed conversely as highlighting the pervasiveness of violent impulses as each character is revealed to harbour murderous longings, whether acted upon or dormant.

breakdown of the rules that tie a social class together.”³⁵ During the early war years, however, several novels within the genre begin to implicitly undermine this conception. In Christie’s *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940), the solving of the murder and the preservation of social harmony are no longer mutual co-guarantors but in stark conflict with one another. Here, Poirot shows that the apparent suicide of a dentist was in fact a ruthless murder carried out by a prominent banker who is described as an integral figure in the maintenance of democratic values against the threats of fascist and communist totalitarianism. When presented with the dilemma of avenging the individualised corpse or safeguarding the wellbeing of the nation, Poirot selects the former, declaring:

‘I am not concerned with nations, Monsieur. I am concerned with the lives of private individuals who have the right not to have their lives taken from them.’³⁶

This affirmation of the purpose of the detective is undercut a paragraph later with Poirot’s troubled musing, “we may be wrong.”³⁷ The note of irresolution that concludes the novel indicates the moral attrition of the detective novel’s scope for delivering either reassurance or conformity.

The Case of the Constant Suicides, while largely isolated from the immediate physical vulnerabilities of war, shows a similar awareness of the moral complexities presented by the broader geopolitical conflict at play. The narrative focuses on two young academics and distant cousins, Alan and Kathryn Campbell, who are summoned to a run-down castle in the remote Scottish highlands after the apparent suicide of their uncle. The old man’s immediate heirs, owing to the technicalities of his insurance

³⁵ James E. Bartell, “The Bureaucrat as Reader: The Detective Novel in the Context of Middle-Class Culture,” in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, eds. Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 183.

³⁶ Agatha Christie, *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (London: Planet Three, 2002), 189.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 191.

policy, stand to gain a small fortune if it can be established that his death (a fall from the topmost window of the tower in which he slept) was either an accident or foul play; if found to be suicide, they will receive nothing at all. The plot is complicated when another family member, wishing to dispel any suggestion of sinister influences (whether mortal or metaphysical) volunteers to spend the night in the tower and is discovered the next morning to have similarly defenestrated himself. By the novel's close, yet another character is revealed to have apparently hanged himself. The eventual arrival of Carr's recurring detective, Dr Gideon Fell, yields a solution both ingenious and far-fetched, involving noxious gases and long-lost relations, ultimately uncovering that the original corpse was indeed a suicide while the subsequent victims were murdered by an insurance agent who stood to profit from a secret familial connection. It is at this point of cathartic disclosure that Carr upends the moral underpinnings of the golden age novel when it transpires that Angus Campbell's body serves the interests of social, spiritual and financial harmony if it can be tactfully misread as the casualty of malicious as opposed to self-directed violence. Fell strikes a bargain with the murderer whereby the killer, in exchange for an opportunity to flee the country and evade justice, agrees to write an affidavit falsely claiming responsibility for the death of the suicidal landowner, all to ensure that the deceased's wife is not denied her insurance income under law. Faced with the prospect of either hanging justly for two murders or escaping from the unjust charge of three murders, the killer allows fatalism to tend towards pragmatism. Corpses no longer demand truth and retribution but may be made to signify in accordance with the needs of the moment. The detective's purpose as an emblem of rationality now extends beyond the mere establishment of truth to its expedient remodelling.

‘The meaning and purpose of this,’ [Fell] returned, ‘is to let Elspat Campbell live out her years and die happily without the conviction that Angus’s soul is burning in hell. The purpose is to provide for Elspat and Colin to the end of their lives as Angus wanted them provided for. That is all’. (163)

Plain observes that “it did not take much to transform inter-war crime fiction’s cursory depiction of the corpse into wartime crime’s pragmatic, and at times brutal, dismissal.”³⁸ The new interchangeability of motivations and culprits that Carr’s text pursues supports this view that the individual grievable body has ceased to occupy a place at the centre of the very genre that began as its most ardent vindicator. The assertion notoriously attributed to Josef Stalin that, while a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic, comes close to conveying the difficulty of preserving this aforementioned individualised sanctity of life during times of mass death such as war or natural disaster. Naturally then, for the golden age murder mystery, whose inception and evolution was shaped by a post-war demand for fantasies of grievability, the outbreak of the Second World War represents an unwelcome return of the repressed. In his memoir of the London Blitz, the Irish-American writer Constantine Fitzgibbon writes a tongue-in-cheek account of the nightmarish scenarios of war conjured up in the public imagination as the prospect of mass destruction from the skies on a scale that threatened to obliterate the proprieties of grief loomed ever larger:

It would not even be possible to bury the dead properly, since it would be beyond the resources of the country to provide the necessary timber for coffins. Mass burials in lime pits was envisaged or even the dumping

³⁸ Gill Plain, “‘A stiff is still a stiff in this country’: the Problem of Murder in Wartime,” in *Conflict, Nationhood and Corporeality in Modern Literature: Bodies-at-War*, ed. Petra Rau (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 121.

of bodies from hoppers into the Channel. However, with the city on fire above-ground, the few roads still open crowded with hysterical refugees, and the tubes crammed with starving, panic-stricken masses prey to virulent epidemics, it is hard to see how the corpses could even have been conveyed to the pits.³⁹

The slain body no longer represents a rupture within the world of the plot, rather it *is* that world. Moreover, by admitting the anxieties of the “dead world” into the self-referentially fictitious realm of sanitised murder, Carr’s text reveals itself to be no longer capable of entirely sealing off (and thereby disavowing) its own narrative conclusions. The transformation of the detective into a figure of ambivalent compromise and the text’s status as a genre-suicide arises not merely from the displacement of justice exhibited in its denouement but the even more serious implication of the interchangeability of bodies, a concept which resonates with the text’s earlier foreshadowing of aerial bombardment (since it is from the perspective of the bomber pilot that the individual corpse truly loses all individuation). This destruction of the principle of individual corporeal grievability is found across several texts of the 1940s, and is most eloquently articulated in the observation of Hercule Poirot in Christie’s *Evil Under the Sun* (1941). Looking down upon a row of sunbathers on the beach, the Belgian detective is struck by the drab uniformity of human life, as the text dismantles the concept of the sacred individualised corpse in favour of a depersonalised aerial perspective.

‘Regard them there, lying out in rows. What are they? They are not men and women. There is nothing personal about them. They are just -

³⁹ Constantine Fitzgibbon, *The Blitz* (London: Allan Wingate, 1957), 7.

bodies... That reminds me very much of the Morgue in Paris... Bodies arranged on slabs like butcher's meat!"⁴⁰

Significantly, Poirot views these unexceptional specks of humanity from the terrace above; perceiving life as though from the vantage point of the aerial bomber. His morbid reflection on the unexceptionality of human flesh is moreover borne out in the novel's ingenious solution, which further dismantles the golden age myth of the importance of the individual. The murder, while knowable and decipherable, is ultimately unavengable owing to the killers' flawless alibis. Unable to prove his case, the detective is forced to draw on a past unsolved murder to ensure that the couple hangs, thereby delivering a generalised form of retribution that is at odds with the individualistic function of the genre. This desecration of a once integral principle of the avengable corpse marks a key facet of the crime novel's unravelling authority as a means of processing trauma.

John Dickson Carr's writing of the 1940s exhibits a preoccupation with matters of war only insofar as they threaten to derail the functionality of his mystery formulas. The manner in which he and many of his contemporaries endeavour to overcome the challenge of war through a combination of incorporation and exclusion is, in itself, informative about the shifting emphases of the genre during this period. It is not merely the superficial accoutrements of war, the blackout curtains, the disruption of travel, and the beguiling ominousness of searchlights in the night that penetrate the bounds of the locked room, but also a new conceptualisation of the individual.

Category collapse is also integral to Agatha Christie's quintessential manifestation of genre-suicide, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*. Set in what the narrator,

⁴⁰ Agatha Christie, *Evil Under the Sun* (London: Planet Three, 2002), 13.

Captain Hastings, terms “these degenerate days”⁴¹ of a non-descript post-war future, *Curtain* is an emphatic abandonment of the structures and categories that sustained the form and its social hierarchies in the face of societal decay and decadence.

Generally, Christie’s novels of the 1940s avoided direct engagement with the war; however, many of the generic experimentations she and several other golden age practitioners adopted during the late 1930s may be read in light of the socio-political climate of the time.⁴² Of the eleven conventional whodunits Christie published in the 1940s (discounting her Ancient Egyptian-set experiment, *Death Comes as the End* (1944), and the spy-thriller oriented *N or M* (1941)), nine feature suicide as prominent plot points. Written during the London Blitz, *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case* is a direct product of the climate of morbid resignation reflected in Frances Partridge’s wish for “some safe way of dying”. The novel was consciously prepared as a nest-egg for her daughter, Rosalind “in anticipation of my being killed in the raids, which seemed to be in the highest degree likely.” Wryly, she assured her family that “it will cheer you up when you come back from the funeral.”⁴³ Faced with the ever-present threat of death from above, Christie enacts in *Curtain* a textual wish-fulfilment by granting her world famous detective the relative luxury of dying on his own terms having confronted a new form of evil that threatens all that he stands for. Had Christie fallen victim to the Blitz as her premonition suggested, her 1940s readership would have encountered in *Curtain* a posthumous text embedded within a posthumous text, the final written testament of Hercule Poirot concluding the last novel of his creator.

⁴¹ Agatha Christie, *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case* (London: Fontana, 1977), 11. All subsequent in-text citations are from this edition.

⁴² Knight writes that Christie’s writings of the 1940s deploy an Austen-esque form of displacement which, while eliding the specific crises of war, offer “a veridical and even moving account of the period and its problems from a domestic and feminine viewpoint.” Stephen Knight, “Murder in Wartime,” in *War Culture: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two Britain*, eds. Pat Kirkham and David Thoms (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), 163.

⁴³ Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (London: Collins, 1977), 527.

Rather than offering readers a sentimental coda, Christie's last Poirot adventure is a rigorous and calculated attack on the role of the detective figure and the world he inhabits, culminating literally and figuratively in his self-destruction. The critical self-reflexivity of the project is made clear from the outset with the novel's return to Styles Court, the site of the first of her mysteries and the venue at which her readers were first introduced to Hercule Poirot. The Essex country manor, once a comfortably enclosed microcosm of "the bucolic dream of England" has,⁴⁴ in this drab post-war world, been rendered porous and banal through its shabby rebirth as a hotel. The elegiac mood of Hastings' return to this fallen bastion of golden age values (mirroring uncannily in several respects the return of Charles Ryder to the stately home of Brideshead in Waugh's novel) is intensified by the shock of the appearance of the cerebral entity of the detective debilitated by the corporeal effects of age.

Crippled with arthritis, he propelled himself about in a wheeled chair.

His once plump frame had fallen in. He was a thin little man now. His face was lined and wrinkled. His moustache and hair, it is true, were still of a jet black colour, but candidly, though I would not for the world have hurt his feelings by saying so to him, this was a mistake. There comes a moment when hair dye is only too painfully obvious. (12/13)

While these ravaging effects of age and illness are revealed at the novel's close to have been exaggerated somewhat by Poirot, the impact of this spectacle at the opening is nonetheless one of genre-inversion. The detective here appears as a pathetic object of detection, whose attempts to conceal the all too obvious toll of time upon his body are

⁴⁴ David Grossvogel, "Agatha Christie: Containment of the Unknown." *The Poetics of Murder*, eds. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe (London: Harcourt, 1983), 256. This nostalgic rendering of the golden age Styles of 1918 in *Curtain* is, however, focalised through Hastings' sentimental and frequently unreliable narration. Poirot significantly professes not to share these warm memories, reminding his companion of his uprooting from his native Belgium as a war refugee.

transparent even to the dim-witted side-kick, Hastings. Such uncanny destabilisation of genre categories is common throughout the novel, most notably in the form of the psychopathic killer whose presence catalyses the implosion of the form.

In the figure of Stephen Norton, an arch-manipulator whose amateur interest in bird-watching belies a deeper voyeuristic impulse towards sadism, lies the existential downfall of the murder mystery. His presence undermines the promise of the whodunit to make mortality and violence safe through the presentation of “the grievable body ... [as] a talisman against death’s fragmentation and dissolution.”⁴⁵ The novel’s solution casts murder as a distinctly fragmented affair, an enterprise divided among multiple culpable actors, both witting and unwitting. Although the manipulative Norton is identified by Poirot as the killer in a moral sense, he is innocent of all violence, preying instead upon the insecurities and fears of the suggestible mind. Thus, it is impossible to bestow a unified moral, legal and social catharsis on a single guilty figure in a world where act, motive and murderous will are all divided across the populous and even Norton, the Iago-like serial killer who preys upon the capacity for evil latent in all humans, is himself merely a symptomatic “drug slave” of a society that has learned to relish the delights of brutality at second-hand. Poirot writes of him that

Norton, the gentle-hearted, loving man, was a secret sadist. He was an addict of pain, of mental torture. There has been an epidemic of that in the world of late years — L’appétit vient en mangeant. (172)

Encoded in Norton’s apocalyptic testament to the ubiquitous banality of evil is an implicit metatextual accusation directed towards the reader. The conditions that gave rise to this compulsive aficionado of pornographic violence may be identical to those

⁴⁵ Gill Plain, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (London: Fitzroy Dearbon Publishers, 2001), 53.

which have seen the archetypal whodunit displaced in popularity by the far more brutal model of thriller typified by James Hadley Chase's *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. Robin Woods, who has likewise identified *Curtain* as Christie's "murder of the mystery", suggests that the novel's upending of the contract between reader and author is felt most potently with the implosion, not of the detective-figure, but of his sidekick. Captain Hastings' susceptibility to Norton's hypnotic influence provides the ultimate metatextual evidence of the irretrievability of the situation since, as Woods notes, Hastings is the reader's ambassador within the world of the mystery.

If the revelation of Hastings as a potential killer was shocking, this act is more so, for Poirot does not simply represent the reader. He represents the principle of justice that keeps crime apart from the reader. Once justice executes itself there is no longer any barrier between the community and crime. We are all susceptible, all criminal. The criminal voice again breaks through the criminal text. Norton has corrupted Hastings and Poirot, and through them he corrupts the reader.⁴⁶

It is ultimately, however, the impasse faced by Poirot – his insoluble moral conundrum – that signifies the textual death of the murder mystery as it is consumed from within by its own rigorous code. Significantly, this existential crisis is found inscribed upon the body of Poirot's victim, Stephen Norton, shot at a point exactly located in the centre of his forehead. At the novel's close, Hastings presents two conflicting readings of this inscription. The first reading suggests that the meticulousness is simply a typical expression of the pathological fastidiousness which has been a hallmark of the Belgian detective's persona since his first introduction and

⁴⁶ Robin Woods, "It Was the Mark of Cain': Agatha Christie and the Murder of the Mystery," in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, eds. Jerome Delamater and Ruth Prigozy, 109.

furthermore of his role within the text as a redeeming figure whose “aim (and purpose) [is] to restore order after it has been disrupted by crime.”⁴⁷ The second reading, and the one that concludes the novel, perceives the gunshot wound as “the brand of Cain”, (188) a Biblical reference to man’s “first murder” and the indelible stain of violence that contaminates all of humanity. Such a concept of universal culpability appears to contravene the promise of individual justice and retribution. Poirot’s transition from detective to prophet places him within the same category as Priestley’s Inspector Goole; through the fall of society, his role is converted from the diagnosis of social ills to the redemption of all mankind. Implicit in this universalisation of the detective’s office is the necessity of his self-removal.

For the worst part of murder, Hastings, is its effect on the murderer. I, Hercule Poirot, might come to believe myself divinely appointed to deal out death to all and sundry. (179)

For Poirot, the prospect of self-appointed death is secondary to the existential suicide he commits in becoming, himself, a murderer. In these anxieties of identity-destruction, he may be read as expressing a condition articulated in Mudford’s suggestion that “the war not only involved the question of who survived, but also of what was being destroyed and the value of what survived.”⁴⁸ The notion that the defeat of fascism would demand the assimilation of the ruthlessness and amorality of fascism into the self and, by extension, the risk of losing oneself to its dangerous allure, proved a prominent talking point within popular discourses.⁴⁹ E.M. Forster in 1939 declared that any intelligent

⁴⁷ John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London, New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 47.

⁴⁸ Peter Mudford, “‘Quantitative judgements don’t apply’: The Fiction of Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene,” in *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival*. ed. Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve (Basingstoke: Palgrave Ltd, 2001), 199/200.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Plain’s analysis of the 1943 Powell and Pressburger film, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* in which the chivalric mode of gentlemanly combat is forced to yield to a tactical realpolitik of war. In *Literature of the 1940s*, 117.

observer could recognise the impossibility of securing victory over Hitler without sacrificing one's own identity and values:

they see, with a clearness denied to politicians, that if fascism wins we are done for, and that we must become fascist to win. There seems no escape from this hideous dilemma ... They are vexed by messages from contradictory worlds, so that whatever they do appears to them as a betrayal of something good.⁵⁰

It is implied here that the elimination of fascism will inescapably demand an existential sacrifice of selfhood and values, a spiritual suicide through which the imagined national self must adopt the mindset and methodologies of the very force against which it is defined. Faced with a similarly insoluble dilemma in dealing with his untouchable foe, Poirot arrives at a course of action whereby the ethical suicide of detective-turned-murderer is logically followed by a literal embracement of death.

Goodbye, cher ami. I have moved the amylnitrate ampoules away from beside my bed. I prefer to leave myself in the hands of the bon Dieu. May his punishment, or his mercy, be swift! (187)⁵¹

For all the hubris that is evident in Poirot's assumption that his aptitude for murder renders him a hazard to all mankind, the Belgian sleuth nonetheless manages to evade the Catholic stigma of "self-murder" that Harry Scobie incurs in *The Heart of the Matter* because his suicide is conducted passively by withholding of the means of living. Christie critics, including Maida et al,⁵² however, have largely interpreted

⁵⁰ E.M. Forster, "The 1939 State," in *New Statesman and Nation*, June 10, 1939, 889.

⁵¹ Susan Baker suggests that in classic detective fiction, "suicide resembles early modern beheading – an end more dignified than that accorded common criminals." The "uncommon" killer of Christie's celebrated 1926 mystery, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is also granted the opportunity to take his own life rather than face capital punishment. In Susan Baker, "Shakespearean Authority in the Classic Detective Story," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46, no.4 (1995): 432.

⁵² Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982), 188.

Poirot's death as a suicide, particularly within the context of his earlier admission that, as a murderer, he cannot trust himself to go on living. Semantics aside, *Curtain* represents a dramatic instance of character suicide and, indeed, genre-suicide. This is brought about through the appearance of the perfect murderer. Stephen Norton's greatest weapon, which enables him to vicariously kill with impunity, is propaganda, the insidious ideological tool. Since nobody (not even Captain Hastings) is impervious to the lure of ideology, Norton's Iago-like manipulations allow him to make murderers of everyone, thereby undermining the role of the whodunit.

Texts such as *Curtain* serve as a refutation to the charge of Christie's wartime writings as purely escapist and politically disengaged. While Christie innovated and upended the clue puzzle form many times over throughout the inter-war years, it is from the late-1930s onwards that these experiments appear to increasingly respond to socio-political tensions around her. The mirroring of suicidal themes and a suicidality of form figures in such novels as a commentary on the increasing dissonance between the frivolous game-playing associated with the detective form and insurmountable historical forces external to the text. This dissonance is most keenly felt in perhaps her most enduringly popular novel, itself a literal and figurative countdown to self-annihilation. Published in November 1939, *And Then There Were None* serves as an articulation of the challenges that were increasingly to stretch the rules of the whodunit throughout the 1940s and as a (perhaps unwitting) allegory of war. The ten victims gathered on an island are each, themselves, the unpunished perpetrators of murder and also, by turns, take on the role of sleuth in the race to identify the avenging angel in their midst, U.N. Owen. The arch-murderer occupies the roles of detective, killer, judge, executioner and even author, while his name, "Justice Wargrave" serves as a darkly apt reminder of the buried traumas that threaten once more to burst through the

surface of the well-made mystery plot. His declaration in the epilogue confession that “it was my ambition to invent a murder mystery that no-one could solve”⁵³ is a chilling articulation of the detective form’s inability to contain the impending confusion of war (and indeed “war graves”). The capital justice Wargrave metes out, meanwhile, is of a kind endorsed by the state. As the lines between self and enemy become increasingly indiscernible with the collapse of the notional character identities that form the bedrock of crime fiction, self-destruction becomes the dominant mood. The novel is effectively a countdown to suicide, as the corpses proliferate with the mechanical predictability of the eponymous nursery rhyme (the novel was originally titled *Ten Little Niggers*) until Vera Claythorne, the “last girl” has nothing left to destroy but herself, spurred on by the phantom presence of her estranged former fiancé.

Like an automaton, Vera moved forward... She climbed up on the chair, her eyes in front of her like a sleep-walker’s ... She adjusted the noose round her neck... She kicked away the chair⁵⁴

Here, the self-reflexivity of the detective story comes to the fore. Vera’s suicide appears as a mechanistic reflex, an act of obedience to the pre-ordained schema of the eponymous nursery rhyme, rather than an autonomous statement.

Christie does not, in her 1940s writing, go so far as to dismantle the aforementioned class-based hierarchies of grievability upon which her golden age writing hangs. Indeed, her repeated redirection of narrative attention towards suicide may be seen in several instances to preserve this structure. A prominent red herring in the novel *Curtain* sees Major Allerton cast in the light of an abusive cad who in the past callously drove his former lover to suicide. The girl in question is implied to have been

⁵³ Agatha Christie, *And Then There Were None* (Great Britain: Harper Collins, 1993), 222.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 200.

a girl of similar social and intellectual bearing to Hastings' daughter, thereby inspiring Hastings to contemplate murder to save Judith from the lethal attentions of such a man. At the novel's close, however, Poirot casually divests the suicide of Allerton's former lover of all significance because she is not "of the independent, highbrow kind" as originally imagined, but rather "a neurotic type... of poor stock." (99) By relegating the girl's death to the status of "red herring", Christie implies a corresponding diminution in her capacity to signify and, by extension, her worthiness of mourning and retribution. The novel's dismissal of working class suicide as unfit material for investigation is not necessarily symptomatic of Christie's own conservatism but rather a residue of the golden age detective story's innate snobbery. While Christie proved reluctant to confront these aspects of the crime genre's ideological and formal conservatism, the dissection and dissolution of such factors proved a central focus for other practitioners within the form.

In *Penhallow*, Georgette Heyer presents a revisionist version of the whodunit that, while set vaguely within the inter-war golden age, strips the genre of all stabilising assurances of justice, bourgeois morality and ratiocentric knowledge-attainment. The intended genre-subversion is foreshadowed in the novel's epigraph from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* in reference to the murderer Barnadine, who refuses to be executed for his crimes and is eventually pardoned by a fallible and capricious justice system:

A man that apprehends death no more dreadfully but as a drunken sleep;
careless, reckless, and fearless of what's past, present, or to come;
insensible of mortality, and desperately mortal.

Measure for Measure Act iv Scene 2

In prefacing her murder mystery with an invocation not only of the unpunished killer but also of the diminution of death's capacity to signify, Heyer makes manifest her attack on the genre in which she operates, subliminally preparing her reader for the text's ultimate renegeing on the contract of the whodunit. While the country manor of Trevellin is superficially similar to the Styles Court of Christie's 1920s debut, Heyer's retrospective appraisal of this world exposes the libidinal undercurrents of illegitimacy, sexual transgression and class warfare typically buried beneath the surface of the classic detective novel. In this work, the crime of illegitimacy overshadows and ultimately displaces that of murder, resulting in a suicide of both character and genre. Taking and externalising the reactionary preoccupations stereotypically associated with the crime genre, Heyer's novel exposes as fraudulent the form's thematic and formal obsession with the policing of boundaries of form and class by emphasising the adulterated illegitimacy that permeates both. This process of debunking results in another "murder of the mystery" as the politics of secrecy and exposure that underpin the detective genre are equally called into question.

Heyer had published nine other detective novels in the clue-puzzle style prior to *Penhallow* and originally intended this work to be her last within the genre, freeing her to work in different modes. *Penhallow*, she wrote, was "a very peculiar, long and unorthodox story," starkly distinct from her "usual murders."⁵⁵ As Jennifer Kloester's 2011 biography illustrates, Heyer's literary vision was heavily influenced by lessons absorbed in her Edwardian childhood that stressed the imperatives of breeding and class as indicators of moral worth.⁵⁶ This ideological emphasis on the maintenance of social

⁵⁵ Jennifer Kloester, *Georgette Heyer* (London: William Heinemann, 2011), 233.

⁵⁶ Heyer's alignment of hereditary with moral and mental balance may also have influenced her view of suicide. She adamantly refused to accept the coroner's verdict of "suicide while of unsound mind" following the death of her seventy-one year old father-in-law beneath a train at Down Street Underground Station in 1931, describing the verdict as "a wicked, hateful thing to have said" while affirming the "level headedness" of the man. In Jennifer Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 115/116.

hierarchies through the preservation of bloodlines and notions of racial superiority is evident in the thematic focus of many of her detective stories as well as her highly popular historical romances. Although not an official affiliate of the “Detection Club”, whose members playfully signed up to Knox’s “rulebook” upon entry,⁵⁷ Heyer was among the most vocal proponents of the concept of “fair play” between author and reader through the observance of genre conventions.⁵⁸ In this 1942 novel however, Heyer presents these codes as unsustainable constructs that have failed to uphold the hypocritical veneer of order and virtue within the closed society microcosm.⁵⁹

All sense of ritualised catharsis associated with the classic texts of the golden age is totally absent in this novel. Although presided over by a prolific progenitor (in the form of the aptly named patriarch, Adam Penhallow), the world of Trevellin bears no resemblance to the “Eden” described in Auden’s outline of the golden age, while the murderous “fallen one” (Penhallow’s second wife, Faith) goes unidentified and unpunished, in part because of her indistinguishability from the fallen society she inhabits.

The novel’s sprawling and often meandering plot incorporates a myriad of perspectives among the Penhallow household and its servants, each of whom is by turns thwarted and tormented by the elderly patriarch. Half-way through the text, Penhallow is murdered by his timid wife because of his intention to withdraw her sensitive, spoiled son from Oxford to train as a lawyer’s clerk, a development that (in outright contravention of the most basic principle of the whodunit form) is explicitly presented

⁵⁷ The Detection Club, founded in 1928 by Anthony Berkeley and G.K. Chesterton stipulated that new members take an oath “never to conceal a vital clue from the reader.” See Howard Haycraft “The Detection Club Oath,” in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: The Universal Library, 1946), 198.

⁵⁸ Melissa Schaub, *The Female Gentleman: Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 103.

⁵⁹ Indeed, the novel’s portrayals of illegitimacy and libertinism resulted in its banning by the Irish Censorship Publications Board for being “in its general tendency indecent.” Jennifer Kloester *Georgette Heyer*, 240.

to the reader without any element of concealment. In the aftermath of the death, attention is drawn to the suicide of the eldest son, Raymond, who, unbeknown to the other family members has discovered that he is not in fact a legitimate child of Penhallow but rather the result of an affair between his father and the nervous eccentric he assumed to be his aunt. Unable to countenance the ignominy and horror of living in the knowledge that he is “just another of Penhallow’s bastards”, Raymond shoots himself in an act which inadvertently gives rise to the general assumption that he is the murderer. The case is left unresolved and the novel ends *in media res*. The perfunctory and misguided police investigation that marks the closing stages of the novel offers no “nostalgic re-forming of social classes”,⁶⁰ but rather confirms Heyer’s anti-cathartic narrative strategy in providing what the Inspector terms, “a very unsatisfactory case.” (431)

Penhallow not only undermines the rules and conventions governing the whodunit, but also the society and values the genre operates to espouse and uphold, ultimately establishing that, as Barnard notes, “the cosiness and the stability [of ‘cosy crime fiction’] are only skin-deep.”⁶¹ Far from being a repository of idealistic values and robust morality, Trevellin is “a prison to anyone not blessed with the strongest of nerves, and the most blunted of sensibilities.”(3) The imprisonment of the leisured class that languishes in this enclosed society is due only in part to the cruel manipulations of Penhallow and owes far more to its members’ collective inability to compete or survive beyond its bounds. The collection of failed artists, pretentious aesthetes, dissolute hypochondriacs and vacuous brutes that make up the youthful branch of the Penhallow dynasty operates under the comforting delusion that the elimination of the old man

⁶⁰ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 39.

⁶¹ Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1980), 30.

would constitute a “universal panacea”. (246) This comforting assumption proves fatefully misguided as Penhallow’s death forces the once-comfortable society to confront its own impotence in facing the challenges of modernity. Heyer’s own summation of the novel’s trajectory may equally be read as a commentary on the consequences of compromising on the overbearing structural demands of the whodunit form. Her suggestion that “Penhallow was a dreadful person, but he did hold the family together, and everything goes to pieces when he dies”,⁶² mirrors the disintegration of the whodunit form that follows from the sully of its purity of form. Penhallow thus represents the illusion of racial purity that sustains and legitimates the otherwise purposeless directionless lives of his children. With his death comes the figurative and literal self-knowledge that, as in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* (arguably the foundational text of detective fiction), culminates in an act of self-destruction both literally (for his son Raymond, who is unable to live with the knowledge of his own illegitimacy) and textually, as the novel itself reneges on its contractual promise of cathartic rebuilding and murders its own mystery.

The self-destruction of tradition when confronted with modernity is a prominent feature of the novel’s approach to genre in addition to occupying its thematic centre. Trevellin is an enclosed society artificially bound to the past by a capricious master, who refuses even the most basic concessions to modernity, including electricity. In the view of Penhallow’s son, Bartholomew, who is determined to marry the shrewd kitchen maid, Loveday Trewithian, “all that tosh about birth and breeding ... [is] out-of-date – dead as mutton!” (185) Penhallow’s objection to the union arises from his pathological fixation with the purity of his “stock”, a term he applies equivalently to his

⁶² Quoted in Jennifer Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 233.

horses and his own offspring as his young wife discovered in horror during her pregnancy:

On the day that he jovially informed the Vicar that his wife was breeding, she knew that she had married a brute; and on that day died her youth.

Despite his fixation on the worthiness of his genetic offspring, Penhallow's sexual libertinism threatens the class distinctions upon which his quasi-feudal regime hangs; his legendary proliferation of illegitimate offspring forges an increasing number of covert links across class boundaries. The popular resurgence of eugenicist thinking in the inter-war fixated primarily, as Ayça Alemdaroğlu states, on the perceived need "to protect a nation's population from degeneration."⁶³ In its codifications and self-policing, the exponents of the detective novel may be perceived as providing the most appropriate literary mirrors for such a project. Classic detective fiction shares with the field of eugenics a belief in the discernibility of societal disorder as arising out of individual and isolatable as opposed to social factors, providing "a popular cultural context in which detectives discern the hidden truth of the criminal past on the bodies of victims and perpetrators."⁶⁴ *Penhallow* opens with a scene reminiscent of the Holmesian model of physiognomic deduction with the footman, one of the elderly eponymous tyrant's many illegitimate offspring, monikered "Jimmy the Bastard", polishing the boots of the residents of Trevellin. Through Jimmy's outsider perspective, the narrative introduces each character implicitly through the condition of their

⁶³ Ayça Alemdaroğlu, "Eugenics, Modernity and Nationalism," in *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity: Bodies, Images and Experiences*, ed. by David M. Turner and Kevin Stagg (London: Routledge, 2006), 128.

⁶⁴ Tamsen Wolff, *Mendel's Theatre: Heredity, Eugenics, and Early Twentieth-Century American Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 94.

footwear from Clara's ageless black glacé slippers, as dowdily comforting as their owner, to the effete elegant patent leather shoes of the hypochondriacal Eugène. (2)

The detective and killer, often perceived as textual mirror images of one another, are replaced by the guilty Raymond and "Jimmy the Bastard", bound together through their shared isolation from the affirmation of stable identity and their exclusive mutual knowledge of Raymond's true parentage. In the absence of a stable scapegoat to vouchsafe the return to social order inherent in the detective ritual, Raymond's suicide serves as a more direct means of preserving the hypocritical silence upon which an ersatz harmony might rest.

Oh, no! It was better to clear out now, before the worry and the suspense had driven him crazy... People might believe him to have been a murderer: he cared very little for that; but if he died now it was just possible that they would never know that he had been just another of Penhallow's bastards; and although, of course, that wouldn't matter to him in his oblivion, he couldn't help clinging to the hope that it would be as Raymond Penhallow that he would be remembered. (395)

Hühn writes that "the basic energy of detective fiction ... seems to derive less from the concrete fight between the protagonists of law and crime as such than from the competition between the opposed but mutually related principles of secrecy and rational cognition."⁶⁵ Heyer's decision to rob her country house murder of this dynamic of secrecy and enlightenment is a deliberate deployment of genre-transgression designed to express the whodunit's failure to preserve itself against the forces of social change. The novel is overtly self-referential at several points, but whereas the trope of

⁶⁵ Peter Hühn, "The Politics of Secrecy and Publicity: The Functions of Hidden Stories in Some Recent British Mystery Fiction," *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, eds. Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy, 43.

metafictional reflexivity is commonly deployed within the golden age genre as a means of acknowledging and affirming readerly expectations, in *Penhallow*, such moments serve precisely the opposite function, highlighting what is, in fact, absent.⁶⁶ One of Penhallow's daughters-in-law, Myra, remarks in the aftermath of the old man's poisoning that the scenario is

‘like a detective story! Mysteries, and suspects, and things. If it wasn't happening to ourselves, I mean!’

Myra's utterance serves as a metafictional reminder to the reader that these very expected narrative accoutrements have failed to materialise and that the author has, in fact, reneged on her contract to supply them. By the time the comparisons are drawn, however, any potential mystery has already imploded, as the reader has been made directly privy to the killer's identity. The killer's calculated double-bluff in concealing nothing of her *modus operandi* is related within the text to her unwillingness to participate in the conventions of the genre and incorporate them into her strategy of inaction (“in the few detective novels which she had read, efforts at concealment had almost invariably proved the criminal's undoing.” (312))

In the essay, “Broken Glass”, Rod Mengham writes of how the war's fragmentation of experience left people “in a vacuum where tried and trusted ways of giving shape and sense to their lives no longer applied.”⁶⁷ Forms and modes traditionally aligned with social cohesion and tradition struggled for relevance in an environment that seemed to defy all attempts at narrative resolution, while discontinuity

⁶⁶ Malcah Effron's thesis explores moments such as this in which detective fiction invokes the genre within its own narratives. It is argued within the thesis that such moments of textual self-referentiality provide an opportunity for a work within the genre to violate its own rules “by identifying them as problematically implausible.” Malcah Effron, “If Only This Were a Detective Novel: Self-Referentiality as Metafictionality in Detective Fiction.” (PhD thesis, Newcastle University, 2010), 60.

⁶⁷ Rod Mengham, “Broken Glass,” in *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival*. eds. Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve (London: Palgrave, 2001), 125.

and fracture rather than completeness and certainty appeared to offer the most satisfactory articulation of the times. Mengham, like several critics of the forties, traces a relationship between war's material destruction of urban spaces and the kinds of fragmentation and dislocation that had been emphasised in the writings of earlier modernists. Heyer's novel dramatises this climate of fractured communication and misunderstanding by leaving her characters with a false solution to the mystery. The reflection of Penhallow's daughter that "upon the whole, Raymond's suicide was perhaps the best solution that could have been found to an appalling situation" (430) might therefore be read metatextually as well as literally. Raymond's suicide is not only a "solution" to the alternative prospect of family shame incurred by the hanging of a patricidal son, but also the best solution to a self-annihilating detective story. It is a solution, moreover that relieves the author of her duty to present any semblance of judicial reckoning that might restore an air of validity to this form of social organisation.

Overall, Heyer's expansive novel is a self-conscious anti-whodunit that advertises at multiple points its infringement of the strictures of the detective form. Heyer divests her inter-war world of mystery and decorum to unearth an irredeemably corrupt society whose double standards and hypocrisies struggle, with the passing of the older generation, to maintain its veneer of integrity. It is this universal hypocrisy, rather than the murder itself, that is set apart as the primary malevolence within the society presented. The novel's explicit overturning of the detective genre's structures is mirrored in the familial disintegration that follows the removal of the tyrannical patriarch, resulting once more in a suicide of genre.

A common feature of the texts hitherto discussed is the implied difficulty of crafting a whodunit in the classic mode that also acknowledges and engages with the

contemporaneous politics of war. While Heyer's decision to situate *Penhallow* prior to the 1940s provides an appropriate arena in which to interrogate and destabilise the foundational principles of the apparently outmoded genre, it may equally read as a means of escaping the more difficult prospect of situating the bourgeois surface values of the golden age tradition within a context that by definition refutes the notion of these values' capacity to ensure order and stability.

Suicide within the 1940s crime genre is not solely a vehicle for self-assessment in the past or present, however. In the writings of Priestley and Hamilton, as shall be discussed, acts of self-annihilation serve as a catalyst for the potential reorientation of the form into a more politically aware entity. In 1943, Mass Observation reported that

as the war continues, thoughts turn more and more towards the future and the peace that is to come. During the last three years much has been written and said in the Press, on the wireless, and at public luncheons and meetings where interested people have met, on the subject of reconstruction; many books and leaflets have been published showing what the post-war world could or should look like.⁶⁸

This proleptic imaginative disposition is reflected across a range of literature from the decade, including in the realm of crime fiction. Popular fiction of the Second World War encapsulates this sense of cautious suspension between a future of hope and one of self-annihilation in the iconic figure of the child, which, as Mengham observes, may serve to convey a dual symbolism "both as a literal embodiment of the future and as a vehicle for meditating on the past, on the lost world of the writer's own childhood".⁶⁹ Crime fiction time and again undermines the optimism of propagandist visions of

⁶⁸ Mass Observation, *An Enquiry into People's Homes: A Report Prepared by Mass Observation for the Advertising Service Guild* (London, 1943), 1.

⁶⁹ Rod Mengham, "British Fiction of the War," 29.

childhood, by presenting children within a *milieu* of dour fatalism, as both products and agents of a world mired in bloodshed. The suicide of pregnant women, a trope which appears in *And Then There Were None* (1939), *No Orchids For Miss Blandish* (1939) and *An Inspector Calls* (1945), becomes a particularly visceral manifestation of the abortiveness of idyllic post-war promises. In order to look forwards, however, J.B. Priestley casts his mind backwards in his “time play”,⁷⁰ *An Inspector Calls*. Viewed through the lens of hindsight, capitalist Britain of 1912 emerges as a colony of lemmings, imprisoned in a historic cycle of self-destroying greed. By situating his play in 1912 – on the eve of the First World War and a mere fortnight before the RMS Titanic’s disastrous maiden voyage – Priestley forces his audience into the role of the helpless Cassandra, powerless to intervene as the towering achievements of a voracious industrial mindset drive humanity ever further towards the brink of extinction. A socialist-humanist, Priestley, employs the skeleton of the classic whodunit in *An Inspector Calls* as a vehicle for social diagnosis, focusing his archetypal investigation, not on a murder, but a suicide. The result is a cautionary vision of a capitalist society racked by self-annihilating greed. In “Letter to a Returning Serviceman” (1945), Priestley warns against a relapse into individualism in the wake of the war.

There was a time around 1940, when we were able to convince a lot of people that only a diseased and rotten society could have thrown up a Hitler, but since then there has been a huge campaign telling us day and night that it was Hitler who somehow produced, presumably from his box of watercolours, any disease and rottenness there may be in our

⁷⁰ Priestley’s dramatic experiments with time were influenced by the theories of the soldier and aeronautical engineer, J.W. Dunne, set out in his book *An Experiment With Time* (1927). His most explicit engagement with this concept occurs in the 1937 play, *Time and the Conways* which, like *An Inspector Calls*, manipulates his audience’s conception of historical progression to condemn the complacency and snobbery of an upper middle class family.

society. Tory gentlemen who have clearly not learned anything, and now never will, confidently offer themselves as our guardians again, assuming that because they choose to forget the sickening muddle, darkening into tragedy, of the Twenties and Thirties, we shall have forgotten too.⁷¹

In Priestley's play, the investigation by Inspector Goole upends the traditional pattern of catharsis through the exile and identification of the murderer, offering instead a forensic look at the dynamic of social causality that implicates the entire community in the suicide of a young girl. In Priestley's vision, ritualistic scapegoats are of no use when it is the entire society that must atone. There is no individual culprit whose exile will restore social order, but rather a community of culpability, induced one by one to concede their complicity in a toxic social order. "You see," he admonishes the Birling clan, "we have to share something. If there's nothing else, we'll have to share our guilt."⁷²

The play was warmly received during its initial 1945 run in Moscow, but unsurprisingly proved less endearing to a London audience, where its perceived heavy-handedness grated against the optimistic hegemony of post-war society. The critic, Rex Pogson, complained in 1947 that

it was no surprise to the audience to know Inspector Goole did not exist. They had known all the time that it was Inspector Priestley... the danger lurking in the play - [is] that it may become a lecture in Civics by the author.⁷³

⁷¹ J.B. Priestley, "Letter to a Returning Serviceman," (London: Home and Thal Ltd.1945), 6.

⁷² J.B. Priestley, *An Inspector Calls*. (London: Heinemann Educational, 1992), 29. All in-text citations that follow are from this edition.

⁷³ Rex Pogson, *J.B. Priestley and the Theatre* (Clevedon: Triangle Press, 1947), 48/49.

Despite this tendency towards didacticism, as John Baxendale notes in *Priestley's England* (2007), “the play is not a plea for an agenda — a set of political proposals — but for something deeper: an ambience — ‘the total climate of values, ideas, opinions, fears and hopes, in which we live.’”⁷⁴ Whether phantasm, fraud or clairvoyant, Inspector Goole deftly reconfigures the individualistic, conservative detective novel as a socialist polemic, using suicide, not murder, as the totemic signifier of interdependence. By exposing the divisions of class, moral culpability and victimhood in which the genre is rooted as artificial constructs, his investigation forms the basis of a detective story that pleads for its own demise.

Priestley's explosion of the detective genre's innate conservatism is not limited to his excoriation of capitalism, however. The imaginative weight of Goole's transformative social vision pivots on an explicitly gendered form of social injustice. For all that the Inspector may claim to represent both the Eva Smiths and John Smiths of the world, Priestley's argument is predicated on the sacrificial femininity of the play's hypothetical victim. Set a year before the death of women's suffrage activist, Emily Davison, beneath the hooves of King George V's horse at the Epsom Derby, *An Inspector Calls* is infused with a consciousness of the social and political power of female suicide. Embodying both a repudiation of a society governed by masculinised corporate greed and the assertion of female agency over the female body, Eva Smith epitomises the transformation of individual weakness into symbolic strength of the collective.⁷⁵ The enemy, in contrast with Smith's self-abnegations, is individualism, which is both masculinised and constructed as duty rather than pleasure in Mr Birling's maxim: “A man has to look after himself.”

⁷⁴ John Baxendale, *Priestley's England: J.B. Priestley and English Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 169.

⁷⁵ This is both literally and figuratively the case within the text, since it transpires that Smith is no more than a composite hypothetical being, a manifestation of multiple forms of female victimhood.

The realm of the symbolic is characterised as feminine from early on in the play. This is registered by Mr Birling, who observes “that clothes mean something quite different to a woman. Not just something to wear — and not only something to make ‘em look prettier — but — well, a sort of sign or token of their self-respect.” It is Sheila Birling’s alertness to the metonymic importance of clothing that inspires her act of casual cruelty against Eva, an act rooted in jealousy whereby she insists upon the dismissal of a shop assistant because the girl looks prettier in a particular dress than she does.

In the same manner, however, this awareness enables Sheila to grasp the symbolic import of Eva’s suicide before the rest of the family and to become the most vociferous advocate for its enduring figurative significance, even after the literal veracity of the Inspector’s tale is disputed.

The worst part is [over]. But you’re forgetting one thing I still can’t forget. Everything we said had happened, really had happened. If it didn’t end tragically, then that’s lucky for us. But it might have done.

(70)

The retreat into the symbolic mode may be read as a female necessity within the pre-suffrage world of the play. Silenced by her employer in her efforts to improve working conditions, thwarted in her endeavours to survive by the privileged and wealthy, and exploited socially and sexually time and again, Eva Smith paradoxically achieves vocal agency only as a corpse. Her suicide allows her to take on the role of perpetrator as well as her customary status of victim within the social crime-drama of her life. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler posits a framework whereby non-violence may be read as a form of suicide and vice-versa.

It is crucial to distinguish between (a) that injured and rageful subject who gives moral legitimacy to rageful and injurious conduct, thus transmuting aggression into virtue, and (b) that injured and rageful subject who nevertheless seeks to limit the injury that she or he causes, and can do so only through an active struggle with and against aggression. The first involves a moralisation of the subject that disavows the violence it inflicts, while the latter necessitates a moral struggle with the idea of non-violence in the midst of an encounter with social violence as well as with one's own aggression (where the social encounter and the "one's own" transitively affect one another).⁷⁶

Eva Smith embodies a form of weaponised vulnerability. By grotesquely burning herself from the inside out with disinfectant she enacts a perverse self-purification in her repudiation of the weapons of outward aggression. Writing and cinema of the early years of the 1940s is littered with such instances of women who attain a supernatural agency through suicide, from the suffocating matriarch of Agatha Christie's stage version of *Appointment With Death* (1945) to the eponymous unseen presence in Alfred Hitchcock's film adaptation of *Rebecca* (1940).

Such a reading conforms perversely with Priestley's own essentialised portrait of authoritative femininity. In his essay, "In Praise of the Normal Woman" (1923), he suggests that a woman who has "received a man's education, taken a man's position in the world, and partly adopted masculine habits" risks losing a far "older method of feminine attack and defence, the method of polite smiling irony."⁷⁷ Maggie B. Gale (2008) interprets Priestley's remarks as a rebuke against women who, by behaving in a

⁷⁶ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, 172.

⁷⁷ J.B. Priestley, *I for One* (New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1997), 87.

way which is culturally interpreted as masculine, implicitly endorse rather than subvert the patriarchal status quo. By destroying her beauty and her unborn child, Eva Smith renounces all possibility of becoming enmeshed in the symbolic order of patriarchy, either as a mother or an object of lust: “She wasn’t pretty when I saw her today, but she had been pretty — very pretty.” (18)

Of course, Eva Smith exists only as the composite “everycorpse”. As a disembodied subjunctive entity, she unsettles a hegemonic discourse that seeks to re-establish pre-war gender norms, representing neither past nor present, but rather the inescapable destiny of a sick society. The original 1945 Moscow production, directed by Alexander Tairov, heightened the fatalistic aura by having Inspector Goole clad in a long-coat contemporaneous in style to the 1940s, and well removed from the Edwardian costume of the rest of the cast, thereby conveying more than ever, the residual influence of Eva Smith’s ghost on contemporary culture.⁷⁸ Hers is a ghost of the present and future as well as past, an emblem of the omniscient inescapability of mankind’s suicidal destiny unless the lessons of war are enshrined in a more equitable society.

By centring his detective narrative on a suicide rather than a murder, Priestley constructs a mystery based, not on “whodunit” but rather the founding question of sociology as articulated by Durkheim: the means by which to reconcile the autonomous and social facets of the subject. The failure of capitalism to honour the latter obligation is not merely cruel; it is self-annihilating, as Goole declares:

We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will come soon when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. (71)

⁷⁸ Maggie B. Gale, *J.B. Priestley* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 146.

The classic linear ritual of golden age fiction whereby the culprit is identified, exiled and harmony restored to the domestic idyll is displaced in favour of a cyclical process, whereby we return to the beginning with yet another corpse waiting to be avenged. Sheila, meanwhile, as the Cassandra-like figure, recognises the confessional process as a suicidal rite in her acknowledgement of Goole's *modus operandi*: ("No he's giving us the rope — so that we'll hang ourselves.")

Finally, just as the traditional whodunit form demanded the self-elimination of Hercule Poirot for his just transgression of the rules of the game, so too does Priestley's remodelled form require that the hierarchical figure of the truth-bestowing detective be undermined and expunged from existence. In the case of Priestley's model, however, this elimination of the detective from the detective story is predicated on the socialist reorientation of the genre. In his analysis of the archetypal detective-figure, James E. Bartell notes that at the moment of disclosure, the sleuth fleetingly assumes a place at the apex of the social hierarchy, temporarily displacing

the squire who should rule ... He is, for the space of one scene the archetypal *parvenu* who has usurped the aristocrat's throne and threatens the opportunities of all other bureaucrats who lust after power.⁷⁹

The role of the detective in classic crime fiction is not to overthrow the notional "squire" of his society but to elucidate the flaws within an otherwise functional society while affirming the essential virtues of bourgeois morality. The traditional crime narrative, therefore concludes with the detective once more ceding power to the presiding social order, usually by relinquishing his prey to the organs of the judiciary.

⁷⁹ James E. Bartell, "The Bureaucrat as Reader: The Detective Novel in the Context of Middle-Class Culture," 188.

In the case of Inspector Goole, however, who, upon administering his stern verdict upon the middle-class Birling household vanishes as though he had never existed, there is no symbolic restitution of old hierarchies and, indeed, the very concept of the hierarchical social structure is called into question. The elimination of the detective and the calling into question of his legitimate existence marks a self-annihilation of the detective story and the forging of a new mode of social reflection rooted in the morality play tradition.

Penhallow and *An Inspector Calls* subvert the class expectations endemic in the detective story form by effectively bringing to light all that had been previously locked outside of the “locked room” mystery, while rendering the genre powerless to fully annex the traumatic realities of twentieth century social and political life. Having said this, while Priestley and Heyer unsettle the conventions of genre, they nonetheless maintain the ratiocentric heart of the whodunit. The core literary principle that renders the inter-war detective story a safe haven from the traumatic memories of the First World War and the gothic pandemonium of the shilling shocker lies not within the diegesis of the text but in the codified honour system of the genre. Since, as Van Dine decrees, “The method of murder and the means of detecting it [must be] rational and scientific,”⁸⁰ both reader and detective of the inter-war murder mystery are guaranteed that the solution, however arduously come by, will not at all seem improbable once it has been articulated. In essence, the text promises to contain the repressed matter it obliquely uncovers. A breach of this genre-entrenched contract of good faith would, as Lord Peter Wimsey declares in 1933, be tantamount to self-annihilating anarchy. Faced with the suggestion that his murderer might be a motiveless psychopath, he vehemently denounces the unconstitutionality of such a narrative device:

⁸⁰ S.S. Van Dine, “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories,” 129.

I mean, it's unsatisfactory, because it would suit one person just as well as another. If I've got to find a homicidal maniac, I may as well cut my throat at once.⁸¹

This expectation that not only the detective but the murderer too will act on principles of rational self-interest underpins the sporting credo of the whodunit in Wimsey's view. With the arrival of the 1940s, however, this concept of fair play is increasingly subordinated to the Darwinian imperative, or in the words of Winston Churchill, "victory at all costs...for without victory there is no survival." Further along the continuum of popular literature, writers from Margery Allingham in *Traitor's Purse* (1941) to Agatha Christie in *N or M* (1941) increasingly turned to the medium of spy fiction to instil the idea that the enemy does not play fair and consequently is not to be encountered with the sporting gallantry of old.

The "psychothriller", as termed by Stephen Knight, was not purely a post-war invention or even a development traceable exclusively to the events of the 1940s.⁸² At the height of the golden age, Patrick Hamilton's play, *Rope* (1929) exemplified this formula through its psychological focus on a homicidal narcissist,⁸³ Brandon, who masterminds the murder of a classmate out of no greater motive than sheer intellectual curiosity and exults in the deed:

I have committed murder, I have committed passionless – motiveless –
faultless – and clueless murder. I have killed. I have killed for the sake of

⁸¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (London: Gollancz, 1930), 37.

⁸² Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 146.

⁸³ Hamilton's psychothrillers of the 1930s, *Rope* and *Gas Light* (1938) may be read as a decisive Marxist rejection of the ideologically conservative classic detective mode. As McKenna suggests, Hamilton's preference for an anti-aristocratic popular tradition of melodrama consolidates his position as "a commercially successful socialist writer, enmeshed in the crisis of masculinity bequeathed to his social stratum and generation of English writers by the trauma of the Great War." See Brian McKenna, "Gender Representation, Sexuality and Politics in the Writing of Patrick Hamilton," (PhD Thesis, Wadham College, Oxford, 1991), 82.

danger and for the sake of killing. And I am alive. Truly and wonderfully alive.⁸⁴

The appearance of Brandon in 1929 undercuts somewhat Hercule Poirot's claim to have diagnosed a troubling new sociological phenomenon in the capricious psychopathy of Stephen Norton. Texts such as *Rope* and Francis Iles' *Malice Aforethought* (1931) are testament to the existence of psychopath-centred narratives amid the golden age; however, these works are sufficiently proximate to the dominant formula of the period as to be considered, in R. Austin Freeman's terminology, "inverted detective stories."⁸⁵ Both Iles and Hamilton in their interwar writing appear to retain and affirm the conservative moral centre of the parent genre so that by the end of Hamilton's play, Brandon has been reduced to a wretched penitent when his crime is exposed by the stabilising detective figure of Rupert Cadell (significantly a veteran of the First World War who bears the psychological and physical scars of his ordeal). By 1941, however, Hamilton, like several other writers within the crime genre, had shifted emphasis to more fully accommodate the nihilistic energies and influences of gothic horror into their writing. Writing in 1946, the critic James Sandoe observed that

lately ... there has been an increasing tendency on the part of writers to explore more morbid states of the murderous mind. From relatively simple aberration they venture into conditions of mind still further from the norm into the twisting ways of psychopathology.⁸⁶

In the essays "Raffles and Miss Blandish" (1944) and "The Decline of the English Murder" (1946), George Orwell expressed his discomfiture with the sense that war had irrevocably diminished the value of human life and claimed that this nihilism had been

⁸⁴ Patrick Hamilton, *Rope: A Play* (London: Samuel French Ltd, 2003), 15.

⁸⁵ Austin R. Freeman, "The Art of the Detective Story," *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: The Universal Library), 15.

⁸⁶ James Sandoe, "Dagger of the Mind," *Poetry* 68, no.3 (1946): 154.

indelibly imprinted on the form and ideology of the crime story. The exaltation of brute strength above all else, including the once sacrosanct principle of fair play, proved particularly troubling to Orwell, as it produced a discourse wherein:

the distinction between crime and crime-prevention practically disappears. This is a new departure for English sensational fiction, in which till recently there has always been a sharp distinction between right and wrong and a general agreement that virtue must triumph in the last chapter.⁸⁷

In 1940s detective fiction, the figure of the murderer is no longer solely a materially self-interested aberration, but rather a symptom of a corrupt society. No longer is slaughter motivated purely by sex and money, the archetypal staples of the mystery canon; as the decade progresses, fictional bloodshed is increasingly presented as the result of socially conditioned neuroses. Carl Malmgren notes that the increasingly criminal centred crime fiction of the post-war endowed the figure of the social transgressor with a complex duality whereby one finds “the protagonist as subject of his own search (for self-hood, for safety, for treasure, etc.) and the protagonist as object of the search for the perpetrator.”⁸⁸ Orwell, Malmgren and Sandoe each in different ways define this new departure in terms of category collapse and a confusion between the object and subject of narrative violence. As intimated at the opening of this chapter, suicide may be read as the ultimate form of such collapse and, as has been established thus far, has been used thematically to express various forms of destabilisation that existentially threatened the inter-war crime genre. George Harvey Bone, the mild-mannered schizophrenic antihero of Patrick Hamilton’s *Hangover Square*, symbolically

⁸⁷ George Orwell, “Raffles and Miss Blandish.” *George Orwell: Essays* (London: Penguin, 2000).

⁸⁸ Carl Malmgren, “The Pursuit of Crime: Characters in Crime Fiction” in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Charles J. Rzepka (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 160.

encapsulates the state of flux between self-destruction and regeneration faced by the crime novel. On its publication, the novel originally bore the subtitle “The Man With Two Minds”, a character attribute that may equally be traced to the text itself. Bone is driven to commit double murder and suicide by a combination of psychosexual neurosis that has roots in a traumatic childhood scarred by the death of his beloved sister and the cruelty suffered at his public school and a sense of social alienation from the sordid 1939 London drinking scene he inhabits. Besieged by both past and future, Bone is thus a point of intersection for the golden age’s “literature of convalescence” and the war’s “literature of anxiety”, a Janus-faced herald of the genre’s new, violent rebirth.

Unlike the works of Carr, Christie, Heyer and Priestley hitherto discussed, Patrick Hamilton’s *Hangover Square* incorporates minimal explicit engagement with the mechanics of the golden age detective story. Set amid a hedonistic urban environment of *femmes fatales*, visceral brutality and nihilistic despair, the novel has more in common with the “mean streets” of the American hardboiled genre than the neat resolutions of the archetypal “cosy crime” of interwar Britain. Despite this stark difference however, the text represents, if not a genre-suicide of the detective story in the vein of the other texts discussed, then an obituary for the form (something which is literally as well as figuratively presented in the closing lines). Hamilton symbolically dramatises the pivotal decline of classic British detective fiction and the ascendancy of the morally complex hardboiled-inflected mode that was to define the crime genre in the post-war years. In its stylised portrayal of schizophrenia, its dissection of the psychosexual allure of fascist ideology and its dystopian portrayal of the decadent wasteland of late-1930s London drinking culture, the text confronts the public and private anxieties of war in a manner antithetical to the mannered mores and strictures of

traditional crime fiction. Despite this emphatic estrangement, *Hangover Square* engages spiritually at multiple points with the genealogy of the crime genre, from its Victorian sensationalist roots to its golden age incarnation. By incorporating elements of what Christopher Taylor terms “ritualised performance” and an interrogation of the dynamics of nostalgia and sentimentality,⁸⁹ Hamilton obliquely critiques the clue-puzzle genre and sets the scene for its immolation at the close of the novel. In so doing he affirms the status of his own text (in the terms of Todorov) as a brutal rebirth of genre via the suicidal ashes of its earlier obsolete iteration.

Critical studies of Patrick Hamilton have tended to read his work either through the lens of his personal struggles with depression and alcoholism, viewing him as a prolific chronicler of London’s pub culture, or his political status as an “isolated” Marxist preoccupied primarily with the impending revolution.⁹⁰ Arnold Rattenbury suggests that the author’s writing from the 1930s onwards evolved from

a clear perception that class-warring capitalism would self-destruct after some final fling with a specifically fascist violence to an increasing concern with the behaviours and humanities possible to working people who would be active in this process.⁹¹

Somewhat less examined (though not entirely ignored) is the influence of this political fatalism on Hamilton’s attitude and approach towards genre. Writing of Hamilton’s psych thrillers of the 1930s, *Rope* and *Gas Light* (1938), McKenna suggests that the repudiation of the popular clue-puzzle form constituted a decisive Marxist rejection of

⁸⁹ Christopher Taylor, “Passing-Out Time.” *London Review of Books* 31, no.2 (2009): 26.

⁹⁰ McKenna unites both perspectives by suggesting that Hamilton “drank to get rid, temporarily, of capitalism. And, as a good Marxist, he would have recognised his drinking as an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction.” See Brian McKenna, “Confessions of a heavy-drinking Marxist: Addiction in the work of Patrick Hamilton,” *Beyond the Pleasure Dome: Writing and Addiction from the Romantics*, eds. S. Vice, T. Campbell and T. Armstrong (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 240.

⁹¹ Arnold Rattenbury, “Literature, Lying and Sober Truth: Attitudes to the Work of Patrick Hamilton and Sylvia Townsend Warner,” in *Writing and Radicalism*, ed. John Lucas (London: Longman, 1996), 209.

what he considered an ideologically conservative classic detective mode. Hamilton's rejection of the bourgeois clue-puzzle form and his preference for an anti-aristocratic popular tradition of melodrama consolidates his position as "a commercially successful socialist writer, enmeshed in the crisis of masculinity bequeathed to his social stratum and generation of English writers by the trauma of the Great War."⁹² Hamilton rejects the "convalescent" strategy of presenting violence as containable or unusual while equally recoiling from the perceived femininity of golden age fiction, a mindset shared among several exponents of the hardboiled form, as crystallised in Raymond Chandler's 1950 article (based on an earlier 1944 essay), "The Simple Art of Murder." Chandler crafts a binary between the robust masculinity of the American hardboiled form and the effeminacy of the British golden age model, a genre he deems suitable only for those "who like their murders scented with magnolia blossoms and do not like to be reminded that murder is an act of infinite cruelty."⁹³ *Hangover Square's* "effeminately vanquished" hero is undone first by his infatuation with a sadistic woman and second through his psychological imprisonment within the formulaic mindset of the feminine clue-puzzle form, a mode of perception that elides the true nature of cruelty. Both feminine manifestations are revealed to be possessed of a treacherousness and individualistic vapidness that lends itself easily to the allure of fascism. In the case of Netta Longden, the object of Bone's obsession,

it might be said that this feeling for violence and brutality, for the pageant and panorama of fascism on the Continent, formed her principal disinterested aesthetic pleasure... She only liked what affected her personally and physically and immediately – sleep, warmth, a certain

⁹² Brian McKenna. "Gender Representation, Sexuality and Politics in the Writing of Patrick Hamilton." (PhD Thesis. Wadham College, Oxford, 1991), 82.

⁹³ Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder" in *Pearls are a Nuisance* (London: Penguin, 1973), 196-197.

amount of company and talk, drinks, getting drunk, good food, taxis,
ease. (129/130)

Netta is flanked by two brutish boyfriends, each signifying either the enduring horror of past trauma or the anxious apprehension of the future; the first lover's "school-bully brown eyes" (150) recalls for Bone the "cruel and resounding atmosphere" (96/97) of his childhood torments, while "the blond fascist" (273), Peter, portends destruction yet to be visited.

The masculinist revenge fantasy that marks the novel's climax sees both forms of femininity violently deposed. In its intertextual allusions to Milton's closet drama, *Samson Agonistes* (quotations from which preface each of the six parts that make up the text's second half) the novel sheds light on its own preoccupation with suicidal violence. Milton's play follows the Biblical story of Samson in his imprisonment, blinding and emasculation through the treachery of a faithless woman, Dalila. The drama culminates in Samson's act of suicidal retribution when, in an awesome display of his regained strength, he pulls down the temple of the Philistine god, Dagon, vanquishing his foes along with himself. The parallels between the unmanned Samson's self-annihilating revenge and George Harvey Bone's double murder and suicide at the close of Hamilton's novel are evident with the obvious qualification that it is not Bone's action that figuratively demolishes the "temple" but Neville Chamberlain's announcement of war over the wireless as Bone carries out the murders.⁹⁴

The implicit alignment of Samson's self-destructive exaction of vengeance with the end of Britain's policy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany may be seen to

⁹⁴ The story of Samson appears again in Hamilton's 1941 musings on a visit to London in which he assessed the wreckage: "Oxford Street, Lewis' gone, Peter Robinson with huge chunks of white pillars lying in Oxford Circus (as though Samson had been having a go at it) a huge building completely gutted in Gt Portland Street." In Nigel Jones, *Through a Glass Darkly: The Life of Patrick Hamilton* (London: Abacus, 1991), 247.

rehearse the anxieties already discussed in relation to Christie's *Curtain*, whereby the defeat of evil necessitates a limited incorporation of fascist brutality into one's own psychological make-up along with all the perils of identity-loss this entails. Such an interpretation is further supported by the fact of Bone's schizophrenia, which renders him by turns pathetically docile and, upon entering his "dead moods" cold-bloodedly and brutally detached. Several critical studies of the novel have elected to interpret Bone's "dead moods" (likened in the text to a somnambulistic indifference to all around him) as a political metaphor for Europe's sleepwalking towards war in the 1930s. There is, writes Widdowson, a "definite relationship between [Bone's] private tragedy and the enormous public tragedy of Europe."⁹⁵ Plain interprets the murders as "the lancing of a political and sexual boil," occurring synchronously with the outbreak of war.⁹⁶ Mellor, meanwhile, maintains dual interpretations of the text as alternatively, through its doom-laden prolepticism, a grim account of the private individual's inevitable conscription into the violent public narrative of war or as an anticipatory representation of the psychological effects of bomb trauma. Bone's uniquely characterised strain of schizophrenic catatonia, he argues

seems to owe much to a model of victimhood prevalent in the literature both popular and scientific of the 1930s: his numbed wanderings and dulled hysteria are those of the putative 'psychic victim' of the air raids, the kind of casualty that any knockout blow should have theoretically produced.⁹⁷

Such a view is, however, complicated by Hamilton's deeply pessimistic view of the bourgeois, *nouveau riche* order of the interwar and his conviction that the war, and

⁹⁵ P.J. Widdowson, "The Saloon Bar Society: Patrick Hamilton's Fiction in the 1930s," *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy*, ed. John Lucas (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), 129.

⁹⁶ Gill Plain, *Literature of the 1940s*, 84.

⁹⁷ Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, 43.

indeed as a whole, signified the decadent self-destructive phase of capitalism. Hamilton's Marxism, Brian McKenna suggests, enabled him to metamorphose "London and its pub world ... to render the human alienation at the heart of the crisis of capitalism in Britain in the 1930s."⁹⁸ The concept of the mild-mannered Bone's violent retribution as providing any kind of definitive catharsis on either a public or private level is further undermined by what J.B. Priestley perceived as Hamilton's innate sense of deracination. Hamilton's writing, Priestley observed, was characterised by

a suspicion of society from which his chief characters are exiled. It is a deep feeling that there are no real homes for his homeless people to discover. It is a growing despair that dreads the way our world is going.⁹⁹

Bone's personality is split therefore, not between good and evil as might initially be assumed, but between effete bourgeois capitalism and its shadow-double, fascist brutality. Hamilton's portrayal of split-personality disorder within the text is remarkable not only for the rich and contentious symbolic resonances it conjures but also because of its apparent superfluity to the novel's primary aesthetic and structural objectives. As Earnshaw observes, "the schizophrenia functions within the novel as a more extreme version of drunkenness"¹⁰⁰, a version that seems redundant in light of the myriad of forces already repressively governing Bone's life and consciousness within the realm of the text. Bone is all too aware of his enslavement to Netta (having recognised her ability to inspire the same abject submissiveness in others (74)), to alcohol, and above all, to the inexorable forces of history ("he knew that Munich was a phoney business" (31)). If one reads the novel as a meditation on the fate of the crime

⁹⁸ Brian McKenna, "Confessions of a heavy-drinking Marxist: Addiction in the work of Patrick Hamilton," *Beyond the Pleasure Dome: Writing and Addiction from the Romantics*, eds. S. Vice, T. Campbell and T. Armstrong, 231.

⁹⁹ J.B. Priestley, "Introduction," *Hangover Square*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Steven Earnshaw, *The Pub in Literature: England's Altered State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 250.

form itself,¹⁰¹ these dead moods become not a mirror of sociohistorical conditions but a refuge from them, a notion supported by Bone's apparent indifference to the impending chaos he senses. Indeed, the individualised violence of his own personal murder narrative proves, for him, a release from the ennui of a communal post-Munich dread:

It bored him stiff, though he realised that it was rather useful actually, that they should be having their war while he was killing Netta and going to Maidenhead, because that way he would get out of the war too. (268)

Within his dead moods, Bone is capable of contextualising his own powerlessness by situating himself as a key player in his own overdetermined classic crime narrative, one which takes the form of a fatalistic countdown to murder. This form of psychic hyper-regimentation, while no less rigorous than his real-life subjugation to addiction and loneliness, offers the dual advantages of providing him with a purpose ("he had to kill Netta Longdon." (18)) and promising a fantasy of restoration to an idealised prelapsarian past in the form of the mythicised town of Maidenhead, a location that connotes for him a blissful childhood holiday spent with his now long-dead sister. It is the ultimate failure of this narrative to deliver on its promise of harmonious contentment that produces the novel's final combustion of the classic detective form and the suicide of its final exponent.

Upon entering his dead moods, Bone is bound to a monomaniacal thought process which can neither be meaningfully questioned nor deviated from. Like a character within a hyper-regulated novel of the golden age, his murderous intent is primarily the result, not of inner passions or personal failings but of the structural

¹⁰¹ While Hamilton rejected the drawing room conventions of the classic detective mode as bourgeois and effete, his most successful experiments in crime fiction of the inter-war and early wartime marry many of the surface elements of golden age crime fiction with hardboiled-inflected brutality. See, for example his plays *Rope* (1929) and *Gas Light* (1938), both of which, despite focusing on the vindictiveness and psychological aberrance of the killer, are resolved through the rational processes of an interceding detective figure.

demands of the form he inhabits and is compelled through generic necessity to conform to. The externalised quality of this impulse is likened repeatedly to the condition of a cinema spectator:

It had come over his brain as a sudden film, induced by a foreign body, might come over the eye. He felt that if only he could 'blink' his brain it would at once be dispelled. A film. Yes, it was like the other sort of 'film, too – a 'talkie'. It was as though he had been watching a talking film, and all at once the sound-track had failed. (15)

It is morbidly ironic that the woman who is object of the erotic fantasy of the "talking film" of his lucid moments and the murderous fantasy of his "silent film" is, herself an aspiring film actress, one whose wish will inadvertently be granted at the novel's close when she is immortalised in the "reels", not of celluloid but of twine in the final act of Bone's ritual. Adherence to the rules of his "silent film" will, within the esoteric logic of his neurosis, fulfil his nostalgic longing for a return to the innocence of a childhood spent with his dead sister in the town of Maidenhead. Admittance to this halcyon paradise cannot be achieved without first obeying the rules of the game. Netta at one point during her mockery of Bone in his dead state compares him to a Trappist monk, an observation that once again highlights the quasi-religious ritualistic faith driving his deadly logic:

Why must he kill Netta? Because things had been going on too long and he must get to Maidenhead and be peaceful and contented again. And why Maidenhead? Because he had been happy there with his sister, Ellen. (18)

Recited again and again with the fervour of a catechism, this correlation of the rupture of sacrificial violence with the rebirth and restitution of a lost idyllic past underpins

Bone's fantasy as it does the classic crime form that holds Bone under its sway. Like a stereotypical aficionado of the cosy crime mode contemptuously denounced by Chandler, Bone labours under the assumption that the stain of violence can be safely compartmentalised and ultimately dispelled through a ritualistic process leading from crisis to intelligibility to catharsis. The falseness of this delusion and the brutality lurking beyond it is brought viscerally to light with Bone's bludgeoning to death of Peter with a golf club,¹⁰² a scene that grotesquely marries hardboiled thuggery with the effete-ness of manner typical of a drawing room mystery:

‘Are you all right, old boy? I’m sorry. I didn’t hurt you did I? Are you all right? Peter, still standing, looked at him with complete seriousness and interest, as though entertaining rather a good new idea ... then slumped down, bringing down the table and the cigarettes and the ash tray and the lamp with him. (273)

Bone's ritual of purgation is only half-accomplished with the drowning of Netta and the clubbing of Peter. In a perverse parody of the clue-puzzle ritual of detection, Bone attempts to lay the foundations of an investigation that will make comprehensible his crimes and thought processes. Taking from his pocket two spools of thread, he proceeds, Theseus-like, to map his way around the crime scene until he has crafted an elaborate web that symbolically seals his victims off from the external political realities beyond his demarcated zone. The blithe terms in which he expresses his satisfaction with this handiwork mimics that of the amateur sleuth; he congratulates himself on

¹⁰² Maycroft has noted the similarity of this scene to the murder of Danvers Carew in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and indeed the broader parallels between both novels. Such resonances exemplify Hamilton's intention to displace the regimentation of the inter-war detective novel through a return to the gothic and sensationalist origins of the crime genre. See Neil Maycroft, "Reading *Hangover Square*: Ideology and Inversion in the Novels of Patrick Hamilton," (paper presented at *Utopian Spaces of British Literature and Culture, 1890-1945*, University of Oxford, September 18, 2009).

having done “his duty to the police, and his duty to himself. It was all threaded together. All the threads were gathered up.” (275)

Bone’s inner crime drama is resolved with this final piece of the ritual and this momentary personal success enables him to embrace a fantasy of individual bliss whereby he can dismiss the unfolding public drama of war as “nonsense”. (275) Such release is short lived however, and he soon recognises the cognitive dissonance upon which his project has been built. No longer able to define “how was Maidenhead going to solve things exactly” (278), he comes to realise that the tyranny of his “silent film” has been no less mendacious in its promises than the daily despotism of his meagre existence; indeed, “it had let him down, like Netta.” (279) Finally, and most damagingly to his enclosed psyche, he is induced to engage with the collective sensations unleashed by Neville Chamberlain’s announcement of war, at which point he finds “he was sorry for everyone.” (280) With bitter irony Bone is furnished in his moment of suicide with the nostalgic release he strove to attain through the mechanistic promises of the classic crime mode. As he slips out of consciousness into a gas-induced oblivion, he believes himself once more to be a child undergoing an operation for adenoids, “and his sister Ellen was allowed in to hold his hand.” (281).

The novel closes with a final exposition of the very factors that rendered Bone’s ritualistic fantasy an impossibility, namely the destruction of the individual by the collective apprehension of war. The quality of individualised grievability upon which his fantasy of golden age release hangs is definitively quashed as both murders and the private turmoil behind them register as no more than a darkly comical aside within the public sphere:

Indeed only one newspaper, a sensational picture daily, gave the matter any space or prominence – bringing out (his crude epitaph) the headlines:

SLAYS TWO

FOUND GASSED

THINKS OF CAT (281)

Hangover Square may thus be read, in the terms of Samson, as Hamilton's demolition of the temple of the golden age crime novel, along with its fallen deities. Through the explosion of each of its tenets in the fire and chaos of the Blitz and the confrontation of fascist ideology, the detective novel is reborn as a more brutal and hardened entity, capable of expressing the apocalyptic nihilism of the period and beyond. The closing bathetic admission of the inconsequentiality of Bone's sensationalist murders makes overt the tacit acknowledgements of war's disruption of grieving processes found in the writing of John Dickson Carr and Agatha Christie. *Hangover Square* is, thus, a meta-narrative of genre-rebirth that renegotiates the meanings of crime, murder, madness and suicide within a wartime context where the individual body has ceased to signify.

Stephen Knight has argued for the particular utility of crime fiction as a point of analysis for exploring the self-perceptions of a nation at war, something that derives both from the form's enormous commercial popularity and its acute fixation on literary and social structures alike.¹⁰³ Recognising the truth of this argument, this chapter has sought to contribute to the still relatively sparse field of synthesising criticism that connects Britain's inter-war golden age to the noir-influenced tradition that gained ascendancy in the post-war years. It has done so by observing the place and function of

¹⁰³ Stephen Knight, "Murder in Wartime," 162.

suicide within crime writing of the 1940s, demonstrating the ways in which themes of self-annihilation served to communicate the genre's transitional crisis during this period. From the breaking of the form's newly-untenable codes in the writings of Carr, Christie and Heyer, to the conscious ideological and structural remodelling carried out by Priestley and Hamilton, suicide temporarily displaces murder within the crime writing of the 1940s as the expressive mode through which the genre mediates its identity.

Any genre, if it is to survive the vicissitudes of historical and social change, is required to adapt, mutate and evolve. Far from being exempt from this precept, the golden age detective story was uniquely beholden to it by virtue of its in-built externalisation of its own conventions and the tacit contract of fair play it institutes between author and reader. The voiding of such a contract and its terms by the onset of war and the attendant disruptions of the established structures of grief, mourning and private life was articulated, I have argued, through a literary and thematic language of suicide. Thus, the trope of self-annihilation became a primary vehicle through which the form expressed its own figurative demise. Promoted from a mere narrative device of the golden age, suicide therefore becomes the vehicle through which the genre's fatalism destabilises and reshapes itself.

In terms of the broader argument of the thesis, this chapter's analysis of genre shows the utility of suicide within 1940s literature as a means of expressing not only the crises of lived experience but the internal self-examinations of a literary form whose very structural existence was threatened with obsolescence by the disruptions of history. In demonstrating the ways, in which the self-destruction of form is mirrored and commented upon through the deployment of suicidal themes, these texts expand the

range of analysis through which suicidality may be recognised as an integral component of 1940s' writing and popular culture.

Chapter IV

Anomic Suicide:

The Disease of Infinite Desire

It is obvious, therefore, that side by side with the question of the declining population and, indeed, not to be dissociated from it, is the rebuilding of family life, in many cases shattered, broken or disorganised by the social upheaval of the second world war.¹

—Lord Horder (1946)

In a 1939 issue of *Woman's Journal*, Margaret Storm Jameson admonished a reader for entertaining the prospect of leaving her children in the care of others with a view to pursuing wartime employment. The author assured the woman

that her most honourable war work consisted precisely in keeping her home what she had made it for her children and her husband, a small cell of warmth and peace in the noisy thoroughfare of this world.

Jameson furthermore exhorted all wives and mothers to beware “the peculiar excitement” of wartime work, which was liable to ferment “a feeling to be ashamed of, to be guarded against ... like a very subtle form of madness.”² By representing a woman’s domestic role as a matter of both patriotic honour and psychological self-preservation Jameson characterises war work as a hazardous appropriation of the male

¹ Lord Horder, “Introduction,” in *Rebuilding Family Life in the Post-War World: An Enquiry with Recommendations*, ed. James Marchant (London: Odhams Press, 1945), 5.

² Margaret Storm Jameson, “In Courage Keep Your Heart,” *Woman's Journal*, 1939, reproduced in Jane Waller and Michael Vaughan-Rees, *Women in Wartime: The Role of Women's Magazines 1939-1945* (London: Macdonald Optima, 1987), 14/15.

sphere which carries the potential for societal harm and, on an intimate level, self-harm. It is, she argues, imperative to a woman's national and personal interests that a traditional mode of nurturing femininity remain at the core of her social being. While the socialist feminist Jameson's views on the subject are more complex than this excerpt implies and are best understood within the context of the author's 1930s dystopian writings on the gender and class politics of militaristic nostalgia,³ her identification of an intrinsic danger and self-compromise in the new possibilities afforded by women's war work resonates with more mainstream and reactionary anxieties of the period.

Propaganda and popular culture of the 1940s can be seen to echo Jameson's concern over the ramifications of the disruption of pre-war feminine domesticity. Even as the progression of the war necessitated an increased participation of women in what had previously been male-dominated occupations (according to Marilyn Boxer and Jean Quataert, by 1943 it was "impossible for a woman under forty years of age to avoid war work")⁴ the response of mass media was to reassure the public that such measures were a temporary imposition. The *London Telegraph* went so far as to opine in 1942 that "because she is always, eternally feminine, the average woman will want to return to

³ Jameson viewed with antipathy political and social developments that stood to further enmesh rather than detach women from the prevailing "unnatural social disorder" of militaristic dominance and oppression that had given rise to the First World War and now stood to bring about yet more bloodshed. In 1934 she wrote, "it is precisely because I hope for social change that I fear war". Thus, rather than suggesting that women eschew entirely the discourse of war, she cautions against the female embracement of a public existence predicated on patriarchal and militaristic conditions and propagandistic assumptions. In the article quoted above she asserts that "on what women think ... depends the future of this land, the future of all the children in it. Let no one tell you what to think. Think for yourself." Phyllis Lassner observes Jameson's unease with the potential ways by which "intoxication with masculinist political machinery can infect women. Their own weak position makes them vulnerable to the 'romantic archaism' that secures their power in traditional private roles with the alluring prestige of a privileged place." See Margaret Storm Jameson, "In the End," in *Challenge to Death* (London: Constable, 1934), 213; "In Courage Keep Your Heart," 15. See also Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their own* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 102.

⁴ Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert eds. *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 215/216.

home life and raise a family.”⁵ The juxtaposition of an immutable, essentialised femininity with the transitory exigencies of war in such pieces is a dominant theme of propagandist discourses designed to contextualise the role of women throughout the decade. In her sociological study of female sexuality in the Second World War, Philomena Goodman writes:

‘For the duration’ was used to legitimise the contradictory demands that were being made in the name of the war effort, on women’s lives and identities. In public discourse ‘for the duration’ impacted on how women experienced the war, how they dealt with their new circumstances, and with the changes in the public and personal ways of talking about women and war.⁶

For a woman, to harbour ambitions of consolidating a position within the public sphere of work was routinely represented as a form of spiritual self-mutilation. In seeking to remain beyond 1945 in the occupational capacity that had proved integral to the winning of the Battle of Britain, she derogated her primary social function within, what David Mace, head of the influential National Marriage Council, termed “the battle of the family”.⁷ For many women who had thrived on the possibilities for increased personal and professional independence opened up by the war, however, the implicit reinstatement of the old order embodied in the returning figures of patriarchal authority, proved a source of deep resentment.⁸

The previous chapter examined how the structural and thematic modulations of a particular genre of popular fiction throughout the 1940s may be understood within the

⁵ Eldridge Haynes, “British Women’s Great Part in War Industries,” *London Telegraph*, June 10, 1942, 4.

⁶ Philomena Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War* (London: Palgrave, 2002), 15.

⁷ David Mace, *Marriage Crisis* (London: Delisle, 1948)

⁸ See Mary Abbott, *Family Affairs: A History of the Family in 20th Century England* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 83-84.

context of the period's changing imaginative discourses of suicide. Equally notable are the links between the evolving discourses of suicide as a body of legal, sociological and medical knowledge and its deployment in popular culture as delineator of the bounds of hegemonically condoned behaviour and identity. As Gill Plain notes, because war "disrupts the existing order ... by jeopardising stability, it increases the value of that order."⁹ The aim of this chapter is to assess the extent to which the concept of anomic suicide (suicide perceived as a phenomenon arising from the breakdown in social norms) is mobilised towards a goal of restoring a pre-war social order. The delineations of gender along public and domestic lines shall prove central to this analysis, which traces the relationship between discursive practices deployed to define wartime and post-war gender norms in relation to the domestic sphere and those used to construct suicide as a phenomenon rooted in gender. Given the focus of this chapter, it will also be necessary to appraise the status of suicide itself as a concept constructed out of gendered discourses, particularly Durkheim's own seminal text, which has in recent decades become a focus of feminist critique. Such analysis will be conducted through close reading of three literary texts by authors who enjoyed considerable popularity throughout the 1940s but whose critical and commercial prestige suffered a sharp decline in the decade that followed. I have deliberately selected such texts because, in falling victim to the vicissitudes of popular tastes in the later post-war period of the 1950s, these authors may be identified as having aligned with a uniquely 1940s zeitgeist.

The core literary texts that form the basis of this analysis share a preoccupation with the attrition of gender norms and each serves to illuminate a particular aspect of the cultural relationship between the adherence to or rejection of social convention and

⁹ Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power, Resistance*, 19.

suicidality. Dorothy Whipple's *They Were Sisters* (1943) presents the anxieties of wartime gender disruption in an inverted form. In this novel, it is not "mobile femininity" but domestic masculinity, the chaotic appropriation of the domestic sphere by men, that enables the newlywed Charlotte's tyrannical husband to usurp every facet of her identity as wife and mother, driving her to alcoholism, drug abuse and ultimately suicide. In Terence Rattigan's play, *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952), meanwhile, the attempted suicide of a woman living in an adulterous relationship becomes the focal point for a multitude of objectifying discursive practices. Through the figure of Hester Collyer, Rattigan interrogates the ways in which unquestioned truths about suicide and sexual morality are publicly disseminated and utilised in the service of preserving societal convention. Finally, Elizabeth Taylor's *A Wreath of Roses* (1949) explores the dilemma of a young woman caught between the false security of pre-war identity and the alienating anomie of post-war modernity. Upon witnessing the gruesome suicide of a stranger at a railway station, Camilla Hill finds herself propelled into a mid-life crisis of regret and displacement that alienates her from all that she has hitherto lived for.

The analyses to follow draw on theoretical tools that have been used to interrogate and destabilise established orthodoxies on suicide. In light of the feminist critiques of Jennifer Lehmann and Katrina Jaworski's postmodern-inflected discussions of the inherent conceptual masculinism underpinning suicide, the key tenets of suicide knowledge will be called into question, including those laid down in Durkheim's foundational text. Additionally, Ian Marsh's Foucauldian Study, *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth* (2010) offers an effective base for assessing how the discursive practices that shaped suicide's material reality in the 1940s are mediated and sometimes undermined within the literary texts examined. Marsh utilises the concept of "dynamic nominalism" to characterise the interactions between systems of classification and the

human phenomena they aim to categorise – a formulation that shall prove central to the dissection of the role of doctors, legal practitioners and religious figures within these works. Finally, Julia Kristeva’s theories of gender, suicide and objectification provide a useful philosophical framework for exploring aspects of the psychosexual gendering of suicide within each of the texts.

In his 1981 discussion of sexual anomie, Edward Tiryakian accounts for Durkheim’s reactionary approach to gender roles in *On Suicide* by suggesting that

[Durkheim’s] religious orthodox family background, his highly stable, happy and uneventful married life to a devoted wife, and his living in a period when sexuality was structured in very routinised and conventionalised relationships between men and women meant that Durkheim – in good typical Victorian male chauvinistic fashion – did not have to take as problematic relations between the sexes.¹⁰

Other theorists have been less amenable to this view of Durkheim as merely “a man of his time”. In *Durkheim and Women* (1994) Jennifer Lehmann identifies Durkheim’s opposition to divorce as evidence of his deliberate upholding of patriarchal norms in spite of his own theoretical and statistical findings. According to Durkheim’s own studies, the liberalisation of divorce law in a jurisdiction is associated with an increase in male suicide rates and a decrease in female suicide rates; therefore, in opposing reform, Durkheim makes a conscious judgement rooted in his own system of values. As Lehmann writes:

Given his own discovery, the conflict of interest dividing men and women over marriage and divorce, Durkheim is forced to make a choice.

¹⁰ Edward Tiryakian, “Sexual Anomie, Social Structure, Societal Change,” *Social Forces* 59, no.1 (1981): 1026.

In recommending policy to combat the social problems of which suicide is symptomatic, he must choose between pro-marriage measures, which would reduce anomie and male suicide rates, and pro-divorce measures, which would reduce fatalism and female suicide rates. He recognises the problem, but it gives him little cause for hesitation. Durkheim decides to support the indissoluble marriage and the interests of men. He decides to attack divorce, anomie, anomic suicide, male suicide and the interests of women.¹¹

In choosing indissoluble marriage as a “lesser of two evils” Durkheim, Lehmann suggests, explicitly subordinates the wellbeing and social existence of women to that of men. The question of the gendered correlations of divorce and marital infidelity is equally pertinent to the study of 1940s culture, particularly in light of the unprecedented upsurge in divorce in the post-war period, as shall be discussed. The essence of Durkheim’s argument here, however can be recognised as a dominant trope across cultural representations of suicide wherein, as Katrina Jaworski writes, “what is male in suicide is never about gender and what is female is always about gender.”¹² Jaworski’s historical discourse analysis asserts that suicide has been constructed in masculinist terms since its conceptual infancy and that this gendered determinism continues to govern all medical, social and legal discourses of suicide. Such a reading is borne out by Durkheim’s unambiguous presentation of suicide as a male phenomenon, an assumption that is founded in his insistence on society as the chief cause of alienation and anomie. He supports his statistical findings on the gendered differential in suicide rates by suggesting that

¹¹ Lehmann, Jennifer M., *Durkheim and Women* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 166.

¹² Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide*, 16.

If women kill themselves much less often than men, it is because they are much less involved than men in collective existence; thus they feel its influence – good or evil – less strongly.¹³

Durkheim thus presents women's exclusion from the public sphere as a natural protective measure against suicidal ideation. He derives this assertion, not from a social constructionist view of gender roles but from an essentialist belief that women, as beings inherently less socially and existentially burdened than men, are largely immune to the "disease of the infinite" that produces egoistic and anomic despair. Despite affirming this natural disposition, he nonetheless cautions against any social concessions towards the emancipation of women, warning:

As for the champions today of equal rights for woman with those of man, they forget that the work of centuries cannot be instantly abolished; that juridical equality cannot be legitimate so long as psychological inequality is so flagrant.¹⁴

The extent to which these gendered assumptions that underpin Durkheim's theory of suicide have conditioned all subsequent discursive practices used to describe the phenomenon remains a contentious subject. An analysis of the representation of female suicide across 1940s popular culture, including cinema and popular fiction, however, exhibits a consistent correlation between ungoverned female sexuality, marital breakdown and self-destruction. Indeed, the incorporation of the self-annihilation of "wayward" females into popular entertainments may be viewed within the context of a broader societal toleration and even encouragement of violence against women perceived to have indulged in licentious wartime behaviour. Alan Allport writes:

¹³ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 263.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 353.

Such women, it was said, were paying the price for a nation that had sinned. The wives and sweethearts of Britain had supposedly broken faith with their absent menfolk. They had committed the unforgivable betrayal: adultery. And not just adultery, but adultery with Americans, Canadians, Poles, Italians – in other words, *foreigners*. Now there was to be a terrible reckoning.¹⁵

Sonya Rose's articulation of the double-bind whereby women in wartime are culturally constructed as both emblematic of the nation and yet, through their disruptive desires, inherently subversive of it explains how the representation of female self-execution for gender transgressions might serve a cathartic function for an audience disillusioned by the gloom of post-war anomie.¹⁶ The conjoining of female chastity with the stability of national identity is symbolically central to such public discourses of anomie and society and serves to emphasise the precarious place of women within the wartime symbolic order. As Stephen Heath writes:

To commit adultery is to adulterate, to render counterfeit, corrupt, to debase 'by base admixture' (the definition given by the OED). Adultery, in fact, is 'category confusion', the slide from identity to indifference, a total indistinction of place. What guarantees identity is the woman who is then equally the weak point in the system: if she gives, everything gives; moving from *her* right place, the adulterous woman leaves *no* place intact ... As mother the woman is sure, as wife always potentially unsure.¹⁷

¹⁵ Alan Allport, *Demobbed: Coming Home after the Second World War* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2010), 85.

¹⁶ Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 92.

¹⁷ Stephen Heath, "Family Plots," *Comparative Criticism: Volume 5*, ed. E.S. Shaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 318.

As a source of catharsis within the plots of popular films and novels of the 1940s the self-annihilation of transgressive female heroines, whether through accident or design is notably prevalent.¹⁸ Such a perspective on suicide as a mechanism of societal rebalancing is addressed by Henry Romilly Fedden in the closing stages of his 1938 study. Fedden considers whether society is in fact perversely fortified by the voluntary self-eradication of its most disaffected members. He remarks that:

in practice the abstract entity ‘society’ is nothing but the striving individuals which compose it. When such of these individuals as are misfits voluntarily remove themselves and their misery by suicide, society directly benefits by their actions. Suicide thus appears as a process by which society rids itself of elements of misery and disaffection.¹⁹

The representation of suicide here as the failure of the individual to conform to normative structures (as opposed to the reverse) is explored across a range of 1940s literature. It is impossible to satisfactorily broach the literary interrogations of such tropes without first examining their most popular and public manifestations in the cinematic form given that the texts under discussion may be read to some degree as writing *back* against these cultural motifs.

The most commercially successful British film of the 1940s, Compton Bennet’s *The Seventh Veil* (1945) is a vivid illustration of how post-war popular culture operated

¹⁸ See, for example, Powell and Pressburger’s *The Red Shoes* (1948), in which the heroine is driven to suicide upon finding herself faced with an impossible decision between following her passion as a celebrated dancer or giving up her career for marriage. See also *The Wicked Lady* (1945), directed by Leslie Arliss and *Bedelia* (1946), directed by Lance Comfort, both of which star Margaret Lockwood as a seductive usurper of men’s prerogatives (in the former, by becoming a highwayman; in the latter by serially poisoning her husbands for their inheritance) who ultimately dies through her own action.

¹⁹ Henry Romilly Fedden, *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study*, 283. A similar line of argumentation is to be found in Leslie Stephens’ (father of Virginia Woolf) 1882 writings on evolutionary ethics, in which he states that a suicide may be recognised as “diminishing the sum of human misery” through his act and that consequently, there were scarce grounds for disapproving of such an act. In *The Science of Ethics* (London: Smoth & Elder, 1882), 392.

to align female over-investment in individualist desires with suicidal ideation. Bennet's psychological melodrama opens with the thwarted suicide attempt of young, celebrated concert pianist, Francesca Cunningham (played by Ann Todd). Francesca's suicidality, it is revealed, arises out of a traumatic episode that has rendered her psychologically incapable of playing the piano, thereby cutting off her most intimate mode of self-expression. After her deliverance from death, she is subjected to a course of psychoanalysis. This interview provides the film's core analeptic framework. As the male analyst prepares to peel away the layers of psychic inhibition to uncover the root of his subject's suicidal ideation, he symbolically compares the process with the erotic striptease of the Biblical princess, Salomé:

The human mind is like Salomé at the beginning of her dance, hidden by seven veils, veils of reserve, shyness, fear. Now with friends, the average person will drop first one veil, then another, maybe three or four altogether. With a lover, she'll make it five or even six, but never the seventh. The human mind likes to cover its nakedness. You will never get the human mind to do that. That's why I use narcosis.²⁰

As the audience is permitted to penetrate into the heroine's psyche via flashbacks to her formative years, the task of reigniting her capacity for musical expression (and by extension her will to live) becomes synonymous with the regulation of her sexual and professional desires. The film explores Francesca's early romantic encounters, first with an American jazz musician and later with an Italian painter, both of which cast her as the more sexually assertive partner: in the former case, she is seen to usurp the masculine prerogative by pre-emptively proposing marriage, while in the latter affair she plans to live in Italy as her lover's mistress. The successful completion of her

²⁰ *The Seventh Veil*, directed by Compton Bennett (1945; London: ITV, 2012), DVD.

treatment and the return of her musical prowess is only arrived at through the heroine's figurative disrobement to reveal her essentialised self. In the final act, the therapist assembles Francesca's suitors along with her cold, overbearing guardian, Nicholas (played by James Mason) and explains what may be expected of this "reclaimed" femininity.

You have to prepare yourselves for a new Francesca... Her mind is clear and the clouds have been entirely swept away... She will want to be with the one she loves, or the one she has been happiest with, or the one she cannot do without, or the one she trusts.

It is Nicholas, Francesca's authoritarian and misogynistic English mentor who proves ultimately to be the object of her true desire. It is through her submission to him that she attains creative salvation and recovers her will to continue living. Thus, in contravention to the story of Salomé, whose striptease proves a portal to sexual and political power over the patriarchal forces that rule her, Francesca's discarding of her figurative "seventh veil" uncovers a latent desire to surrender to those very forces. The erotic potentialities of her earlier life are exposed as unconscious affectations, concealing her truest essence of chaste matrimonial fidelity. Read as a work of post-war propaganda, *The Seventh Veil* is notable for constructing a return to pre-war gender norms not exclusively as a matter of national duty for women, but as a spiritual and psychological imperative. The trope of the sexually and socially rebellious female who is driven, through her disastrous pursuit of individualism and eroticism, to the brink of suicide appears again in the 1949 film *The Passionate Friends* (which alters the original novel by H.G. Wells upon which it is based to have the heroine, Mary, rescued from her suicidal impulse by her dull, yet dependable husband).

Even in instances where female sexual desire is presented sympathetically, the framing of the suicidal ideation that ensues is telling. At the climax of David Lean's film, *Brief Encounter* (1945), suburban housewife Laura Jesson (played by Celia Johnson) is brought to the brink of self-annihilation by her inability to reconcile personal passion with the patriarchal demands of post-war femininity. A collision between mundane domesticity and high melodrama is narrowly averted as Laura recoils, at the last moment, from acting on her desire for oblivion having sacrificed passion for social duty.

I meant to do it Fred, I really meant to do it. I stood there trembling, right on the edge, but I couldn't. I wasn't brave enough. I should like to be able to say that it was the thought of you and the children that stopped me but it wasn't. I had no thoughts at all, only an overwhelming desire not to feel anything ever again. Not to be unhappy anymore, I turned. I went back into the refreshment room. That's when I nearly fainted.²¹

Among several dramatic alterations Noel Coward made in adapting the screenplay for *Brief Encounter* from his 1936 short play *Still Life*, was the decision to allow the audience access to Laura Jesson's private thoughts and reflections through her internal monologue. Laura's suicidal confession is by necessity unspoken and as in-articulate as her illicit passion for Alec. Her explicit disavowal of heroism or bravery in overcoming her suicidal impulse, situates her act as a failure. Indeed, her suicidal disposition is characterised as an absence of thought and feeling, a manifestation of passivity as opposed to active death-seeking. In this way, she is not dissimilar from the

²¹ Performed by Celia Johnson in *Brief Encounter*, directed by David Lean (1945; Great Britain: Carlton Video, 2001), DVD. The screenplay was based on the 1936 play, *Still Life* by Noël Coward, but shifts emphasis from the potential affair to Laura's predicament in subordinating desire to her social identity as wife and mother. Crucially, Coward's screenplay allows access to Laura's inner monologue and consequently contextualises her repressed impulses, both violent and suicidal.

other heroines discussed in this chapter; Hester Collyer, rejects the idea of suicide as brave and dismisses her motivation as a mess of irrational emotions; Charlotte Leigh in *They Were Sisters* cannot bring herself to live any longer and Frances in *A Wreath of Roses* is filled with suicidal self-recrimination for having practiced a cowardly concealment of her true antipathy towards life for many years.

As her apparently oblivious husband remarks at the film's close, Laura has "been a long way away". Her tryst with a young doctor, Alec, has so transfigured her perception of life that she cannot help but despise all the old sources of bourgeois certainty and comfort represented by her friend, Dolly. She is trapped between death and a living death, perceiving, like Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, that the only alternative to boarding the train of social convention is throwing oneself beneath its wheels. In this light, Laura comes to personify the turmoil of a nation that has spent the war years "a long way away" and now struggles to reconnect with its old existence. The fact that this necessary sacrifice and its near-suicidal consequences are gendered as female is significant to the focus of this chapter.

Antonia Lant notes that Laura's dilemma "is aired within the terms of realism, subtly suggesting that women are naturally ineffective ... and unable to control their own destinies."²² Under such a reading, Laura is defined not merely by her failure to pursue passion but also and equally by her failure to embrace death. Rather than an expression of frustration and despair at her entrapment, her unconsummated suicidality is thus presented as further evidence of her psychosocial subjugation.

²² Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 192.

Elsewhere, Lant views the films, cartoons and advertisements of the war as enacting a necessary remodelling of gender constructions to align with the national character demanded by the upheavals of the period. However, she asserts:

at another level recruitment [of women] sapped the idea of nation from within; mass mobilisation undermined traditional notions of civil stability in which the sexes had clearly defined roles and in which a woman's place was at home. Women could no longer be counted on to be at home – indeed they were now required by law not to be.²³

It is particularly noteworthy that Laura's internal monologues throughout *Brief Encounter*, including her confession of suicidal despair, are silently directed towards her oblivious husband, Fred, indicating that female suicidality, even when unspoken, is intelligible only in relation to the male sphere. As Richard Dyer writes,

The price of the film giving her narrative authority is the insistent reminder that the terms in which she speaks are laid down by men – not by individual men, but by masculinist discourse itself, carried in the looks, bearing and clothes of men, in what Laura has so well learnt of male values. Yet, of course, she does not pour it all out. She is silent. The price of her speech is not only the way it cedes authority to men, but also not being heard.²⁴

Turning now to the literary representations of the masculinist framing of female suicidality, it becomes clear that the shifting role of women during the war produced an intensification of these ways of understanding self-destructive behaviours among women. Dorothy Whipple's *They Were Sisters* presents the gendered anxieties of the

²³ Antonia Lant, "Mobile Femininity" in *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 15.

²⁴ Richard Dyer, *Brief Encounter: BFI Film Classics* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 38.

Second World War in an inverted form that posits “stationary masculinity” (as opposed to “mobile femininity”) as an existential threat to the family and, by extension, the nation.²⁵ The novel concerns the interwar experiences of the three Field sisters: Lucy, Charlotte and Vera, as they navigate various joys and challenges of married life. The eldest, Lucy, leads a life of selfless devotion to her family, having in her youth turned down the prospect of a university education to care for her father and younger siblings after the death of her mother. Lucy enjoys a stable and companionate friendship with her husband, and though the couple has been unable to conceive a child she acts *in loco parentis* at various points in the narrative to the neglected and abandoned offspring of her siblings. Vera, meanwhile, though doted on by her husband, is bored by the humdrum restrictions of domestic femininity and entertains a string of extramarital courtships culminating in her divorce, financial ruin, and escape to South Africa. The timid and shy Charlotte, who forms the crux of Whipple’s narrative, succumbs to the magnetic but infantile charm of Geoffrey Leigh, resulting in a marriage built on tyranny and capriciousness on one side and abject self-effacement on the other. Charlotte’s psychological deterioration, driven in part by Geoffrey’s total appropriation of the domestic sphere and, with it, her identity as spouse, mother and homemaker, manifests as alcoholism, drug addiction and ultimately suicide. Despite setting the novel’s events

²⁵ The collapse of Dorothy Whipple’s literary reputation in the post-war years is an obvious gauge of the societal shifts that had been set in motion during the 1940s. Her 1939 novel, *The Priory*, was a bestselling success with pre-publication subscription sales of 15,000, a figure that was surpassed by *They Were Sisters*. Two popular film adaptations of her novels were released in the 1940s: *They Were Sisters* (1945) and *They Knew Mr Knight* (1946). By the early 1950s however, her popularity, like many other writers in her genre, had all but evaporated; her final novel, *Someone at a Distance* (1953) failed to attract a single review. More damning yet was the shift in cultural tastes which in subsequent years saw her name become a by-word for mediocre sentimentality. When the publisher Carmen Callil set up Virago Modern Classics in the 1970s, she instituted Whipple’s name as a cultural nadir. In a 2008 article for *The Guardian*, Callil recalls: “We had a limit known as the Whipple line, below which we would not sink. Dorothy Whipple was a popular novelist of the 1940s whose prose and content absolutely defeated us. A considerable body of women novelists, who wrote like the very devil, bit the Virago dust when Alexandra, Lynn and I exchanged books and reports, on which I would scrawl a brief rejection: “Below the Whipple line.” In Carmen Callil, “The Stories of Our Lives,” *The Guardian*, April 26, 2008.

at a safe remove from the ongoing gender destabilisation of the 1940s, Whipple uses the story of Charlotte Leigh to express her dark reservations about the existential consequences of uprooting men and women from their traditionally sanctioned roles respectively within the public and private spheres. In his discussion of her 1939 novel, *The Priory*, Steve Ellis notes the opportunistic fashion in which Whipple elides the political realities of the wartime context in which she writes while nonetheless reflecting an oblique “awareness” of the war as a backdrop to personal concerns of marriage and familial well-being.²⁶ A similar strategy is discernible in *They Were Sisters* which, despite its historical remove, incorporates topical narratives of children’s evacuation (not, in this instance to escape from literal bombardment but from the daily onslaughts of a toxic home environment), sexual anomie and the disruption of once stable categories defining family life.

The domestic life of the Leigh family is, on the surface, an immaculate simulacrum of the idyllic interwar households of 1940s nostalgia and propaganda. Although visually splendid and superbly maintained, this “observed house” is presented as being infected with a social perversion that cannot be registered by the voyeur’s gaze. In the absence of an authoritative feminine presence within the household to articulate this dysfunction, it falls to a panoptical chorus of servants, teachers and neighbours to outline the Leigh family’s transgression of bourgeois orthodoxy and intuit the corrosive otherness of its configuration:

‘The master’s the mistress here,’ the housemaid had explained to the new cook. ‘A house is no place for a man, not all day,’ the departing cook had

²⁶Steve Ellis, *British Writers and the Approach of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 97.

declared. 'Give me a place where the man goes out to business and doesn't stop at home, minding other people's.' (76)

Whipple presents the Leigh narrative not only as a case of spousal abuse but as a nightmarish vision of patriarchal usurpation of the domestic sphere and the masculinist colonisation of the social roles of wife and mother. Geoffrey is presented, not simply as a domineering domestic abuser (indeed, Whipple's representation of spousal abuse is notable for its total absence of physical violence) but as a developmentally stunted child, whose boyish penchant for practical jokes and his capacity to maintain a prank long past its natural lifespan at first endears him to his homosocial peer group before ultimately marginalising him. This is conveyed early in the novel through his raucous antics with the Field brothers and one particular drunken escapade of the young men hanging off lampposts:

He could outhang anyone. He outhung their patience. They left him in the end, but it tickled them to wake up much later in their beds and think that old Geoff was probably still hanging there, doubled over the crossbar. (14)

Geoffrey's pathological hyper-competitiveness transfers into his courtship of and proposal to Charlotte (both of which are conducted through a series of cruelly manipulative pranks). Upon their marriage, he arranges his business affairs so that he may collapse public and private spheres of his operations by making the home the centre of both his business and domestic empires, eclipsing his wife entirely and inspiring within her a sense of her own spectral non-existence. The family is buffeted by its patriarchal patriarch's erratic shifts from extravagant shows of munificence to casual brutality to feigned attacks of crippling ill-health.

The process through which Whipple traces Charlotte's passive surrender of the feminine sphere to an incipient drive towards self-annihilating anomie may be understood in the light of Julia Kristeva's writings on female suicide in the essay "About Chinese Women". In the section headed "I Who Want Not to Be", Kristeva posits a gendered psychoanalytic view of suicide that contrasts the masculine and feminine literary constructions of the phenomenon in the writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Marina Tsvetaeva. Drawing on a mind-versus-body dialectic of male/female suicide (already discussed in relation to the work of Katrina Jaworski), she suggests that Kirilov's "logical" suicide in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) constitutes a creative action through which the male asserts his supreme will over God, thereby essentially becoming God. In contrast with this construction of male suicide, she suggests that female suicide arises from a passive yearning simply "to dissolve being itself, to free it of the word, of the self, of God".²⁷ Charlotte's unmooring from the symbolic order and her slow and passive renunciation of life are legible within this frame of reference. Kristeva writes:

Once the moorings of the word, the ego, the superego, begin to slip, life itself can't hang on: death quietly moves in. Suicide without a cause, or sacrifice without fuss for an apparent cause which, in our age, is usually political: a woman can carry off such things without tragedy, even without drama, without the feeling that she is fleeing a well-fortified front, but rather as though it were simply a matter of making an inevitable, irresistible and self-evident transition.²⁸

²⁷ Julia Kristeva, "About Chinese Women," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1986), 158.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

Charlotte's decisive shift towards self-destruction occurs "without melodrama, without vehemence of any kind" when she is sexually rejected by her husband; enraged that she chose to stay an extra few days on a visit to her sister's house, he banishes her indefinitely from the marriage bed with the scornful putdown: "what man would want you in his bed?" This final expulsion from the matrimonial realm out of which her entire identity has been fashioned, leaves her craving a passive withdrawal from life; "she wished to be dead, to be quiet somewhere, to be out of it all." (92)

Kristeva's model describes a condition of total anomie that induces the suicidal female to seek a dissolution into nothingness. Charlotte's gradual unmooring from the normative security of the symbolic order is coded in similarly passive terms; indeed, Whipple presents her not merely as a put-upon victim but as a masochistically tacit accomplice to her own erasure. Her utter relinquishment of control over the domestic sphere ("It was a man's house. She had given in to Geoffrey in everything, even in the furnishing of the house ... there was something hotel-like in Geoffrey's taste. (75)) precipitates not only her own psychological disintegration but abandons her eldest daughter, Margaret, to the (impliedly incestuous) indoctrination of her father. Margaret's increasingly prominent role as Geoffrey's surrogate wife exacerbates Charlotte's sense of deracination. Whipple conveys this Kristevan sensation of non-existence through a repeated evocation of the cinematic experience, a simile that evokes both the clinical perfection of Geoffrey's regimented fiefdom and Charlotte's non-participatory role within this vision:

An endless talking-film with one subject had become a mental habit with her. She was as tired of this private film as if she had been forced, in reality, to sit before a screen for weeks, months, nay years, without relief. But she could not shut it off. She often had the impression that,

even when she was thinking and talking of other things, away at the back of her mind it was going on all the time and just the same. (74)

Despite the obvious surface incongruity of such a comparison, Whipple's descriptions of Charlotte's filmic consciousness bear an interesting similarity to the "dead moods" of Patrick Hamilton's George Harvey Bone (discussed in the previous chapter). In Mellor's analysis of *Hangover Square*, Hamilton's evocation of cinema to describe the torpid experience of the schizophrenic's "dead moods" is traced to the experience of the psychologically scarred victim of bombing.²⁹ The perpetual cinema reel playing in Charlotte's consciousness emphasises her superfluity to the unfolding drama ("she knew the house was as well run without her as with her." (76)) It also, however, aligns her with Bone as a pre-war figure who has escaped the intolerable anxieties of his position through imaginative escape into a realm of total dissociation. The fact that her increasing obsolescence within the domestic sphere is conveyed through a language of aeriality and de-humanisation further links her uprooting to a broader set of concerns that were in play during the war years. Whipple repeatedly likens Charlotte's slow descent towards self-annihilation to the plight of an insect tormented from above by a sadistic child. In the following example, this image is pointedly set against the context of aerial bombardment, implicitly correlating Charlotte's timid failure to assert her claim to the traditional roles of wife and mother to a lack of personal fortitude and a want of resilience. Whipple writes:

Katherine Mansfield wrote a tale about a fly upon which a man, over and over again, idly dropped a great blot of ink. Over and over again the fly struggled out, dried its wings, worked over itself, recovered, became

²⁹ Mellor writes: "like a putative civilian in a bombed city imagined on 1930s paranoiac principles, George is one of the mental walking wounded, and his outer and inner worlds are conflated to a point of somnambulistic shuffle." Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, 44/45.

eager to live, even cheerful, only to be covered by another blot. At last, the fly struggled no more; its resistance was broken. Charlotte was like that fly. Her resistance had been long – thirteen years – but it was at an end. She struggled no more. (121)

This intertextual simile is striking in its deployment of the language of aeriality and bombardment, a subtle framing which ensures that any readerly sympathy for Charlotte's domestic torment is to be tempered with a stern rebuke that aligns a weakening of wartime resolve with the weakening of the family. Apart from its overt reference to Katherine Mansfield's 1922 short story, "The Fly", the passage implies a more immediate thematic parallel with Virginia Woolf's essay from 1940, "The Death of the Moth". Woolf's essay uses similar imagery to communicate the ever-increasing inconsequentiality of human life when perceived from the militaristic perspective of the aerial bomber, describing how

one could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by the tiny legs against an oncoming doom which could, if it had chosen, have submerged an entire city; not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew, had any chance against death.³⁰

Whipple suggests that Charlotte's death, while tragic, must be read equally within the public context of her failure to defend and uphold her traditional station within the home.

Whipple's vision of the male colonisation of the domestic sphere is designed, I have argued here, to rehearse wartime anxieties over the shifts in women's roles within the public sphere and the attendant implications of such developments the future of family

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, "The Death of the Moth," in *Collected Essays Volume 1*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 361.

life. Such vividly expressed apprehensions confirm her place within what Alison Light terms “conservative modernity”, a middlebrow, middle-class mode that constituted “a deferral of modernity and yet ... also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which had gone before.”³¹

While Whipple places unquestioning faith in the agreeable capabilities of doctors, state functionaries and (in the case of the 1945 film adaptation of *They Were Sisters*),³² judges to accurately and compassionately decipher the true nature of suicide, Terence Rattigan devotes his 1952 play to the unravelling of such certainties. *The Deep Blue Sea* exhibits and interrogates the multitude of discursive practices brought to bear on suicide and attempted suicide in post-war Britain. This facet of Rattigan’s play has largely been overshadowed by the circumstances of its creation and its playwright’s critical self-sabotage throughout the 1950s. Before embarking on the proposed reading of the play as a critique of dominant forms of suicide knowledge and their effects, it is worth considering why the play’s extra-textual life has worked to undermine such approaches since the its first production in 1952.³³

The fact that critical readings of Rattigan’s work up until relatively recently have failed to duly acknowledge its social and political ramifications for suicide discourse may largely be attributed to the playwright’s own impulsive self-definition in

³¹ Alison Light, *Forever England*, 10/11.

³² The 1945 film adaptation directed by Arthur Crabtree alters the ending so that Charlotte’s suicide not only provides the *deus ex machina* by which the idyllic image of British family life may be rebuilt through Lucy and her husbands as adoptive guardians, it has the additional cathartic function of bringing about the downfall of Geoffrey (played by James Mason). At the inquest into Charlotte’s death, the details of her years of abuse at the hands of her husband are made public resulting in his social ruin and abandonment by his beloved eldest daughter, Margaret. The film version also presents Charlotte’s decline and death in a more condensed and straightforwardly suicidal form in that, rather than dying of an overdose, she despairingly throws herself in front of an oncoming car.

³³ Critical and theatrical reappraisals of the play and of Rattigan began with Karel Reisz’s 1993 revival of *The Deep Blue Sea* at the Almeida Theatre, London. There have been five major Rattigan revivals in London, three at the Chichester Festival Theatre and one at the Royal Exchange, Manchester. As well as several adaptations of Rattigan texts for BBC radio, a film adaptation directed by Terence Davies was released in 2011.

opposition to the “Play of Ideas” and his vehemently expressed disdain for the emergence of the theatre of the “Angry Young Man” as typified by John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956).³⁴ Throughout the 1950s, Rattigan wrote a series of articles defending what he professed to be his character-based theatrical model against what he perceived to be an oppressive Shavian/Ibsenian critical consensus. The most provocative of these tracts, “Concerning the Play of Ideas” (04/03/1950), *New Statesman*) unintentionally consolidated his reputation as an exponent of the formulaic “well made play” as opposed to a playwright of intellectual or social depth, thereby landing him, in his own words, in “the intellectual and critical soup.”³⁵ While Wansell suggests that Rattigan’s blatant aversion to socially engaged theatre stemmed from his dismay at the unenthusiastic critical reception of his play, *Adventure Story*, there is an additional potential reason for which the playwright might plausibly have wished to dissuade his audience from close-reading his work for social signifiers. On 28th February 1949, Kenneth Morgan, with whom Rattigan had, up until some weeks prior, lived and been in a romantic relationship, committed suicide at his flat in Marylebone, Manchester. Morgan was discovered, according to the coroner’s report, to have taken an overdose of sleeping tablets and, when these had failed to kill him, he had draped a tea towel over his head and held himself over a gas ring on the stove until he lost consciousness. The centrality of this event in shaping *The Deep Blue Sea* – both as an emanation of the playwright’s grief and his terror at being publicly associated with the case in the press and consequently outed as homosexual – is evident. According to Wansell’s biography of Rattigan,

³⁴ Questioned by a *Daily Express* reporter on his response to Osborne’s play, Rattigan intensified the juxtaposition by suggesting that Osborne was deliberately aiming to produce an effect of “Look ma, I’m not Terence Rattigan.”

³⁵ Quoted in Geoffrey Wansell, *Terence Rattigan: A Biography* (Oberon Books: London, 2009), 214.

It has been suggested that on the very same evening [of the discovery of Morgan's body] Rattigan told Peter Glenville, while they were going down in the Adelphi lift on their way to the theatre for the evening performance [of 'Adventure Story'], that 'The new play will open with the body discovered dead in front of the gas fire.'³⁶

Regardless of the precise veracity of that rumour, within months of the event, Rattigan had clearly formulated the idea for his play; his friend and critic B.A. Young supports this view with a similar anecdote, confirming that "he was heartbroken. Yet instantly he must have decided that the way to commemorate his great friendship should be in the form of a play".³⁷ While subsequent readings of the play have foregrounded the influence of Morgan's death and Rattigan's fear of public scandal, these have generally focused on how the dynamics of repression and shame serve to propel Hester towards attempting suicide.³⁸

Although the following Foucauldian analysis of *The Deep Blue Sea* shall focus on the playwright's critique of the social structures that produce "regimes of truth" pursuant to suicide, it is worth noting the overlapping contexts between both spheres of analysis. As Wansell writes:

No one, and certainly not Rattigan, ever discovered the reason for Kenneth Morgan's suicide. the pressures of being a homosexual had cost other young men their lives, especially if they were about to be revealed in public. The pain of losing a lover, whether male or female,

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.197

³⁷ B.A. Young, *The Rattigan Version* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), 90.

³⁸ One long-standing rumour went so far as to suggest that Rattigan had originally drafted the play with a homosexual relationship at the centre but had eventually reworked it to recast the central role as female in the knowledge that such a play would never pass the Lord Chamberlain's censorship. Such rumours have been refuted by the play's director, Frith Banbury and several of Rattigan's critics and subsequent directors. See Geoffrey Wansell, *Terence Rattigan*, 226.

overwhelmed many other young men and women. The fear of being left alone or abandoned threatened the sanity of stronger men than Kenneth Morgan. And the desire for private revenge, or for attention, from a previous lover could never be ignored completely as a motive.³⁹

As Wansell observes here, the indecipherability of the suicidal act is rendered doubly opaque by the air of secrecy and euphemism that is accrued through the machinations of sexual morality. In *The Deep Blue Sea* the sexual transgression of the adulterous heroine is more straightforwardly readable as a repudiation of pre-war expectations of femininity and, indeed her suicide is consequently interpretable as an extension of that rebellion. Sean O'Connor writes that

like Laura Jesson [of *Brief Encounter*] Hester breaks with convention and society. She rejects the morality imposed upon her by church and state by her clerical father and lawyer husband. These two institutions and the men who represent them have defined the tenor and the boundaries of Hester's life ... Hester, once married to the law, has now set herself on the other side of it: 'attempted suicide is a crime, anyway, isn't it? People get gaoled for it, don't they?'⁴⁰

O'Connor's reading of Hester as a renegade of Law (both judicial and ecclesiastical), while useful in articulating the play's construction of post-war female sexuality, fails to account for her total objectification as an attempted suicide. Far from evading or rebelling against the stifling structures of her childhood and married life, Hester's status as a would-be suicide interpellates her into a tyrannical network of conflicting medical, legal, religious, literary and social truth formations.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 197.

⁴⁰ Sean O'Connor, *Straight Acting: Popular Gay Drama from Wilde to Rattigan* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2016), 185.

Rattigan's friend and biographer B.A. Young, perhaps unwittingly, underscores the play's Foucauldian resonances when he compared the treatment of Hester's suicide attempt to the workings of a classic whodunit. He opines that:

There are two problems to be solved. The first is, why did Hester try to kill herself? The second is, given the same circumstances, would she do it again?⁴¹

By casting the still-breathing Hester in the mould of a "Body in the Library" archetype, Young discloses Hester's true status within the realm of the text as an object of theoretical truth-forming practice. Young here highlights the desire on the part of both the audience and of those within the diegesis of the play to locate a discernible and unitary truth to be derived from Hester's suicide; however, in the absence of an authoritative detective-figure to unearth such truth, that office of truth-formation is subject to contention among the text's multiple stake-holders. By interpreting Hester's body as a site of self-inflicted criminality, Young indicates the processes through which the diagnosis and management of the heroine becomes a public pursuit. It is Ann, Hester's neighbour who identifies this loss of bodily selfhood that arises from suicide when she remarks:

It's a sordid business, isn't it, a suicide? I wonder if they think of that when they do it – police and coroners and things. I suppose we'll have to give evidence. (15)

The production of truth in relation to Hester therefore becomes a process of social dominance such that, by the play's final act she is transformed into an object of intergenerational barter between an older and younger man when Freddie departs to South Africa, leaving her to the "care" of her estranged husband.

⁴¹ B.A. Young, *The Rattigan Version*, 106.

Before addressing fully the objectification of Hester as an artefact of suicide knowledge, it is necessary to consider a third site of truth-forming detection neglected by Young. In addition to the question of *why* Hester attempted to end her life and *whether* she will make a further attempt, the play presents a counter-inquiry as to *whether* Hester actually did *try* to kill herself. The question of intent lies at the core of suicide; however, such intent is in itself the product of discursive formations, as Katrina Jaworski asserts. She writes:

Yet suicide is an explicitly individual act not because a person is automatically responsible, but because they are hailed as being responsible. By having responsibility attributed to them, the individual is situated as the original source of the intention to suicide. At the same time, a ‘doing,’ made apparent by the taking of life, that expresses an outcome, marks suicide. It is unclear what the outcome will be, other than there must be one to signify the taking. What is made clear is that the intention behind the taking must be deliberate in order to have the outcome recognised as a suicide.⁴²

Jaworski identifies suicide as a performative act whose designation, diagnosis and ramifications are subject to the gendered discursive practices that surround the subject.

As Judith Butler writes:

When words engage actions or constitute themselves a kind of action, they do this not because they reflect the power of an individual’s will or intention, but because they draw upon and reengage conventions which have gained their power precisely through a *sedimented iterability*. The

⁴² Katrina Jaworski, “Suicide Agency and the Limits of Power,” in *Suicide and Agency: Anthropological Perspectives on Suicide, Agency and Power*, eds. Ludek Broz and Daniel Münster (London: Routledge, 2016), 184.

category of ‘intention’ indeed, the notion of ‘the doer’ will have its place, but this place will no longer be ‘behind’ the deed as its enabling source.⁴³

In this light, Rattigan’s focus on an attempted as opposed to completed suicide may be read as feeding into a concerted topical inquiry into such practices. Rattigan conceived of and composed the play as medical and sociological discourses were evolving to conceptualise “attempted suicide” as a discrete phenomenon in its own right with attributes and determinants not necessarily identical to those of completed suicides. In 1952, the year *The Deep Blue Sea* premiered, the psychiatrist Edwin Stengel explicitly refuted the notion that “a person who has attempted suicide ... has bungled his suicide.”⁴⁴ From the early post-war years, moreover, the view of attempted suicide as a “cry for help” as opposed to a *de facto* effort to die gained increasing traction, particularly in the perception of female attempted suicides. Christopher James Millard writes that

after 1945 in Britain there emerges an ‘epidemic’ of ‘attempted suicide’ that is read as not aiming at death exclusively, but is instead a form of communication – a ‘cry for help’. This ‘epidemic’ consists predominantly of young people (increasingly gendered female) who present at general hospitals after having taken an amount of medication that is deemed excessive, but insufficient to kill them.⁴⁵

⁴³ Judith Butler, “For a careful reading,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell and N. Fraser (New York: Routledge, 1995), 134.

⁴⁴ Edwin Stengel, “Enquiries into Attempted Suicide [Abridged],” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 45, no.9 (1952): 613.

⁴⁵ Christopher James Millard, “Re -inventing the ‘cry for help’: Attempted Suicide in Britain in the Mid-Twentieth Century c. 1937-1969” (PhD Thesis, Queen Mary, University of London, United Kingdom, 2012), Web. 20/12/2017.

“But she did try to kill herself, didn’t she?” (21) appeals Ann of Dr Miller, emphasising that, in the absence of a completed “doing” of the self-enacted death on Hester’s part, the question of intent is the sole province of truth. This question is echoed almost verbatim in Hester’s subsequent interview with her estranged husband: “But you did try to kill yourself?” (30) The answers provided on both occasions prove insubstantial and evasive; Hester responds to her husband by mockingly reciting the formulaic legalese: “While the balance of my mind was temporarily disturbed. Isn’t that the legal phrase”.⁴⁶ (30)

Hester, while refusing to actively operate as a source of truth formation in the discursive battleground, is nonetheless transformed into a mirror of the responses of those she encounters. In his reading of the thwarted love plot of the play, John A. Bertolini has compared Hester to the mythological figure of Echo in her vain pursuit of Freddie’s Narcissus. As Bertolini observes, Rattigan deploys a dialogue motif in characterising Hester which sees her echo a line or phrase spoken by her interlocutor.

Hester mechanically echoes the words of her interlocutors as a way of holding herself together, but also of concealing herself. The repetitions imply that she fears letting herself say more than the minimum, fears that something within her will loosen that she cannot afford to have loosen. ... The echoes reveal her weakness, and hence her doom, for she sees that once she loses Freddie, life will slowly drain itself out of her, and she will waste away, like Echo pining for Narcissus, too enfeebled by the

⁴⁶ Such an agency-denying legal formulation may be read as holding a poignant significance for Rattigan. In the inquest following the death of Kenneth Morgan, the actor with whom Rattigan lived and shared an intimate relationship, the coroner recorded a verdict of “Suicide while the balance of his mind was disturbed.” In “Newspaper report on the suicide of Terence Rattigan’s former lover Kenneth Morgan,” *St. Marylebone and Paddington Record*, March 11, 1949, accessed February 12, 2018, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/newspaper-report-on-the-suicide-of-terence-rattigans-former-lover-kenneth-morgan>.

pain and the prospect of loss to speak any words but those spoken to her.⁴⁷

Within the context of this analysis, however, Hester's representation as Echo may be read, not as an indication of her romantic despair, but as an accurate representation of how she is objectified; as an object of suicide knowledge,⁴⁸ she becomes a sounding board for a myriad of discourses ranging from the religious to the prurient. In the figure of Jackie, Freddie's drinking companion, she is most notably recast as a fraud. The scene in which Jackie plays sceptical juror to Freddie's recitation of Hester's suicide note is an exegesis of the gendered nature of suicidal discourse:

Freddie I got the whole story out of old Ma Elton. She definitely tried to gas herself, and would have succeeded if there'd been a shilling in the blasted meter – (*He has replenished both glasses generously.*)

Jackie Well – that shows she couldn't have been too serious about it.
(Taking glass from **Freddie**.)

Oh, thanks. Cheers.

Freddie Where's your imagination? If you're in a state of mind where you're going to try and bump yourself off, you don't think about things like meters.

Jackie (*judiciously*) Well, I would.

Freddie That from the man who once wrote off three Spits by forgetting to put his ruddy undercart down.

Jackie That was different. I wasn't trying to bump myself off.

⁴⁷ John. A. Bertolini, *The Case for Terence Rattigan, Playwright* (Vermont: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 132/133.

⁴⁸ In describing Hester as "an object of suicide knowledge" I refer to the ways in which she is repeatedly interpellated within the text by a variety of expert truth-forming institutions that claim interpretive jurisdiction over her behaviour (the law, the medical profession, literature, society).

Freddie You gave a fairly good imitation of it – (42/43)

This exchange between the two men encapsulates the delineations between male suicide (coded as active and unambiguous) and female suicide (which appears as enigmatic and, through its perceived passivity, open to allegations of frivolity). Paradoxically, while the very passivity of Hester's suicide attempt calls the veracity of her intentions into question, in doing so, it casts her in a far more pro-active and cynical light than a straightforward reading of deathly intent. This is because, as Olive Anderson's historical study of suicide and attempted suicide asserts, "[p]arasuicide is necessarily parasitic on a widely-diffused assumption that self-harming behaviour should be responded to with help, sympathy and remorse..."⁴⁹

Upon her discovery unconscious before the gas fire, Hester is transfigured into an object of suicide knowledge, constricted and reconstituted by a myriad of discourses vying for dominance over her identity. Thus, while the central crisis of the play may be, as Kenneth Tynan suggested in his review of the original production, "the failure of two people to agree on a definition of love",⁵⁰ the social and intellectual impetus derives from the failure of society to agree on a definition of suicide. In exposing and exploring the varied discursive practices imposed on Hester as a woman who has attempted suicide, Rattigan brings multiple forms of "suicide knowledge" into conflict. This mode of inquiry is brought into action from the play's opening tableau: on the floor of "a large and gloomy Victorian mansion, converted to flats after World War I ... [lies] Hester Collyer, with her head covered by a rug, very close to the unlit stove." (9) From the outset, Hester's prone body is placed within the architectural and spiritual confines of the Victorian mores, whose spectral influence have not yet entirely dissipated,

⁴⁹ Olive Anderson, "Prevention of Suicide and Parasuicide: What Can We Learn from History?," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 82, no.11 (1989): 642.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Sean O'Connor, *Straight Acting: Popular Gay Drama from Wilde to Rattigan*, 182.

though they have like the building that houses them, acquired “an air of dinginess, even of squalor, heightened by the fact that it has, like its immediate badly-blitzed neighbourhood, so obviously ‘come down in the world’.” Rattigan tacitly enjoins his audience to view this opening still-life through such a lens. Against the austere decayed Victorian backdrop, Hester’s prone body forms a tragic picture of the “fallen woman archetype”; suicide was, as Olive Anderson notes in her study of Victorian suicide “the inevitable final retribution for fornication or adultery.”⁵¹ Rattigan allows such a formulation to settle over the scene before its disruption by the intrusion of Hester’s neighbours and landlady. Hester, meanwhile, echoes back the clumsy reassuring platitudes of her neighbours and friends with enigmatic references to her status as Wicked Lady.

Rattigan, however, endeavours to chart the transformation of “wickedness” in post-war Britain from a concept rooted in Victorian misogyny and prurience to one of pragmatism. To this end, he mobilises the elderly landlady, Mrs Elton, as a mouthpiece for received wisdom and post-war conventionality. Mrs Elton explicitly invokes the concept of “wickedness” within moments of appearing onstage. Significantly, however, she does not speak within the context of sexual intemperance but in relation to the post-war imperative of frugality. Upon discovering the source of the gas escape throughout her property, she assumes that it is the result of carelessness on the part of her tenants: “Phew! It’s here all right. They must have left something on. Wicked waste—” (10) As the true situation unfolds itself to her, Mrs Elton deploys the notion of wickedness once more to rebuke Hester for her suicide attempt. “I can’t make you out. You’re not a wicked woman – and yet what you did last night was wicked – wicked and cruel.” (26) Ultimately, however, Mrs Elton lays the charge of wickedness upon society, itself. She

⁵¹ Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 199.

alludes heavily to the cause of Kurt Miller's being struck from the medical register (implying that he was discovered to be homosexual), and returns to her initial theme of wickedness as the wastage of society's resources. In the case of the erstwhile Dr Miller, the man was engaged in invaluable research into infantile paralysis prior to his social disgrace: "I think it's a wicked shame the way they've treated him. Imagine a man like that being a bookmaker's clerk. There's waste for you, if you like." (74)

This reconstruction of wickedness as the waste of social resources as opposed to the intimate betrayal of self or principle is at odds with Hester's own entrenched view and undermines the utility of attempted suicide as a sexual stratagem for her.

When pressed by her landlady to give an account of her motivations, Hester proves enigmatic, citing a demonic influence, though not necessarily in an ecclesiastical sense.

No. I didn't mean that kind of devil. Or is it the same kind? Anyway when you're between any kind of devil and the deep blue sea, the deep blue sea sometimes looks very inviting. It did last night. (26)

Hester's symbolic correlation of death with "the deep blue sea" is significant, particularly given her artistic talent for painting piers, however her lack of specificity as to the kind of "devil" that inspires her suicidal performance complicates the juxtaposition. Throughout the play, as shall be further explored, she is caught between two competing modes of expression: the lyrical eloquence of her upbringing, as the daughter of a clergyman and the wife to a judge, and the RAF vernacular of understatement and slang favoured by the plebeian social set of her lover and his drinking associates. Hester's invocation of the notion of "any kind of devil" to explain her suicidal state of mind further complicates the nature of her act, given that her choice terminology may be read in relation to the moralistic teachings and opprobrium of her

literary and religious identity or, conversely, the nonchalant vacuity of her current social milieu (within which such exclamations as “hell” and “damn all” are repeatedly shown as commonplace and meaningless). Compounding this ambiguity is the text’s undermining of the pillars of officialdom that might otherwise claim to offer a definitive diagnosis of Hester’s predicament. Through his depiction of troubled representatives of society’s pillars – a debarred physician, a repressed lawyer, and an adulterous clergyman’s daughter – Rattigan questions the authority of such structures to claim meaningful insight into the complexities of self-annihilation.

It is through the eyes of a fellow-object of heteropatriarchal opprobrium that Hester begins to construct a path of life for herself. Kurt Miller has been dismissed by several critics as a purely functional contrivance, existing purely to interrupt Hester’s final suicide attempt and to clumsily serve as a mouthpiece for the play’s overall theme of bitter resilience. B.A. Young suggests that Miller, with his euphemistically conveyed homosexuality, may be a leftover remnant from Rattigan’s rumoured earlier draft of the play, which explored the Kenneth Morgan story with greater frankness. Within the context of the present reading of the play, however, Miller appears as an integral fulcrum for Rattigan’s discourse analysis in that, as a disgraced holder of medical expertise, he constitutes both an object *and* subject of suicide knowledge. Drawing on Foucault’s writings, Ian Marsh analyses the historical impact of social and medical power-knowledge on the construction of suicide and notes the existence of a

‘multiplicity of force relations’ that have acted to form, over time, suicide and suicides as objects of knowledge, and related processes or modes of subjectivation. These ‘force relations’ are to be found in the ways in which the expert, authoritative knowledge comes to be produced and disseminated and in the practices that enable and sustain such

knowledge, and their effects can be mapped in terms of the objects, concepts and subjects produced in relation to such discursive practices.⁵²

As a repository of medical “authoritative knowledge”, Miller is initially deferred to as the definitive source of truth as to Hester’s physical and psychological condition, a fact which legitimates his use of physical violence to rouse her out of her drugged stupor and induces the other neighbours to demand of him his judgement on her likely fate. He occupies, however, an ambivalent position in relation to this power-knowledge. This is the result of his own status as an object of the truth effects of medical and social force relations, which, owing to his implied homosexual transgression in the past, has resulted in his literal and personal exile from these structures. His repeated repudiation of the title of “Doctor” is uttered in the same vein as Hester’s refusal to answer to the name of “Lady Collyer” and just as she must learn to exist outside the hegemonically endorsed symbolic order, so too must he, as Mrs Elton remarks.

Oh no. Not a hope, I should say, dear. You know what they’re like, and what he did wasn’t – well – the sort of thing people forgive very easily. Ordinary normal people, I mean. (75)

Miller thus has fallen victim to the discursive practices of psychological and sexual normativity that he has helped to disseminate; he is exiled from the nexus of power-knowledge and his symbolically appropriate redeployment as a bookmaker’s clerk, exposes his past expert pronouncements as educated fallibility. When asked to provide an expert opinion on the likelihood of Hester making a further suicide attempt, he renounces the mantle of authority.

I’m not a prophet either. In fact I make a fairly respectable living out of other people’s pretensions to prophecy. Still, if you want me to be a

⁵² Ian Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) p.

punter for once, I would say that she probably will try again, and try again very soon. (20)

In the absence of a stable “regime of truth” (Foucault) the erstwhile Doctor Miller is not alone in “making a punt” as to the cause, nature and likely outcome of Hester’s initial tableau; the normative vacuum is filled by the speculation and surmise of the peripheral players within the drama. The diagnosis of Hester thus becomes a public pursuit, positioning the play, as B.A. Young suggests in his reading, as a “whodunit”:

Hester. (Simply.) What should I do?

Miller. What makes you think I can tell you?

Hester. How near did you come to the gas fire, once? (76)

Stripped of his mantle of official authority, the doctor and his pronouncements are almost universally reviled. Hester initially considers him to be “horribly efficient” and remarks that “he looks too much like a blackmailer to be one.” Anne meanwhile considers him to be a “phoney”.

Literature provides the source of much of Hester’s suicidal anguish. Indeed, the first entrance of Freddie Page is presented as though he were an emanation from Hester’s literary imagination; he appears moments after Hester (alone for the first time since her failed suicide) picks up a book. As the stage direction suggestively indicates:

Hester sighs. Then she goes to the sofa, lies down on it (her back to the door), and picks up a book. After a moment she puts the book down on her lap and stares sightlessly ahead. The door opens and Freddie Page comes in. He is in his late twenties or early thirties, with that sort of boyish good looks that does not indicate age. He carries a suitcase and a bag of golf clubs. The latter he deposits in a corner with a rattle. It is plain that Hester has heard him come in, but she does not turn her

head. During the ensuing scene she never looks at him at all, until the moment indicated later. (36/37)

Page, as his name implies, is a *tabula rasa* upon which Hester inscribes her own literary fantasies and desires. He holds a fascination for Hester that is rooted in her literary imagination, and equally her expectations of how her suicide is to be received and of how she, as a “fallen woman” is to be treated by society are largely the products of her bookish outlook. In attempting to explain the nature of her passion to her husband, Hester draws inspiration from Shakespeare’s “Venus and Adonis,” implicitly disclosing more than she is aware about her attitude towards love and death. In the poem, Venus deploys multiple stratagems to keep the object of her desire from leaving her to go to the hunt. She enjoys temporary success when, in fainting in the guise of death, she tricks him into kissing her. The parallels here with Hester’s desperation to secure the lasting affection of Freddie Page are numerous and support the view of Hester’s suicide attempt as demonstrative as opposed to mortal in design. In Rattigan’s play, however the interplay of Venus and Adonis is replicated in the second movement, with the non-lethal “hunt” of the golf course (Hester declares herself to be “a golf widow”) and Hester’s performance of self-annihilating despair replaced with Freddie’s actual departure to near-certain death as a pilot and Hester’s second suicide attempt, this time derailed only by a chance intervention.

Ultimately, it is the ex-doctor who counsels Hester against ceding the authority of her own lived experience to the regimes of literary, medical and judicial truth. In this sense, he works to re-consign suicide to the realm of unspeakability by divorcing it from its societal connotations in favour of a purely individualistic philosophy of life and death. He urges her that:

To see yourself as the world sees you may be very brave, but it can also be very foolish. Why should you accept the world's view of you as a weak-willed neurotic – better dead than alive? What right have they to judge? To judge you they must have the capacity to feel as you feel. And who has? One in a thousand. And you alone know how unequal the battle has been that your will has had to fight.

In advising Hester to reclaim the sole prerogative of “knowing”, Miller dismantles the social construct of suicide and by extension the entire network of condemnatory literary, medical and legal structures that deterministically cast Hester as a self-annihilating fallen woman.

Thus, in *The Deep Blue Sea*, Rattigan explores the objectification of the suicidal subject by systems of law, literature, medicine and religion. Far from a gesture of defiance or self-determination, suicide, and particularly female suicide is presented as an act of unintended surrender where the subject is metamorphosed into a cautionary tale designed to bolster the normative processes of multiple branches of power-knowledge. Bertolini's identification of Hester as a post-war incarnation of Ovid's Echo encapsulates not merely the manner in which her internal crisis of passion and despair causes her to implicitly affirm through repetition the language of her inquisitors but also the manner in which her suicide attempt transfigures her inescapably into a passive reverberation of hegemonic discourse.

The myth of Echo and Narcissus also makes a symbolically significant post-war appearance in Elizabeth Taylor's novel, *A Wreath of Roses*. Taylor's novel explores the multi-faceted role of women in the legitimation and propagation of male fantasies of violence and destruction. In the spheres of romance, art and domestic duty, the hegemonic construction of femininity is interrogated and implicated in militaristic

ideologies. The central narrative thread follows Camilla Hill, a prim and repressed secretary at a girl's boarding school, who, during a holiday to the countryside, forms an intense bond with a man she believes to be processing an unspeakable war trauma. As the pair abstractedly ruminate on the developmental consequences of having an emotionally starved childhood, Camilla contemplates her paramour, the enigmatic Richard Elton, and wonders if he himself had "spent his life studying his own reflection in a pool? Absorbed in himself until no one else was any good? No longer seen, even; but crowded out by his own image." (75/76) In recognising the Narcissus-like self-absorption of her magnetic love-object, Camilla fails to comprehend her own role within the mythical paradigm as a helpless echoer of Elton's dangerous self-imaginings.

Unbeknown to Camilla, Richard is in fact a homicidal psychopath pursued by the law, and the supposed reflection into which he pours his attention is an elaborate fabrication woven from popular wartime culture mixed with self-pitying revenge fantasies. Focusing intently and unquestioningly on Richard's falsely-mirrored self, Camilla fails to register her own transformation into the vehicle of an ersatz history. She neglects to observe the correlation between his Narcissus and her own transformation into the false-mirror/pool that legitimates and encourages his delusions, despite her uneasy observation that "he stares at me so." (76) In contrast to Hester Collyer who exists as an Echo of society's self-affirming discourses of suicide knowledge, Camilla proves enthusiastically compliant in serving as the endorsing echo of Richard's false mythos that will ultimately culminate in the latter's suicide. Her role within this false history of war is to serve as an amenable canvass upon which the sadistic psychopath may inscribe and reshape his violent past into a format that is legible and legitimated within the memorialising structures of the post-war and, in doing so, permit the teller to rationalise his own death. As Elton writes in his diary:

I am closer to her with words than I ever was with loving anybody, or hurting them, because her mind unlocks my mind ... For I think God has sent her to me to help me to die, to give me a chance ... And because she is the last thing that will ever happen to me, it shall be different from all that went before. (78)

Through her romantic credulity Camilla becomes a complicit vehicle for the transmission of a violent mythos that can only beget yet more violence. As I intimated with this chapter's opening quotation from Storm Jameson, reservations over the increasing role of women in the public sphere were not confined to reactionary circles but extended to include a discomfort with feminine collaboration in the patriarchal structures that produced the chaotic violence and militarism of history. Jameson retrospectively outlines the progressive feminist's dilemma during the war in her autobiography, as a choice between:

On the one side the idea of the Absolute State, with its insistence on total loyalty to the words and gestures of authority, its belief in the moral beauty of war ... On the other all that was still hidden in the hard green seed of a democracy which allowed me freedom to write and other women freedom to live starved lives on the dole.⁵³

As an active member of the communist party, herself, Elizabeth Taylor appears to rehearse many of these concerns over the female accommodation and facilitation of militaristic masculinist discourses, not only in her representation of Camilla's macabre bond with the serial killer, Richard Elton, but through the ways her friends, Frances (the celebrated artist) and Liz (the new mother and vicar's wife) submit within their own spheres to bolstering the power of such ideologies.

⁵³ Storm Jameson, *Journey from the North Volume 1* (London: Collins, 1969), 293.

Taylor's novel is bookended by two almost identical acts of male suicide, opening with the death of an unidentified "shabby man" at a railway station and concluding in a similar fashion with the killer, Richard Elton, leaping onto the tracks. Despite this bordering of the text with an intimation of cyclical patterns of male self-destruction, the body of the narrative primarily focuses on the position of women within this paradigm. Taylor examines the ways in which women are often unwitting and unwilling collaborators in the nationalistic and militaristic myths that generate war and violence. Her novel shares Storm Jameson's concern with the ways in which both traditional modes of femininity and the figure of the supposedly emancipated "mobile woman" are conscripted into discourses that make brutality and violence appear palatable, even beautiful.

The following reading of *A Wreath of Roses* recognises Taylor as a writer inflected by the modernist tradition – a quality of her work that was largely neglected during her writing career, in part because of her isolation from the London literary scene and the perception of her as a bourgeois writer for women's magazines.⁵⁴ Contemporary critical response to *A Wreath of Roses* has tended to focus on its examination of the unreliable dynamics of memory within a post-war setting. Victoria Stewart compares Richard Elton's fabricated war history to the broader post-war literary trope of the imposter-narrative. Stewart writes that

laying claim to a false past, usually portrayed in these texts as a form of self-aggrandisement, can also be a means of attempting to fit oneself into

⁵⁴ Indeed, despite attracting the support and admiration of Elizabeth Bowen, Taylor was an object of scorn and cruel barbs throughout the late 1940s and 1950s from a group of fellow female novelists described by the critic Robert Liddell as "The Lady Novelists Anti-Elizabeth League". Such antagonistic figures included Kate O'Brien, Pamela Hansford Johnson, Stevie Smith and Olivia Manning, who, in 1952, not only excoriated Taylor's previous two novels for their alleged lack of substance, but mocked her decision to send her children to boarding school, whereas "a woman like Betty Miller, whose children are at day schools, can write only by the most jealous guarding of her very limited spare time." In Olivia Manning, "The Facile Feminine Pen," *Harper's Bazaar (UK)*, August 1952.

the prevalent discourses of war, even if in actuality one has been excluded from them. On a narrative level, it can also be a way through which the power of such discourses can be interrogated. What status does a 'true' war story have if an invented one seems equally credible and has equal impact?⁵⁵

Such a reading implies that through the figure of Elton, Taylor interrogates the integrity of the mythos of war by confronting it with a figure of localised peace-time violence. The impossibility of maintaining the boundary between war and post-war is brought into focus by the novel's treatment of homecomings, both the false homecoming of Richard Elton, who assumes a past he never lived, and the notional homecoming of the film director, Morland Beddoes, who is to meet for the first time a woman he has only ever known through written correspondence from his time as a prisoner of war. As the novel progresses, however, this stabilising concept of home is revealed to be a chimera whose falseness, once established, plunges the homecoming subject into a crisis of anomie and alienation. Far from a refuge from war's discourses, the domestic space as imagined within the text is a seedbed of reactionary militarism. Despite its idyllic pastoralism, Frances' cottage with its upside-down "Welcome" mat (whose hospitable greeting is significantly legible only to those already past the threshold) and army of cacti is tainted by its complicity within this framework. Although the space is ostensibly a haven of female independence and artistry, offering refuge and respite to the three women, it is financially sustained through Frances' perpetuation and commodification of a sentimental insularity through her painting of "an English sadness" that neither confronts nor challenges. Frances' large and obstreperous dog,

⁵⁵ Victoria Stewart, *Narratives of Memory: British Writing of the 1940s* (London: Palgrave, 2006), 153.

ominously named Hotchkiss after the large-scale armaments manufacturer, is domesticated in theory yet proves impossible for any of the women to control.

Taylor took the initial inspiration for her novel and the character of Richard Elton from the lurid real-life case of the murderer and sexual sadist, Neville Heath. In June 1946, Heath sexually assaulted and murdered two young women. His trial and hanging proved a *cause célèbre* of the post-war, intensifying public anxieties concerning the uncontrollable violent appetites of brutalised returning soldiers. The fact that Heath was also discovered to have posed as a war hero, despite having in reality been court-martialled three times also represented a troubling blow to the integrity of military honours. In attempting to commit the circumstances of Heath's crimes and deceptions to fiction, Taylor joins a broader literary trend towards imposter narratives, which serve to destabilise the memories of war. Beaman notes that rather than following her original intention in attempting to unravel the psychology of the killer through her novel, Taylor instead "tries to understand how a woman who might have encountered [Heath] at that time could have allowed herself to trust him."⁵⁶

While Beaman here articulates the crux of Taylor's narrative as one of female complicity in structures of masculinist violence, the scale of the novel's ambition is far broader, than this observation immediately suggests. *A Wreath of Roses* is a novel of post-war anomie that explores the gendered consequences of adhering obdurately to a manifestly false set of norms and principles. These norms of love, motherhood and sexuality which Taylor locates chiefly within the domestic sphere may produce catastrophic consequences, particularly when they are uprooted and destabilised

⁵⁶ Nicola Beaman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor* (London: Persephone Books, 2009), 197. Taylor abandoned her original design upon realising that Heath's violent psychopathy had not been the result of wartime trauma but had originated in childhood; she declared that it "wouldn't be interesting to watch the growth of a tiny sadist into a full-grown one. It would only be a matter of size, not a slow transformation from one thing into another." (197/198)

through socio-political upheaval. As the three women in the text negotiate their post-war roles, either as beneficiaries of an increased array of sexual and professional possibilities or upholders of traditional modes of home-making, they forced to recognize and confront not only the violence of the world, but their relation to it.⁵⁷ Moreover, it is a novel that juxtaposes nostalgia with violence while exploring the power each entity has to eclipse the other. In this regard, Taylor considered the novel to be her “personal statement about life, that all beauty is pathetic, that writing is like Ophelia handing out flowers, that horror lies under every leaf”.⁵⁸ The defeatism and anxiety implied in this sentiment infuses much of the novel, as well as the act of creation itself, as art is interrogated for its role in concealing life’s violent horror.

For a writer traditionally aligned with middlebrow women’s fiction, such a stark pursuit of relentlessly morbid sensibilities appears as a radical departure. Indeed, in 1947, Taylor voiced her own misgivings about the project, writing:

I am worried about my book. I have turned my back on all that people liked in my other novels – the light thrown on little daily situations (for thus they write to me) and there is nothing funny, no wit, no warmth, no children, no irony, no *perceptiveness*. It is *deadly serious*. Horribly sad. Cold. Everyone will hate it. It is also about people’s bodies. They will feel insulted. The people in it are not pleasant consistently. The unpleasant are often *right*. I have come out of my range – a great mistake– and have swept in violence, brutality, passion, religion, all the things that had been better left out.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Even Liz, a determined figure of maternal self-abnegation, is disturbed by the thought that her identity as a mother amounts to no more than the production of another generation to be slaughtered in war: “‘Suppose there is a war!’ she thought. ‘Suppose that I bring him up to be civilised and sensitive and unsuspecting, and all that changes...’” (143)

⁵⁸ Letter 515 to Ray Russell, April 1948, quoted in Nicola Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*, 211.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 202.

Taylor does not merely grant admittance to these “better left out” elements of darkness; her novel seeks to uncover the consequences, both private and public, of rigorously and deliberately ignoring such violent truths. The overarching symbolism of the novel, tied to the titular *Wreath of Roses* serves as a cautious reconciliation of the opposing elements of beauty and decay. The morality of such a marriage of forces and the ethics of deploying beauty to mitigate the fear and pessimism of existence are central to the philosophical struggle of one of the three protagonists. Frances, the elderly painter nearing the end of her career, seeks to atone for her lifetime’s work as an agent of the sentimental objectification of female youth and English pastoralism through her painting. She resolves therefore in her final opus to welcome the existential pain and suffering she has kept at bay for so long, crafting a disturbing symbolic portrait of female suicidality:

She took the picture roughly in her hands, the paint tacky against her palms ... ‘a sort of high-pitched silliness, a terrible silliness.’ She stared down at the creamy-pink and yellow picture, half a mirror with reflected hands lifting a wreath of roses, a flash of golden hair. ‘It is like Ophelia handing out her flowers,’ she thought. ‘The last terrible gesture but one.’
(195)

The “but one” upon which Frances inwardly ruminates refers, of course, to Ophelia’s suicide immediately following her act of floral distribution and indeed the novel’s overarching symbolic association of floral imagery with an outmoded and self-thwarting type of femininity largely emanates from Frances’ disappointment and despair. The novel’s title, as implied in the epigraph, is derived from a passage from Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931). The excerpt in question is focalised through the

character of Rhoda, a disaffected and alienated character who is revealed by the novel's close to have committed suicide. The epigraph reads:

So terrible was life that I held up shade after shade. Look at life through this, look at life through that, let there be rose leaves, let there be vine leaves – I covered the whole street, Oxford Street, Piccadilly Circus, with the blaze and ripple of my mind, with vine leaves and rose leaves.⁶⁰

For Rhoda, as for several of the characters in *A Wreath of Roses*, floral imagery connotes the imaginative reserves that are deployed to make palatable life's ennui and travails and thereby keep suicidal ideations at bay. Over the course of the novel, Camilla and Frances are both compelled to overcome these illusory consolations and, as Helen Dunmore writes in her introduction to the novel, delve “deep into the self-deceptions that grow up in order to soften life, and end up choking it like so many weeds.” (xiii)

In the case of Frances, the recognition that she has devoted life and career to this disingenuous aesthetic of “high pitched silliness” leaves her crippled by suicidal remorse. She awakens daily to the sight of her peeling wallpaper decorated with moss-roses and is filled with self-reproach:

For was I not guilty of making ugliness charming? An English sadness like a veil over all I painted, until it became ladylike and nostalgic, governess, utterly lacking in ferocity, brutality, violence. Whereas in the centre of the earth, in the heart of life, in the core of even everyday things is there not violence, with flames wheeling, turmoil, pain, chaos?
(34)

⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2015.

Floral imagery does not merely connote the false nostalgia that makes a return to pre-war social structures seem desirable, rather, it is implicated in a broader network of deceptions that shape the novel's representations of time and space. Within the text, the discarding of floral beauty is equated with the abandonment of those delusions that make life bearable, an act which is both liberating and dangerous. While Frances is left drained and morbid by her Ophelia-like completion of the floral portrait, Camilla's desecration of a bouquet gathered by Liz and Morland late in the novel anticipates her subsequent coming to consciousness of the dangerous brutality concealed beneath her lover's charming overtures. The renunciation of floral beauty is therefore an extrication of oneself from idealised visions of reality both past and present.

Flowers are, moreover, intimately connected with the sensations of memory and time. Camilla's annual delight in returning to Frances' cottage is aligned with an idyllic pastoral scene wherein "cows moved deep in buttercups, hedges were dense and creamy with elderflower and cow parsley." (6) Like Rattigan, Taylor reveals herself, through the relationship between Camilla and Richard, to be preoccupied with the insurmountable challenges of realigning the selfhood of the pre-war with that of the post-war and the self-destructive anomie that arises from such fractured identities.

Richard Elton, like Freddie Page is a living anachronism entombed in a 1940s zeitgeist that imbues him with a fictitious quality and transforms him into an "homme fatale."

Unlike Hester Collyer, however, Camilla Hill is presented as a figure of frigid reserve, embittered by her belated realization that she has squandered the opportunities for sexual and emotional release presented by the war years and constricted by her own concessions to conformity. As Liz and Frances tend to their respective offices of motherhood and artistry, Camilla laments her own comparative inconsequentiality. She is saddled with an inescapable regret, "a fear of being left out inspired her, a feeling that

life was enriching everyone but herself, that education had taken the place of experience and conversation the place of action.” (44) As a woman, she is tormented by a simultaneous desire to repudiate the pre-war norms of domesticity and motherhood, yet finds herself bewitched by the primal certainties carried in the archaic books of female deportment that litter Frances’ house. Half contemptuous, yet half yearning for the stability of identity these texts represent, she is entranced by their sacrificial and self-annihilating presentation of the marital ritual and recites to Liz from an old volume belonging to Frances’ mother entitled *The Solemnity of Wedlock*:

‘For seldom, we fear, does the bride, half-smiling, half-weeping beneath her crown of orange blossoms, appreciate the character of the sacrifice she has made. Too often does she wake up with a sudden surprise to the awful breadth and depth of the chasm that lies between her wifhood and her maidenhood, the *now* and the *then* ...’ (33)

Within the symbolic language of the text, the matrimonial crown of orange blossoms belies a wreath of roses, signalling a surrender to the forces of death and violence, a deceit that Camilla is only alerted to once she has been directly traumatised by life’s brutality.

It is not until her traumatic experience of witnessing a suicide at a railway station that Camilla is uprooted from her placid assumptions about the universe and her place within it. As with Woolf’s *Clarissa Dalloway*, Taylor’s female protagonist is awakened to the ersatz standards and structures that govern her existence through a distant encounter with the suicide of a male stranger. Camilla experiences this “happening” (3) as an ongoing corporeal, temporal and sexual awakening which plunges her into existential crisis. Her hitherto stable selfhood is shattered by the

intrusion of the unknown “shabby man” as his final self-annihilating act, confronts her with the realm of the in-articulable. As Jaworski writes:

suicide can be understood as being caught within a life-death nexus – a nexus that is contextual, relational and sometimes ambiguous. Death and life cannot be easily compartmentalised and clinicised. One speaks to the other, each depending on the other for its meaningfulness in complicated and confusing ways – ways that may not always provide determinate ‘truths’ and answers.⁶¹

Taylor manifests this cosmic disturbance initially as a rupture in the temporal order of reality. The uncannily mirrored male suicides that begin and end the novel serve to highlight the dynamics of memory and repetition that inform the novel’s representation of its heroine’s relationship to history. This fractured relationship may be usefully understood through the lens of Julia Kristeva’s writings on cyclical (female) time versus monumental (male) time.⁶² Kristeva defines cyclical women’s time in opposition to the historical linearity of men’s time. Taylor’s novel opens in the present tense with Camilla appearing to inhabit a cyclical understanding of time rooted in seasonal rhythms and routines of departure and return, while occupying a venue officially dictated by the linear progression of time: a railway station. In the opening scene, of the novel, Camilla is sunk in a time-less mood as she prepares to participate in an annual tradition of visiting old friends in the country.

Afternoons seem unending on branch-line stations in England in summer time. The spiked shelter prints an unmoving shadow on the platform, geraniums blaze, whitewashed stones assault the eye. Such trains as

⁶¹ Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide*, 14.

⁶² See Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” *Signs* 7, no.1 (1981).

come only add to the air of fantasy, to the idea of the scene being symbolic, or encountered at one level while suggesting another even more alienating. (1)

The functional nature of the railway station as a site of arrivals and departures (or even, on its immediate symbolic level, as a place of appointed entrances and exits, births and deaths) is initially obscured from Camilla's mind. It is not until the violent intercession of the shabby man that the scene shifts and time is rapidly compressed; in contrast with the lingering expansiveness of the previous narration, the suicide is conveyed in a single sentence:

All at once, the man on the footbridge swung himself up on the parapet and, just as Camilla was putting out her arms in a ridiculous gesture as if to stop him, he clumsily jumped, a sprawling jump, an ill-devised death, since he fell wide of the express train. (3)

For Camilla, the incident is described as a desecration of time; it "broke the afternoon in two. The feeling of eternity vanished. What had been timeless and silent became chaotic and disorganised". (3) The pathetic death of the shabby man, whose corpse becomes an object of curiosity for all those surrounding, awakens Camilla to the suicidal fictitiousness of her previous self-conceptualisation in time. The existential horror the ordeal awakens in her relates to her ruptured vision of cyclical time; she can no longer perceive all railway stations as identical and even though the next stop appears the same as the previous one "as if they had completed a circle" (5), she is no longer capable of entertaining such perceptions, finding herself newly fixed in a morbid linearity of outlook:

To her shocked mind, it seemed that the death she had witnessed was not to be so easily left behind as the train moved forward; but that it would

go along with her. She experienced a moment of fear and recoil, introduced by that happening, but related to the future as well. (3)

As the novel progresses, Camilla finds herself increasingly torn between monumental, and cyclical, a disorientation that leaves her vulnerable and susceptible to the illusory glamour and false narratives of Elton. In order to illustrate Camilla's disrupted position in relation to this symbolic order, it is once again useful to draw upon a Kristevan view of femininity and the symbolic. *A Wreath of Roses* explores three distinct archetypal female dispositions in relation to the phallogocentric symbolic. The three women at the centre of Taylor's novel are positioned as either acolytes of the paternalistic structures of language and the symbolic or as silently incarnate devotees of the maternal. Liz, a new mother and wife to a vicar, thoroughly and uncomplicatedly aligns with the maternal, rejecting both language and the paternal. The fourth chapter opens with an image of her languidly unmoored from language. In contrast with Camilla who physically and intellectually anchors herself to written text, she lazes under a mulberry tree allowing the fragments of a letter she had intended to write to her husband be carried off by the wind as she drifts off to sleep. (52) Later in the chapter, she refuses to present prizes in her capacity as vicar's wife, declaring that "women don't make speeches." (56) In contrast with Liz's repudiation of language, Camilla and Frances occupy a more ambivalent territory in relation to the paternal symbolic order. Camilla confides to Richard her early submission to the ratio-centric patriarchy of her childhood home,

'A dark Victorian house, muffled rooms, too many books. My brothers walking up and down *discussing*. Any subject, so long as it came nowhere near their hearts, or emotion or reality. Their dry voices, their pale faces; a man's world. They were all older than me. None of them

married. I sat there as a child, reading a book, conforming exactly to their idea of what a little girl should be; precocious, sedate, trying to look like Alice in Wonderland. I accepted it all, their voices, the cerebral atmosphere; though I was being choked by it ...' (74)

Her selfhood is predicated on a denial of the corporeal, as indicated by the binary opposition she draws between herself and the first-glimpsed Richard Elton, whose bearing depicts

a kind of man who could never have any part in her life, whose existence could not touch hers, which was thoughtful rather than active and counted its values in a different way. (2)

For Frances, meanwhile, as an artist who has forged a career as the purveyor of such floral fictions, the guilt at having concealed the insupportability of life comes as a crushing defeat in her old age. Her final painting, which is to serve by way of atonement for her crime of eliding the violent and chaotic nature of the world sets her in opposition to her wartime admirer, Morland Beddoes. Niamh Baker accuses Beddoes of doing “what many male critics have done to women artists: tried to restrict them to their femininity.”⁶³ This portrait is of a woman ultimately renouncing the delusions of life and embracing the lonely abyss. The text is divided between the individuals who gather, arrange and surround themselves with flowers (young Frances, Liz) and those who desecrate and repudiate them (Camilla). The double-meaning of the notion of de-flowering is additionally significant in this regard since it is Camilla’s yearning for sexual initiation that propels her towards a figure of violence and death.

⁶³ Niamh Baker, *Happily Ever After?: Women’s Fiction in Postwar Britain 1945–60* (USA: Macmillan Education, 1989), 152.

Taylor acknowledges that the separateness of these gendered spheres has been blurred throughout the war years. As N.H. Reeve notes, Camilla's traumatic witnessing produces an array of "uncanny and disconcerting effects which take away the calming powers of repetition just as Camilla was most in search of them" (161). In the immediate aftermath of the suicide which precipitates their encounter, Camilla and Richard are distinguished by their varied reactions to the suicide. While Richard is capable of naming the experience as "upsetting", Camilla shrinks from confining the experience within the realm of linguistic approximation:

‘Upsetting!’ he said suddenly, his eyes upon her as he wiped his palms on a silk handkerchief. ‘Something more than upsetting,’ she rebuked him, and turned again to the unrolling landscape, but he saw tears under her lashes as she looked away.’ (4).

Camilla's rebuke is rendered all the more uncanny when, at the end of the first chapter the exchange is echoed almost verbatim between her and Liz. This time it is Camilla, who has apparently unwittingly entered into Elton's linguistic mind-frame by taking on the role of naming and truth-seeking:

‘An awful thing happened where I was waiting to change trains, some poor little man threw himself in front of the express, or rather bungled it and fell on the lines at the side; died when they picked him up. I wonder why?’ she suddenly asked herself aloud... ‘Upsetting!’ ‘Something more than upsetting, I should say,’ Liz observed. But then there was a complicated business of climbing a stile and getting Hotchkiss underneath. When they talked again, it was about other things. (12)

Taylor uses this echoing effect to highlight the archetypal female reflexive response as “something more” than that which may be contained by language. Camilla is driven

from her initial response of mute incomprehension to wondering “why” such violence exists and admitting a latent fascination with death that she unknowingly shares with the serial murderer. Camilla’s adoption of Elton’s turn of phrase, however, signals a degree of ambivalence within her psyche and an acceptance of the stranger’s propensity to fashion reality out of language. By serving as a willing audience to Elton’s subsequent lies and self-delusions, she herself takes on the titular role of the wreath of roses, obscuring from herself the violence of the world in a manner that carries her close to death.

*

Allport, noting the tenfold increase in divorces between the beginning of the war and 1946, observes that the close of the war produced a paradoxical scenario whereby “at its greatest moment of reunion the family seemed to be on the point of collapse.”⁶⁴ This chapter has put forth the case that the remodelling of gender norms throughout the 1940s and propagandistic efforts to preserve a pre-war vision of family life are inextricable within literary and cultural discourses from the framing of suicide as a phenomenon arising out of a condition of anomie. Indeed, such an alignment between the construction of suicide and patriarchal norms can be seen as ingrained within the very conceptual identity of suicide, as Jaworski argues. The writings of Taylor, Rattigan and Whipple engage with and expose the alignment between 1940s discourses of gender normativity and the social construction of suicide. The widespread depiction of female madness and suicide as natural hazards brought on by wartime disruptions of gender norms is interrogated in Rattigan’s *The Deep Blue Sea* while Dorothy Whipple’s

⁶⁴ Alan Allport, *Demobbed*, 11.

They Were Sisters serves as an exemplary cautionary portrait of a home in which gender norms are upended with catastrophic consequences for the woman. For Elizabeth Taylor, a writer suspended between literary modernist and popular traditions, suicidality is implicated in the process of creation and is revealed to be both an inevitable outcome of female transgression and a necessary mode of consciousness for the female artist to enter in order to liberate her work from patriarchal structures. Thus, this chapter has outlined the ways in which suicide and feminine adulteration are conjoined within the imagination of 1940s literature in a manner that transcends political tradition. Whether the female subject is perceived as betraying hearth and home through her public labour or violating her own gendered interests in supporting an oppressive status quo through that same war work, the anxieties and conflicted sensibilities that emerge from such impasses are frequently conveyed through a cultural language that reverts to the suicide trope.

Conclusion:

The Tamed God?

The war they think is war is suicide, and those that go and get skilled in war should be put in clink for attempted suicide because that's the feeling in blokes' minds when they rush to join up or let themselves be called up. I know, because I've thought how good it would be sometimes to do myself in and the easiest way to do it, it occurred to me, was to hope for a big war so's I could join up and get killed.¹

–Alan Sillitoe (1959)

Read with the power of hindsight, Alan Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959) becomes a Janus-faced anatomisation of the relationship between suicide and selfhood in a post-war Britain where the theme of self-slaughter augurs an unpromising future and punctures pious mythologies of the past. In the title short story of the collection Colin Smith, a talented athlete and borstal internee, ultimately refuses to surrender his body to the post-war welfare state's biopolitical redemption narrative by deliberately losing an important race against a rival reformatory. Realising that the elation he once felt in long-distance running has been appropriated and processed into political capital by an alienating establishment, embodied in the borstal's governor, a "pot-bellied pop-eye bastard" with "lily white workless hands," the boy reclaims a modicum of bodily autonomy in the only manner available to him – a refusal to cross

¹ Alan Sillitoe, "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," in *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (Chicago: Signet, 1959), 15. All subsequent in-text references are from this edition.

the finish line. This pyrrhic victory over a sanctimonious elite garners no prize for Smith but the personal satisfaction of believing he has maintained a personal ethic of authenticity in resistance to the governor's patronising espousal of a petty bourgeois dream of success:

Honesty. Be honest. It's like saying: Be dead like me and then you'll have no more pain of leaving your nice slummy house for Borstal or prison. Be honest and settle down in a cosy six pounds a week job. (13)

Smith's is an act of self-sabotage that, in Denny's words, exudes "almost a Christlike passion, for a tragically deluded society suicidally hostile to life".² While this thesis has committed to focusing on literary suicide in its literal and concrete manifestations (largely excluding cases that may be read as spiritual or symbolic suicides), it is nonetheless interesting to read Smith's defiant act of bodily reclamation within the context of his indictment of the preceding wartime generation, quoted in this chapter's epigraph. Sillitoe here deploys the concept of suicide to interrogate the legacy of the Second World War and to resurrect 1940s' anxieties of identity and autonomy. In particular, Smith's narration harnesses the fear (discussed in Chapter 3) that in securing victory over the threat of Nazi Germany, Britain had by necessity absorbed into its identity the germ of fascism. Beneath the piety and progressivism of the welfare state, Smith observes the authoritarian face of class warfare; his supposed liberty in being permitted to run unaccompanied through the glades surrounding the reformatory is a charade, tightly monitored by sentries "watching out over the drives and fields like German generals from the tops of tanks". (8) The policeman who arrested him is meanwhile recalled as being "like Hitler in the face, right down to the paint-brush tash, except that being six-foot tall made him seem worse". (27) Referring to the 1962 film

²N. Denny, "The Achievement of the Long-Distance Runner," *Theoria*, no.24 (1965): 10.

adaptation, Ferrell suggests that in refusing to cross the finish line and thwarting his opportunity for progression within the social system he inhabits, Smith “undermines the labyrinthine rules and regulations, the daily degradation and obsequiousness, the phony ideologies of competitive loyalty to the institution and the state”.³ His vehement repudiation of “competitive loyalty” takes the form of a rejection of the myth of the 1940s as a period of collective triumph and national solidarity; instead he sees only fragmented individual acts of self-annihilation, no different in substance from that which is considered criminal in peacetime. Indeed, it is significant that in his derisive alignment of war with criminality, he identifies suicide (as opposed to murder) as the war’s defining symbolic transgression. In so doing, he probes the specific form of self-annihilating fantasy that shaped and expressed individual and collective expressions of desire during the 1940s, using the idiosyncratic imaginative language of the period to mount his generational critique. The denunciation of war as a hypocritical front for the self-annihilating desires of those who, in Smith’s view, are already “dead” in every meaningful sense of the word makes way for a personalised conceptualisation of war as the eternal conflict between “‘them’ and ‘us’”.

The preceding chapters have shown how the bifurcation of wartime experience into public politics and private desire produced a doubled understanding of suicide as an act to be read differently in accordance with the cultural and political inscriptions imposed upon the body. Sillitoe’s story, however, demonstrates that this dualism is also replicated within a disillusioned subsequent generation’s conceptualisation of war. While Sillitoe’s Smith recognises the suicidality endemic in the political establishment’s insistent valorisation of military sacrifice, he is more circumspect in

³ Jeff Ferrell, “Against the Law: Anarchist Criminology,” *Social Anarchism* 25 (1998), accessed 15 July 2018, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/all/en/display/127>.

articulating the self-annihilating quality of his own private war against the punitive structures of the post-war state. The label of suicide is thus deployed as a framework through which militaristic violence is robbed of its generative aura and reduced to the level of delinquency. It is unclear, however, whether Smith's dismissive attitude towards official narratives of enchanted militaristic violence and sacrifice also includes an earnest belief that *de facto* suicides "should be put in the clink." Published two years before the 1961 Suicide Act decriminalised the act of suicide in England and Wales,⁴ the collection features another story in which the question of self-annihilation precipitates an unveiling of the coercive power of the welfare state. "On Saturday Afternoon" relates through the eyes of a young boy the attempted suicide of a middle-aged man and his apprehension and arrest by the police. Here the social and legal prohibition on suicide serves to support a vision of a post-war Britain in thrall to the underlying principles of fascist totalitarianism. The man's attempt to hang himself is foiled by his own ineptitude in affixing the rope to a flimsy light fitting, but his arrest is the result of an officious surveillance culture abetted by strangers and neighbours. In multiple senses, Sillitoe presents this outcome, where, as the young boy muses "a poor bloke can't even hang himself these days" as the outcome of an oppressive system of class enslavement. Confronting the police officer with the plea "it's my life, ain't it", the suicidal man receives the response, "you might think so ... but it ain't". (103) As Lang notes, this episode illustrates that "not only the possessions and labour of the working classes are controlled by the moneyed and powerful members of society, but even their very bodies are not their own."⁵ Suicide functions within the text as a rebuke

⁴ Northern Ireland adopted the terms of the act in 1966, while the change had no impact in Scotland where suicide had never been a criminal offence.

⁵ James M. Lang, "Redefining Englishness: British Short Fiction from 1945 to the Present," in *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, eds. Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 287.

to the promise of the welfare state; despite its provision of accessible healthcare and housing, the underlying regulation of working class bodies converts these boons into instruments of control. The man's undignified death (thwarted in the first instance by the flimsy construction of the light fitting to which he attached the hangman's noose, and finally accomplished by throwing himself out the upper storey window of the hospital into which he was forcibly committed) has the sole outcome of inspiring the young boy witness with a willingness to comply.

The black coal-bag locked inside you, and the black look it puts on your face, doesn't mean you're going to stain yourself up or sling yourself under a double-decker or cut your throat with a sardine-tin or put your head in the gas-oven or drop your rotten sack-bag of a body on to a railway line, because when you're feeling that black you can't even move from your chair. (104)

In both stories suicide figures as the quintessential honest act, one that is despised by the self-congratulatory authoritarians of the welfare capitalist system and feared by the petit bourgeoisie. Thus, if in the literature of the 1940s, suicide exists as a trope through which wartime experience is mediated and rendered articulable, for the subsequent generation of the late 1950s, it serves as a means of critiquing the legacy and promises of that seminal period. Indeed the centrality of class conflict to the representations of suicide in 1950s British literature (in texts such as L.P. Hartley's *The Go Between* (1953)) furthers the intimation of Sillitoe's Smith that the Second World War is to be viewed as of secondary importance to the ongoing war between "us" and "them" – a war whose continuation and interminable progression is rendered articulable via similar suicidal modes of literary expression.

While 1940s literary suicide emphasised its own performative dimensions through its exposure of the frames of referentiality through which the suicidal body was made readable, the 1950s increasingly emphasised suicide as a renunciation of performance altogether, particularly with regard to matters of sexuality (as is in evidence in works such as Mary Renault's *The Charioteer* (1953) and Rodney Garland's *The Heart in Exile* (1953))⁶ and family (in Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958)).⁷

As Kenneth O. Morgan writes, the decades that followed the Second World War produced, and continue to produce, a wide array of diagnoses of the course of modern British history. Almost all of them, in some sense, originated from perceptions of the Second World War and what it was supposed to have meant for modern Britain.⁸

The role of the suicidal body as a product of 1940s discourses within this diagnostic process has hitherto been under-examined. I am hopeful that the insights garnered within this thesis may spur a more far-reaching consideration of how the suicidal imagination of this pathologically mythologised decade has influenced the discursive formations of subsequent social developments. This is chief among several ways in which this research aspires to engage with current developing fields of academic

⁶ Renault's novel revives the zone of uncertainty between egoistic and altruistic modes of suicide (discussed in my second chapter) when the fighter pilot Bim refuses to bail out of the cockpit of his plane after it is shot down, dying in a presumable suicide, as Ferrebe writes, "due to the despair engendered by his exhaustingly performative existence." In Alice Ferrebe, *Literature of the 1950s: Good Brave Causes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 118.

⁷ Prior to the play's substantial cutting and revision by Joan Littlewood, Delaney's play originally contained repeated and vividly articulated references to suicide and infanticide (as the protagonist asserts she would rather end her life than give birth). The original draft also ended with the suicide of Geof, the surrogate father of the teenage Jo's baby but was subsequently rewritten to more ambiguous effect. See Louise Kimpton Nye, "Looking at the original script for *A Taste of Honey*," September 7, 2017, accessed July 14, 2016, <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/looking-at-the-original-script-for-a-taste-of-honey>.

⁸ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Britain Since 1945: The People's Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

enquiry. Before speculating as to how other such expanded analyses might unfold, it is important to reconsider the essential components of this study, its aims and its development.

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The objective of this research has been to discern what (if any) patterns of meaning might exist across the range of suicidal representations in 1940s British literature. From early on in the process it was evident that suicide does not typically figure merely as a thematic endpoint in the writing of this period, rather it functions as a portal through which a multitude of themes may be accessed and commented on. In the literary construction of suicide can be detected the decade's distinctive architecture of grief and anticipation, its zones of transgression and rectitude and a myriad of concerns relating to the public and private dilemmas of war and its aftermath. I have endeavoured to shed light on as many of these areas as possible, exploiting the opportunities afforded by my chosen methodology as well as, on occasion, making the best of certain restrictions. It is worth, at this point, reassessing the key pillars of my approach to consider what additional lines of inquiry might be opened up in the future through the adoption of alternative strategies.

While not always integral to the intellectual fabric of my textual analyses, Durkheim's four typologies of suicide provided the external scaffolding for this project from its early stages of conceptualisation to its final presentation. A Durkheimian alignment of suicide's doubled existence as a gauge of both individual and collective well-being has also proved a strong undercurrent throughout the study. Overall, this structural design has proven liberating in many respects but has also been constricting

in others. In literature as in life, the occurrence of suicide is rarely so straightforward as to be neatly diagnosable from one of four models. While Durkheim makes a passing acknowledgement of the hybridity of suicidal forms in *Suicide*,⁹ it has been difficult to convey such nuance in this thesis without overwhelming the core material with the minutiae of what has essentially constituted a framing device. In conceiving of this ordering device as providing a thematic point of departure for each chapter, this work has enjoyed a great deal of liberty in reading the literary constructions of suicide both with and against the grain of Durkheimian orthodoxies. This approach has also to a large degree accommodated the analysis of a heterogeneous corpus of texts, facilitating the comparative study of a variety of genres, themes and literary registers alongside one another. Despite this heterogeneity, however, the model has inevitably lent itself more readily to the dissection of certain forms over others. A strong emphasis on suicide's cultural status as both begetter and extinguisher of narrative-making in public and private spheres, has resulted in an overall bias towards prose and, to a lesser extent, theatrical forms, largely at the expense of a sustained examination of poetry. The thematic approach has also excluded by necessity figures such as Anna Kavan and David Gascoyne, whose writing exists somewhat anomalously in relation to these four frameworks.

Reliance upon a sociological model to structure a thesis of this nature inevitably foregrounds the key paradox alluded to in the introductory chapter: why, given the notable decline in Britain's suicide rate during the Second World War, does the literature of this period exhibit such a prevalent and engrained fascination with themes and tropes of self-annihilation? My approach to this question has extended beyond

⁹ "Individualised in particular cases, [these typologies] are complicated by various nuances depending on the personal temperament of the victim and the special circumstances in which he finds himself. But beneath the variety of combinations thus produced, these fundamental forms are always discoverable." In Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 258.

traditional appeals to the established “myth of the Blitz” as a period of unparalleled solidarity and collective meaning to encompass critical perspectives that countenance the unacknowledged individual suffering, dread and ennui of the 1940s. I have engaged with the theories of Stonebridge, Mellor, and Saint Amour in approaching the wartime sensibility as one shaped, not merely by trauma, but by anxiety, anticipation and a yearning to reassemble a coherent narrative of past, present and future.

My first chapter initiated a strand of inquiry that extends throughout all areas of the thesis, namely, the role of literary suicide as a device for the interpellation of individuals and groups into overarching political and imaginative discourses of the war and post-war. The conscription of Virginia Woolf’s death into a broader narrative of political upheaval exemplifies this supplanting of the personal sphere by questions of nationhood and patriotism. This narrative-igniting property is not, however, exclusively presented in the terms of oppression. In the writing of Stevie Smith and Virginia Woolf, the suicidal imagination is a seedbed in which a new communally comprehensible language may one day germinate. The ubiquity of death in wartime as simultaneously a terrifying external spectacle and an intimate ally (“the only god who must come when he is called”, in Stevie Smith’s words) provides the foundations of a new social order in which both autonomy and understanding are made possible. This chapter served to establish suicide as more than a thematic end-point within the texts discussed but also as a literary language through which otherwise inarticulable concerns and anxieties could be expressed.

The chapter that followed expanded upon the concept of war’s undermining of distinctions between public and private life by approaching the suicide question from the converse perspective and investigating the assimilation of suicidal language and imagery into official narratives of heroism, martyrdom and religiosity. The

conceptualisation of military self-sacrifice in the individualistic terms of self-slaughter played an important role in the cultural construction of the fighter pilot. Such narratives, I have argued, served the dual function of acknowledging the reality of the pilot's profession as one that requires the embracement of death as a statistical likelihood, while affirming the individuality and agency of the British pilot in contrast with the Nazi bomber or kamikaze. Thus, I have shown that the myth of the self-annihilating airman encodes the essence of the Second World War's ambivalent discourse of personal autonomy and freedom using the language of suicide as its expressive mode.

Having established the multifaceted role of the suicide trope in 1940s culture as a vehicle for self-definition in matters of nationhood, race, and personal alienation, I ventured in my third chapter to apply this framework of analysis to the study of the 1940s crime genre. Despite the relative lack of practical utility for the concept of fatalistic suicide in industrialised societies, I endeavoured in this chapter to make the case for viewing the genre modulations of the 1940s detective story in the terms of self-annihilation. The formal modulations of the detective novel found textual expression through a heightened emphasis on suicidal themes, tropes and language, I have shown, and the impact of the war upon generic convention was self-consciously absorbed into the changing underpinnings of the form.

Finally, my fourth chapter focused on the mobilisation of suicide within hegemonic cultural discourses of the late and post-war periods to advocate for a return to pre-war gender norms. The re-emergence of the Victorian trope of the self-annihilating "fallen woman" in 1940s popular culture is traceable, I have contended, to a broader hegemonic drive towards the reassertion of pre-war structures of gender, domesticity and work. The manipulation and subversion of that trope by writers such as Terence Rattigan and Elizabeth Taylor have the effect of laying bare the heightened

gendering of suicide and attempted suicide amid the social, sexual and cultural fluctuations of the period.

*

In the culture of 1940s Britain, suicide is a literary trope through which violent change is mediated and conceptualised in terms amenable to the preservation of the autonomous individual. Such change, whether of cultural expectation, literary form, political upheaval or societal breakdown is assimilated into the narrative of the suicidal individual and thereby brought under the subject's own aegis. For this reason, Frances Partridge's confession to yearning for "some safe way of dying", though expressed in the context of the privacy of her own family, has resonated through multiple areas of this thesis. The literature of the 1940s presents suicide in numerous guises; whether as a beacon of courage, cowardice, succour or redemption, it is almost always manifest within the context of relative safety. This concept was later to be understood by Edwin S. Shneidman, the clinical psychologist whose pioneering advances through the 1950s onwards inaugurated the discipline of suicidology when, in explaining his concept of suicide as a manifestation of psychic pain, he drew on a hypothetical scenario debated by European intellectuals of the 1940s:

The question was: if you kill yourself when the Gestapo knocks on your door, have you – without any moral judgment in it (except, perhaps, about the Gestapo) – committed suicide? What else would you call it? Accident? Natural death? Homicide? In a terrible sense all suicides

– *every* suicide is committed because the real or figurative or imagined or hallucinated ‘Gestapo’ is knocking at the psychic door.¹⁰

This thesis has examined suicide not only as the object of fervid artistic and political interchange but as the literary medium through which certain conversations were made possible. Such a conversation persists today, albeit under starkly different precepts and presumptions. Contemporary discussions of self-slaughter, whether philosophical, social or artistic are inhibited and channelled, as Bennet observes, by the (often prudent) presupposition that “the only legitimate form of suicide discourse is the discourse of suicide prevention.”¹¹ There is, I have shown, another mode of suicidal discourse to be found in literature that neither seeks to encourage or prevent the act from occurring, but rather takes refuge in its possibilities. Literary suicide and its real-life counterpart are interconnected yet entirely separate phenomena. In art we romanticize suicide and endow self-destructive acts with a poetry and majesty that would be both irresponsible and unthinkable in real life. The same may be said of war. In drawing on the imaginative possibilities offered by the purest distillation of personal agency available to human beings, the writers of the 1940s seek to confront the essence of the ways in which war subjugates and elevates the destructive power of individuals.¹²

Al Alvarez set out the core principle of his seminal 1971 study of suicide with the declaration that

in a sense, the whole of twentieth-century art has been dedicated to the service of this earthbound Savage God who, like the rest of his kind, has

¹⁰ Edwin S. Shneidman, *Suicide as Psychache: A Clinical Approach to Self-Destructive Behaviour* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 12.

¹¹ Andrew Bennett, *Suicide Century*, 18.

¹² See also Antonin Artaud’s philosophical contention that “if I commit suicide, it will not be to destroy myself but to put myself back together again. Suicide will be for me only one means of violently reconquering myself, of brutally invading my being, of anticipating the unpredictable approaches of God.” In Antonin Artaud, *Artaud Anthology*, ed. Jack Hirschman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965), 56.

thrived on blood-sacrifice. As with modern warfare, enormous sophistication of theory and technique has gone into producing an art which is more extreme, more violent and, finally, more self-destructive than ever before.¹³

Through four branches of textual analysis, this thesis has shown that the literature of 1940s Britain yields several instances whereby Alvarez's cruel deity appears in a domesticated, docile form. This thesis has brought nuance to the manifestations of this "savage god" within the literature of the 1940s, observing the sets of circumstances when such a deity may appear benign and consoling as well as harsh and reproofing. The titular quotation from Partridge's war diary conjoins suicide and safety. Safety, an elusive yet urgently craved commodity in wartime is a protean and subjective concept, indeed its literary meanings in wartime frequently have little to do with the more immediate connotations of survival or corporeal integrity. Amid a harshly demanding climate of war, defamiliarisation and displacement that, as Scarry observes, demands of the subject that he "unmake" himself to survive, suicide represents the ultimate refuge from the fragmenting chaos of history.

¹³ Al Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 188.

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