



## The Myth of Suicide

### *Volitional Independence and Problematized Control in the First Century C.E.*

*Estragon:* Let's hang ourselves immediately!

*Vladimir:* From a bough? (*They go towards the tree.*) I wouldn't trust it.

*Estragon:* We can always try.

*Vladimir:* Go ahead.

*Estragon:* After you.

*Vladimir:* No, you first.

*Estragon:* Why me?

—SAMUEL BECKETT, *Waiting for Godot*

“I'll neck myself, and you'll lose your job.”

—TATZ (1997)

The presence of an affective disorder, especially manic-depressive illness, is the single most important risk factor for actual completed suicide.

—GOODWIN and JAMISON (1990, 7)

People do not kill themselves because they are depressed or lovesick or bored or in pain—that is, not unless they are characters in fiction. They kill themselves because they are ill, with manic depression, for example, or schizophrenia. Their deaths are usually swift, private, and accomplished without much warning. People also kill themselves when they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol. But that is a different matter. Judgment then has been irreparably impaired.

People who are depressed, lovesick, bored, or in pain often attempt to kill themselves.<sup>1</sup> The lack of success and the often quite public nature of their death attempts point to a motive that has little to do with an attempt to gain

relief from pain. Such attempts speak to an implied audience. The suicide attempt in such cases represents a dialogue with friends, family, associates. The suicide attempt enacts a message for the audience that is not a plea for help or understanding. Rather, it represents a form of self-assertion, an insistence on the volitional integrity of the actor (look at Beckett's Estragon and Vladimir). The suicide attempt is, paradoxically, life-affirming. It insists on the primacy and importance—even the inviolability—of the self. It is an attempt to reformulate the self.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps that is why such actions so frequently fail.

It is for this reason that I assert that suicide is a myth. The very word *suicide* is a distraction. It masks the reality of genuine illness—manic depression, say, or schizophrenia. Or the word masks the paradoxical reality of this life-affirming assertion, this attempt at the reformulation of the self.



Late in the fifth century B.C.E., in the Sicilian city of Syracuse, Chaereas kicked his beautiful, young, and pregnant wife in the belly. He thought she had been unfaithful. He was wrong. He was wrong, too, when he thought that she had perished from the blow. Alive but comatose, poor Callirhoe was entombed in an expensive crypt by her grieving father, Hermocrates, the ruler of Syracuse. She awoke within that tomb. Luckily for her and the baby, she was rescued. But, alas, it was not at the hands of her beloved, intemperate, and jealous young husband, nor was it at the hands of her solicitous father. Instead she was saved by Theron, an unscrupulous leader of a pirate band, who was supplementing his living with tomb robbery. Theron and his crew rescued Callirhoe not out of kindness but in the expectation of extracting a large ransom from wealthy Hermocrates. They did so in vain, for as soon as guilt-stricken Chaereas and Hermocrates learned of Callirhoe's survival and abduction, Hermocrates furnished a trireme to be captained by Chaereas across the Ionian Sea in pursuit of Hermocrates' unfortunate daughter and the pirates.

Chaereas's departure was not easy. Chariton describes it for us in section 3.5 of his novel *Chaereas and Callirhoe* (whence I derive this little tale). Not only was a ship not immediately available, but it was the wrong time of year for sailing. Chaereas's difficulties did not end here. The eventual launching of the trireme was hindered by the clamor of a large crowd of Syracusans—"not only men, but also women and children"—and "there simultaneously occurred tears and prayers, moaning and encouragement, terror and courage, resignation and hope." Many of the Syracusans, in fear for their relatives on the ship, wanted the rescue voyage delayed, despite the obvious dangers for Callirhoe. Chief among these were Chaereas's parents.<sup>3</sup> Ariston, his old and sick father,

begged that the launch be delayed until he had time to die “in Chaereas’s arms.” His mother, dreading familial solitude, asked to accompany the sailors. Let them throw her overboard if she proved a burden, she implored. She then bared her breasts and besought Chaereas to respect the solace they had offered him as a baby.

Faced with this alarming dilemma (should he give up the search for his Callirhoe or should he risk hurting his parents?), Chaereas struck upon a remarkable solution.<sup>4</sup> In full view of the crew and the assembled Syracusans, he threw himself from the war ship and into the sea, *apothanein thelôn* [wanting to die]. This was, by any standards, a remarkable and decisive solution to the dilemma. Chaereas’s friends fished him from the water, his parents (no doubt embarrassed) clammed up, and the voyage took place. Chaereas’s solution is more than remarkable. It is wholly typical of this romantic hero’s response to bafflement and frustration (emotions that, as you might expect, usually relate to Callirhoe). Often in Chariton’s novel, when Chaereas suffers marked frustration, he attempts suicide, or prays for death, or goes out of his way to court destruction. Two aspects of Chaereas’s suicide attempt single themselves out. First, it reflects a startling helplessness. This is an emotion that troubles, in varying degrees, all of the major male characters of this Greek novel. Second, Chaereas’s suicides are usually very public affairs. In this instance his attempt is performed in front of a gathering that engrossed the majority of Syracuse’s citizens.

The suicide attempt is bogus, but the helplessness behind it is quite apparent. Chaereas, in this very famous passage, is faced with an intolerable situation in which strong counterclaims are made. Family loyalty demands that he stay in Syracuse. Amatory loyalty (and moral responsibility) demands that he leave Syracuse in search of Callirhoe. It is clear to any reader of the novel that Chaereas will go. But how, in this romantic context, can he do this with the full acquiescence of his parents and the other viewers? With comic brio Chaereas hits instinctively on his remarkable solution. By acting out a suicide attempt, he demonstrates to his parents that his emotional condition is of a far more serious nature than theirs. Chaereas is so devoted to Callirhoe, he attempts to demonstrate to them, that life without her would lead to his demise. This attitude is to be expected (and to be accepted) of real heroes. Chaereas, to gain parental approval, must demonstrate his bona fides. He does so in the time-honored tradition (which I have surveyed already in chapter 2) of matching disunion with death. It would be far too grandiose to claim that life without Callirhoe for Chaereas would lead to the disintegration of his social personality. But, according to the traditions of love literature, something of this order is likely. If Chaereas is to affirm the integrity of his social self, he must resolve

the dilemma by, as it were, buying off his parents. The theatrical, but ultimately bogus, suicide attempt does just this. The phony nature of Chaereas's dive, however, does nothing to diminish the veracity of the helplessness and bafflement that to that point he had suffered. But the point remains. Chaereas's suicide attempt is a life-affirming, if risky, action. It affirms and gains public support for his intention. To put it in a grandiose way: it offers a means for the shoring up, even the reconstruction, of the social personality that was under threat from the irreconcilable claims of parents and Callirhoe.

Perhaps real-life suicide attempts are always theatrical. By that I mean that perhaps they always presuppose an audience, even if that audience is not at hand. (The note, the prospect of postmortem discovery, and the announcement of the death to the near and dear are all based on the expectation of an audience, however eventual. Suicides rarely arrange their deaths in such a manner that their bodies simply disappear.) But in real life, as writers such as Jamison (1999, 200; cf. Kraepelin 1921, 78) demonstrate, suicide, when successful, comes swiftly, unexpectedly, and in solitude. It is, furthermore, more likely to be the product of mental illness (manic-depressive illness or schizophrenia) than of anything else. Chaereas, I am saying, does not fit the bill. Frustrated love seldom leads to successful suicide, except perhaps in poetry or the novel. If it does in real life, then the amatory complications mask or are driven by psychosis.

In this chapter I will argue that we witness in Chariton's suicides not so much the reflex reactions of frustrated lovers as we do the reflections of a literary experience of helplessness and passivity. At first sight these suicides (and their apparent helplessness) may seem to match well those various passive affectivities shown, in the preceding and following discussions, to have become prominent in the first century of our era: boredom, depression, depressive lovesickness, interiority, and an oppressing sense of the dominating linearity of time itself. Things are not as simple as this. Suicide provokes interest beyond this totally predictable aspect of mere helplessness and passivity. Most of the suicides that will be cataloged in this chapter and, indeed, most of the discussions of suicide to which I will refer are theatrical (Griffin 1976, 65; Leigh 1997) and unsuccessful.<sup>5</sup> Here suicide is an action to be performed either in front of others or with an expectation of their subsequent viewing and reaction. Often the audience will rescue the sufferer from his or her intended action. We have just observed this in Chaereas's throwing himself from the trireme in front of the assembled Syracusan population. Without an audience, Chaereas's suicide would have no meaning. My point is that while the suicide participant may appear to be driven by helplessness, the suicide itself, as it is being discussed, formulated, and occasionally acted upon, is above all an act of

self-affirmation. It affirms the autonomy of the self. It represents an action that, in its end, displays qualities that are the direct opposite of passivity.<sup>6</sup> Suicide therefore becomes a means for the reconstruction and recalibrating of the self and of the social personality, when this comes under threat.<sup>7</sup> It is of profound relevance to this claim that modern literature suggests that depressives, those sad and passive playthings of fate, do not have a high representation among successful or attempted suicides.



Let us return to Chariton and examine in more detail the numerous suicides and suicide attempts within *Chaereas and Callirhoe*. There are more than twenty suicide attempts within this novel (and only one that is successful, at 7.5.14).<sup>8</sup> Chariton's heroes attempt suicide for a variety of reasons. They can be driven apparently by love, unexpected or shocking news, jealousy, guilt, grief, or despair. They can even be motivated by a sense of honor. These suicides regularly betray the registers of frustration, bafflement, passivity, and helplessness. But the common theme in all of them is a self-display and an affirmation of the self.

Let us look at a few typical instances. These concern love. Chaereas, Dionysius, Mithridates, and Artaxerxes endure what might best be described as frustrated love. In the instances of Chaereas and Dionysius, it can make them suicidal. In the instances of Mithridates and Artaxerxes, it does not lead to attempted suicide, but it does cause them to exhibit symptoms of a mental state that can in this novel be associated with either death or suicide.<sup>9</sup> Suicide, whether love is involved or not, often acts as a constituent within an almost formulaic chain of events. If it is lovesickness with which we are dealing, then we may expect the sufferer to register an initially overpowering emotion that will induce speechlessness (the hero becomes *achanês* or *aphthônos*) and cause the person to fall to the ground in a black swoon.<sup>10</sup> Soon they are marked by the burning wound of love.<sup>11</sup> Subsequent reactions may involve depression, a sense of mourning, further swooning followed by a deathlike trance, blushing, silence, insomnia, weeping, and even the sweats.<sup>12</sup> If love remains unconsummated the victim will either sink into a wasting illness or attempt suicide.<sup>13</sup> (Dionysius and Chaereas try to kill themselves by starvation. Chaereas contemplates hanging himself and cutting his throat.) But it is not just love that can cause this lugubrious chain of events. The pattern may be replicated if lovesickness's congener, jealousy, is involved.<sup>14</sup> When Chaereas is falsely informed of Callirhoe's unfaithfulness, he is initially speechless, just as if he were love-struck. Then he becomes depressed, swoons, exhibits a state resembling

mourning, and weeps. Chaereas even contemplates suicide, a resolution that is displaced by his sense of anger (1.4.5–8). It is anger that causes him to assault Callirhoe (1.4.10). Discrete elements of this suicidal schema may be found elsewhere, although they do not culminate in suicide, anorexia, or violence. Unexpected events or shocking news may provoke in Chaereas, Dionysius, or Mithridates the very emotions that resemble those attributed to the lovers Chaereas and Callirhoe when they first caught sight of one another. So it is that unexpected events or shocking news causes our heroes to fall, to experience a black swoon and depression, or to exhibit a trancelike state that resembles death (3.1.3 offers a very good example: “At this unexpected news Dionysius was paralyzed; a mist covered his eyes and, completely losing consciousness, he looked just like a dead man”).<sup>15</sup> Dionysius’s condition resembles, in its symptoms, a number of those that we have witnessed previously. I would here single out again Basedow’s descriptions of boning (discussed at the beginning of chapter 4). Figure 5 is a photograph that Basedow claims represents an Australian Aboriginal who has just been “boned.” Could we speculate that this is what Dionysius (or Stagirus or the Zuni girl or Sappho or any one of a number of others) might have looked like soon after the attack?

But to return to the schema that I have suggested is exemplified by Dionysius: attempted suicide, or at least a wish for suicide, may appear without these schematic accoutrements, notably in the instances of guilt, grief, or despair. Very occasionally suicide may actually seem to be the right thing to do. This is usually the case when it is Callirhoe who is tempted.

Suicide, comfortably playing a smaller part in a larger affective chain of events, seems, on the surface of things, to mirror the schema that I have noted in earlier chapters in the discussions of boredom and depression. Let us look back then to the constellation of symptoms exhibited by boredom and depression (and forward to the way time was registered) and attempt to see how these are linked to suicide. We have already observed that ancient authors perceive a continuum between melancholy and boredom and suicide. This is no less true for Chariton than it is for Seneca. Do the stages of development that these states exhibit reflect the schema into which I have suggested that suicide may fall? In Chariton, depression and even boredom can be confused with the contributory factors leading to suicide or its partner anorexia. Leisure, so often linked with grievous boredom and melancholia, is behind the Great King of Persia’s infatuation with Callirhoe. Artaxerxes’ desire, Chariton tells us, is the product of his idleness (his *argia*; see 6.9.4).<sup>16</sup> The term Chariton uses for idleness is easily to be associated with boredom. Artaxerxes’ subsequent symptoms—excessive silence (always to be associated with depression), insomnia, weeping, and hints of an attitude resembling that of a person who is mourning—match those



FIG. 5. Basedow's photograph of a victim of "boning" (ca. 1890s).  
(Reprinted from Herbert Basedow, *The Australian Aboriginal*  
[reprint, Adelaide: F. W. Preece and Sons, 1925], 193.)

symptoms that we have noted earlier of sufferers especially of melancholia. Mithridates offers us another useful parallel. Significantly he is described in 4.2.8 of Chariton's novel by the present participle *aluón*. Best translated here as "depressed," that word in its nominal form, *alus*, is the Greek word for boredom and, sometimes, depression.<sup>17</sup> The satrap's silences and weeping do nothing to allay our suspicions that the template upon which his symptoms have been outlined is as applicable to one suffering depression as to one on track for suicide. Perhaps I am here belaboring the obvious, for the conceptual link



FIG. 6. “Zeus malinconico” (first century C.E.).  
(Courtesy of Museo Nazionale di Napoli.)

between boredom, depression, and suicide is an easy one. Yet the similarity of the terms used to describe them is provoking.

A further illustration of this simple point relates to the Greek term *achlus*. The word may designate the black swoon that afflicts, so often and under such different circumstances, Chaereas, Callirhoe, and Dionysius.<sup>18</sup> It is a term often used of those who are love-struck (see Archilochus 112.2; Hunter 1989, 175). But it is also one to be linked, through the Homeric contexts in which Chariton embeds it, to mourning, a preeminently depressive condition. Elsewhere I have argued that it may even act as a synonym, in Apollonius of Rhodes’s epic at any rate, for depression itself (Toohey 1992a). This curious conceptual congruity could be pursued to more obvious lengths. We have seen in earlier chapters, for example, how Seneca links boredom with suicide, how depression could lead to self-destruction, and how lovesickness, from which all of the main players of Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe* periodically suffer, could easily be confused in medical circles with melancholia.

But, as I have stated, all of this is on the surface of things. Suicide need not follow the chain of symptoms that I have just described. To demonstrate this, I would like to draw attention back to chapter 2 and to Sappho’s *Phainetai moi* ode (31 Campbell). In that poem, we have a charting of the physical reactions of the poem’s speaker as she watches another woman and man seated together.



The sight of that other woman speaking and laughing with this man induces extreme emotional—presumably erotic—symptoms: speechlessness (v. 9), a burning sensation on the skin (vv. 9–10), loss of vision (v. 11), ringing in the ears (vv. 11–12), cold sweat (v. 13), trembling (vv. 13–14), pallor (vv. 14–15), and a near-death experience (vv. 15–16). These are symptoms that, as we have just seen (in chapter 4 in the case of boning), are always indicative of extreme psychological frustration. They become, for obvious physiological reasons, canonical in the description of frustrated love.<sup>19</sup> But, and this is my point, what is missing is suicide. Sappho suffers considerably, but no mention is made of death or of nooses. Another striking parallel (but not connected to love) was provided for us in Basedow's description of boning (quoted at the beginning of chapter 4). The symptoms experienced by the victim of boning were astonishment, blanched cheeks, glassy eyes, a distorted facial expression, voicelessness, spasms, swooning and collapsing to the ground; then sickening, fretting, the rejection of food and community dealings; and finally imminent death. The symptoms here match very closely those of Sappho or of Chariton's benighted heroes. Basedow's Australian Aboriginal does not, however, take his own life. Death results, if not quite from wasting, at least from a rapid physiological breakdown.<sup>20</sup> The symptoms highlighted by Chariton, by Sappho, and, remarkably, by Basedow exhibit powerful similarities and help us place the reactions that may precede suicide in Chariton's romance within a larger discursive—and physiological—context. This instructive parallel tells us, however, that these symptoms do not invariably lead to suicide. That is a choice made by Chariton for his characters.

An instructive example of how it is that suicide, or attempted suicide, may supervene on amatory frustration in Chariton's novel is provided at that point where Dionysius decides that he can tolerate his lovesickness for Callirhoe no longer (3.1.1–3) (Loeb translation).

Frustrated in his love for Callirhoe, Dionysius could endure no longer: he had resolved on suicide by starvation and was drawing up his will with directions for his burial. In it he begged Callirhoe to visit him even if dead. But Plangon was seeking an interview with her master and had been turned away by his attendant, whose orders were to admit no one. Dionysius heard them arguing at the door and asked who was making the uproar. When the attendant told him that it was Plangon, he replied, "This is a bad time for her to come," having no further desire to see anyone who would remind him of his passion, "but call her in anyway!" So she opened the door and said, "Sir, why are you breaking your heart as though all were lost? Callirhoe invites you to marry her. Put on your best clothes, offer sacrifice, and welcome the bride you love!"

As you can see, Dionysius is determined to do himself in. But notice how public an affair his starvation is to be. He is probably on his own, or perhaps in the company of a secretary (will making is no solitary task), but his actions are taking place in the midst of a large and presumably busy palace. His attendant assists. Plangon, to judge from her initial comments, seems to understand what Dionysius is doing. Notice, too, that when Plangon arrives, Dionysius makes little attempt to turn her away, despite the proximity of death. Two conclusions concerning the nature of this suicide are possible. First, one could surmise that the presence of these people is indicative of Dionysius's lack of desire actually to carry his intention through. Perhaps he hopes one of them will dissuade him. The second point is that this audience is admitted to provide a public affirmation of Dionysius's intended action. Dionysius wants them present to see him, to affirm and witness his decisiveness, his choice, and his plight—to commend, that is, his individuality and his selfhood. I think that the same point could be made of his calm attention to the details of his funeral. Real despair is a private matter. His actions actually affirm his sense of individuality. Dionysius's actions seem stage-managed.<sup>21</sup> I have made exactly the same point concerning Chaereas's jumping into the sea. By attempting suicide, Chaereas denies publicly the rights over him of the claims of Callirhoe and his parents. By attempting suicide in such an extravagant manner, he underscores what we might call his volitional independence.

Were we to check through the remainder of the suicides in Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, we would find that in most cases (except perhaps when Callirhoe contemplates suicide at 2.11.3–4 and 3.10.4), we are dealing with occasions that match, in their self-display, these two passages.<sup>22</sup> The suicide is usually stopped because there are friends nearby to catch the performance. Chaereas always has such an audience handy in the person of his shadowy friend Polycharmus. (How often do we watch the patient Polycharmus rescue his friend?) Despite the exuberant theatricality of all of these suicide attempts and despite their paradoxical affirmation of the victims' selfhood, they are sorry affairs. Most readers, on first encountering Chariton, find Chaereas a mildly repellent character. This is not just because of the brutal kick that he delivers to Callirhoe. It is because of his passivity, his helplessness, and his too frequent attempts at self-destruction. He is, as David Konstan dubs him, a hapless hero. New readers to this novel usually feel the same way about Dionysius and even the cagey Mithridates. But I think that part of the usual distaste felt for these characters may relate to their enthusiasm for suicide. It seems, in their cases, to be such a phony remedy, one designed not as a desperate response to a desperate and debilitating emotion but as a means for shoring up a battered sense of self.

Before continuing with other (Roman) authors, I would like to reemphasize some of my main points. Because I have found that many people find these repugnant, they need all the more stress and clarification. My first point is that as far as Chariton is concerned, there is no such thing as suicide. Rather than providing a route to oblivion, an escape from grief through death, these apparent suicides aim paradoxically to affirm the will to life, the volitional independence of these characters. Suicide, that is, offers through its public display a means for guaranteeing psychic integrity. My second point is that the melancholia, ennui, boredom, anorexia, and lovesickness that seems to appear willy-nilly across the Mediterranean in this century does condition the circumstances in which these suicides are represented. The general emphasis on suicide in an author like Chariton reflects this tendency. At the same time, however, it offers an alternative or solution to these tendencies. Chariton's suicides aim to remedy the effects of these lugubrious conditions. My third point relates to Rome (to which I will shortly turn): Roman literary suicides, though far more theatrical, are driven by the same circumstances as are the Greek ones. A final point is that these suicide attempts, because they often resolve the public claims of an acute dilemma, are all about control. They often dramatize an actor's desire to assert control over his or her own circumstance, when faced with others' desires to do just that to him or her. Perhaps the best way to put this is to use that faddish, but useful, verb *problematized*: control, in these instances, has been problematized.



The famous black-figure depiction on the pot by the Attic potter Exekias in figure 7 captures the Homeric Ajax just as he is on the point of committing suicide (I have recounted the details of his story in chapter 1). The painting dates to ca. 530 B.C.E. It predates Sophocles' play entitled *Ajax* by approximately ninety years. Exekias's alarming portrait conjures an image of suicide that is completely at odds with that evoked within Chariton's novel. Above all, in Exekias's version the hero is alone. Ajax is drawn at a distance from his ship (just visible to the right). His only onlooker, as is pointed out by Shapiro (1994, 152), is the "ghostly" image of Ajax's helmet "propped on the big Boeotian shield" (to the right of the picture). His solitude is enhanced by his vulnerability. He crouches forward, cowed almost, completely naked and by a barren shore. This shoreline seems to reflect his inner state in much the same way as has been said of the palm tree, drooping in melancholy sympathy for the hero (Hurwit 1982). Anxiety lines are etched on Ajax's forehead. His sword—the very weapon that the hero should wield against his enemies—is set up threateningly



FIG. 7. Exekias, “The Suicide of Ajax” (ca. 530 B.C.E.).  
 (Courtesy of Chateau-Musée, Boulogne-sur-Mer.)

near his head. Soon Ajax will cast himself belly-first onto this weapon.<sup>23</sup> The utter solitude is also emphasized by Sophocles in his version. In the *Ajax*, Sophocles has his protagonist trick his companions into allowing him to seek solitude for his suicide. There is no theatricality or self-display in this death. It is swiftly realized, completely private, and accomplished with no warning. There is in Ajax’s death something that is not just pathetic but disgraceful, even demeaning. How could a great warrior sink this low, become so vulnerable, be so swayed by emotion?

Ajax was probably mentally ill. Sophocles skews the picture (see my discus-

sion in chapter 1) by stressing the solitary heroism of the hero and his resistance to the new sophisticated social values of Odysseus. So, too, does the *Problema* (see my discussion of this in chapter 1). The illness behind the play, behind the painting, behind the *Problema*—the life situation that these exploit—is likely what Collinge recognized as manic depression, or perhaps it is what now might be termed schizoaffective. This is because of Ajax's delusions. The successful rate of suicide among such sufferers is alarmingly high. Such suicides are seldom carried out in the theatrical mode of Chariton's melancholy heroes. Depressives like Chaereas seldom achieve successful self-immolation.<sup>24</sup>

I have dwelt on Ajax's death to reemphasize the points made at the outset of this chapter, but within a context of ancient literature. People killed themselves in ancient life, just as they do now, because they are mentally ill, not because they are depressed, lovesick, bored, or in pain. The valueless notion of suicide masks other problems. Successful suicides are not theatrical, unless they are enforced. It will not do to say, of Dionysus for example, that privacy was nearly impossible in the ancient or premodern worlds. In day-to-day life this was undoubtedly the case. (It is not easily had in the modern world either, for that matter.) But Ajax found it, despite his slaves. No doubt many others did too when the mind-forged manacles demanded it.



Encolpius is the starting point for Rome. He is a character in Petronius's *Satyricon*. Petronius's narrative, which, with a little chronological liberality, may be dated to approximately the same period as that of *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, has as one of its intentions the parody of the Greek novel, of which Chariton's novel is one of the few complete surviving examples. The *Satyricon* inverts many of the habitual circumstances of the Greek novel: for well-born Greek heterosexual lovers, it substitutes down-at-the-heel Roman homosexuals; for faithfulness, it substitutes promiscuity; for an upper-class milieu, it substitutes a low-life one. In fact the *Satyricon* is replete with the sorts of event that the Greek novel eschews: murder, blasphemy, child sex, cannibalism, gluttony, and bad taste on an extravagant scale. One of Petronius's more trenchant parodies of the Greek novel—and it is hard not to think that this is a parody of Chariton in particular—is a very amusing failed suicide that upends all of the apparent seriousness of Chariton's many attempts. One would like to see Petronius's target here as Chariton's novel, with its noteworthy overrepresentation of suicide. What is so interesting about Petronius's parody is that it preserves the key characteristics of Chariton's suicides, their self-display and the self-affirmation of those who attempt the act. In the

scene that I quote from shortly, Encolpius, the protagonist of the *Satyricon*, seems to be about to have his boy lover, Giton, abducted. Eumolpus, a seedy, out-of-work academic poet, has just declared his infatuation to Giton in front of Encolpius, whose understandable anger caused Giton discreetly to leave their doss-house bedroom on the pretext of looking for some water. Shortly afterward, Eumolpus slipped from the room to find Giton, but not without locking Encolpius inside. The prospect of losing Giton (it has happened before) causes Petronius's protagonist to attempt suicide. The prospect of losing Encolpius and having to take Eumolpus for a lover, Giton pretends (his suicide attempt is a bogus one), causes in him the same emotions. Here, at any rate, is the core of the scene in which we watch Encolpius's attempt to do away with himself (*Satyricon* 94.23) (Penguin translation).

Shut up inside like that, I decided to finish everything by hanging myself. I had already put the bed frame against the wall tied a belt to it and was inserting my neck in the noose when the door was unlocked and Eumolpus came in with Giton and in a race against death brought me back to life. In his grief Giton, unlike Eumolpus, went mad with rage; he raised a great outcry and, pushing me with both hands precipitated me on top of the bed.

"You're wrong, Encolpius," he said, "if you think by any possible chance you can die before me. I tried first: I looked for a sword in Ascyltus' rooms. If I had not found you, I was going to throw myself to my death. To make you realize death isn't far away if you look for it, see in your turn what you wanted me to see."

With this he snatched a razor from Eumolpus' hired servant and slashing his throat once and then twice collapsed at our feet.

Thunderstruck, I let out a cry and following his collapsing body to the floor, I looked for a way to die with the same instrument. But Giton showed not the slightest suspicion of a wound nor could I feel any pain myself. It was a practice razor and blunted for the purpose: to give apprentices courage, it had a sheath fitted round it. This was the reason why the servant had not panicked at his snatching the razor and why Eumolpus had not intervened in this fake death scene.

The bathetic inversions (they are also parodic—Encolpius's excessive second suicide attempt demonstrates this) should be apparent. The love triangle is homosexual for a start. Encolpius attempts (somehow or another) suicide from, of all places, a bed frame. Giton, the catamite, tries to upstage his lover's suicide. His attempt, however, is performed with a harmless instrument. (Did Giton realize that the razor was blunt? The scene seems to suggest that this is the case.) As if one suicide attempt were not enough, Encolpius then repeats

the action. (The surfeit undermines credibility.) Encolpius's rival, Eumolpus, makes no attempt to intervene. Above all, both suicide attempts seem to have been designed for show rather than for effect.

Public show, rather than private grief, drives both death attempts. Both aim to resolve a dilemma. Both assert, in the manner of Chariton's suicides, volitional independence. Giton's is the more obvious. His attempt is a very public affair—it is performed in front of Encolpius, Eumolpus, and the hired servant. Giton's dilemma is to be caught in between the demands of the two lovers. The suicide attempt reasserts his devotion to Encolpius and independence of Eumolpus. Its phoniness, however, demonstrates his recognition of Eumolpus's claims. The suicide attempt also asserts the youth's volitional independence. Giton seems to know that it will fail (as must Chaereas's when he jumps into the sea). But the attempt aims to distance his lovers and to assert his own control.

Encolpius's despair, on seeming to lose Giton, is such that he initially tries that most despised of suicide modes, hanging. (The scene has a close parallel in *Chaereas and Callirhoe* 5.10.6 ff., where Chaereas, despairing of ever regaining Callirhoe, "was seized with an inconsolable grief" and, "left alone, . . . fastened a noose." After a lengthy soliloquy, Chaereas "kissed the noose" and began to place it around his neck. Polycharmus arrived just in time and "forcibly restrained his frantic struggles.")<sup>25</sup> Before his second attempt, Encolpius seems (just like Chaereas) to swoon from emotional excess (he is "thunderstruck").<sup>26</sup> How should we understand Encolpius's suicide? The first attempt, ostensibly driven by grief, is as self-serving as are the sad Aboriginal suicides alluded to in the second epigraph prefixing this chapter. Helpless and frustrated Encolpius may be, but his death attempt is designed in part to punish Giton and Eumolpus (as it were: "I'll neck myself, and you'll lose your job") and paradoxically to assert his volitional independence. Encolpius has no audience now, but he soon will have. The audience is implied. The second attempt—out of grief or frustration?—makes the same point again to Eumolpus.

Petronius makes mockery of the whole scene by having his attempted suicide performed with a blunt razor, then leaving the gullible Encolpius to replicate the action, no doubt much to his subsequent embarrassment. Petronius's parody is built upon faithlessness, Chariton's on faithfulness. Petronius's psychologically realistic vignette substitutes amoral bathos for romantic pathos. But note that in this instance from Petronius, suicide is flamboyant and, as in Chariton, a theatrical event. Giton, in particular, requires an audience for his charade, a charade that is designed mockingly to demonstrate his personal independence. Giton renders problematic the issue of control.



It is chilling when literary representations prefigure events within an author's life. Petronius's own suicide attempt was far more successful and far more spectacular than that of his fiction Encolpius. What makes his death so alarmingly relevant to the present discussion is that it preserves, as it is reported by Tacitus (*Annals* 17–20), the parodic element of our *Satyricon* passage while remaining the most public of performances. Petronius, formerly favorite of the emperor Nero, had aroused the enmity of the emperor's confidant, Tigellinus. He connived at Petronius's death by accusing him of being an intimate of Scaevinus, who had been implicated in plotting against Nero. Petronius, facing certain death, determined to forestall the emperor by taking his own life.<sup>27</sup> It was the manner of his death that was so extraordinary. Here is Tacitus's description (*Annals* 16.19).<sup>28</sup>

The emperor at this time happened to be on a visit to Campania. Petronius got as far as Cumae and was prevented from going any further. He refused to prolong the suspense that hope or fear involved. Not that he was hasty in taking leave of life. On the contrary, he opened his veins and then, as the fancy took him, he bound them up or reopened them. Meanwhile he talked with his friends, but not on serious topics or anything calculated to win admiration for his Stoicism. He listened to their contributions—not discussions about the immortality of the soul or the views of the philosophers, but simply gay songs and light verse. He dealt out rewards to some of his slaves and floggings to others. He had a good dinner served and slept for a while, so that his death, though forced upon him, should appear natural. Even in the codicils to his will, he refused to put down any of the deathbed flatteries for Nero or for Tigellinus or any of the other courtiers. Instead he wrote out a full description of the emperor's vicious activities, prefaced with the names of his male and female partners and specifying what novel forms his lust had taken. This document he sent under seal to Nero. Then he broke his signet ring in case it should be used later to endanger others.

The calculated indifference to death in this suicide scene appears to have two targets. First, there is the emperor himself: Petronius's apparent fearlessness seems designed to thwart Nero's taste for cruelty and for instilling fear into his subjects. Second, Petronius's death (at least as Tacitus tells it) seems to have been stage-managed to parody the pretensions of the Stoic deaths of men like Seneca and, before him, Cato the Younger. Petronius's death, as Griffin suggests (1976, 199), is designed to exemplify a dislike for the "element of self-glorification in the long philosophical discourse and the imitation of Socrates and Cato." Griffin goes on to point out:



There developed the anti-philosophical tradition of death with panache. Here the fearlessness and rationality were shown by attention, not merely to ordinary matters like Seneca's will, but to the positively trivial. So Tacitus shows us Claudius' victim Valerius Asiaticus checking the location of his funeral pyre before opening his veins to ensure that the flames would not damage his trees (*Ann.* 11.3). But his triumph in this style is the death of Petronius, carried out on Nero's order and clearly regarded by victim and writer as the answer to the *iactatio* [the vaunt] of people like Seneca (*Ann.* 16.19).

There is an unexpected similarity between Chaereas's leap into the sea in *Chaereas and Callirhoe* 3.5 (and indeed most of Chariton's suicides) and Petronius's leisurely death. Chaereas was caught in a dilemma, between the demands of his parents and those toward Callirhoe. By his theatrical leap he declared publicly his independence of both. He asserted, as I have been suggesting, his selfhood. Petronius's dilemma, I suppose, consisted in the conflict between demonstrating intellectual distance between himself and what he seems to have seen as the pomposity and falseness of the philosophical suicide, on the one hand, and the need to display indifference to Nero's arbitrary exercise of power, on the other. His solution (a feigned indifference to the whole process of death), which we have just witnessed, neatly solves the dilemma, as Chaereas's leap solved his. At the same time, Petronius's suicide produces, in its utter, if low-key, self-display, a profound affirmation of individuality and of what I have termed volitional control.

The comparison with Chaereas deserves emphasis. The differences between Chaereas and Petronius are marked. For Chaereas the "why" of suicide is important. For Petronius the "how" is what is important. But of equal significance is the presence and absence of helplessness and frustration. Chaereas's literary context is frequently a melancholic one. Petronius's is not. Petronius's aristocratic Roman world is habitually built upon self-display. Chaereas's bourgeois one is built on no such show. Chaereas's death may be fiction, and Petronius's may have been historical fiction,<sup>29</sup> yet the posture that both produce is of a kind. Both use the display involved in suicide as a means for reformulating or reaffirming the volitional power of the social self.

One final point concerning Petronius's death needs to be made. It is Tacitus who tells us the story, not a coroner. There can be no doubt that he shapes and adds nuance to this in accordance with his own particular response to suicide. This response will be as much the product of his own ear (forty years subsequent to Chariton and Petronius) as it will be of his psychology and conscious beliefs and, especially, of the generic and the discursive traditions shaping his

writing. I stress this point (and will repeatedly come back to it) because it makes more clear how the description of Petronius's death provides further evidence for the trends noted in *Chaereas and Callirhoe* and in the *Satyricon*. (We are not muddling real life with fiction in this instance—or in the instances to follow.)

At any rate, the type of modish, Stoic suicide that Petronius seems to have targeted (or that Tacitus targeted) through his own death is exemplified in the famous *mors voluntaria* of Seneca.<sup>30</sup> Tacitus's description of this ought to make clear precisely that at which Petronius had taken aim. Following is Tacitus's description (*Annals* 15.61–64, epitomized by Griffin [1976, 65]; this description will be subject to the same constraints, discursive and other, as the last one). Seneca has just denied the charge of plotting against the emperor. (The “republican” poet had conspired against Nero with a group gathered about Calpurnius Piso. The conspirators intended to assassinate Nero and to appoint a new emperor. The plot backfired. Among others, Lucan and his uncle Gallio, were condemned to death. Lucan's father, Mela, also perished in the cross fire.) Tacitus reports that Nero subsequently questioned the praetorian officer who had delivered this edict to Seneca, asking “whether Seneca was meditating suicide.” Tacitus continues:

Upon this the tribune asserted that he saw no signs of fear and perceived no sadness in Seneca's words or looks. He was ordered to go back and announce the death sentence . . . Seneca, quite unmoved, asked for tablets on which to inscribe his will. When the centurion refused his request, he turned to his friends, protesting that, as he was forbidden to reward them, he bequeathed to them the only thing he still possessed, yet the finest of them all—the pattern of his life . . . Then he rebuked them for their tears, asking “where had their philosophy gone?”

At this point Tacitus goes on to narrate how Seneca and his wife severed their veins (and how Seneca had attempted and failed to dissuade his wife from imitating him).<sup>31</sup>

Even at this last moment Seneca's eloquence did not fail him; he summoned his secretaries and dictated much to them, which, as it has been published for all readers in his own words, I forbear to paraphrase.

Griffin (1976, 65) suggests it is probable that what Seneca dictated was likely to have been philosophical, “perhaps about the immortality of the soul.” She believes that this can be “inferred from the suicide of Thræsea Paetus, in the next year.” This was an imitation of Seneca's “in several respects.” But let us return to Tacitus.

Seneca, meantime, as the tedious process of death lingered on, begged his doctor to produce a poison which he had previously procured for himself, the same drug taken by those condemned by public sentence of the people of Athens (i.e., hemlock). It was brought to him and he drank, but in vain, for his limbs were cold and impervious to the poison . . . At last he entered a bath of warm water, from which he sprinkled the nearest slaves, saying, "I offer this liquid as libation to Jupiter Liberator." He was then carried into a vapor-bath, where he suffocated.

The "key themes" that seem to be displayed by Seneca's suicide are easily isolated (cf. Griffin 1976). Seneca's death is above all calm, brave, and resolute. He does not waver in his intent, nor will he allow his friends to. The death is also philosophical, both in that it uses philosophical models, above all that of Socrates, and in that philosophical discussion seems to have been an important part of the proceedings. Seneca's death is a reaction to limited options. But in choosing to die according to a pattern selected by himself, Seneca, as Tacitus depicts him, has a volitional triumph of a sort—though it could hardly compare to that of Chaereas when he leaps off the trireme, for Chaereas was under no compunction to die. Tacitus's Seneca exhibits a degree of control over the manner of his fate, therefore, but his position is an utterly helpless one. Seneca's mode of death offers a solution to his dilemma—the necessity of death without pandering to the emperor's cruel willfulness. In keeping with this notion of display of will and, in the face of crushing tyranny, a display of selfhood, Seneca's death is carried out in public, in the most theatrical of manners. I suppose that Tacitus's depiction of Seneca's death is an admirable one. It has certainly been much admired.

Seneca's death, contrived philosophically according to Tacitus's romantic description, contains, in many ways, the advice on suicide and the idealized portraits of suicide that are scattered throughout his writings. Of suicide Seneca believed, as did most Stoics, that "provided the *moment* and the *reason* were right . . . [when according to nature life was no longer possible] . . . a man was justified in making a rational departure from life" (Griffin 1976, 72).<sup>32</sup> Diogenes Laertius (7.130) states, and Seneca does not seem greatly to disagree (Summers 1952, 253), that "the wise man will make a rational exit from life either on behalf of his country or for the sake of his friends or if he suffers intolerable pain or mutilation or incurable disease." Seneca vividly suggested that the "body is a guest house and that we must depart as soon as we find we are a burden on our host" (*Epistles* 120.14). Why prolong life unnecessarily (*Epistles* 4.4)? Intolerable hardship can render suicide a freedom (*De ira* 3.15.4). If the future looks doubtful, then the issue is not "of dying sooner or

later but of dying well or ill” (*Epistles* 70.5). In Seneca’s eyes one may choose an “easy, rather than a hard, death” provided, naturally, that an easy death does not compromise one’s Stoic morality. This is not to say that Seneca offered a *carte blanche* for suicide. He disapproves of the contemporary fad for death and suicide—evident in a contemporary *libido moriendi* [lust for dying] (*Epistles* 24.5)—which seems to have been driven by a disgust or weariness or boredom with life (an *odium* or *fastidium vitae*: *Epistles* 3.5, 77.6; *De tranquillitate animi* 2.14–15). Seneca also disapproves of men such as the gourmand Apicius, who committed suicide rather than face a life without good cooking (*Ad Helviam* 10.8.11). Elsewhere he shows a marked disapproval of suicide when it is motivated by desperation (as was Jocasta’s at *Oedipus* 1024–39 or Hercules’ at *Hercules furens* 1202 ff.) or by a desire for revenge (as was Phaedra’s at *Phaedra* 1159–1200).

If Seneca’s death has its philosophical underpinning in such writings as *Epistles* 70 and 77 (cf. *Phoenissae* 63–215), it has its dramatic counterpart in the notable Stoic suicide of Hercules in the *Hercules Oetaeus*. In this play, Hercules, accidentally poisoned by a cloak meant by his wife, Deianira, as a love charm, chooses to immolate himself on a pyre built on Mt. Oeta. He sees this fiery suicide both as a release from the intolerable pain caused by the poison and as a fulfilment of the will of Jupiter that had foreordained this death. Philoctetes, in a description that would have made any informed Stoic envious, depicts Hercules’ last moments on the pyre in this manner (*Hercules Oetaeus* 1683–90):

What victor ever stood in his chariot so joyfully  
 Triumphant? What tyrant with such a countenance ever gave laws  
 To nations? How calmly he bore his fate! 1685  
 Our tears stopped; grief’s shock subsided  
 In us. No one grieved that he should perish.  
 Now we were ashamed to weep; she whose sex  
 Bids mourning, Alcmena, with dry cheeks  
 Stood, a mother almost the equal of her son. 1690

Had Seneca been able to envisage his own death, I am sure that it would have been modeled on this exemplary Stoic ending.

It was not just myth that provided for Seneca a rich store of these types of resolute, theatrical, and Stoic death. Real-life Roman aristocrats offered examples. (The depiction of their ends, however, are subject to the same discursive constraints as were those of Tacitus.) In the long discussion of suicide in *Epistle* 70, Seneca cites the famous Stoic Cato the Younger, who, having led the resistance against Caesar in North Africa, declared after his defeat that he was unwilling to ask a pardon of Caesar. To accede to such a request would be

tantamount to an admission of the legality of Caesar's position. Instead he chose to stage-manage his death: he read Plato's dialogue on the afterlife, the *Phaedo*, twice on the eve of his death, slept, then, after waking near dawn, stabbed himself (Plutarch *Cato Minor*). Tullius Marcellinus's death was less spectacular but no less resolute and theatrical. In *Epistle 77* Seneca tells us that this man, prematurely aged and ill, determined on suicide as a means of foreclosing a joyless existence. Marcellinus, after consulting his friends, starved for three days, then lay in a warm "bath and had hot water continually poured over him." Seneca continues, "The sensation of gradually dying, he pointed out to his attendants, was not without certain pleasure."

Deaths less attractive but no less spectacular or admirable could be exemplified from the lower classes. A German gladiator, Seneca tells us in *Epistle 70.20–21*, so loathed the captive's life in the arena, that he choked himself to death with a toilet sponge normally used for anal cleaning. Of such a mode of death, Seneca notes that it was *parum munde et parum decenter* [scarcely clean and decent]; but, he queries, *quid est stultius quam fastidiose mori* [what is more stupid than to die fussily]? The suicide of disaffected gladiators must have been common. Soon after this representation, Seneca recounts how another man took his own life as he was being conveyed to a morning exhibition in a cart. Pretending he was asleep, he allowed his head to droop so far over the side of the cart that his neck caught in the spokes of a wheel and broke. Another gladiator, in a sham sea battle in the arena, thrust his sword into his own neck rather than continue with the nautical charade.

The role of self-assertion is as important in these *literary* suicides as in any of those discussed so far. The dilemma for these slaves is obvious: fight in the arena and survive, after a manner, or refuse and face immediate death. The suicides provide a dire solution to this dilemma. Suicide provides a mode for the rejection of both alternatives. In so doing, these very public, yet utterly literary, deaths act as a profound, if tragic, means for self-affirmation. Note, too, the remarkable match between the control exerted by Rome over these slaves and the reassertion of control that they represent. These deaths, just like the others we have examined, highlight the difficulties related to the issue of control.

The route from Chaereas to Seneca may seem to be a long one, and the types of death may seem quite different. As I have stated, for Chaereas it is "why" that matters, and for Seneca it is "how." Yet there is more to the Silver Latin suicide than the mere "how." There is a persistent fascination with self-killing that goes beyond Stoic posturing. The fascination seems to match that of Chariton. As I have stated at the outset of this chapter, all of this talk does not provide a link between frustration and helplessness and suicide. Rather, it

offers a link between suicide and self-affirmation. For reasons too complex to canvass here, the first century of our era seems in Mediterranean culture to have brought with it a challenge to the social integrity of the personality. The best that I can do here is to suggest that this is the result of an increase in private freedom that is balanced by a curtailment of public freedom. Control thus becomes put at issue. At any rate, one of the means by which this psychological challenge was met was through the paradoxical self-affirmation involved in all of this talk about suicide.<sup>33</sup>

So it is that, despite the rationality of Seneca's discussion and depiction of suicide, one is justified to suspect, as does Gordon Williams (1978, 177), that Seneca is more than usually concerned with, and even interested in, suicide and death:<sup>34</sup> fascination, that is, displaces disinterest. Williams refers us to Seneca's view (*Epistles* 61.4) that life is but a preparation for death and observes, citing Leeman (1971), that the theme of death is present in over half of Seneca's surviving 124 long letters. It is significant that most of Seneca's suicides are carried out in the face of certain death. This is not like Chariton. There do exist, however, unexpected similarities between Seneca's representation of suicide and that of Chariton and, for that matter, of Petronius.<sup>35</sup> These similarities cluster beneath four lemmas. First, all of these deaths are performed in public and their details are almost stage-managed. These suicides are theatrical events. Second, these deaths and death attempts are driven not by desperation but by choice. (This is not true of the gladiators; their situation is truly desperate, and their deaths are achieved by stealth; that they are public is an avocational inevitability.) Third, the mode by which these deaths are achieved provides a resolution to a pressing dilemma. (I stress the term *mode* here, for it is not suicide or even attempted suicide per se that resolves the dilemma. It is how suicide is staged. So it is that Chaereas's dramatic leap into the sea resolves the conflicting demands created by his parents and Callirhoe's abduction and that Seneca's stagy and public mode of suicide provides a resolution for the conflicting demands of the emperor's death sentence and the need to display indifference to his arbitrary exercise of power.) The fourth point relates closely to the third. These dramatic, stage-managed suicides foreground what I have termed volitional control. I could put it in another, more familiar way. These dramatic modes of suicide involve a remarkably public and deliberate display of self. These modes of suicide thus cast into relief the problems related to control (whether it is that of the emperor, the family, or the individual) and, in so doing, present a realignment of personal values, commitments, and loyalties. The end product is the highlighting of the need for the individual to be able to exhibit personal control; power, that is, ought to be shifted from the group to the individual.



Let us spread the net more widely still. Let us test these conclusions against some of the depictions of suicide in another of the writers from this period, Seneca's nephew, Lucan, the author of an incomplete, ten-book epic, the *Civil War*.<sup>36</sup>

Lucan's most remarkable suicide occurs within his gory description of a sea battle. This battle occurs early in the conflict between Julius Caesar's invading forces and those Romans and allies who were loyal to the traditional Roman senatorial classes. In the sea battle to which I am referring, the Massilians (Greek inhabitants of the modern Marseilles) are resisting the attempt of Caesar's forces to dominate the littoral between Italy and Spain. This sea battle represents the culmination of the key conflict between the Gallic city and Julius Caesar's forces (*Civil War* 3.509–762). Young Argus was a Massilian and was fighting in hopeless defense of his city. He was mortally wounded by a shaft cast into his lower abdomen. At the other end of the ship stood Argus's father, watching this event with horror. The father's reaction, by twentieth-century standards, was peculiar. Disregarding Argus's silent plea for terminal comfort, the old man stabbed himself in the throat and, in case this method might fail, leaped overboard to drown. At the same time, he muttered to his son (3.742–47):

I will not waste  
The time allowed by the cruel gods: I will pierce  
My aged throat. Grant pardon to your unhappy parent,  
Argus, for running away from your embrace, from your last kisses.  
Not yet has the hot blood left your wounds  
And only half dead do you lie: you can still outlive me.

Argus's father, to an exaggerated degree, reflects a typical ancient fear of outliving one's children. This father's suicide, carried out in such a way as to leave no room for error, was designed to avoid the situation. Although the death is bizarre, almost to the point of becoming comical, it does share important features with the other suicides we have witnessed so far. Philosophically speaking, on the face of it, this death—despairing, precipitate, overemotional—is the direct opposite of the type of death recommended by Seneca. Yet it does exhibit the traits of a Stoic, Senecan tradition: above all it recognizes that there is little value in preserving a life that has become intolerable. Seneca persistently recommends this course. It is important to recognize, however, that Lucan, himself a Stoic, clearly disapproves of this death and views it as excessive and as an unnecessary hastening of the end.

What interests most, however, is the fact that this literary suicide reflects the four qualities that I highlighted at the conclusion of the previous section of this chapter. First, the death of Argus's father is a thoroughly public event. It takes place within sight of the dying son and on a crowded ship's deck. Second, however desperate the father may feel, he has chosen this death. It is very difficult to view this bizarre death, in fact, as a reaction to grief. Were grief involved, we would expect the father to expend a little more affection on his suffering, deathbound son. It is almost as if Argus's father were driven by what he understands as the popular estimation of a father who survives his children (negative); his choice, that is, seems almost more intellectual than emotional. Third, the suicide represents a neat solution to what was an acute dilemma. This dilemma consists in the tension between his natural desire to comfort his son and his perhaps less natural desire to avoid the grief attendant on outliving one's own child. Suicide provides a useful way out and, at that, one sanctioned by Stoic philosophy. Fourth, Argus's father's suicide is as theatrical an event as we have seen so far. More than problematizing control, it aims to demonstrate the volitional power of the old man. It stands, at the expense of the poor son, as a very emblem of the triumphant assertion of self, of the shoring up of the self in the face of potentially overwhelming grief and frustration.<sup>37</sup>

The death of Argus's father, therefore, represents one tessellated motif within a larger affective mosaic. Other elements are provided by Seneca, by Chariton, by Petronius, and by Tacitus. We should not think of this mosaic as representing a suicide epidemic. Instead we should think of it as representing a *literary* epidemic of suicide, as a kind of unconscious textual dialogue taking place on the subject of suicide between a number of writers in this period. The parameters of this dialogue were narrow. They were set by a need to query the concept of individual volitional control, of the autonomous self. Suicide—the private, pain-driven action to which I alluded at the beginning of this chapter (exemplified by Ajax's death)—is hardly at issue here. Argus's father is making a point for all those about him. This has to do with his own independence of spirit.

This concept of an *unconscious* textual dialogue deserves emphasis and clarification. It is clear that Lucan approaches these suicides and suicide attempts in a deliberate, if ambivalent, manner. He seems attracted to the Stoic resolve it may embody, but he feels that, as often as not, it exhibits a total lack of control, an arrogant reaction to dangerous circumstances or emotional frustration.<sup>38</sup> For Lucan, suicide is above all a sign of weakness. It is this, I suggest, not because of the despair that drives it but because of the arrogant selfishness and self-sufficiency that it entails.

Not all suicides are so. When a suicide is faceless, the public aspect is pre-



served, but despair and pain can come to the fore. Take, for example, the following description of the reaction of Romans to the threat of proscription by Sulla, a Roman general who invaded and “ruled” Rome in the late seventies B.C.E. (*Civil War* 2.154–59).

One man broke his windpipe with a noose and choked his throat,  
Another headlong hurled himself and split apart  
When he smashed on hard ground, and so they deprived the  
    bloodstained  
Victor of their deaths; another personally piles up  
The wood of his own funeral pyre and leaps into the flames  
Before all his blood has poured away, and he takes the fires while he  
    can.

Two of the types of death described here, hanging and jumping from heights, are among the most despised forms of suicide.<sup>39</sup> The third, I suppose, is a travesty of the typical dignified Roman funeral. These deaths, in Lucan’s eyes, are driven by emotion, frustration, and fear (would Sulla necessarily have proscribed these individuals?). As Lucan depicts them, they are precipitate and indicate a lack of control. Worst of all, they have no philosophical substance. This attitude of Lucan is mirrored elsewhere, but perhaps even more extravagantly, by the starved and fluid-deprived troops of Afranius and Petreius, two republican commanders who were on the losing side of the Caesarean military maneuvers in Spain. After being bottled up and deprived of sustenance for some time, they eventually broke out and, in desperation, moved on Caesar’s troops. They were terrifying, for they were driven by despair and a desire to perish (a *velle mori*, as Lucan puts it).<sup>40</sup> There is, in Lucan’s eyes, something utterly unhealthy in such actions even when performed by troops on the side that he supports.

Lucan did not understand the motives of his own subjects. Compared with the deaths already surveyed, these evidence the same pattern of self-display, volitional independence, the desire for a resolution of a dilemma, and the assertion of self. Rather than exhibiting despair and solitary hopelessness, these deaths are best understood as proud assertions of individual autonomy. Whatever Lucan’s intention (or that of his narratological mouthpiece) in these scenes, the dominant and lasting impression is of the problematization of control. It is as if this textual dialogue on control, carried out between Seneca, Petronius, Lucan (and, whether we like it or not, Chariton) set the parameters for Lucan’s representation.

Lucan, then, almost willfully misconstrues suicide. This is exactly what we would expect when discourse rules. Lucan persistently views suicide as either

a refuge for cowards or a refuge for those for whom living longer holds no attractions. The next example I would like to cite from Lucan's epic embodies this miscomprehension. Yet its depiction chimes in with this chapter's themes of volitional independence and problematized control. It comes from the central section of *Civil War* 4. The Caesarean Antonius, besieged in Illyria by the loyalist Roman forces of Pompey, tries to escape with his soldiers aboard three rafts (4.402–52). When one of these is checked, the soldiers on board, rather than surrender, kill themselves at the urging of their commander, Vulteius (4.452–581). Here is how Lucan depicts their determination (4.532–41).

Determined to die, the soldiers stood  
 With life already renounced, fierce, indifferent to the battle's outcome  
 Because the end was promised them by their own hand, and no  
     uproar  
 Shook the warriors' resolve, prepared for the worst;  
 And few in number, they resisted countless hands at once  
 On land and on sea; so great is their confidence in death.  
 And when they thought that blood enough had flowed in battle,  
 They turned their frenzy from the enemy. The vessel's captain,  
 Vulteius himself, was the first now to demand death with throat laid  
     bare.

Vulteius and his followers display, it seems, a no-nonsense Stoic resolve (4.573–581). But in this instance the suicide, though admirable, is wasteful, even futile (Saylor 1990), or so it seems to Lucan. Suicide here has been enacted by forces prolonging civil war and hostile to the survival of Rome. The soldiers would have been better put to devote such resolute determination to the protection of Rome rather than to their own “freedom.” Lucan makes his two-sided judgment of their spectacular suicides (something he might have said of his own death) in the following lines (4.573–79):

Fame, running through all  
 The world, spoke of no craft with a louder voice.  
 Yet even after the example of these warriors, cowardly  
 Races will not grasp that to escape slavery by one's own hand  
 Is not an arduous act of valor; but that tyranny is feared  
 Thanks to the sword and liberty is chafed by cruel weapons,  
 And they do not know that swords are given to prevent slavery.

Lucan's narrator ignores the theatricality of the death of Vulteius's men. He misses its proud self-assertion of volitional control and individuality. The narrator displays little sense of the problematizing of control evident in this pas-

sage. His carping republicanism diminishes the selfish, self-assertive heroism of these Pompeian soldiers.

The *Civil War* provides us with one suicidal figure who throws into relief the distressing falseness (and subservience to discourse) of so much of what we have viewed to this point. For this figure, suicide is rejected as being unworthy, as somehow playing false to the dilemma in which she is trapped. If death must come, it can only be through grief, through wasting. We witness this in those three scenes where Pompey's unhappy wife, Cornelia, seems set to commit suicide. Pompey was the loyalist Roman general and is one of the three main characters of Lucan's epic. In some ways he is its star. At 5.774 Cornelia avers to her husband that she will commit suicide if he dies. When Pompey is eventually murdered by Achilles, in front of Cornelia's very eyes, she understandably wants to do away with herself (*Civil War* 8.652–56).

Traitor, were you being kind? As you approached your final destiny,  
Did I deserve to die? I shall die, and not by the favor of the king.  
Allow me, sailors, to make a headlong leap, or fit  
The noose and twisted ropes around my neck, or let some comrade, 655  
Truly worthy of Magnus, drive the sword right through.

It appears in this scene that Lucan views Cornelia's death wish with considerable reserve. Coming so close after Pompey's speech expressing a resolute, Stoic acceptance of death, Cornelia's speech inclines one to think that she needs to imbue herself in more of her husband's spirit. This is, as we learn, precisely the spirit in which she is imbued. At 9.104–16 Cornelia rejects suicide as unworthy of the wife of Pompey and indicates that death will come to her through grief alone.

“Great Pompey, it [my soul] could see your pyre and not take refuge  
In death. I'll crush it in my breast with the pounding strokes 105  
Of grief. I'll distill it in my tears. I want no sword,  
No rope, no drop headfirst through empty air: heartbreak  
Alone must kill Great Pompey's widow.” Saying this,  
She veiled her head in funereal black and, sworn to shun  
The light, interred herself in cavernous depths of the hull 110  
To hug her bitter pain. Her very tears become sweet  
To her and, with no man to love, she loves her grief.  
The rising swell, the east wind howling in the ropes,  
The sailors' shouts as sheer disaster threatens, leave  
Her unmoved. She prays for what they dread, invokes the storm 115  
As friend, and lies composed for her death.

The rejection of active suicide seems based on the realization that its self-display, its volitional control, and its assertion of self would in this case tell more of the person committing the suicide and of her individuality than of her devotion to another. It is as if Lucan intuits that Cornelia rejects suicide precisely because its self-assertion would dim—even upstage—the tragedy of the death of her husband, Pompey. It would demean the *selflessness* of her love. The passivity of wasting is all that is left open to her.<sup>41</sup>

Lucan's take on suicide has its most startling reflection in real life. Lucan committed suicide at approximately the same time as Seneca and as a result of the same conspiracy. He was just twenty-six. The circumstances of his death, as Tacitus describes them (*Annals* 15.70), display some of the Stoic resolve of his uncle.

Then he [Nero] ordered death for Annaeus Lucan. When, because of loss of blood, he felt his feet and hands going cold and life gradually leaving his extremities (though his heart was still warm and his brain clear), Lucan remembered the poem he had written in which a wounded soldier died a similar death. He recited the verses. That was his last utterance.

The quotation of the words of the dying soldier are a fetching touch. The nobility of this scene, however, was compromised by reality. It seems somewhat to match Lucan's own jaded interpretation of his epic suicides and suicide attempts. In Suetonius's life of Lucan and in Tacitus (*Annals* 15.56), it is said that after his arrest, Lucan denounced his mother, Acilia, in the expectation of gaining pardon (but see Getty 1940). Lucan hoped this might evoke fellow feeling in the matricide Nero. Acilia was neither pardoned nor punished. The tale does not end here. Lucan's father, Mela, in pursuit of his dead son's personal fortune, was falsely implicated in the Pisonian conspiracy by one of Lucan's friends. At the urging of Nero, Mela took his own life. Lucan's uncles, Seneca (as we have just seen) and Gallio, perished in the same circumstances. The only glimmer of light in this black landscape appears with Lucan's stage-managed death, as Tacitus reports it. Perhaps all this demonstrates that the discursive representation of suicide bears scant relationship to the actuality.



Behind all of these deaths from this period, whether they are apparently real-life or fictional, idealized Stoic or panic-driven, sentimental or parodic, there seems to exist an underlying set of rules, a syntax, as it were, that determines the modes and motives for suicide. The suicides of Chariton and Seneca, for example, do differ on several key aspects: Seneca's Stoic suicides are often

compelled, whereas Chariton's are chosen; the Stoic deaths exhibit calm, resolve, and philosophic detachment, while Chariton's lovers display haste, indecision, and excessive emotion; Seneca's suicides focus on the "how," Chariton's on the "why." Yet the similarities between the various suicides and suicide attempts are both striking and compelling. The main "syntactical" similarities may be listed as follows:

1. These suicides and suicide attempts are motivated by a profound sense of constraint or frustration.
2. Suicide, in its immediate context, is usually designed to provide a solution to a dilemma presented by constraint or frustration.
3. To achieve the end of resolving this dilemma, the suicide or suicide attempt usually is carried out in such a manner as to create public display.
4. Such a display is normally designed to elicit strong emotions from its audience.
5. We find that this display, directed at some form of immediate audience, can be designed to exhibit weakness or strength, depending on which is envisaged as most useful at the time.
6. This display of strength or weakness, perhaps because it is a chosen thing, problematizes the concept of control (even if this is, as is usually the case in fact, to stress its complete lack).
7. This display of strength or weakness also aims to affirm the actor's apparent volitional control; his or her action, therefore, demonstrates will.
8. Thus, the suicide or suicide attempt is above all a demonstration of the integrity of an individual's selfhood.

The eight rules can be fleshed out in such a manner as to provide a "map" by which we may trace the etiological origins of some of the forms of suicide that have been described in this chapter.<sup>42</sup> The "map" runs as follows. When faced with an insoluble and enduring cause of frustration,<sup>43</sup> caused by shock, overwhelming emotion, unendurable social pressure, confinement, or sense deprivation, an individual, depending on their station within their society or their group and their gender, may react in a passive or self-directed manner. Typically this will produce a physical reaction.<sup>44</sup> There will be astonishment, blanched cheeks, glassy eyes, distorted facial expressions, voicelessness, spasms, and swooning and collapsing to the ground.<sup>45</sup> Either of two subsequent reactions are possible. Sickening may follow. This is accompanied by fretting, wasting, a rejection of food, and, eventually, a withdrawal from the

community or group. In such cases death soon follows, as a result, it seems, of a psychic disintegration. (This type of reaction more or less resembles that of Sophocles' Ajax.) A sufferer, however, may react in such a manner that leads to psychic reformulation. Such a course, as we have seen throughout this chapter, will in some way put at issue control or power (whose exercise has caused the individual this trouble in the first place). To achieve control or power, the individual challenges his or her community by some form of a public self-display. In the examples in this chapter, such a theatrical display was achieved through a very public and stage-managed suicide or attempt at suicide.

What we are dealing with here in this "map" and in these rules is not reality but the cliché of compounded literary representation. (It is for this reason that I have entitled this chapter "The Myth of Suicide." Real suicide is not at issue here.) Another way of putting this might be to suggest that what we are viewing is a discursive construct—in the Foucauldian sense. The rules tell us a considerable amount about the literary formulation of suicide and suicide attempts, but not about real-life suicide. (The closest thing that we have here is Ajax's death, one devoid of the usual self-promotion of the deaths and would-be deaths of this chapter.) These rules do, however, tell us about the sorts of pressure that may have given rise to this discourse. Discourses do not exist in timeless intertextual voids; they reflect reality, though not in a simple, one-to-one or reflexive manner.

It would be neat to be able to provide an explanation for the remarkable prevalence of the ancient attribution of suicide to the period of the writers discussed in this chapter.<sup>46</sup> To try to determine whether we are dealing with a sociological reflex rather than with a contemporary literary enthusiasm, however, is unconvincing. Occasionally one sees this interest in suicide attributed to the "decadence" of the period: it was, that is to say, a sociological reflex. Such speculation is provided with its most vivid testimony from certain passages in Seneca. I will repeat some of these here, primarily to illustrate just how unhelpful such claims can be.

The Latin phrase *fastidium vitae* is used occasionally by Seneca. It represents a satiety—even a disgust with life—that is produced by the predictable and repetitive sameness of things (*quousque eadem?* [More of the same?], asks Seneca). This emotion is alluded to often in Roman literature. The restless and unsatisfied emotion to which Seneca refers here is perhaps to be linked with the bored restlessness of the wealthy to which Lucretius and Horace refer and that I have discussed in an earlier chapter. (It may also be linked with the *aegritudo animi* discussed by Cicero in the *Tusculan Disputations*.) But for imperial writers such as Seneca this emotion takes on a far more dangerous allure. The con-

dition can engender in people a type of a “death wish,” a *libido moriendi* or a *velle mori*. So Seneca tells us at *Epistles* 24.25.

. . . and above all let that emotion be avoided that has taken hold of many, a death wish [*libido moriendi*]. For, Lucullus, just as there is an unreflecting inclination of the mind toward other things, so there is to death. This often gets hold of the most noble and most gifted men, and often the lazy and ignoble. One group despises life; the other is wearied by it.<sup>47</sup>

It seems that death, usually by one’s own hand, offers the most potent cure for this illness (surely an extreme form of what we would call ennui). If we can believe Seneca’s descriptions, then the emotion of *libido moriendi* was widespread in his era and was, in some cases, a product of *fastidium vitae*, a weariness with life.<sup>48</sup>

It is possible to provide a more detailed description of this illness or *morbus*. The malady is neatly characterized, as we have seen earlier, by Seneca at *De tranquillitate animi* 2.15 (Loeb translation adapted).

And so we ought to understand that what we struggle with is the fault not of the places but of ourselves; when there is need for endurance we are weak, and we cannot bear toil or pleasure or ourselves or anything for very long. This has driven some to death, because by often altering their purpose, they were always brought back to the same things and had left themselves no room for anything new. They began to be sick of life and of the world itself, and from that self-indulgence that wasted them was bound the thought “More of the same [*quous que eadem*]?”

A supplement to this passage is provided shortly after by Seneca in *Epistles* 24.26 when he suggests:

[T]he same satiety for doing and a disdain [*fastidium*]—not boredom [*odium*]—for life assails certain individuals. We are driven into this, philosophy itself forcing us, when we say: “How long the same things? Surely I will yawn, I will sleep, I will eat, I will be thirsty, I will be cold, I will be hot. Is there no end? But do all things go in a circle? Night overcomes day, day night, summer gives way to autumn, winter presses on autumn, which is checked by spring. All things pass that they may return. I do nothing new, I see nothing new. Sometimes this makes me seasick [*fit aliquando et huius rei nausia*]. There are many who judge living not painful but empty.”

Suicide, according to Seneca, may be the result of an extremely oppressive form of boredom. It is unlikely that Seneca was correct. I know of no certain link between suicide and decadence (and anyhow, most of Chariton’s romantic

and suicide-prone heroes show little evidence of decadent Roman habits).<sup>49</sup> Suicide is the product of unendurable frustration, of extreme psychological trauma, or of psychosis. There is little evidence to suggest that it is ever the product of ennui or even of depression. Seneca's unconvincing romantic—or is it world-weary?—speculation suggests that the notion of suicide must have been a topic of considerable concern and of interest to Romans during this period. That is all.

Suicide was of such appeal because it provides a superlative demonstration of the problematization of personal control. In the case of many of our Stoics, the problem is the result of their subservience to an emperor, a slave master, even a god. In the case of Chariton's heroes, the other extreme, it is the result of subservience to an overwhelming emotional demand. The powerlessness may result in a profound sense of helplessness—we witness this frequently in the cases of Chaereas and Dionysius—and, often, in *seemingly* utter passivity. The suicides and suicide attempts so often represent means for solving dilemmas. We have seen how Chaereas's leap into the harbor in Syracuse resolved the conflicting demands of his parents and Callirhoe; we have seen how Seneca's death resolved the demands of self-pride and an arbitrary imperial cruelty. These dilemmas are normally the product of forces outside the victim (parents, Callirhoe, or Nero). It is important, therefore, that the solution to the conflicting demands involves a public display—even an eye-catching element of self-display. How else, other than through display, can our potential suicide demonstrate to those causing his or her problems that he or she can rise above them? It follows that these deaths are designed to elicit strong emotional responses from their viewers—whether these are Dionysius's retainers, Chaereas's friend Polycharmus, or the crowd of admirers who thronged Seneca's death performance. This emotive display, if one is a Stoic, exhibits strength and resolve; if one is a Roman facing Sulla's proscriptions, it highlights one's individual defiance, even within a situation of apparent powerlessness and helplessness. Circumstances dictate the sort of response required. The issue that these displays render problematic is power and control: one questions this external power (whether it is Eros's or Nero's) by pitting one's own power against it; or one highlights the arbitrariness of this external power by making publicly prominent one's helplessness. It follows, therefore, that in these suicides and attempted suicides we witness from the actor great displays of willpower, or, as I have termed it, volitional control. Naturally this display is ultimately futile, for extinction renders the suicide a gesture of powerlessness. (Thus, these suicide and suicide attempts represent above all powerful demonstrations of selfhood. The paradox in this is acute.) But perhaps even more im-



portantly, these literary suicides and suicide attempts represent a problematization of control and of power.

The frequency of these modes by which these suicides and suicide attempts are enacted in the literature of this period therefore points not so much to an upsurge in the desire of people to do away with themselves but to some form of a crisis in the way individuals perceived authority and thus registered their own selfhood. I doubt that this crisis is the result of the periodic excesses of the principate or of anything as banal as “decadence,” for this crisis seems Mediterranean-wide.<sup>50</sup> It is registered in regions with a more tangential relationship to the principate and in regions where decadence can hardly have been an issue. Rather, it must be the result of a number of interlinked factors, such as urbanization, the centralization of control structures, the multicultural nature of the large Mediterranean cities, the eroding of traditional class structures, and so forth.

What we may be able to say with a little more confidence still is that this apparently literary epidemic fits very well into a larger attitudinal framework, one that highlights those states of passivity and interiority that we have seen given such prominence in a number of the conditions discussed in earlier chapters.<sup>51</sup> With the type of suicide discussed in this chapter, we seem to be sharing in a dialogue that embraces a broad range of passive affective conditions—melancholia, lovesickness, and, as will become apparent in later chapters, a reevaluation of the way that time should be employed. It is a dialogue within which suicide plays a small, though noteworthy, role. It is my suggestion that the frequency of suicides, as they are depicted in literary texts, is so pronounced in this period not just because of this problem of control but also because it so matches the formulation of the dialogue of passivity that I have attempted to register throughout this book. Had it not fitted so easily within this textual discourse, it would not have become so prominent.



It may seem to be extreme to speak of suicidal epidemics (especially those represented primarily in the minds of writers). They have existed in eras other than the classical.<sup>52</sup> There was a notable example in fin de siècle France. It offers neat correlation for the forces behind this classical outbreak. At the same time, it emphasizes the striking affective similarity between Greece and Rome of the first century of our era and recent history. Allow me to stress again, however, that we can hardly be dealing here with anything other than a *literary* epidemic of suicide. As I have stated earlier, we should think of this as a kind

of unconscious textual dialogue taking place on the subject of suicide between a number of writers in this period and as a dialogue whose parameters were narrow and were set by a need to problematize the concept of individual volitional control, of the autonomous self. Suicide—the private, pain-driven action to which I alluded at the beginning of this chapter (exemplified by Ajax’s death)—is hardly at issue here. At any rate, I base my brief epitome of French *fin de siècle* suicide on Alvarez 1971.

“I dreamed of suicide,” wrote Flaubert of his youth. He goes on to describe how he and his provincial friends “swung between madness and suicide; some of them killed themselves . . . another strangled himself with his tie, several died of debauchery in order to escape boredom; it was beautiful!” (Alvarez 1971, 221). Flaubert’s enthusiasm (something carried on in the literature of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries) provides a vivid and instructive tableau with which to finish this chapter. In this period the Romantics and the Decadents and, later, the surrealists and the dadaists lavished particular attention upon suicide. It was as if they had invented it. What is remarkable, however, is just how close these deaths are, in “syntactical” terms, to those we have already confronted in this chapter.

Suicide did not always resemble Flaubert’s version. It did not necessarily require the dignification of boredom and madness. De Vigny’s *Chatterton* was credited with doubling the suicide rate in France between the years 1830 and 1840 (Alvarez 1971, 210). Given the unreliability of statistical collection in this period, however, the high incidence of morbidity associated with this epidemic (not of a sort to be confused with the affective epidemics represented by *acedia*) can have existed only in the minds of journalists and the credulous. So we hear that in the same period a young man, accused of pushing his pregnant mistress into the Seine, defended himself in court with the statement “we live in an age of suicide; this woman gave herself to Death” (Alvarez 1971, 211). A character in a popular contemporary novel summed it up neatly: “suicide establishes a man. Alive one is nothing; dead one becomes a hero . . . all suicides are successful; the papers take them up; people feel for them. I must decidedly make my preparations” (Alvarez 1971, 212). These preparations were at least made on the page. Keats died at twenty-five. The Romantic association between youth, poetry, and death encouraged the aberration. Shelley died two years later at age twenty-nine, Byron at thirty-six with the heart and cerebellum of an old man; Coleridge solaced unexpected longevity with opium; Baudelaire finished himself off with syphilis, Rimbaud, literary career complete at twenty, as a *littérateuricide* (Alvarez 1971, 203). The theatricality and self-display involved here hardly needs to be underlined. Alfred Alvarez, discussing this Romantic angst in his book *The Savage God* (whence I have taken

these illustrations), acutely remarks that “suicide *à la mode* had one element in common: the belief that the suicide himself would be present to witness the drama created by his own death” (Alvarez 1971, 210). Suicide had become a thoroughly literary affair. It was a metaphor, a “supreme, dramatic gesture of contempt toward a dull, bourgeois world” (Alvarez 1971, 210).

The enthusiasm for suicide was carried on past the Romantics and past the Decadents well into the twentieth century.<sup>53</sup> The dadaists and the surrealists enacted their own version of the suicide cult in Paris. Suicide became a metaphor enlisted in the service of art. We read, “Sir, allow me to reply to your question by copying out the notice on my bedroom wall: enter without knocking, but you are requested to commit suicide before leaving.” So ran one of the responses to a 1933 symposium on the theme “Is suicide a solution?” (Alvarez 1971, 232). It was published by the Parisian arts magazine *La révolution surréaliste*. Most contributors answered in the affirmative. Dada, on Alvarez’s explanation, entailed a destructive agitation against everything: established values, the bourgeoisie, art, even life itself. It was, Alvarez believes (1971, 226), a product of the “sense of universal moral bankruptcy which followed the First World War.” For the Dadaist, meaningless art reflected a meaningless world. Suicide inevitably became the most representative work of art.

A death marked the movement’s beginning. For the exquisite and influential Jacques Vaché, life and death were art. He took his life with an opium overdose shared with two unwitting friends. “I object to being killed in the war,” he wrote, “. . . I shall die when I want to die, and then I shall die with somebody else.” Vaché’s death, notes Alvarez (1971, 239), was the “supreme Dada gesture, the ultimate psychopathic joke: suicide and double murder.” The demise of Jacques Rigault in 1929 is said to mark the end of the movement (Rigault observed that “suicide is a vocation”). Rigault, who consistently destroyed everything he wrote, did leave the following comment: “the only way left to us of showing our contempt for life is to accept it. Life is not worth the trouble to leave it” (Alvarez 1971, 231)

As Alvarez describes things, we can descry in these passages several characteristics that we have already isolated in ancient literary contexts. That we are witnessing an essentially literary event deserves highlighting at the outset. These suicides appear to have been more written about than acted upon. Their representation in words, however, emphasizes other aspects. These vaunted deaths are all determinedly public and, to follow Alvarez’s descriptions, determinedly theatrical, even stage-managed. Above all, these deaths rely for their impact upon an audience, even if it is only a reading one. The deaths, furthermore, represent freely chosen actions. So Vaché states, “I shall die when I want to die.” Another writer states of suicide, “I must decidedly make

my preparations.” With this assertion of volition is problematized the notion of control. Above all, these Frenchmen are insistent upon their right to control their actions and, in particular, the manner by which they will die.

Following from this self-display, the assertion of volition, and the problematization of control is, most obviously, the assertion of self, its assertion as an entity separate from the world about. How could this have been better expressed than by that Gallic aficionado who maintained: “suicide establishes a man. Alive one is nothing; dead one becomes a hero . . . all suicides are successful.”