

This won't hurt

AMIA SRINIVASAN

Simon Critchley
 NOTES ON SUICIDE
 104pp. Fitzcarraldo Editions. Paperback,
 £10.99.
 978 1 9106950 6 7

Published: 17 February 2016

made clear what this has to do with that, though we do learn that Webster once wrote a fake suicide note that read “Dear Simon, Break a leg, or all your legs”, which she signed “with all my love-hate, Jamieson”. Instead of a theoretical way into suicide, Critchley says he wants to find a practical way out of it, to rid himself of “fantasies of self-destruction . . . motivated by self-pity, self-loathing and revenge”. He explains that the book is being written in a hotel room in East Anglia, where he came from New York to “meet the darkness in the darkness, at the end of the land . . . the vast, the unlimited”.

It is bad form to question the sincerity of someone's suicidal ideation, but one cannot help it with Critchley. His motivation might not be academic, but *Notes on Suicide* is more of a philosophical essay than a felt reckoning with the prospect of taking one's own life. In this it feels like Descartes's *Meditations*, the cold North Sea replacing Descartes's warming fire, death replacing doubt: a crisis staged for the reader's benefit, with nothing really hanging in the balance. Surely no one who has seriously contemplated suicide could question whether there might be good reasons for killing oneself. Yet Critchley begins his essay by making heavy weather of both arguments for and against suicide's permissibility, claiming they all face insurmountable problems. We have a duty to God, some say, not to kill ourselves – or, in a more secular register, a duty to our families – but what if we're miserable? We have the right to take our own lives, some say, but doesn't this ignore the legitimate claims others have on us? Why not simply say: other people might have legitimate claims on our lives, but sometimes those claims are trumped by more pressing considerations: unbearable pain, indignity, a political cause? Like other drastic actions – quitting a job, ending a marriage – suicide isn't a decision to be made lightly, but to ponder seriously whether it is ever reasonable to forget what torture life (or work, or marriage) can be.

Critchley is convinced this is a minority view, and that most of us remain in the grip of a Christian metaphysics that sees suicide as an absolute wrong. Could he be right? Assisted suicide might remain controversial, but ordinary suicide is legal throughout Europe. (Criminalizing suicide raises the problem of how you punish a dead person; the neat solution of Sir William Blackstone, the eighteenth-century English jurist, was to ditch the corpse in the highway with a stake driven through it.) Even the recent debates in Parliament about the assisted dying bill did not refer much to the inviolable sanctity of life, but rather to the reasonable (if ultimately unconvincing) worry that the law would encourage vulnerable people to die for bad reasons. The bill failed, but that is at odds with the mood of the country; a 2010 survey suggests that 82 per cent of the British public supports medically assisted dying for terminally ill patients, and the number only drops to 71 per cent among religious people. Is Critchley right that we abhor suicide? Or do we just mourn those who kill themselves when there was still succour to be found?

When Critchley turns from abstraction to real cases of suicide he finds no dearth of understandable motivations: desperation, revenge, boredom, economics. Most interesting is the suicide that heeds Seneca's dictum that the wise man "lives as long as he ought, not as long as he can". George Eastman, founder of Eastman Kodak, shot himself in the heart, leaving behind the note: "To my friends: my work is done. Why wait?" Hunter S. Thompson apparently felt that late was better than never: "67. 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted. Boring . . . 67, you are getting greedy. Act your old age. Relax. This won't hurt". Critchley admires this sort of end, sober and unentitled. But he is attracted most of all to suicide done for no apparent reason, as a leap into the absurd. He quotes approvingly from Edouard Levé's novel *Suicide* (Levé turned in the manuscript ten days before hanging himself): "Your death was scandalously beautiful".

Simon Critchley's ultimate refutation of the absurdist case for suicide is that suicide is too positive an act: if nothing means anything, then why do anything at all, let alone kill yourself? Why not meet the world, instead, with indifference – or love? But here the author betrays the casual nihilism he wishes to affect. Love isn't something we might as well embrace because life is pointless, but one of the things that gives life, when it has one, its point. To think otherwise is to indulge an adolescent fantasy of suicide, one that not only obscures the real terrors that drive many people to it, but also the real goods they thereby, often knowingly, forsake. For Freud the mystery of suicide – how the self-loving ego could destroy itself – had its solution in hate: melancholics come to see themselves as a mere object of loathing; the self as subject is destroyed, almost incidentally, along the way. But many suicide notes are also love notes, as if the anticipation of acting out one's self-hatred frees one to love more fully, finally. Kurt Cobain, in his suicide note, described how he had become "hateful toward all humans in general" before scrawling in large letters at the bottom of the page: "I LOVE YOU! I LOVE YOU!"

By continuing to use the site, you agree to the use of cookies. You can change this and find out more by following this link.