

Instruments of Escape

Cleombrotus high on a rock,
Above Ambracia flood,
Bade sol adieu, and as he spoke,
Plunged headlong into the flood.

From no mischance the leap he took,
But sought the realms beneath,
Because he read in Plato's book,
That souls live after death.

Callimachus, Epigram XXIV

Death by Drowning

The suicide of Cleombrotus of Ambracia haunts Europe as an unsettling echo of its inaugural execution – itself interpretable as suicide or murder – the death of Socrates.

In the bustling Athenian marketplace where a long-established myth tells us Western culture began, the pursuit of truth through reason held one compelling sales pitch against the sophists' pursuit of worldly power through rhetoric, the enigma of Socrates' joviality on the day of his death. In the *Phaedo*, Plato's account of that day, Socrates having apparently enjoyed his time on death row cheerily reflects on how a life dedicated to reason is itself practising death. The true philosopher, having already denied so many facets of bodily life, half-lives in a state of half-death. Plato thus concretised the Greek image of the good death, *eu-thanasia*, that despite its tragic dressing un.masks itself as the epic of a fearless hero defeating the ultimate monstrosity. The last words of Socrates before he drinks the poison, a parting joke that his friends owe a sacrifice to Asclepius the god of medicine, suggests that death is not merely an inevitability to be faced bravely but a welcome cure to the sickness that is life. Two millennia later, Michel de Montaigne in his *Essays* could still repeat the claim Socrates embodied that day, that "to philosophise is to learn to die."

What then of Cleombrotus? Although the promise of jovial indifference to life or death seems attractive enough, what about the person whose response to encountering a teaching on learning to die is to accept the lesson so readily that they choose to plunge immediately into death? Was such a person simply too immature or fragile for exposure to serious material addressing death (and can we be sure that we are not?), had they fatally misunderstood what they were presented with (and if so who was at fault?), or were they the courageous ones willing to hold to the consequences of an argument wherever it led? It is unsurprising that Plato soon began to theorise about education, asking at what age someone was ready to progress to philosophy

understood as learning to die. Cleombrotus's death showed that the *Phaedo*, a text that has a better claim than any other to establish our cherished image of the fearless pursuer of truth and the rewards of a life dedicated to reason, is dangerous. Although that text was spared such measures, those who took an interest in death were soon to collide with censorship. A century and a half later, Hegesias of Cyrene's text *Death by Starvation* presented a vision of death so seductive that it supposedly led to a spate of suicides in Alexandria. Nicknamed *Peisithanatos* or death persuader from then on, Hegesias was banned from teaching by King Ptolemy II Philadelphus. In the perhaps exaggerated description of Giacomo Casanova, Ptolemy II worried this doctrine would depopulate the city.

If the story I am telling is convincing then, from the very beginning of Western culture, we have faced a tension between the fundamental promise that reason will help us to passively accept death without fear, perhaps even to face it joyfully, and the underlying concern that it might lead us to actively accept death, to enthusiastically embrace it in the manner of Cleombrotus plunging into the deep waters of the Ambracian Gulf.

The practical problem with walking the perhaps impossibly narrow line between being detached from life yet shunning suicide is that those whose lives are full of pain require a convincing argument to hold them in this life, yet here philosophy has not served us well. Socrates did his best to offer two reasons why the lover of wisdom – despite the fact that they are practicing death, already half-dead and that death is a cure for life – should nevertheless not take their own life. That these arguments are unconvincing can be seen from Cleombrotus's suicidal response to reading the *Phaedo*. In later texts Plato takes a more pragmatic approach to quelling this risk, suggesting that those who commit suicide should be buried in unmarked graves without funeral rites. While we might conquer the fear of death through reason, it seems we conquer the attraction of death through new fears. Over two thousand years later when Albert Camus writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that there is “but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide”, we still possess no particularly convincing arguments.

We are thus presented with a fundamental choice: to continue to work at the long task of learning to die despite the danger to ourselves and others of addressing a death that often proves more seductive than we would like to admit, or to abandon the task that originally sat at the very heart of Western culture. That very few contemporary thinkers or artists would describe what they do as “learning to die” suggests that we have largely taken the latter path. If I would like to defend philosophy's inaugural vocation, I would also insist that the death of Cleombrotus must mark our pursuit. We are not free to learn to die any way we choose; to address death is a sacred duty because lives are at stake.

The purpose of this long preamble before addressing Edgar Martins' *Siloquies and Soliloquies on Death, Life and Other Interludes* more directly is to stress that the tensions Martin struggles with directly and indirectly in this work have a long history. I would suggest we ought to approach these images from two perspectives. On the one hand, we must consider them in the light of their material content as parts of an

investigation that contributes towards the task of learning to die. Martins invites us into a rich world of objects and bodies that our society rarely allows us access to: a set of uncanny entities that might pose significant challenges to our common construal of time and death. On the other hand, and this is just as interesting, we can see in Martins' photographic practice an attempt to negotiate or at least "fail better" at what I have referred to as the sacred dimension of the task. That is to say, we should not only appreciate the riches that emerge from the archive but attempt to inhabit the decisions that Martins has made in selecting, producing and displaying these images. If the word did not sound too humble on the tongue, we might say that Martins offers an education in tact. In the rest of this essay I will offer some preliminary work in the direction of these tasks.

Razor

Each item used to commit suicide presents itself as an enigma. Whether the choice emerged across a lifetime of elaborate suicidal fantasies or was simply snatched as the nearest object capable of doing the job in the climax of an unprecedented emotion, someone has chosen *this* singular object as their route out of existence. Although few in the West believe that we take possessions with us in the manner of the pharaohs, with violent deaths this last object becomes irrevocably bound up with the identity of the dead: the shotgun that killed Kurt Cobain or the stones in Virginia Woolf's overcoat pockets are as inseparable from their identities as Socrates' hemlock or Christ and the cross. This is perhaps a peculiarity of our culture – a legacy or cause of the way we recognise saints by the objects of their martyrdom, typically portrayed as haunting the background of their lives or as a burden symbolically carried by them until the real encounter with the instrument of the death on their last day. The life-history of those who die by violent means thus becomes retrospectively shot through for us by the instrument of their death. Like Oedipus or Macbeth, every step of a life now framed as tragic is conceived as leading towards some fateful prophesised appointment with an ominous object, which offers itself as the hermeneutic key to understanding each and every moment of their life or word they wrote.

We see a straight razor. It is a simple tool that a man presumably held to his throat every day of his adult life while trying carefully to avoid cutting himself. One day, we assume, he decided to wield it for an entirely different purpose. We are compelled to speculate about this man even if we have no face, age or name to start from. Did he, the cold blade against his neck, dream daily of this fatal deed until the morning came when, perhaps with no obvious external cause, he finally carried through a long-fantasised act? Perhaps not, perhaps he had never considered suicide before and it was only in the fog of some unknown personal tragedy that he reached in turmoil for the one blade in the house he knew to be sharp. But what tragedy could provoke such an act: a death, infidelity, something political? Suddenly this series of fantasies implodes – we are told the victim was a woman! This straight razor, an object so deeply associated

in our contemporary semiotics with the most macho masculinity, was used by a female for the act of suicide. Indeed, all three straight razors photographed by Martins were used as suicide instruments by women.

If we feel an illicit pleasure looking at such objects while dreaming a series of stories, perhaps we should not judge ourselves too harshly. The compulsion to indulge in playing detective with the minimal clues we are offered is so automatic as to be practically unconscious. Just as I cannot avoid constructing an image of the previous owner of a second-hand book through the passages they have underlined, the choice of suicide instrument offers itself as saying something about a person we will never have any other access to. We might call this empty space of fantasy that so many of Martins' images set in motion the idiosyncratic enigma of the suicide instrument, but what fills this void is always a lie.

A more or less accurate factual reconstruction of events is always possible. We can model and map out the place of suicide and list the sequence of actions: an unbounded accumulation of details where another piece of the puzzle might always come to light. Yet what we are really drawn towards in our fantasising is not the diagrammatic event but the lived death in all its sound and fury. The productive tension stretches between two distinct fantasies: the fantasised experience of a life in its last moments that I produce before the image and the fantasy that I can make progress on this path. My confident pronouncement – “Ah, but of course, now we are getting somewhere!” – as I learn that the razor was used by a female stems from the belief that I am somehow nearer to cracking an essential mystery that still inhabits the object. Yet, even if somehow we were granted all the facts, the fantasy of capturing those last lived moments when someone took up this object as an instrument of escape would still be a lie. That suicide is beyond the bounds of our empathetic imagination, that it is essentially private, is symbolised by the suicide instrument that simultaneously provokes and rejects our fantasies.

To justify these claims, we must turn to what I will call the general enigma of the suicide instrument. To reach this enigma we will briefly pass through Martin Heidegger's 1927 book *Being and Time*. Whereas previous thinkers characterised our basic relationship with things through the model of a detached consciousness inspecting an isolated object – “I contemplate the razor” – Heidegger argued that the way the razor fundamentally discloses itself to me as part of my lived world is far richer. The razor is not contemplated, it is reached for and used in pursuing tasks. We are oriented towards the future when engaged in worldly activity and the razor is thus *ready-to-hand* for our purposes. It only discloses itself as an isolated physical object in space and time, as *present-at-hand*, if something goes wrong: if it is missing, blunt or falls apart. The third modality of disclosure is the way I relate to other purposive, questioning beings akin to myself, which Heidegger called *being-with*. Although this redescription of how objects disclose themselves is compelling, it is when objects refuse to be reduced to this tripartite schema that encountering them might teach us something fundamental about the lived world we construct. I argued in my book *The Politics and Pedagogy of Mourning* that Heidegger offers then withdraws encountering the corpse of a loved one

as event that cannot fit this account of worldly disclosure, while in 1935 Heidegger explicitly claimed that artworks could not be reduced to it. If coming face to face with a corpse or artwork offers a kind of transformative education, it is through how its mode of disclosure challenges our constitution of temporal lived reality. It is on this level, I claim, that encounters with uncanny objects such as corpses can teach us about dying. What I have named the general enigma of the suicide instrument would be how it too refuses these modes of disclosure.

Corpse, artwork, suicide instrument – three enigmas that complicate our account of being in the world and three entities we encounter in a labyrinthine overlapping in Martins' work.

Scissors

We see an unusually shaped pair of scissors. Of course it is not a pair of scissors but the photograph of a pair of scissors or perhaps the reproduction of a photograph. The image nevertheless refers us directly to an object that still exists somewhere in the world and that could still be used for its original purpose. It remains a simple pair of scissors that might be found sat neatly on a table. This entity is not merely mute about its previous existence – it knows nothing about it. The scissors as scissors remain bluntly and brutally indifferent to their violent past: unstained. That they will never be used again for the purpose they were created for – that they have become the focus of another kind of concern that merits their removal to an archive – could easily be forgotten if they strayed too far from their label. It is only separable details such as the box they are stored in and some writing on a report that tells us this object once played a unique, unrepeatable and terrible role. Without context, nothing would make us think this photograph was of a suicide instrument.

To be unstained, indifferent and mute – only tainted by a detachable record and a forgettable context – is the general enigma of the suicide instrument. The object is precisely not a camera storing the events it witnesses. There is no record in and on the object of the fateful moment of its use: it has not been transformed and has not incorporated the death into its material structure. It is this lack that empties out the space that will be filled by the fantasy images of the idiosyncratic enigma. We will be spurred on by the underlying fantasy that the object is a riddle to be solved. It is always *as if* our next fantasised construction, correctly informed by all those facts we have been told about the victim, might finally mesh into place with a memory image buried deep within the object. Yet the object itself has not become a riddle and there is no solution. The illusion or delusion that inspires the play of fantasy trades on a feeling of proximity – we dream before the suicide instrument that we are getting closer to a singular person who, granted a few shreds more of information, we might claim to know and understand in that climactic moment that would retrospectively make sense of everything.

Cable

We see a cable. The image evokes a distinct shiver of repulsion, as if there is something especially cruel about suicide instruments that are not to be found on a list approved by tradition. A touch of blackly comic absurdity infects the death and threatens to make mourning even harder on those who remain. We wonder why the person could not have found some rope. Soon perhaps we will concede that few of us have strong ropes at home compared to endless metres of sturdy computer cable. Where normally it is an anachronism that feels out of place, here we might say it is the very chronism that gives the instrument a sense of unreality. We realise that we might ourselves use just such a cable for such a task, that it eminently sensible, and so the fantasy that we have grown a little closer to understanding the victim's last moments is fed.

That the cable had an original function that it could very possibly still carry out is the first dimension of the general enigma of the suicide instrument. It is the fact that a suicide instrument was not made to be a suicide instrument. Suicide involves the misuse of an object. While in some cases the object may have been modified or damaged such that it can no longer return to its original function, even in these cases it cannot properly be said to have ceased to be what it was and become a suicide instrument – it is only a damaged cable.

The second dimension of the general enigma is that the misuse is doubly unique. It is unique because the life taken is unique and because it is an act performed only once. While other objects might be misused – the stool that have become a hat-stand, the pencil that clears a drain – the suicide instrument is uniquely misused as it can never again bring about the end of that singular life. Even if the same cable were used for suicide by someone else, it would not be the same misuse.

The general enigma's third dimension is that one can never gain expertise with a suicide instrument. It takes us time and repeated uses to find an object disclose itself as *ready-to-hand* for our projected purposes. A child does not simply pick up a pen and write or ride a bike, even if they have seen others using them and know all the steps theoretically. One must return to an object to use it with expertise, but the suicide instrument allows no return. It is an object that is always unwieldy in the hands of an absolute beginner.

The fourth dimension is that the suicide instrument in its unique and inexperienced misuse has no onward address. Normally when we use an object purposefully it forms part of an interrelated equipmental totality. The cable refers to a computer, to a printer, to a whole world of possible actions from the most mundane daily grind to those broader aims that give sense to our lives. Objects are made for each other and mutually illuminate each other insofar as we engage with them in living in the world. Yet, in contrast to this richness where every object refers to and makes sense of other objects, the suicide instrument has no onward address. Suicide is an action that leads nowhere and cannot form a part of any worldly project since it is an attempt to escape its projects. The cable, in the act of ending a life, refers to nothing else that

would make sense of it. While it is action that opens the world and makes sense of objects, suicide is the closing of the world. Curled in on itself to the point of collapse, the suicide instrument in the moment of its use refers to nothing but the user and the user to nothing but the instrument. This is the essential solitude of suicide – the end of empathetic intelligibility rather than an opportunity for it.

De Profundis Clamavi Ad Te

From out of this infinitely tightly wound referential circuit of instrument and user no experience can emerge. Suicide is an unintelligible black hole. Though, from its periphery, flashes of scrambled information radiate. It is in these fragmentary words that the greatest danger of suicide as lure and contagion lie. While the suicide instrument is encountered by the survivors as indifferent, a simple razor like any other whose former unique misuse is entirely closed off from us, the words of the dead are anything but indifferent. It is not merely a respect for family privacy but this risk of being drawn in by words from those who chose to escape meaning that results in the variety of approaches taken towards presenting suicide notes. It is here we see most clearly the struggles of Martins' artistic practice. In negotiating with the archive, images are manipulated to remove words, unique angles are chosen that refuse to deliver content, copies with content removed or altered are produced and offered in place of originals.

Seen from the side, the suicide letter becomes a mere cut across the void. It has become the lifeline on a palm that refuses us, barring access to the oblique words of parting. Insofar as we are granted access to some last words there is no obvious pattern to comment on. Although many address family, the last words can be addressed to the living or the dead, words of furious anger or words petitioning forgiveness, some contemptuous of the world and others fretting over its minor details, some offer figures pumped up to superhuman stature yet more often someone shrinking from this world.

We see a paper aeroplane. A last message from a prisoner sent flying to his mother. It is a matter of code and faith: a truly private message trusted to the wind and the kindness of strangers. A Freudian temptation invites us to see all last words as addressed to some real or abstract mother. Whether an accusation or an apology, in closing this world of meaning perhaps we always address Gustave Courbet's origin of the world in some sense. The step out of time is often also a step out of age. As if in that fatal moment one became every age all at once – as much a child folding a paper plane, raging for a gift or sulking at some petty grievance, as an adult contemplating the most serious of actions, the only utterly serious action. Is this once again a secularised lingering of a Christian inheritance: the promise that at the final moment all distinction of man and woman, of age and race would be annihilated? The paper aeroplane or the message in a bottle, a prayer from absolute solitude sent out to wander in the world towards an anyone who is also that one true addressee.

Once again we are speculating before images and once again there is an illicit

pleasure. There is no more legitimacy to the fantasy of theorising about the last words that come at moment of death than there is to the fantasy of capturing a person's last lived moments through the instrument of their death. We are searching for keys to a lockless door.

Jacques Derrida argued against Freud that there can be no science of the work of mourning. Each devastation is unique and there is properly no such thing as a general concept of "mourning" or "loss" of which particular instances of grief would be examples. This is part of why we are so clumsy in offering comfort around fellow mourners, since even with the same death none of us has lost the same thing. Similarly, we have seen that there is no such thing as the suicide instrument. It does exist if by exist we mean something persisting in the world. Uniquely misused in the hands of an absolute beginner, we are now left with only an unstained pair of scissors or a damaged cable. Suicide flares up in the course of our meaningful worldly time as an instant that cuts across it as obliquely as a letter turned ninety degrees to its frame. Its traces are cinders – not recoverable shreds to be pieced together but an utterly fine ash. Although the messages that escape the moment of suicide seems to testify to something universal, the desire for intelligibility is the longing of those left behind. Martins' work is a seduction and refusal that works in ebbs and flows. We are drawn to posit everything that the work denies us. If it has been successful, I would suggest, we might walk away from it with some kind of acceptance. Not an acceptance of non-meaning, as we can never achieve that, but an acceptance of the fact that we will never be able to accept non-meaning. We, this we who is still not so terribly alone.

Timothy Secret
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Timothy Secret studied Philosophy and Kings College London before undertaking an MA in European Thought at University College London, followed by a second MA and PhD in Philosophy at the University of Essex. Timothy has previously held a research and teaching position at the University of Essex. Timothy was one of ten awarded the status of AHRC and BBC Radio 3 New Generation Thinkers 2012. Since then he has appeared on national radio several times, engaged in film work with BBC Arts Scotland and made appearances at several major public philosophy events.