

INTRODUCTION: A GENEALOGY OF SUICIDE

I

In a satirical piece entitled 'A Receptacle for Suicides', a contributor to Adam Fitz-Adam's periodical *The World* (1756) outlines his scheme to 'sanitize' the experience of 'self-killing' by supplying not only the venue for individuals seeking to end their lives, but also the means by which they might achieve their goal.¹ Remarking on 'the number of sudden deaths that abound in this island,'² 'John Anthony Tristman' invokes England's eighteenth-century reputation as a suicidal nation afflicted by a kind of cultural death drive. The aptly named Tristman helpfully proposes to 'remedy th[e] inconveniencies' encountered by 'all such of the nobility, gentry and others as are tired of life' by providing 'convenient apartments' and expeditious methods of self-disposal less shocking to the 'delicacy' of such individuals than popular means of suicide.³ The author concludes his macabre, semi-Swiftian excursus by claiming only the heads of suicides as his 'constant fee, that by frequent dissections and examinations into the several brains, [he] may at least discover the cause of so unnatural a propensity.'⁴ Paradoxically, the contributor suggests a biological cause for suicide even while identifying the act as unnatural, thereby reinforcing the divide between the body and nature that was already conceptualized in the mechanistic philosophy of the period.

In this satire, suicide is denoted by the euphemism 'sudden death', reflecting the Christian concern with the abridgement of and interference with time that the individual's act of 'rushing into eternity' ostensibly involved. In this period, the term 'suicide' itself was a neologism arguably indicative of the alteration of attitudes towards voluntary death in the eighteenth century.⁵ Walter Charleton is commonly credited with coining the term in his translation of the *Ephesian and Cimmerian Matrons* (1652)⁶, although others argue that it was originally introduced into the English language in the early seventeenth century by Thomas Browne and adopted decades later by Robert Burton. Regardless of its origin, the word entered the vocabulary of the novel at roughly the mid-eighteenth century mark. Samuel Richardson's second work, *Clarissa*, is commonly viewed as the first English novel to employ the term, since it is cited by Johnson's

Dictionary under the entry for suicide, but one can find numerous examples of early novelistic experiments that liberally employ the term.⁷ Scholarly opinion holds that the word 'suicide' afforded a more objective, less judgemental alternative to 'self-murder', the term that was still very much in usage at this time, but there is little consensus on this point. The word itself, which constitutes 'bad Latin' in its unorthodox use of a pronoun as a prefix, was probably avoided by philologists and students of the 'Ancients' as a debasement of the Latin language. Hence, the history of the term itself is a vexed one; the invention of the word possibly precipitated the adjustment of attitudes towards the deed it describes, but it is equally conceivable that changing beliefs necessitated a term that was simultaneously technical abstraction and euphemism. Whatever the case may be, by the mid-eighteenth century the word had infiltrated the English vocabulary sufficiently that Richardson could employ the term in *Clarissa* and expect to be understood. With the coining of the word 'suicide', a comprehensive category was introduced that arguably allowed for the progressive narrowing of the understanding of diverse modes of self-destruction available to the human. The invention of the term also brought suicide under the scrutiny of institutional authority and thus rendered it a new object of power.

The satire's concern with the containment and disposal of the suicidal body reflects the medicalization of suicide that gradually took place over the course of the eighteenth century. The projector's scheme and expressed desire to 'open up a few corpses' (to borrow Foucault's catch-phrase) satirically anticipates the quest of scientific research from the nineteenth century to the present day to isolate an organic cause for suicide.⁸ The eighteenth-century 'clinic' and organizations devoted to resuscitation like the Royal Humane Society in part initiated these investigations when they vexed the boundary between life and death, and intervened in the efforts of those determined to die. Whereas the satirical persona 'Tristman' devotes his attention to facilitating suicide, the mainstream medical establishment sought out ways to keep the body alive.

This concern with the administration of life denotes a form of 'biopower', according to Michel Foucault, who chronicles the emergence of disciplinary techniques and invisible, increasingly incorporated apparatuses of control, which inaugurated a shift away from the sovereign 'right of power over death' amid the burgeoning of liberal capitalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁹ The birth of 'biopolitics', however, does not ratify a 'social contract of mutual self-interest and cooperation among free and equal natural persons', as Bruce Jennings emphasizes, but rather erects 'a structure of protection designed to preserve the life of functional, productive, and efficient bodies.'¹⁰ Integral to this renovated approach to death was an altered outlook on suicide for, as Foucault observes, the 'determination to die ... was one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power had assigned itself the

task of administering life.’¹¹ Under this rubric, suicide emerged as a troubling assertion of individual rights, becoming, as Ian Marsh notes, less a ‘transgression to be punished, [than] a problem to be managed’ in this period.¹² The appearance of this form of internally regulating power has considerable repercussions for any sustained consideration of suicide, an act that, according to Foucault, demonstrates that ‘life has [not] been totally integrated into the techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them.’¹³ Although the era of bio-power (which for Foucault marks the threshold of modernity¹⁴) ushers in the privatization of death, suicide stands out as a singularity, at once subjected to and resisting the operations of power.

As the eighteenth century progresses, suicide acquires an increasingly public dimension, originating present-day notions that it is ‘an account of a death made warrantable and recorded in the work of a state agency’. As the sociologist Dorothy Smith insists,

Suicide is not and cannot be simply a characterization of a death. Rather, it ... expresses a relation between state interests, the established frame of reference in which those interests are realized as an array of legally warranted categories, and an event that is constituted as such by practical activities of agents of the state.¹⁵

As Smith goes on to explain, suicide generates medical records and death certificates and becomes the concern of ‘coroners’ courts, police work, and the legislative and administrative processes that maintain, articulate, and regulate these.’¹⁶ As such, government and social institutions interrogate all of the particulars of self-inflicted death in a way that posthumously brings the individual back into the biopolitical fold.

The public scrutiny to which cases of suicide have been subjected historically became more focused in the eighteenth century, owing to medical intervention and the proliferation of forms of print media dedicated to scrutinizing the minutiae of everyday life. Indeed, both suicide and martyrdom are often viewed as ‘anarchic or rogue manifestations of mortality’ that, according to Zohreh Bayatrizi, ‘need to be brought under a regime of ordering or given an appearance of orderliness within the institutionally authorized frameworks of public health, penal law, epidemiology and medicine.’¹⁷ The novel as an interactive participant in the public sphere through print culture must be considered another disciplinary framework that exposes suicide to scrutiny, analysis and even, in certain instances, containment. This is not to say that the novel passively reflects ideology; as a genre of the intelligentsia, the novel may even, in the words of Dominick LaCapra, work through ideological ‘forces in critical and at times potentially transformative fashion’ and ‘contain programmatic elements in outlining desirable alternatives.’¹⁸ However, even LaCapra concedes that this is ‘not a prominent feature’ in many novels, including those that are central to

his study, for in crude terms, there is no 'outside' ideology. As a form of meta-politics, the novel may be considered one of many 'literary-aesthetic apparatuses' that, as Tony Bennett notes in his consideration of the 'sociology of literature', belong to 'a broader field of liberal technologies bringing social conduct under the influence of specific regimes of truth and authority'.¹⁹ This study postulates that novelistic works navigate a middle course between passive reflection of and active opposition to ideology, particularly in reference to representations of suicide in eighteenth-century British narrative.

This study's consideration of the novel's representation of self-accomplished death in relation to eighteenth-century conceptions of power and knowledge seeks to recover and historicize gendered meanings of suicide in this period, meanings that Foucault's understanding of the act as a political relation largely overlooks. Foucault's disregard for gender difference stems from the fact that the neutral body he theorizes is persistently masculine, which to a large extent is owing to the fact that he works within the philosophical tradition of Western liberalism.²⁰ In many of the novels examined in this study, suicide accords agency to novelistic characters typically denied any measure of personal autonomy as a result of their social status. However, since these texts seldom allow suicide to figure as an individual act – which is ironic given the emphasis on the individual in Enlightenment discourse – the agency suicide confers is constantly deferred or displaced onto a higher level of signification or purposiveness through the construction of suicidal sacrifice as a national affair. This is the chief thrust of my argument in this book.

The perception of suicide as a mode of resistance to social control in the eighteenth century was mediated through and obfuscated by the discourse of property rights, which John Locke developed almost in opposition to theories of natural law and their tacit endorsement of instinctual drives. In his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke maintains that the individual 'has an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for it'.²¹ In the late seventeenth century, Locke thus constitutes the body as property of a divine authority, viewing suicide as an appropriation of property to which the individual has no legitimate claim. Over the course of the next century, however, this very attempt to locate the suicidal body within the discursive network of property rights results in precisely the inverse effect of the intended repression; survivors of the deceased (particularly among the upper classes) increasingly resisted the forfeiture of their inheritances to the Crown. The historian Donna Andrew has argued persuasively that the jury decisions regarding suicide cases brought before the Crown 'reflected as much a growing concern with the sanctity of property inheritance as with the secularization of society'.²² According to this argument, attitudes

towards voluntary death changed not because of increasing ‘enlightenment’ on the part of civil structures of government, but rather owing to emergent notions of property rights.²³ During this period, institutions of power sensed their hold on the body slowly slipping away and consequently rechannelled their energies into other networks of sociological systemization. One of the techniques, as it were, of explaining away the aberration of suicide involved subjecting it to the array of systematizing and normalizing apparatuses that helped construct it as an irrational act. The notion that, as the philosopher Ian Hacking observes, ‘one can improve – control – a deviant subpopulation by enumeration and classification,’²⁴ accounts for the fact that suicide has historically been the subject of sociological statistical analysis. Inevitably, the unexamined notion that suicide constitutes ‘deviant’ or pathological behaviour distorts statistics and the organization of knowledge from the outset of the formal study of this phenomenon, which consistently grapples with the view that suicide may vex but need not necessarily violate reason.

Given the permeation and institutionalization of this ideological apparatus, this study situates the eighteenth-century novel’s treatment of suicide within the discursive categories of the ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’, with closer attention to the form’s mediation of the notion of a ‘death principle’, which logically emerged as a counterpart to the ‘life principle’ promoted by moralists, members of the clergy and political thinkers. According to Thomas Hobbes,

A Law of Nature (*lex naturalis*) is a Precept or a General rule, found out by Reason, by which a Man is forbidden to do that, which is destructive of his Life, or taketh away the Means of preserving the same; and to omit that, by which he thinketh it may be best preserved.²⁵

This denial of the right to death is essential to the smooth operation of Hobbes’s Leviathan state, in which we find precisely this sovereign hold over the life of the subject steadily tightening. Suicide, according to this perspective, co-opts the power of the state over the life of the subject, and constitutes a political act rather than a mortal sin. The state, as Hobbes reads it, depends upon the prohibition of suicide for, if self-preservation ceases to be an issue, then the social contract loses its potency and the ‘Leviathan’ diminishes into a feeble creature. A suicide, in this sense, can veritably be called a ‘crime’ against the state and humankind itself. For all intents and purposes, Hobbes politicizes the religious principle that self-love constitutes the most primal human instinct.

Early Christian theologians such as Thomas Aquinas condemned suicide on the grounds that it violated the tenets of natural law. Eighteenth-century moralists also affirm the notion that suicide contravenes the law of nature as they echo Aquinas’s insistence that ‘everything naturally loves itself’ and ‘naturally keeps itself in being’ in accordance with a built-in divine decree.²⁶ A 1791 essay in

the *Literary Magazine and British Review* offers the opinion that 'self-murder is always an act highly unnatural, and men who do not live in a state of civil society, will never be guilty of it.'²⁷ The notion that suicide is foreign to a 'state of nature' was consistently reiterated over the course of the century, and often refuted in novels such as John Shebbeare's *Lydia* (1753), when contact with aboriginal cultures disproved the idea that suicide was exclusively a phenomenon of metropolitan consumer culture. The fact that 'nature' was often invoked to illuminate the principles of natural law resulted in considerable slippage between the latter concept and the state of nature in this period.²⁸ Moreover, critics of the theory of natural law appealed to empirical evidence attesting that inveterate self-loathing might in fact appear to some individuals just as 'natural', or at least that the 'instinct' for self-preservation might be overcome under sufficiently dire circumstances. John Donne's assertion that 'man has a natural desire of dying' clings to the rhetoric of the 'natural' but turns it decisively on its head.²⁹ Although his thesis might appear to anticipate Freud's controversial 'death instinct', closer examination reveals that the desire for death acknowledged by Donne lacks the destructive component often associated with the Freudian drive, since it rather seeks to translate the individual from body into pure spirit.³⁰ Suicide, or *bia-thanatos* (to borrow Donne's coinage), becomes not so much a self-destructive gesture as a self-affirming act that registers one's belief in the afterlife. This much is affirmed in Richardson's *Clarissa*, where the degree to which a character anticipates death becomes a measure of the character's entitlement to a reward in the afterlife.

Not surprisingly, the political economist and philosopher Bernard Mandeville also voices his objection to the notion of an all-conquering instinct of self-preservation. Repudiating the social contract theory, Mandeville observes that 'there are things that a man may have a stronger aversion to than suicide,' and 'he that makes death his choice must look upon it as less terrible than what he shuns by it.'³¹ This notion of 'the natural', especially as encoded in natural law, drew the criticism of thinkers such as David Hume and Jeremy Bentham, as it came to be conceived that a rational individual might actually choose death over an undesirable life.³² Hume's controversial essay 'On Suicide' (1783), published during his lifetime only in unauthorized editions, justifies voluntary death on the basis of the resilience of the natural world and its ability to adapt to unforeseeable circumstances and 'accidental occurrences'. According to this reasoning, suicide assumes the status of an accident that lacks the capacity to affect the 'laws of matter and motion' that govern the Newtonian universe. Forcefully arguing that suicide does not compromise the laws of motion, Hume substitutes an understanding of the laws of physical nature for the older rubric of natural law. His argument is predicated on the negative notion that the impact of suicide differs negligibly from that of involuntary death, which is intrinsic to the natural

order. If, in the grand scheme of things, a human being 'is of no greater importance than an oyster', the voluntary death of that individual can scarcely lay claim to any greater significance.³³ Although Humean scepticism was not particularly palatable to novelists like Richardson, who would likely have accused the philosopher of 'devaluing' life, the destabilization of categories of 'the natural' that 'the suicide debate' produced inevitably fostered an intellectual climate in which the status of voluntary death itself was called into question.³⁴

From some eighteenth-century perspectives, natural law emerges in this treatment of suicide as an ideological construct elaborated in order to contain the 'epidemic' of early Christian suicides. This ideology draws upon the discourse of nature in order to produce itself as natural in turn and thus assume the backing of divine authority. While eighteenth-century thinkers increasingly challenged this idea, the novel engaged more generally and perhaps obliquely with the notion of the natural, and in particular with the persistent treatment of suicide as an extension of sacrifice that is germane to the discourse of martyrology, which I will revisit in more detail later. For now, it is interesting to observe that paradoxically, while the 'criminal' or transgressive aspect of suicide could be mitigated through association with sacrifice, this very sacrifice was ostensibly forbidden by natural law and other forms of ideological management, which insisted that the body was not one's to sacrifice.

Detractors of suicide apart from Locke uniformly rejected the notion that the body, be it male or female, was the property of the person inhabiting it. In *A Discourse of Self-Murder* (1716), John Cockburn insists that 'birth or habitation makes us subject, and being subjects, we are under laws and government, and so have no absolute power over our bodies and lives: that is the property and prerogative of the sovereign.'³⁵ For writers like Cockburn, suicide constituted a 'double crime', as an offense against both God and the state. Similarly, a tract also bearing the seemingly ubiquitous title *A Discourse on Self-Murder* (1732) and tentatively ascribed to Peniston Booth, avers that 'a man's body is not absolutely his own.'³⁶ This view would persist into the next century with Immanuel Kant's emphatic pronouncement that 'Man cannot dispose of himself because he is not a thing; he is not his own property ... He is not entitled to sell a limb, not even one of his own teeth.'³⁷ Kant's mercantile statement conflates the sale of the body with suicide, a tendency that became common as suicide was increasingly associated with the marketplace. This deontological conception of the body as leased to the subject on the condition that it remain intact and inviolable unto death was rejected by sceptics like Hume who, without necessarily advocating the open sale of body parts, would not have questioned the right of the individual to dispose of his or her members. Indeed, one extrapolation of Hume's contrasting belief in 'corporeal violability' holds that the human body 'as with any property has a price.'³⁸ Hume's implicit approbation of slavery confirms this interpretation

of his attitude towards the body, although he would have assigned a degree of sanctity to the human body contingent upon discriminatory considerations of race. The slavery and suicide debates are highly contiguous not only in their contemplation of the body as a commodity, but also owing to the fact that suicide often afforded a source of agency to the enslaved as a mode of resistance to a corporeal *techne* of power. These considerations render suicide less a question of individual autonomy than a matter of property rights.

Eighteenth-century debates thus incorporated suicide into the economic context that resulted generally in the commodification of the body. In these deliberations, suicide represented both a political infraction and an economic transgression. In his *Elements of the History of England* (1770), Abbé Millot (Claude François Xavier) comments that

[C]ommerce levels the distinction of wealth, and every Englishman is a free being, and feels his own importance. Humour, caprice, and whim, are the natural consequences of national liberty From the disdain and disgust that everything brings along with it, they will be unhappy ... Hence, undoubtedly, that rage of suicide, whereof England affords so many examples. An Englishman, upon principle, grows weary of living, and quietly says to himself, 'I will live no longer'.³⁹

The Abbé's assessment of the English culture of suicide merely reiterates popular continental opinion of the country's melancholic cultivation of voluntary death. This so-called 'character flaw' was excused both internally and externally on the grounds that high suicide rates were a necessary corollary of the civil liberty on which England prided itself, and even rendered a condition of British virtue in popular medical works like George Cheyne's *The English Malady* (1733).⁴⁰ According to this standard Whig 'functionalist' position, their relative degree of autonomy empowered the English both to act as free agents and to commit suicide, an action that was typically seen as uncommon in nations where individual rights were relatively restricted. Hence, as literary critic Eric Gidal observes, European accounts situate England's 'civic melancholy' somewhere 'between enlightenment and pathology'.⁴¹ As a result of this peculiar correlation of liberty with voluntary death, a paradox resides at the heart of English character that is never wholly resolved in either foreign or domestic discussions of the matter. This constructed sense of 'cultural difference' allocates to England a distinctive identity, albeit one contoured around negativity and a social stigma.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, the publicization of suicide rendered the phenomenon an index of the social health of the nation. This study explores the implications of the fact that the English were perceived in popular and elite thought as being more suicidal than their European counterparts, that on an individual level they were casualties of the judicial, civil and religious institutions presumably securing them the ability to take their own lives in the first place.

More significantly, in the eyes of social theorists the consolation that this suicide-mania was a by-product of British advancement as a 'civilization' overshadowed the social import of the supposedly high suicide rate. In this sense, suicide was merely annexed to luxury and effeminacy as the supposed after-effects of civilization. In order for one to live well, this logic argued, one must be prepared to die unwell, or at the very least prematurely. An early consumer-culture mentality presupposed that even death was a commodity that was available for the purchasing, as the satirical business venture discussed at the commencement of this introduction suggests. Further, the association of suicide with incipient consumerism heightened the sense that it was an unnatural act, a mere product of the artifice of civilization and a source of the pathological nature of the concept of the nation. The literary critic Margaret Higonnet has accurately described suicide as historically occupying 'the site of the Other, as both a feminine gesture and a sign of cultural alterity',⁴² but the English fall outside of this paradigm, to a certain extent embracing and perpetuating the notion of their 'eternal disposition ... to suicide'⁴³ in at least the first half of the eighteenth century.

Prior to the rise of print media and as early as the seventeenth century, the London Bills of Mortality promoted the notion of a nationwide suicide pandemic. The figures tabulated in these bills supplied material evidence to authors of treatises against suicide like John Prince who in 1709 reported that 'there have been no less than thirty eight persons that destroyed themselves the last year in and about London only, as appears by the last Bill of Mortality.'⁴⁴ The reliability of the Bills as an accurate source of information concerning the higher rates of voluntary mortality in London as opposed to other European urban centres was frequently challenged on the basis of flawed methodology and the absence of a comparable source of statistics outside the country. My goal, however, is not to afford empirical evidence for eighteenth-century national stereotypes, but rather to begin to answer the questions posed so cogently by literary critic Max Novak in the closing remarks of his review of Georges Minois's *History of Voluntary Death*: 'If ... there was no English Malady, why was the idea embraced so eagerly by both the English and foreigners? What did it mean for the English to think of themselves as prone to suicide in both their literature and in the way they lived?'⁴⁵ This study locates the answer to this problem in the eighteenth-century English novel's negotiation of national and gendered identities.

II

In the preface to *The Deist's Manual: Or, A Rational Enquiry into the Christian Religion* (1705), Charles Gildon retracts an earlier defence of suicide offered on behalf of his (unlawfully) deceased friend, Charles Blount, and declares himself 'perfectly convinc'd, that Suicide is not lawful.'⁴⁶ However, notwithstanding his

recantation, Gildon allows that 'it is sometimes a Virtue to Destroy our selves, or Voluntarily to Sacrifice our Lives for the Good of our Country, from this Maxim, That this Publick Good should be Prefer'd to any Particular'.⁴⁷ This qualification depends upon a clear distinction between suicide and self-sacrifice: 'the Principle of Self-Preservation ought never to be broke, but for the Preservation of that, which secures that of every Individual, that is, by promoting, and defending, the Preservation of the whole Community, to which each Particular owes his own Preservation'.⁴⁸ Yet Gildon still considers self-sacrifice a violation of the principle of self-preservation, even as his statement antedates Cèsare de Beccaria's more developed argument that exile does more harm to the national community than suicide.⁴⁹ While Gildon does not dispute that 'every Man has a Right of removing himself from one Government, or Nation, to another',⁵⁰ he insists that an emigrant remains still 'a Member of Humane Society' and as such, must 'do his Part to contribute to the Good of Mankind some where or other, whereas by destroying himself, he takes himself from all'.⁵¹ Gildon's universalist argument evidently lacks the nationalist thrust of the more specified treatments of suicide in relation to Englishness (and Britishness) that increasingly surface in the ensuing decades of the eighteenth century. In this sense, Gildon lends support to Nicholas Hudson's argument that in the views of many eighteenth-century individuals, 'To sacrifice oneself for the nation or the public was, in an important sense, to embody eternal *human* values – an attitude captured with evidently resonant force by Addison's *Cato* (1713)'.⁵² As Hudson argues, the notion of cultural particularity was not yet fully developed in the eighteenth century, although I contend that the novel sows the seeds of precisely such an understanding that would align voluntary death with a nationalist ethos.

Just as Gildon places voluntary death in a transnational context, his 'apology' similarly 'universalizes' gender, ignoring difference and positing a solitary male suicidal subject. In this respect, his work reflects the tendency of many of the suicide-constitutive discourses in the eighteenth century to elide the problem of female suicide. In the satire discussed at the opening of this introduction, the author laments 'the disgraceful methods that persons of both sexes in this metropolis are almost daily taking to get rid of their being'.⁵³ The obliging and enterprising 'Tristman' subsequently outlines his designs for 'a commodious bath for disappointed ladies, paved with marble ... where the patient may drown with the utmost privacy and elegance',⁵⁴ suggesting that the feminization of suicide demands the development of an aesthetics of the act. Women's contribution to the nation's reputation for suicide is acknowledged in this tract, but often overlooked in many of the moral and religious treatises published on the subject of 'self-murder' during this century, culminating with Charles Moore's sweeping dissertation on suicide in 1790, which deviates only negligibly from earlier studies such as John Jeffery's strongly titled, *Felo de se: Or, A Warning*

against the Most Horrid and Unnatural Sin of Self-Murder (1702). Although these treatises persistently feminize voluntary death, they typically represent the agents of suicide as male.⁵⁵ Some might argue that these pamphlets merely posit a universal subject, although this argument obscures the fact that a neutral subject typically presupposes a masculine one, for as theorist Elizabeth Grosz states, 'the neuter can only be filled in by the male body and men's pleasures'.⁵⁶ While non-fiction writings posit a general, albeit highly masculinized (if unmarked) human subject, the subjects of novelistic treatments of suicide are either women, or 'effeminate' men. This book recovers a sense of gendered experience in eighteenth-century representations of and engagements with voluntary death, without subscribing to an essentialist sense of difference, but rather complicating an issue – the gender paradox of suicide – that is too often disregarded entirely in considerations of the subject. Despite the fact that this study deals with gender as opposed to women's experience exclusively, the first two chapters explore how representations of women lay the groundwork for the later novel's treatment of voluntary death. While novels in the first part of the century generally dwell upon the suicidal woman, after the 1750s, they increasingly devote attention to the suicidal male, the victim not only of the gambling hall but also of unrequited love.

The anthropologist, Mary Douglas, observes in *Purity and Danger* (1965) that 'the meanings of male suicides and of female suicides are different in Western societies'.⁵⁷ The eighteenth-century novel assumes this very distinction in dwelling on a specifically female form of voluntary death. However, the first well-recognized sociologist of suicide, Emile Durkheim, claimed that women lacked the intellectual development requisite to end their lives; in his view, women were more governed by instinct than men and accordingly more disposed to adhere to a principle of self-preservation.⁵⁸ According to this construction, suicide was a male behaviour and a mark of the superiority of the sex. Twentieth-century studies of suicide, such as Henry Romilly Fedden's *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study* (1972), reinforce the notion that women are less inclined to commit suicide than men, arguing that owing to limits imposed on their education, women were less disturbed by 'the unsettling influence of independence of thought, the weight of abstract problems of life and death'.⁵⁹ This mindset was pervasive in the eighteenth century, which, outside the literary record, consistently disputed women's capacity for voluntary death. In his historiography of suicide, Howard Kushner addresses this historical tendency to tie 'the disparity between female and male suicide rates to a set of gendered distinctions that conflated physical differences with what was metaphorically feminine'.⁶⁰ In his view, 'Social constructions ... as opposed to biological distinctions ... became the operative metaphors used to explain the alleged immunity of women to suicide'.⁶¹ According to this model, women's suicide defies metaphysical social assumptions and

is comprehensible only as deviation from traditional gender roles, while male suicide stems from the pressures of everyday responsibilities.

Eighteenth-century responses to literary or actual cases of female suicide were frequently complicated by the fact that under the law and in popular opinion women were denied the degree of agency deemed necessary to take their own lives. In her address to the English Legislature on the subject of *The Hardships of the English Laws in Relation to Wives* (1735), Sarah Chapone raised precisely this point, challenging the legal position that women cannot act as 'free agents' in their own deaths, as indicated by the verdict delivered by the coroner's jury in a case of a 1732 double suicide (ostensibly but never explicitly identified as that of Richard and Bridget Smith), which found the husband guilty of suicide and punished his corpse accordingly, yet purportedly excused the wife on the supposition that she hanged herself 'at the command of her husband'.⁶² Chapone took issue with the notion that the law offers exemption from punishment as 'a favour to the weakness of the sex' and construes it rather as a 'fine compliment to the authority of our domestick lords and masters'.⁶³ The view that a woman possesses insufficient autonomy to take her own life was enshrined at the level of law, as Chapone's address makes clear, in a position that seems to contradict the clear movement towards an association of suicide with all things feminine. Many of the novels considered in this study appear to bolster this position, even while they assign a central position to female suicide. The very conditions that would render women's suicide possible are denied by the cultural codes that limit female agency, and this study suggests that the eighteenth-century English novel restores the historical reality of women's suicide by affording a space for the representation of the phenomenon.

The growing centrality of suicide to the eighteenth-century English novel might be considered the product of a 'feminization' of culture in the eighteenth century, a trend that social and cultural historians argue extended even to religious institutions.⁶⁴ In the medical discourse of the day, suicide represents a feminine condition, a sign of a weakened mind or body, while religious discourse similarly attributes the act to a lack of spiritual fortitude, or a feminine openness to temptation or an external tempter. However, in a political sense, suicide might yet denote a heroic and therefore masculine act, albeit one that undermined the authority of the state, while in an economic context, suicide was subsumed into the 'effeminate' continuum of luxury and consumption. Thus, although dominant discourses of the period mostly insist upon an a-suicidal female body, they simultaneously construct suicide as a typically feminine behaviour, suggesting that an understanding of voluntary death is both contingent on and limited by the indeterminate nature of gender itself.

Unlike most suicide historiography that evacuates gender, in *The Art of Suicide* (2001) Ron Brown acknowledges the centrality of gender to these inves-

tigations, arguing that 'in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century new ascriptions arose of suicidal behaviour that were linked to tainted femininity'.⁶⁵ To a large extent this consideration is indebted to Elisabeth Bronfen's psychoanalytic work on the subject of the intimate relationship between femininity and death in addition to the implications of the aestheticized sacrifice. In addition to Bronfen and Brown, Silvia Sara Canetto, Howard Kushner and Margaret Higonnet represent a minority of scholars who address the gendering of suicide. Canetto uncovers the 'gender scripts' that inform life-threatening behaviour, while Higonnet's work goes far towards explaining the dominant paradigm in Western culture which affords 'a mythic vision of suicide as feminine',⁶⁶ but does not specifically address suicide's bearing on the English novel. Although Higonnet historicizes suicide primarily in relation to the nineteenth century, her suggestive essays on this subject formulate their central theses at the expense of the eighteenth century.⁶⁷ Accordingly, the details rather than the larger arguments of her work are invaluable to this study. Whereas Higonnet locates the feminization of suicide in the nineteenth century, my study argues that suicide as a discourse is already feminized in eighteenth-century contexts, owing partially to the abandonment of the heroic paradigms of the classical tradition borrowed from Greece and Rome.

The fact that suicide as a phenomenon was gender marked during this period renders questions of gender highly relevant to considerations of the subject in relation to the novel. Female characters in these works contemplate suicide repeatedly, and even when their male counterparts commit suicide, they typically do so only by sacrificing their masculinity. This study explores the process whereby suicide produces a gendered body, questioning whether suicide within this context becomes, in effect, to borrow Amanda Gilroy's term, 'a historically specific technology of gender'.⁶⁸ In a slight departure from contemporary theory's concern with the 'lived body', my project concerns itself with the 'unlivable body', the body that wants to die.⁶⁹ This approach does not, however, advocate a return to the focus on the 'dead body' so central to the mechanistic, Cartesian legacy that some theorists believe still persists today in the assumptions of modern medicine.⁷⁰ Instead, the suicidal body situates itself between the moribund and the animate, representing a particularly complex site of gender, unlike other related instances, in which gender ostensibly ceases to signify at the point of death. In its attempt to read suicide as part of a 'cultural politics of the body', this project's approach to gender draws partially upon Judith Butler's discursive understanding of the subject, albeit with an attempt to consider the relevance of the body as a material entity that subsequent feminist constructivist investigations have sought to restore.⁷¹ Just as the body can never entirely divorce itself from discourse, in the eighteenth-century novel the suicidal body stands behind and inhabits the discourse of voluntary death.

Although women's voluntary deaths contributed to the overall 'statistics' that offered empirical corroboration of the English Malady, accounts often overlook the relevance of women's experience to the linking of suicide with the 'nation's business'. While economic discourse constructs woman as the ideal consuming subject, it yet ascribes to her only a limited degree of liberty or self-determination, thereby corroborating Claudia Johnson's proviso that a 'woman's presence in a ... public sphere is not to be confused with her empowerment there'.⁷² Literature of the period frequently attributes male suicide to financial ruin incurred by bad investments or dissipated lifestyle: the incapacity to lead a 'good' life impels men to choose a 'bad' death. The same literature presents women as somehow unaffected by and indifferent to material circumstances: their suicide attempts spring not from impoverishment or indigence, but rather from passions unfulfilled and unrequited. Women exist outside and beyond the economic systems of society according to this model, which, as feminist critic Genevieve Vaughn observes, dictates that they 'are brought up with the values that will allow them to do unilateral caregiving, often maintaining both paradigms internally, validating the exchange paradigm even while acting according to the gift paradigm'.⁷³ This somewhat essentialized and ahistorical notion of capitalist practices positing a system of exchange gendered as male, and identifying the 'selfless' act of gift-giving as female, is nonetheless partially supported by the frequent construction of female suicide as self-sacrifice in the eighteenth-century novel. To a certain extent this view is corroborated by the literary historian, Laura Brown's assessment of the effects wrought by mercantile capitalist ideology upon fiction's representation of the female figure, which subsequently becomes aligned with 'commodification and trade on the one hand, and violence and difference on the other'.⁷⁴ Since women have been 'socialized into the belief that their bodies are not theirs',⁷⁵ they may dispose of their bodies on the condition that they give of themselves for a higher purpose, thus rendering their suicides (at least in a literary form) simultaneously acts of empowerment and abjection.

In arguing that the novel assigns suicide an intermediate form of agency, I draw upon Srinivas Aravamudan's model for understanding how suicidal behaviour may serve simultaneously as an expression of agency and a strategy of containment on the part of European writers.⁷⁶ Female voluntary death in the form of suicide or self-sacrifice does not necessarily endorse victimhood or entail a capitulation to social disciplinary codes. Instead, suicide may afford a productive locus of agency complicated but not annulled by the dense nature of a discourse that can never entirely extricate itself from religious concerns surrounding the action in this period. The authors discussed in this study reveal a certain degree of ambivalence towards the potentially subversive implications of their representations of voluntary death, but their work simultaneously demonstrates the fact that suicide encapsulates a certain degree of independence, and

is never entirely susceptible to authorial control in the first place. Authors may attempt to contain the disruptive effects of suicide by preventing their characters from dying, yet once invoked as a sign, suicide continues to inhere in narrative form in the form of a suicidal subjectivity. Even amid the gender constraints that appear to foreclose suicide as an option for women, female characters nonetheless engage in the 'struggle for rhetorical ownership of illness'⁷⁷ that increasingly defines discursive engagements with the idea of the English Malady.

III

Suicide was not only symptomatic of larger cultural problems that were eventually organized under the heading of the 'English Malady', but as the century progressed, debates among the *philosophes* in France and scattered remarks by prominent thinkers such as David Hume in England increasingly challenged the bases of its prohibition. A discourse of suicide thus emerges coterminously with the development of the novel as a dominant literary form and vehicle for cultural commentary. Described by Michael McKeon as 'an early modern cultural instrument designed to confront on the level of narrative form and content, both intellectual and social crisis simultaneously', the novel thematizes suicide to the extent of its representational capacity.⁷⁸ The genre's willingness to broach the subject of suicide contributed to its condemnation by critics such as Vicesimus Knox who denounced prose fiction's capacity 'to lead innocents to disease, infamy, madness, suicide and a gibbet.'⁷⁹ Many eighteenth-century English novels accommodate a kind of 'suicide narrative', a term justified by the prolific body of largely fictional writing on the subject that according to Jeffrey Timmons warrants 'its denomination as a subgenre of philosophical, historical, theological and literary discourses.'⁸⁰ Far from operating as a mere plot device or 'surface effect' the modes and means of suicide enact a performance of a death drive at work at the level of narrative, as, in undertaking what might be considered a supreme act of transgression, suicidal characters define themselves by their acts of self-extinction.

The apparent neutrality of novelistic representations of suicide in the eighteenth century has drawn the attention of critics like Timmons, who claims that the form addresses 'not so much as a word of reproach' to its suicidal characters.⁸¹ For some time, critics and historians alike attributed this propensity to the larger forces of secularization at work within society during this period. For example, Michael MacDonald and Terence Murphy's study of the socio-cultural history of suicide in England champions the secularization theory, maintaining that 'During the early modern period attitudes and responses to suicide first hardened and then grew more tolerant and sympathetic.'⁸² A central argument of this self-described 'neo-traditional' history of early modern suicide holds changes in the

nature of the coroner's jury responsible for the secularization of suicide; as jury members grew increasingly literate, they were able to draw upon a wider range of cultural reference to inform their decisions in regard to suicide verdicts.⁸³ MacDonald's and Murphy's foregrounding of the role enacted by the evolution of communication technologies in altering the way people responded to suicide illuminates the relevance of a historical approach to these issues as they are mediated by the eighteenth-century novel.⁸⁴ At the same time, their claims for the secularization of suicide elide the extent to which suicide remained a discourse that could never entirely detach itself from religious considerations, as we see in the frequent conjunction of suicide and sacrifice. As the historian, Rachel Healy argues, following Susan Morrissey's cue, 'the ambivalent role of clergy, the persistence of religious sanctions against suicide, and continued efforts by the state to curb suicide all suggest that the term "hybridization" better characterizes the changes over this period than the older term "secularization"'.⁸⁵ The history of suicide in the eighteenth century dramatizes a struggle, pull and counterpull, rather than the triumph of the secular over the spiritual, in keeping with the 'project of modernity' more generally, which, as the historian Jane Shaw has argued, was in many respects a deeply religious undertaking.⁸⁶

As discussed in the preface to this book, religion continued to exert an important influence in most segments of society, and had more of an impact upon popular culture than proponents of the 'secularization thesis' often acknowledge. Although Deists and other 'freethinking radicals' sought to detach suicide from ecclesiastical authority, the notion of voluntary death as the product of demonic influence or possession persisted in popular socio-cultural attitudes. A religious strain also permeates the eighteenth-century novel's representation of suicide, which consistently explores the relations between suicide and sacrifice, thus suggesting the tenacity of Christian proscriptions in the eighteenth century. English Protestantism accommodated a nationalist vision bound up in the discourse of 'Reformation martyrology' that was already established in John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (1563). Although James C. W. Truman argues that the 'Protestant martyr-subject [was constituted] in discursive terms that were primarily gendered female, even as most martyrs were men',⁸⁷ Elizabeth A. Castelli insists on the contrary that 'within the interpretative framework of sacrifice, martyrdom draws upon and generates ideals of "masculinity"'.⁸⁸ Truman bases his argument upon a specific text, whereas Castelli's work evokes the tradition of gender-coding in the West according to which masculinity is positively charged in contrast with a feminine negativity that disallows sacrifice and suicide.⁸⁹ However, as Castelli notes, 'in the Christian theorizing of martyrdom as sacrifice, gender works in a number of different (and not always ideologically coherent) ways'.⁹⁰ Early novels similarly challenge these gender categories even while upholding them, and I argue that the discourse of suicide as mediated

through the eighteenth-century novel consistently circles around this aporia in its alignment of (specifically) women's suicide with sacrifice.

By mid-century, suicide has been firmly established as a central feature of the plot and thematic content of the novel, which similarly absorbs a cultural interest in melancholia and mourning. A language of sacrifice that, as Benedict Anderson observes, signifies the persistence of religious paradigms in a burgeoning ethos of nationalism, in turn informs the treatment of suicide in many of the works discussed in this study. These novels represent suicide as a gift of the self, a selfless, ego-effacing social action that gives meaning to the act for both survivors and the agent. Sacrifice thus functions to obscure suicide, suggesting that it is only in constructing death as a gift that female characters in these novels obtain a degree of selfhood. In this respect, the 'system of sacrificial responsibility' articulated in the novel does not imply the 'exclusion or sacrifice of woman', which Derrida sees at work in anthropological, theological and philosophical engagements with the problem of the 'gift of death'.⁹¹ On the contrary, women's deaths are central to a national ethos of sacrifice in the eighteenth century.

This discussion raises the question as to whether women's suicides and identities are always inherently sacrificial. In *Reflections on Marriage* (1700), Mary Astell famously described a woman's marriage to an inferior partner as a supreme 'act of martyrdom',⁹² while the vast majority of recent theorists suggest that women can never escape the logic of sacrifice in any aspect of their personal lives. The process of exclusion and repression that constitutes female identity in Judith Butler's view is itself inherently sacrificial, while Julia Kristeva actively solicits a rewriting of the 'sacrificial contract' that binds women to a socio-symbolic order.⁹³ Accordingly, contemporary feminist engagements with the hermeneutics of female suicide question whether, in the words of Susan M. Wolf, 'women's decisions to commit suicide, and society's acceptance of those decisions as appropriate, may be skewed by a long history of cultural images revering women's sacrifice and self-sacrifice'.⁹⁴ Conversely, an alternative perspective, articulated by Diane Raymond, argues that since 'women's historical role has been to endure selflessly all forms of labor and abuse, particularly in the domestic sphere, suicide may for women be the ultimate transgressive act'.⁹⁵ This question as to whether suicide represents a disciplining of the female body or an assertion of agency is explored but never quite resolved in the novel. The texts that I focus on in this study express some ambivalence towards this concern; even as they suggest that suicide represents a source of agency, in their attempts to render death symbolically resonant, these authors assimilate self-destruction into the very continuum of sacrifice that was seen as the end of agency in some views. At the same time, many of these works circumvent a strict either/or approach altogether in positing as a third option a hybrid form of sacrificial suicide. Because this notion of sacrifice, predicated on traditional religious notions of voluntary death still

persisted in popular thought and practice, suicide could be accommodated under the rubric of sacrifice. Secular and nationalist developments heralded an increasing emphasis on the political sacrifice, involving the subordination of the individual to the collective will, rather than to a conception of divine will, as seen in Charlotte Smith's *Desmond*. Within this shift, a notion of suicide emerges that is nebulous, vague and increasingly difficult to define, notwithstanding the apparent concreteness afforded by the invention of the term.⁹⁶

In his late nineteenth-century consideration of this ambiguity Durkheim observes, 'Because altruistic suicide, though showing the familiar suicidal traits, resembles especially in its most vivid manifestations some categories of action which we are used to honouring with our respect and even admiration, people have often refused to consider it as self-destruction.'⁹⁷ However, as Durkheim goes on, this distinction breaks down when one considers its basis in the intentionality and motives of the act, which are difficult to read from the outside, and the fact that even an 'egoistic' suicide, to borrow his term, might have 'its own morality' in its sentiment of individual autonomy.⁹⁸ In eliding the distinction between suicide and self-sacrifice (or altruistic suicide), Durkheim is able to bring both forms of voluntary death into his case study. Although he predicates his research upon findings related to the social classifications of nationality and age, avoiding 'innately established' categories such as race and heredity, it becomes increasingly evident over the course of his study that Durkheim's understanding of nationality is deeply imbricated with religion, as seen particularly in his treatment of altruistic suicide.⁹⁹ Initially England represents an anomaly, given his fairly conventional argument that the relative freedom accorded to the individual in a Protestant as opposed to a Catholic society renders him or her more susceptible to suicide. Durkheim's statistical findings that by the late nineteenth century the English were less disposed to take their lives than their European Protestant peers initially confute this hypothesis. However, he eventually attributed this anomaly to the fact that the Anglican hierarchical organization of clergy and traditionalist emphasis actually curtailed the subject's liberty and integrated her into society to a degree that discourages flight from the group in the form of suicide. While Durkheim's study ostensibly puts to rest the myth of English suicide, it raises a larger problem in respect to the centrality of other forms of voluntary death more readily accommodated in this culture.

The apparent irreconcilability of Protestant individualism with sacrifice prompts further questions integral to a historicization of female suicide. The scholar of religion, Ivan Strenski, has observed the difficulties that a nationalist ethos creates for the 'traditional Protestant resistance to the ideal of self-effacing sacrifice'.¹⁰⁰ With the emergence of an idea of the 'nation', the individualism associated with Protestant England must somehow find a way to reconcile itself with the needs of the state, thus striking a balance between the community and the

subject. Yet, suicide is typically interpreted as a supreme assertion of individuality, one that betrays the larger community in leaving behind survivors to mourn and dependents to support themselves in alternative ways. In this respect, self-accomplished death can be viewed as antithetical to the concerns of a nation that can only endorse voluntary death in the form of sacrifice for the greater good. The novel inscribes a nationalist imperative to frame suicide as self-sacrifice, not just for the purpose of circumventing religious proscriptions, but also in order to advance the idea of the nation that was so central to the form. To a considerable extent, this sacrificial motif is organized around the image of the 'allegorical mother' whose offspring, according to feminist critic Julie Mostov, 'belong to the entire country's guardians, heroes and martyrs ... Th[e] pain, suffering and sacrifices [of individual mothers] are recognized only as part of the nation's sacrifice; their individual plights are relevant only to this extent.'¹⁰¹ The role of the maternal as a controlling image for the praxis of mourning generally deemed constitutive of national consciousness is present to a certain extent in the novels discussed within this study, particularly in Charlotte Smith's *Desmond*. However, many of these works opt for a more generalized version of femininity that demands a reassessment of 'gender blind' studies such as Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.¹⁰² Although, as many recent accounts have argued, the importance of a monolithic idea of the nation has been rather exaggerated at the expense of a coexisting ethos of transnationalism, the novels considered within this study nonetheless often present their suicides as sacrifices to a national idea that takes shape within the spaces of their narratives.¹⁰³ At the same time, the cult of Wertherism that I discuss in Chapter 4, and England's and France's skirmish over their respective national rates of suicide, which is the subject of Chapter 5, reaffirm that national identity is as often fabricated in conjunction with as against a hostile 'other'.

Despite its social concerns, the novel has traditionally been viewed as an essentially 'individualistic and isolationist form'.¹⁰⁴ Conceding that this form represents 'humankind in society', J. Paul Hunter insists that it typically represents a 'single individual – alone – pursuing and reflecting upon his or her place in that society'.¹⁰⁵ However, characters' relations to the larger social contexts in which they are embedded remain crucial, as seen in the intersubjective aspect of suicide.¹⁰⁶ In this sense, the novel, as an aspect of culture, suggests a way of looking at the 'symbolic identity' individuals fabricate when they see themselves as members of a collective, described by the social psychologists, Clay Routledge and Jamie Ardnt, as 'something larger, more meaningful and ultimately, longer lasting than their own physical lives'.¹⁰⁷ Novels afford a crucial space for fantasizing this 'symbolic identity'; they go beyond Benedict Anderson's claim that they help imagine a 'community', for they allow for an imaginative encounter with

and transcendence of death through this national identification. As Routledge explains,

Secular ideologies also make us feel less finite... national and other social identities allow us to feel like we are part of something larger and more meaningful than ourselves. In this way, contributing to our nation, community, company, family and other groups makes us believe that though we will die, part of us will live on through these institutions.¹⁰⁸

It is this identification that explains the sacrificial impulse, and in particular the tendency to translate self-destructiveness into self-sacrifice. The fact that social identities are so difficult to transcend accounts for this degree of slippage between suicide and sacrifice.

This category of sacrifice, however, is as elusive as an understanding of suicide. Strenski contends in his book on the rhetoric of sacrifice in French politics and political culture that sacrificial language is historically embedded in public discourse, and is inescapable.¹⁰⁹ Pointing to a ‘lack of conceptual consensus’ about the meanings of sacrifice in theories articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, René Girard and Susan Mizruchi,¹¹⁰ Strenski poses the following set of compelling questions in a slightly later work: ‘Is sacrifice a total giving up or a giving of? Is it gift, consecration, scapegoating, source of transcendent power, or abomination?’¹¹¹ Can it be all of these things at once? As Strenski’s work suggests, situating suicide in relation to larger communal and national structures does not necessarily serve to sanction sacrificial models or victim positions; instead, it is possible to locate an alternative form of agency within an understanding of suicide as an act that always partakes of a sacrificial structure: the suicide is both a casualty of society (or biology) and an individual engaged in making a personal decision that also asserts a profound social relevance. A narrative of suicide – told either from the perspective of the suicidal individual, as in the epistolary/dialogical situation constructed in works like *Clarissa* and *The British Recluse*, or from the third-person perspective of Burney’s or Shebbeare’s works – typically incorporates the sacrificial element ascribed to voluntary death both by its agents and those that mourn their loss. It is for this reason, perhaps, that in its ‘secular form’ suicide is less an individual than a profoundly social act, especially as represented in novelistic forms.

In *Fables of Aggression*, Frederic Jameson insists that ‘representations of death will always prove to be complex displacements of an indirect, symbolic meditation about something else.’¹¹² Given its associations with the idea of the nation, voluntary death does in fact consistently figure as a sign of ‘something else’ in the novel, but the meaning of female suicide is never completely left behind either. The novel to a certain extent exploits the gendering of suicide in this period to refigure it as a supreme gesture of sacrifice. Addressed within the context of a

range of divergent discourses, suicide eventually takes on the status of a discourse in its own right. Changing perceptions of the nature of the body, its relation to subjectivity and its susceptibility to the operation of power all necessarily shape the discourse of suicide, which also continues to be contoured by issues of gender, as fiction of this period attempts to reconcile burgeoning notions of individual rights with duties to a collective. Ultimately, national narratives and suicide narratives converge in the novel, producing a vision of England as a veritable 'Receptacle for Suicides'.

Copyright