CHAPTER 1

Literature and Suicide

This book is as much about the living as it is about the dead, about hope as well as despair, about the future as well as the past. And it is about how we can make sense of our lives and how we can be certain of doing no such thing. In other words, the book is about the devastation and human disaster of suicide and about how literature records, configures, and imagines survivors' responses to such deaths. But it is also about the cognitive impulse to imagine one's own suicide as peculiarly and pervasively human. A work of literary suicidology, this book concerns twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and how it represents what can be considered the ultimate assertion of selfhood just at the point of its decisive end. Given the prevalence of suicide ideation and suicide events both within and beyond the contemporary literary canon, I will argue, it is remarkable that critics have paid suicide so little attention. I seek to address this notable scholarly lacuna by exploring key literary texts of the last one hundred years as exemplary of a consistent but varied configuration of a critical concern in human affairs.

We are all touched by suicide: everyone alive is, in effect, a suicide survivor. More than 800,000 people take their own lives each year worldwide – more than 6,000 in the United Kingdom, approximately 40,000 in the United States.[1] While this may only equate to between one and three individuals per ten thousand in the general population each year,[2] many more are closely affected by the act and indeed by the thought: estimates vary wildly, but probably more than ten times as many people actively attempt to kill themselves, and empirical surveys estimate the number of people with suicidal thoughts at some point in their lives at anywhere between 10 and 63 per cent.[3] In his 1951 introduction to the English translation of Émile Durkheim's classic sociological study of suicide from 1897, George Simpson suggests that 'every individual has what we may call a suicide-potential', while writing in 1972 the suicide theorist Jacques Choron goes on to claim that 'practically everyone at one time or another has toyed with

the idea of killing himself'.[4] In this sense, being a suicide survivor is not just a question of living on after the death of another person but also of living with suicide as a 'permanent possibility' for oneself as much as for others.[5] This book addresses the thought that the potential for suicide can be considered part of what it means to be human: only *Homo sapiens* are known knowingly to kill themselves, and we are all suicide survivors in the sense that no one alive has yet undertaken the act for which almost all are uniquely equipped. And yet this book is also about suicide as a source of affective sustenance, even of optimism – as a way of getting on, rather than getting out (you get on by thinking of getting out, holding the option open as a way of escaping it). And it is about the unique and varied ways in which twentieth-century literature engages with the terrible, necessary human possibility and actuality of suicide.

A 'death like no other'

Suicide Century investigates literature as the space in which suicide can be conceptualized and imagined, actualized, promoted, and resisted. It focuses on the constitutive ambivalence of the act and on its fundamental epistemic obscurity – on suicide as a profound, unfathomable denial, destruction, or negation of the self, and simultaneously as an ultimate assertion of identity and agency.[6] Against the 'normatively monolithic' contemporary conception of suicide in the West as primarily a question of mental health, the book responds to literature's wider, more complex, and, I would argue, more sophisticated conception of suicide as (also) in some cases an active decision and a permanent, if not universal, human possibility.[7] Indeed, suicide can even be seen as an 'exceptional affirmation', as Maurice Blanchot puts it, while still an act governed by 'illogical optimism'.[8] In this respect, suicide may even be conceived of as a singular political act, as a 'form of resistance' to authority but one that, in destroying the agent of that resistance, paradoxically 'serves power'.[9] In Michel Foucault's terms, suicide operates 'at the borders and in the interstices of power that [is] exercised over life'.[10] As Kelly McGuire argues in a study of suicide and gender in the eighteenth century, the question of agency in suicide is particularly pronounced for women, for whom it is already a vexed ideological question.[11] While suicide is often held to be a particularly heinous act because it contradicts nature, for the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte this characteristic precisely marks its 'superiority': even though suicide is ultimately 'cowardly', the 'resolve to die', Fichte remarks in *The Science of Ethics as Based on the Science of Knowledge* (1798), 'is the purest

representation of the superiority of thought over nature'.[12] This idea is echoed, in some ways, by Antonin Artaud when he declares in 1925 that suicide can be seen to be a means of 'reconquering myself' and of 'anticipating the unpredictable approaches of God'; for Artaud, suicide will allow one to 'reintroduce my design in nature' and to 'give things the shape of my will'; it will allow me to 'free myself from the conditioned reflexes of my organs'. And yet there remains the lurking suspicion that this 'freedom' to kill oneself is itself a function of one's 'irreducibly predetermined being'.[13] In either case, since suicide is a peculiarly human action, one is confronted by the question of meaning – of what, and indeed of whether, suicide means: 'What are human beings doing when they end their own lives?' Jean Baechler asks.[14]

Suicide, 'a death like no other', is fundamentally ambivalent and may be considered an instance of the profound and multifaceted undecidability by which literature is itself constituted.[15] Literature, I will argue, engages with the ways in which suicide, as a 'uniquely resonant strand in human behaviour',[16] makes and unmakes subjects, induces and resists empathy, and insists on and makes inconceivable our understanding of ourselves and of others. Suicide, 'one of the most enigmatic' of human behaviours, is, according to Baechler, 'strictly unintelligible' in the individual case, even while it 'cries out for interpretation'.[17] Suicide is an 'uncanny fulcrum', as the critic Anne Nesbet puts it, between '"meaningful" life and "meaningless" death', both a triumph over and a surrender to death.[18] Above all, suicide makes and unmakes meaning. If, as Ross Chambers contends, there is 'no such thing as suicide by accident', then every act of suicide would therefore imply its own unique 'significance'; and yet while the suicide endows himself with 'immense' 'discursive authority' through his action, he 'simultaneously and irrevocably' loses control of the act's meanings.[19] In this sense, the suicide becomes 'other' to our sense of what it means to be a subject or individual, to have or to be a self. Nothing makes others more 'other to us' than their suicide, Adam Phillips argues, since the act makes those others 'both more and less the authors of their own lives'.[20]

Although definitions of suicide are contested and historically and culturally variable, in this book I propose to appeal to what I term the 'canonical' conception of suicide (one to which it is possible that no act has ever entirely or purely adhered) as a gathering of five key characteristics: the act is willed or intended; it exclusively involves the deaths of one or more individuals who have independently (even if in cooperation) made the decision to die; it is undertaken by an individual or individuals

who can be said to have at least a minimal agency; it involves a certain temporality (it occurs within a limited period of time); and it involves a death that, at the moment it occurs, is otherwise avoidable.[21] The point of such a conception is not to rule out other forms of self-killing, including broad categories such as martyrdom, suicide bombing, mass suicide, and euthanasia; other methods, such as long-term addiction, self-starvation and other eating disorders, high-risk behaviour (including extreme sports), and heroic but life-threatening actions; and other mental states, such as intoxication, insanity, and (alleged) demonic possession – since, as I say, it is possible that no act of suicide strictly adheres exclusively to these criteria. Nor indeed is it to overlook the ways in which suicide and suicidal behaviour merge into what Durkheim calls 'other forms of conduct', including such 'embryonic' forms of suicide as 'the scholar who dies from excessive devotion to study' (suicides 'do not form . . . an isolated class of monstrous phenomena', as Durkheim puts it).[22] Rather, it is to try to construct a baseline against which the act of self-killing might be measured. Nevertheless, this limited conception of 'canonical' suicide is the version to which many of the instances discussed in this book refer, and may be said, in addition, to have the authority not only of the philosopher Immanuel Kant ('What constitutes suicide is the intention to destroy oneself') but also of the general or folk sense of suicide underlying what *Chambers Dictionary* refers to simply as 'the act or an instance of killing oneself deliberately'.[23]

In this book, I will suggest that it is imaginative literature – rather than philosophy, theology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, epidemiology, or indeed suicidology itself – that most fully, most consistently, and indeed most rigorously explores the phenomenon, and in particular the phenomenology, the lived experience, so to speak, of suicide.[24] Germaine de Staël asserts in her *Reflections on Suicide* (1812) that suicide involves 'the whole moral organization of man', and the historian Marzio Barbaglio argues that, 'More perhaps than any other action, suicide depends on a vast number of psychosocial, cultural, political and even biological causes'.[25] Literature – modern literature in particular – allows for an investigation not just of ethical and religious questions of suicide nor simply of its economic, sociological, psychological, medical, and psychiatric causes and legal and social consequences but also, most profoundly, of what the act means for the subject and for his or her survivors – what it is like, what is involved in contemplating or deciding to kill yourself: *how* it is. Literature potentially offers us a sense of what the Holocaust survivor, writer, and eventual suicide Jean Améry calls the '*condition suicidaire*'.[26]

This book starts from the premise that literature is a meaning-making discourse or, more accurately, that literature enacts the endless processes by which meanings are made, that it *requires* meaning-making, even while it resists and refracts any final or definite achievement of it. As such, I will argue, literature is eminently the discourse that allows for an exploration of suicide just to the extent that suicide may be considered as an act that both asserts and at the same time fundamentally withholds meaning: it insists on the shaping of a life, but still eradicates purpose from that life. Answering the question 'Is suicide a solution' in *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1925, Paul Valéry comments evocatively on the 'precariousness of the distinctions and contrasts we try to make among perceptions, tendencies, impulses, and consequences of impulses – between making happen and letting happen, between acting and undergoing – between *willing* and being capable' in relation to suicide: 'Seen under the microscope, the thread spun and measured out for us by the Fates is a cable whose multicolored strands cross over and under and reappear in the evolving twist that holds them and carries them on'.[27] It is literature, we might say, that most carefully registers the multicoloured evolving twists of such threads.

Literary Suicide

From Dante's forest of suicides and Chaucer's legends of good women in the fourteenth century to novels by Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Emily Brontë, Hardy, and Henry James in the nineteenth century, representations of suicide are prominent in and critically important to the pre-twentieth-century European literary canon. In earlier traditions, where suicide is not simply dismissed or condemned as a sin, crime, or act of insanity, it is often glorified as heroic or as the act of a tragic if flawed hero, lover, artist, or thinker. Suicide in fact plays a crucial but historically varied role in the pre-twentieth-century literary canon, but seems to have been particularly important in the early modern period. In his wide-ranging survey of the cultural history of suicide in Europe up until the end of the eighteenth century, Georges Minois comments that the act was 'a nearly obligatory ingredient of tragedy in England in the years 1580–1620', and in his world history of suicide, Marzio Barbagli reports an 'exponential' increase in plays featuring suicides from just eight in the six decades leading to 1560 to as many as ninety-nine in the first quarter of the seventeenth century – marking a developing sense that suicide is a function of human choice, rather than diabolic possession, and also registering a new 'sensibility' that brings the act out of the shadows and into the permissive space of Elizabethan

theatre.[28] One critic counted fifty-two suicides in Shakespeare's plays alone – including *Julius Caesar* (Cassius, Brutus, and Portia), *Antony and Cleopatra* (Mark Antony, Cleopatra), *Romeo and Juliet* (both of them), *King Lear* (Goneril kills herself; the blinded Gloucester is deceived into attempting to throw himself from a cliff), *Macbeth* (Lady Macbeth directly and her husband indirectly – a form of suicide-by-cop), and *Timon of Athens* (in the death of the eponymous nihilistic and misanthropic antihero).[29] It is notable, indeed, that Shakespeare's most famous play revolves around the actual suicide of Ophelia and the contemplation of the act by the protagonist himself. And it is notable too that what must be English literature's single most quoted line – Hamlet's self-tormenting question, 'To be or not to be'[30] – presents a character contemplating killing himself (despite frequent denials by critics from Samuel Johnson to Harold Bloom, this is surely the only way that the line can reasonably be construed: if that is the question, then 'not to be' can only entail killing oneself).[31] In this sense, *Hamlet* might be understood to be structured around the *philosophical* question of suicide – the question that, according to the nineteenth-century German Romantic writer Novalis constitutes the real beginning of philosophy, the 'genuine philosophical act', and according to the French existentialist writer Albert Camus the one 'genuine philosophical problem'.[32]

Shakespeare's play involves Ophelia's actual suicide, to be sure, but it also revolves around suicide as a question – as, indeed, the unavoidable question. Even while Hamlet's first soliloquy notes God's 'canon 'gainst self-slaughter' (1.ii.132), even while he decides against killing himself in his more famous second soliloquy (in this way, he concludes, 'conscience' or consciousness itself 'does make cowards' (3.i.82)), and even while the play ends with Hamlet's plea to his friend Horatio not to take *his* life, at least not immediately – one reading of 'Absent thee from felicity awhile' (5.ii.340) – the play and, to an extent, English literature thereafter are haunted by the suicidality of its protagonist. This is why Horatio is right to fear from the start that the ghost might tempt Hamlet 'toward the flood' or to 'the dreadful summit of the cliff / That beetles o'er his base into the sea' – that it might put 'toys of desperation' into his brain (1.iv.69–76). Hamlet, that tortured, self-tormenting everyman is, from the beginning to the end of the play, suicidal.

Summing up three or four decades of statistical work on suicide, Émile Durkheim insists that 'there is always and normally, in every society, a collective disposition taking the form of suicide' and that suicide is a 'chronic' and 'normal element of the moral temper' of society.[33] It is from a recognition of the centrality of suicide in the English literary canon and its

sociologisation and normalisation in the twentieth century that the present book begins. I set out from the premise that, in diverse ways and in response to highly variable, historically specific contexts, literature provides a space in which the inadmissible – in this case suicide as itself a *defining* human possibility – can be discussed, elaborated, challenged, effectively imagined, and vicariously enacted. If the thought of suicide is, in part, an antidote to the struggle of life itself, a survival mechanism, even a way to avoid dying (you imagine doing yourself in in order not to), literary representations of suicide are bound up with the more general ambiguity of, or the ambivalence involved in, suicide ideation – a cognitive habit or tendency or event in which the *thought* can function not only as a prompt towards or a rehearsal for but also as a defence against the act. For one thing we know about suicide is that ambivalence is built into the act: 'The majority of suicidal patients are ambivalent to the very end', the World Health Organization reports; ambivalence 'saturates the suicidal act', Kay Redfield Jamison comments.[34] The point is made dramatically clear in the comments of one of the subjects of Eric Steel's remarkable documentary film *The Bridge* (2006). Kevin Hines reports regretting the jump after launching himself from the eponymous Golden Gate Bridge – changing his mind, in effect, halfway down – and deciding that he wants to live, after all. He explains that in the remaining moments of his fall, he arranged his body so as to minimize injury as he hit the water. He was injured but survived, a living testament to a fundamental problem in suicidology, the question of intention – a crucial aspect of any definition of suicide but one that can always change, at any moment, right up to and indeed beyond the literal point of no return.

Representations of suicide in literature reflect not only personal or psychological but also social and cultural aspects of ambivalence towards the act. And this ambivalence may also be understood to reflect, fundamentally, the institution of literature more generally: its status as socially and psychologically affirmative and redemptive, on the one hand, and as a discourse or practice that undermines and disturbs personal, social, and cultural certainties, formations, and identities on the other. We might say that literature makes living, continuing to live, possible, but that at the same time – and therefore – it questions how and why one might do so. In this book, I want to take that thought seriously and, through a discussion of modern fiction and poetry, to consider literature as the preeminent discourse of suicide ideation, the discourse in which suicide can be more or less openly thought, conceived, challenged, imagined, planned, practiced, performed – and avoided.[35]

The Ideation Pharmakon

The starting point for this book, then, is the proposition that the human propensity for suicide ideation in the weak sense (the general and not necessarily, in the end, suicidal sense) helps to explain the otherwise curious and seemingly transhistorical insistence on the representation, contemplation, and imaginative envisioning of suicide in the literary canon.[36] At least since Hamlet's famous soliloquy, suicide has played a central if mostly unacknowledged role in the institution of literature. But with the gradual relaxation of religious and legal restrictions on suicide, its increasing medicalisation and pathologisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the sociologisation and normalisation of the act in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suicide becomes an increasingly prominent concern in canonical literature – from the suicides that punctuate each of James Joyce's major texts, Virginia Woolf's prefiguring of her own suicide in 1941 in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1931), and a focus on the act in writers such as Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, D. H. Lawrence, Elizabeth Bowen, and William Faulkner towards the beginning of the century; through the death-driven poetry of Stevie Smith and 'extremist' suicidalities of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and others in the 1950s and 1960s; to what is, if anything, an even more pervasive concern with the act and idea in novels such as Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), David Vann's *Legend of a Suicide* (2008), and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and *The Pale King* (2011) at the end of the century and the beginning of our own. This book begins, then, from the fundamental recognition that suicide is an essential, irreducible, and conceptually, thematically, and formally significant, if potentially scandalous or transgressive, feature of the modern literary canon.

While the book is informed by the historical phenomenon of suicide and suicide ideation – by the rich historical, sociological, and epidemiological data on suicide, for example, and by the actual suicides of writers – it also, and more centrally, focuses on literary representations of suicide as important cultural dimensions of suicide ideation. Despite appearances, I want to suggest that the thought of suicide – suicide *as* a thought – can be conceived not only as negation but also as affirmation – an affirmation, even, of life. For many, the thought of suicide, the knowledge that there is a way out, is itself life affirming, even lifesaving (you do not need to kill yourself because you know that you can kill yourself). For suicide to be a possibility, and therefore for the act to be affirmative, life-affirming,

to be constitutive of hope – to *save* lives as well as to end them – suicide must be thought, imagined, conceived, planned. And it must be possible to think, imagine, conceive, plan it, again and again – for suicide to be 'real' and therefore potentially able to save one's life, it must be embraced by the individual as a practical possibility, as an act that might indeed be undertaken. What psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and others refer to as 'suicide ideation', in other words, is not only fundamental to the individual who intends or carries out the act: rather, suicide ideation may be conceived of as an inevitable, even as a necessary aspect of what it means to be human. Suicidality is constitutive of the human condition if it can be taken to include thinking about, contemplating, and imagining the possibility of ending one's life.

Suicide Century, then, seeks to investigate and to understand the under-recognized fact of the prevalence of suicide as a key concern of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. A preliminary account of its argument might briefly be sketched in the following terms: suicide ideation is fundamental to those medical, therapeutic, psychiatric, psychoanalytic, and social work discourses and practices concerned with suicide or with suicidal subjects or individuals. In this context, suicide ideation can be conceived of in terms of a person's thoughts about and plans for killing him- or herself. When engaged in with a certain frequency or in certain ways, suicide ideation tends to be interpreted, along with other tendencies, thought and speech patterns, behaviours, and dispositions, as a key indicator of a propensity towards or likelihood of a suicide attempt. But suicide ideation might also be seen in fact as a far more general psychological state, reflex, habit, or tendency. Indeed, it might be seen as a human characteristic, a peculiarly human attribute that in some way plays a part in defining what it means to be human. It is something of a truism in certain strands of philosophical thinking to say that to be human involves the ability to think the future, a thinking that necessarily includes the knowledge of one's ultimate, unavoidable death. 'Nor dread nor hope afford / A dying animal', W. B. Yeats avers in his twelve-line poem 'Death' from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) – unless, that is, the dying animal is human: for 'man', he contends, 'knows death to the bone', has 'created death' indeed, and 'awaits his end / Dreading and hoping all'.[37] Despite what many would no doubt think of as the tragedy of this singularly human knowledge, it becomes possible to argue that there is a human need also (and therefore) to imagine *choosing* to die, since the thought of the future must include the possibility that one's life will at some point become psychologically or physically intolerable and that one will therefore be forced – or

decide – to end one's life. Indeed, the thought of the future as such – which must logically include the thought of a future state that is intolerable – may itself be said to be intolerable in the absence of the thought that one could at some point choose to end one's life: in a sense it might be said that thinking the future is neither logically nor affectively possible without the thought of an escape. Or one might put it differently: to think of the future is necessarily to include the possibility not just that the individual who is doing the thinking might be absent, radically and permanently absent (in other words no longer alive) but also that such absence could be a result of the thinker's own actions. Suicide, in this sense, is structural to the condition of humanity, to being human, inasmuch as being human involves a) thinking, b) a thinking of the future, and c) a thinking of a future in which, in a fundamental sense, one will not be present.

It is no doubt for this reason that Friedrich Nietzsche declares in *Beyond Good and Evil* that the thought of suicide is 'a powerful solace' and that 'by means of it one gets through many a bad night'.[38] Influenced, like Nietzsche, by the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner similarly remarked in a letter to Liszt in 1845 of his 'ardent longing for death, for absolute unconsciousness, total non-existence'.[39] And some thinkers have even conceived of suicide ideation as affirmative since, as Montaigne argued as early as 1573–4 in 'A Custom of the Isle of Cea', 'Living is slavery if the freedom to die is wanting'.[40] 'One doesn't kill oneself', Maurice Blanchot declares in *The Space of Literature*, 'but one can'. This, he contends, 'is a marvelous resource'. To be able to die – having death 'within reach, docile and reliable', as Blanchot puts it – may even be said to 'make life possible'.[41] The Romanian French philosopher E. M. Cioran is perhaps the most outspoken of twentieth-century writers in his assertion of the benefit of at least the *idea* of suicide, of suicide ideation: in *A Short History of Decay* (1949), he declares that we are '[b]orn in a prison' and that we 'could not reach the end of a single day if the possibilities of ending it all did not incite us to begin the next day all over again'. For Cioran, the 'prison' of the world 'strips us of everything, except the freedom to kill ourselves'.[42] The thought, the very thought of suicide, this 'consolation', this 'gift' that 'fill[s] us with dread' but also 'delights' us, *is* freedom, our only freedom. Like Montaigne, Cioran asserts that the individual who has *not* imagined his own suicide is nothing more than 'a degraded galley slave or a worm crawling upon the cosmic carrion'.[43] Even though Cioran does not in the end recommend suicide (since it anyway always comes 'too late', as he aphoristically asserts in *The Trouble with Being Born*), he nevertheless sees it as constituting what the sociologist Thomas Osborne describes as an