This claim asserts that hysteria is a prelude to passion. I would maintain that, far from being a prelude or a preparation, hysteria is passion's deadly adversary; hysteria loathes passion as a potential usurper of its usurped domain. With similar shrewdness it abhors wit, discrimination, imagination, humor, and judgment — all those aspects of intelligence whose injury and impairment are its goal and result. It is true that we must live with hysteria, but we need not, I think, honor it. In fact, if we give it its rightful identification as the sworn enemy of our capacity to be fully human we may give ourselves a crucial advantage in the struggle we must constantly engage in to transcend it.

Notes

1 Sigmund Freud, "Fragment of a Case of Hysteria," *Collected Papers* (1905), (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 3 : 131-132.

2 Freud, "A Case of Hysteria," pp. 141-144.

3 Freud, "A Case of Hysteria," p. 137.

4 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind," *Poets of the Engish Language* (New York: The Viking Press, 1950). Vol. IV, p. 332.

5 Allen Tate, "Three Types of Poetry," *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York: The Swallow Press & William Morris, 1948), pp. 100-101.

6 Tate, "Three Types of Poetry," p. 102.

Despair and The Life of Suicide

BY LESLIE H. FARBER

Gabriel Marcel has written: "... the fact that suicide is always possible is the essential starting point of any genuine metaphysical thought."[1] It might equally be said that the possibility of suicide will always oppose psychiatry's efforts to rid itself of metaphysical concern. For once that possibility disrupts the civilized and ordinary boundaries of psychotherapy, every technical category loses its ordered place in our thinking and must be questioned with a new urgency or exploited in a manner that robs it of whatever truthful meaning it may have earned. What I have chosen to discuss here is – if I may be permitted this irony – the life of suicide, as distinguished from the act itself.

Martin Buber once remarked: "The act of suicide – it is a trapdoor which suddenly springs open. What else can one say?" Well, one can say a great deal, to judge from psychiatric literature. But, it is my impression that while to the man who kills himself the act of suicide may be a trapdoor suddenly sprung, to the analyst it seems rather to resemble a psychological staircase, leading step by logical step to an inescapable culmination. Although I don't wish to force the image, I must remark that whether this staircase goes down or up, it must always be traveled backwards. Confronted with the fact of suicide, the analyst must construct his explanation in reverse, laying motive upon motive (hostility is favored here), and strategy upon strategy, until he reaches some final necessity. Having arrived at the end of his staircase, he may then retrace his steps forward, issuing those kitchen prescriptions for the heading-off of the act with which we are all familiar.

I would suggest that this staircase, though a far more reassuring and manageable structure than the suicide's own trapdoor, exists principally in the analyst's head, not in the real world. On the other hand, the world is full of trapdoors, even though the only ones we can be sure of are those which have already sprung open. The invention of the staircase is hardly surprising; a trapdoor offers very little to an investigator bent on explanation, and, by extension, recipes for prevention. But it is my suspicion that the staircase leads us, not to greater understanding, but merely away from the issue. It prevents us, after all, right at the outset, from even considering the possibility that the act of suicide is not the final move in a chain of causation – that perhaps it is not caused at all, in a psychological sense. Naturally, this is not an agreeable proposition to the psychologist, who tends, understandably, to feel somewhat panicked if suddenly robbed of his basic tenet and tool, causation. Be that as it may, I feel that there is a more fruitful approach, even for psychiatrists, to the issue of suicide than the construction of causes out of motives. And that is: to leave aside, for the moment, the act itself, and to contemplate what I have called "the life of suicide" – which must be seen, not as the situation or state of mind which leads *to* the act, but that situation in which the act-as-possibility, quite apart from whether it eventually occurs or not, has a life of its own.

It is part of our most profound – or metaphysical – awareness of ourselves, as Marcel has pointed out, to acknowledge that the possibility of suicide belongs to the human condition. We know this and must live with it, in much the same way as we know and must live with the fact that sin and evil are no strangers to our nature. But the awareness that it is possible for us to kill ourselves does not lead us to embrace suicide, any more than does the awareness that we are sinners prompt us to go forth and sin. For the man who is caught up in what I have called "the life of suicide," however, the possibility of being the author of his own death exercises a demonic and seductive fascination over him. This fascination takes different forms. There is a certain kind of person for whom the idea of suicide is a secret and cherished solution to any difficulty life may throw across his path. Suicide is the ace up his sleeve (revealed to no one), the secret possession of which shapes his response to any and every problem. Such a man confronts his life whispering to himself, "If I can't find a better

job, I'll kill myself. If my son won't confide in me, if my daughter flunks her final exams, if my wife forgets my birthday just one more time – I'll kill myself." This man, although caught up in one form of the life of suicide, is not, I think, in despair. Despair, which arises only in someone capable of some seriousness toward his life and himself, is literally beyond such a person. His secret scheming with the concealed trump of suicide altogether robs any event in his life – and quickly enough his entire life – of meaning, but without imposing upon him the necessity of acknowledging or dealing with meaninglessness. And, because concealment is so vital to his "advantage," as he conceives it, and therefore his deviousness and dishonesty are so virtually impossible to penetrate, he is, I believe, the most difficult of all potential suicides to treat – or help in any way. Though not suffering the estrangement of true despair, this man is actually more separated from the world and his fellows than the despairer in his worst agonies of despairing isolation. I will return to this question of estrangement, but at this point I would like to contrast this form of the life of suicide that I have described with a form that we more commonly encounter: the suicidal preoccupation of the man who *is* in despair.

Suicide finds no more fertile soil for its intrigues than despair – that "sickness unto death" in which, as Kierkegaard observed, we long to die and cannot. It is the middle years that are most vulnerable to the claims of this sickness of spirit, which now radically questions all we have been, at the same time scorning the solace formerly sought in the future, making who we are to become the most oppressive of questions. As both the workings and visages of the flesh falter and wither, all crude preconceptions of immortality are shattered, giving way to a brooding – and equally crude – apprehension of the finitude of our earthly stay. Gradually – or even suddenly – there emerges the realization, "For better or worse, that was it. There never was a second chance." Time past now isolates itself as an alien, often perverse accomplice, sometimes accepting, but more often refusing, memory's overtures. What cannot be remembered robs us of goods that seem rightfully ours, so that memory turns feverish and willful in its pursuit of the past – the past we thought we owned when it was the present, and assumed we would continue to own in the future. What we

would remember eludes us; what we would forget we now remember with a fresh and painful clarity we never before knew. All those cruelties, deceits, and betrayals which we inflicted on the human order disclose themselves as wounds that would not and cannot heal. Of such real guilt Martin Buber wrote:

> A man stands before us who, through acting or failing to act, has burdened himself with a guilt or has taken part in a community guilt, and now, after years or decades, is again and again visited by the memory of his guilt. Nothing of the genesis of his illness is concealed from him if he is only willing no longer to conceal from himself the guilt character of that active or passive occurrence. What takes possession of him ever again has nothing to do with any parental or social reprimand, and if he does not have to fear an earthly retribution and does not believe in a heavenly one, no court, no punishing power exists that can make him anxious. Here there rules the one penetrating insight – the one insight capable of penetrating into the impossibility of recovering the original point of departure and the irreparability of what has been done, and that means the real insight into the irreversibility of lived time, a fact that shows itself unmistakably in the starkest of all human perspectives, that concerning one's own death. From no standpoint is time so perceived as a torrent as from the vision of the self in guilt. Swept along in this torrent, the bearer of guilt is visited by the shudder of identity with himself. I, he comes to know, I, who have become another, am the same.[2]

As despair deepens, what had meaning now seems meaningless; what seemed meaningless is fraught with meaning. There develops an ever-widening rift between the despairer and the person he was, between him and the world in which he lived. Though estranged from the world and the self who formerly dwelt in that world, he is at the same time – out of his craving for reconciliation – now wholly absorbed with that world and that self. Envy and pride conspire to increase the rift. Strangers passing him on the street appear to him transfigured by their thoughtless possession of just what he has lost: the sheer, taken-for-granted ordinariness of life. In

the misery of the envy they incite in him, he isolates and exalts that quality of life that can flourish only in disregard: a sense of belonging to whatever worlds one lives in that is both concrete and casual. Finding himself outside his own world, he discovers that he is unequal to it, and he yearns to sever whatever ties still bind him to this world to which he no longer belongs. Fitfully he contemplates other worlds – the simple job, the monastery, the tropical island, the sick room. But, he flinches as he imagines addressing himself to the machinery of preparation, explanation, and farewell that such a flight requires, and he realizes further that no haven offers a promise of honoring his passport on arrival. Though he may believe himself the most miserably humbled of men, it is not humility but pride that rules his imagination in this enterprise. His visions of escape from his tormenting world are apt to be rather grand possibilities such as remote lands and the monastic life. Taking a job as a shoe clerk does not occur to him – though it might be more in keeping with the humility he ascribes to himself. Within him, pride and despair, which since the earliest stages of his affliction have found themselves natural and powerful partners, each encouraging and supporting the claims and strategies of the other, now discover in the despairer's yearning for escape merely one more invitation to exercise their formidable collaborative gifts and assume command. Inspired by his despair, his pride now invents in its own image the possible alternatives to the world that surrounds him, excluding him. It may happen that he perseveres, and reaches his island, or the disturbed ward of some closer-by institution, thus shutting out the world that had shut the door on him. Yet what he cannot shut out, what accompanies him on any journey he makes, is his own despair. And, with his despair, his overweening pride. His despair is not in the possession of the world, nor can he abandon it as he can abandon a city, a job, or a marriage, and flee to some uncontaminated place. His despair is his alone; it travels with him and lives where he lives; and, whether he stays or flees, he must eventually discover that it responds in any significant sense as little to geographical as to stylistic change. Its indifference to maneuvers is absolute.

Because intercourse with his fellows only reminds him of what he no longer has, he slowly loses the power to be with other human beings – even as their physical presence grows ever more essential. To some degree he is conscious that his mounting self-absorption is accompanied

by a dwindling perception of others. What concern he manages he must will: thus does he leap from his reveries to arrange his features in some imitation of interest and animation, to open doors, light others' cigarettes, to "participate" – usually in some stilted, feverish way that constitutes the best performance to which his will alone can move him – in "the scene," in "a social situation," where his presence in a group of people seems to require certain ordinary capacities he finds he now suddenly and totally lacks. Dreading that others will recognize what he already knows and abandon him, he feels compelled to declare some disability that will legitimize his distracted self–absorption in the eyes of those about him, in the hope that they will extend the same tolerance toward him that any invalid may rightfully expect. Like the sinner in *The Fall,* by Camus, the despairer knows that "the essential is being able to permit oneself everything, even if, from time to time, one has to profess vociferously one's own infamy."[3] In this state, he experiences an overwhelming longing to confess – but what he confesses is not his wickedness, which would be a proper subject for confession and which might involve him in some redeeming attitude toward both his confession and his life. Instead, what he wishes to confess is his worthlessness – his infirmity. Such a confession is spurious, of course; it does not touch on issues of forgiveness or repentance that are relevant to his condition. In "confessing" infirmity, what the despairer would coerce – and here his willfulness is quite brutal – is an acknowledgment of his disease in terms that are almost physical. I find no mystery in the eagerness of those in despair to secure a physical diagnosis – say depression – and then offer themselves to pills or electric shock or lobotomy – anything that will spare them real contrition. But, more mysterious to me is the willingness of those of our calling to accept the more demonic terms of despair, to conspire to relieve the despairer of his humanity through chemical, electrical, or surgical means.

Even in such a brief account of the landscape of despair, it must be clear that despair – potentially at least – is both destroying and renewing. With this double potentiality in mind, T. S. Eliot has addressed himself to the despairer in this manner :

> I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love

> For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
> But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
> Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
> So the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing.[4]

While we may not share the author's rather Eastern reliance on the waiting itself as the way out of despair, still we must acknowledge how difficult it is for the despairer to still his soul – or his mind. While despair means literally the loss of hope, the movements of despair are frantically directed toward hope; but the hope born of despair may turn to the prescriptions of the isolated will. Spurning the self–illumination arising from true humility, despairing hope concerns itself pridefully with certainties. Even the certainty of hopelessness may paradoxically appear as a form of hope, promising to make reasonable what is unreasonable, namely hopelessness itself. The despairer may, at this opaque moment, be utterly convinced of the clarity of his vision, condemning the world that preceded his despair as no more than a sentimental insanity, a silly fabrication created by his own unwillingness to discern the harsh truth about this existence. It is as if his imagination, in its fullest sense, had abdicated, and now his will could apply itself to the task of reducing what is most human, to pursuing ever further the inevitability – and therefore the essential absurdity – of all that has been and all that will be. He now seems to himself, despite his melancholy, the most reasonable and forthright of men. Like Kirillov in Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed,* he proclaims, "I am just such a scoundrel as you, as all, not a decent man. There's never been a decent man anywhere ... all the planet is a lie and rests on a lie and on mockery. So then, the very laws of the planet are a lie and the vaudeville of devils."[5] This is the realism of a truly macabre predictability. And a "vaudeville of devils" accurately describes the stale, repetitious, lifeless routines from which the despairer yearns to escape. Surprise and mystery have vanished from his view, if not from his experience. If he contemplates a visit with friends, he can no longer imagine the casual, the unexpected moment that might offer even momentary relief. No, instead he writes both scripts and concludes from his authorship that, since he knows what would happen, there is no reason for making such a visit. But, if life itself should provide a casual moment, even with a stranger, which quite cuts through

his self–absorption, wholly transforming his mood, he has no capacity to celebrate this moment. In fact, he will disown or conceal the moment, rather than allow it to question his dismal certainty, and he thus learns cagily to protect his state from life's interventions. Even the rational or logical steps to his conclusions, which strike him as utterly convincing, may turn shabby if exposed to the light of discourse. So, pride urges him to keep his own counsel, even though it mean his death. Thus does the despairer appear before us to ask that most extraordinary and truly diabolical question – especially when addressed to a psychotherapist – "Is there any good in talking?" After this, we may recover our composure and succeed in engaging him imaginatively, so that real talk does, after all, begin to come about. Despite his absolute certainty of a few moments before that even momentary relief from the torment of despair was no longer possible, his despairing self–absorption may yield to forthright interest in the subject at hand, a yielding which goes beyond mere distraction. Relief has, in spite of everything, actually been granted him; his despairing certainty has been exposed to the real world of discourse and proved false. We might even say that a minor miracle has occurred. What are we to answer then, when, as the hour nears its end, our patient or friend, preparing to take his leave, turns to us and asks, "But haven't you something *useful* to say to me – something I can use after I leave here?" If there is an answer to this question, it has not occurred to me. I wish to comment only on one of its most curious aspects: the man who spoke these words was one who had recently been in despair and would, very likely, soon be in despair again. Yet, by this question, which could occur only to a despairing mind, despair reasserted its claim on him, still without forcing upon him the anguish that is its customary companion. Contained within his question is the reminder that such fleeting moments of relief are all very well, but after all truth is truth and logic is logic, and by truth of course he means despairing truth, and by logic he means despairing logic. This is to say that what he wishes to take with him to counter his despairing certainties are other certainties, maxim-like morsels, prescriptive in nature, which, like pills, will offer him some comfort when the pain returns. Almost while still celebrating the wonder of his renewal, he has with his question submitted himself again to despair.

The fascination of suicide to a despairing mind lies in the fact that it offers a demonic solution for every anguished, humbling, and potentially renewing claim which despair may make. As Marcel has written, the possibility of suicide may provide the beginnings of metaphysical thought. However, when an absorption with suicide possesses the despairer, it becomes as Marcel has said – "the expression of another much more profound and more hidden possibility, the possibility of a spiritual denial of self, or, what comes to the same thing, of an impious and demonic affirmation of self which amounts to a radical rejection of being."[6] We have, I think, no more desperate illustration of the manner in which suicide violates every human claim which may exist in despair than Kirillov's explanation of his suicide:

> Man has done nothing but invent God so as to go on living, and not kill himself . . .I can't understand how an atheist could know there is no God and not kill himself on the spot. To recognize that there is no God and not to recognize at the same instant that One is God oneself is an absurdity, else one would certainly kill oneself. If you recognize it you are sovereign, and then you won't kill yourself but will live in the greatest glory. But one, the first, must kill himself, for else who will begin and prove it? So I must certainly kill myself, to begin and prove it. Now I am only a god against my will and I am unhappy, because I am *bound* to assert my will. All are unhappy because all are afraid to express their Will. Man has hitherto been so unhappy and so poor because he has been afraid to assert his will in the highest point and has shown his self–will only in little things, like a schoolboy. I am awfully unhappy, for I'm awfully afraid. Terror is the curse of man ... But I will assert my will, I am bound to believe that I don't believe. I will begin and will make an end of it and open the door, and will save. That's the only thing that will save mankind and will recreate the next generation physically; for with his present physical nature man can't get on without his former God, I believe. For three years I've been seeking for the attribute of my godhead and I've found it; the attribute of my godhead is self–will! That's all I can do to prove in the highest point my

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[6]Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 2, *Faith & Reality* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1960), p. 194.

[7]Dostoyevsky, *The Possessed*, pp. 629–630.

This quotation is a combination of two speeches of Kirillov's that occur close together in the course of a dialogue several pages long, a series of assertions that seem to me to constitute an excellent example of certain aspects of the suicidal despair I have been discussing. As I examine Kirillov's declarations, I will try to make clear my own understanding of what is happening in this passage, and what significance it may have for our consideration of despair and the life of suicide.

As Kirillov expounds on the purpose and necessity of his suicide, the voice we hear seems hardly to belong to a person. Or, if we can imagine a person to be present, it must strike us that this person's singular life as a human being is almost wholly submerged in a sea of generalizations about the human condition and the existence of God. Both the tone and the substance of these generalizations exhibit the certainty of a creature with godlike pretensions, while at the same time testifying, by the forced nature of the logic, that this certainty is constantly assailed by fear and doubt. Further, that uncertainty is unnaturally frightening to such a mind; in its fear of any sort of question, it leaps to answer the wrong questions. Again, Eliot's lines come to mind: Kirillov is precisely a man unable to still his soul—or his mind, which, indeed, has become merely the reasoning function (however impaired its power to reason) of his sovereign will. The very thing he cannot do is wait. Willfully he hopes, and inevitably his hope is hope for the wrong thing. Bereft of faith, yet lusting for faith, willfully he invents his own creed and embraces it with willful belief. He is indeed "not ready for thought," yet thought seems to be the only response his mind can imagine to the despair which overwhelms it.

We should note that at no point—in this passage or in the course of the entire scene—does Kirillov admit, or indeed even begin to recognize, his own despair. This is the worst of

all despairs in which, as Kierkegaard has written, the despairer does not know he is in despair. With that variety of logic that is born only in despair, he reasons that even though he might live on and on in "greatest glory" as God, he must be the first to kill himself in order to "prove" his divinity—or, more accurately, his immortality. Usually the despairer, as I mentioned earlier, learns to mask such demonic logic as this out of his prideful apprehension that any explicit exposure might reveal it as foolish, even absurd. But Kirillov, ignorant of his despair, fails to experience such apprehension; although not altogether confident of the truth of his assertions, neither his doubts nor his pain suggest to him the nature of his condition. What intervenes between the plentiful evidence of despair and his notice of such evidence is, of course, his will, which cunningly blocks his vision at every turn.

And, in this willed blindness toward his state of mind, he is incapable both of imagining, and certainly of contending with, such a real issue as guilt. There is little suggestion, in his discourse, of a human soul suspended in anguish and guilt over its own particular injuries to the human order. Being beyond remorse, all Kirillov can do is to call himself and all other men scoundrels, at the same time declaring the entire planet to be a mockery. That there might potentially be guilt, were he able to pursue real self-illumination, is suggested by his wish to save not himself but "mankind," even though all men be scoundrels. Out of his loss of faith, he perpetrates a familiar psychologism, strangely similar to Freud's view of religion: namely, that men have invented God in order to stay alive. Untroubled by any memory of other times when he must have deceived himself with other certainties, Kirillov now decrees without hesitation that if there is no God, then he must be God. Not only is there no suggestion of guilt in Kirillov's proclamations, neither is there any intimation that

he may have wrestled with—or even acknowledged—the terror aroused in him by the idea of his own death. What we hear instead is the rather plaintive statement that he is unhappy and afraid. And, even the possibilities for self-illumination that might lie in this limited admission—were he able to hold himself still in the presence of such unhappiness and fear long enough to perceive some hint of their nature and meaning—are quickly dissipated in the generalization that "terror is the curse of man."

At only one point in this passage does Kirillov seem perilously close to an encounter with the real nature of his condition—an encounter which might force him to abandon his despairing logic. His abrupt assertion that his suicide is "the only thing that will save mankind and will recreate the next generation physically; for with his present physical nature man can't get on without his former God, I believe," contradicts the primary assumption on which his entire argument has rested up to this point: namely, that man could get on without God perfectly well, if it were only proven to him once and for all that God didn't exist. Here Kirillov seems suddenly to have stumbled upon an alarming and utterly unmanageable truth: man's need for God is contained in his very physical nature—his mortality, his helplessness to alter the absolute necessity of death. That such a truth could have penetrated the fortifications that will has erected on every side of his awareness must mean that Kirillov, despite his claims to omniscience, has failed to convince himself with his own despairing reasoning. In the moment of his realization of this failure, and faced with the truth he has just perceived, his despair would seem to be on the brink of a crisis of exposure and self-illumination. But his will, rather than accept such a defeat, commands avoidance of this crisis, and presses him instead to outwit the moment with the most extreme and

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The principal attribute of his godhead, he has discovered, is "self-will," by which he means the naked will directed toward the self – an unconditional Nietzschean will, which we might term willfulness, or perhaps pride, and which suggests the "demonic affirmation of self" of which Marcel has spoken. Kirillov will not entertain the possibility that such "self-will" might have landed him in his suicidal despair. Instead, he asserts the demonic principle that man has been unhappy because he has been afraid to be willful enough. Therefore, he will prove his independence and his "new terrible freedom" through the "supreme" act of "self-will," namely, suicide. This is to say that if, out of cowardice, he has failed himself and others, he will now prove his courage, not by contending in fear and trembling with the tumultuous questions of his existence and thus finding his life, but by ending his life. What never occurs to him is that by means of this very concept of "self-will" his whole argument has – perhaps not in terms of its own peculiar logic, but certainly in relation to truth, turned itself on its head. Instead of seeing "self-will" as his affliction, he conceives it as his godhead, and the instrument of his self-realization.

Instead of seeing that his sovereign "self will" enslaves every human aspect of his intelligence, he imagines it as the key to his "terrible freedom." Instead of recognizing "self-will" as the unmistakable clue to his demonic despair, he finds in it – by virtue of the extraordinary demands it imposes – the supreme heroism of his calling, justifying and explaining whatever fear, doubt, or pain may have threatened to shake his resolve. Instead of calling into question his manner and, along with it, all his reasoning, the idea of "self-will" arrives in his mind as a sort of deus-ex-machina of logic, clarifying and confirming all that has gone before, setting upon the ordered whole its seal of authority and exaltation.

Having thus established the necessity of his suicide, Kirillov shoots himself. While perhaps a literary necessity, this is not really characteristic of the life of suicide, which may or may not terminate in the suicidal act itself.

Even before plots of suicide have begun to invade and absorb the despairer's subjectivity, his "self-will" may be exerted in destructive ways other than the "supreme" act of suicide. In an effort to breach his growing sense of estrangement, he may explode into a mania of self-assertive activity in which he would seem to be trying to overpower his anguish by exalting those more headstrong aspects of his nature which have brought him at last to despair. Alcohol or drugs may offer brutish assistance to this euphoric surge of personal motion, by means of which he tries to force his way back into the world. Of all the movements of despair, this clatter of the spirit is the most deafening and the most defeating, convincing no one, least of all himself. Deprived by this rush of will of the capacity for quieter moral discrimination, he now exposes himself to more and more opportunities for guilt, which must also be overridden. Desperately hungry for reconciliation, he becomes increasingly estranged from those loved ones who might conceivably offer some relief, were it not being demanded of them. At this stage in his deprivation, he may turn unhappily to the task of documenting his estrangement by becoming a self-appointed, though miserable, expert on those deficiencies of his fellows that render them incapable of love – particularly the love toward him that would lighten his despair. While dimly conscious that his hectic state makes him unlovable, he maintains, in the midst of his fever, a wavering hope that the other will overwhelm his isolation with a burst of affection that will lighten his

anguish and effectively dispute his despairing certainties. Naturally, he hesitates to reveal his perceptions of the manner in which the other has failed him, out of fear that he will make himself even more unlovable in the other's eyes. Nevertheless, his need may provoke him into an angry encounter in which, despite admissions of his own state, he still manages to list his charges. When love – or the inability to love – is examined in this objective manner as still another article of knowledge, every human being must acknowledge his failure. To defend one's capacity to love is a spiritual impossibility; it forces the loved one to objectify and therefore lose that which cannot be objectified, namely love itself. Often enough, the consequence of such an encounter is mutual despair. Even if the loved one manages not to fall into despair himself, he may still feel himself charged with the responsibility to love, so that in a self-conscious way he attempts to will what cannot be willed.

This phase of explosive activity will persist until the despairer's excesses become so outrageous to himself that a sudden and shocking perception of his own behavior plunges him into real self-loathing. In this state, he can no longer escape – or postpone – an acknowledgment of his despair, and, by virtue of this very acknowledgment, he may – still within despair – find his way toward the beginnings of self-illumination and renewal. But, should the possibility of such renewal elude him, he will now discover that this self-loathing has landed him in the bleakest, most naked realm of despair. The rush has subsided, leaving his despairing mind increasingly at the mercy of suicidal machinations. It is as though the will, which formerly asserted itself in activity, now turns to the invention of the details of one's self-destruction. At this stage, the body grows heavy and alien, so that the most ordinary physical tasks seem like monstrous obstacles, making the despairer wonder how he could ever have taken these matters for granted. He experiences his body as a ponderous affliction to which he longs to put an end. Yet, at the same time, his physical vanity is offended by this new imposition, so that often, in the midst of his suicidal ruminations, he will leave his chair to inspect his face in the mirror for any new wrinkles that may have appeared. At one moment, he may have decided on the exact date for his demise, while in the next he finds himself considering the purchase of a new and fashionable jacket Such an outlandish mixture of the profound and the trivial – so characteristic of the

life of suicide – does some disservice to his view of himself as a tragic figure. Increasingly, he comes to charge himself with duplicity, shallowness, even frivolity, and now it appears that the act of suicide is necessary to prove his seriousness. The absurdity and pathos of the life of suicide stem from the despairer's will to achieve — through suicide — his status as a moral human being. In a sense he asks, "How can I live decently in suicide?" Referring to the "radical rejection of being" that follows upon the "demonic affirmation of self" in the contemplation of suicide, Marcel adds, "that rejection is the final falsehood and absurdity; for it can exist only *tbrougb* someone who is; but, as it becomes embodied it develops into perverted being."[8]

As a demonically constitutive symbol, suicide invokes every human concern. Inevitably the issue of courage is raised — not the courage to live in spite of despair, but the courage suicidally to put an end to all those cowardly hesitations that prevent the despairer from consummating his death. Brooding over the manner of his suicide, he searches again and again for the considerate way — the way that will make manifest his continuing solicitude for those who would be most damaged by his death. Timing becomes a weighty problem: it would be cruel to spoil the Christmas season for his family, selfish to disturb office business at this particular moment. (Let us note that this intricate solicitude toward others is, in truth, merely an absurd imitation of — or substitute for — his real guilt toward them and toward the whole human order, a guilt he is incapable of contending with directly.) The suicide note, since it must justify what cannot be justified, becomes a formidable and frustrating document as it is composed and recomposed in the despairer's mind, each new version suggesting the possibility that perhaps no note would be preferable to an unconvincing one: particularly since any note, depending on its imaginative adequacy, may expose to the despairer the essential absurdity of all he seeks to prove.

Even the extent of his suffering must be witnessed and authenticated by suicide. Repeatedly, he announces to himself that his state his unbearable. But, should he be challenged on this score — that is, how is he to know what is and what is not bearable for himself, in other words, what gives him this godlike certainty? — his answer, to himself, at least, is that it must be unbearable, otherwise he would not be thinking of suicide.

In solitude, this answer appears unassailable to the despairer. In fact, it may happen that the act of suicide seems to have become necessary to demonstrate how unendurable his pain is, in which case he commits suicide in order to prove it unendurable. Here, the despairer takes his own life to prove that he is not responsible for taking his own life. By definition, what is unendurable cannot be endured; therefore, his suicide is not a matter of choice but an externally determined response to a situation that has deprived him of choice. The flaw in this logical construct, of course, is that his definition of his condition as unendurable is very much a matter of choice, and thus, obviously, so is his suicide. What is interesting here is the despairer's effort to deny the fact of choice and, by extension, to deny responsibility for his suicidal act. He does not say: "I am in great pain; I do not know how much longer I can contend with it; I do not know if I will be permitted some relief, or how much, or how soon, or if it will afford me any more than momentary comfort. But I choose to bear these uncertainties no further. I prefer to end my life of my own will and by my own hand. I choose this act and accept full responsibility for it." Though such a declaration contains a fairly accurate description of his situation, the despairer goes to some trouble to avoid such an acknowledgment of choice and responsibility. He must believe his suicide to be an inescapable fate imposed on him from without.

Why? Is it perhaps possible that, even in the grip of his despair, he has not lost contact with his more human self, and the human truths his despair strives to deny — has not lost contact to such a degree that he no longer conceives suicide as a demonic act? Indeed, because he *does* recognize its nature, he shrinks from confronting the actual role of choice in his act. Even his despair will not allow him such an unholy embrace of moral grotesquerie as suicide. Were he capable of acknowledging the nature of this unholy embrace, and his responsibility in submitting to it, his despair — and his despairing estrangement from the world of the human — would be complete. The fact that his despair, instead of prompting this acknowledgment, labors to deny it altogether, to persuade him of his role as a helpless, and therefore blameless, victim; this fact suggests that in an important sense despair, by its very nature, is incapable of wholly fulfilling itself. As I remarked earlier, despair seems to afflict only those whose relation to life is a serious and potentially responsible one. It seems to me

that those who are vulnerable to the worst torments of despair are also those who — because of what they were before falling into despair, and still, in the clutches of despair, potentially are — are seldom able quite to reach the demonic affirmation of self and the radical rejection of being toward which their despair strains. In some sense, the despairer moves hazardously, despite distractions and entrenchment, toward a tragic, often excessively tragic, position in regard to the inauthentic in his life and in his relations with others. In other words, through his objectifications he may arrive at an extreme and radical concern over the very center of his being, creating in this way an abyss too wide and too deep for easy bridging. The very strategies of despair, and especially the logical strategies involved in the contemplation of suicide, reveal that there is some connection still linking them to life-outside-despair — perhaps only imagined, but imagined still — that despair is unable to sever. Despair would not be so anguished a condition as it is were it as wholly and hopelessly estranged as it believes itself to be.

There is one last clause to the pact suicide makes with despair: suicide appears to offer a means of contending with the necessity and all the attending uncertainties of one's own death. What Buber has written of guilt applies equally to the person in despair: potentially he is permitted "the real insight into the irreversibility of lived time, a fact that shows itself unmistakably in the starkest of all human perspectives, that concerning one's own death." Opposing this insight, suicide promises, through an act of will, to resolve the terrors of mortality that in despair are so overwhelming. Death itself is certain; but how, when, where, in what manner, under what conditions, with what serenity or wild ravings, and *how soon* — this knowledge is not granted us. There is, however, one way in which a man may attain it, and by so doing "cheat" death, become its master by mastering its uncertainties—and this way is to stage and execute his own death, at the time, place, and in the manner of his own choosing. But, once embarked on this enterprise—or the contemplation of this enterprise—he becomes absorbed in the scene itself. As though carelessly overlooking the inevitable climax of the action: death, *his* death, he focuses his attention upon the staging of the act; he reviews and evaluates the methods available to him; in his imagination he lives and relives the discovery scene — at which in reality he can hardly expect to be present. And yet, in effect he

must expect to be present, if through suicide he intends to master the terrors of death, because such terrors belong to life. Although the strategies involved in the attainment of this mastery can succeed only by luring his attention away from the real issue of his own death, their success is almost always incomplete and intermittent. Since his death is, after all, a detail of action inescapably necessary to his scenario — the single act about which his entire dramatic construction turns — its ultimate significance is not likely to remain safely hidden behind his busy concern with an endless variety of production problems; from time to time it rudely assaults his awareness, and in those moments he realizes all too clearly that the mastery suicide seemed to offer him was a cheat and a fake. But, each time this dreadful moment arrives, he wrenches away from it and fastens his imagination again on the fictional representation of his death, in which what absorbs him is not his actual death but the possibility for self-expression that the drama affords.

And why should an opportunity for self-expression — so strikingly, almost farcically, inappropriate to his particular situation — tempt him so? We need but briefly remind ourselves of his condition, and the extraordinary vulnerabilities common to it, to guess that the explanation for his response lies in what he believes is being promised him in return for the cooperation he so wholeheartedly supplies. What can this promise be but that self-expression, given free reign in this exceptional enterprise, will produce for him the dramatic representation of some uniqueness, some singularity of self with which life has seemingly so far failed to provide him, and of which his natural — unself-engineered — death threatens to rob him? What I wish to point out here is that all this is a dream of the will — a despairing attempt to affirm the self in a form in which the self has never been and can never be. The uncertainties — and even the terrors — of death belong, as Kirillov almost discovered, to life and to our nature. Living the life of suicide a man struggles to deny this truth, and should the trapdoor spring open beneath him, he will die proclaiming his denial. But, it is a redeeming paradox of the life of suicide that it does not always — and need not — make its exit from life via the trapdoor. The despairing man can return to life — alive. Many have done so, and some have left their accounts of that treacherous passage to remind us that salvation is never wholly out of reach, even in the farthest country of despair.

Notes

1 Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1961), p.26.

2 Martin Buber, "Guilt and Guilt Feelings," *Psychiatry*, 20 (1957), 116.

3 Albert Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p.141.

4 T.S. Eliot, "East Coker," *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), p.15.

5 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Possessed* (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), pp.625-629.

6 Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: 2. Faith and Reality* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1960), p.149.

7 Dostoyevsky, *op.cit.*, pp.629-630.

8 Marcel, op.cit., p.194.