Introduction

"Suicide appears, then, as the quintessence of modernity." Walter Benjamin

1.

Various accounts of the current age, many of them broad in scope, have been published in recent decades. These accounts claim that we are living in a time of anger and impatience, in a world of weariness and exhaustion, of faster pace and acceleration, of new wars and culture clashes, in a society of fear, narcissism or restlessness. Older concepts, too, of secularisation (which has recently conflicted with the alleged return of religion), postmodernism or the digital revolution are by no means off the table when it comes to describing the hallmarks of the modern epoch. A shift which ought to be regarded as one of the most significant and consequential sea changes of the 20th and 21st centuries, and whose various aspects have been examined and discussed, but rarely from a broader perspective, is the radical re-evaluation of suicide. For many centuries suicide was condemned as a grave sin, or even a "double murder" (of both the body and the soul), as a crime that deserved severe punishment, not only by the mutilation and unconsecrated

burial of the body, but also by the confiscation of family assets, for example, and, at the very least, was deemed an effect of madness and illness. While in antiquity, suicide could still have honourable associations, after the Christian religion rose to ascendancy it was seen as a disgrace and ultimate failure. In a letter to Carl Schmitt dated 27 April 1976 published only a few years ago, Hans Blumenberg lamented "that we have shifted the pagan sacramental view of suicide to an unattainable distance. We must remember not only Seneca but also Masada and Warsaw. Most astonishing of all is that this trait of 'modernity' is yet to be described elsewhere." Only Walter Benjamin had already noted in his essays on Baudelaire that modernity "is marked by suicide," which "seals a heroic will"; suicide is simply "*the* achievement of modernity in the realm of the passions."

The issue of suicide is a central leitmotif of modernity. Since the fin de siècle or, at the latest, the end of the Second World War, there has been a radical re-evaluation of suicide in several cultural spheres – on the one hand, through a process of the removal of taboo, and on the other, through the dissemination of an emancipatory "technology of the self": as a protest in politics, as a strategy of attack and assassination in recent manifestations of armed conflict, as a fundamental theme of philosophy and the arts, in literature, painting and film. Suicide and attempted suicide have been decriminalised – in the United Kingdom as late as 1961; laws on various forms of assisted dying and assisted suicide in medical practice have been liberalised. And a re-evaluation of suicide has taken place in the sciences, too. The printing of Émile Durkheim's *Le Suicide* in 1897, often compared with Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), placed the theme in the context of the social sciences; cultural-critical reflections, like those presented in *Suicide as a Social Mass Phenomenon of Modern Civilisation* (1881) by Tomáš Masaryk, who went on to become president of Czechoslovakia, have increasingly been ousted by arguments based on statistics and empirical data. Durkheim distinguished between four elementary types of suicide: egotistical, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic; and he formulated

a theory of "social death" as the correlation between suicide and the strength of bonds in a community. Among the pioneers of psychiatric suicide research was Jean-Étienne Esquirol, a student of Philippe Pinel. In his work *Des maladies mentales* (Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity, published in English translation in 1845), he differentiated between suicide provoked by the passions and suicide after a murder, referring to the seasons, climate, age and gender as possible causes, as well as to measures for prevention and therapy. Esquirol rarely based his accounts on figures; he predominantly used case studies. And, in a sense, this is where the discussion has remained to this day: sociologists comment on statistics, psychologists discuss case studies. However, forging a link between statistics and case histories still proves difficult.

Suicide research was only established as an independent discipline after the Second World War. In 1938, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Karl Menninger was still lamenting the scientific taboo of suicide in *Man Against Himself* – a year before Sigmund Freud's suicide, which was supervised by his doctor and friend Max Schur. In view of high suicide numbers,

> one would expect that there would be a wide general interest in this subject, that many studies and researches would be in progress, that our medical journals would contain articles and our libraries books on the subject. Not so. There are novels, plays and legends galore which involve suicide – suicide in fantasy. But there is surprisingly small scientific literature dealing with it. This is, I think, is only another evidence of the taboo which is associated to the subject – a taboo related to strongly repressed emotions. People do not like to think seriously and factually about suicide.

In 1948, the psychiatrist and psychologist Erwin Ringel founded one of the world's first institutions for the prevention of suicide in Vienna; established under the auspices of a Viennese charity, the clinic was simply called *Lebensmüdefürsorge* (suicide care centre). Its forerunner was the *Lebensmüdestelle* (suicide centre) of the Ethical Society of Vienna, which was set up in 1928 by Wilhelm Börner, and run by numerous volunteers until 1939, among them August Aichhorn, Charlotte Bühler, Rudolf Dreikurs

and Viktor Frankel. In 1975, Erwin Ringel's suicide care centre was turned into a modern crisis intervention centre, independent from the Church, and still exists today. The difference between the terms "suicide care" and "crisis intervention" reflects a shift in mindset that requires clarification: "suicidal" describes a mental state that is finally reached towards the end of a long process and that it is very difficult to influence. The term "crisis", on the other hand, already existed in Greek antiquity and was adopted into medical terminology from legal language: *krísis* originally meant decision, or judgement; a crisis in medical terms referred to the moment reached at a certain point during the course of an illness when a change results in recovery or death. In the first book of his *Epidemics*, Hippocrates observed that "crises lead to life or death or cause decisive turns for the better or worse." There can be intervention in a crisis, while care is associated with affective attention. The older term referred to people and their care, whereas the newer term refers to many kinds of precarious situations – political, economic or structural crises as decisive moments of a particular development. At this juncture, an open-ended question: why have so many words with the prefix *für* in German (such as the word *Fürsorge*, meaning 'care') disappeared from our everyday vocabulary or taken on pejorative shifts of meaning? Why are *Fürsorger* (carers) or *Fürsprecher* (advocates) so unpopular? Do they perhaps have connotations of conservatorship, paternalism and disempowerment?

In America, the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) was founded in 1960, followed by the American Association of Suicidology (AAS) in 1968; in Germany, the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Suizidprävention* (German Association for Suicide Prevention) was founded four years later. While Erwin Ringel took up a leading position in the German-speaking world as the first president of the IASP, in the USA it was the clinical psychologist Edwin S. Shneidman who helped to permanently establish suicidology as a discipline in its own right, as the co-founder of the Los Angeles Suicide

Prevention Center and, from 1970 to the conferment of his emeritus title in 1988, as professor for thanatology at the University of California in Los Angeles. Initially, suicidology excelled as a therapeutic discipline for the prevention and avoidance of suicide. Ringel's research into "pre-suicidal syndrome", with its three relevant characteristics of constriction, reversal of aggression and suicidal fantasies, certainly contributed to this objective. But how can motives or questions be understood and interpreted if the prerequisites for the possible prevention of their occurrence are of primary importance? In his later works, Shneidman focused on the suicidal mind and undertook a close reading of individual case histories of suicides and suicide attempts. David Lester, now emeritus professor of psychology at Stockton University in New Jersey and former IASP president, followed his lead. Lester had acquired both a doctorate in psychology (in 1968 from Brandeis University) and a doctorate in social and political science (in 1991 from the University of Cambridge). He initiated a cultural turn in suicidology by simply reversing the above-quoted comment by Karl Menninger regarding cultural, literary or artistic imaginings of suicide, which happen to be strikingly more abundant than scientific analysis of suicide, and taking novels, films or artworks dealing with suicide seriously as research objects. In *The "I" of the Storm*, Lester commented on diaries (Cesare Pavese), letters (Vincent Van Gogh) and suicide notes, poems (Sylvia Plath) and interviews with people who had survived a suicide attempt. At the end of the book, he emphasised the need to listen attentively to the words and texts of the suicides, because clinical case histories and statistics are too far removed from the real pain, experience, and thought of a suicidal person.

The definition of suicidology as a science of prevention and intervention is difficult and delicate because it requires a mixture of descriptive and normative approaches, and also because it implicitly threatens to perpetuate the traditional assessment of suicide: suicides must be prevented because they inflict pain and suffering

on the survivors – either the relatives or the suicides themselves, for example due to the consequences of a suicide attempt – and harm society. In short, suicides are bad: They are no longer regarded as serious sins or crimes, but as irrational, pathological actions. Yet every year, according to reports from the World Health Organization, significantly more people commit suicide than are killed by wars or violent acts. In figures: In 2012 some 56 million people died worldwide, 620,000 of whom were killed through violence, 120,000 through wars, and about 500,000 through murder and manslaughter; but more than 800,000 people committed suicide in the same period. In Germany, the suicide rate has declined significantly since the early 1990s, but in 2015 more people died through suicide than the combined total who died as a result of traffic accidents, murders, illegal drugs and AIDS. Quite apart from unreported cases, these figures require a more neutral consideration of suicide. It is not without reason that this issue needs to be freed of taboo, specifically in debates about suicide among the elderly and euthanasia: a consolidation of the demystification, decriminalisation and destigmatisation of suicide that have resulted from its depathologisation. Not everyone who takes their life is ill or crazy. It therefore seems quite fitting to me that the common German expression *sich das Leben nehmen* ("to take one's own life") cannot be translated exactly into many languages. Difficulties are presented not only by the duplication of actors – the one who takes something, and the something that is taken – but also in the ambiguous meaning of the verb *sich etwas nehmen* ("to take" but also "to help oneself"), which could denote an appropriation of something: I seize something or take possession of it. I turn my life into my life, even in the moment of extinguishing it. To take your own life: The ambiguity of *annehmen* "to accept" and *wegnehmen* "to take away" must be endured; and it does not require a recursive "self". The fact that suicidal fantasies are not merely a "pre-suicidal syndrome" was in fact a claim already made by Friedrich Nietzsche: "The thought of suicide is a powerful consolation: it helps one survive through many an evil night." Kate, the suicidal heroine

in Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer* (1961) crowns this argument with the paradoxical assurance that suicide is "the only thing that keeps me alive. Whenever everything else fails, all I have to do is consider suicide and in two seconds I'm as cheerful as a nitwit. But if I could not kill myself -- ah then, I would. I can do without nembutal or murder mysteries but not without suicide."

2.

In this book, on the one hand I follow the historical chronology; on the other, I concentrate on various forms of the cultural experience of suicides. The focus is therefore not on the personal motives or social background of suicides, nor on the possibilities of prevention and therapy or even the practicable methods of suicide; what is explored are the cultural meanings given to suicide. Statistics and case histories are cited: not to conduct any type of research into the causes, but to illuminate dominant discourses and contexts. In this sense, treatments of suicide in artworks, literature and film are taken just as seriously as philosophical, social science and psychological investigations as sources which can contribute to the description of suicide cultures. Which terms should be used? Most contemporary studies decide on this question at the outset: In order to avoid prescriptive valuations, they usually renounce expressions such as *Selbstmord* (self-murder) or *Freitod* (voluntary death). The connotations of the word *Selbstmord*, which only became common in German from the 17th century, is too negative, whereas *Freitod* – from the Latin: *mors voluntaria* – suggests too positive a meaning. This is why the term *Suizid* has prevailed in German. Not only is it more morally neutral, but it is internationally understood, correlating to "suicide" in English and French or "suicidio" in Italian and Spanish. Only in Scandinavian languages and Dutch are there equivalents to *Selbstmord* – *selvmord* (Danish, Norwegian), *självmord* (Swedish) and *zelfmoord* (Dutch). In colloquial usage, different euphemisms are often used: *sich umbringen* (to kill oneself),

sich entleiben, Hand an sich legen, sich das Leben nehmen (all of which translate into English as either "suicide" or "to take one's own life"). Recently, the phrase "going to Switzerland", referring to Swiss euthanasia organisations, has also become a euphemism for suicide.

How can suicide cultures be characterised? In some cultures it is difficult to speak of suicide; sometimes it is concealed due to shame, frequently skirted around using metaphors, as death records and inscriptions on gravestones testify to this day; the terminology and register of public debates on suicide can quickly change. However, the distinction between space and time is heuristically useful where voluntary death is concealed or only rarely and reticently commented upon and where it is frequently placed or envisioned before a backdrop of polymorphic cultural discourse of a ritual, aesthetic, literary, musical or philosophical nature. I would therefore like to suggest a distinction between cultures and epochs that are fascinated by suicide and give it a great deal of attention, and periods and forms of life that tend to taboo and devalue suicide. Cultures fascinated by suicide tend towards its idealisation, and respect and admire it on many grounds; cultures critical of suicide deem it a moral disgrace and an existential defeat. Cultures fascinated by suicide idolise a short, intense, adventurous life, geared towards a range of experiences and innovation: "I hope I die before I get old", sang the Who in their 1965 hit "My Generation". Cultures critical of suicide, however, prefer a long, quiet, peaceful life geared towards a narrow range of experiences and tradition. But, of course, these attitudes do not necessarily correlate with low or high suicide rates: China, for example, has both an eminent tradition critical of suicide and, at the same time, rising suicide rates, which can be attributed in part precisely to the lack of respect for suicide – unlike in Japan, for instance. A few years ago, the tabloid press reported that a Chinese passer-by, upon seeing a person contemplating suicide on a bridge in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, and who was causing a traffic jam, abruptly pushed the man off.

"Detainee Lian Jiansheng said he pushed the man off the bridge because every suicide is selfish. In addition, he was violating the public interest." While suicide-critical cultures often despise those who commit suicide in their midst and consequently do not intervene, techniques and strategies of suicide prevention have been developed and institutionalised by cultures fascinated with suicide, as if their protagonists knew only too well what powerful seduction and enormous attraction has to be resisted. Perhaps this is why Christianity took a particularly hard line towards suicide, because they were so familiar with the core of their own fascination – the desire for martyrdom as the ideal way for Christ's disciples.

Against the background of the broad distinction between periods fascinated by suicide and ones critical of it, Walter Benjamin's thesis can be extended: The issue of suicide is a central leitmotif, even the "quintessence of modernity"; and modernity appears in many ways to be an age that is increasingly fascinated by suicide, increasingly positive towards the idea of taking one's own life. Most accounts assure the reader, at least in the foreword, that every suicide is a tragic and shocking event; but at the same time, numerous guidelines on committing suicide are available in bookstores and on the Internet, which favour the rise of suicide in the canon of *techniques de soi* or "technologies of the self", to use a term from Michel Foucault. These "technologies of the self", which Foucault explored using examples from antiquity – from Stoicism to early Christian asceticism – have taken on the project of examining and explaining the individual self, its physical or psychological development, growth or improvement. They follow different objectives: happiness (in the Greek form of eudaimonia), purity, wisdom, perfection, holiness or immortality. In doing so, they operate with diverse strategies of "subject-splitting": As an active producer, the self is designed as a work or product whose goal is perfection. In this sense, the subjects see themselves as proprietors, who shape themselves as their own property, as both perpetrator and victim – as in Ernst Jünger's words, who rejected suicide

in order not to appear to himself as a victim "who can't defend himself", as both player and stakes, as writer and reader, as saviour and saved, as guard and prisoner, and in the Kantian sense, as transcendental and empirical subjects – *Homo noumenon* and *Homo phaenomenon*. Thomas Jouffroy was absolutely right when he wrote in 1842: "Suicide est un mot mal fait; ce qui tue n'est pas identique a ce qui est tue" – "Suicide is a poorly made word; he who kills is never identical with he who is killed". The same logic appears in the comfort which Bertolt Brecht expressed in one of his last poems as the certainty that "There can never be anything wrong with me, if I myself am nothing". The grammatical construction sets the subject, with whom something is wrong, in relation to what is wrong, the loser of the lost. Frequently, this "split subject" is also metaphorised as the difference between soul or spirit, and the body. Thus begins the speech given by Domenico, played by Erland Josephson, in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Nostalghia* (1983): The old mathematician stands on the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius and before setting himself on fire, he confesses: "I cannot live in my head and body at the same time. That's why I'm not able to be one single person."

Technologies of the self are told and taught orally, recorded, illustrated and sung. They presuppose the use of symbolic cultural techniques – languages, texts, images or songs. Symbolic cultural techniques – such as speaking, writing, reading, making images or singing – differ from other cultural techniques due to their epistemic achievements. They can be described as techniques with whose aid symbolic work is carried out. As symbolic cultural techniques, they are potentially self-referential: Hence, speaking can be spoken of, writing can be written about, reading can be read about, singing can be sung about and images can appear in images. However, it is practically impossible to thematise hunting in hunting, cooking in cooking or ploughing in ploughing, unless symbolic techniques are used: by following farmers' instructions, reading recipes or producing amulets intended to influence the successful outcome of hunting. Potentially self-

referential symbolic cultural techniques stand in a strange contrast to these other cultural techniques (hunting, cooking, ploughing, etc), because they are also acquired through practices of exercise, habituation and routine, yet always remain threatened by the risk of reflexive interruption: *écriture automatique*, which was so popular among the surrealists, cannot be permanently practised. The results not only have a high potential for confusion, but also a high potential for innovation. Anyone who runs the risk of noticing what he is doing at a given moment is also in a better position to change what he is doing. Technologies of the self – as symbolic cultural techniques – are not, of course, mere references to the self, but need and generate media. The voice figures as a primary medium of language; bones, tusks, stones or metal objects were the early "carriers" of various images and sketches, then came flat panels made of different materials (wood, stone, metal, paper, etc.) and finally, technical devices, from the camera to the phone, and from the radio and television to the computer. It is striking how easily these media are ignored and overlooked. The metaphorical interpretation of self-consciousness as a mirror in the philosophy of German idealism never explored the actual glass plate with metal coating, which only reached an acceptable level of reflection in the seventeenth century, nor did the psychoanalytic description of a "mirror stage" (Jacques Lacan). Cultural techniques produce media – and vice versa; because their history naturally depends on the media that convey and facilitate them.

The concept of the split subject sounds more dramatic than intended. It recalls older concepts of schizophrenia or the broad field of "dissociative disorders", which are also described and commented on in psychological and psychiatric literature about suicidal behaviour. However, these "dissociative disorders" are usually connected with phases of confusion and loss of control; the contentious notion of "multiple personalities", for example, that have little knowledge about each other. By contrast, splitting the subject, which is made possible by the practice of technologies of the self, expands the possibilities

for action and experiences of freedom; the act consolidates the hope of being able to change and become someone else. When drawing or writing letters and diaries, we design our own selves; and sometimes, as with Fritz Zorn or Roberta Tatafiore, we design our own death. Death is no longer seen merely as a destiny, but as a calculable, designable project. In the eight rooms of the project "Nachlass" (Legacy), which Stefan Kaegi of Rimini Protocol, together with the set designer Dominic Huber, set up in September 2016 for the Théâtre de Vidy in Lausanne – as well as for performances in Douai, Zurich, Amsterdam, Dijon, Strasbourg, Dresden and Berlin – we are faced with people's last messages, songs and sound recordings, films, photographs and objects; we enter "mausoleums of the 21st century", of the digital age of legacies. What is immediately evident is the influence of the history of media revolutions on the dissemination of technologies of the self: the invention of handwriting, for example, which 4,000 years ago made it possible to transcribe the enigmatic conversation of a suicide with his soul, the invention of the printing press, photography, sound recording, film or computer. To be sure, for centuries only a few members of the elite practised the technologies of the self described by Foucault. It was not until the rise of the early-modern theatre that the gradually increasing literacy of a broad section of the population drastically changed circumstances from the second half of the eighteenth century, most recently in the present-day digital globalisation.

It is not without reason that "suicide fashions" or even "suicide pandemics" have been traced back to attending a theatre performance or reading novels. The fascination with tragedies that began in Shakespeare's time was responsible for the spread of the "English malady" of rising suicide rates; in 1786, Zacharias Gottlieb Hußty wrote the first volume of his *Diskurs über die medizinische Polizei* (Discourse on Medical Policy):

> For a long time it was fashionable in England to perform tragedies in which the author had at least five or six persons murdered by the end: these sad and

gruesome performances pleased the profound nation, and their inclination to melancholy and dark, funereal ideas noticeably multiplied. In France, suicide has never been more popular than since the advent of weekly stage shows, where an abandoned tender lover soon stabs herself in the chest with a dagger, or an unhappy hero takes his own life to end his suffering: melancholy has been gradually settling over this country ever since endless lamentations began to be performed in every theatre, and this lively nation can watch its most wonderful asset – joyfulness – writhing away from its heart.

Equally polemical diatribes were directed at "Werther fever" at the beginning of the 19th century, and social media platforms and the Internet, and especially forms of news coverage, are suspected of enticing their users to melancholy and suicide.

3.

In 2014, the Austrian writer Michael Köhlmeier published the novel Zwei Herren am Strand (Two Gentlemen on the Beach, transl. into English by Ruth Martin, Haus Publishing, 2016), which revolves around the themes of depression and suicide, the so-called "Black Dog". The focus is on the friendship between Charlie Chaplin and Winston Churchill, described in a multilayered labyrinth of documentary and fictional references, both of whom are familiar with the recurring "Black Dog". And so they recognise each other as doppelgängers during a night walk on the beach:

> They walked across the sand with their trousers rolled up, and came to the firm, damp strip at the water's edge, and as they headed north, parallel to the brightly-lit houses of Santa Monica Beach, Churchill asked: "Are you sick?" "Do I look it?" Chaplin asked him in return. "Yes." "How do I look?" "Like a man who is contemplating suicide," Churchill replied. "You can't tell a thing like that in the dark." "Is that so?" On another occasion, one of them told the other he had decided at that moment not to introduce himself. Both found the prospect of an anonymous confession in the shadows of night more tempting than the idea of making the acquaintance of some celebrity or other. They admitted that although they may not have recognised the person they were talking to, they certainly recognised his personality, meaning that each recognised his own tribulations. Chaplin – who undoubtedly had an affinity with romantic archetypes – said that a shudder had run down his back at the thought of meeting a doppelganger (though admittedly this was a doppelganger who didn't resemble him in the slightest): a second self, clothed in the flesh of another, so to speak.

So it starts with an almost uncanny encounter, a split subject that promptly evokes associations with Dracula and Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. The story of the friendship between Chaplin and Churchill, who on the beach promise to visit each other immediately in the event of a crisis, wherever they happen to be in the world, is also reflected in a frame

narrative about the relationship between the first-person narrator and his father, who is presented as an almost obsessive Churchill expert.

Köhlmeier's novel outlines a theory of the birth of comedy from the spirit of a technology of the self: the "method of the clown". Right in the first part of the book, Charlie starts to explain this method to his new friend, who immediately interrupts him: "No foreword, please! The method, Charlie! We're only interested in practice!" Chaplin replies:

> "All right. The practice. I write myself a letter. Understand, Winston? A letter to myself. [...] Buster Keaton put me on to the method. He told me I should get a large sheet of paper. And I should lay it out on the floor. [...] Then I lie down on the piece of paper." "How?" "Face down." "Face down, very well." Go on, Go on!" "I lie on this paper like a meal on a tablecloth. Are you laughing at me, Winston?" "No, Charlie. Am I laughing? Look at me! Am I laughing? Is that laughter? That's not laughter. That's just how my face is." "The only remedy for the thought that I might be mad is to do something mad. This is very serious, Winston. This is the method of the clown. There is no man in the world more serious than a clown."

Chaplin also explains that it's necessary to lay naked on the paper – "This is very important. A pair of trousers is already something of the world, as is a shirt" – and then write a letter to oneself: "Dear Charlie, I write and write whatever I feel like." At the same time, the naked writer had to turn clockwise on his belly and write in a spiral from outside inwards, as if in a "maelstrom". The novel itself also revolves like a spiral around this "method of the clown", which is explicitly expressed in another passage:

> We split ourselves in two, we see ourselves both dwarfish and monstrous – and find both of these funny. We find ourselves funny. And there you go: for a little while, the world can't hurt us. So the method of the clown consists of nothing more than making a person seem ridiculous to himself – with the aim of making him feel alienated from himself. All alone, it's impossible for a person to laugh at himself, because laughter always means laughter at someone else's expense. He has to split himself into a self that laughs, and another that is laughed at. That's the aim of the method.

The "method of the clown" is a technology of the self that recalls a game: a game with clear rules that I have to play with myself by laughing with death and at death, as Chaplin himself comments in the novel:

"I've always been aware that the Tramp was playing with death. He plays with it, mocks it too, thumbs his nose at it, but every second of his life he's conscious of death, and that's why he is so frighteningly clear about the fact that he's alive." […]
He would tell the same reporter: "The clown is so close to death that only a knife's edge separates them, and sometimes he crosses even this final line, but he keeps coming back. That's why he's not quite real – in a certain sense, he's a spirit."

Can one play and laugh with death? Even the dead in the late medieval *danse macabre* never performed as preachers of repentance who let God's destiny triumph over human ignorance. Sometimes they seemed to mock the living; but more often they appeared to be in high spirits, laughing, grinning and joking: a little gleeful, because dying was already over and done with. Their facial expressions were rarely grim or angry; occasionally they danced, or played the flute or lute. Their appearance represented traditions of the cult of the dead, where laughter must be heard, as in the European carnival or the *dia de los muertos*, the Day of the Dead, in Mexico. There too, the practice of what Nigel Barley calls "a jester's relationship to death" is cultivated.

Once a year, around the time of All Saints Day (1 November), the dead are returned to the land of the living and served a lavish feast. They are given new clothes; drinks and delicacies are served. Regional customs are different, depending on the extent to which the ecclesiastical authorities insist on "respect for the dead" and sobriety; tradition favours boundless cheerfulness, excess and dance. In some cases, the men dress up as women to dance. In certain circumstances, the dead are led along paths of marigolds to the houses of their relatives, or people gather at the cemetery for food and music.
 For the children, richly glazed or chocolate-coated skulls are made from sugar fondant. Figurines of papier-mâché, sugar, tin and paper show the dead doing all sorts of activities. They make phone calls, ride trams, sell newspapers, or even themselves.

Even suicide attempts and suicides can be portrayed as comedic in movies such as Hal Ashby's *Harold and Maude* (1971) or *The World's Greatest Dad* (2009) or in Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down* (2005), filmed by Pascal Chaumeil in 2014. The recently published *Kleine Geschichte des Suizids* (Brief History of Suicide) by Anne Waak (2016) presented several examples that test our sense of black humour.

Interestingly, gloomy and tragic dimensions come to the fore precisely when we

dare to discuss suicide and suicide attempts in the context of the playful: when lives are at stake in the Roman gladiatorial games, in wars, tournaments, duels or dangerous competitions, from car racing to apnea diving, whose suicidal fascination was conveyed so brilliantly in Luc Besson's cult film *The Big Blue* (1988). Well-known theories of games, as presented in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), do not mention the suicidal element of playing; and in Roger Caillois' *Les Jeux et Les Hommes* (Man, Play and Games) (1958), there is only one mention of imitative suicides after the deaths of James Dean and Rudolph Valentino. In his essay on Huizinga, Georges Bataille comments on the "hazards" of play, in which "every rival risks himself", but suicide is not discussed. How can games be classified? Huizinga refers to the fields in which games permeate culture: language, law, religion, war, knowledge, art and philosophy; Caillois makes use of the categories of *agon* (contest), *alea* (luck and chance), mimicry (imitation) and *ilinx* (intoxication and ecstasy), while Friedrich Georg Jünger differentiates between games of lucky chance, games of mastery and "pre- and post-imitation" games. Jünger mentions putting one's life and person at stake, but not suicide. The French sociologist Jean Baechler was probably the first theorist to pay attention to playful suicides – alongside escapist, aggressive, oblative and institutionalised suicides – in his dissertation *Les Suicides* (Suicides) (1975, foreword by Raymond Aron). With reference to Roger Caillois' four categories, Baechler explained various "suicide games", such as the *jeu du pendu*, where the aim is to jump from a tree with a noose around one's neck and to try to cut the rope with a knife during the fall. Today, the *jeu du pendu* is only played symbolically, as in the game of "hangman", for example. In another game known as "murder party", all game participants were given a gun, but only one gun was loaded. The players were locked in a darkened room and had to fire their guns on command. Baechler also cited a Yugoslavian club from the interwar period, where people played cards; one additional card was added to the pack that symbolised death. Whoever drew that card had

to take their own life the following day.

"Russian roulette" is much more popular than these other games. The term is usually traced back to a short story called "Russian Roulette" by Georges Surdez, published in the New York weekly magazine *Collier's* on 30 January 1937. In it, a German foreign legionary named Hugo Feldheim tells the story of how the Russian Sergeant Burkowski used to make bets by removing a bullet from his revolver, spinning the cylinder, pulling the trigger, and regularly surviving, despite a one-in-five chance that he would kill himself. In fact, he had cheated and secretly removed all the bullets. Eventually his trick was discovered and, out of shame, the sergeant really did shoot himself. His story about the Russian officers who allegedly left their suicides to chance in the same way in Romania in 1917 was probably also simply aimed at inciting betting. In short, historical sources for Russian roulette are unknown, and the game may have taken the direct route from fiction to reality. While Graham Greene claimed during a BBC interview with Christopher Burstall on 15 August 1969 that he played Russian roulette in his unhappy youth, his biographers have suggested this is at least doubtful. Whatever the case, Russian roulette has proved resilient and spread as a literary and cinematic theme. In Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970), Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Luc Besson's *Leon* (1994), and Géla Babluani's *13 Tzameti* (2005), the game is presented in different contexts: as a kind of divine judgment and proof of God in a church, as a method of torture in the Vietnam War, as a method of blackmailing a professor used by a young girl, or as a gloomy parable for financial capitalism. More examples could be provided; however, it should not be overlooked that Russian roulette is in fact played or practised as a method of torture – as in Chile after 1973. In an article in the volume *Suicide as a Dramatic Performance* (2015), David Lester provided some concrete figures on this: 20 Russian roulette victims – 19 men, one woman – in Dade County, Florida, in the years 1957 to 1985, which corresponds to 0.31 percent of all suicides in this period and region, 15

victims in Wayne County, Michigan, between 1997 and 2005, and 71 Russian roulette deaths across the entire territory of the US from 2003 to 2006. When the figures are analysed according to sex, age, alcohol and drug use, level of income and ethnicity, the results are, of course, not surprising: they are mostly younger, often unemployed men from African American or Hispanic families; they are rarely sober when they play Russian roulette, and they almost never play alone. The comparison with duelling, which Lester also sees as a type of risk suicide, is more revealing. He refers to the famous duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr on 11 July 1804. Hamilton, one of the founding fathers of the United States, told his friends beforehand that he would not shoot; he died during the duel. After his death, a suicide note was published, in which Hamilton justified his decision. The story automatically calls to mind the duel between Settembrini and Naphta in the penultimate chapter of Thomas Mann's novel *Der Zauberberg* (1924) (English: The Magic Mountain, 1927): Settembrini shoots into the clouds, and Naphta is outraged.

"'You shot in the air,' said Naphta, self-controlled, letting his gun sink. Settembrini replied: 'I shoot wherever I please'. 'You are to shoot again!' 'I don't think so. It is your turn.'" Settembrini thus represents Hamilton; but Naphta doesn't want to follow the script: "'Coward!' Naphta screamed, conceding with this cry of humanity that it required more courage to shoot than to be shot, picked up his pistol in a way that no longer concerned the duel, and shot himself in the head." Shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, suicides start to accumulate on the magic mountain after Mynheer Peeperkorn takes his own life. Today, however, at a time when numerous variations of virtual suicide games exist, as well as technologies of digital subject-splitting which can be practised with avatars and forms of death on all levels, Russian roulette and duels seem almost antiquated.

4.

The question of suicide is the leitmotif of modernity. Would a visitor from a foreign planet really perceive our planet as a place of self-destruction, as Karl Menninger speculated at the beginning of *Man Against Himself*?

> Men fly above ancient and beautiful cities dropping explosive bombs upon museums and churches, upon great buildings and little children. They are encouraged by the official representatives of two hundred million other people, all of whom contribute daily in taxes to the frantic manufacture of instruments designed for the tearing and ripping and mangling of human beings similar to themselves, possessed of the same instincts, the same sensations, the same little pleasures, and the same realisation that death comes to tend these things all too soon. This is what one would see who surveyed our planet curiously, and if he looked closer into the lives of the individuals and communities he would see still more to puzzle him; he would see bickerings, hatreds, and fighting, useless waste and petty destructiveness. He would see people sacrificing themselves in order to injure others, and expending time, trouble, and energy on shortening that pitifully small recess from oblivion which we call life. And most amazing of all, he would see some who, as if lacking aught else to destroy, turn their weapons on themselves.

We could easily expand this panorama for Martians, by pointing out people who read books, look at pictures, watch films and play games that centre on the subject of suicide and self-destruction. While stakeholders in suicide prevention warn of the effects of imitative suicides and media coverage, and while this very day – 6 May 2017 – the physicist Stephen Hawking has recommended emigrating to other planets because the earth will no longer be habitable in one hundred years, others regard the ability to commit suicide as almost the epitome of being human.

A multitude of abilities have already been characterised as unique features of the human species. Aristotle claimed that man was unique, because he is capable of state-building, language and communication. He is the clever animal capable of working, speaking, thinking, learning, playing, crying and laughing; he is the animal that fell into time, which – as if torn from the "peg of the moment" – could appear caring and revenging, calculating and grieving, an animal that can remember and "make promises."

Man is the animal that knows it is an animal, and thus transcends the sphere of the animal. However, experts in ethology, cognitive sciences and animal studies have systematically relativised these various claims to uniqueness: They have demonstrated that different animal species construct and use tools, that they can complete learning processes (without human guidance), that they can use symbolic communication techniques and are capable of recognising themselves in the mirror, and that they can remember, plan, mourn, forgive, and even lie, deceive and, of course, play. On the very first page of *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga emphasises: "Yes, it can be said that the human species has not added any essential features to the general concept of play. Animals play in the same way as people. All basic features of play are displayed in animal play. You need only to watch young dogs playing to detect all of these features in their lively romping." At least in theory, the old boundaries between humans and animals have been successfully dismantled; and sometimes it even seems that the ability to kill and destroy ourselves is the only capacity left that may be claimed as singularly human.

Are animals truly not capable of committing suicide? And why is the discussion about collective and imitative suicides still illustrated by reference to lemmings? The myth of "mass suicide" in lemmings – a family of rodents that live in the Arctic tundra – probably developed in Scandinavia. It is correct that significant periodic fluctuations in their numbers lead to migrations, during which some animals are killed. But the idea of lemmings plunging in thousands from the cliffs into the sea is certainly a figment of the imagination. The myth was spread worldwide by a 1958 Disney documentary, *White Wilderness*, in which the "mass suicides" of the lemmings were impressively shown. But the filmmakers had lent a hand, as journalist Brian Vallée proved in a report for Canadian television in 1983. According to his account:

> the scenes were shot in Alberta, Canada, where there are no lemmings at all. The wildlife crew had bought lemmings from Inuit children in Manitoba and then brought them to the

film set. To create the impression of a mass migration, the lemmings were placed on a large, snow-covered turntable, which was then rotated and filmed from all possible camera angles. The stream of lemmings was nothing but a film loop in which the same animals could be seen over and over again. And then comes the evil part of the story. "The lemmings reach the final precipice", claims the narrator, "this is the last chance to turn back. Yet over they go, casting themselves bodily out into space." Thanks to a stunning camera perspective and a perfect depth of focus, the viewer sees the rodents fall into the yawning chasm of a river valley, allegedly driven by a death instinct. The reality was considerably more mundane, according to Vallée's research: The Disney crew helped, pushing and throwing the lemmings, who were not suicidal at all, into the abyss. In the final shot, the dying animals can be seen in the water. "But gradually strength wanes, determination ebbs away, and soon the Arctic Sea is dotted with tiny, bobbing bodies."

The author concludes in an outraged tone: "So much for the Arctic Sea, so much for waning strength: This was a mass murder of animals at the service of the Hollywood dream factory." Merely our own fascination with suicide was secretly documented and staged.

In an article for the journal *Endeavour*, the British historians of science Edmund Ramsden and Duncan Wilson investigated the question of animal suicides in more depth. They cite not only myths – such as the Christian legend of the pelican that tears open its own breast to feed its young with blood – but also scientific research and laboratory experiments in the 19th century that were inspired, for example, by a report on repeated suicide attempts by a dog (reproduced in the *Illustrated London News* on 1 February 1845) that allegedly tried to drown itself: it threw itself into water and plunged is head below the surface without moving its legs. Research on animal suicides in more recent times, as detailed by the authors in their summary, sets out to classify and determine biochemical or genetic causes of non-intended suicide in animals and people. However, a completely different line of thought was pursued by Claire Colebrook, an Australian cultural scientist who teaches at Penn State University, in her article in the anthology *Animal Catalyst* (2014), edited by Patricia MacCormack. Citing the work of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, she refers to the "counteranimality" of man who, in the very attempt to survive as an organic material organism, creates an existence beyond the boundaries of his own nature. Man is a "suicidal animal" capable of acting beyond the interests and boundaries

of its organic selfhood. From a certain point of view, according to Colebrook, human suicide is precisely a confrontation with one's own animality: "If it is possible for the human animal to undertake a war upon itself, which in its most extreme form would lead to self-annihilation, this is only because humanity is necessarily a form of war against animality." The human capacity to bear a relation to animality – to apprehend itself as higher than or at least other than animality – is a war on the self, according to Coleman: following Derrida, it is simply "a war of the suicidal animal," and this war against animals and the environment is only possible as long as man perceives himself as an autonomous, inviolable self beyond the world. In other words: The final boundary between humans and animals – in the form of the thesis that man is the only animal that can commit suicide – is a recursive effect, the final result of a whole series of wars and boundaries against animals and one's own animality.

Perhaps it is all the more remarkable that precisely the technical dreams of overcoming organic animality – the visions of cyborgs and long-lasting, possibly immortal "superbeings" – result, at least in cinema, in characters deciding in favour of mortality and suicide. This began with Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and the magnificent closing soliloquy of the replicant Roy Batty, played by Rutger Hauer, who at first revolts against the programming of his short four-year life, before accepting death and almost becoming a Christian martyr, with a dove and a nail through his hand: "I've seen things you people would never believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die." Sure, the replicant does not commit suicide, but he is also not sure whether he still wants to live. Nine years later, the cyborg killer in James Cameron's second *Terminator* movie (1991), played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, also chooses to die in Christian fashion, albeit not on the cross, but in molten steel. Since he is not programmed for suicide, he has to ask Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) for

assistance. A year later, the heroine of David Fincher's *Alien III* (1992) – Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) – plunges into molten steel to avoid carrying an alien baby. And in *Bicentennial Man* (1999), directed by Chris Columbus, the android Andrew Martin, played by Robin Williams, agrees to be transformed into a mortal human out of love for Portia (Embeth Davidtz). All of them – and it is not hard to find other examples – follow the model of the centaur Cheiron, who voluntarily renounces immortality in the Greek myth. Does an era of "machine suicides" await us? On the evening of 17 March 1960, Swiss artist Jean Tinguely unveiled his machine sculpture *Homage to New York* in the Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York: a kinetic arrangement of various waste items and leftovers which Tinguely had found in the city's rubbish dumps and junkyards, such as an old bathtub, a weather balloon, several bicycles and a piano. According to his original plan, the structure was supposed to start smoking and rattling before finally plunging into a small pond, thereby "committing suicide". However, the machine quickly caught fire and had to be extinguished by the fire department. Marcel Duchamp greeted the auto-destructive machine by writing a poem from 1912 on his invitation card and sending it to New York: "si la scie la scie/et si la scie qui scie la scie/est la scie que scie la scie/il y a suissscide métallique" (And if the saw saws the saw/And if the saw sawing the saw/Is the saw sawed by the saw/What results is a metallic Swiss-icide). In those days, "going to Switzerland" was not yet an established phrase.

Chapter 1. Who owns my life?

"The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to yourself."

Michel de Montaigne

1.

Albert Camus was 28 years old when in 1942 – in the middle of the Second World War – he published two of his most important works: the novel *L'Étranger* (The Outsider) and the philosophical essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (The Myth of Sisyphus). The essay begins with a declaration of his philosophical programme: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide." *The Outsider*, too, is not only about the senseless murder of an Arab and an equally senseless execution, but also in a sense about the hero's suicide. This perception was also expressed by Kamel Daoud in his critically acclaimed novel *The Mersault Investigation,* published in 2013 in Algiers, which shadows and opposes *The Outsider*: "He killed, but I knew that it was about his own suicide." The allusion to Camus' *The Fall* (1956), which resulted in his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957 and which also revolves around suicide, is only found in the title of the German translation, *Der Fall Meursault*; the German word *Fall* can denote both a legal investigation and a fall.

Why is suicide referred to as the only "truly serious philosophical problem" at the beginning of the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*? Camus himself quickly translated this question into the question of judging "whether life is or is not worth living." But against this framing of the problem it can be objected not just that, historically, the perception that

life is "not worth living" has often enough – in the National Socialist euthanasia programmes, for example – been passed as a verdict on the lives of others; but also that this perception does not necessarily lead to the decision to commit suicide. It is quite possible to deny the value of life without wanting to give up life; Camus also argues for this possibility when he asks us in the last sentence of his essay to imagine Sisyphus as a "happy man". We might even argue, presumably in agreement with Camus, that the world is populated by people who do not believe in the higher meaning and value of life, or in the need to choose suicide as a means of exit. And vice versa: Some people choose to commit suicide in the form of self-sacrifice or martyrdom, precisely because they believe in a higher meaning and value in life.

A question that appears more obvious than the thesis that suicide constitutes the only "truly serious philosophical problem" because it reaches a decision for or against the value of life, is one that has been passionately discussed since the era of ancient philosophy and extends all the way to our present-day debates on euthanasia: is suicide allowed or forbidden? The question likes to ensconce itself behind aspects of terminology or translation: Should we refer to it as *Suizid*, *Freitod* or *Selbstmord* (suicide, voluntary death or self-murder?) The term *Selbstmord* is reminiscent of the prohibition on killing in the Ten Commandments; it is mostly avoided in recent literature. Yet in his German translation of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Vincent von Wroblewsky consistently translates the French *suicide* as *Selbstmord* – and probably rightly so. This is because Camus placed suicide close to murder, not only in the novel *The Outsider*, but also in his drafts for the work, which were made between 1936 and 1938 but not published until 1971, more than ten years after the author's death, under the working title *A Happy Death*. In this first version of the novel, the protagonist, who is called Patrice Mersault, kills the rich Roland Zagreus, who has been wheelchair-bound since an accident in which he lost both his legs. Mersault successfully disguises the robbery as suicide, which is easy because Zagreus

keeps his money in a box, along with a farewell letter and a revolver which he occasionally plays with before deciding to continue living. His name, incidentally, is a reference to Thracian mythology: Zagreus is the son of Zeus and Persephone, and is often portrayed as a small child with a bull's head. Mersault, on the other hand, is even more obviously a revenant of Rodion Raskolnikov than in the published version of the novel from 1942.

Is suicide allowed or forbidden? Ivan Karamazov's "law" that "everything is permitted", which he "never wants to renounce", explicitly includes suicide; it is not without reason that Ivan talks several times to Alyosha about "tossing the cup against the wall" at the age of thirty and "returning to the Creator the entry ticket for the world". Everything is permitted? On 10 January 1917, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in his diary on the eastern front of the First World War: "If suicide is allowed, then everything is allowed." The sentence can also easily be reversed: suicide is only allowed if everything is allowed. This attitude has shaped jurisprudence for centuries. Only after the turn of the millennium, on 3 November 2006, did the Swiss Federal Supreme Court declare suicide a human right within the meaning of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights; until 1961, however, suicide attempts were considered a crime in the United Kingdom. For example, on 9 December 1941, a London court sentenced the 29-year-old Jewish woman Irene Coffee to death by hanging because two months previously she and her mother had taken an overdose of sleeping pills in order to commit suicide. The mother died, the daughter survived and was accused of matricide under applicable law. The death penalty was commuted to a life sentence at the very last moment. In an article on the BBC News website dated 3 August 2011, journalist Gerry Holt recalls another case from 1958:

> When police found Lionel Henry Churchill with a bullet wound in his forehead next to the partly-decomposed body of his wife it is hard to imagine the emotional turmoil he must have been in.
> He had tried but failed to take his own life in the bed of their Cheltenham home.
> Doctors said the 59-year-old needed medical treatment at a mental hospital, but

magistrates disagreed. In July 1958 he was sent to prison for six months after pleading guilty to attempted suicide.

These sentences appear absurd to us today. They were justified on the grounds that it is a punishable crime to attempt to deprive the Crown of a subject (or that subject's future tax payments), which means nothing less than: Our own lives do not belong to us. This seemingly self-evident statement has been invoked by most religious, moral or legal prohibitions of suicide in history. The question of whether suicide is allowed or forbidden can therefore be transformed into the question of who actually owns our lives.

"Belonging to Oneself" is the title of the fourth chapter of Jean Amery's plea for voluntary death. In it, he asserts that it is a "fundamental fact that man essentially belongs to himself – and this outside the network of social entanglements, and also outside of a biological destiny and prejudgment that condemns him to life." Even in antiquity, when suicide was most respected, this "fundamental fact" was by no means recognised. All too easily, a military defeat or the impossibility of paying back a financial debt could cause the loss of civil liberties; and this loss could extend to further generations. A slave did not belong to himself, but to his owner, for "the slave is part of the master," according to Aristotle's *Politics*. In Seneca's letters to Lucilius, more than four hundred years later, the former complained of "how few" succeed "in owning themselves", even though it is "an invaluable asset" to "become one's own property." Seneca did not believe that we belong to ourselves from the outset, but rather that we should strive for this goal; and he also knew that this "priceless commodity" demands of us constant careful examination of "the quality of life, not its length". If the wise man "encounters many cumbersome things that disturb his peace, he releases himself; and not only does he do so in extreme distress, but as soon as his fate makes him suspicious again, he carefully looks around to see if he has to stop at that point." Seneca himself followed this maxim consistently when Nero's command to commit suicide reached him.

2.

Why are we not the owners of our lives? And why doesn't Seneca consider the idea of "belonging to ourselves" to be a "fundamental fact", but rather a difficult goal and precious commodity? The answer is obvious, and it has been formulated from the earliest times: Our life is not ours because it was given to us – because we did not give it to ourselves. We did not create ourselves; we are not our makers. As far back as the Vedas – such as the 3,000-year-old Shatapatha Brahmana – this insight was seen as an elementary state of indebtedness, which is why David Graeber, in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years,* cites some sentences from these scripts as a motto: "Through birth, every being becomes a debt to the gods, the saints, the fathers and the people. If you make a sacrifice, it's because you owe something to the gods from birth." The sacrifice is the gift that reciprocates a previous gift – the gift of one's life and very existence. Graeber could also have cited many sentences from the prophetic books of Israel, from the Greek tragedies, or Anaximander's famous saying: "the source from which existing things derive their existence is also that to which they return at their destruction, according to necessity; for they give justice and make reparation to one another for their injustice, according to the arrangement of Time." This phrase, incidentally, precedes by 1,000 years the theology of original sin, as developed by the bishop and Church father Augustine in a dispute with Pelagius: however, Anaximander's appeal to retribution and the "order of time" leaves open whom we actually have to thank, or to whom we are indebted, for our lives. By contrast, the Vedic saying calls upon the gods, saints, fathers and people as examples of those who have given us life and who, consequently, might call for suicide to be prohibited, for being a rejection of that gift.

To whom, then, do we owe our lives? The earliest answers to this question are shrouded in prehistoric darkness. They virtually demand a projection of the "primal

scene" onto history. Sigmund Freud described the observation of intercourse between parents as the "primal scene", a term that first appeared in his case story of the "Wolf Man". Implicitly, however, it was clear that the pathos of this term was related not just to the sexual behaviour of the parents, but also to the subsequent knowledge of having resulted from such a scene. Since Johann Jakob Bachofen's *Mutterrecht* (1861) and Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877), kinship ethnology has been debating whether so-called "primitive peoples" knew the connection between sexuality and reproduction. Bronisław Malinowski, for example, emphasises in his study *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929) the "ignorance of the causal connection between sexual intercourse and pregnancy". A guarantor had reported to him "that he had returned home after more than a one-year absence and found a newborn child. He told me this as an example and definitive proof that sexual intercourse has nothing to do with becoming pregnant." Fatherhood, Malinowski concluded, is practised as "social fatherhood"; the children, however, owe their birth to the spirits of deceased ancestors, who lay the child on the woman's head." Blood from her body pours into her head, and on that blood stream, the child gradually slides down until it settles in her lap."

However, to answer the question of to whom we owe or are indebted for our lives, it does not matter if we postulate a natural or social construction of kinship. This is because the prehistoric "primal scene" requires the ability to imagine birth and death, which does not necessarily require a formation of differences between nature and culture: a symbolisation of the routes via which we come into the world and eventually leave it. Traces of this symbolisation can be discovered in the period around seventy thousand years ago that the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari describes as a "cognitive revolution," analogous to the agrarian revolution. Harari claimed that the development of a language of fiction was a central cultural achievement of this age, during which groups of the genus *Homo sapiens* set off from East Africa and settled in Western Europe,

meeting and merging with the Neanderthals: the "ability to communicate large amounts of information about things that do not exist". One of the most prominent accomplishments of this new language of fiction was probably the symbolisation of birth and death. This can be deduced from the earliest graves, in which the dead were buried with stone tools, jewellery, animal remains or red ochre, perhaps as the colour of life; some graves have a significant east–west orientation. Was life associated with the movement of the sun? Were ideas about life after death developed and established as rituals? In a 30,000-year-old grave site of mammoth hunters in Sungir, Russia, archaeologists found a children's grave with two skeletons buried head to head. The boy, probably twelve years old, "was covered with 5,000 ivory pearls and wore a cap with 250 fox teeth", while the girl, about nine years old, "was adorned with 5,250 ivory pearls. Around the children lay figurines and other ivory objects." Harari rightly emphasises the enormous expense of such a funeral, about the motives of which we know nothing at all.

Grave findings do not allow a reliable reconstruction of ritual practices and concepts, but they can at least be related to planned actions, as well as the countless paintings on the walls of Palaeolithic caves in northern Spain or southern France. No less puzzling than the children's grave in Sungir is the "fountain scene" in the caves of Lascaux: On the descent to a four to five-metre-deep shaft opening, which leads into the lower caverns, it shows a man with a bird's head lying on the ground with an erect penis; he seems to have been attacked by the bison pictured directly next to it, whose lower abdomen has a spear inserted into it so that the entrails gush out. Near the man lies a staff, whose tip is adorned with a bird and is perhaps a weapon or a symbolic reference to a myth that we do not know. But that is not the decisive factor. It is crucial for our argumentation that the language and pictorial technique of fiction made it possible to formulate a question about origins and future that was no longer bound to spatial orientation. Now it was possible to speak about, paint, symbolise or ritually practise things

that did not exist at that moment; the old questions that Ernst Bloch asked at the beginning of his major work, such as "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where do we go? What do we expect? What awaits us?", led to new answers. Since then, people have not only communicated about where they are from, where they are going and which group they belong to, but also about a world that can only be reached in their dreams and visions: a world before birth, even before entering their mother's womb, and a world that first begins when living, breathing people or animals are mysteriously transformed into corpses.

On the walls of Palaeolithic caves, numerous stylised, often engraved representations of a vulva can be found; crevasses, tube-shaped canals or caves were highlighted with red ochre. Perhaps the caves themselves were associated with a vulva? Did they perhaps serve as centres for the rituals of "rebirth" of vanished animals, as Max Raphael or Hans Peter Duerr conjecture? The characters misleadingly named after Venus, such as the Venuses of Willendorf, Lespugue, Dolni Vestonice, Moravany nad Vahom, Brassempouy, Mal'ta and Kostenki, date from the same period. They were small, usually eleven centimetres (or even smaller), made of mammoth ivory, limestone or fired clay; the Venus of Savignano, which was found near Modena in 1925, is one of the largest surviving artefacts, with a height of 22.5 cm. We know no more about the meaning of these statuettes and their possible ceremonial use than we do about the meaning of the Palaeolithic cave images. Did the hand-sized idols serve as images of a mother goddess, a mistress of animals, or a female guardian spirit? Or as apotropaic amulets? As symbols of death and rebirth rituals? The ivory figurines were probably neither goddesses nor objects of a fertility cult, but perhaps we may regard them as an early expression of the experience that life is created and passes away, appears and disappears, is given and taken, so that the most one can do is to try to influence the rhythm of these processes.

3.

The question of who owns our lives, and whether we are free to do with them – and their ending – as we choose was probably not even raised in prehistoric cultures. For this question presupposes two concepts that were only developed in the course of the agrarian revolution: the concept of property and the concept of social distinction, domination and kinship. Only with the help of these ideas could things and materials, living beings and persons, be deprived, as it were, of the processes of metabolism, temporal circulation and communication. Hunters and gatherers did not have a concept of possession. When several groups of people – more than ten thousand years ago – began to found cities, irrigate soil and grow crops, they often encountered resistance for this reason. Why should someone exclusively own land and its fruits? According to prehistoric evidence, fields, meadows, lakes, oceans and forests and their yields were available to all living beings – not only humans, but also animals. The fact that land could be seized and claimed as property must have seemed like a robbery of kinds to our distant ancestors, almost in the spirit of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who in his polemic paper of 1840 *What Is Property?* asserted that property is theft.

Immanuel Kant still differentiated between residence and possession: "All human beings are originally (i.e. prior to any act of choice that establishes a right) in a possession of land that is in conformity with right, that is, they have a right to be wherever nature and chance (apart from their will) has placed them. This kind of possession (*possessio*) – which is to be distinguished from residence (*sedes*), a chosen and therefore an acquired *lasting* possession – is a possession *in common* because the spherical surface of the earth unites all the places on its surface." Especially today, it is advisable to recall this utopia of a global community – Kant's acceptance of an original total possession constituted by nature, of the "communio possessionis originaria".

No less important than the question of the reasons for land seizure and the state of

settledness – as a claim of territorial affiliation – is the development of ideas of temporal affiliation. Even secondary burials in settlements still inhabited by semi-nomadic groups more than ten thousand years ago were presumably staged for those who died in action – for example, while hunting. At the place of death, they were initially only temporarily buried or skeletonised, and finally buried after returning to the settlement. The transport of bodies or bones in this way was certainly not only practised to document the connection of the deceased to a central place of residence, but also to ensure the collective identity of the group that the dead had belonged to during their lifetimes. It is no coincidence that the dead were buried in communal graves (of two to ten persons); death rituals ensured that people of the same descent and affiliation merged. Kinship formed the first symbolic order along whose lines the question as to who actually owns life and who must be obeyed on the matter could be asked and answered; the terms "obey" and "belong" lead back to the same root, namely the Old High German verb *gihörian*, from which words like *hören* (to hear), *angehören* (to belong) and *gehörig* (proper) are derived. Whoever hears and follows an order or a command proves himself to be obedient and expresses his affiliation. This affiliation establishes power: the power to give orders, the power to punish, the power to kill; and to rebel against this power entails suffering a social death, to kill oneself.

And thus, we arrive at the "primal scene" of the "primal scene", not in Freud's much-criticised "primal horde" but in the first answer to the question of who my life belongs to, namely: those who have given it to me, my mother and parents, my family and kinship group, my ancestors and their ancestors. The answer continues to seem plausible today. In her recent book *L'ethique de la dette* (The Ethics of Debt, original pub. 2012), Nathalie Sarthou-Lajus observed that "man is not the author of his own life and cannot declare himself to be his own creator. Even before any actual bank loan has been made, the human being is born as heir and debtor." The wording indicates a break: the change from maternal to paternal genealogy, from group morality to the economy of inheritance

and guilt, and, above all, the shift from the life of humans to gods and creators, as is already present in the saying from the Vedas. If one wanted to extend the series of "revolutions" – although we are talking here of millennia-long upheavals and not of comparatively short revolutions like those resulting from the storming of the Bastille or the Winter Palace in Petrograd – one could continue the analysis of the "cognitive" and "agrarian revolution" with an account of a mental "axial" revolution (following Karl Jaspers). In the course of this "revolution", writing was invented. Initially used primarily for the preparation of lists, such as dynastic registers, directories of assets and livestock, star catalogues and rules of law, it led to the emergence of book religions and philosophy.

Book religions, as it were, sacralised the primal scene. My life no longer belongs to parents or ancestors because they gave it to me, but to a divine, metaphysical authority. This authority overrides genealogy. What is significant are, for example, the stories from the Book of Genesis. They document the creation of human beings, but also the deep ambivalence of God the Creator, who imposes birth and death on them as punishments for the forbidden enjoyment of the fruits of the tree of knowledge and drives his creations out of Paradise. He reacts with disgust and a flood to people's desire to reproduce: "The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, 'I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them.'" (Genesis 6: 6–7) And it is no coincidence that the chapter before the report on the flood is about Adam's genealogical line. Human reproduction is simply uncanny to God; he competes, in a sense, with the ancestors, the "heroes of old". (Genesis 6:4) In different religions, the founders – Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed – are fatherless rebels; the "anti-genealogical experiment of the modern age" already began more than two millennia ago. Traces of this attitude can also be found in the Christian gospels: In the Gospel of St Matthew, Jesus asks of a messenger who

announces the arrival of his mother and brothers: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" (Book of Matthew 12:48) And elsewhere, he emphasises: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother." For "anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Book of Matthew 10: 34–37)

A sense of family is therefore rejected: It is not parents or ancestors who own my life, but the divine Creator. In most religions – in Islam too, incidentally, and even in Buddhism, which wavers between a clear rejection of suicide and conditional recognition of it – suicide is therefore strictly prohibited, namely as the inadmissible appropriation of a divine possession by man. Only since the European Enlightenment and the more or less clear separation between religious communities and states has the answer to the question of who owns my life been shifted yet again: from our ancestors and gods to nations. Nations also claim possession of the bodies and lives of their citizens. Since Lazare Carnot's *Levée en masse* of 1793, young men have been forced into conscription and military service; desertion is severely punished. National propaganda requires women to contribute to ensuring more offspring by giving birth. In France in 1896, the influential *Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population*, a "national alliance for the increase of the population", was founded. And in the Nazi era, women were awarded the Mother's Cross, analogous to the Iron Cross. In the Bundestag election of 2013, the possibility of introducing mothers' pensions was discussed, and tracts on demographics, such as Thilo Sarrazin's *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Is Doing Away with Itself, 2010), warn of the consequences of a decline in the birth rate.

4.

Who owns my life? After the ancestors and gods, it was states and nations that reserved proprietary rights, in particular by prohibiting suicide or, at the least, the

assistance of suicide. It is still striking that the line of argument often appeals to all three authorities – parents, God and state; the German urologist and obstetrician Friedrich Benjamin Osiander, for example, notes at the beginning of his extensive investigation into suicide *Über Selbstmord* (1813) that it is "nothing other than murder of oneself, a cruelty against oneself, a breach of obligations that one is guilty of in the eyes of the state, one's parents, relatives, friends and all those that life would have been useful to and a crime against those who gave us life out of divine power." Kant also vigorously rejected suicide in *The Metaphysics of Morals*: "Suicide is a crime (murder)", a serious breach of the duties "against other people (spouses, parents against children, underlings against superiors, or one's fellow citizens, and finally, against God)", "without being called upon, the human being deserts his post in the world".

The last formulation, for one, recalls the military background of the prohibition of suicide: He who deserts his "post" without an emergency or order deserts life, as it were.

John Locke's *Second Treatise on the Government* (1690) deserves special attention; his contract-theory-based line of argument, such as the rejection of genealogical authorisation by appealing to the descent of Adam and Eve – has inspired many a constitution. In Section 27 of this work there is after all the thesis that "every Man has a Property in his own Person" to which "nobody has any right" except himself. However, this sentence aims at a summary of production law, as its continuation reveals: "The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his." That's why Locke formulates various restrictions: The prohibition of killing other people, for example, is not derived from the need to respect the "self-ownership" of others, but from the fact that we must not violate the divine Creator's ownership rights:

> For all men are the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, at whose command sent into the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property whose workmanship they are, made to last during

his, not one another's pleasure.

From this provision in § 6 – unlike § 27 – the prohibition of suicide can also be derived. For "man may be in a state of liberty, but not a state of licence to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself or so much as any creature in his possession."

Another restriction concerns children, who were conceived by their parents. "Children, I confess," says Locke,

> are not born in this perfect state of equality, though they are born to it. Their parents have some kind of rule or jurisdiction over them, when they come into the world and for some time after, but it is but a temporary one. The bonds of this subjection are like the swaddling clothes they are wrapped in, and supported by, in the weakness of their infancy. Age and reason as they grow up, loosen them, till at length they drop quite off and leave a man at his own free disposal.

Obviously, self-ownership can be overruled by workmanship, at least temporarily; and besides God, parents are granted temporary property rights to their creations. Yet this order could well be reversed, as Kant illustrated in §28 of the doctrine of his *Metaphysics of Morals*, namely in that self-ownership relativises the principles of workmanship, provided that "the thing created is a person", and that "from a practical point of view, it is a quite correct and necessary idea to regard the act of procreation as one by which we have brought a person into the world without his consent and on our own initiative, for which deed the parents incur an obligation to make the child content with his condition so far as they can. – They cannot destroy their child as if he were something they had *made* (since a being endowed with freedom cannot be a product of this kind) or as if he were their property, nor can they even just abandon him to chance." In short, the procreation of a child is an act of violence, because "the new mortal, though a person, is not asked whether he wants to be there or not; he is forced to live and into life." Kant therefore concludes that "children can never be regarded as the property of their parents," even

though "*mine* and *yours* require the same thing".

So who do we belong to? Our parents and ancestors who made our existence possible? A god who created us?

The state that authenticates our identity and notes on all birth, marriage, and travel documents when and where we arrived on this planet? Or ourselves, in a strange split between owners and possessions? From John Locke's interlocking of self-ownership and workmanship, the premise is that we belong to ourselves as long as we, through work, can subsist and earn our own living. Under this condition we are self-made men: people who belong to themselves because they "made" themselves. The term "self-made man" was actually coined by Frederick Douglass in a speech he gave for the first time in 1859, and then on many other occasions. Douglass was born a slave in 1817 or 1818. He hardly had any contact with his mother; she died when he was seven years old. His father was probably also his owner. He learned to read and write as a house slave in Baltimore before fleeing to New York in 1838 for freedom. In 1845 he published his first book, entitled *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.* Douglass successfully involved himself in the movement to abolish slavery and establish equality for women. In 1870 he was the keynote speaker at the celebrations for the adoption of the 15th Amendment, which prohibited anyone from denying a person the right to vote based on their ethnicity. Four years before his death in 1895, Douglass was appointed Consul General to the Republic of Haiti. In his speech from 1859 he said:

> Self-made men (…) are the men who owe little or nothing to birth, relationship, friendly surroundings; to wealth inherited or to early approved means of education; who are what they are, without the aid of any favoring conditions by which other men usually rise in the world and achieve great results.

In clear agreement with John Locke, he stated: "My theory of self-made men is, then, simply this: that they are men of work."

It is not superfluous to recall that his talk of the "self-made man" must be viewed

in the context of the fight against slavery, rather than rags to riches stories. Nor is it superfluous to criticise liberalism's narrative of progress – from family to religion, from state to the individual. Only recently did Thomas Piketty try to demonstrate to what extent the conditions for individual careers still depend on birth, parentage, circle of friends, inherited wealth and early educational opportunities; social mobility is still much lower than expected and forecast even a few years ago. On the horizon of such criticism, it is evident that the self-made man – said with Freud's words – "is not the master in his own house." Freud knew that Oedipus and Antigone and Romeo and Juliet live in our midst and cannot even dream about belonging to themselves. In fact, their tragic stories are driven by the competing commands of fathers, gods, rulers, judges and traders, shaken by the violence, as it were, with which the polyglot demand is made to give up their own lives in event of a crisis. Locke's assertion – *every human being belongs to himself* – seems ludicrously helpless in contrast to the reservation of property rights of families, churches, states, armies, corporations and syndicates. At present, more than 190 million children (between the ages of five and fourteen) work in agriculture, quarries, mines or textile factories, as labourers in private households and tourism, as street vendors, beggars, prostitutes or soldiers. Never before have there been as many slaves as today, according to authors such as Lydia Cacho and Benjamin Skinner. The latter sums up in *Foreign Policy*:

> In the middle of New York City, you are some five hours away from being able to negotiate the sale, in broad daylight, of a healthy boy or girl. (...) He or she can be used for anything. Sex and domestic labour are the most frequent uses. (...) Before you go let's be clear on what you're buying. A slave is a human being who is forced to work through fraud or threat of violence for no pay beyond subsistence. Agreed? Good. Maybe you thought that slavery died out in the 19th century. Since 1817 a dozen international treaties have been signed for the abolition of slavery. And now, there are more slaves in the world than at any point in human history.

5.

What does someone own who owns himself? He owns little more than a project, a

spectrum of possibilities, to make something of himself through work. In this sense Max Stirner, in the prologue to his treatise *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1845), asserts that I am "the creative nothing, the nothing from which the ego itself as creator creates everything." In short, I belong to myself, but as nothing. I have nothing when I have myself. The negation of domination, the enlightening maxim of wanting to belong to nobody except myself, is elevated to become a principle; but at the cost of being identified with the positively connotated nothing, raised to the status of a noun: "the principle of nothing is empty," notes Amery, "no doubt about it, in comparison to the principle of hope which encompasses all possibilities of life, the great, intensive life experienced with reflection. But it is not only empty but also powerful, since it is the real finality of us all. This power, the power of emptiness, of what is beyond words, empty mightiness, which cannot be summarily described by any sign, is not attainable through any speculation" interleaves the philosophy of Enlightenment with the early Romantic ideals of the genius. In the philosophical debates around the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, the concept of "nihilism" soon circulated, which had scarcely ever been used before. There was a polemical debate over the "nihilism" of Fichte and Schlegel. As Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi noted, for example, in a letter to Fichte (6 March 1799): "Verily, my dear Fichte, it should not irk me if somebody, or if thou, wishes to call that with which I oppose idealism – for I rebuke nihilism – a chimaera." With similar intent, Jean Paul, in his *Introduction to Aesthetics* (1804), criticised the "poetic nihilism" of early Romantic poetry, "which would rather destroy the world and the heavens out of egotism just in order to have an empty playing field in a void, and which tears away the dressing of his wounds, seen as a fetter."

The formulation of the dressing as a fetter is revealing because it highlights the point that someone who belongs to himself is injured. If "self-creation" fails, if securing one's own existence – in the way we refer to it colloquially today, without considering

what we are actually saying! – fails, only the void remains. A possible motive for this criticism was already stated by Jean Paul in 1796 in his famous "Speech of the Dead Christ from the Universe that There Is No God": In this narrative of a nightmare or a vision that later became a veritable manifesto of atheism, the returned Jesus declares judgment on the world. He assured the hosts of the dead, even the dead children, that they shall not rise, and that they have no father: "Then came into the temple a heartrending sight, the dead children who had wakened in the churchyard, and now cast themselves before the sublime form on the altar saying: 'Jesus! have we no father?' --And he replied with streaming tears: 'We are all orphans, I and you, we are without a father.'" The speech culminates in a revealing reversal of the project of self-creation: "How everyone is so alone in the vast crypt of the universe! I only have myself at my side – O father! O father! where is your infinite breast that I rest on it? – Oh, if every 'I' is his owner, father and creator, why might it not also be his angel of death?" The capacity for self-creation turns into the capacity for self-destruction, for the "empty power" of suicide. If I belong to myself, then suicide is also allowed – the transformation of the self and self-creator into an "angel of death".

During the first half of the 19th century, criticism of nihilism was directed at a quickly growing circle of addressees. Not only artists or philosophers were characterised as nihilists, but also political activists during the *Vormärz* period. Stirner was criticised for taking this direction, for example by the Hegelian Karl Rosenkranz, who noted in his diary: "Theoretically, such nihilism can no longer develop all ethical pathos into anything; it can only be followed by the practice of selfish fanaticism, by revolution." In his novel *Fathers and Sons*, incidentally published in the year (1861) when the tsar abolished serfdom, Ivan Turgenev describes the social revolutionaries as nihilists. What is meant in the novel as pejorative was later taken on by the Russian anarchists as a positive label with which to describe themselves. In this context, Friedrich Nietzsche in *Beyond Good*

and Evil (1886), when referring to "some evil, threatening sound in the distance," writes: "as if a new kind of explosive were being tried somewhere, a dynamite of the spirit, perhaps a newly discovered Russian nihilist, a pessimism *bonae voluntatis*, that not only denies, means denial, but—dreadful thought! practises denial." And he characterises "this kind of 'good will'" as "a will to the veritable, actual negation of life." He asks: "Nihilism is at the door; where does this most uncanny of guests come from?", and answers a little later that nihilism means "that the highest values are devalued." Nihilism is "the symptom (…) that those who have gone astray have no more consolation: that they destroy to be destroyed, that, detached from morality, they no longer have any reason to 'surrender' – that they place themselves on the ground of the opposite principle and want power themselves by forcing the powerful to be their executioners. This is the European form of Buddhism, denial, after all existence has lost its 'meaning.'" *Destroying to be destroyed*, and vice versa: *To be destroyed in order to destroy.* The intention of a suicide attack can hardly be described any more precisely.

Nietzsche's insights are alarmingly topical; they find a late echo in a remark by Heinrich Popitz, who stated in his study *The Phenomena of Power* (1992):

> The assassin and martyr publicly deny the completeness of power. Both show the decision over life and death does not lie only with the power holder. They show that precisely the power to kill limits all power of humans over humans. Power can be complete insofar as it can do the utmost harm. Power is incomplete because the decision to do the utmost harm cannot be monopolized – anybody can kill – and the decision to let oneself be killed cannot be denied to others.

(This lesson is also learned by Katniss Everdeen, the sixteen-year-old heroine of the successful young adult trilogy *The Hunger Games*, when, in the arena, she refuses to kill and instead reaches for the poisonous berries.) Nietzsche's thinking consistently culminated in a dedicated plea for "voluntary", "rational" death. Already in the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) he had his prophet preach: "Many die too late, and

some die too soon. Yet strange sounds the precept: 'Die at the right time!' Die at the right time: so teaches Zarathustra. (...) My death, I praise to you, the voluntary death, which comes to me because I want it. (...) Free for death, and free in death; a holy Naysayer, when there is no longer time for Yes: thus he understands about death and life." And in the second volume of *Human, All Too Human* (1886), he differentiates between involuntary, natural death and voluntary, rational death:

> Natural death is death independent of all reason, actual irrational death, in which the wretched substance of the husk determines how long the kernel shall or shall not continue to exist: in which therefore the stunted, often sick and thickwitted prison warder is the master who decides the moment at which his noble prisoner shall die. Natural death is the suicide of nature, that is to say the annihilation of the rational being by the irrational to which it is tied. Only in the light of religion can the opposite appear to be the case: because then it is the higher reason (God's) which gives the command which the lower reason has, fairly enough, to submit to. Outside the religious mode of thinking natural death is worthy of no glorification. – The wise regulation and disposal of death belongs to that morality of the future, at present quite ungraspable and immoral sounding, into the dawn of which it must be an indescribable joy to gaze.

This "morality of the future" is also the morality of allowed, even proffered suicide.

The early 20th century was marked by Nietzsche – perhaps it was even Nietzsche's century, as has sometimes been claimed. In this century, the question of who my life belongs to has been answered with the increasingly clear exclamation: *Myself!* But at the same time, this answer tends towards the increasingly paradoxical certainty that my life is only mine because my death is mine. *My death belongs to me.* This is the title of an astute analysis of contemporary debates on self-determined dying published by Svenja Flaßpöhler in 2013. In her foreword, she emphasises the dialectical causality between the modern demand "to make use of one's own rationality, and to translate effectively the sovereignty gained during the Enlightenment into the most diverse of cultural techniques," and into voluntary death, "if people turn to others in the last phase of their existence – in order to exit life with their support in a self-determined way." "My death belongs to me": This sentence not only recalls the feminist slogan, "My womb belongs to me" or Max Stirner's "creative Nothingness"; it also recalls the elementary and consequential

interlocking of dying with the possessive pronoun that Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaimed: "My death, I praise to you." *My* death? How can death become *my* death? How should it belong to *me*? Can we still follow Rilke's lyrical mysticism of 1903, this invocation of the "great" death "which everyone has in him", the "fruit around which everything revolves?" The German translation of Harold Brodkey's account of his dying bears the title *Die Geschichte meines Todes* (The Story of My Death); the English original version, on the other hand, was called, perhaps more truthfully, *This Wild Darkness* (1996).