Freedom, Suicide & Selfhood in Early Modern Thought

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‘À mourir il ne reste que le vouloir’, said Montaigne in ‘Coustume de l’isle de Cea’; ‘To die there wanteth but will’.1 Like many sentences in the Essais, the comment suggests philosophical depth but is inscrutable in surface meaning. What kind of argument is Montaigne making in this curious essay towards the beginning of Book Two? It is tempting to call it an argument about suicide. Yet equally obviously, it does not call itself an argument about suicide. It does not even call itself an argument. The essay begins with the statement ‘to philosophate be to doubt’ (ii.26), but then places its own enquiry lower than doubt, calling it sub-philosophical, indistinguishable from fantastical ravings. Only a scholar can debate important issues; only a theologian can resolve them. Montaigne is neither: he reserves any authority in his own discussion to the inalienable truth of the divine will. As for his own essay, it describes, it does not comment; and its object is not a principle or even a belief, but a ‘custom’ or a ‘habit’. Perhaps the essay does not even have a subject.

Patrick Henry has rightly commented that Montaigne could not have called the essay, ‘Du suicide’, since the word did not yet exist.2 The French word, like the English ‘suicide’, is mid-seventeenth century.3 When John Donne wrote Biathanatos in around 1608, often called the first modern formal defence or justification of the act of taking one’s life (which I will be discussing in depth in due course), he added as a sub-title: ‘A Declaration of that Paradoxe, or Thesis, That Self-homicide is not so naturally Sinne, that it may never be otherwise’.4 As well as ‘self-homicide’, Donne used the term ‘self-murder’, which was rather older, occurring in Foxe’s Book of Martyrs in 1563.5 Sir Philip Sidney referred to the act of ‘self-destruction’ in Arcadia in the 1580s; Milton later used the same composite word in Paradise Lost.6 In Hamlet, everyone will recall, the word used by Shakespeare is ‘self-slaughter’.7 There is a sense, then, that the early modern word is a neologism, in which the only common factor is the reflexive prefix ‘Self-’. Selbstmord is both inherently self-referential and yet also paradoxical, in that it involves the destruction of the very thing it is. As a term it feels forever strange, a compound noun that has to be put back together each time anew, rather in the way the action is unmentionable or intrinsically difficult. We recall that as late as David Hume in the late eighteenth century, he wrote an essay forthrightly entitled ‘Of Suicide’, but thought better of publishing it while he was alive, so that it only appeared, posthumously, in 1783.8 For Patrick Henry, this is explanation enough for Montaigne’s reticence.9 Montaigne’s method is partly aesthetic and partly defensive. ‘Coustume de l’isle de Cea’ is an exemplary piece of humanist rhetoric, coming across its point sidelong; and it is an exemplary piece of philosophy, because it knows its subject is dangerous and even forbidden, so it has to tread carefully.

1 Essais, II.iii, first published in 1580, revised in 1588 and 1595; cited here from Œuvres complètes, ed. Albert Thibaudet et Maurice Rat, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 331. English translation by John Florio (1603); cited here from The Essayes, ed Desmond McCarthy, 3 vols (London: Phoenix, 1928), ii.27. All subsequent citations from these eds.
4 ΒΙΑΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ a declaration of that paradoxe or thesis, that selfe-homicide is not so naturally sinne, that it may never be otherwise : wherein the nature and the extent of all those lawes, which seeme to be violated by this act, are diligently surveyed / written by Iohn Donne (London: John Dawson, [1644]), title page.
6 The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia (1590), II.xii, in Complete Works of Sir Philip Sidney, ed. Albert Feuillerat, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), i.227; Milton, Paradise Lost, x.1016.
7 Hamlet, 1.2.132.
8 Essays on Suicide and the Immortality of the Soul, ascribed to the late David Hume, Esq., never before published (London: M. Smith, 1783).
Henry has demonstrated carefully that the essay on Cea divides itself into three rhetorical sections. The first can be called ‘Arguments in Favour of Suicide’; the second, ‘Arguments Against Suicide’. These two sections aggregate undigested examples from the classical and modern past, such as, in favour of suicide, the Spartan child facing slavery under Philip of Macedon, who exclaims, ‘It were a shame for me to serve, having libertie so neere at hand, and therewithall threw himselfe headlong downe from the top of the house’ (ii.26). Or, in the opposite direction, Montaigne cites Virgil’s dire warnings in the Aeneid, VI (later quoted by Dante) of the fate in the afterlife of the violent against themselves, Proxima deinde tenent maesti loca (‘Next place they lamentable hold in hell’).\(^{10}\) Into the midst of these literary and historical examples are freely interpolated various philosophical remarks, rather in the manner of the later Wittgenstein, tossed in front of us as self-evident, requiring no further analysis. First among these, placed in silent juxtaposition to the strange story of a child refusing life under tyranny, is the phrase, ‘C’est ce qu’on dit, que le sage vit tant qu’il doit, non pas tant qu’il peut (p. 332) (‘the wiseman liveth as long as he ought, and not so long as he can’, ii.27).

Montaigne presents this without any source; but a careful reader will remember that it is not only a citation but a word-for-word translation of a well-known line from Seneca, Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales: Itaque sapiens vivit, quantum debet, non quantum potest.\(^{11}\) Indeed, Henry has shown that of the eight arguments for suicide, seven are derived from Seneca, and are encrusted with seventeen direct translations from Seneca’s letters, ten of which come from a single letter to Lucilius, Epistola LXX. Nature has ‘left-vs the key of the fieldes’ (Ep. LXX (i.68-70)). She has ‘appointed but one entrance into life, but many a thousand ways out of it’ (Ep. LXX (ii.64)). Or the sentiment with which I began, ‘To die there wanteth but will’: ad mariendum nihil aliud in mora esse quam velle (Ep.LXX (ii.68)). The epigrams pile up unabated: ‘Death is a remedy against all evils… The voluntariest death, is the fairest. Life dependeth on the will of others, death on ours… To live is to serve, if the libertie to die be wanting.’\(^{12}\) The eighth argument in favour of suicide Henry attributes not to Seneca directly but to a general Stoic view: that God gives permission, when life is worse than death, for us to depart in peace. Indeed a wise man may decide to leave his life even when in an apparent state of happiness, just as a fool is determined to prolong his life even when he is in the midst of misery. Suicide was permitted ‘when the advantages of living were outweighed by the disadvantages of living’. Henry finds in this a reworking of Plato in the Phaedo, although with a different slant: ‘we must not put an end to our lives until God sends some compulsion’: nevertheless, sometimes God does do exactly that.\(^{13}\) Henry, then, places Montaigne within a rhetorical tradition of commonplace wisdom, of the tacking together of classical citations in one direction and another. Yet where-as his identification of the pattern of Senecan references is a fantastic piece of scholarship, we might wonder if he has quite caught the literary and philosophical flavour of the result. For one thing, whereas humanists were (in the normal run of things) only too pleased to tell you about their sources, Montaigne obliterates any reference to Seneca by name in this first section, despite quoting from him seventeen times. Seneca only comes into the essay by name twice, both in the third section. This last section Henry’s analysis seemingly fails to have the measure of. It is much the longest, and between the first edition of 1580 and the last of 1595 it doubled in length. The additions consist only of new examples, without any philosophical analysis.

I therefore wonder if Montaigne’s object is more deceptive than it appears. My feeling is that the work would be less disturbing if it was called ‘Du suicide’, or even ‘De la mort volontaire’, a phrase he can and does use several times in the essay. Yet to unravel this we have to uncover some of the modern mystique that surrounds the subject. For I do not think it is too much to say that in the twentieth century the idea of suicide was reinvented. Indeed I think that for many people suicide appears to be a thoroughly modern problem, and its philosophical discussion a thoroughly modern debate. In that sense, early modern discussions, such as in France in Montaigne, or in the Netherlands in Justus Lipsius, or in England in Shakespeare or Donne, appear as stage-
posts on the route to modernity. When we think about this we know that it must be wrong: after all, suicide is a standard topic in ancient philosophy, especially in Plato or Cicero or Seneca; but then we quickly re-adjust, and attribute this kink in intellectual history, like most other kinks, to the secularization thesis. What stopped modernity becoming modernity is Christianity, and suicide illustrates this issue like no other: once the everlasting ‘Cannon ‘gainst Selfe-slaughter’ got unfixed, Renaissance humanism opened the way to how we think today.

However, I think there is a much more profound sense in which suicide has been reinvented in the twentieth century, which puts us on the other side of a divide from Montaigne. Arguments about suicide in modern society centre on the act itself, conceived principally as a medical condition or a sociological problem. Indeed suicide is a primal moment in the history of the social sciences. Emile Durkheim’s *Le suicide: Étude de sociologie* of 1897 is a classic of methodology as much as of material, using comparisons of suicide rates in Catholic and protestant countries to formulate a general thesis. Albert Bayet’s *Le suicide et la morale* of 1922 linked Durkheim’s legacy to a sociological interpretation of history. For Bayet, a lapsed Catholic, when theology is taken away, all that is left of suicide is a social problem, requiring social explanations and solutions. And while Durkheim conceived social research as an antidote to psychological studies of suicide, it is within the medicalization of psychology that the modern condition of suicide has come to be understood. There are now neurological theories which try to explain why suicide happens, what makes one person more prone to the instinct than another. Jonathan Glover in *Causing Death and Saving Lives* states that suicide nowadays is ‘thought of as an irrational symptom of mental disturbance and so as a “medical” problem’. As a result, indeed, some people have a problem in seeing it as a topic in moral philosophy at all:

the reaction against responding to suicide with horror and condemnation has made widespread the view that the question is not in any way a moral one. (p. 171)

Suicide is the modern sin, perhaps the sin of modernity. It is secular, social, and psychological. Suicide stands as a test-case of moral philosophy. It tests the limits of the law’s inquiry into the realm of the self, as perhaps also the self’s responsibility to itself. In the law of nature, the self at least has a stake in taking good care of itself, and the moral law of society has a duty to encourage this stake. But the law should not go too far. The presumption of guilt in relation to suicide is a prime example of an archaic or outdated principle. It belongs to a society which assumes that God has the final jurisdiction of the soul. In a society which no longer, at least collectively or officially, believes in the soul, we no longer have any right to condemn the suicide. This is the ultimate claim of a private sphere.

Writing backwards into history, it is within this twentieth century construction that early modern arguments about suicide have been contained. They are premonitions of the modern view. Montaigne in the *Apologie de Raimond Sebond* plays with the idea of a natural theology, in which he imagines a religion of natural desires. If we believed in an eternal life in the same fashion as a philosophical principle, he speculates, we would have no fear of death. ‘Je veuil estre dissout, dirions nous, et estre aveques Jesus-Christ’ (“I wish to be dissolved and be with Jesus” we would say’). The sentiment gently mocks Christian belief in the immortality of the soul while assimilating it with a general desire for death. In the 1588 edition of the *Essais*, Montaigne here interpolated a long quotation from Lucretius, Book III, in line with a habit he shows elsewhere not only in this essay but in the ‘Coustume de l’Isle de Cea’: *Non iam se mortiens dissolvi conqueretur* (‘He would not now compleane to be dissolved dying’). Seneca in the *Epistulæ ad Lucilium* expresses the view that a death instinct is universal. Montaigne’s frequent comments on preparedness for death are often assumed to be part of a similar syndrome. I am going to reject this reading of Montaigne and early modern suicide, as I am of other writers who followed him over the next fifty years.

Donne’s *Biathanatos* is a prime case in the creation of what I see as a mistaken lineage of the secularizing and
psychologising of suicide. Yet it is first helpful to see how the work has come to be interpreted in what I take to be the wrong way, as there are reasons for it. The opening sentence of the work refers to his ‘sickely inclination’ for death:

BEZA, A man as eminent and illustrious, in the full glory and Noone of Learning, as others were in the dawning, and Morning, when any, the least sparkle was notorious, confesseth of himself, that only for the anguish of a Scurffe, which over-ranne his head, he had once drown’d himselfe from the Millers bridge in Paris, if his Uncle by chance had not then come that way; I have often such a sickely inclination. (p. 17)

The sentence has a beguiling quality of self-reflection combined with impersonal statement. It is anecdotal, whimsical, novelistic and yet autobiographical. It has seemed natural to look to this work, as to so many of Donne’s writings, for subjective speculation and even introspection. Donne, we say easily, ‘was much possessed by death’. In a letter to his friend the courtier Sir Henry Goodyer (or Goodere), probably contemporar y with his treatise on suicide he described the desire in pathological terms, admitting that ‘a thirst and intimation after the next life’ could readily become ‘envenomed, and putrefied, and stray into a corrupt disease’.20 This turns quickly into a more complex personal meditation:

With the first of these I have often suspected myself to be overtaken; which is, with a desire of the next life: which though I know it is not merely out of a weariness of this, because I had the same desires when I went with the tyde, and enjoyed fairer hopes then now: yet I doubt worldly encombrances have encreased it. (p. 49)

Biathanatos is a scholastic, not personal work. It consists of exhaustive analyses of canon law, of natural law theory, and of moral philosophy, in order to contradict the universal ban on suicide. There are cases, he argues, where Christian theology has made death the lesser of two evils: martyrdom is the principal and most obvious. Within natural law, too, there are circumstances in which the continuation of life is itself contrary to nature: where the body is too weak to enjoy its own goods, or where pleasure or happiness has become impossible. Moral philosophy abounds with examples of the preferability of an honourable death over a dishonourable life, such as one subject to tyranny or enslavement or moral turpitude. Yet despite its philosophical seriousness, Biathanatos within modern commentary is more likely to be seen inside a modern lens of personal conflict or agonistic self-realization. Donne yearns for death and argues himself into accepting it.

Modernity’s favourite early modern would-be suicide is of course Hamlet:

HAM. To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. (3.1.56-60)

Since the nineteenth century, the idea of self-murder in this speech has been assimilated to a view that Hamlet is in some sense prey, by this stage in the play, to a form of mental disorder. As Margreta de Grazia has put it, ‘After Coleridge, criticism will increasingly look for psychological explanations for Hamlet’s “strange and odd behaviour”, attributing it to various kinds of psychic disturbances, disorders, pathologies, neuroses’.21 Suicide is at the heart of this modern, neurotic Hamlet. The argument is neatly circular. Suicide is defined as a form of mental disturbance; Hamlet is assumed to be discussing his own proneness to a suicidal inclination; and Hamlet then in turn has acquired the status of the quintessential dramatic type of the neurotic. Coleridge at one point himself used the vogue term ‘psycho-analytical’ to describe his approach to the problem of Hamlet’s character, and the engine of Freud’s methodology has completed the pattern.22 What begins with the Oedipus Complex ends in the Death Drive. Hamlet is modern psychic man.

The logic of this argument has nonetheless been disputed in several respects. While the psychoanalytic bent in Hamlet criticism has always been controversial, De Grazia has argued that a whole tradition of interpreting Hamlet has grown up in which the play, as it were, awai-

20 Letters to several persons of honour written by John Donne Sometime Deane of St Pauls London. Published by John Donne, Dr. of the civil law (London: J. Flesher for Richard Marriot, 1651), p. 49.
ted a psychological explanation to bring it into life. More specifically, in what may be the longest ever footnote even on this most annotated of dramatic soliloquies, Harold Jenkins has commented on how the idea of suicide has been exaggerated to create an extreme sense of Hamlet’s mental confusion. Such interpretations have especially ‘shared the error of applying the speech to the speaker’s personal problems’. Yet nothing in the speech, Jenkins insists, relates it to Hamlet’s individual case. Jenkins therefore concludes that we should resist interpretations of the speech ‘which distort the general proposition by irrelevant metaphysics’. De Grazia has built on Jenkins’s scepticism about psychologising Hamlet in order to create what we might call an anti-metaphysical Hamlet, not so much the play within the play as the play before the play. Suicidal Hamlet is just one more example of the abundance of philosophical Hamlets who have sprung up in the image of their philosophical creator: Hamlet as Schopenhauer, Hamlet as Nietzsche, Hamlet as Kierkegaard, Hamlet as Freud.

I am in sympathy with the idea of ridding early modern thinking of the desire proleptically to think like we do, as if the only things that matter in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are those that lead to modernity. Yet formally, Jenkins is surely wrong: not only is Hamlet patently referring to taking one’s own life, at least in some sense, but also the play refers frequently to the question, both directly and obliquely. Ophelia’s death is analysed in both complex and comic terms as self-induced; and Horatio, too, offers to end his own life: ‘I am more an antique Roman than a Dane’, he says, avowing the Stoic fashion for choosing death over ignoble life. But perhaps Jenkins is also wrong, philosophically. This takes me to the heart of my argument. It may be instead that, rather than philosophy being the problem, we have mistaken one form of philosophy for another. It is my contention here that suicide is exactly the issue, but again, not because we have placed too great an emphasis on suicide, but that we have assumed that a modern understanding of suicide is the only one.

I mean this in two principal ways, both of which can be seen very specifically in Hamlet’s language. The first goes back to the reflexive form of ‘self-slaughter’ that I discussed earlier, a factor present but occluded in the Latinate form ‘sui-‘. Jerrold Seigel has commented in his history of the philosophy of selfhood how in most European languages, such as ‘the self’ in English and ‘das Selbst’ in German, the abstract noun for the concept is derived from a grammatical form. But the word ‘self’ as a noun is a late seventeenth-century invention, first found frequently in Locke; as in other early modern languages, English contented itself with a grammatical language with which to confront problems of the self. My interest is in that peculiar sub-set of actions which a person does to herself. What this implies is a particular concentration on the agency of the person. The modern inclination to see Hamlet’s suicide in terms of a disorder, of a pathological desire to do something which comes from some psychological reservoir so deep inside himself that he does not recognise it as his own action, is therefore highly misleading in this context. Suicide in Hamlet does not deflect attention away from voluntary agency, and towards some form of pathological compulsion, but precisely back towards it.

The other question raised intensely by ‘self-murder’ in Hamlet is one of necessity versus freedom. It may be that the most important word in Hamlet’s most famous line is the one that is least commented on: ‘or’. This most unnoticed of prepositions contains within it a metaphysical grammar of incalculable consequence. What most troubles Hamlet about the question of being is the fact that it is a question at all: there is an alternative. But it is a choice which only comes into operation at the moment of death. No person has the choice about whether ‘to be’: by definition, a person already is, and his birth now lies in a pre-history beyond his choice. But in death, choice comes (paradoxically) into being: non-existence is revealed as an alternative state.

This is my crux. Histories of suicide, unconsciously or not, place it within an epistemological category all of its own: an instinct outside of our control, almost outside of us. This is true both of the sociological and the psychoanalytic explanations of suicide, even though in other ways those methods seem opposite. ‘From sin to

insanity’ goes the title of one recent book. Or consider Alexander Murray, who in his exhaustive study of medieval suicide consciously marginalises any cases where the act is described as being done in equanimity or joy: ‘A wish to die can only result from the strongest negative impulses from life: loss, incapacity, failure and pain.’ Henry Fedden’s demographic study purportedly proved suicide was on the up in the sixteenth century. All of his explanations, stereotyped as they are, assume that suicide is a depressive illness: I quote, the ‘birth of melancholy’, ‘fascination with death’, ‘an obsession with the role of the individual’, and finally, ‘the depressing nature of the doctrines of Calvin’. This last explanation appears everywhere, and was the subject of an influential book, The Persecutory Imagination, by John Stachniewski. My fear is that Calvinism tended to cheer people up in the seventeenth century rather than depressed them. But more fundamentally, I contend that contrary to a modern view of suicide as a form of mental disorder and pathological instinct, suicide in early modern thought raises fundamental issues about freedom and agency.

I return, then, to Montaigne. To gain a sense of Montaigne’s context I want to compare a contemporary and at least superficially very similar argument in Justus Lipsius. The essay on Cea, in its initial form, can be attributed to the earliest phase of Montaigne’s writing, 1572-4. In a letter of 1575, Lipsius asked, Mentem enim istam liberam quis tyrannus mihi artat? (‘What tyrant constrains this free mind of mine?’). His answer came in the form of a Greek Stoic epigram: ‘Who is slave when he is scornful of death?’, citing a series of ancient political suicides: Socrates, Seneca himself, Helvidius. Both in this and a related letter Lipsius discussed suicide as a defence of the idea of freedom. In this way he made suicide exemplary of the Stoic political ethic: for, in Freya Sierhuis’s words, ‘liberty, the freedom attained by the individual by submitting to reason, is in effect the cornerstone of Neostoic psychology and ethics’. His researches into Tacitus led him to many examples of ancient suicide in the face of tyranny, his personal favourite being Publius Clodius Thrasea who opposed Nero to the point of self-inflicted death. The point to make here is that suicide appears in humanist thought primarily as a political argument. Suicide sets the limits to tyranny by giving the individual a right which cannot be reached by tyranny: the right to decide whether to endure such a life. Lipsius constructs suicide as a defence of political subjectivity as defined by its own sovereignty of autonomy. If a man can overcome his last final attachment to the passions and control even the fear of death, he is a free agent. We may note that this is precisely the context in which Montaigne declares ‘À mourir il ne reste que le vouloir’, and not one of morbid anxiety. To live is to serve, if the libertie to die be wanting, he quotes from Seneca (Ep. LXXVII (ii.176)). This is also, perhaps, a better context for understanding Hamlet’s soliloquy than we may have realised. Lipsius discussed suicide at some length here and in two other places, briefly in the classic De Constantia of 1584, and at more length in a pair of chapters in the later Manuductio ad Stoicam philosophiam. We can say he made three and a half stabs at suicide if we include a promised sequel to De Constantia, a dialogue entitled Thrasea sive de contemptu mortis (‘Thrasea or the contempt of death’), for which there is an incomplete draft plan in manuscript. If we want to know what Montaigne’s essay would look like if it was a treatise, then we could look at Lipsius. Lipsius includes the same sources in favour of suicide from Seneca as Montaigne. Lipsius also clarifies Montaigne’s sources against suicide. While Henry attributes these to Augustine in De civitate Dei, the citations are not word for word. In fact the cases and ideas discussed in Augustine come from classical sources, and appear in their original state in Greek or Latin in Lipsius. They are from Pythagoras and Protagoras as well as Plato, from Epictetus and the Latin Stoics.

as well as later collections such as Diogenes Laertius. Together they form a kind of Stoic humanist poetic anthology of suicides that is clearly generally dispersed. Lipsius’s edition of Seneca included as a frontispiece an engraving of Seneca in the act of committing suicide. Rubens was one of the artists and used the image as the basis for his all too graphic portrayal of the episode now in the Alte Pinakothek.

Is Montaigne in the essay on Cea a Stoic, and is he encouraging us to be one? Henry’s division of the text into clearly demarcated portions certainly leads us that way. Or is Montaigne just playing the Stoic, and agitation us into some further more troubling reflection? Does he, like Lipsius, see the ideal citizen as a man who acts according to reason, is answerable to himself, is in control of his emotions, and is ready to go to war for the right cause; and does he think of the suicide as conforming to this example, even as representing it (in Jan Papy’s paraphrase in his excellent study of Lipsius as a Christian stoic) as the ‘affirmation par excellence of liberty’? Many, myself included, find it tempting indeed, the straight man. Perhaps it is also too easy to use Lipsius as Montaigne’s neo-Stoic in any simple sense. But perhaps it is also too easy to use Lipsius as Montaigne’s straight man.

Indeed, the Manuductio shows that Lipsius’s method and argument in relation to suicide is not at all simple. Suicide occupies the last two chapters of Book III, the culmination of twenty chapters of what Lipsius calls the Stoic ‘Paradoxes’. The paradoxa represents for Lipsius a formal demonstration of truth by means of rhetoric: what appears improbable or even logically impossible is revealed to be the truest form of reality. The Stoic wise man can appear to be enslaved but is a king in reality; he can have no money but be rich, he can suffer life’s worst tragedies and yet be happy, inside himself. That is, his wisdom does not concur with external forces or values, but has subjective validity. In his own self he is always free. At first it seems as if suicide is the ultimate test of truth as paradoxa. In the final reckoning, a wise man demonstrates his own liberty by taking his own life. The wise man (we have heard this before by now) lives as long as he ought not as long as he can. Taking one’s own life is reasonable on behalf of one’s country, or friends, or if he is suffering intolerable pain or an incurable disease. We remember all this material from Montaigne. Yet at this point, Lipsius’s argument is overtaken by a different sense of ‘paradox’. First, and uniquely in this part of the Manuductio, he finishes his argument with a citation that appears to undercut what has gone before. Plato at the end of the Laws, he recalls, says that a man who kills himself when he is not ordered to by the state, or when he is not compelled by some intolerable misfortune, so that he is beyond remedy or endurance – such a death Plato calls a kind of sloth, or unmanly cowardice. Even more strikingly, the next chapter begins with a straightforward question addressed to Lipsius as part of his dialogue form: ‘Alas, do you not somewhat incline to the argument for suicide.’ Lipsius replies: ‘Absit: respuo.’, as if to say, ‘God forbid’. It is a unique moment of recoil in Lipsius, a self-rejection, a turn on the self in defiance of his own logic. The moment of repentance is forced out of him, as it were, by Christian conscience. Lipsius had returned to the Catholic church in 1591. Yet as well as quoting Augustine’s denunciation of Stoic suicide, in which Augustine equates suicide with murder, Lipsius also quotes liberally from Stoic sources against suicide.

So is this the shape which explains Montaigne’s essay? In part, perhaps. However, I think it is a mistake to think that it is Christian censorship which is the cause of philosophical uncertainty in relation to suicide. Scepticism in Montaigne reaches much further than this, it is the centre of his writing style, and more than that, a kind of form of life. Perhaps our rush to create a simple divide between Christianity and scepticism also makes us underestimate Lipsius’s capacity for ambiguity. Lipsius was a careful reader of Montaigne; he surely noted ‘L’Isle de Cea’ in writing the Manuductio. The Cea, as we have seen, creates a montage of examples and arguments about suicide, yet it also casts the reader adrift
on this sea of allusion, by taking away the reference points for the citations. It gives almost no indication of its formal logic. Citations in favour of suicide are given no heading or analysis or even synopsis, or any framing warnings. We follow blithely a chain of references to our own mortality and voluntarism, until the chain abruptly stops, with the words, in mid-paragraph: Cecy ne s’en va pas sans contraste (p. 332) (‘But this goeth not without some contradiction’; ii28). The argument then slips into reverse gear, as it were, but without telling us; until once again this thread of thinking also closes, with the barest announcement, ‘Amongst those of the first opinion, great questioning hath there been’ (ii.31). In both directions, the transition is both abrupt and concealed. It is as if Montaigne is thinking aloud.

He goes first this way, and then that, he tacks back and forth, as if improvising his way along. We are reminded of his description of his own writing style in ‘De la vanité’: ‘nonchalant et fortuit’.38 Yet there is I think philosophical method here as well as literary grace. In the ‘Apologie de Sebond’ he gave an indication of a perfect kind of argument, if he had ‘health and leisure enough’: sincerely and exactly, according to their divisions and formes, to collect into one volume or register, as much as by vs might be seene, the opinions of ancien Philosophie, concerning the subject of our being and customs, their controversies, the credite, & per-taking of factions and sides, the application of the Authors and Spectators lives, to their precepts, in memorable and exemplarie accidents. (ii.296)

His ideal writer for such a project would be, he affirms, Justus Lipsius. The Cea is an example of this kind of ideal of accidental writing, but taken to an extreme form. Why is this? I think it has to do with the very subject matter in hand. Suicide in neo-Stoic thinking is a final proof-test for human autonomy, for a subjectivity that is sovereign. Self-control is subject to no external constraint. This form of political suicide is present in Hamlet, maybe in some of Hamlet’s soliloquies, and certainly in Horatio’s unfulfilled promise to follow Hamlet to the grave. It is also beautifully captured by Cleopatra after the death of Antony:

CLEO. We’ll bury him; and then, what’s brave, what’s noble,
Let’s do it after the high Roman fashion,
And make death proud to take us. Come, away. (4.15)

Yet in Montaigne’s version there is also equally a sense of suicide as setting the limits to human subjectivity, and the transience and contingency of selfhood. ‘À mourir il ne reste que le vouloir’. This is, as we have seen, a quotation from Seneca. Yet what does it mean to ‘want’ death? To wish to die is not quite the same as to wish no longer to live. At the same time, it is not possible, logically, to choose life. Life is not something in our control or at our command. I am alive by virtue of the fact that I was born. It is not something I ever asked for or willed into being. By contrast, I can choose not to live. But can I choose death, exactly? Is death something I can do (like eating apples, opening a door)? Death is a negative quality: the absence of life. And yet: I cannot exactly choose not to live, in the sense that it takes more than an effort of will. I can’t close my eyes and think to myself, now I die. I have to kill myself, or persuade someone else to kill me, in order no longer to live.

The subject of Montaigne’s enquiry thus shifts from suicide as an affirmation of political freedom to a more puzzling and insoluble question of what is it to want something, and what is it to do something. This is the occasion of his third and longest section, which is also the most confusing. It abandons argument and Stoic sententiousness, quoting from Seneca and other authorities much less readily, and instead allowing human stories to speak for themselves. At times it is pure narration, a novelistic delight in oddness of detail or circumstance. There is an extreme attention in particular to what we might call narrative syntax, to how events fall out. Montaigne lumps examples together, making a kind of accidental writing through attention to exemplary story-telling. In the process he makes his argument subject to the accidentality of life. The ‘Isle de Cea’ is above all a study in voluntarism. This is a key point in what I am calling a counter-attack on the idea of the sovereign subject. Suicide appears to make the self free to make its own destiny, to choose its own state.

38 Essais, iii.ix; p. 973.
Montaigne first encourages us to believe in this idea of sovereignty, as Lipsius does; but then in a second move he undercuts the very idea that he has nurtured. Freedom of the will is sacrosanct; but freedom is not quite what it looks like. Both the will, and the idea of the voluntary, are prone to many forces at once, and not all of them are in any position to be in control of.

Suicide, we know, relies upon a strong test of intentionality in law. I will use here a second model from Hamlet to explain this aspect of the argument about suicide: I will call it the Ophelia complex. Ophelia appears to commit suicide but the detail of the evidence is not so clear. A branch she is lying on falls from a tree, and she fails to save herself, ‘As one incapable of her owne distresse’. Is that self-murder, or death by accident, or misadventure? Many of Montaigne’s examples hinge on this uncertainty, making the relationship between the desire and will of the agent and the circumstances of the agent’s action extremely difficult to interpret. I can will something, and the opposite happens; or the thing I wanted happens, but not at all because of me wanting it or putting my will into action. This applies both to our best wishes and to our worst fears. ‘Moreover’, he says, ‘there being so many suddaine changes, and violent alterations in humane things, it is hard to judge in what state or point we are justly at the end of our hope’ (ii.32). A Sicilian, to escape being conquered by the Turks, first kills his daughters, then runs into the midst of his enemies, assuring his death (ii.33). Nicanor in the Bible runs himself through with his own sword, but it does not work; so he falls off a high building hoping to complete the job (ii.34). As Montaigne puts it, ‘it seemeth, that force is in some sort, intermixed with some will’ (ii.34). His heroes rush to death or await it patiently, but in the end death must come to them and not they to death, since death itself is not finally an action or event within our control.

We do not, it appears, finally own our own stories. Even at the moment of decision in taking charge of our own destiny, something else intervenes. Montaigne plays constantly on the activity or passivity of an action, on just what it means to be the agent of one’s own actions. And this is also, I think, the point of Donne’s strange beginning to Biathanatos. Modern eyes fall on Donne’s self-description of his ‘sicklye inclination’ to death, but just as intriguing is the presence in the first sentence of the work of the celebrated Calvinist theologian, Theodore de Bèze. Beza, he says, escaped death by the skin of his teeth, moreover, in a strange concept, he escaped his own suicide. On the point of throwing himself into the Seine as a young child, ‘if his Uncle by chance had not then come that way’. Suicide, we know, is only suicide when it can be shown that we intended to die by our own action; but what does it mean when we have the intention but the act is not fulfilled?

The desire for death places the contingency of life ever in view. And so, like Hamlet, ‘To be or not to be’, Donne’s syntax is overcome by the curious signifier of metaphysical uncertainty, the little word ‘or’. The first two sentences of Biathanatos are stretched out to breaking point by tenuous relative clauses; in the second sentence, divided no fewer than six times by the conjunction ‘or’, finishing:

Or that there bee a perplexitie and flexibility in the doctrine it selfe; Or because my Conscience ever assures me, that no rebellious grudging at Gods gifts, nor other sinfull concurrence accompanies these thoughts in me, or that a brave scorn, or that a faint cowardlinesse beget it, whenssoever any affliction assailes me, mee thinks i have the keyes of my prison in mine owne hand, and no remedy presents it selfe so soone to my heart, as mine own sword. (p. 17)

Donne has ‘the keyes of my prison in mine owne hand’ just as Montaigne has ‘the key of the fieldes’. Nature ‘nath appointed but one entrance vnto life, but many a thousand wayes out of it’.

Perhaps in both Montaigne and Donne the argument only appears on the surface to be one about self-murder, because the real subject is even more painful and troubling. What it is to die conceals the underlying question, what is it to live? They use the case for and against suicide not only to examine the limits of subjectivity, but also what we might call a subjectivity of limits. It is quite possible that Donne read Montaigne in reaching his own arguments; but in any case both were reading Lucretius at this point. In one of the most extraordinary twists and turns in Montaigne’s essay on Cea, he makes
the desire for death and the desire for life almost inter-
changeable. 'Sometimes the shunning of death, makes
us to run into it', he says; 'As those who for feare of a
break-necke down-fall, doe headlong cast themselves
into it' (ii.30). Then in another volte face, he asks how
we could disdain our life in the first place. C'est nostre
estre, c'estre nostre tout. Life 'is our being. It is our all
in all' (ii.30); how can I want what makes me not? He
concludes:

it is against nature, we should despise, and carelessly
set our selves at naught: It is a particular infirmity, and
which is not seen in any other creature, to hate and
disdaine himselfe. It is of like vanitie, that we desire to
be other, then we are. (ii.30)

This is my third and last version of suicide, what we
might call Hamlet's own, the mortal self. For the desire
for death puts into question the very personhood that
defines the idea of 'desire' in the first place. Not only
is the will not sovereign, but the self that wills is also
contingent. We cannot know our own end without
understanding where we come from. And where we
come from was never within our power. At this point
Montaigne introduces a piece of pure Epicureanism
which brings forth some of his most beautiful writing:
'The securitie, indolencie, impassibilitie, and privation
of this lives-evils, which we purchase at the price of
death, bring us no commoditie at all' (ii.31): La secu-
rité, l'indolence, l'impassibilité, la privation des maux
de cette vie, que nous achetons au prix de la mort, ne
nous apporte aucune commodité (p. 334). At this point,
as so often when Montaigne is at the edge of his most
pressing concerns, he quotes Lucretius. It is a citation
also found in the essay in Book I, 'That to philosophy
is to learn how to die'.

I am fuerit, nec post unquam
revocare licebit. 'In a moment, the present will have
gone, never to be recalled'. Yet would he know himself
again? He is who he is, he cannot be another. He is
bound to the exclusivity of his body and to the fortui-
tousness of his making. Thus the imagination of his own
death sets the limits of his enquiry into himself. Suicide
is a false solution, since it offers an idea of a perso-
nal autonomy which is an illusion. Subjectivity is both
more fragile and more materially resistant than we had
thought. Yet to show this he asks, what kind of philoso-
phical problem is suicide. Suicide tests the very concept
of philosophy or of philosophical argument. And what is
philosophy if it cannot go there?

39 Essais, i.xx; p. 86.
40 De rerum natura, III.915.
41 M.A. Screech, Montaigne's Annotated Copy of Lucretius: A Transcription and Study of the Manuscript, Notes and Pen-Marks
42 This essay was written during the term of a Visiting Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Studies in 2010-11. I would like to thank all the staff at CAS
who helped make my stay so productive and enjoyable. In the writing of this essay, I would also like to thank the following for many fruitful conversations
on the boundaries between philosophy and literature: Dr Sonja Asal, the Managing Director; Prof Dr Andreas Höfele, my host at the Department für
Anglistik; Dr Björn Quiring, also in Anglistik; and Dr Freya Sierhuis, Member of CAS.