

myself, who has reasonable knowledge of, and interest in the period, and an interest in the Bloomsbury Group. (My own first analyst was Adrian Stephen, then elderly and frail). But after that, we are in deep waters, where the writings of Virginia Woolf are subjected to a very close analysis in a language which presented me as the 'general reader' with so much difficulty that it became off-putting. The book appears in a series entitled, 'Women in Culture and Society' and is written in a language of feminism, feminist psychoanalysis and contemporary literary criticism. To those familiar with this style of discourse, it will be accessible, but this must be a limited readership.

Elizabeth Abel states that Virginia Woolf shared an historical moment with Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, but that she is less concerned with influence than with intertextuality – although the distinction seems arbitrary and should be argued, and not simply stated. She argues that, together with Melanie Klein, in the 1920s, Virginia Woolf offered a deep, visionary matricentric alternative to Freud's patricentric view of the development of culture, but that in the 1930s, she turned away from this, back to the father, as she feared that the fascist celebration of motherhood was becoming too threatening.

Abel's argument is at a high level of abstraction and she offers little and only selective information about Virginia Woolf's life and how the events of her life might be linked with her writing. Thus, Virginia Woolf's own family romance scarcely appears. Although this may satisfy the literary world, and indeed, many are well satisfied, to go by the citations on the cover of the book from such authorities as Nancy Chodorow, I was not. I had just read a most interesting account of Virginia Woolf's relationship with her elder sister, Vanessa Bell, (*A Very Close Conspiracy* by Jane Dunne. Jonathan Cape, 1990), which had illuminated for me the depth and complexity of that relationship. So, I found it astonishing that there is no reference at all to Virginia Woolf's sister in the book, or to sisterhood, or to hetero-

or homosexuality, very powerful aspects of Virginia Woolf's life-story. This absence of consideration of relationships, other than the very earliest one to the mother and to the very early Oedipal relationship, unfortunately characterize much of the Kleinian view of psychic development, where the significant stages are all seen in relationship to the mother. Incidentally, Klein's ideas are well set out early in this book.

Later, Abel does introduce Winnicott's and Marian Milner's notions of the transitional space as the origin of cultural experience in describing Lilly Briscoe's paintings in *To the Lighthouse*. The paintings are sensitively discussed in terms of establishing boundaries of the mother/child relationship, but it became very clear to me from Jane Dunne's book that boundary issues were crucial, both to Virginia and to her sister, Vanessa, and that they need to be looked at in terms of that relationship.

For the general reader, I unreservedly recommend Jane Dunne's *A Very Close Conspiracy* as a beautifully written work of originality that speaks convincingly of aspects of Virginia Woolf's development and writings that must be taken into account in any description in depth of her work. Elizabeth Abel's text will probably be closely read and discussed within a specialized circle, where the absence of biographical and cultural material will not be seen as detracting from the closely argued main thesis.

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Anton J. L. van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity*. London: Routledge, 1990. £35.00.

Suicide is a hot historical subject nowadays. For almost a century, while sociologists were demonstrating how revealing its study could be, historians remained mostly indifferent.

Occasional books – some of them huge slabs of learning – revealed fascinating information about self-killing. But mostly, their authors wasted their time and erudition. The subject of suicide fascinated the public, as it still does; it was dismissed as trivial by professional historians, as it often still is.

There are signs of change. Recent books and articles, published in the last six years, have analysed suicide in England, Switzerland, America and France. Among them is one masterpiece, Olive Anderson's *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*. More studies are on their way. At the very least, what this belated rush to analyse the history of suicide has shown is that the sociologists are right – it can be a key to understanding the culture and social dynamics of whole societies.

But there is a catch. The historian writing about self-killing in a particular period and place must be sensitive to the benefits and feelings of the era; he or she must be an imaginative intellectual. Anton J. L. van Hooff, it is hard and sad to say, fails the test. He has written a bad book about one of the most interesting periods in the history of suicide, a period whose attitudes to self-killing still inform our own understanding of the subject.

This is a pity, because he and his students have done their homework pretty well. They have compiled a large dossier of almost 1,000 ancient cases of suicide, real and fictional. An appendix listing them will be invaluable to future historians of the subject. (Although it is not entirely trustworthy; it omits, for instance, Anthony and Cleopatra, but includes one of the latter's servants, Charmion.) Van Hooff also usefully corrects several errors in Yolande Grisé's eccentric *La suicide dans la Rome antique*, a book whose arguments are occasionally as hard to follow as van hooff's.

But the problems with this book are myriad. In the first place, it is written backwards. An undisciplined discussion of the intellectual and legal context of suicide comes at the end of the book, long after the individual cases have been described. The

result is that the ambivalence of antique culture to suicide is confused rather than clarified; the fabled tolerance and fascinating points of intolerance of Greek and Roman society are noticed but not analysed. Surely, it is the historian's duty to sort out for us the specific contexts in which suicide was celebrated or condemned and to discuss clearly any general trends that may be perceptible.

The reversal of contextualization and case studies also leads to an intolerable level of repetition. In order to understand the examples, most of which appear first in the early parts of the book, one has to know something about legal procedures and attitudes, which formed their context. By the time van Hooff gets to a full discussion of the latter, we have therefore heard both the principles and (in some cases) the specific authorities and applications several times.

But perhaps the most noticeable example of van Hooff's faulty method concerns language. He tells us much about the vocabulary of self-killing; he frequently writes as a philologist. He gives of eight pages of Greek and Latin circumlocutions for suicide in an appendix and spends more pages discussing the shades of meaning in terms for self-killing in the text. (The general point of these, which seems to be that the flexibility of the language of suicide reflects the complexity of contemporary responses, is certainly valid.) But, having told us that the word 'suicide' is a seventeenth-century invention, he uses the Latinized variant of the term, 'suicidium' in a chapter on its existence as 'an institution and a confession'. Thus a term that is (rightly) said to have been non-existent in the period under discussion turns up as a particular, and undefined, neologism of the author. For classicists, who are (justly) fabled for their precision of language, this should be a punishable offence.

And what in the world does the title of this book mean? 'Autothanasia' is not a word found in the appendix of classical terms for suicide (although, to be fair, 'autothanatos'

is), just as 'suicide' is not. The juxtaposition seems to imply a progression or contrast; but none is discussed. 'Suicide' was coined to denote a less pejorative conception of self-killing than the alternatives, 'self-murder', for instance. It thus stood for a particular viewpoint that emerged gradually during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The author's Greek neologism has no parallel history, and no clearly-defined meaning. Whatever else we get, *Autothanasia to Suicide* is emphatically what we do not get. All this terminological muddle is symptomatic of larger problems. This book has neither a thesis nor a sense of temporal progression.

Mostly, what one regrets in van Hooff's book is the lost opportunity. Suicide in the classical world may seem familiar enough, but it is a topic that raises issues of immediate concern, at least in Britain and the United States. We can only hope for another, better book that clarifies the classical heritage that informed so much modern thinking about the subject. The best scholarship in English so far is Miriam Griffin's articles on Roman suicide. More work of similar quality is urgently needed. The field is wide open.

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News and Notes

At the meeting of the Italian Society of History of Psychiatry held on 29 April 1991, Prof. G. Roccatagliata (a member of the Advisory Board of *History of Psychiatry*) was elected President, Prof. Mario Di Fiorino secretary, and Dr Carla Ramacciotti treasurer.

The new Managing Committee comprises: as honorary members, Prof. Giuseppe Ferrari, Prof. Antonio Iaria and Prof. Filippo Maria Ferro; and as founding members, Prof. Carlo Maggini, Dr Luciano M. Canova, Dr Antonello Pintus, Prof. Mario Di Fiorino,

Dr Carla Ramacciotti and Prof. Giuseppe Roccatagliata.

To enrol in the Society (annual fee Lit.25.000), contact the Secretary, Prof. Mario Di Fiorino, Via Ordanino 13, Castiglione delle Stiviere (MN), or the Treasurer, Dr Carla Ramacciotti, Vis S. Martino 83, Pisa.

The main office of the Italian Society of History of Psychiatry (a special division of the Italian Psychiatric Association) is in Via De Toni 5, 16132 Genova.