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Suicide as a Political Factor: Edith Wharton, Tana French, Terblanche Delport

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There is a subspecies of the Hegelian "negation of negation" that is as a rule ignored by even the most perspicuous interpreters: the "negation of negation" as a *failure of negation itself*. Since the ultimate case of self-negation is suicide, we should focus on a failed suicide.

Surviving Suicide as the Living Dead

The masterpiece of the failed suicidal "negation" is Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1911), a short novel that takes place against a backdrop of the cold, gray bleakness of a New England winter: in Starkfield (an invented small town), the narrator spots Ethan Frome, "the most striking figure in Starkfield," "the ruin of a man" with a "careless powerful look [...] in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain." (Wharton 1995, p. 3) The narrator gradually learns the whole story, reaching decades into the past when Frome was an isolated farmer trying to scrape out a meager living while also tending to his frigid, demanding, and ungrateful wife, Zeena. A ray of hope enters Ethan's life of despair when, 24 years ago, his wife's cousin Mattie arrives to help. His life is transformed as he falls in love with Mattie who returns his love. Zeena suspects this and orders Mattie to leave. Since Ethan lacks money to escape with Mattie, he takes her to the train

station. They stop at a hill upon which they had once planned to go sledding and decide to sled together as a way of delaying their sad parting, after which they anticipate never seeing each other again. After their first run, Mattie suggests a suicide pact: that they go down again, and steer the sled directly into a tree, so they will never be parted and so that they may spend their last moments together. Ethan first refuses to go through with the plan, but in his despair that mirrors Mattie's, he ultimately agrees, and they get on the sled, clutching each other. They crash headlong and at high speed into the elm tree. Ethan regains consciousness after the accident, but Mattie lies beside him, "cheeping" in pain like a small wounded animal, while Ethan is left with a permanent limp.

The epilogue returns to the present: while visiting Frome in his house, the narrator hears a complaining female voice, and it is easy to assume that it belongs to the never-happy Zeena, but it emerges that it is Mattie who now lives with the Fromes due to having been paralyzed in the accident. Her misery over her plight and dependence has embittered her, and, with roles reversed, Zeena is now forced to care for her as well as Ethan: she has now found the strength through necessity to be the caregiver rather than being the invalid.[1] In an agonizing irony, the lovers Ethan and Mattie have gotten their wish to stay together, but in mutual unhappiness and discontent, with Zeena as a constant presence between the two of them—the ultimate case of Mladen Dolar's formula of being as a failed non-being.

Is, then, the attempted suicide an authentic act, and the couple's survival a pure contingent accident, or is there an inner truth to the survival that makes the suicide attempt a fake? No wonder that, in spite of the simplicity of its plot, *Ethan Frome* caused such confusion among interpreters. At the level of genre, it was described as a work of brutal realism, a Gothic tale, or an adult fairy tale (the wicked witch wins and the lovers do not live

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[1] See Ethan Frome on Wikipedia.

happily ever after). With regard to the ethical stance implied by *Ethan Frome*, a long line of critics, from Frederic Taber Cooper—who wrote back in 1911 that "It is hard to forgive Mrs. Wharton for the utter remorselessness of her latest volume [...] Art for art's sake is the one justification of a piece of work as perfect in technique as it is relentless in substance" (Taber Cooper 1995, pp. 120-121)—to Lionel Trilling: "In the context of morality, there is nothing to say about Ethan Frome. It presents no moral issue at all." (Trilling 1995, p.126) Roger Ebert (in his review of the movie) characterizes the novel as a "cheerless morality tale." (Ebert 1993) Especially weird is the case of Trilling. In reply to a taunt by Richard Sennett, "'You have no position; you are always in between,' Trilling replied, 'Between is the only honest place to be.'" (Sennett 1999, p. 363) It sounds like those who, today, condemn the Russian attack on Ukraine but show understanding for Russia. In a stance which cannot hide its elitism, Trilling dismisses average people caught in the circle of habitude, as if only a small elite is able to act in a properly ethical way: he suggests that "the story examines what happens to individuals who are hobbled by 'the morality of inertia.' The lovers lack both the courage and the conviction to forge a new life for themselves, thanks to their subservience to community standards. Their fear dooms them to the routine, death-in-life existence that they so desperately yearned to transcend. The real moral of *Ethan Frome* is—follow the imperatives of your heart or risk losing your soul." (Brussat and Brussat n.d.)

Again, there is the opposite reading: "the ending turns *Ethan Frome* into a cautionary tale, a warning to the readers that *not* following your dreams can have serious negative consequences." (Shmoop Editorial Team 2008) But is this really the case? Ethan abandons his plan to borrow money and escape with Mattie for moral reasons—he is a sensitive moral person. What brings him to self-destruction are class distinctions: the harsh poverty deprives him of choices. In the pre-accident part of the story, Mattie and

Ethan seem to think that the best they can hope for is to be able to continue living together with Zeena, seeing each other as often as possible. This plan comes true in a hideous way: they are forever together, but as two crippled living dead. Ethan and Mattie end up in a desperate situation because they were NOT ready to follow their dreams (and, say, escape together, or at least openly confront Zeena with the fact that they cannot stay away from each other), i.e., in Lacanese, because they compromised their desire… But did they? Here enters the final twist of the story: in the very last pages, Mrs. Ruth Hale tells the narrator something that changes everything:

> Mrs. Hale glanced at me tentatively, as though trying to see how much footing my conjectures gave her; and I guessed that if she had kept silence till now it was because she had been waiting, through all the years, for someone who should see what she alone had seen. / I waited to let her trust in me gather strength before I said: "Yes, it's pretty bad, seeing all three of them there together." (Wharton 1995, p. 72)

She drew her mild brows into a frown of pain. "It was just awful from the beginning. I was here in the house when they were carried up—they laid Mattie Silver in the room you're in. She and I were great friends, and she was to have been my bridesmaid in the spring... When she came to I went up to her and stayed all night. They gave her things to quiet her, and she didn't know much till to'rd morning, and then all of a sudden she woke up just like herself, and looked straight at me out of her big eyes, and said... Oh, I don't know why I'm telling you all this," Mrs. Hale broke off, crying.

What exactly did Mattie say to Ruth when she woke up after the accident? Why couldn't Ruth bear to repeat it to the narrator? Whatever it was, it, combined with the change (for the worse) in Mattie's personality (who now acts and even looks like Zeena 24 years ago), leads Ruth to speak the novella's final lines:

> There was one day, about a week after the accident, when they all thought Mattie couldn't live. Well, I say it's a pity she did. I said it right out to our minister once, and he was shocked at me. Only he wasn't with me that morning when she first came to... And I say, if she'd ha' died, Ethan might ha' lived; and the way they are now, I don't see there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues. (*Ibid*., pp. 73–74)

Are these last words—"the women have got to hold their tongues"—really anti-feminine, resuscitating the old cliché that women chatter too much? Things are not so simple: to what exactly does "holding tongues" refer? *Not* to general rumors that circulate in a small town but quite specifically to Mattie's words when she awakened after the snow accident—and they were not mere gossip, they possessed almost testimonial value of the last words one says when one is not sure one will survive. Mrs. Hale's last words can thus more appropriately be read as a defense of mere chatter: hold your tongue instead of saying something that is a matter of life and death. Although we never learn what these words were, we can safely presume that they concern what happened between Mattie and Ethan. Since it must have been something really shocking, it can only be that the two had sex and/or then tried to kill themselves. (I follow here the reading by Blacktall 1995, p. 174.) The often-advocated reading according to which the finally revealed truth of the attempted escape and suicide is narrator's fiction into which he projects his own "shadow" (in the Jungian sense of the dark repressed part of his Self) should thus be flatly rejected:

> Within *Ethan Frome* the narrator lapses into a vision (the tale of Ethan which is, as we have seen, a terrified expression of the narrator's latent self). […] The novel focuses on the narrator's problem, the tension between his public self and his shadow self, his terror of a seductive and enveloping void. (Griffin Wolff 1995, p. 145)

Mrs. Hale's final words add an additional twist, they confirm that the narrator's "fiction" did lay a hand on some traumatic Real which is too strong to be directly put into words. Echoing Lacan's dictum "truth has the structure of a fiction," the narrator's fiction touches the Real. In short, Freud wins over Jung.

A Failed Suicide in Today's Global Capitalism

The motif of failed negation can also be a part (or, rather, the final touch) of a more complex plot, as is the case with Tana French's *Broken Harbor* (2013),[2] which depicts a perfect case of how capitalist self-reproduction can drive those who blindly adhere to the predominant ethics to murderous madness. Every theorist who loses time with musings on the complex relationship between the "economic base" and subjective libidinal economy should read her novel; while the liberal-capitalist financial speculations and their brutal consequences for individual lives are the massive background presence of the novel, it focuses on the way the affected individuals react to their economic and social predicament, bringing out all their idiosyncrasies, their unique ways of doing what each of them considers the right thing to do. None of them is dishonest, they are all ready to sacrifice everything, including their own lives, to set things straight, and the novel presents different ways of how "doing the right thing" can go wrong. Therein resides the sad lesson of the novel: it is not simply that the turmoil of global capitalism corrupts individuals, pushing them to betray their basic ethical stance; even when they try to follow their ethical stance, the system insidiously achieves the opposite effect.

Two young kids of the Spain family are found smothered in their beds, while their parents, Pat and Jenny, are stabbed in the

[2] In my observations on *Broken Harbor*, I rely heavily on Amy Adams's blog (Adams 2012).

kitchen downstairs—against the odds, the mother may survive. These multiple murders happen in "Brianstown," a Dublin suburb planned as a glamorous multi-purpose, all-inclusive community; things went wrong when the market collapsed in 2008, leaving most of the estate unfinished and uninhabited. Only four families remained on the property, prisoners of a housing market where they owed more than the houses were worth after the developers cut corners and can't be located. And now the multiple murder of the Spains haunts the eerie location. (Empty apartments and whole apartment blocks are one of the key symptoms of today's global capitalism, they abound in all big cities from New York to Dubai; in China alone, there are today enough uninhabited apartments to house the entire population of Germany and France.)

The murders are investigated by Mick "Scorcher" Kennedy, the Murder Squad's star detective whose fundamental belief is that if one toes the line and follows the rules, everything will turn out right. The Spains pose a challenge to this belief because they *did* everything "right," they invested deeply into the way people are "supposed" to live. The house was beautifully furnished and maintained, they themselves were lovely, they seemed to be doing everything they were supposed to. They met and married young, they adored each other, they had two beautiful children. Pat had a prestigious job that earned enough that Jenny could stay home with the children. They drove the right cars, had the right parties, wore the right clothes, invested in home ownership so they could get onto "the property ladder." Jenny made herself into the perfect housewife, even switching out scented candles with the seasons. Then the economy collapsed, Pat lost his job and couldn't find another one, and they ended up dead.

Since Pat was, like Scorcher, also a man who played by the rules, Scorcher resists the evidence that would implicate Pat as the murderer, and insists on pinning the deaths on a loner, Conor, who had loved Jenny since they were teens. Conor had his own personal financial crisis, and had taken to hiding in an empty

building on the estate where he could watch Pat and Jenny enact the kind of perfect life he dreamed of for himself. Early on in the novel, he is arrested and confesses to the murders. However, even as Scorcher celebrates the solve, he can't stop questioning the loose ends. Why were there holes cut into the walls all over the house? Why were there baby monitors scattered around? Who wiped the browser history from the computer and why? Why did the killer use a kitchen knife rather than bringing his own weapon?

At the end we discover it was neither Conor nor Pat who did the killings: it was Jenny, who caved in to the psychological pressure of watching her husband become unmoored. As the months go by, Pat stops searching for work and slowly falls into his own obsession. He becomes convinced that his own worth as a husband and father is inextricably bound up in capturing an animal who lives in the attic. Although they have almost no money left, he starts buying electronic equipment to capture this animal. First, he wants to protect his family, but as the weeks go by with no physical evidence of the animal, he cuts holes and sets up video baby monitors hoping to catch sight of it. He buys live bait (a mouse from a pet store) that he sticks to a glue trap and then places in the attic with the trap door open. The beast haunting the house is a Real that is not part of reality: a pure embodiment of negativity/antagonism, an anamorphic stain that, "looked on as it is, is naught but shadows. Of what it is not" (as Shakespeare put it in *Richard II*).

Jenny never believed in this animal, she just indulged Pat's weird hobby, but when Emma, Pat's and Jenny's daughter, returns home with a picture of her house, and she has drawn a large black animal with glowing eyes in a tree in the yard, Jenny is pushed to act: she goes upstairs and smothers the children to save them from their father's madness. She then goes into the kitchen, where Pat has stuck his own hand into one of the holes he's cut into the walls, using himself as live bait; in his other hand, he has a large kitchen knife. Jenny takes the knife and kills him; however, she's

too exhausted to finish the job, killing herself also. This is when Conor rushes in: he's seen the struggle from his hide-out, and runs to the house to save them. Jenny doesn't want to live, and she asks him to finish her off. He loves her, so he tries, but he's not ruthless enough, and she survives. It is Conor who also tries to save Pat's posthumous reputation by wiping the computer history. His final act is to confess to the murders to save Jenny the horror of realizing what she has done when she awakens.

Curran finds in Conor's apartment a piece of evidence that seems to implicate Jenny, but he doesn't turn it in—he thinks that it might be better to let Pat be blamed for the deaths, and leave Jenny free to take her own life. Because Curran got the evidence tainted, this is the end of his career as a detective. He wanted to act on his own recognizance, his own belief as to the "right" thing to do—but if you do this, the system collapses. Scorcher falls into the same trap: over-identified with Pat as he is he simply cannot allow Pat to be thought of as a murderer, even though Pat is dead, and it wouldn't matter to him to be considered a murderer. So Scorcher manufactures his own evidence in order to put the case back on what he considers the right path: he enlists Jenny's sister in the play of "discovering" a piece of Jenny's jewelry and "remembering" she had picked it up at the crime scene. In this way, Scorcher also destroys his own career.

Broken Harbor thus tells the story of the repeated failure of people who desperately want to do the right thing. Pat's case is straight: the father-provider who just wants to maintain a safe haven for his family isolates himself from them and ends up in full paranoia. Conor, who loves Jenny and is ready to ruin his life to save her, bungles things further and enacts a meaningless sacrifice. Curran and Scorcher, the two detectives investigating the case, are both brought by their ethical commitment to violate the rules of police investigation. Jenny's fate is the most desperate—her plan is to obliterate her entire family, but she fails to include herself in the series of corpses, so she survives as a miserable, totally broken

leftover, turning her intended tragic act into a ridiculous, almost comical, performance. We don't know what will happen when/if Jenny awakens from her coma: Will she persist in her miserable depression? Kill herself? Awaken with no memory and thus become able to begin again? Or somehow manage to go through the painful process of mourning? There is a totally crazy, optimistic potential at the margin of the story: What if she awakens and gets together with Conor who truly loves her?

Suicide as an Emancipatory Political Act

But is this the last word on this topic, or can we nonetheless imagine a successful suicide as an emancipatory political act? The first association here is, of course, public suicides as a protest against foreign occupation, from Vietnam to Poland in the 1980s. In the last years, however, a suicidal proposal aroused a wide debate in South Africa. Derek Hook[3] reports how, in March 2016, Terblanche Delport, a young white academic, sparked outrage at a Johannesburg conference at the University of the Witwatersrand, when he called on white people in South Africa "to commit suicide as an ethical act"—here are Delport's own words:

> The reality [in South Africa] is that most white people spend their whole lives only engaging black people in subservient positions—cleaners, gardeners, etc. My question is then how can a person not be racist if that's the way they live their lives? The only way then for white people to become part of Africa is to not exist as white people anymore. If the goal is to dismantle white supremacy, and white supremacy is white culture and vice versa, then the goal has to be to dismantle white culture and ultimately white people themselves. The total integration into Africa by white people will also

[3] I owe this reference to Delport, Hook, and Moss to Stephen Frosh (Birkbeck College, University of London).

> automatically then mean the death of white people as white as a concept would not exist anymore. (Quoted in Hook 2020, p. 613)

How, more concretely, are we to imagine the symbolic suicide of the South African whites? Donald Moss proposed a simple but problematic (for me, at least) solution: racist Whiteness is a parasitic formation on whites themselves:

> Whiteness is a condition one first acquires and then one *has*—a malignant, parasitic-like condition to which "white" people have a particular susceptibility. The condition is foundational, generating characteristic ways of being in one's body, in one's mind, and in one's world. Parasitic Whiteness renders its hosts' appetites voracious, insatiable, and perverse. These deformed appetites particularly target nonwhite peoples. Once established, these appetites are nearly impossible to eliminate. (Moss 2021, p. 355)

To get rid of their racist stance, the whites have to get rid of the parasitic whiteness which is not part of their substantial nature but just parasitizes on them, which means that, in getting rid of their racism, they do not lose the substance of their being—they even regain it, obliterating its distortion. I prefer to this easy way out Hook's comment (inspired by Lacanian theory):

> Delport's rhetorical and deliberately provocative suggestion is perhaps not as counter-intuitive or crazy as it at first sounds. Arguably, it is the gesture of giving up what one is—the shedding of narcissistic investments, and symbolic and fantasmatic identities—that proves a necessary first step to becoming what one is not, but might become. This is the transformative potential of anxiety that clinicians work so hard to facilitate, and that I think can also be discerned—however fleetingly—in the instances of white anxiety discussed above: the potentiality that a new—and hitherto unthinkable—form of identification is being unconsciously processed and negotiated. (Hook 2020, p. 629)

What I nonetheless find problematic in these lines is the optimist turn: suicide does not mean the actual collective self-killing of the South African whites, it means a symbolic erasure of their identity, which already points towards new forms of identity. I find it much more productive to establish a link between this idea of the whites' collective suicide and the idea of so-called afro-pessimism. Recall Fanon's claim that "the Negro is a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly declining declivity": is the experience that grounds today's "afro-pessimism" not a similar one? Is the insistence of afro-pessimists that Black subordination is much more radical than that of other underprivileged groups (Asians, LGBT+, women…), i.e., that Blacks should not be put into the series with other forms of "colonization," not grounded in the act of assuming that one belongs to such a "zone of non-being"? This is why Fredric Jameson is right when he insists that one cannot understand class struggle in the US without taking into account anti-Black racism: any talk which equalizes white and Black proletarians is a fake. (A point to be noted here is that, when the young Gandhi protested against the white rule in South Africa, he ignored the plight of the Black majority and just demanded the inclusion of Indians into the privileged white block.)

So what if we turn Delport's suggestion, radical as it may appear, around and propose that it is the Blacks in South Africa who should commit a collective symbolic suicide, to shed their socio-symbolic identity, which is profoundly marked by white domination and resistance to it, and which contains its own fantasies and even narcissistic investments of victimization? (In the US, the Blacks are right in using the term "Victim!" to insult their Black opponents.) One can thus repeat exactly the same words: the Blacks need to perform "the gesture of giving up what one is—the shedding of narcissistic investments, and symbolic and fantasmatic identities—that proves a necessary first step to becoming what one is not, but might become." Consequently, I see afro-

pessimism not just as a recognition of dismal social reality but also and above all as something that announces “the potentiality that a new—and hitherto unthinkable—form of identification is being unconsciously processed and negotiated.” To put it brutally, let’s imagine that, in one way or another, all the whites would disappear from South Africa—the ANC inefficiency and corruption would remain, and the poor Black majority would find itself even more strongly dislocated, lacking the designated cause of its poverty. To revolutionize a system is never equal to just eliminating one of its parts, in the same way that the disappearance of Jews as the disturbing element never restores social harmony.

The key move has to be made by Blacks themselves—was Malcolm X not following this insight when he adopted X as his family name? The point of choosing X as his family name and thereby signaling that the slave traders who brought the enslaved Africans from their homeland brutally deprived them of their family and ethnic roots, of their entire cultural life-world, was not to mobilize the Blacks to fight for the return to some primordial African roots, but precisely to seize the opening provided by X, an unknown new (lack of) identity engendered by the very process of slavery which made the African roots forever lost. The idea is that this X that deprives the Blacks of their particular tradition offers a unique chance to redefine (reinvent) themselves, to freely form a new identity much more universal than white people’s professed universality. (As is well known, Malcolm X found this new identity in the universalism of Islam.) To put it in Hook’s terms, Malcolm X proposes for Blacks themselves to bring to the end their deracination with a gesture of symbolic suicide, the passage through zero-point, in order to free the space for a new identity. Such a gesture would render white domination simply pointless, a solipsist dream, a game missing a partner with whom it can only be played.

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