

Biathanatos

I owe to De Quincey (to whom my debt is so vast that to point out only one part of it may appear to repudiate or silence the others) my first notice of *Biathanatos*, a treatise composed at the beginning of the seventeenth century by the great poet John Donne,¹ who left the manuscript to Sir Robert Carr without other restriction than that it be given "to the Press or the Fire." Donne died in 1631; in 1642 civil war broke out; in 1644, the poet's firstborn son gave the old manuscript to the press to save it from the fire. *Biathanatos* extends to about two hundred pages; De Quincey (*Writings* VIII, 336) abridges them thus: Suicide is one of the forms of homicide; the canonists make a distinction between willful murder and justifiable homicide; by parity of reason, suicide is open to distinctions of the same kind. Just as not every homicide is a murder, not every suicide is a mortal sin. Such is the apparent thesis of *Biathanatos*; this is declared by the subtitle (*That Self-homicide is not so Naturally Sin that it may never be otherwise*), and is illustrated or overtaxed by a learned catalog of fabled or authentic examples, ranging from Homer,² "who had written a thousand things, which no man else understood, and is said to have hanged himself because he understood not the fishermen's riddle," to the pelican, symbol of paternal love, and the bees, which, according to St. Ambrose's *Hexameron*, put themselves to death "when they find themselves guilty of having broken any of their king's Laws." The catalog takes up three pages, and in them I note this vanity: the

¹That he was truly a great poet may be demonstrated by these lines:

Licence my roving hands and let them go
Before, behind, between, above, below.
O my America! my new-found-land. . . (*Elegies* XIX)

²Cf. the sepulchral epigram of Alcaeus of Messene (*Greek Anthology* VII, 1).

inclusion of obscure examples ("Festus, Domitianus' minion, who killed himself only to hide the deformity of a Ringworm in his face") and the omission of others that are more forcefully persuasive—Seneca, Themistocles, Cato—but which may have seemed too obvious.

Epictetus ("Remember the essential thing: the door is open") and Schopenhauer ("Is Hamlet's soliloquy the meditation of a criminal?") have defended suicide in copious pages; the foregone certainty that these defenders are in the right makes us read them negligently. That was my case with *Biathanatos* until I perceived, or thought I perceived, an implicit or esoteric argument beneath the obvious one.

We will never know if Donne wrote *Biathanatos* with the deliberate aim of insinuating this hidden argument, or if some glimmer of it, however fleeting or crepuscular, called him to the task. The latter hypothesis strikes me as more likely: the hypothesis of a book which in order to say A says B, like a cryptogram, is artificial, but that of a work driven by an imperfect intuition is not. Hugh Fausset has suggested that Donne was thinking of crowning his defense of suicide with a suicide; that Donne may have toyed with the idea is possible or probable; that it is enough to explain *Biathanatos* is, naturally, ridiculous.

In the third part of *Biathanatos*, Donne considers the voluntary deaths that are mentioned in the Scriptures; he dedicates more pages to Samson's than to any other. He begins by establishing that this "exemplary man" is an emblem of Christ and that he seems to have served the Greeks as an archetype for Hercules. Francisco de Vitoria and the Jesuit Gregorio de Valencia did not wish to include him among suicides; Donne, to refute them, copies the last words he spoke, before carrying out his vengeance: "Let me die with the Philistines" (Judges 16:30). He likewise rejects St. Augustine's conjecture that Samson, breaking the pillars of the temple, was not guilty of the deaths of others nor of his own, but was obeying an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "like the sword that directs its blades by disposition of he who wields it" (*The City of God* I, 20). Donne, having proven that this conjecture is unwarranted, closes the chapter with a phrase from Benito Pererio, saying that Samson, in his manner of dying, as much as in anything else, was a type of Christ.

Inverting Augustine's thesis, the quietists believed that Samson "by the demon's violence killed himself along with the Philistines" (*Heterodoxos españoles* V, I, 8); Milton (*Samson Agonistes*) defended him against the charge of suicide; Donne, I suspect, saw in this casuistical problem no more than a metaphor or simulacrum of a death. The case of Samson did not

matter to him—and why should it have?—or only mattered as, shall we say, an “emblem of Christ.” There is not a hero in the Old Testament who has not been promoted to this authority: for St. Paul, Adam is the figure of He who was to come; for St. Augustine, Abel represents the death of the Savior, and his brother Seth the resurrection; for Quevedo, Job was a “prodigious design” for Christ. Donne perpetrated his trivial analogy to make his readers understand: “The foregoing, said of Samson, may well be false; it is not when said of Christ.”

The chapter that speaks directly of Christ is not effusive. It does no more than evoke two passages of Scripture: the phrase “I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:15) and the curious expression, “He gave up the ghost,” that all four evangelists use to say “He died.” From these passages, which are confirmed by the verse “No man taketh my life from me, but I lay it down of myself” (John 10:18), he infers that the agony on the cross did not kill Jesus Christ and that in truth Christ took his own life with a voluntary and marvelous emission of his soul. Donne wrote this conjecture in 1608: in 1631 he included it in a sermon he preached, while virtually in the throes of death, in the Whitehall Palace chapel.

The stated aim of *Biathanatos* is to mitigate suicide; the fundamental aim, to indicate that Christ committed suicide.³ That, in demonstrating this hypothesis, Donne would find himself reduced to a verse from St. John and the repetition of the verb *to expire*, is an implausible and even incredible thing; he undoubtedly preferred not to insist on a blasphemous point. For the Christian, the life and death of Christ are the central event in the history of the world; the centuries before prepared for it, those after reflect it. Before Adam was formed from the dust of the earth, before the firmament separated the waters from the waters, the Father knew that the Son was to die on the cross and, as the theater of this future death, created the heavens and the earth. Christ died a voluntary death, Donne suggests, and this means that the elements and the terrestrial orb and the generations of mankind and Egypt and Rome and Babylon and Judah were extracted from nothingness in order to destroy him. Perhaps iron was created for the nails, and thorns for the mock crown, and blood and water for the wound. This baroque idea glimmers behind *Biathanatos*. The idea of a god who creates the universe in order to create his own gallows.

Rereading this note, I think of the tragic Philipp Batz, known to the

³Cf. De Quincey, *Writings* VIII, 398; Kant, *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der Vernunft* II, 2.

history of philosophy as Philipp Mainländer. He, like me, was an impassioned reader of Schopenhauer, under whose influence (and perhaps under that of the Gnostics) he imagined that we are fragments of a God who, at the beginning of time, destroyed himself, avid for non-being. Universal history is the shadowy death throes of those fragments. Mainländer was born in 1841; in 1876, he published his book *Philosophy of Redemption*. That same year he took his own life.

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