The Death of Conrad Unger: Some Conjectures Regarding Parasitosis and Associated Suicide Behavior

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IV(a). Conrad Unger: Snapshots of a Suicide

Conrad Unger’s suicide on September 4, 2009, his 50th birthday, was considered inevitable, if not overdue, by those who knew him (as ineludible as Quin’s, Woolf’s, Wallace’s or Nerval’s), and yet when news of it reached us, his family and friends, we still saw need to question that sense of inevitability that we’d quietly absorbed so many years before and had lodged inside us ever since like some dull, gloomy dyspepsia. The inescapable truth is that he had long ago, like two of his favourite literary characters, Kirilov and Stavrogin, been “eaten up by an idea.”

A month prior to his death, Unger left his wife of eleven years and his twelve-year old daughter and took up residence in a studio flat approximately 40 miles from the family home. During his time there he had virtually no contact with the outside world: there were no callers, no telephone conversations, and no reported interaction with his neighbours. The only person he

is known to have spoken to during those four weeks was the proprietor of a local mini-mart, dialogues all of which were entirely utilitarian.

When I saw the photographs and the video footage of him hanging from that tree — five different people made and disseminated such documentation — I had trouble recognizing him. Maybe I hadn’t wanted to recognize him. Or maybe I never had. The first photograph I saw was taken from some twenty or so metres away; he looked like a forlorn bug. Even in close-up this effect was not entirely lost: once gangling in his youth, his sedentary life-style had gifted him a marked tumescence around the midriff, while his arms and legs, though of more than sufficient length, had remained exceptionally thin for the appendages of a fully-grown man.

Unger was seen two days prior to his death, in a park across the street from his new lodgings, staring up at the branches of a large oak for more than an hour. His demeanour on that day is said to have been one of calm focus, bordering on serenity.

Unger spent the eve of his suicide eating a copy of every story and every novel he’d ever published. He kept his throat wet with brandy and marked every fifty pages with a slice of ripe pear.
A suicide note was discovered in his left trouser pocket: an adaptation of Father Time’s departing scrawl in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, it read: “Done because I am too menny.”

His was not the early to bed of Pessoa’s Baron of Teive, his contagion torched in a fit of reason, but the full awakening of once fragmentary voices, their humble residue sliding down his inside leg, his day made black and white.

**IV(b). Conrad Unger: Excerpts and Synopses**

*Mirror-Blind* (Novella, 1992): a reworking of the vampire myth in which the protagonist, Adrienne, kills just so that she can view her reflection.

“It’s more than vanity: I have to be able to see the owner of all this. I have to witness that place of origin. Photographs do not only smile when I smile. And even though my reflection

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28 All the page numbers listed in this section are to first editions.