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

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II. Parasitoidal Possession

The exalted suicides of some humans might appear to be completely antithetic to the suicide behaviors of insects parasitized by their entomopathogenic fungi or hairworms (nematomorpha). However, on closer inspection we begin to see how the manipulatory goals in the two cases can appear almost fused. But before delving into the possibility of parallels, let us first get clear about the parasitoidal process, as seen in ants infected by Cordyceps unilateralis and crickets/grasshoppers infected by hairworms.

*Cordyceps unilateralis* is an entomopathogenic fungi, particular to tropical forests, that is parasitic on ants. The spores of this parasitic fungus precipitate from suitably placed leaves and fix themselves to an ant’s exoskeleton. Upon germinating they enter the ant’s body through minute respiratory holes (spiracles) in the ant’s tough cuticular armour. Once inside the ant, tiny mycelial filaments start to devour its non-essential tissues, while leaving vital organs intact. When the time comes to sporulate, the mycelia infiltrate the ant’s brain, modifying its future discernment of phero-
mones. This chemical hijacking results in the infected ant scaling the stem of a plant and attaching itself to its apex, or to the underside of one of its leaves, by its mandibles. Destination reached, the fungus eats through the ant’s brain, killing it in the process. The fungus continues to eat and grow until it is ready to reproduce, at which point its fruiting bodies bud from the ant’s head and detonate, releasing a thick mist of airborne spores that drift down onto the forest floor and infect other ants.

Once the parasite is ensconced in its host, the host’s fate is set, and its identity becomes that of the parasite. Labeling the ant’s behavior, then, as in any way suicidal might appear fanciful, given that its identity is not its own but rather that of the parasite, for which the behavior represents the continuation of its life-cycle, and that the ant dies not from attaching itself to a leaf but from having its brain eaten. But this is to ignore two keys points: firstly, although the ant is subsumed by its host, it is still the demise of the ant that concerns us when investigating parities with human suicide; and secondly, that encephalophagia marks the ant’s end is true only in a most literal sense, for its real end comes with displacement, when it isolates itself from its community, and it is this that marks what might be called the ant’s suicide behavior.
The attribution of suicidal drives to arthropods is perhaps more clearly demonstrated in the case of hairworm infection. A hairworm’s aquatic larva is ingested by a host insect, typically that of a terrestrial arthropod such as a cricket or grasshopper. While in juvenescence the miniscule hairworm nourishes itself on its host’s internal tissues, slowly growing until it is somewhere between three and four times the length of its host. In order to continue its life cycle — living independently and reproducing — the adult hairworm must first find water. In order to achieve this next stage in its development the hairworm manipulates its host’s behavior, causing it to commit a nocturnal suicide by jumping into water, after which the adult worm swims free of its drowning vehicle and goes in search of a mate.

Hairworms are sometimes referred to as **Gordian worms**, due to the parasite’s similarity to the knot fashioned by one-time peasant and Phrygian king Gordius. The knot came to symbolize a seemingly intractable problem, a cipher of such complexity that all attempts at solution appeared futile. Eventually in 333 B.C., after many had tried and failed, the knot was unfastened by Alexander the Great who, frustrated at finding no ends to facilitate an untying, used his sword to chop through the knot, thus producing the desired end post-solution. (An oracle had predicted that whoever
could untie the knot would become king of Asia, a position Alexander went on to occupy, thereby fulfilling the prophecy.) What is important to note is how this “Alexandrian solution” mirrors the resolution that suicide affords to its perpetrator: like Alexander to the knot, a suicide responds to the labyrinthine perplexity of human life with an audacious and violent solution.²

III. Four Literary felos de se: Nerval, Wallace, Quin and Wolfe

When considering as our case studies various literary suicides by drowning or hanging, we find that the cause is often identified by the suicide as nothing more nefarious than the perpetual trial of routine, the dull uniformity of thought, the drab fug of human life itself, a condition to which death becomes ultimate remedy: one irrevocable act of annihilation replacing a necrotic inculcation of partial anni-

² Roman Emperor Gordian I was also a man of letters, his most well-known work being the long epic poem “Antonias.” In common with both Gérard de Nerval and David Foster Wallace, he hung himself with his belt.