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

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A book is a postponed suicide.

—Cioran

I. Introduction

There are ways of dying that don’t involve death, and you can suffer them by the hour. These mechanisms of dying might more accurately be called protracted enervations, or infirmities of freedom. But these are cumbersome expressions, so I’ll stick with dying. In
instances of dead-life, a condition more prevalent than you might at first imagine, suicide is a method of undying, and this appears to be especially true of cases where the sufferer, the dead-lifer, is acutely aware of their own perished state. Many who have seen photographs of a suicide, or been unfortunate enough to have witnessed one firsthand, testify to the look of interrupted animation that is often present on the faces of these autogenous corpses: it is as if their ante-mortem emancipation were inscribed deep in the facial musculature, deep enough to leave the surface of the skin as a portrait of imperial governance. (Recall that most kissed of faces: L’Inconnue de la Seine.)

The recent death by suicide of my close friend, Conrad Unger (writer, theorist, and amateur entomologist), caused me to confront not only the commonplaces of self-disposal, but also their connections to literary life and notions surrounding psychological possession, to revaluate in both fictional and entomological terms just what it is that drives someone like Unger to take his own life as a matter of course, as if it had always been his only rightful end.

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1 Conrad and I met at university in our late teens and remained friends up until his death. I was one of the last people he visited before embarking on his pre-suicide exile.