AN ATTEMPT TOWARDS THE IDEA OF 'SELF'

A RESPONSE TO THE TEXTS OF JACQUES DERRIDA*

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With the kind assistance of Ivailo Znepolski, Jacques Derrida came to Sofia. Having encountered difficulties with the opacity of his written texts, I was struck by the lucidity of his speech, and could liken his illuminating manner of talking to that of Paul Ricoeur, whom we had had the opportunity to hear courtesy of Ivailo Znepolski again. The feeling of difference I experienced kept me from taking part in the discussion with Derrida. It seemed to me that the eminent philosopher's aporetic way of thinking undermined the transcendentalism I have chosen to follow. My respect for him, however, led me to take a closer, more careful look at certain texts of his which I had read before. This time, my response was different – I would call it a mixed feeling of respect, trickery, and pause. My previous sensation of complete otherness was transformed into the notion of inner difference. A recent text, 'The Other Heading', and more specifically the capitol/capital view it proposes of Europe, made me see myself as a provincial European putting a positive colouring on his anachronism. Thus 'tricked' by Derrida, I found my place in the paradigm of deconstruction. I realised that I had been following it all along, practising a constructively tinged deconstruction; hence my definition that any manner of philosophical reasoning consists in deconstruction, reconstruction and therefore new construction.

What is Derrida's philosophical reasoning? It obviously rejects construction, led by the idea that it is deconstruction that helps philosophical discourse be what it is. Hence the concern for making connections where there previously were none and destroying them where they used to be the rule. Deconstructionist discourse removes, relocates, replaces, reorders and rearranges – and generally questions. Besides, it belongs to someone and cannot become common property, cannot be covered by facile abstract statements that would make it indistinguishable from life. On the other hand, it is a festive occasion where a group can gather but cannot unite. The idea is that, alarmed by their realisation of the strangeness of the world, those present cannot establish any positive bond among each other. Unlike everyday life, which helps such bonds come to being, a deconstructionist séance conveys placid acceptance of the impossibility of formulating universally truthful statements, and quiet joy at the state of being entangled in a web of so many signifiers and signifieds.

Derrida does not rule out the eventuality of unalarmed listeners, capable of conversing, also taking part in the séance. The interior dialogue typical of the deconstructionist may sometimes find exterior expression. Of course, even then he will be dialogising with absentees whose thinking is akin to his. Such thinkers, infected by interior dialogue and radically different from the silent others who hunger for an easy construction to put their relationships with the world in

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* Separate and together. Bogdan Bogdanov, Sofia, 2005, pp. 319-336.

order, Derrida calls ‘we’. Living or dead, they form a privileged group who exist out of time. Free of the places where they were shaped, too, as well as of personality, they are not interested in their own welfare. Unlike most philosophers of the past, though, who considered it good to dwell on general welfare (which serves as refuge to those incapable of thinking), Derrida, walking in Nietzsche’s footsteps, offers not refuge but alarm. He provokes alarm by piling on the questions, avoiding answers and linear sequences, and revealing the aporetic accidentality of being.

Being in a deconstructionist mood, and inspired by Derrida’s ideas, I ask myself whether this way of thinking is not grounded in an axiom worthy of being ‘exposed’. I perceive this axiom because of the constraints imposed upon me by the anachronic environment that has shaped me. In my effort to understand and make use of Derrida’s texts, as for me understanding relies on a certain degree of submissiveness, a poor man’s mind frame reminiscent of American pragmatic philosophy, I realise that the difference between the reasoning in these texts and my own is in that they follow different ‘self’ paradigms.

According to Derrida, each ‘self’ is an identity attacked by non-identities: an unstable unity, a difficult or rather impossible combination of identical and non-identical faced with antinomies and aporias. Naturally, there are areas not to do with reasoning that seemingly lend themselves to non-antinomical surmounting of contradictions. Reasoning and discourse, however, must remain true to the principle of incompatibility of identity and non-identity. A ‘self’ may be identical in one situation and non-identical in another, but at any given moment in time there is only identity or only non-identity. The unfolding ‘self’ is constantly at risk of breaking down into contradictions or lapsing into complete otherness, which cannot but be a cause of alarm to its subject.

The cultural axiom searched for in the above line of reasoning lies in the subversive notion of complete closedness and original separateness of the ‘self’. This notion finds one expression in life and another in philosophy. In life, internal non-identity is replaced by seemingly external othernesses assaulting us. In Derrida’s texts, an identity resolved to be too much of one adopts an aporetic mind frame. The philosopher refuses to present to the temporary world the referents of both the individual temporary ‘selves’ and the larger ‘self’, and establishes his thinking existence in a negative manner, by breaking up the unstable separatenesses into strings of elements fenced off from each other by aporetic thresholds preventing uncontrollable transitions and conglomerations. Thus, without exteriorising the interior other, as ordinary people do, he preserves the separateness of things and, ever on the alert, does not allow for their permutation or transformation. He watches over the ‘simmering’ of meanings in so many names, and his gesture is well illustrated by the metaphor of removing a dish from the fire before it burns and stops being edible.

Hence the feeling that understanding of the ‘self’ is possible only up to that point where the latter may transform into something else. This will account for the specificity of Derrida’s own ‘self’, which does not permit its bearer to be ‘tainted’ by supra- or sub-personal actions. For this reason, Derrida does not allow his speech to waver and produces a specific chant-like discourse that never falls into banality or silence. This is the verbal expression of a ‘self’ constructed in the

European fashion, occupied with its unique idealness achieved in aloneness rather than with the banalities or perfections that would question it.

Of course, spurred on by the thrust of my text, I am overstating things. Many have done the same before me, and have done it better. So let me tone things down and clarify: the above-described 'self' is artificial – as is the notion that it forms the background of the French philosopher's texts, while my experience is organised by another type of 'self'. In fact, I do not differ from Derrida in that respect. My discourse is performative. The truth about the present situation is that, leaning on my anachronic state and my ability to understand certain antique texts, I am employing Derrida to construct a different, and in my opinion necessary, 'self'. I am doing so because I consider that, by questioning the axiomatic character of the above presented line of thinking, I will become extra-situational and will manage to stir up certain points of traditional European cultural behaviour. That is how my intention was formed to positively deconstruct the perception of 'self' in the circumstances of modern European life.

This deconstruction cannot be carried out in the manner of Derrida. My provinciality is an obstacle to my conversing authentically with the great names of the European tradition. I also lack the talent to emulate their verbal expression. What I can do is converse with that generalness or commonness within me that makes me little different from others. That is within my power because of the non-social existence I am accustomed to, and also because of my professional experience with anachronic antique attitudes. Thus, unlike the authentic conversation of the lofty self-identical with lofty identical others that is held by Derrida, I will talk to my internal non-identity, viewing it as an external entity which has somehow penetrated within me, and in the process of questioning it I will try, admittedly at the risk of self-delusion, to establish some objectivity. It is within this situational framework that I take up the subject of the separateness of 'self'.

The modern way of life makes me take my separateness and aloneness for granted. Real and ideal mobility, distance from places, people and things – with these and other, more complex forms of independence, my aloneness has both individual and common features. One's cultural mindset would make one concentrate on the specifically individual within it, on difference rather than on similarity. Naturally, both are complex enough, combining as they do genus and species features. But if we are prone to exploring the difference of aloneness, its similarity – and especially the very principle of separateness – elude our range of vision. There used to be a focus on its representation in the past, particularly in the old religious cultures; however, with the spreading of secular culture in the 18th century, most symbols employed in that representation became obsolete. Hence the modern problem under discussion – the individual finds it difficult to activate the notion that he is a compromise between differences that may border on uniqueness and forms of similarity, among them separateness, which make him hard to distinguish not only from other human beings, but also from most animals.

This notion has many facets. I choose only one of them, the fact of my human aloneness, and tell myself: 'My temporary aloneness finds expression in the perpetual clarification of the obscure external world through its transformation into an internal world. In the course of my existence, absorption of the world alternates with discarding what has been absorbed. The absorption process enhances my aloneness and separateness, while the discarding one is more often a stage of rejecting them.' Thus among the many forms I perceive of my 'self', one is the alternating of

aloneness achieved and aloneness constrained. It is hard to imagine the two stages at the same time, so I dwell on one or the other. In this particular case, I am focussing not on the dialectics of different and similar, of individual and common, in my aloneness, but only on the aspect of similarity or commonality. And I ask myself what ideas and emotions arise within me from this concept of a form of separateness replicated in all human beings.

This concept may find expression in various situations. One of them amounts to our all being similar repositories for external things. Some of these weaken within us, and some even die away. Others acquire the energy for a more effective existence. This perspective, which denies personality, saddens but also gladdens. It depends on how I valuate it. Do I take repetition to signify deprivation, or do I feel joy at the penetration into my being of something which is not mine and is marked by objectivity? Then again, it is relevant how I perceive my uniqueness. Do I consider myself completely identical and suffer from the cracks in this fundamental identity, or do I regard my identity as relative and open to the longer-lasting human, animal or even broader biological existence? It all depends on whether I can tell myself, 'There is nothing more tedious than being an elderly man, than my whole being resting on a certain fundamental idea of my own uniqueness!'

Where does this idea draw energy from and how can I deprive it of that energy? It draws on the belief in the originality of my physical appearance, on the notion that the course of my life makes for a unique story, and on my social prominence. The latter is easiest to deconstruct, as it relates to roles played by others, too. Both the roles and my excellence in their performance belong to me only relatively. Viewing them as mine, I actually serve, strengthen and even further their objective definition. So instead of feeling bitter that they do not belong to me to the degree I previously thought, I should try to enjoy the expression of their objective existence in my person.

My original life story is harder to deconstruct. I can attack it by setting apart the common plotlines it contains, the mythologies of the many social environments I live in, including the general storyline that organises the life of all human beings and, for that matter, all beings. My task is to understand them, to imagine them fragmented into effective symbols and feelings. As a result of registering what is not mine in my personal story, I should delight at the expression of its objective existence in me. Hardest to deconstruct is the massive symbol of my body. Its separateness is a definite sign of the transitional nature of the 'self'; hence the sorrow at realising its indisputable destructibility. I will need knowledge and special notions, symbols and emotions, which are not maintained by the modern cultural environment, to understand that the corporeality that has found expression in my body is also a constantly self-restoring durability. This perception would grow into joy if my inner perspective could shift from the temporary unit that I am to the common life forms expressed within it.

The first positive effect of emotionally adopting such a viewpoint would be my worrying less that, with the passing of time, I am more prone to illness. The approach of old age does not bother me and even helps me make a distinction, separating the consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle and a hereditary faulty metabolism from the natural lessening of physical strength which befalls everyone. As a contemporary person, I try not to imagine old age as something only too natural, independent of one. So I direct my inner perspective not to its drawing near, but to the fact that what is natural is the dying away of some creatures and their perpetual replacement with others. As Marcus Aurelius said, a human's life ends like a ripe pear which falls from the tree,

rots, and sinks into the soft soil. I use this comforting simile to chase sorrow away and reflect not on the transitional character of the biological body, but on the constantly self-restoring nature of corporeality. This also helps me better understand the changes exhibited by my own corporeality: for instance, it is only natural that, as the years go by, my skin should lose its fresh smoothness, and that the latter should then exhibit itself in the lives of other creatures. What matters here is that the longer-lasting existence of smooth flesh should prove more important than its possession.

Of course, such theorising may also serve as a means of solace. It depends on what aspect of it we consider and what external meaning we give to it. Every single thing in the world, and in discourse, is intended towards another. The intentions that run through discourse, however, are dependent on me, on the edifice of my knowledge, notions, distinctions, symbols and emotions, on the joy of discerning the general within separateness. How is this edifice of rational formulas, notions, symbols and emotions achieved? Through education, but also through the work of each 'self' as it asks questions on certain subjects, realises their instability and seeks transitions between them. As, in this case, the facility of interweaving longer-lasting and more fleeting moments within the temporal structure of the 'self'. The subject of aloneness, in its turn, precedes the motifs of loneliness and death.

I might tell myself, 'I am sad because I am alone.' Is it not possible that this statement could be positively deconstructed? Could it be that I feel bad because, remaining alone, I face my inactual shapelessness? Should I make moves to form connections with places, people and things, thus becoming involved in more effective entities than my aloneness, such as social groups gathered for work or entertainment purposes, institutions, whole countries, cultures, and worlds? The names I give to these entities do not coincide with their meanings and referents. Hence the incessant discussions and debates as to what they signify and what they mean, and the development of extra meanings in the process of their use.

Perhaps the most widely discussed of these entities is society. What is society from the perspective of the aloneness of the individual person, which faces him with his own shapelessness? An inventory of situations for overcoming small, individual separateness and aloneness through wholeness, a mechanism for temporary actualisation of aloneness. Society supplies one with the energy of other souls, opens supra-soul horizons and offers mirrors for gazing into one's own unknown depths. This may be achieved through physical mobility, but also by ideal means, in an environment of so many unlonely alonenesses where the individual can communicate with himself as with another. It is precisely for this environment that human society has accumulated so many mediators – objects, devices, written and visual texts.

If the modern European world is more advanced in anything compared to the traditional worlds, it is in its greater opportunities for transforming the indefinite own into the other, as well as the other into the own, and for relocating, rearranging, fortifying and transcending the self by internalising the growingly differentiated into separatenesses external. These opportunities are provided to organic, temporary groups of people, and also to individuals. They are provided so that work can be done and aims can be achieved, as well as for the very ordinary reason that time be passed. This trend of European modernity's seeking and finding expression in growingly differentiated situations of conceptualising the own and the not-own, including certain precarious views of the world and humanity, has two main consequences. One is external – the world

becomes increasingly uniform and self-referential. The other is internal – the individual is alarmed at the growing external differentiation and self-reference, sees it as alien to himself and develops a feeling of fundamental separateness and loneliness.

I can tell myself the following: 'Real human separateness and aloneness is one thing, while the feeling of loneliness is another. I should not blame my loneliness, my inability to cope with the ever-expanding environment of situations, on the environment itself. Like the soul, the external environment is merely an opportunity. It expects me to investigate its potentialities and transform them into real situations, to resolve my own inactuality. In this relationship, nothing comes first or second, nothing is more or less important than another. It is the relationship itself that matters. In order to be part of it, education is necessary, as well as personal effort in building up an inner image to correspond to the discursive social environment. I can do that even when the big world is not before my eyes. Every person has his own small worlds, his network of possessions, rooms and locations. In fact, this network is more broadly realised than the unactualised inner world of my soul. The point is that, on the basis of a real external situation or an ideal imaginary one, I need to build up within myself a network of ideas, notions, symbols and emotions that will encompass the intrusive external abundance and transform it into correspondent inner speech.' Thus, the positive deconstruction of the feeling of loneliness begins with the act of clearly distinguishing basic aloneness from the feeling of loneliness.

But let me not overstate. Loneliness is also indistinguishable from aloneness, which in its turn is a form of expression of so many beings and things. The vortex of constantly changing, in the world and in one's consciousness, interweavings of meanings and things, brings into the thematic interweaving of loneliness, aloneness and separateness under discussion yet another major theme – that of nonexistence and its specific aspect of death. To make the observation of such a semantic vortex easier, we focus on one or another motion within it. But it is the vortices themselves that are more authentic. Hence Derrida's particular brand of realism. By dwelling on as many motions as possible in his work, he draws attention to the semantic vortex they are part of. This approach is contagious. Under the impact of *Aporias* and the lecture on the death penalty delivered by Derrida in Sofia, I too have come to interweave the themes of 'self' and death, that negative determinant of human aloneness.

The understanding of death may take a more overt, rational form, or a more covert, symbolic one. One of the possible rational approaches is realisation of distinctions. I am accustomed to distinctions from Plato's dialogues and Aristotle's texts, so that is the way I take and tell myself: As far as a thing is identical to itself, death consists of two situations – the dying itself and then the state of now nonexistent aloneness. This division of situations capitulates before the practical and symbolic connectedness of the two situations into the singular word 'death' and the concept attached to it. The concept may be viewed as not related to situation or subject, while situations are always subject-bound. If I imagine the situation of death-dying more discursively, I will find that it, too, is divisible, insofar as it is one for the dying person and another for the person watching or thinking about him.

I also face the distinction that it is not irrelevant whether death takes place because of organismic dysfunction or because of violence. Dying can be a peaceful and even uplifting experience. I refer to the much described feeling of bliss at crossing the threshold between life and death. On the other hand, in cases both of physiological death and of a killing, dying is associated with

feelings of pain and horror. Provoking compassion and fear for oneself, it is these cases that are before the eyes of the contemporary observer. Of course, death-dying may also be regarded as a positive act. This idea is upheld by certain traditional cultures, as well as by many modern people and even whole social groups. This opposition between these two ways of viewing the death experience are shaken if I consider the deep-structure cultural axiom they are founded on. Like the negative experiencing of another's death in modern European society: it is a symbolic affirmation of the value of the individual's separateness and aloneness, and therefore a kind of statement on the subject.

Hence the specific role of Heidegger's view of human existence on the premise that death is only a personal thing. Derrida deconstructs it by respectfully adding further distinctions and concretisations, but also by undermining the certainness of the separateness between human and non-human existence. The premise itself can also be questioned: dying is a personal thing only to the extent to which a person's separateness is only separateness, but in fact it is not entirely so. Death connects, in a way, the one that dies, the one that kills, and the one that observes or learns of the killing-dying-death of another. A symbol of transforming otherisation, death binds these three figures in the realisation of the temporariness of each aloneness and its openness to complete otherness. The concept of death puts in order a disordered line, as it means dying, and dying is killing and therefore violence. This is even truer of suicide death, loaded as it is with the extra idea of super-effective treatment of a self of itself as of another.

Thus, it is difficult to contemplate death as a sufficiently identical thing mainly because death-dying-killing is an agent extracting it from its semantic nest. Dying-killing brings violence into it, which is broader than death. And the ground is laid for dual judgement: the confusing question arises of to what extent violence is natural and to what it is culturally constituted. Because the killing of one human being by another is a species feature of human 'nature'. Categorically distinguishing humans from other animals, this feature is judged negatively and in contrast with human good sense and civilisation. But killing-death is also, if not positively, then at least neutrally judged as proof of the essential instability, openness and mobility of the human species. A human being violates another human being's life and dares take it away because he is marked by basic non-identity and otherness. Killing is a symbol of that which is most human in human beings, the constant transcending of the species 'self'. This transcending is not manifest only in the killing act - death by violence is an effective expression of the general situation of violence, transgression and excess of human existence.

In this context, special attention must be accorded to the attractive violence of the love act, as well as to its specific negative manifestation, rape. They are linked to the violence of torture, penetration and breaking the intactness of the body, on the one hand, and with killing-dying, and therefore death, on the other. It is not by chance that death-dying symbolises all sensations of extremity, including the positive experience of exultation. These sensations of crossing a borderline and of excess include exultation or dejection at the 'violence' of the human group, or sociality, upon the individual – the violence of what we call authority. For what is authority if not a threat on separateness, and violence aiming at transition to a new wholeness with a view to longer-lasting supposed welfare?

Hence the vortex of so many relationships and meanings in the death penalty, which brings together death, dying, killing, violence, the welfare of the dying individual's separateness and the

debatable welfare of a community. The death penalty is specific violence upon an individual or a group subject, and the perpetrator of violence is a human collective employing the violence of transgression to symbolically organise both complex inner relationships within the collective and a number of extra-human relationships. In this sense, as in everything else, the death penalty constantly transcends itself. Viewed as a social act, it is a line formed by the situations of the court and the killing. Both develop roles and theatricality, and proceed like public performances with appointed performance and spectators. The 'theatre' of the death penalty is an attempt at a reflexivity of sorts, a breaking up of death-dying-killing into well differentiated interdependent moments. This attempt of modern secular society at sufficient immanence of the death penalty cannot succeed, as it fails to express the transcendental transgressive aspect of dying-killing, which the old traditional cultures expressed by means of the cult sacrifice.

In its turn, this concerns the modern way of thinking about the death penalty. Despite the stable cultural stand on the value of life and the conviction that the death penalty is precisely a penalty or punishment, modern reasoning on the subject is still 'mined' by the possibility of an alternative judgement on death by violence. Killing and violence are perceived with an oblique duality, both as an act of excess and transgression and as an act that may be a public good. This leads to different types of thinking in regard to the death penalty. It is sometimes problematised with a view to social pragmatics, facilitation of regimes and humanisation of relationships. The debate may proceed immanentistically – when the death penalty is considered a sufficiently closed, self-identical object. Jacques Derrida's public lecture in Sofia was in that vein. It avoided transcendental solutions that would have halted the debate or led it into another direction. Derrida did not try to behave immanentistically; he was careful not to allow the debate to be interrupted. His stand was organised by current discussions on the problem and by the applicability of the repeal of the death penalty. He was performative rather than being taken by the opportunity for an anachronic thought-vortex. So I will have to rescind my previous statement that his speech is always and only a kind of 'chant'.

At the same time, I respect the possible thought-vortex on the issue and, reacting deconstructively to Derrida's lecture, stress on the other, transcendental line of reasoning. In it, the insufficiently self-identical death penalty proves open to other objects and situations, including doubt as to the European way of valuating life and death, which Plato explored brilliantly in *Phedon*, as well as the contemporary post-modern European explanatory horizon. I refer to the premise of basic instability, openness, and transgressive mobility of the human being.

This naturally gives rise to the question of what is philosophy today. As with other objects, for instance the understanding of freedom, it would be more fitting to discuss philosophy in the plural. Today, it would make for greater precision if we consider its different manifestations. One of them deals with the semantic vortices the globalising world faces us with, and it is the one organising most of Derrida's texts. But there is also another philosophy, supported by historicist-typological material, which produces texts with both reflective and civil effectivity. Such was the lecture on the death penalty delivered by Derrida in Sofia. This division of philosophies, however, is somewhat crude: Derrida's philosophising probably develops yet more models of philosophy, which may be classified according to other principles.

Of course, traditional philosophy does not treat such plurality kindly. Its performative ambition is to provide a text platform that can bring all human beings together. It does so through its

equalising general concepts. Hence the opposition to reasoning based on hierarchically structured fundamental principles. The latter are considered useless and even harmful to the modern way of life. And if there is any need for a principle to serve as a basis, then that seems to be the phenomenological statement that there are multiple worlds and modes of thinking because the number of subjects who experience, imagine and think has multiplied infinitely. It would be wonderful if we could somehow register those subjects, but at different times they vary not only in number, but also in kind. The viewpoint of the individual becoming subject is, so to say, our imperative today.

The point is that the most essential aspect of this becoming is the subject's transition to all sorts of othernesses, such as that of his own 'self', of the various types of 'we', of material and natural, real and ideal worlds, and finally the otherness of nonexistence. Thus, after the useful job of deconstruction, which reminds thinking and acting subjects not to take traditional ideologies on faith, the next serious question arises – that of how these subjects develop mechanisms to help them become part of the various types of otherness, how they come to situational systems functionally akin to ancient rituals and traditional religious systems, how they pass from immanentist to transcendental worldviews in a secular manner, without falling victim to fundamentalism and misleading religious symbols.

For the time being, I can only understand that the modern 'self', ever protecting itself from the assaults of 'we', must get used to perceiving itself not only as a fixture and a static structure, but also as a process of becoming, in which the 'we' and the 'I' voices constantly change and alternate. The modern 'self' is a melody whose tones are principles combining with each other in a new relationship. I am employing a metaphor, but my understanding is practical rather than poetical. The 'ethics' of alternation, of high and low points in this melodic structure, presupposes that I be both deconstructively critical and constructively existentialist, that at times I be a narcissistically closed entity and at others an open, indefinite instability sinking into a more stable unit which has come to face me and allow me into itself, such as another person, human group, philosophy, country, world, and what-not.

Of course, I usually do not manage to disconnect from the static aloneness to which I am accustomed, and which I regard to be myself. I do not know who or what to blame. I do know, however, that transcending oneself is possible. Aloneness is, to a certain extent, fictitious. Its static character is more of an aspiration which is only momentarily achieved. I have witnessed it being violated and transcended with other people, as well as with myself sometimes. As it now seems to me that I am in the process of transcending myself thanks to Jacques Derrida.

I started working on this text as a result of my attempts to edit and correct my diary entries from the spring of 1978. Discontent with my inability then to state simply that which had inspired me to put down my thoughts (an inability which is present, to no lesser degree, even today), and also to act in a general manner, i.e. out of time, place, and age (at which, I think, I am somewhat better now), I found unexpected support in Derrida's texts. They helped me transcend, for a moment at least, my limitations in that respect. Naturally, I may be deluding myself. My only wish is that if, at some future point, this text disappoints me, I will feel shamed and will once again find good support that will lead me to experience the joy of transcending myself. That, I think, would not only be a comforting sign of the background success we all inevitably hope for – the overcoming of our own mortality.