

Fred Cutter, *Art and the Wish to Die: An Analysis of Images of Self-Injury in Art from Prehistory to the Present*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983. 294 pp. \$22.95 (cloth), \$11.95 (paper).

The mythic image of the serpent Oroboros is an appropriate one with which to begin discussion of *Art and the Wish to Die*. Oroboros, recall, is a symbol of life-affirmation or of death, depending on one's inclination and mental health. Forever and forever the snake devours (or gives birth to) itself.

Like Oroboros, Cutter's scholarship has a certain circularity. His book is intriguing but ultimately flawed because the thesis is obscured, fragmented and coiled around the numerous images of self-destruction liberally reproduced from Cutter's own collection. There is an arguable link drawn between artistic images and suicide prevention, but it is drawn none too clearly. The text lacks an identifiable theoretical framework which could have focused the presentation and the attentiveness of the reader. Instead, this disjointed chronology effectively cancels any points to be made about suicide prevention.

All of this is unfortunate, since many elements incorporated in the text would seem to insure its success: (1) it is written around an important topic; the despair, desperation and guilt associated with self-injury as well as the romance of the "good death" so elusive in modern society; (2) it is liberally illustrated with fine black and white reproductions; (3) it is written in a conversant style that is indicative of practitioners rather than academicians (Cutter is a practicing psychologist and suicidologist); and (4) it attempts to deal with a very complex set of issues: the psychological and sociological motivations to take one's own life, the power of the graphic image, the artist's intent, and the reciprocity between artist and society. However, these complexities are taken separately by Cutter and, as a result, receive superficial and disjointed treatment.

Beginning with the artist and the created image of suicide, Cutter assigns the artist a "special sensitivity." He notes that

artists are potential forces for further change of assigned meanings to self-injury phenomena. They usually emphasize the humanistic, and their visual messages often have impact where verbal ones are discounted. This is the role that suicide themes can play in suicide prevention (9-10).

This image of the artist as visionary, as somehow "more human," is quickly dispensed with and seems misplaced. Cutter shifts from aesthete to psychologist in short order with little transition or continuity. He tells us that five million persons living at any one time are at risk of committing suicide. All told, nearly fifty million persons are involved with someone who has between a one to ten percent chance of dying from self-injury. These phenomenal statistics, as well as our general ambivalence towards suicide in the West, have made for a curious compendium of modern attitudes and images about suicide.

The study of suicide is fairly recent (Cutter dates the first scientific inquiry to Durkheim's *Suicide*), but efforts to prevent suicide date from the oral tradition of the Old Testament. St. Augustine was the first to define suicide as the greatest possible of sins, a judgment prevailing in church councils for several centuries. Corpses of suicides were desecrated and denied sacred burial, a collective punishment for the audacity of the flesh to preempt the will of God. Suspension of these practices corresponded in part to the shift from sacred to secular society, a point not taken up here. Yet, the remnants of collective retribution and moral uncertainty toward the suicide and his or her family remain.

After a review of the literature on suicide and suicide prevention, Cutter turns to images of self-injury and catalogues the pieces within the context of the culture producing them. There are nearly one thousand known pieces of art that depict self-injury. Most of these are Western and date after 1200 A.D. Cutter categorizes artist's images of suicide by salient theme. The early period until the Renaissance, is characterized by religious iconography, depicting the demise of Judeo-Christian figures, followed by the more secular Heroic theme. Images from the 14th to the 19th centuries glorify what Durkheim would have termed altruistic suicide, self sacrifice for a greater good or the ultimate sublimation. These are rational suicides, acts to expiate dishonor (as in the death of Lucretia who plunges a sword into her breast to protest her rape by her husband's military rival), or failure in battle (such as Mark Anthony). In the affirming, laudatory images the victim is elevated as an example of appropriate conduct under trying circumstances.

The heroic theme is adjoined by artist's images of suicide as a stigmatized act from the 17th through 19th centuries. This view of suicide, more aligned with dictates of the church, presents the victim as beneath contempt. The irrational theme of suicide appears later

in the 19th century. Victims are more to be pitied than condemned, as attested by various renditions from this period of the drowning of Ophelia. Other themes identified by Cutter, which bring us to the present, include an acknowledgment by artists of clinical depression and suicide, the morally neutral tone of ambivalence towards suicide, and the participation demanded of the audience in the "cry for help" theme.

Elaboration of these themes, and exploration of corresponding social trends of a particular historical epoch, could have drawn the reader into a compelling argument. Instead, Cutter steps away from his classificatory scheme and looks at specific kinds of suicide (i.e., Biblical suicides, the self-immolation of lovers, and dramatic deaths of legendary women). In so doing, he fails to find that balance between the nomothetic objectives of a sociology of art and the generalizing principles of psychology on the one hand, and the specificity of historical pieces and historical periods on the other. At least part of the problem is editorial. Subheadings segment each idea, giving the impression visually that the argument is not unified. Instead of a crisp, journalistic device for highlighting the fine points of Cutter's argument, such choppy editorial work detracts.

While Cutter has obviously done his homework, his interpretation and results are atheoretical. At issue is what *Art and the Wish to Die* is trying to convey. What are we to make of the elaborate chronology of suicide depictions by artist, epoch and frequency against the backdrop of strategies for modern suicide prevention? What is the purpose describing the tales informing the artist's canvas if a classification scheme is developed and dropped? And what of Oroboros?

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