

## SHORTER NOTES

## TWO NOTES ON GREEK SUICIDE

## I

Near the end of the fifth book of *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle has a brief discussion (1138a6–14) of suicide, to illustrate the question of whether one can wrong one's self. Suicide, he declares, is not enjoined by law, and what law does not enjoin, it forbids. Thus the suicide does do wrong – but to whom or what? Surely the polis, not himself (for his suffering is voluntary, and no one wrongs himself voluntarily). διὸ καὶ ἡ πόλις ζημιοί, καὶ τις ἀτιμία πρόσεστι τῷ ἑαυτὸν διαφθείραντι ὡς τὴν πόλιν ἀδικούντι.

Recent writers on the subject provide the following exegesis of this last sentence:

According to Aristotle (*EN* 5.1138a) Athenian law did not explicitly condemn suicide, though *de facto* it treated it as illegal. He draws this conclusion from the fact that legal penalties were imposed in the case of those who made unsuccessful attempts at suicide, involving a fine as well as loss of civil rights. In his attempt to explain the rationale behind the legal practice, Aristotle comes to the conclusion that suicide was regarded as an act of social irresponsibility.

R. S. J. Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (London, 1985) 98

[A]ccording to Aristotle there existed [*sc.* in Athens] sanctions against attempted suicide: fines and loss of political rights. Such an attempt in the eyes of the Stagirite was rightly punished as an instance of anti-social behaviour.

A. J. L. van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: self-killing in classical antiquity* (London, 1990) 168

There cannot be much doubt that Dr van Hooff has relied on Professor Garland here; but in any event I respectfully submit that what Aristotle is telling them, and us, is something altogether different.

(a) Why assume an allusion to Athens? In doing so, Garland and van Hooff admittedly follow the earliest pioneers of ancient suicidology, K. A. Geiger (*Der Selbstmord im klassischen Altertum* (Augsburg, 1888) 69) and Rudolph Hirzel ('Der Selbstmord', *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 11 [1908] 75–104, 243–84, 417–76, at 264 n. 2). Thalheim, however, more prudently wrote of 'der Staat' ('Selbstmord', *RE* 2.2 (1923) 1134f.); and there must indeed be a heavy burden of proof upon anyone seeking to interpret ἡ πόλις as Athens here. It is more naturally taken as one of Aristotle's habitual (and tantalizingly unverifiable) generalizations.

(b) Whatever view be held on the preceding point, Garland and van Hooff – though not, this time, their predecessors – have misunderstood the practices and attitudes that Aristotle is referring to. The key phrase is τῷ ἑαυτὸν διαφθείραντι (for the idiom cf. (e.g.) Polybius 8.20.6), which as an aorist can only describe someone who has made a *successful* attempt at suicide! Consequently, all talk of (i) fines upon and (ii) loss of citizen rights by such a person – by now a cadaver – is absurd. Instead, (i) ζημιοί should be understood in its well-attested, more general sense of 'penalize', and (ii) τις ἀτιμία, likewise, is not the technical term elucidated by M. H. Hansen (*Apagoge, Endeixis and Ephegesis against Kakourgoi, Atimoi and Pheugontes* (Odense, 1976) 55–90) but merely 'disgrace of some kind'. As to what kind, Aeschines 3.244 ('if someone kills himself, we bury the hand that did the deed separately from the body') and Plato, *Laws* 873D (suicides in Magnesia 'are to be buried individually – without even a single fellow-occupant of their grave – and ingloriously, in deserted and anonymous locations, the graves unmarked and nameless') offer some clues.

## II

Seeing what was happening, most of the suppliants, who had refused (to be tried), killed each other there in the temple; some hanged themselves from the trees, οἱ δ' ὡς ἕκαστοι ἐδύναντο ἀνηλοῦντο. (Thucydides 3.81.3: Corcyra, 427.)

The striking word here is the final one. In her recent article 'Attitudes towards suicide in ancient Greece', *TAPA* 121 (1991) 1–34 (which, amidst many larger merits, at p. 19 correctly construes ἡ πόλις and διαφθείραντι – though not ἀτιμία – in the passage of Aristotle just discussed), Elise P. Garrison valuably retrieves this point from the oblivion to which Thucydides' commentators had consigned it. She writes (p. 13):

Thucydides, in the Corcyrean civil war episode (3.81), mentions the suicide of the Messenian prisoners who refused to be tried by their captors... [He] lends a 'tragic' air to this kind of suicide by using the word ἀναλίσκομαι for suicide. The basic meaning of ἀναλίσκω, 'use up' or 'spend', is extended by the tragedians to 'kill', and in this meaning seems primarily to be restricted to tragedy (e.g., Aesch. *Ag.* 570; Soph. *OT* 1174, Fr. 892 (Radt); Eur. *El.* 681)

This is all fair comment as far as it goes, but what needs to be added is that 'spending' life – whether one's own or another's – can be regarded as a favourite Thucydean idiom:

(i) 4.48.3 (Corcyra again, two years later – and the only other instance of mass suicide in Thucydides; for individual suicide see 1.138.4 [Themistokles] and 2.92.3): the opponents of the demos ἐφυλάσσοντό τε ὡς ἐδύναντο καὶ ἅμα οἱ πολλοὶ σφᾶς αὐτοὺς διέφθειρον, [...] ἀναλοῦντες [Suid. Zonar.: ἀναδοῦντες codd.] σφᾶς αὐτοὺς κτλ.

(ii) 7.81.5 (Syracuse, 413): τοιαύταις δὲ προσβολαῖς καὶ οὐ ξυσταδὸν μάχαις οἱ Συρακόσιοι εἰκότως ἐχρῶντο, [...] καὶ ἅμα φειδώ τέ τις ἐγένετο ἐπ' εὐπραγίᾳ ἤδη σαφεῖ μὴ προαναλωθῆναί τω κτλ. (cf. Dio 59.18.4: ἐαυτοὺς προανάλωσαν)

(iii) 8.65.2 (Athens, 411): καὶ γὰρ Ἀνδροκλέα τέ τινα τοῦ δήμου μάλιστα προεστῶτα ξυστάντες τινὲς τῶν νεωτέρων κρύφα ἀποκτείνουσιν, [...] καὶ ἄλλους τινὰς ἀνεπιτηδείους τῷ αὐτῷ τρόπῳ κρύφα ἀνήλωσαν.

Also noteworthy: Pericles' reference in 2.64.3 to Athens' 'expenditure' of lives on warfare (πλείστα δὲ σώματα καὶ πόνους ἀνηλωκῆναι πολέμῳ) and Nicias' advice in 6.12.1 that, after the draining 420s, 'expenditure' begins at home (καὶ χρήμασι καὶ τοῖς σώμασιν ηὐξήσθαι· καὶ ταῦτα ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν δίκαιον ἐνθάδε εἶναι ἀναλοῦν).

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## IO! IN OVID

The scribes of the Latin poets were not, as a rule, in the habit of interpolating exclamatory particles; on the contrary, their tendency was to trivialise. The particle *io* has MSS authority in two passages in Ovid where distinguished critics reject it.

Kenney in the Oxford Text of *Ars Amatoria* 3.742 prints,

labor, io: cara lumina conde manu.

labor io *RO*<sub>g</sub>: labor, eo *Palmer*: labor et o *B<sub>b</sub>P<sub>b</sub>\**: labor iam *UW*: et labor et haec *A<sub>b</sub>*: iam (o *P<sub>b</sub>*) morior *aw*: iam moriar *A<sub>g</sub>*.

In his note on a passage where the particle is not in dispute, *Graia iuvenca venit, quae te patriamque domumque / perdat! io, prohibe! Graia iuvenca venit!* (*Her.* 5.117–18), Palmer says, '*io*, "ho!" in Ovid always a cry or shout, either of joy or