T he story is as old as philosophy itself. Socrates, found guilty of impiety and of corrupting the youth, is sentenced to death. He escapes the executioner to save himself, he refuses. In his Phaedo, Plato explains how, just a few hours before drinking the hemlock that kills him, Socrates offers a novel redemption of the philosopher: those who practise philosophy do not prepare “themselves for dying and death”. With these words, and with the death that followed them, Socrates established a long-standing tradition where death is not simply another topic for philosophy but the very life-force driving it.

The following centuries saw further interventions: from the Stoics, Epicurus, Cicero and later from Michel de Montaigne, who, borrowing the line from Cicero, wrote an influential essay called “That to philosophize is to learn how to die”. These classical and Renaissance accounts tended to be therapeutic: in the face of later from Michel de Montaigne, who, borrowing the line from Cicero, wrote an influential essay called “That to philosophize is to learn how to die”. These classical and Renaissance accounts tended to be therapeutic: in the face of death, philosophy’s task was reconciliatory.

Philosophy’s infatuation with death continued into the twentieth century, becoming a preoccupation first of all in Germany, through Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time, and then in France, in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and the many others inspired by Heidegger’s work. Such reflections were not so concerned with rubbing balm on unsettling truths. Instead they were connected with the problem of nihilism: given the finality of death and the anoxia of a transcendent arbiter of meaning, how can life bear any meaning at all?

Costica Bradatan’s Dying for Ideas: The dangerous lives of the philosophers is situated firmly within this “thanatological” vision of the tradition. Rather unflinchingly, Bradatan sees philosophy as a form of therapy – as an “art of living” which, crucially, ought to be understood as an “art of dying”. In the opening pages he argues persuasively that death is not simply the opposite of life, but that it enters life and lends it urgency – that it can even “breathe new life into it.”

For Bradatan, there are two aspects to philosophy’s encounter with death. First, death is a topic for philosophy (perhaps the topic). Here, he provides brief summaries of the writings of Montaigne, Heidegger and Paul–Louis Landsberg. As sophisticated as these accounts are, however, Bradatan argues that they are also rather lifeless – that they are too detached from their object to speak about it with the urgency that it deserves.

Thus Bradatan turns to the second aspect, looking at Socrates, Hypatia, Thomas More, Giordano Bruno and Jan Patocka: “martyr–philosophers” who did not simply have ideas about death, but who died for ideas. “Once the books are dead, so are the ideas; their prisons are turned into tombs by their execution. Now death can no longer be a ‘topic’, there cannot be anything abstract about it.”

Regardless of their philosophical colours, these thinkers are the ultimate empiricists, using their bodies as laboratories in which to test their ideas; by turning to them, Bradatan hopes to depart from the abstract terrain that characterizes philosophy’s purely textual brushes with death.

At one point, Bradatan writes that Heidegger uses the metaphor of ripening fruit to describe our relationship with death. The mistake is revealing. It is true that Heidegger employs this metaphor; but while he admits a limited comparison between the two things, he also sharply distinguishes them. Like an unripe fruit, human life seems to be characterized by an essence which lies ahead of it. So a “not yet” towards which it grows. But that is where the analogy ends. When a fruit becomes ripe, it reaches its fulfilment; when a person dies he or she “comes to naught”. Crucially, Bradatan ignores the distinction that Heidegger draws between death and demise, and this misreading seems to inform his entire book, which operates around a search for self-fulfilment through an “exemplary death” (or “demise” in Heidegger’s parlance).

Bradatan turns the exception of Bruno – who swore so fouly as he approached the pyre that his tongue was bound with a leather gag – of all the philosophers whom Bradatan considers to have “performed” exemplary deaths exercise complete control and mastery in their last moments: they die walking, talking, laughing and mocking the authorities that execute them. They remain themselves right to the end, dying deaths that are uniquely theirs. Doesn’t the story of theuces tell us that certain acts, a fear of the loss of control and self that more commonly awaits us at the end of life?

After all, most of us do not face deaths such as these; indeed, for most of us death will not be a “performance” at all. One rarely dies on one’s own feet, let alone like Socrates, heroically walking to meet death head on. Most of us will die in a bed, probably not our own, under heavy sedation which will ease us into unconsciousness before the “main event”. This will most likely take place after a rather extended stay in the unnerved cities that lie along the border between being and non-being, during which time we will become less – not more – like the selves we were. Philosophy has absolutely not been circumvented by medicine; however, to remain relevant it must explore the implications that death has for life.

In an atmosphere of abstraction, Bradatan hopes to be a dissenting voice. Ultimately, however, he rehearses that very abstraction itself. Because when confronted with the realities of the deaths we face, Dying for Ideas – with its (barely) repressed Prometheanism and its abstract infatuation with mythic heroism – teaches us almost nothing about what lies ahead: a fact that would perhaps be easier to ignore if it weren’t for Costica Bradatan’s deftest understanding of philosophy as a form of therapy.

This won’t hurt

AMIA SRINIVASAN
Simon Critchley
NOTES ON SUICIDE
978 1 910690 6 7

This book is not a suicide note”, Simon Critchley reassures us at the start of Notes on Suicide. Instead he proposes to “look at suicide closely, carefully, and perhaps a little coldly.” Yet four pages later we are told that Critchley’s interest in suicide isn’t “remotely” academic. For reasons “we don’t have to go into” (don’t we?), Critchley’s life has “dissolved over the past year or so, like sugar in hot tea”. In 2013 Critchley and his psychoanalyst wife Jamieon Webster published The Hamlet Doctrine, a meditation on the incapacity to love; they separated soon after. It isn’t made clear what this has to do with that, though we do learn that Webster once wrote a fake suicide note that read “Dear Simon, Break a leg, or all your legs”, which she signed “with all my love-hate, Jamieon”. Instead of a theoretical way into suicide, Critchley says he wants to find a practical way out of it, to rid himself of “fantasies of self-destruction . . . motivated by self-pity, self-loathing and revenge”. He explains that the book is written in a hotel room in East Anglia, where he came from New York to “meditate on the idea of suicide at the end of the land . . . the vast, the unlimited”.

It is bad form to question the sincerity of someone’s suicidal ideation, but one cannot help it with Critchley. His motivation might not be academic, but Notes on Suicide is more of an philosophical essay than a felt reckoning with the prospect of taking one’s own life. In this it feels like Descartes’ Meditations, the cold North Sea replacing Descartes’ warming fire, death replacing doubt: a crisis staged for the reader’s benefit, with nothing really hang-