CHAPTER II

SERVANT AND WIDOW

BAYET, in his admirable book *Le Suicide et la Morale*, produced a formula which goes far to explain why, at certain times, suicide has been bitterly attacked and at others as firmly defended. He exposes the hand of both those who absolutely defend, or condemn, suicide on moral grounds. Give me, he says, the type of judgment prevailing among people at any given time and place, and I will tell you whether they consider suicide criminal or not. Since it is with just this question of the attitude to suicide that the present book occupies itself, it will be wise to give a short account of Bayer's theory. It appears to fit in with the facts and we shall use it frequently for reference and illustration.

There are, and have been since the intellectual type was first differentiated, two sorts of morality. The first and primitive sort (*morale simple*, Bayet calls it) is the morality of the mass of the common people; it is founded on religion and superstition and has a definite link with taboos and tribal custom. The second sort (*morale nuancée*) is the moral of aristocracies and of the educated and intellectual minority; it has its roots in reason and does not judge an act in itself but on its results and social repercussions. The *morale simple*, if it condemns an act, does so out and out; certain things are in its eyes intrinsically wrong, tainted, immoral (primitive ideas of magic of course come in here). The *morale nuancée*, ideally speaking, considers each case on its own merits and after deliberation passes judgment. Each

of these moral forces has been uppermost at different periods; and each, when victorious, tries to dictate the general tone and attitude of society. Naturally, the moral "in opposition" is never altogether destroyed, and even if temporarily silenced merely awaits its opportunity to bob up again.

Applying this idea of twin-morality to history, we find that it explains very adequately the fluctuations in the status of suicide. As rationalism and education decline so the penalties against suicide increase; and vice versa. Thus the Classical and Renaissance tolerance of suicide follows the defeat of the *morale simple* of early times and of the Dark Ages. Within any given period, and on a more delicate scale, the theory also works out nicely. For instance, the temporary revival of learning and civilization under Charlemagne resulted directly in a certain modification and lenience in the Church's anti-suicide legislation. Thus Bayet shows that the contemporary type of moral everywhere dictates the attitude towards personal suicide.

Before embarking on the general history of personal suicide it is, however, necessary to isolate an altogether different type of self-destruction to which we may give the name of sacrificial or institutional suicide. Unlike personal suicide which has always been frowned on by the community, except in certain exceptional societies, institutional suicide is in itself the creation of the community and meets with recognition and approval. The crux of the opposition between these two modes of suicide lies in this, that whereas the personal suicide is a rebel, the institutional suicide dies, not as an individual at all, but in some social capacity (the classical example of institutional suicide being the self-destruction of the widow involved in *suttee*). Such suicides have also been called *altruistic* since they can only be common in groups where the sense of self and personal individuality is poorly developed. Thus, as personal suicide may be said

to result from hyperindividuation, so institutional suicide results from a lack of consciousness of individuality.

Institutional suicide, then, is the self-destruction which society may demand of an individual in his social capacity. Such a demand usually arises in societies where the life of the individual is valued not for itself, but as a function of the community, where in fact his individuality is subordinated to a collective good. It is a type of suicide, therefore, which we shall expect to find most prevalent in the highly developed social organization of primitive communities. As the fully grown man detaches himself from his parents, so the fuller consciousness of individuality results in an ever greater detachment of the individual from the community Thus forms of institutional suicide tend to decrease with the progress of decentralization in society.

From Western Europe most set forms of institutional suicide have long since disappeared. In one case after another it was discovered that the sacrifice demanded of the individual served no good purpose and had been originally instituted through superstition or a misinterpretation of facts. Our general attitude towards sacrificial suicide to-day is, however, still one of approval where the act can be shown to have a practical basis and a reasonable necessity. Thus the convention that a captain must not desert his ship is a set form of institutional suicide and represents the type of this suicide which may be expected to persist indefinitely. In the same way the action of anyone who deliberately sacrifices his life for another, even though the action has a purely personal character, meets with approval. Such a suicide can be classed as institutional since it conforms so exactly to the ideal values and the ideal outlook of society.

The line of demarcation between institutional and personal suicide is not always easy to draw, particularly as recognized forms of institutional suicide are always being modified to suit changing ideas. To-day the duty of the

civilian to take up arms for his country, and the utility of the institutional suicide demanded from the conscript, begin to be questioned. A series of wars to end war makes certain people suspect that this form of institutional suicide may be no more reasonable than that involved in the Indian *suttee*. It may equally well derive authority from a false chain of argument.

In primitive societies where institutional suicides usually adopt set ritualistic forms, such doubts must be rare. The question is more cut and dried. A survey of the subject shows that institutional and ritualistic suicides have existed from the earliest times and have been practised in nearly every part of the world. They divide fairly easily into certain types or categories. Commonest among these is the custom which compels a widow to take her life on the death of her husband, if he is a person of rank. This type of institutional suicide appears in varying forms in many countries. Among certain Central Africans and Melanesians the wife was customarily buried alive with her husband; among the Natchez of North America and the Maoris she met death by strangulation. Elsewhere she was burnt on her husband's pyre, and it is with this custom, as it appears in the *suttee* of the Hindoos, that we are most familiar. For centuries the Hindoo widow immolated herself with her husband, and as late as 1803 two hundred and seventy wives willingly met death in this way within thirty miles of Calcutta. In 1821 there were still over two thousand deaths of this sort in all India. The voluntary nature of these suicides is attested by the difficulty which the British have found in putting a stop to the custom since it was declared illegal in 1829.[1]

[1] The following appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* for August 31st, 1937:

"Three men are on trial at Gwalior for aiding and abetting the practice of suttee. A widow of fifty announced her intention

Herodotus, speaking of the Crestonaeans of Thrace, says that no sooner does a man die than "a sharp contest" follows among his wives as to which has the best right to share her husband's grave. Prescott, in his *History of the Conquest of Peru*, writing of events two thousand years later, goes out of his way to emphasize a similar eagerness among the Incas. When a great man died a number of his attendants and favourite concubines were immolated with him, and, says Prescott, "the women have been known, in more than one instance, to lay violent hands on themselves when restrained from testifying their fidelity by this act of conjugal martyrdom."

Similar to the suicide of the widow was the sacrifice of the servants and followers of a great lord or king, who were often compelled by custom (and urged by their feelings) to share their master's death. Caesar, when he tells how certain picked warriors, or soldurii, were unwilling to survive their chieftain, is merely instancing a form of institutional suicide found in the most divers countries. A traveller reaching Pekin as late as the fourteenth century saw four female slaves and six guards buried at the funeral of the Chinese Emperor. Herodotus tells how, in Scythia, a dead king

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of immolating herself on her dead husband's pyre. The result was that a crowd of 15,000 gathered to follow the bier.

"The police made efforts to persuade the woman from her intention, but without success. The crowd also refused to help the police, who were unable to reach the pyre.

"Brandishing a sword, the woman jumped into the flames and was burnt to death while the crowd delivered incantations."

Such obstinate survivals of *suttee* are peculiarly odd, since it appears that the practice once died out spontaneously, and for a long time persisted in a purely symbolical form. The wife simply lay down on her husband's pyre, preparatory to rising again for a second marriage. Only after the sixth century did the increased power of the Brahmins, who hoped to get the dead wife's property, reintroduce *suttee* and spread the custom again throughout India.

was buried with his cupbearer, cook, groom, lacquey and messenger. A year after his death fifty of his servants and fifty of his horses were strangled, stuffed, and set upon scaffolds round his tomb, every dead man riding a dead horse and ready still to serve and fight for his dead master. Officially, at any rate, the death of these servants and warriors who followed their lord into the next world was voluntary. For instance, the king of the Sotiani among the Celts had six hundred picked companions who vowed to live and die with him. "In return for which," the historian says,

> they also share his power, and wear the same dress, and eat the same food; and they die when he dies as a matter of absolute necessity, if the king dies of any disease, or if he dies in war, or in any other manner. And no one can ever say that any of them has shown any fear of death, *or has in the least sought to evade it when the king is dead.*[1]

In Africa the burial of the King of Benin was habitually the occasion for a strange scene, whose voluntary character is attested. The King's favourite lords and servants leaping into the tomb, used actually to vie with each other for the honour of being buried alive with his body. The sequel to their enthusiasm shows the ritualistic and social nature of these suicides.

> After the dispute was settled and the tomb had closed over the dead and the living, sentinels were set to watch it day and night. Next day the sepulchre would be opened and someone would call down to the entombed men to know what they were doing and whether any of them had gone to serve the king. The answer was commonly, "No, not yet." The third day the same question would be put, and a voice would reply that so and so had gone to join his majesty. The first to die was deemed the happiest. In four or five days, when no answer came up to the question and all were silent in the grave, the heir to the throne was informed, and he signalized his accession by kindling a fire on the tomb, roasting flesh at it, and distributing the meat to the people.[2]

[1] Athenaeus, quoting Nicolaus of Damascus.
[2] Frazer, *The Dying God.*

In Japan such devotional suicides of a semi-ritualistic and institutional nature have always been common. As late as 1912 the suicide of the Count and Countess Nogi astounded Western Europe, but assured them a household immortality in Japan. As the Emperor Meiji's funeral *cortège* left the palace, the Count, who had been the hero of the Russo-Japanese war, and his wife committed "junshi", or devotional suicide. They hoped by their death to accompany the divine Emperor heavenward.

The origin of both these institutionalized types of suicide —widows and followers—is probably to be found not only in the idea that they were expected to provide in their several ways for the wants of their master in the next world, but that, like the weapons and utensils buried with them, their presence would make unnecessary the return of an unsatisfied ghost to fetch them. The burial-places of the Pharaohs show this idea in its most complete development. Although the progress of Egyptian civilization replaced the body of wife or servant by image and representation (and there was thus no actual suicide involved), the tombs reveal that each great man was buried with a complete outfit calculated to set him up comfortably wherever he might be. Not only were the obvious necessities included, such as weapons, wife, and the means of grinding corn, but the man was supplied with scents, combs, luxuries, and now and then a suite of furniture.

Another class of institutional suicide involved the death of an individual either sacrificed to, or representative of, a god. The perfect example of such an individual is provided by the young man who, among the Aztecs, impersonated the god Tezcatlipoca, and for a year received the homage and reverence of the people. At the end of this term, but choosing his own moment, the man-god delivered himself up proudly and voluntarily to his stipulated death.[1] To

[1] Cavan, *Suicide*.

this category also belong Frazer's priest, slain on the wooded shore of Lake Nemi; and types such as the representatives of Attis, who, in primitive times, died yearly in imitation of the god and by their deaths hoped to effect his resurrection and with it the return of spring. Such institutional suicides—to honour the gods or promote the yearly cycle of crops—have occurred in places as far removed as Scandinavia and the Philippines, nearly always with the underlying idea that the death of the victim was a voluntary one. In India similarly destined victims, rescued by the military, escaped whenever possible and gladly returned to a lingering death; in Uganda eye-witnesses of institutional sacrifices have related that the victims rarely complained and submitted to their fate under the impression that they were doing a great service to their tribe and laying down their lives for an ideal. The idea of a *voluntary* sacrifice seems indeed to have been so essential that when animals came to replace human victims, flatteries and tendernesses were sometimes whispered in their ears as they were led to the altars so that they might be supposed to be willing participants in their own death. Closely connected with these institutional sacrifices were the compulsory, yet voluntary, deaths of primitive tribal kings whose tenure of office for a certain number of years was ritualistically terminated by their deaths. Among the countless examples of such suicides we need only mention one. The King of Calicut on the Malibar coast, known by the highly sacred title of *Samorin*, reigned only twelve years. At the expiration of this period, as an eighteenth-century traveller relates, he was accustomed to give a vast feast to his numerous nobility and gentry. After the feast he saluted his guests and went up on to a scaffold prepared specially for the occasion, and there, in view of the whole assembly, very decently cut his own throat.[1]

[1] Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, quoted in Frazer, *The Dying God*.

Somewhere into this sacrificial category must also be fitted the Jaïna sect of Southern India, who threw themselves under the wheels of the Juggernaut, and the devotees of the Japanese divinity Amida, who, amidst applause, made hecatombs for their divinity, throwing themselves into the sea or burying themselves alive. Similarly, to this type of institutional suicide must belong those *anciens habitans des Isles Canaries*, of whom Jean Dumas speaks. At certain festivals, having celebrated the rites of the god in their temple on the summit of a mountain, many of them tripped down the verdurous slopes with song and dance, and so, without hesitation, over the precipice edge which was to lead them to eternal happiness. Among the Northern peoples the fabled death of Odin resulted in approved and almost institutional suicides. The God-hero, on the approach of death, had assembled his warriors and, taking a spear, had wounded himself in nine symbolic places, saying that he thus went to join the Gods at their immortal feasting, where he would receive with honour all those who similarly died with their weapons in their hands.[1] As a result many of the hyperborean peoples, when faced with sickness, age, or the possibility of captivity, were accustomed to take their own lives, hoping in this way to ensure themselves a place in Valhalla. At the same time they were probably influenced by the primitive idea that the body will appear in the next world in the same state as it leaves this, and they preferred to make their entry into heaven with honourable wounds rather than decrepit and diseased.[2]

[1] A second tradition supposes Odin to have ended his earthly existence by hanging.

[2] There is a type of religious and institutional suicide distantly allied to some of the above examples, which exhibits a charming illogicality. It used to be the custom in Malabar for those taken ill to pray for recovery, vowing themselves to their idol in return for the grace that should cure them. Once hale and whole, the grateful

More philosophic and reflective is the type of institutional suicide connected with Brahmin asceticism. Broadly speaking, suicide among them seems always to have been praiseworthy when it was brought about, not by dislike of this world, but by a desire for the next. It was essential that it should involve no perturbation of spirit, and that it should be merely the ultimate application of those self-negatory principles which lead to Nirvana. The Institutes of Menu say: "As a tree is loosened from the river bank when the current carries it off, as a bird leaves the branches of a tree, so he who leaves his body . . . by his own volition, is delivered from a monster." And again: "The Brahmin who leaves his body by one of the devices [holding the breath, starvation, etc.] which the saints and great ones have practised, is admitted with honour into the realm of Brahma." Strabo says that at one time many of the Brahmins believed that sickness and disease were shameful and that the only honourable way to die was by fire. Thus, at the approach of disease or old age a Brahmin would erect a funeral pyre, preparatory to suicide. Then, says Strabo, "he anoints himself, sits down on the pyre, orders it to be lighted, and burns without a motion."

Buddhists in China used to show the same preference for fire in the institutional suicides which were performed in the mountains of Tien-tai, where three or four monks every year used to sacrifice their lives. They hoped to attain for themselves Nirvana, and for their community protection from evil influences, blessings, and a reputation for sanctity. Wide publicity was given to the suicidal solemnity, and on a fixed day the institutional suicide, in view of a large concourse of people, entered a furnace. There he

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patients fattened themselves for a year or two and then, upon one of their recurrent festivals, committed suicide by cutting off their own heads before the idol which had saved their lives. (Frazer, *The Dying God.*)

took his place on a wooden seat and the door was slammed to. The furnace was lighted, and after the ceremony the ashes of the suicide were collected, preserved, and washed with the reverence accorded to the relics of a saint.

Institutional suicides of a more practical flavour, whether with reference to the next world or to this, have always existed coincidently with such religious practices. Dumas says that the Gauls, before throwing themselves on the pyres of their chiefs or relatives, would make away all their goods and property, with the stipulation that these should be returned at a proper rate of interest when the recipients themselves should at last reach heaven. In Sparta the demands of a military state created what was practically another form of institutional suicide in the unwritten law that no Spartan might turn his back on an enemy. So strong was the feeling in favour of this law that the sole survivor of Thermopylae, having escaped an institutional suicide, was driven to a purely personal one. Another form of institutional suicide with a practical basis arose in countries where there was a danger of food shortage, such as Siberia and Greenland. In such places the suicide of the old and the sick, whether voluntary or forcibly imposed by the community, was closely connected with euthanasia. On the coral atolls of the South Seas, where the food problem was particularly acute, the necessity for such measures was got over by abortion and infanticide.[1]

[1] Stevenson tells us that in his time in certain of the Ellice Islands only two, and sometimes only one, child was allowed to each couple.