

CHAPTER III

THE SUICIDE HORROR AND THE SAVAGE

I

PERSONAL suicide, whether in the classical or modern world, bears no relationship whatsoever to institutional suicide. Personal suicide is a conscious revolt, a protest against either life or society; it is the most extreme act of individualism of which a man is capable. Unlike the institutional, the personal suicide is usually persecuted by society, or only grudgingly recognized even in times of tolerance. His history is not an account of attitudes and customs, but of individual actions and unique situations; often complex; not to be untangled; and lost to memory when the life itself is taken. General laws here are useless, and statistics are no more than numbers. The only true history is a tale carried on from day to day of lives that end in this way. Life itself is the only true log of such death. The bullet strikes down, the parasite gnaws home; there one can collect facts and make statements. But who will detect where and when, over how many years and through what woman, belief, or trick of the fancy, a man nurses his own ending?

Neither is it the obvious factors, the surface changes that new civilization brings, which alter the sum of these individual suicides. Though you may argue that Cato to-day can carry his integrity to the new world, or Romeo and Juliet remove from Mantua, Cato and such lovers will still die, unless they think in a different mould. Growing as each civilization flowers and then fading with the return to

barbarity, suicide is unaltered by the superficial. Simple hardships do not cause these deaths. The struggling tiller of the constricted spade-work centuries, with nothing to lose, never turns against himself. Only when he has stopped frantically scratching the soil and can take a moment's breath, only when he looks at his curious hands and listens to the monotonous tapping of his heart, does something break through into his consciousness. He takes gun, poison, water, fire; and so goes on his way.

Though statistics in their proper place must come in for what they are worth, the most effective way one can visualize and consider this turning back to death is, as it were, in a mirror. The one thing which we can follow, the one thing which is not altogether bound up in the particular, is the general attitude of society towards the individual suicide. By tracing this from the vaguest times until the present day, we shall watch the ebb and flow of opinion which, in its movement over this subject, will throw into the light innumerable single cases far removed in time and type, giving them a reality of background. By turning on these dead men the praise or blame to which they were once subjected—a social measure which we can gauge fairly exactly—we may reanimate the time and circumstances, pick out here and there from oblivion just the valuable and authentic fragment.

Personal suicide is in its broadest definition any action or abstention from action which causes death and which was undertaken with the knowledge that death would *probably* ensue. The degree of probability is of course most important, and different people will consider that quite different degrees are high enough to make an action suicidal. Usually the greater the critic's own intrepidity the higher will be the rate of probability necessary to make an action appear suicidal. In this definition the adjective *personal* automatically eliminates the man who gives his life for another, or the soldier who faces death on the battlefield. Fundamen-

tally, these are not personal suicides; and men in such cases act as social units. Their death is a sacrifice for the general good. If one wished, though the scope of this book is not large enough, one could extend our definition to take in self-mutilation, castration, and all sorts of metaphorical suicide, such as renunciation of ambition; also it would take in the things to which people refer in phrases like "social suicide" and "political suicide", when these are consciously undertaken. One knows of people who continually do the wrong thing, as if with intention, and continue to live as though dead.

The word *suicide* is itself of fairly recent origin. Though obviously derived from Latin, it corresponds to no single Latin word, for the Romans themselves always used periphrases to express the thought. Phrases such as *sibi mortem consciscere*—to procure his own death; *vim sibi inferre*—to cause violence to himself; or *sua manu cadere*—to fall by his own hand, are the commonest expressions. In England the early name for suicide seems to have been *self-homicide*, which brought the action into line with the current legal attitude. The word *suicide* first appears about the middle of the seventeenth century. In Edward Philipps's *New World of Words*, published in 1662, we find the following:

One barbarous word I shall produce, which is *suicide*, a word which I had rather should be derived from *sus*, a sow, than from the pronoun *sui*, unless there be some mystery in it; as if it were a swinish part for a man to kill himself.

In France the word probably came into use rather later. Richelet's dictionary of 1680 does not mention the word (though it gives *parricide*), and the general idea seems to be that its first appearance is in the *Dictionnaire de Trevoux* in 1752.¹

¹ Horace Walpole in 1763 has not adopted the new word; possibly it was not fashionable. He writes to the Earl of Hertford: "November passes with two or three self-murders and a new play."

We see that the English seventeenth-century writer has violent ideas about self-destruction. Before beginning to follow the fluctuations of public opinion, its incidental changes, and the long history of suicide, we must peg down at its origin this writer's violent prejudice. We must trace back to its first sources the suicide-antagonism, which different men and differing societies intensify or relax. This antagonism appears everywhere as an essential background, that civilization and ideas must modify before a reasoned attitude to suicide can be established.

The more obvious causes for such a suicide-antagonism, the directions in which one immediately turns for an explanation of the prejudice, are invariably only of secondary and contributory importance. They never themselves account for the basic horror. Let us first go back to the Jews. Suicide among these people prior to their final dispersion is extremely rare. The Old Testament presents, in all, nine cases spread over a period of some thousands of years, and for this reason one might be tempted to think that we had inherited an enduring prejudice from a Hebraistic attitude and teaching. Such, however, is not the case. There is no specific anti-suicide teaching in the Old Testament, and, what is more positive evidence, Saul's suicide is recorded without a hint of criticism. Later, Josephus says that "the bodies of those who commit suicide remain unburied until after sunset, although soldiers killed in battle may be buried before". This mild usage seems hardly serious enough to be a punishment. Josephus himself proves that among the common soldiery suicide was regarded as an appropriate sort of behaviour on certain occasions. After the defeat of his army by the Romans in Judea, Josephus wished to surrender to Vespasian; his troops, however, would not hear of it and flocked round him, urging him to kill himself and allow them to follow his example in a mass suicide. Josephus himself seems to have had a technical dislike of self-destruction.

tion, as he insisted on their substituting for simple suicide a drawing of lots by which each man was to kill his opposite. In this way a large number of his troops died. Luckily the historian himself was able to arrive at some sort of *modus vivendi* with his partner and thus both were spared.

Neither, as we shall see later in a detailed examination of the classical period, do we find the origins of the suicide-horror among the educated Greeks and Romans. Such an irrational attitude would run directly contrary to the usual conception of the classic spirit; traces of it certainly do appear in this period, but they are to be found in a sort of popular morality, subterranean, hardly expressed in literature or society, and dating back to something Dionysiac, primitive, and of an earlier date.

Similarly, and in spite of the ideas generally held, it is useless to look to Christianity for the origin of the suicide-antagonism and horror. The New Testament nowhere condemns suicide; and, as is shown elsewhere in the suicide history of the Christian and medieval periods, the Church offers no opposition to suicide before the third century. It is only after that date, when the Church has to shoulder the old popular moralities which come to the fore on the disintegration of civilized standards, and the break-up of the Roman Empire, that its attitude to suicide undergoes a gradual change.

No, it is in something far more primitive than classical Rome or the Christian Church that one must look to find the basis of the horror of suicide. Literature will not help us very much, for literary productions being always more or less the outcome of a certain degree of civilization will usually not be in touch with the primitive and irrational section of society which fosters the suicide horror, nor will literature exist at all in the early stages of social development when the suicide horror is born. It is rather to works on magic

and primitive religion, to the accounts of African tribes and Australian aborigines that one must look. There, in the rudimentary era of magic and superstition, the horror of suicide is formed, and it is through our inherited unconscious that it is handed on to us with other strange ideas whose original meaning has been equally obscured by time and transformation.

In the primitive taboo lies the origin of the suicide horror. Now the taboo itself originated in the belief generally held among primitive peoples in a "power" (mana, etc.) which permeates everything.

Among primitive peoples "power" is its own cause it exists before and independently of gods and spirits. It is merely "power", and whether it is good or evil depends upon how it comes into contact with man. Man must beware of it and act cautiously in regard to it, for if it can help, it can also harm. Anything which is filled with power must therefore be treated with certain measures of precaution; only certain specially qualified persons can come near it, others must avoid it.¹

It is in fact taboo, and taboo represents the negative side of magic; it is magic that is not directed to obtaining specific ends but rather to warding off possible evil.

Now this "power" was quite naturally believed to be particularly inherent in certain acts and situations, such as birth, marriage, and death, and it was about these points that taboos accumulated. They involved almost always a ritualistic system of lustration—which, though varied in form, had always the same end, the magic purification of those who had come into contact with the "power". Their uncleanness was viewed as a sort of infection that could be got rid of by washing, sacrifices, or some more complicated ritual. Until this infection was at an end the taboo effectually isolated the tainted individual from general society. The

¹ Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*.

dead were always unclean or taboo, and in Greece a bowl of water was placed outside a dead man's house so that the mourners might purify themselves before departure. Even more dangerous and unclean, however, were homicides and their victims; in fact, all those who had undergone a dangerous and sudden death. Both warriors and the slain were included in this taboo. Innumerable examples from all parts of the world testify that these feelings were widely and generally held.

One can distinguish two separate features in the fear of the unnaturally dead, and the murderer. First is the primitive and fundamental fear of the ghost which seems to be at the bottom of the whole thing. Not only will the man who has been snatched from life bear rancour and a desire for revenge, but the very fact that his soul has been taken by force and hurried away will mean that it retains a portion of matter; it is soiled and unclean, and will come back to haunt the earth. Lack of a proper burial was often considered to have the same effect, and it will be remembered how Odysseus punctiliously returned to Circe's Island to make a pyre for the dead Elpenor, even though the latter was "no great fighter, and loose minded". Secondly, there is the element of blood-guilt; though perhaps primarily connected with the ghost fear, this idea obviously acquired other social and almost moral significances. The idea of the "rightness" or "wrongness" of shedding certain blood (the tribe's or the family's) comes into play.

Three or four examples from the Indies and Europe will serve to illustrate the taboos which surrounded unnatural death. In the island of Timor in the East Indies the blood-stained chief, returning after battle, had to undergo a most exacting purification. "A special hut is prepared for him, in which he has to reside for two months, undergoing bodily and spiritual purification. During this time he may not go to his wife or feed himself; the food must

be put into his mouth by another person."¹ Such precautions are dictated by the tribe's simple fear of the ghosts of the slain to whom sacrifices are meanwhile offered in appeasement. Among the Puna Indians the purification was even more complex.

Attended by an old man, the warrior who had to expiate the crime of blood-guilt retired to the groves along the river bottom at some distance from the villages or wandered about the adjoining hills. During the period of sixteen days he was not allowed to touch his head with his fingers or his hair would turn white. If he touched his face it would become wrinkled. He kept a stick to scratch his head with, and at the end of every four days this stick was buried at the root and on the west side of a cat's claw tree and a new stick was made of greasewood, arrow bush, or any other convenient shrub. He then bathed in the river, no matter how cold the temperature. The feast of victory which his friends were observing in the meantime at the village lasted eight days. At the end of that time, or when his period of retirement was half completed, the warrior might go to his home to get a fetish made from the hair of the Apache whom he had killed. The hair was wrapped in eagle down and tied with a cotton string and kept in a long medicine basket. He drank no water for the first two days, and fasted for the first four.²

The essentially superstitious nature of such purifications and their direction against the ghosts of the dead is proved elsewhere by certain tribal usages, in which the element of purification is subordinated to positive measures taken to frighten off the ghosts themselves. Such is the case in New Guinea, where a whole village will turn out to try and terrify the ghost of a murdered man with shouts, threats, and the beating of drums. The Greeks also believed that the newly dead haunted their murderers, who, for this reason, became taboo. In Greece a murderer was not allowed to return to the district where his victim had been slain without a ritual-

¹ Frazer, *Taboo or the Perils of the Soul*.

² F. Russell, *The Puna Indians*. Bureau of American Ethnology.

istic purification. Only the sacrifice of a pig could lift the taboo and re-admit him to community life and the temple.

Plato, in his *Laws*, speaking of the involuntary killing of a free man, shows how, in his time, the close connection of penalties and punishments with superstition and taboo had not been lost sight of. "There is," he says,

an ancient tale, told of old, to which we must not fail to pay regards. The tale is this—"that the man slain by violence, who has lived a free and proud spirit, is wroth with his slayer when newly slain, and being filled also with dread and horror on account of his own violent end, when he sees his murderer going about in the very haunts which he himself had frequented, he is horror-stricken; and being disquieted himself, he takes conscience as his ally, and with all his might disquiets his slayer—both the man himself and his doings. Wherefore it is right for the slayer to retire before his victim for a full year, in all its seasons, and to vacate all the spots he owned in all parts of his native land" . . .

If such precautions were taken to calm the ghosts of the murdered and to counteract the uncleanness of the murderer, how disturbing to primitive minds must the suicide ghost have been. Not only had blood been spilt, but the blood of the family; for suicide is family blood-guilt *par excellence*.¹ Whereas, the ghost of a murdered man bore malice only against his executioner, the ghost of the suicide was believed to harm society in general, and the latter was held to be indiscriminately and collectively responsible for his death.

The suicide, it was thought, must have been grievously wronged or troubled; thus his spirit would be particularly revengeful. Among the savages suicide is indeed often committed as an act of direct vengeance; the suicide trusts that in a disembodied state he can more successfully work

¹ The Goajuro Indians of Columbia carry this idea yet further. If a man even accidentally cuts or wounds himself he is considered to have spilt family blood, and his maternal relations are entitled to demand blood-money as compensation.

evil on those who have harmed him. In Homeric times suicide came to be considered an effective act of vengeance for a double reason. Not only would the ghost haunt, but the act was in itself a supreme sacrifice, in return for which the gods would be almost bound to take such steps as the dead man had desired. Ajax, before falling on his sword, called to the furies to avenge his death upon the Greeks; later the defeat of the Spartans at Leuctra was attributed to the suicide of Skedastos, who long before had taken his life in vengeance for the violation of his daughters by Spartan soldiery.

The primary preoccupation of early society with the ghosts of suicides and of the violently dead is still reflected in popular superstition all over Europe. The ghost story, the appearance of the murdered man, the house of the suicide, prove that the unfortunate spirit does, in the belief of the people, even to-day, take vengeance on society. At Beaumont in Picardy, legend has it that the ghosts of certain *jeunes filles* who drowned themselves to escape the violence of the Knights Templars, still take appropriate vengeance. The long dead chevaliers are to be seen flying across the countryside pursued by the spectres of the infuriated girls. Even the dead, it seems, are not immune from molestation by the spirits of suicides. (It is worth while noticing that those "honourably" dead, that is, those whose suicide or violent end occurred in the service of the state or the state's ideals—those in fact whose death was sacrificial—do not usually haunt. Heroes and soldiers have no ghosts.)

Though we now tolerate our spectres, in early times strict measures were taken against those who thus "walked". The only way that society could protect itself was to destroy or annihilate the corpse, so that the risen ghost would be incapable of harm. Thus, at Porto Nuovo in New Guinea the public executioner was allowed to keep the jawbones of those he had killed and hang them on the walls of his hut.

This rudimentary precaution made it impossible for the ghosts of his victims to come and disturb him by their cries, groans, and imprecations. Similarly the aborigines of Australia used to cut off the thumbs of the enemies whom they murdered in order that their ghosts might be unable to fling a spear at them. The gunman without his trigger-finger would presumably be equally ineffective.

Such precautions taken against violent deaths, were doubly necessary against suicides whose rancour had a wider scope and did not confine itself to a single murderer. Thus in Athens at one time it was customary to lop off the hand of a suicide; if possible that with which he had taken his own life. A one-handed ghost was hardly formidable. In the island of Cos, if a man hung himself, not only was his body sent safely beyond the borders of the country, but with it went both the tree and the rope with which he had accomplished his purpose. All connection with the man's death was thus carefully severed. This may be well compared with the medieval custom observed at Metz, where suicides were put in a barrel and floated down the Moselle and so out of the territory which they would naturally wish to haunt, and away from those on whom they would want to be revenged. Another common expedient for getting rid of the ghost of a suicide was to burn the body, so that his spirit should find it impossible to "walk". Among the Wajagga of East Africa the fear of the suicide's ghost finds expression not in mutilation or banishment, but in an attempt at mollification. When a man has taken his own life by hanging, a goat is substituted for his body and hung from the same noose. It is subsequently cut down and killed as a sort of placatory sacrifice to the ghost of the dead man, which it is hoped will thus be restrained from haunting the community.

It is among the Baganda, however, that the procedure with regard to suicides gives us the most direct clues as to the origin of later practice in medieval Europe. The

Baganda women, having no knowledge of the real cause of pregnancy, believed that they could be impregnated by the particularly active and frustrated ghosts of suicides who wished to return to life. For this reason, whenever they passed the spot where a suicide had been burned, they threw a little grass or a few sticks on the place, thinking in this way to circumvent the ghost. Exactly similar precautions were used, and for similar reasons, when passing the grave of a child who had been born feet first. The ghosts of suicides and children were thus both considered to be specially active. Now, what is of particular interest, as showing the reasons for later European procedure, is the treatment of these unfortunate children. Every child born feet first was considered unclean, and strangled. Then, in order to confine its restive spirit, it was securely *buried at a cross-roads*. Here is the link that directly explains our later English custom of burial at a cross-roads.¹ Even our habit of transfixing the suicide's heart with a stake, can be traced back to a simple anti-ghost measure. In order to restrain the vampire from "walking" and doing its harm, a stake had to be driven through its heart, thus pinning within the body the evil and errant spirit; the transfixing of the suicide is analogous.

Thus the whole basis of the historical suicide-horror can be traced back to a primitive taboo and the fear of the ghost. The prejudices of Saint Louis, of Hamlet's grave-diggers, and of Victorian society, fall into line with the best aboriginal ideas, and are not out of place to-day in mud-huts, kraals, and jungles.

It remains, however, to trace the transference of these simple ghost fears and taboo horrors into the realm of ethics and religion. How and when did these fears and horrors put on respectability? It will be remembered that tabooed

¹ Such a spot may have been chosen so that the suicide's ghost should not be able to find its way home.

persons were thought to be in some way "unclean". Now this notion referred to something purely physical. No idea of moral uncleanness was involved, for even the successful warrior whose victims were a source of honour to himself and the community, came under the ban of the "unclean".

To get rid of this physical uncleanness and to come out of taboo, a certain magic had to be observed and certain altogether practical purifications had to be performed, such as elaborate washings, shaving of the hair, abstaining from foods and so on. In time, however, these purifications lost their original and practical meaning and took on a symbolic significance. Thus the idea arose that they cleansed the subject from moral guilt rather than from a simple taint. The growth of religious ideas gave a particular twist to the situation and these purifications were viewed as efforts to make atonement to some god for a wrong done. Thus the original act which had involved the taboo became a moral and religious sin. The elaborate precautions taken to lay the ghost of the suicide seemed in time to be either expiatory sacrifices to the gods for a sin committed (the Wajagga's goat, for instance), or direct punishments brought by society against the corpse of the suicide (cf. the Athenian custom). In this way by an altogether erroneous interpretation of the facts, suicide itself became criminal, an offence against gods and men.

There was, however, another coincidence which accelerated this process. It so happened that hanging, and in a lesser degree drowning (both favourite forms of suicide), were directly connected with certain religious and mythical rites. Even to-day a particular opprobrium attaches to these types of suicide. The reason for this opprobrium can be traced back to classical times, where it first appears from a remote and unplumbed past. The rites of Artemis, Attis, Bacchus, and Odin in the North, all probably involved at some time

or other the hanging of a voluntary priest or involuntary victim as sacrifice, and in this way hanging came to be considered as a semi-sacred death. With the progress of time and the growth of moral ideas these victims to the gods were replaced either by symbolic dolls or by swinging festivals, in which the celebrants on swings symbolized the suspended sacrifice. The social conscience now looked back with shame and disgust on the human sacrifices of the past, and, by a familiar paradox of primitive thought, what had been sacred, became accursed. The ritualistic death by suspension, the praised social and sacrificial suicide, disappeared and was replaced by a horror of hanging, and particularly of suicide by hanging. (This transference of feeling corresponds to a general law which might run something like this: when any type of sacrificial suicide loses its social sanction, it becomes invested with a suicide horror which tends to be strong in direct ratio to the strength of the earlier sanction.)

A glance at the use of suspended puppets, swinging, and swinging festivals, will show how widespread was the belief in the religious nature of these acts, and thus, originally, in the religious nature of the hanging they represent. The custom of swinging as a magic or religious rite intended to bring about a certain end is general among primitive peoples. In the Indies priests rock themselves to and fro to obtain inspiration, others swing at harvest time, and yet others swing to ensure good hunting. In Esthonia the custom is connected with the summer solstice, and to-day in Calabria at Christmas-time swinging is still practised, and its devotional aspect is recognized.

Athens in classical times celebrated a swinging festival in which, more clearly than elsewhere, the religious origin of the custom is to be seen. Bacchus, when he brought the gift of wine to man, entrusted his secret to a certain Icarus, whom he sent out into the world to spread the precious knowledge.

So Icarus loaded a wagon with wine-skins and set out on his travels, the dog Maera running beside him. He came to Attica, and there fell in with shepherds tending their sheep, to whom he gave of the wine. They drank greedily, but when some of them fell down dead drunk, their companions thought the stranger had poisoned them with intent to steal the sheep; so they knocked him on the head. The faithful dog ran home and guided his master's daughter Erigone to the body. At sight of it she was smitten with despair and hanged herself on a tree beside her dead father, but not until she had prayed that, unless the Athenians should avenge her sire's murder, their daughters might die the same death as she. Her curse was fulfilled, for soon many Athenian damsels hanged themselves for no obvious reason. An oracle informed the Athenians of the true cause of this epidemic and instituted the swinging festival to appease Erigone; and at the vintage they offered the first of the grapes to her and her father.¹

We see here the link of swinging rites not only with religion but with suicide; a double connection that is later repeated in Rome. There, when a man had committed suicide by hanging, a doll was hung up in a tree on the day that the parentalia of the dead man were celebrated.

Such puppet and swinging rites, though deriving from religion, can be connected in two ways with the general suicide horror. First, the idea of swinging—either the puppet in the wind, or a living celebrant—may well have an extended significance as a practical move to frighten the ghost. It bears great similarity to the Malayan practice, where a witch-doctor will swing to and fro to chase away disease or evil spirits. Secondly, the familiar idea of purification probably entered into the custom, for air, like fire, was regarded as an efficacious agent against things "unclean".

The particular horror attached to suicide by drowning, and its religious nature, was mentioned above. This horror was brought about by the same sort of forces that made hanging so reprehensible. Firstly, rivers were almost always sacred to some local deity, and suicide by drowning was an

¹ Frazer, *The Dying God*.

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act of impiety that contaminated the water. Further, it appears that death by drowning was once sacred. The primitive Roman cult of the Tiber included the sacrifice of human beings who were flung into the waters. Later these, like the suspended victims, were substituted for a symbolic sacrifice, a bundle of osiers; and thus in time the peculiar horror of suicide by drowning developed.

There are two other reasons for the growth of the suicide horror, which, though less fundamental than the taboo and religious causes, nevertheless were operative before the traceable history of suicide begins. In the first place, suicide shows a contempt for society. It is rude. As Kant says, it is an insult to humanity in oneself. This most individualistic of all actions disturbs society profoundly. Seeing a man who appears not to care for the things which it prizes, society is compelled to question all it has thought desirable. The things which makes its own life worth living, the suicide boldly jettisons. Society is troubled, and its natural and nervous reaction is to condemn the suicide. Thus it bolsters up again its own values.

The last force which turns opinion against the suicide is the economic one. Though a Marxian interpretation of the social attitude to suicide would be amusing, the economic element has in actuality usually played second fiddle to religious and superstitious factors. Even in primitive societies, however, the economic factor is easily discoverable. A grown male suicide deprives the tribe of a useful warrior; a woman's suicide means the death of a potential mother. Within the primitive family-unit similar arguments work even more strongly. From an early age every able-bodied son is a productive unit in the family economy. His suicide causes dislocation and reduces the production of wealth. The loss of the father is even more serious.

The strongly economic attitude of parents in primitive society is illustrated in an extreme case by certain islanders

(and also in antiquity by the customs of Asia Minor and Cyprus). These islanders as a matter of course let their unmarried daughters out on hire, and mothers "wait impatiently for the time when their young daughters will be able to help the household by their earnings".

In England in the nineteenth century the capitalist system produced a state of affairs in which the industrial labouring family could only keep its head above water by utilizing its every unit from the age of six and eight up. In such a family, as in the average farming household, and even in the economy of the medieval artisan, an individual suicide put an added economic burden on all those who remained. Later, in tracing the history of suicide, it will become clear how slavery, feudalism, and the practice of confiscating the property of suicides, in their turn all lead to an accentuation of an economic prejudice against suicide. It must be noticed, however, that this economic prejudice, as well as the affront offered to society by the fact of suicide, create an antagonism to the act that is reasonable, tempered, and usually definable; an attitude, in other words, that differs sharply from the blind, unreasoning, vindictive, hate and horror, which are based on the old taboos and ghost fears.

II

Institutional suicide, as we have seen, flourishes among primitives; yet personal suicide among certain savages seems to be unknown. When questioned on the subject the aborigines of Australia and the natives of the Caroline Islands apparently laughed at the very idea of a man killing himself; the notion was to them preposterous. Generally, however, personal suicide does occur among primitive peoples in varying degrees of frequency. It differs, however, very considerably from suicide as it has developed in the Western world, self-destruction is not often caused by the

nostalgia, melancholy, pain, fear, love and poverty that we meet in civilization. Most commonly, primitive suicides result from anger, jealousy and (particularly) desire for revenge. These suicides, from their very nature, are anti-social. Usually they meet with the disapproval that one would expect. For instance, among the Pelew islanders suicides are not buried, and the natives of Borneo, half-anticipating Dante, believe that those who commit suicide by drowning spend their existence in the next world up to their waists in water. Condemnation of personal suicide, however, is not universal, and different tribes take differing attitudes. One meets everything from complacency to absolute condemnation.

The relative rareness of the usual European suicide motives can be partly accounted for by the closeness of primitive tribal organization which leaves little room for the unappreciated individual or the bewildered and isolated misfit. The supply of essential wants—sex, food, and so on—is regulated by the community; and in the same way it supplies and regulates ideas and mental patterns. When a psychological misfit of some sort does lead to suicide, the subject, thinking in the terms of his tribe, usually believes that he is possessed and that his personality has been affected by malign influences. Such misfits apparently are not uncommon in parts of the Niger valley, where usually the suicide, unable to fight against the melancholia which has come to “possess” him, simply and literally “holds his breath” until he dies.

The most common type of primitive suicide—the revenge suicide, with an element of uncontrolled anger often visible—is best illustrated by a reference to child psychology. The child who has been misused or punished wishes to die, and thereby to be revenged on its parents. It says, “If I were dead, *then* you’d be sorry.” The primitive goes a step further. He puts the threat into practice. Such suicides,

though they grow less common in succeeding stages of civilization, by no means disappear. Chatterton, damning an unappreciative public before he died, reflects an element of such a revenge suicide.

That even to-day the revenge motive can be carefully and naïvely elaborated in a primitive way is shown by the story of a French nineteenth-century lover whose mistress had betrayed him. Before killing himself he called his servant and gave orders that after his death a candle should be made of his fat and carried, lighted, to his mistress. To accompany it he wrote a note, saying that as he had burned for her in life, so he did in his death. Proof of his passion she would find in the light by which she read his letter—a flame fed by his miserable body.

Among primitives the cause of suicide is often slighter than among such "civilized" people, and members of the Iji tribe will sometimes destroy themselves at the slightest provocation, abuse, or chaff. Such primitive suicides expect to get their revenge in one of two ways. Either they believe that their ghosts will haunt and plague their enemies, or, more rarely, they hope to bring into operation the tribal law of retaliation whereby their enemies will also be compelled to commit suicide. The nature of the revenge expected varies from tribe to tribe and country to country. In Northern Siberia the suicide relies on his ghost to revenge his death; in Southern India he leaves the task to tribal custom, for in the Peninsular the law of retaliation prevails in all its rigour. If a quarrel takes place and a man tears out his own eye or kills himself, his adversary must do the same, either to himself or to one of his relations. The women carry the barbarity still further. For a slight affront put on them, a sharp word said to them, they will go and smash their head against the door of the woman who has offended them, and the latter is obliged immediately to do the same. If a woman poisons herself by drinking the juice of a poisonous herb,

the other woman who drove her to this violent death must poison herself likewise; else her house will be burned, her cattle carried off, and injuries of all kinds done her until satisfaction is given.¹

Naturally in many tribes complex influences modify the simple anger-revenge suicide. Thus among the Todas, one finds the actual method of suicide dictated by religious belief. In their Kwoten god-myth suicide occurs by strangling; thus a Toda, when furiously angry and threatening to commit suicide, will say, "My neck tying, I will die." And this, in fact, is the type of suicide that is chosen.

For our purpose we may class most of the personal suicides of the Orient until the last hundred years with primitive suicides; for these Eastern civilizations, though highly organized, exhibit the same static qualities as primitive civilizations. Among Orientals, however, something very curious happened. Apart from the usual types of institutional suicide, such as death of widows and attendants, or military suicide, there was an absolute institutionalization of the typically primitive anger-revenge suicide. This prevalent type of personal suicide was, in fact, made social and thus officially sanctioned; at the same time the complex nature of Eastern civilization broadened and complicated the causes which in primitive tribes produce the simple anger-revenge suicide. In China, for instance, the particular position of the father, and ideas of metempsychosis, brought new elements into play. In Japan the whole thing was given a decidedly political and national twist, so that a man would commit suicide out of dislike for a policy rather than a person, or because he had failed in some public mission.

None the less, the institutionalized survival of primitive motives everywhere remained the basic element of typical Oriental suicide. Between the five hundred Chinese philoso-

¹ Father Martin, *Lettres edificantes et curieuses*, 1781, quoted in Frazer's *The Dying God*. Such suicides are semi-institutionalized.

phers who threw themselves into the sea in the reign of the Emperor Chi-Tiang-Ti, being unwilling to survive the burning of their books, and the last political suicide of this century, there is usually a persistent similarity of motive.

The semi-institutional nature of all *hara-kiri* is particularly plain. But certain types of *hara-kiri* were inevitably more social and less personal than others. Thus the *hara-kiri* committed by criminals and defeated opponents with the gracious permission of authority was a procedure as absolutely institutionalized as Hindu *suttee*. This concession to the condemned resembles in some ways the *mortis arbitrium* of the Romans which we shall meet later. Marco Polo describes the Chinese procedure in detail.

When a man [he says] in the great province of Mabar has committed a crime and has been condemned to death, he tells the king that he wishes to kill himself for the honour, and in the love of, such and such an idol. The king accepts, and then all the relatives and friends of the man who is to kill himself place him upon a seat and, having provided him with at least twelve knives, carry him around the town, crying: "This brave man is going to kill himself for the love of such and such an idol." Having thus paraded him, they arrive at the place where the execution is to take place, and he who is to die takes a knife and cries aloud: "I kill myself for the honour of such and such an idol." And with one knife he stabs himself in the arm, and with another knife he stabs himself in the other arm, and with yet another he stabs himself in the stomach, and so dies. And his relatives then burn his body with acclamation.

Thus even the execution of *hara-kiri* always was, as it still is, a solemn ceremonial. Usually staged in the presence of witnesses, it involves a set ritual, though not always one similar to that which Marco Polo saw. More commonly a dagger, held in the left hand, is plunged into the belly on the same side below the navel. The cut is then carried across to the right, where the blade is turned and finally drawn

upwards. The operation must be carried out with absolute impassivity.¹

It must be emphasized that the foregoing remarks do not attempt to cover the whole ground. They refer simply to what seems most characteristic of Oriental suicide, and they are chiefly relevant to a period prior to the infiltration of Western influences. To-day the situation conforms much more to that of Europe. Both the causes of suicide and the attitude of society towards it have changed and are still changing. East and West begin to approximate even here. In Japan *seppuku*, *hara-kiri*, and the old forms of suicide, are disappearing. It is no longer possible to say as Montesquieu did in the eighteenth century that the Japanese "rip open their bellies for the least fancy". To-day nine out of ten Japanese suicides drown or hang themselves. In nineteenth-century China, opium—certainly not in the approved tradition—became the commonest instrument of suicide. None the less, several thousands of cases showed the old anger-jealousy-revenge motives still paramount, though other causes, such as the marriage relationship, were also of considerable importance. An examination of five Chinese towns in 1898 led to the belief that there were half a million suicides per annum for the whole country, or 1 person in 800. Such estimates are unreliable, but the fact remains that a society was formed to keep four boats circulating around the Foochow bridge to save intending suicides from drowning.

¹ In 1868 twenty Japanese knights involved in the murder of a French officer were condemned to execute *hari-kari* before the French ambassador. The latter, however, found it impossible to appreciate to the full this token of Nipponese friendship. When eleven of the victims had done their duty he could bear the sight no longer and the remainder were reprieved and banished.

