ARTICLE

The Shirkers of Life: Suicide in the Trenches

Brigitte Mahuzier
Bryn Mawr College

SUMMARY

This paper examines the reasons why, during WWI and its aftermath, in the great frenzy of commemorations, suicide in the trenches was either transformed into self-sacrifice or simply ignored, erased from collective memory.

KEYWORDS: Great War, trenches, suicide, sacrifice, murder, infanticide, heroism, commemoration, community, state contract

A person committing suicide leaves behind an emotional and epistemological void. Whether the act of taking one's life is preceded by silence, as was almost always the case for suicides in the trenches; by the most deceptively anodyne last words, such as Socrates asking Crito to repay his small debt to Aesclepius, or by poignant farewell letters like Virginia Woolf's letter to Leonard; those "left behind" are left struggling to understand not just the reason or reasons for the act, but the act itself. As Françoise, the wise servant in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, says as she watches with dismay a parade of young soldiers ready for the next war, why give up your life when "le seul cadeau que le bon dieu ne fasse jamais deux fois" (88).

If Françoise, as a good specimen of the secular spirit of her time, considers the sacrifice of one's life as a sign of pure madness, Socrates's last words in the *Phaedo* invite us to examine the gift of life from the rational perspective of the philosopher. As Jacques Derrida shows in *Donner la mort*, the gift of life (*don de la vie*) has its counterpart in the gift of death (*don de la mort*), as both life and death are "given." Furthermore, as gifts they both entail a debt, or counter-gift. For Françoise, to give up the gift of life, as soldiers do on the battlefield, smacks not only of madness ("c'est ni plus ni moins des fous") but of a fall from humanity: "ce n'est pas des hommes mais des lions" (Proust 88). For Socrates, however, the "gift of death" is a precious gift in that it allows him the possibility to commit suicide before he is killed by the City of Athens, which condemned him to death. For this, he feels indebted to Aesclepius, the god of medicine, the "doser" of *pharmakon*, who provided him, through careful dosage, with the "gift of death." But since this is a gift entailing a debt, Socrates has then to free himself from it in order to assume his act of suicide as *sui-cide*: the killing of the self by the self, reclaiming the *sui* as the conscious and deliberate agent of the *cide*.[1] When the philosopher "se donne la mort" by paying back Aesclepius, he then becomes master of his own time. Socrates chooses the time, not to mention the means of his own death, in an act of reason and self-respect; he deliberately refuses to do what his disciples encourage him to do, cling to a life whose end is decided by others or by external circumstances.

For Françoise, to let yourself be killed on the battlefield is a sign of madness, for there is no assurance of being paid back for a life that's all you have. But when all things are lost, on the

battlefield or elsewhere, when the state or some external decree has decided on your imminent death, when you feel condemned to certain death, suicide seems reasonable, a way to reclaim control over one's life, one's time. What I wish to stress from the outset is the radical, antisocial, anti-natural (why die when you have more time to live?) nature of suicide. Suicide creates unease in the witnesses (in this case Socrates's disciples) who do not grasp the reasons behind the gesture, or perhaps who do not want to grasp them for the understanding would devalue their own life. Suicide makes us uneasy. Not being able (or willing, or something in-between) to grasp suicide, the "only serious philosophical problem," we talk, and talk, we add coats of interpretations, and we devalue language and reason in the process (Camus 15). For talking about someone's suicide, attempting to find "the" reason(s) for it, seems in the end futile, preposterous, and only enlarges the incommensurable nature of the gap between those who live (contingently) and those who are dead (out of choice). Those who are dead took their reasons with them, beyond the tomb, no matter what they wrote or said. Silence is what they left behind, a deafening kind of silence, *le silence assourdissant du suicidé*.[2]

The French language is itself eloquent on the subject of suicide. Among a number of euphemisms (such as "mettre fin à ses jours," to put an end to one's days), two verbal expressions have a story to tell. Whereas "donner la mort," as noted above, participates in what Derrida points to as the economy of gift and social contract, where it takes at least two to function, the reflexive version, "*se* donner la mort," would seem to derail or highjack the reciprocal nature of the contract (as gift/counter-gift), by making the "don" reflexive. The other verbal expression in French to refer to the act of "committing suicide" is "se suicider." The *-cide* suffix—which can be conveniently used with appropriate roots designating the object of extermination, such as matricide, infanticide, and also insecticide, pesticide—should, with the prefix *sui*, suffice to indicate the killing of self. It does so in English, but in French, a supplemental and superfluous reflexive pronoun "se" is added, and instead of saying "il ou elle *a suicidé*", one must say" il ou elle *s'est suicidé(e)*." It seems to work like censorship, which in the case of self-censorship, is often designated as *s'auto-censurer*, with its superfluous reflexive pronoun (*se*) making no more sense than in *se suicider*, but indicating that something is amiss: what is normally done by outside forces is instead turned toward the self.[3]

Suicide and Sacrifice

And indeed something is amiss with this act, which is claiming its autonomy from the contract, civil or religious, and its radical difference from self-sacrifice. Suicide is not to be confused with self-sacrifice, for self-sacrifice (and sacrifice in general) is eminently legible, socially acceptable, desirable, and often encouraged in societies based on contract. As Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert write in their "Essai sur la nature et la notion du sacrifice," published in 1899, "il n'y a peut-être pas de sacrifice qui n'ait quelque chose de contractuel" (there might well be no sacrifice without something contractual about it) (127). Sacrifice and contracts go hand in hand; neither of them is disinterested as they are both based on the idea of "rachat" (buying back a debt or a wrongdoing). Suicide, on the other hand, rejects the contract, and therefore the debt and everything that goes along with debt; it is not invested in contractual logic, and it is a solitary gesture, socially unacceptable. As the pleonastic reflexive pronoun indicates, it is an act of barricading the self with layers of self-protection. The *suicidé* (there is no adequate translation of this substantive in English) takes his or her secret with him or her, beyond the grave, leaving this grave in the middle of the land left behind. The *suicidé* is the black sheep of the flock, not the sacrificial lamb. There is even a kind of romantic aura attached to suicide, the ultimate gesture of rejection, defiance, the

beautiful last gesture of self-destruction in a world pitifully clinging to remnants of sordid life. Artists and poets, have always been attracted to suicide like moths to light, often burning themselves in the process, or, as Elizabeth Leake argues in *After Words: Suicide and Authorship in Twentieth-Century Italy*, deliberately turning the act of suicide into a work of art, a form of authorship-recognition, as the *suicidé*'s life and death become texts to be read.

Before the War: Emile Durkheim and the Pre-War Military Theorists

Suicide, clearly, is not sacrifice. What may seem obvious now was more complex for the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who, in 1897, published the results of an important study on suicide with the unadorned title, *Le suicide*, indicating that he was a pioneer in this field. In his analysis, Durkheim, who was particularly interested in the relation between suicide and peace/wartime, does not separate suicide from self-sacrifice in the death of a soldier, considering self-sacrifice in battle as a variant of suicide. He creates a strange oxymoronic expression to define it: "un suicide altruiste obligatoire" (an obligatory altruistic suicide). "Le soldat qui court au-devant d'une mort certaine pour sauver son régiment ne veut pas mourir, et pourtant n'est-il pas l'auteur de sa propre mort au même titre que l'industriel ou le commerçant qui se tuent pour échapper aux hontes de la faillite?" (4). According to Durkheim, the difference between the soldier who runs to his death and the industrialist who commits suicide is that the first, who takes his orders from without, does it for the others and is therefore altruistic, whereas the second, who takes no order but his own, does it for himself, and is therefore selfish. Noting that the suicide rate tends to be lower during periods of war, he concludes that wars are good for morale, because they bring out the spirit of selfless sacrifice, or altruistic suicide, tightening social bonds between men in what he considers to be an increasingly selfish and materialistic society, run by industrial adventurers or shopkeepers—precisely those who commit suicide selfishly.

Glorious and Useful Sacrifice

But Durkheim is not a military theorist, and his vision of the "altruistic suicide" of the soldier on the battlefield would be anathema to pre-1914 military analysts. If for the sociologist self-sacrifice at war is a variant of suicide, for the military theorists, then, self-sacrifice is never to be confused with suicide. Military theorists absorbed the ideas of Carl von Clausewitz's treaty on war, according to which it is the nature of modern warfare to push nations or groups at war to extremes, the winner being the one who is the more determined of the two, ready to annihilate the enemy through all available means and the strength of the will. A good soldier, like a good officer (rank is immaterial) is thus one who accepts without questioning the certainty of death. He is what François Lagrange, in his historical study of the notion of sacrifice just before World War I, calls a "combattant de la 'mort certaine'" (a fighter doomed to certain death) (63). But what the rationalist Durkheim calls a suicide, evoking the platonic ideal of reasonable choice, the military theorists in their pre-war enthusiasm call sacrifice, evoking religious fervor and the necessary holding back of personal reasoning. Thus we read in the military reflections of a pre-war military instructor at the École de Guerre, Lucien Cardot, clearly inspired by Clausewitz's concept of war as a battle of wills, that the solution to leading men to their death is to instill in them the spirit of sacrifice. "Il faut trouver le moyen de conduire les gens à la mort," he writes, "sinon il n'y a plus de guerre possible: ce moyen est l'esprit du sacrifice" (65). According to Lagrange, when Cardot wrote this in 1908, he was retired from the army and could express his opinion without fear. For

him, to go to war meant to go to one's death, and the trick was to instill in his troops the same spirit of sacrifice, of religious inspiration.

But if the lexical and semantic register of war has become, in the pre-war era, fundamentally religious, it does not mean that legions of soldiers are led to their certain death like sacrificial lambs to the god of war, in a kind of Girardian scenario of mass violence. Quite the contrary: at the onset of World War I, success being predicated on material and manpower, each man was not only useful alive but also in death. Each individual soldier must exact the maximum profit from his own death, not for himself but as a sacrifice for his unit, his corps, and by extension his country. According to General de Castelnau, also quoted by Lagrange, the soldier, confronted by a certain death, must, "mourir puissamment, et pour cela, organiser solidement et judicieusement la position de résistance sur le terrain choisi" (69). Thus suicide is not only an anti-social act, it is a stupid waste of a good life that could have been put to use for military profit and the benefit of the nation.

According to the pre-1914 military heroic and pragmatic vision of war, dying in battle still conserves the kind of flamboyance of the duel, based on the visibility and the respect of the "worthy enemy." This concept, developed by Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Zarathustra*, inspired many idealist young men, bored by the humdrum of bourgeois life (among them Ernst Jünger and Pierre Drieu la Rochelle). Yet it was doomed, antiquated the minute the war of movement, with the cavalry playing a major role, turned into a war of positions, with the infantry immobilized in the mud of the Western Front for the next four years, having only very occasionally a direct frontal contact with the enemy. From this moment, self-sacrifice in white gloves, a red uniform, and a handsome *képi*, dying standing up, charging the enemy with a bayonet—all those beautiful images fit for Rimbaud's childish version of war as in "L'éclatante victoire de Sarrebruck" (1870)—suddenly become dusty accessories to be relegated to a *cabinet de curiosités*.

Charles Péguy's Last Heroic Gesture

The last to play the noble self-sacrificing hero perfectly, according to the old military doctrine, with good timing and the right gesture, was Charles Péguy, the mythographer of Joan of Arc, who himself would become mythologized for having died so gallantly. Years later, in 1937, when Jean Renoir filmed *La Grande Illusion*, he both denounced and celebrated the character of Captain de Boeldieu, the defunct aristocratic vision of the noble enemy whose sense of decorum—wearing white gloves as he plays the flute to distract attention from those escaping—could be interpreted as the *chant du cygne* of a dying breed. Péguy, the type of heroic soldier that might have inspired Renoir, died standing up, killed in action on the field of honor. His death, at the time, constituted what Lagrange terms "une combinaison optimale" (78), an optimal combination of glorious and useful action: glorious as he stood up alone as the battle was raging, and useful as he inspired his men to go to their death. He believed that the war he was fighting was a "just war," and like his heroine, Joan of Arc, that he had a mission to accomplish, no matter how desperate or unreasonable it was. According to Camille Riquier, Péguy's latest biographer, for some of his contemporaries on the left, such as Paul Léautaud, his death was viewed as stupid and useless; but for others, like Maurice Barrès, on the nationalist right, in agreement with the pre-war military dogma of "optimal combination," it was heroic and useful. The fact that Péguy died on the day the French army won the first battle of the Marne, on September 5, 1914, was seen by them as proof that military sacrifice was justified and good. Whether an "imbécile" (an epithet he claims for

himself in defiance of the secular intellectual dogma of his time) or a national hero, Péguy died just in time. Shortly after the mythologized episode of the Marne, the last war of movement—modernity interfering in the form of the taxi's horse power—the war became immobile, the enemy invisible, while sacrifice turned into massive and anonymous killing.

After the War: Maurice Halbwachs

Writing at the time of the first great frenzy of commemorations, Maurice Halbwachs contests Durkheim's conflation of sacrifice and suicide in *Les causes du suicide*, published in 1930. In this work, Halbwachs, a disciple of Durkheim, shows not only that self-sacrifice was linked to a military elite who had prepared for the wrong war, but also that sacrifice became endangered as such by the length of the conflict, its massiveness, extreme violence, anonymous nature, and lack of visible enemy. In other words, there was nothing left for old-style heroism of the Péguy model, or for the Saint-Cyrian cavalry with their elegant attire (unless, that is, you left for Arabia, and your name was Lawrence). And yet, ironically, it is in this post-heroic moment, when heroic self-sacrifice is more than ever celebrated as a quasi-religious dogma, that suicide must be erased from the picture, unrecorded.

A soldier on whose death record the word *suicide* appeared could not be counted among war heroes, to be honored by the state; their names were erased from the lists of the honorable casualties. In France, where every village gathered funds to build commemorative monuments, their names, not appearing on the official list, would not be engraved among those "morts pour la France." Their widows would not get their pensions, and the whole family sometimes chose to forget their existence for fear of being humiliated. All this shaming, in the form of monetary and psychological retaliation, prompted falsified death declarations and erasure of the word "suicide" from the official documents, some of this done at the source, out of compassion, to spare the family or the spouse. This alternative truth was then replaced with the wooden language of the patriotic press, such as "mort pour la patrie" or "died in combat"; whatever the language, it was all the same ready-made expressions, piously serving as a cover-up—pitiful, tragic, and risible at once.

Risible and profoundly tragic, such are the stories told by Pierre Drieu La Rochelle in *La Comédie de Charleroi*, published in 1932. In the eponymous story, which takes place in 1919, the narrator, a young penniless veteran of Charleroi (as was Drieu himself), is hired by a rich Jewish woman, Mme Pragen, to search for traces of her son, who died, or disappeared, at Charleroi where they had fought together. During their trip to Belgium he reveals himself as a resentful man, sarcastic, anti-Semitic, misogynist, who cruelly makes fun of Mme Pragen (whose name, it should be noted, is a near acronym for *argent*). He describes her as obsessed by a desire for recognition, dressed up absurdly in a nurse's uniform, eager for the approval of her easily bought entourage, and using her son's death for her own self-glorification and social acceptance. In sum she is the bad mother, a familiar figure in anti-war literature.

At the end of this exhausting voyage on the battlefield of Charleroi where he himself relives his own tragic fall from the Nietzschean ideal of superheroism, however, he describes her as empty and lost, a figure from Greek tragedy. At this point, Drieu's pitiless narrator comes to feel a kind of camaraderie with the woman whose horrible solitude he begins to grasp, akin, as he notes in passing, to that of a battlefield after a battle. Recognizing the comedy he himself had played on that day at Charleroi (when he smeared his face with his own blood, exaggerating his wounds for

his superiors), he finally feels compassion for the woman, as he sees that they are both victims of the comedy of war. He comes to understand that all the fuss she makes over her son—organizing a day of commemoration in his honor in the little village of Charleroi, paying for a mass, distributing money to the children who attend the mass, along with images of her son, listening to the mayor's boring and cliché-filled speech, all that frenzy of parades, speeches, all those gestures, whose vocabulary is so limited and repetitive—is just a sadly inadequate way for her to try to deal with her loss.

In 1915, in his essay "Considerations on War and Death," Sigmund Freud had written about the effects of World War I's casualties, arguing that the idea of immortality had been invented by those who were unable to forget, to deal with such carnage. Drieu's narrator practically quotes him: "L'idée d'immortalité est né dans l'esprit de ceux qui se souviennent, qui ne peuvent oublier" (84). As he comes to understand what Mme Pragen is going through, he also comes to terms with this nagging need in her to remember her son, no matter how useless all the fuss she makes is for him, and how limited the expression of grief is for her: "Les morts se promènent dans les cerveaux des mères, des amis. C'est là leurs Champs-Elysées" (84). In the end, he concludes, "Le monde est absurde, mais les gestes qu'il fait sont beaux" (83). This *Comédie* is both a tragedy and a work of derision, and perhaps we can see, in Drieu's profoundly ambivalent and confused feelings, torn between sarcasm and compassion, a troubled mind. Perhaps we can link this obsession with suicide that appears in his stories—his narrator is tempted but saved by an accidental intervention—and who will later prevail, as Drieu himself, after a failed first attempt a week before the end of World War II, succeeds in committing suicide 15 March 1945.[4]

Framing Suicide: Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*

In 1929 Robert Graves, one of the many British poets who wrote about their experience of fighting in the trenches in Northern France, published his memoir, *Goodbye to All That*. As Paul Fussell stresses in his analysis of Graves's war writing in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Graves is a comedian, and humor, in all its shades and kinds, is his favorite weapon. In Chapter VI, "Theater of War," Fussell analyzes Graves's particular forms of humor, always in the service of satire. With his "first-rate nose for anything nasty" (according to Sassoon), Graves builds his war memoirs out of "anecdotes heavily influenced by the techniques of [British] stage comedy . . . imposing a pattern of farce and comedy onto the blank horrors or meaningless vacancies of experience" (107). It is not until we are a third into the book that Graves introduces us to his "first spell in the trenches," as his guide, Captain Dunn, puts it, and his first dead bodies (125). Another third of the book later, we leave the French trenches (the year is 1917), as young Robert is sent back to the UK on account of a bronchitis diagnosed by the same Dr. Dunn. What is striking, and emphasized by the author himself, is that the three years he spent in the French trenches (including his leaves) are framed on either side with the discovery of a suicide. Suicide is the terminus *a quo* and the terminus *ad quem* of his "Theater of War." What comes before and after seems almost irrelevant, offstage.

The first discovery takes place at the end of a long first night watch where petty officer Graves got "acquainted with the geography of the trenches," and "once tripped and fell with a splash into deep mud" (105). There he sees a man lying on his face in a machine gun shelter, tries to make him stand up, and shoves his light in his face, and only after the machine gunner next to him says "No good talking to him, sir," does he realize that the reason for his disorderly appearance

and lack of obedience is that he killed himself. "Why?" is the question that immediately comes to Graves's mind and is answered by not one but two reasons, according to his mate: "He went through the past push, sir, and that sent him a bit queer; on top of that he got bad news from Limerick about his girl and another chap" (106).[5]

At the other end of the French trenches episode, we find another suicide. The scene is told with the same scarcity of details and lack of emotion: "The chaplain was gabbling the burial service over a corpse lying on the ground with a waterproof sheet." Here again, we are given two reasons: "the miserable weather and the fear of the impending attack were responsible for his death" (253). Without comment, Graves concludes: "This, as it turned out, was the last dead man I saw in France, and like the first, he had shot himself" (253). And he then moves on to tell a story of stolen horses which completely absorbs his attention and his compassion. So much so that his friend Yates, after his departure from France, thought necessary to reassure him in a letter not only that the horses were found (they had been stolen by the machine gun company and painted to disguise them) but that they were unhurt, "except for the grazes on their bellies" (254).

"Suicide in the Trenches," the Poem

This apparent callousness on Graves's part, his tendency to treat the most heart-wrenching experiences of war with humor and casualness, shocked his friend Siegfried Sassoon when he read a copy of *Goodbye to All That*. But the rupture of their friendship was the result of a crass indiscretion on the part of Graves toward his friend: without his consent, he inserted in the memoir a letter Sassoon had written him from a hospital where, gravely wounded, he depicts himself as mentally defeated by the war, haunted by the dead men he felt he had abandoned on the battlefield. Added to that was the suspicion, on the part of Sassoon, that Graves had inserted this letter because he knew that this would sell. Whether these accusations were fair or not cannot be settled here. Suffice it to say that the two men could not be further apart in their response to the war, as evidenced in their wildly different approach to suicide in the trenches. Among the great quantity of war poems written by Sassoon during the war, we find this very moving poem, entitled "Suicide in the Trenches":

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain,
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go. (17)

This well-known poem was first published in February 1918 in *Cambridge Magazine* and later in Sassoon's collection *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* that same year (May 1918). Written in iambic tetrameter, it needs no commentary, its title preempting all possibility of playfulness. Unlike Rimbaud's famous "Dormeur du Val," where death slowly creeps up the stanzas, until the last shocking double bullet holes ("trous rouges") eliminate all possibility that the boy lying in the blue watercress is sleeping, we already know from the title that the "simple soldier boy" killed himself, making the first "happy" stanza yet more tragic.

In the second stanza, where the seasonal change is clearly noted, creating an obvious contrast with the first stanza (happy spring has turned into glum, morose winter), a number of elements are listed as possible causes for the boy's suicide: the gloominess of the weather (which must not be underestimated); the sound of war itself, "crumps," which refers to the sound of exploding bombshells; too many lice and not enough rum, the repetition of "um" (glum, crumps, rum) creating a kind of childish buzz. Not unlike what we see in Graves's suicide narratives, no single or major cause is emphasized to explain the suicide, just a passage through the various physical torments of hell. What Sassoon stresses, and what is missing in Graves's stories, where the narrator is still in a state of shock and will remain so for the entire narrative, is the lofty and direct indictment of his contemporaries, the "smug-faced crowds with kindling eye," cheering the soldiers as they march by, their eagerness to send these boys to die, killing not just their bodies but their spirit, their grins, their joy, and their laughter.

Suicide and Infanticide: *Cherchez la femme*

There is, it seems, a fine line between suicide and murder. For some, like the poet Elsa Triolet, suicides are always murders: "il n'y a pas de suicides," she wrote in 1947 in *Les Fantômes armés*, "il n'y a que des meurtres" (25). In other words, behind each suicide there is a collectivity of murderers. The worst murder, or at least the most often denounced as such, is that of motherly love, as we have seen in Drieu's *Comédie*, where Mme Pragen, however much the narrator ends up understanding her motivations, is nonetheless viewed as a sort of Medea. Graves places in his *Goodbye* a copy of a letter "By a Little Mother," an anti-pacifist letter which was published in *The Morning Post* in 1916 and reprinted as a pamphlet; its 75,000 copies sold like hotcakes. In this letter, which attracted a vastly positive response among readers including the Queen herself, a mother tells of her great pride in producing sons willing to die for her country and urges other mothers to do the same. Graves places it in the middle of his book, without commentary, for it speaks for itself. Fussell sees it as the ultimate staging on the part of Graves of what he finds most repugnant: patriotic infanticide.

For Céline's anti-hero narrator Bardamu in *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), women in general and mothers in particular are viewed as the core of the problem. Bardamu's own mother carries the weight of a whole class of fatalistic *abrutissement* (stupor, resignation), convinced as she is that the great number of young men, like her son, being killed in the trenches is testimony to the sinful nature of her class. Bardamu concludes that there is nothing to be done; his mother has already given up on her son and is ready to accept his death (not even for patriotic reasons). As for women his own age, Bardamu describes them as genetically formatted by nature's call. The strong healthy nurses, destined for fruitful procreation, have no reason to pick a loser like him. What they want is a strong and wealthy member of the bourgeoisie. A doctor would be nice, which explains their volunteering in the army medical corps. Bardamu, superfluous, unwanted, is

enjoined to go back to the front: "Nice little soldier boy, you're going to die . . . you're going to die . . . be nice, die quickly": this is what he hears as he is recovering from his traumatic experience of the front in a psychiatric hospital (73). This is what he understands as the subtext of the nurses' "spoken words and expressions of sympathy." Not only do they hasten the little soldier boys back to the front, but their death will make great, tear-jerking stories: "Do you remember little Bardamu? . . . Poor boy, his morale was way down . . . A few poetic regrets, if adroitly placed, are as becoming to a woman as gossamer hair in the moonlight" (73).

In many war narratives, in Céline's, Drieu's, even in the German writer Erich Maria Remarque's anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) where the narrator's mother is silently and tearfully anticipating her son's death, the temptation is clear: *Cherchez la femme.* And here she is in *Voyage*, with her gossamer hair, that bitch, that slut, that *marâtre,* who is just like the war itself, sending her helpless children to be hacked apart by steel, like lambs in a slaughterhouse, while she prostitutes herself with the rich Argentinians. But it is only too tempting to *trouver la femme*, especially after the war, when resentment runs high and fingers are often pointed in the direction of the women and other so-called "shirkers of war," who profited from it materially and symbolically. It is also too tempting to erase the large and small acts of kindness by women, like popular author Camille Marbo, among so many others, who selflessly offered their time and effort to organize against this mass murder of the nation's sons, whether they personally had children or not. Women were all mothers, they would say, united in their loss; they voiced their common plight as mothers, their abhorrence of the mass killing of youth. "But oh they were so young, so young," writes Mary Gilmore in her collection of poems *The Passionate Heart*, published in 1918. Women activists moreover pointed the finger at those mothers who would, in the lyrics of a popular protest song, "dare to put a musket on his [their son's] shoulder/To kill some other mother's soldier boy." Like the women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, they threatened to strike against procreation, ready to play their parts in a great "grève des ventres." But as we know, the Great War, which increased the visibility and activism of women, silenced them and sent them home the moment it was over.

When the accusatory finger is not pointing in the direction of the rear but in the direction of the trenches, it is the *suicidés* who bear the brunt of guilt for having refused to participate in the war effort. Not only are they considered war shirkers, but they also disturb the whole economy of sacrifice according to which you are not your own agent in a community, especially as it is under attack; they disturb what Carl Schmitt, in his Concept of the Political, published in 1932, the same year as *Voyage*, considered the state constitutional prerogative to designate friend and enemy. The person to kill is not you, in "country number one," but those in "country number two," according to Céline, who in his own sardonic style positions himself against Schmitt. Finally, they are seen as arrogantly untouchable, for they cannot be punished by death for betrayal because, like Socrates, death is what they've chosen. But unlike Socrates, who dies in peace, surrounded by his friends, the *suicidés* of the Great War die alone, in the extreme solitude of the battlefield which, if they don't pull the trigger then and there, they carry with them to the end of their night, refusing to march along to the military music.

Smile!

If modern democratic wars such as WWI are large operations between states who have, in the pursuit of peace and happiness for the individuals, bound these individuals together through

contracts such as *Déclarations* or Bills of Rights, these individuals must not only be ready to sacrifice themselves for a greater good, they must do it happily. Happiness is not a simple right, it is also an obligation, an imperative. The ultimate sacrifice is to be performed with music and cheerfulness. Like the nurses in the military hospital where Bardamu is being treated, the state will whisper in your ear: "Nice little soldier boy, you're going to die . . . you're going to die" (Céline 73), but like a good citizen soldier of the French revolutionary army, you will sing "La victoire en chantant" all the way to the trenches. Even in the trenches, at least for a short while, you will continue, like Sassoon's "simple soldier boy," "whistling with the lark," and before leaving home, like Paul Bauer's comrade killed early in the War in Remarque's *All Quiet*, you will smile at the camera for your mother, standing in front of a curtain with a nice peaceful landscape painted on it.[6]

Works Cited

Cardot, Lucien. *Hérésies et apostasies militaires de notre temps*. Berger-Levrault, 1908.

Camus, Albert. *La Chute.* Gallimard, 1956.

———. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Gallimard, 1942.

Céline, Louis-Ferdiand. *Journey to the End of the Night*. Translated by Ralph Manheim, New Directions, 1983.

Derrida, Jacques. *Donner la mort*. Galilée, 1999.

Drieu La Rochelle, Pierre. *La Comédie de Charleroi*. Gallimard, 1934.

Durkheim, Emile. *Le Suicide*. Alcan, 1897.

Gilmore, Mary. *The Passionate Heart.* The Press, 1919.

Graves, Robert. *Goodbye to All That*. Knopf Doubleday, 1958.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *Les Causes du suicide*. Alcan, 1930.

Hubert, Henri, and Mauss, Marcel. "Essais sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice." *Mélanges d'histoire des religions*, Alcan, 1929.

Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford UP, 1975.

Lagrange, François. "Les combattants de la 'mort certaine': le sens du sacrifice à l'horizon de la Grande Guerre." *Culture et Conflits*, no. 63, Automne 2006, pp. 63–81.

Leake, Elizabeth. *After Words: Suicide and Authorship in Twentieth-Century Italy*. University of Toronto Press, 2011.

Proust, Marcel. *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 1. Gallimard, 1987.

Riquier, Camille. *Philosophie de Péguy ou les mémoires d'un imbécile*. PUF, 2017.

Sassoon, Siefried. "Suicide in the Trenches." *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. E. P. Dutton & Company, 1918.

Schmitt, Carl. *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Duncker and Humblot, 1932.

Triolet, Elsa, *Les Fantômes armés*. La Bibliothèque Française, 1947.

Notes

[1] From the Latin *sui* (self) + suffix *-cidium* from the active verb *caedō*, *caedere*, to kill; literally, to cut down.

[2] In English "deafening silence" does not possess the poetic quality of Camus's sonorous oxymoron (in *La Chute*, 1956).

[3] As pointed out by Elisabeth Ladenson (personal communication).

[4] During and after World War I, a number of writers killed themselves. Some of them were veterans like Pierre Drieu la Rochelle. Some committed suicide, like Georg Trakl, at the onset of the war, in November 1914 or at the end of it, like Jacques Vaché in 1919. Others, belated victims of the war (Stefan Zweig, a victim of World War II as well, in 1942; also Ernest Hemingway in 1961), but none of them in an act of defiance or self-aggrandizement. Another paper remains to be written on those who committed suicide beyond the trenches, on suicide at the end of their individual and collective trajectories. Their motivations, to the extent that they can be grasped, cannot be lumped together.

[5] Limerick is the original cradle of the Irish part of the Graves family, and it is no coincidence that it is mentioned in this liminal staged suicide.

[6] Such was the picture given to Paul Baumer, the narrator of Remarque's *All Quiet on The Western Front* (*Im Westen nichts Neues*, 1929) by the mother of one of his dead comrades, one among many such pictures, with exactly the same pose and background, the same factitious smile.