

Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide

Marzio Barbagli

Lucinda Byatt, Translator

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Several centuries of research trace the various motives behind suicide—some trivial, others political, but always tragic and disheartening.

Suicide is a grim subject. Yet to artful writers, it offers not only tense moments and drama but also opportunities for examining the context in which some leave the world before their time is up. In *Farewell to the World*, Marzio Barbagli, a sociologist at the University of Bologna, has produced an encyclopedic but immensely readable account of the social norms that surround, and individual motives that propel, such fateful choices. He goes back several centuries to trace trends in suicides in Europe, China, India, and the Middle East. The book first appeared in Italy in 2009. Lucinda Byatt delivers an excellent English translation.

In an essay on suicide, Voltaire noted that the best preventive is “always to have something to do,” and that Thomas Creech scribbled in his manuscript on Lucretius, “N.B. Must hang myself when I have finished.” About Creech’s death, Voltaire said, “He kept his word with himself that he might have the pleasure of ending like his author. If he had undertaken a commentary upon Ovid he would have lived longer.” Barbagli also highlights other forces, some of which appear trivial. In 1745, Jean-Bernard Le Blanc wrote about an acquaintance who killed himself “to avoid the trouble of dressing and undressing every day.” Some, such as the Sioux of North America, thought about the afterlife when they made their tragic decisions—believing that they would forever have to drag the tree on which they hanged themselves, they selected the smallest one possible.

Political calculations loom large in other tragedies. In 1963, a Vietnamese monk set himself on fire in protest against his president’s policies; his death played an important part in the change of regime that followed. Barbagli describes many other instances in which death is not an act of defeat and resignation, but where instead self-destruction is a weapon employed by the weak to make the “strong and powerful tremble.”

Farewell to the World is a deeply insightful book that will interest suicide-prevention counselors and others who are curious about this complex topic.

KARUNESH TULI (Fall 2015)

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