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War and the Death of Innocence

EAMON MAHER

WHENEVER I think of war, the names Péguy and Céline immediately spring to mind. Péguy is famous for linking war with the glory of Christian sacrifice. In the run-up to 1914, thanks in no small measure to the writings of people like himself and Claudel, there was a noticeable rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the Republic in France. Thousands of priests fought side by side and died with other French men in the trenches, a place where Péguy would eventually meet his own end in September 1914. Céline's classic account of the degradation and horror of war, *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, published in 1932, has been described by Tom Quinn as a 'revolutionary novel', which is 'an unforgettable account of a doomed world, crushed by one war, and waiting to be crushed by another one.'¹ Céline had first-hand experience of the *Grande Guerre*, an incident from which he would never fully recover, and I mention him here because Jean Sullivan, one of the writers with whom I am dealing, was an admirer of his writings and admitted to bringing two books with him wherever he went – Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. We will see that this fascination with Céline was not in any way coincidental.

Camus and Sullivan were born in the same year, 1913, and their experience of the First World War was inextricably linked to the fact that it claimed the lives of their fathers and thus transformed their own lives completely. Both speak of the event in terms that leave no doubt as to the trauma caused by the fact that they never came to know their fathers, who both died on the Western front – they were just two of some three million men who met the same fate on this front. It is impossible to im-

1. See Tom Quinn, 'Against Man and God', *Doctrine & Life*, vol. 53, no. 7, September 2003, pp. 398-409.

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agine the pain and suffering inflicted on wives and children, family and friends, by such an unprecedented massacre. Sullivan spoke of how he suffered from 'a complex of being a son without a father, the son of a dead man' ('*complexe de fils sans père, de fils de tué*'). For a couple of years after his father died, he at least had the reassuring comfort of his mother's love, but when she was forced to remarry in order to hold on to the family farm, young Lemarchand (Sullivan's real name) felt doubly betrayed. He spoke movingly of his pain in an interview with Bernard Feuillet:

There is always one image that comes back to me. Crying, I run on a pathway through the fields. Why am I late? I have no idea. I arrive at the house – it's my mother's wedding. She isn't dressed in white as it is her second time to get married. She is also crying as she comes over to me ... My writing has been a constant attempt to cure myself of this scene. The death of my father, the remarriage of my mother have marked my whole life.²

Seeing himself replaced in the affections of his mother by the arrival of a man who wasn't his father left deep scars in Sullivan's psyche. He links the two events in such a way as to allow one to assert that early in his life he felt that the war deprived him of both a father and a mother.

Camus had a similar experience of loss and abandonment, even though his mother never remarried. He did, however, witness her degradation at having to slave as a cleaning lady ('*femme de ménage*') in order to put food on the table and look after the education of her sons. She was also obliged to follow the orders of her rather draconian mother who even went so far as to call her daughter a whore ('*putain*') when she noticed her growing attraction to a man who was attempting to court her in the 1920s.

The two books with which I deal, Sullivan's memoir, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, which I translated into English, and Camus' autobiographical novel, *Le premier homme*, which was published after his premature death in a road accident on January 4, 1960, although very different in terms of setting and ambience, deal with war in a manner that is quite similar.

2. *L'instant l'éternité : Bernard Feuillet interroge Jean Sullivan* (Paris: Le Centurion, Collection 'Les interviews', 1978), pp. 19-20. The translation is my own.

Sullivan recounts how the first blow to his mother's happiness came on the Sunday before war was declared as she was making her way to the pilgrimage for peace that had been organised at the shrine of Saint Anne of Auray. Her brother, a priest, was with her and during one of the stops along the way he got off the train to get hold of a paper in which he discovered, much to his joy, that there was going to be a war. 'We'll go to Berlin!', he had declared. Sullivan was most ambivalent towards this man who was too ready to marry Christianity and duty with the desire to lead and to be a hero:

In between the First and Second World Wars he went on military training exercises to keep himself fit for the next conflict. Even if he didn't much like the socialist in Péguy, he was still in awe of the writer who brought together so well the idea of the Gospel going hand in hand with the fatherland, the notion that the Catholic Church and France were one and the same thing.³

M. Lemarchand was an altogether different type of character. Sullivan speaks proudly of the fact that his father didn't talk about going to Berlin and that he had no notion of becoming a hero. He was a man attached to the land and to his young wife, someone who was caught up in the maelstrom of history: 'I suspect that as he was heading to the station across the paths he was saying goodbye to the land with the soles of his shoes.' (*Anticipate*, p. 24) Out of solidarity with the death of his father, Sullivan couldn't bear to look at the newsreels of the First World War:

It's almost as though the soldiers could see themselves, as if I were among them, these men who were rudely torn from their humble existence, these puppets tossed about in the communication trenches, blessed by their priests, robotic soldiers bolstered up by alcohol as much as by the monstrous propaganda which confused everything: money, fatherland, religion, God. It is always the living who recall the wars. (*Anticipate*, pp. 24-5)

This is a clear indictment of the way of presenting war that seeks to sanitise the indescribable horror that is at its root, by extolling the glory

3. *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, trans. Eamon Maher (Dublin: Veritas, 2000), p. 21. Henceforth the page numbers from this edition will be supplied in the text.

of fatherland and martyrdom. Sullivan says that he would like to have the perspective of those who died in wars – which understandably never happens. In some way, this identification with the victims of war explains his fascination with Céline's novel, *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, which really is an account of war from beyond the grave. Its main protagonist, Bardamu, never recovers from what happens to him in Flanders and is dead in mind and heart after his experiences there. A short time after he joins the cavalry division of the French army, he realises his mistake: 'No doubt about it, this crusade I'd let myself in for was the apocalypse!'⁴ What irritated Sullivan most of all was the way in which government officials, with the support and collusion of the Catholic Church, told blatant lies about the war, presented it in terms that sought to elide the death and suffering it brought in its wake. Céline's mock-heroic tone hits straight at the imposture. Thus we read in *Voyage au bout de la nuit* the following admonition:

The biggest defeat in every department of life is to forget, especially the things that have done you in, and to die without realising how far people can go in the way of nastiness. When the grave lies open before us, let's not try to be witty, but on the other hand, let's not forget, but make it our business to record the worst of the human viciousness we've seen without changing one word. (*Voyage*, p. 28)

Sullivan was keen to convey the huge anguish his mother endured as she waited anxiously for news from her husband at the front. The postman, a M. Chauvin, in order to avoid disappointing her when there were no letters, made a detour so as not to be seen passing empty-handed:

The letters all said that my father, the soldier, was ready to die, as if he wanted his wife to gradually get used to the idea of his being dead and that she would at least have the slight comfort of knowing that he had died in peace. (*Anticipate*, pp. 25-6)

Lucien, Camus' father, was among the first French soldiers wounded in the Battle of the Marne. Olivier Todd's biography quotes a letter sent by the soldier to his wife from hospital which read: 'A big kiss for you and

4. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage to the End of the Night*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: John Calder, 1997), p. 19.

the children and hello to my friends. Send me your news, my health and news are all fine, no worries.'⁵ A few days later he was dead. Camus' mother rarely spoke to her sons about their father. Whatever information they got about him was sketchy and Camus was forced to 'imagine what this man who had given him life was like. Immediately after my birth he went off to die in an unknown land on the other side of the sea.'⁶ Jacques Cormery, in *Le premier homme*, relates with pride how the headmaster, M. Levesque, described the campaign on which he and Jacques's father had served together in Morocco. When they went to relieve one of their companions on sentry duty, they were faced with the following horror: 'His neck had been slit and, in his mouth, with its ghastly swelling, had been placed his entire penis.' (*Premier homme*, p. 66) The father's reaction was that the enemy were not proper men: otherwise, how could they have perpetrated such atrocities.

Both Sullivan and Camus take pride in the quiet strength of their fathers, the simplicity and archaic sense of duty and honour that guided their actions. In Camus' words, his father was: 'A hard, bitter man who had worked all his life. He had killed when commanded to do so, accepted everything that couldn't be avoided. At the same time, something deep inside him had always resisted being tamed.' (*Premier homme*, p. 67)

There is in the mothers a passive acceptance of the loss of a husband as well as a determination to struggle on for the sake of the children. In the case of Mme Lemarchand, there can be no doubt that she loved her first husband in a way that was never matched in her feelings towards her second spouse. But when she persisted in talking about him to her son, the latter considered that, by remarrying, she had lost the right to speak of his father. It was only when he came to maturity that he plagued her with questions about this man who was only kept alive by her memories.

She was a woman who was prone to visions. One night she had seen her husband covered in blood as a huge hand was pinning a medal to his tunic. He got up and flung the medal in the mud, then dragged himself along the ground to try and find it again. When she checked the dates,

5. Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), p. 6.

6. Albert Camus, *Le premier homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 31. This, and all translations from *Le premier homme*, are my own.

she discovered that the night she dreamed about his death was the same as the date he had been killed and awarded his medal:

And this vision, which she only allowed herself to talk about guiltily and in a very low voice, had helped her more than anything ... to find peace. For a long time afterwards, all she had to do was close her eyes and she could see a blinding light in the midst of interspersed rainbows and my father coming towards her joyfully, saying: 'Don't be afraid any more, the war is over, there is no more death.' (*Anticipate*, p. 27)

However, on Armistice Day, when the bells were ringing all around Brittany, Sullivan went in search of his mother and found her quietly milking a cow. When he drew closer he saw the tears streaming down her face. It was not long afterwards that she remarried, thus throwing her son into emotional turmoil. Because they were only babies when their fathers were killed, Sullivan and Camus depended on their mothers for information about the war heroes. The futile and unjustified nature of their deaths angered the two writers. We have seen how Sullivan summed up its impact on his life. For both, it marked the death of childhood. Camus writes:

He himself had had to grow up alone, without a father ... It had been necessary for him to learn things on his own, to grow in maturity, strength and independence, to find his own morality, his own truth. (*Premier homme*, p. 181)

One can detect a note of bitterness in these lines that show how the death of the father led to a feeling of solitude in the young boy. Sullivan and Camus are writers who distinguish themselves for their portrayal of characters who have been wounded by life, who are misfits, marginals, social pariahs. It is my contention that this is due in no small measure to the death of their fathers.

Camus' most famous fictional depiction, Meursault (*The Stranger*), is someone unable to pretend to feelings that are not true. He doesn't show adequate grief at his mother's funeral, which leads in large measure to the guilty verdict of the jury in his trial for the murder of an Arab man.

Many of Sullivan's characters similarly choose the marginal path when they see the futility of lives governed by the need for material and social advancement. The hero of *Eternity My Beloved* (*Car je t'aime ô éternité*), Strozzi, had an eventful career. He was expelled from various schools for refusing to conform and ended up superior in a seminary. That came to an end when he was found to be acting as an intermediary for the French resistance. He ends up back in occupied Paris where he becomes an unofficial chaplain to the prostitutes in Pigalle. He finds in this 'suspect' milieu the type of fulfilment he never had in any other ministry: his superiors are dubious about the strange path he chooses to follow but, while they withdraw his salary, they stop short of expelling him from the priesthood.

The preference for characters such as these shows the extent to which Camus and Sullivan were marked by war. Camus has a wonderful evocation of the trip made by Jacques Cormery to the war cemetery in Saint-Brieuc, where his father was buried. Like Sullivan, he comes to realise to what extent he has been moulded by the premature death of this man who remains a stranger to him. On reading the dates after his father's name, '1885-1914', he discovers that his father died at the age of twenty-nine whereas he is now forty:

[S]omething here was not in the natural order of things and, in truth, there was no order but only folly and chaos in the situation where the son found himself to be older than his father. (*Premier homme*, p. 30)

In spite of the initial moment of revolt, there is a sense in which Cormery acknowledges the role his father's death has played in his literary evolution:

However, what he had sought avidly to know through contact with books and other human beings, he now saw that this secret was intimately linked to death (*the death of his father*). He had sought far away that which was close to him in time and in his bloodline. (*Premier homme*, p. 31)

So what does all this tell us about the role played by the war in the lives of Camus and Sullivan? They were wounded psychologically by the loss of their fathers and were forced at an early stage to make their own

way in life.

Sullivan turned initially to the priesthood, a vocation that was dictated to a large degree by his mother's piety and faith, but also by a desire to escape from a restricted and restricting social background. Deprived of his own father, he would strive to be a type of surrogate father to others through the priesthood and later through literature, which was to become his true vocation. There are hardly any children in his novels, which is significant. His characters look back through the eyes of an adult at the child they were and wonder at how far they have travelled from that state of innocence. Relationships between children and their parents are characterised by tension and a lack of understanding in Sullivan's fiction.

Camus looked on his teacher, Jean Grenier, as a replacement father and it is clear that he saw literature as a means of exposing hypocrisy and declaring certain truths. He was anti-war and anti-violence because he saw what they can lead to. In *Le premier homme*, we come across the description of a fight between Cormery and a classmate called Munoz. Cormery wins the confrontation but after the initial elation has died down – the cheers of his friends, the feeling of having proved his point – he looks at his adversary and sees that it hasn't been worth the effort:

He saw at that precise moment that war is not good, since defeating another man is as bad as being beaten by him. (*Premier homme*, p. 146)

War brings about the death of innocence because it opens a person's eyes to the fact that there is no victory that is ever worth the shedding of human blood and that there is no glory in defeating the perceived enemy. It is noticeable how different this philosophy is from the sentiments expressed by Péguy in his poem, 'Heureux ceux qui sont morts', from the collection *Eve*.

Happy are those who have died, for they have returned
To the original clay and the original earth.
Happy those who have died in a just war,
Happy the ripe grain and the harvested corn.⁷

7. Charles Péguy, *Souvenirs* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection Catholique, 69th edition, 1938), p. 124) Translation is my own.