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Youth's Suicide

Gustav Landauer

1911

Nothing in our time—not the crises of the poor, privation, hunger or homelessness— is so terrible and ominous as the ever-increasing rate of youth suicide. It's bad enough that young people are compelled—thanks to the church-inspired moral platitudes of their parents, teachers, of their entire milieu, which envelops beautiful and natural things in a haze of self-satisfied deceit—to pursue, in a stark and dreadful way, sexual gratification by way of a prostitute, where many contract syphilis and choose to die as a result of the desperation, the illness, and supposed sin. This is dismal enough. Even some among those who avoid infection from their sexual experiences, whether by virtue of heredity or inurement, nevertheless fall so sick and weaken so that they can no longer bear life. The most gruesome reality is that more and more youth settle on suicide, not because they are physically or mentally ill, not because they are incapable of meeting the demands made of them at school, but rather because they are too talented, too unique.

Let me be clear. There exists a distinction between sickness and health; and as for sickness, there are those who bear a measure of responsibility. There also exists, however, the norm

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Translated by Stephen Bender and Gabriel Kuhn

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and deviation from the norm. The school system sets up certain standards that must be attained. Parents send their insufficiently proficient children to the academic schools with the expectation of particular societal benefits and associated status. The child is incapable of fulfilling the prescribed role, falls ill, becomes despondent and commits suicide. Against these children a crime has been committed: by the society, by the parents, and by the teachers.

However, others stray from the norm in other respects. In the later grades, they outgrow the school experience; they yearn for free thought, free expression, useful endeavors, and the pursuance of an inexpressible life of the senses, body, and spirit through love, art, achievement, and work. Held captive as they are by the gruesome dullards who administer their prison, they find neither love nor understanding nor freedom.

They do exhibit feelings of superiority toward some of their fellow students and later particularly towards their teachers. And why not? Perhaps the sense of their own talent and individuality will wane; for now however, they have the genius of youth, their heart is worn on their sleeve, their fists grasp the scepter, and the world is theirs.

*Young Siegfried was a proud boy
From his father's casde descended he
Resting in father's house was not his fate to be
Rather wander out and about in the world did he
Just as other bygone heroes went striking
Those forest and field dwelling dragons and giants*

At 8 or 9 they've already memorized it, but no one ever bothers to explain what it means; no one encourages their right to wildness and boundlessness. For us adults, freedom means order and self-discipline, for youth, at least for a time, it is allowed to mean something else, even if it means passion and impetuosity. How all that, often at home and always at school,

is brought low and dissolved by the murky backwash of insipid Philistinism !

Ludwig Gurlitt, one who has frequently written about the crisis of the schools, with robust words and an energetic air, has now published in the Berliner Tagesblatt of April 4 the gripping letters written by friends of three gymnasium students who had shortly before killed themselves in Leipzig. Here are a few passages: 'I am certain that Friedrich Hammer would still be living today had he not faced the prospect of setting foot inside that school again, as the thought of returning to school was the final scraw in precipitating his act. Everyone knows the kind of strain involved when one has to resume this enforced work. He too was coerced, as his own readings drove him to grasp for different values...' Werner Naundorf was and remained the personified opposition to the humanistic Gymnasium... what he wanted was meaningful work that challenged him, even if to the point of exhaustion. For him, this related to issues of the national economy... what he hated was the frittering away of time, which the school required him to endure. He was active in the Social Democratic movement, more attracted to its ideals than to its practical consequences, since they challenged his privileged self... he realized that at the core of the maelstrom of terminology to which we are subject lay a reactionary spirit. He yearned for useful work and as a result became fully alienated from the school curriculum."

'Erich Poschmann seemed to me a victim of the dilemmas that come with home and school. Protest! His family was conservative, the school reactionary, and he a thoroughgoing modern. Erich worked in school only in order to please his parents; for himself he delved into art history. He wanted to be an architect. The work he did for the school was only a concession to its authority. As he himself said, it hurt him deeply that he lacked the strength necessary to make his parents acknowledge his aspirations and to make known to the school his contempt as he had to us.'

Professor Gurlitt's suggestion to shorten by one year the duration of schooling in the higher institutions of learning misses the target; it is a shabby, inconsequential expedient.

Those who wish to push their proposals on professors, school boards, and government agencies would be clever to demand specific measures. However, from such overtures, I await nothing decisive. To be clear, the worst of this situation is not that it is as it is, but that it causes the effects it causes. The worst of the students suffering is caused by the state of our society. Said differently, in other eras, among other peoples the response to such oppression would be resistance; the consequence of sterile tyranny would not be sickness, infirmity, and meek escapism, but rather virile rebellion.

In the writings of the schoolmates of the dead, one thing turns up repeatedly, it is that which we recognize all too well in this young generation : an illusory maturity and objective self-awareness, a certain tone of selfcentered melancholy reminiscent of a coquettish pose. We know this stagnant youthless youth, whose numbers continue to climb. These young people are not only the product of reactionnary schooling, but also modern literature. The schools could well be less miserable than they are, if only those artists and novelists, who were products of them, didn't remain so alienated from the people and public affairs.

Where are those who were once in these schools, over whom a shudder still runs when they recall their school days? Where are they when the time comes to fight against this school system and that which sustains it? Where are they when the time comes to create something new? Where are they when the time comes to bring joy to the young generation in these schools?

Students, artists, writers, working men and women must join together and devote themselves to the young men and women, in word and deed, in conduct and in friendship. Parents, even the best among them, are not enough; youths require

comrades and alliances. I'm not demanding the foundation of the 1001st club or reform group, but rather solidarity with the youth so that they can escape their individual torment and can therefore elevate themselves into participation in public life. No government and no police force can hinder our sparking a strong youth movement. Not only do young people need the public sphere to help them in their struggle to grow up and to draw on the exhilaration of life, but it is also the public sphere that needs youth and its wild and great exuberance. How else to leave behind the swamp of reaction, the scheming and empty quarrels of rudderless political parties, and the languishing state of these evermore artful and artificial weaklings, so that we may regain our original briskness and healthy daring.