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Author(s): Sterling Fishman

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# Suicide, Sex, and the Discovery of the German Adolescent

STERLING FISHMAN

Thus our society has passed from a period which was ignorant of adolescence to a period in which adolescence is the favourite age. We now want to come to it early and linger in it as long as possible.

Philippe Ariés

"FOR THE GREAT DRAMATISTS of the late nineteenth century," writes the critic, Eric Bentley, "a play was a bomb to drop on the respectable middle classes." (1) In the winter of 1890-1891, the young playwright Frank Wedekind created his bomb, the explosive drama, *Spring's Awakening* (*Frühlingserwachen*), in which he bitterly attacked the moral hypocrisy of his day. In dealing with the sexual problems of adolescence, Wedekind harshly condemned middle-class prudery and an education that taught German children the facts of German history, but not the facts of life. In one frank scene after another, he explored the tragedy of this situation. Fourteen-year-old Wendla becomes pregnant without ever discovering how she conceived. She finally dies from the effects of "abortion pills." Her lover, Melchior, searches for answers to his sexual questions and finds dishonor instead. He commits suicide. His friend, Moritz, is unable to help and wanders in despair at the final curtain. Only the self-righteous parents and teachers, who have crushed "spring's awakening," survive.

Not unexpectedly, German censors retaliated by banning Wedekind's play. The exasperated author then published it in Switzerland at his own expense. Yet, it was not produced. German producers apparently feared that its frank treatment of adolescent sexual problems was too shocking for theatergoers in the 1890s. But it was not to remain in oblivion for long. By 1900, the play began to find a

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*Mr. Fishman is Professor in the Departments of Educational Policy Studies and History at The University of Wisconsin.*

reading public. Soon thereafter Max Reinhardt successfully staged it in the German Theater (*Deutsches Theater*) in Berlin. (2) By World War I it had even gained a permanent place in the repertoires of several German companies. This raises an interesting question: how did a play that was banned in 1891 gain respectability so quickly?

A remarkable change in the popular attitudes of the German public had occurred during this brief span of time. In approximately 1900, the German middle-class public not only began to tolerate plays and novels dealing with such problems as adolescent sex and suicide, but actually began to relish them. A whole spate of such works became popular almost overnight. Wedekind's play had been their precursor. The change did not go unnoticed by the author of *Spring's Awakening* or other perceptive observers living at the time. Writing in 1911, Wedekind recalled: "For ten years—1891 till about 1901—the play *Spring's Awakening* was generally regarded as unheard-of filth. Since about 1901, it has been regarded as an angry, deadly earnest tragedy, as a thesis play, as a polemic in the service of sexual enlightenment." (3) Another commentator, the Steglitz Gymnasium teacher and educational reformer, Ludwig Gurlitt, recognized the same phenomenon in an article that he wrote on the subject. He noted that although the German theater had not dealt with the sexual and educational problems of young people for more than a century, since 1900 it had been inundated with plays on these subjects. In seeking to account for this transformation, Gurlitt hopefully attributed it to a "spiritual revolution"—a "national reformation." (4)

Gurlitt was too vague. The change in the German moral climate could not be attributed to anything so nebulous as a "spiritual revolution." Rather, it resulted from a startling and sudden discovery by middle-class adults of a new world—the world of adolescence. Even more startling was the discovery that the inhabitants of the new world, who were no longer children, but not yet adults, had problems which were peculiar to themselves, especially sexual problems.

Hitherto, most German burghers had thought in terms of two age categories, childhood and adulthood, virtually ignoring the existence of any intermediate stage. So long as one was in school, he remained a child and was treated accordingly. Having left school, one immediately became an adult. (5) Even the *Abitur*, or secondary

school final comprehensive examination, was frequently called a "maturity examination" (*Reifeprüfung*), although it was administered to people who had been physically mature for several years. As a result, the offspring of the lower classes, who left school early, became adults at a young age, while those of the middle classes frequently lingered on as children until their late teens. Every additional year of school protracted childhood another year and correspondingly deferred entrance into the adult world and adult activities.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, this deliberately delayed and retarded development did not constitute a major social problem. It involved only a small number of young people, most of whom were probably highly disciplined in sublimating their drives or very discreet in satisfying them. Those who developed maladjustments were presumably carefully concealed by their parents and teachers. By the end of the century, however, an increasing number of young people remained in school for longer periods of time, during which they were expected to behave like children although their bodies and drives were fully developed. An increasing number of social disorders attended this peculiar custom, the most dramatic of which were student suicides. In a highly literate and bureaucratic state like Germany, suicide was one maladjustment that could not easily be hidden. Every instance was drily and carefully recorded in official records and journals or luridly and less carefully reported in the daily press. When, for example, the fifteen-year-old son of a respectable middle-class family in Stuttgart jumped into the Neckar with his thirteen-year-old pregnant girl friend, the event received full official and public exposure. (6)

Furthermore, a growing interest in psychology precipitated inquiries into the causes of these acts of self-destruction. As a result, more complete statistics and case studies were collected. Meanwhile, the drama of suicides, especially those of young people, began to attract the attention of creative writers. Adolescent suicide soon became one of the leading subjects of German dramas and novels. And, as might be expected, the growing host of school reformers became preoccupied with this problem as well. They saw the increase in suicides as the direct result of an evil and outdated educational system.

Thus, it was a growing awareness of the problems of adolescence, especially suicide and sexual maladjustments, that precipitated the dis-

covery of adolescence—that awkward and intermediate age between childhood and maturity. Wedekind's revolutionary drama had merely dealt with these problems ten years before they were widely recognized and accepted by middle-class Germany. The same recognition was probably taking place elsewhere in the Western world as well as in Germany. It was this new awareness that also caused a growing interest in educational problems, especially on the secondary level. We now turn to that new awareness of adolescence and especially to that painful phenomenon which did most to reveal its existence—the adolescent suicide.

## I

To the intellectual historian fascinated with the *fin de siècle*, nothing seems more expressive of the decadent mood of this age than its preoccupation with the suicide question. The literature on the subject in Germany alone is large. All of it makes compelling, though grisly, reading. Some of it purports to be statistical and scientific. Some of it is downright polemical or sensational. The principal debate centered on whether the increasing incidence of suicide among young people could be attributed to poor schools, urban living, or the complexities of modern life. Every commentator recognized its increase as a serious problem. Each prescribed his own solution to the problem.

One of the earliest and most interesting studies of the subject was a work by Gustav Siebert in 1893. Siebert's main thrust was against a society that contributes to the increasing incidence of suicide through defective schools, or fails to prevent it by means of the family and the church. He begins by pointing out that although suicides among young people occurred even in the sixteenth century, the number has risen alarmingly in recent times. He then cites a host of recent newspaper reports of cases to prove his point. "The *Münchener Post* reports from Münchaurach," he writes, "that a local school inspector, who was a priest, beat a ten-year-old girl on her naked rear end in front of her entire class, despite her violent protests. The child then took her life in a nearby pond because of her embarrassment." (7) In recounting the double suicide of the Stuttgart lovers, mentioned above, Siebert quotes the *Berliner Morgenzeitung*

*tung* as to the motive: "The girl, who was unusually well developed for her age, is said to have found herself in a blessed condition." (8)

Not content merely to report the increasing number of suicides, Siegert seeks to analyze the cause of this increase as well. He quotes several authorities on the problem, one of whom is the English historian, Thomas Henry Buckle. Buckle was a sociological determinist who saw suicide as one of the consequences of an advanced civilization about which nothing could be done. "Suicide is merely an indication of the general condition of society," writes Buckle, "and . . . the individual crime only realizes what is a necessary consequence of previous conditions." (9) Siegert disagrees. First, he points out that many youthful suicides are pathological in nature. Of these, many victims have inherited degenerative tendencies, which should be recognized early and treated. Even many children who commit suicide while playing, he notes, are deranged in some way. Any child who engages in the kind of play or mime that can lead to suicide should be suspect. But those suicides that can best be prevented, he argues, stem from sociological rather than pathological causes. Even where these two causes cannot be separated, which happens most frequently, remedial action can be taken by the home, church, and school, each working in conjunction with the other, to prevent suicide.

He especially singles out the schools as potentially important in preventing suicides. Paradoxically, he charges, the schools of Germany, which could do so much to prevent suicide, have in fact caused its increase. Rather than calming troubled souls, the schools have merely added heavily to the burden that they bear. One-half of all the male suicide cases and one-third of all the female cases that Siegert includes in the study stem directly from anxiety associated with schools. Of the contributory causes of student suicides, punishment and fear of punishment stand as the most significant. This is an evil which must be stopped, Siegert insists: "The punishment which drives a child to suicide is a horrible barbarianism that cannot be scourged sharply enough." (10) The teacher who surrenders to a sudden outburst of anger and administers cruel and degrading punishments is guilty of complicity in any suicide that results. "Curb your sudden anger and make your heart accessible to moderating influences," (11) he advises. Although Siegert does not

specify which kinds of punishment he would tolerate, he does approve of discipline "suitable to the individual." In fact, individualization of instruction as well as punishment constitutes his main plea for reform. "Through the *individualization* of instruction and the corresponding *diminishment* of the number of children in classes," he confidently asserts, "school administrations can check the great increase in child suicide." (12)

The other great evil that the schools can correct, Siegert adds, is intellectual overloading. Sounding ever more like a contemporary school reformer rather than a dispassionate student of the suicide problem, he denounces the schools for this sin. "It is our innermost conviction," he writes, "that the goals of our schools, especially the lower ones, are too high. Too high, not only in relation to the power of the memory and the exercise of the mind, but also in relation to the immense amount of splintered intellectual material with which the child becomes crammed. . . . To want the impossible from children is not only silly, but criminal." (13) This overloading has so frequently resulted in mental disorders that doctors have labeled the mental illness "overload psychosis" (*Überbürdungspsychose*). Furthermore, this preoccupation with the learning of great quantities of dead material has caused serious physical problems as well, which contribute to the general breakdown of students. Boys become physically emaciated and near-sighted, while girls develop crooked backbones and bad eyes. "*Let the body not pay for the progress of the mind!*" Siegert urges. "Provide space for the happy child's play and bodily exercise in the air and sunshine so that the children's world will not be crushed by intellectual burdens." (14) Then, and only then, he concludes, will the number of childhood suicides decrease and the guilt of the schools "be deleted from the account of sins in the book of life." (15)

Although Siegert did not differentiate clearly between childhood and adolescent suicides, he did associate the growing incidence of suicide with student life and the difficulties of maturation. In recognizing this, he began unknowingly to speak about the problems of adolescence. Not unexpectedly, his work became popular with school reformers. He provided needed grist for their ready mills. The Steglitz reformer, Ludwig Gurlitt, read it and was impressed. In his polemic, *The German and His Fatherland* (*Der Deutsche und*

*sein Vaterland*), he included numerous references to the problem and to Siegert's conclusions. "Can there be any graver charge against a school system than these frequent student suicides?" Gurlitt asks. "Is it not grisly and horrible if a child voluntarily renounces seeing the light of the sun, voluntarily separates himself from his parents and brothers and sisters, from all the joys, hopes, and desires of his young life, because he doubts himself or no longer can bear the compulsions of school?" (16) He even cites statistics to show the magnitude of the problem. In Prussia alone there were 289 cases of reported suicide among students between 1883 and 1889. England, he notes enviously, does not even keep statistics like these, because the whole idea would be absurd to Englishmen, whose days in school are happy ones.

Gurlitt probed the subject of student suicide even further in a pamphlet entitled *Student Suicide (Schülerselbstmorde)*. (17) In writing this Gurlitt goes further toward recognizing adolescence than did Siegert. In addition, Gurlitt notes that adolescent suicide is a middle-class phenomenon. He points out that these suicides, the reports of which have become as common in the press as reports of other accidents, are not the acts of proletarian children who are suffering from hunger or the bestiality of their parents. Rather they are the children of "good families." Furthermore, he asserts, the suicide problem is graver than it appears on the surface. For every ten who actually commit suicide, he calculates, there must be at least a hundred who contemplate it—a horrifying thought. Like Siegert, he asks: what is the cause of this calamity?

Although some individuals inherit a predisposition for suicide in the same way that one inherits a predisposition for any disease, Gurlitt argues, in most cases the environment is at fault. The same child who commits suicide in one environment might not do so in another. Just ask an English school teacher about the suicide problem, says Gurlitt, and he will shake his head in astonishment at the question. Healthy, robust English schoolboys just do not consider suicide as a solution to any of their problems. In Germany, on the other hand, the entire system of educational and administrative preferment places intolerable pressures on a youth. He is compelled to study interminably and take crucial examinations which will have a profound effect on the course of his life. Under the stress of such



unwholesome conditions, he may resort to suicide as a means of escape.

What is even more disturbing, Gurlitt adds, is that no one in Germany recognizes that the system is at fault. Rather, everyone concerned eagerly scurries to absolve himself of guilt. The teacher or parent who inexcusably precipitated the suicide by means of a severe beating or censuring is accused of complicity. Meanwhile, the horrendous system under whose crushing weight all must labor and suffer goes free and unscathed. "The guilt does not lie with any individuals," Gurlitt cries heatedly. "It lies in the entire *school and educational system*. . . . *The guilt lies with the system.*" (18)

The most vicious aspect of the German educational and bureaucratic system, Gurlitt continues, is its impersonality. Every administrator, teacher, and student becomes part of a vast, impersonal apparatus. Each day students are herded into pedagogical barracks and disciplined by state pedants. No attempt is made to understand the nature and needs of young people. Administrators and teachers deal with students, parents, and colleagues in cold, official tones. Even student suicides are reported in the same heartless manner. Officials live in fear of their superiors and the rest of officialdom. When one gymnasium director was informed that one of his students had committed suicide, his only reaction was one of relief that it had not occurred in the school, in which case he would have suffered the stigma of official embarrassment and the burden of submitting a thick batch of official reports.

Gurlitt's argument against the entire ironclad bureaucratic structure of German schools and society was not a new one. Paul Lagarde had made the same accusations more than thirty years earlier. Where Gurlitt superseded Lagarde, however, was in linking the growing suicide problem with the pressures created by this system. As a result, the Steglitz reformer proposed no less than an overhaul of the entire testing and certifying apparatus of the German bureaucracy. German schools, as part of this ponderous system, had grown rigid and impersonal. They needed reform. Yet, Gurlitt even doubted whether the schools were still capable of reforming themselves. They might have entirely exhausted their powers of rejuvenation. Perhaps someone not associated with the German schools or bureaucracy would have to be summoned to carry out the necessary

changes. But, if reforms were not immediately undertaken, Gurlitt warned direly, at least a dozen additional suicides would occur in the next half year. "And whose sons shall not be added to the list?" he asks threateningly. "You see, dear gentle German citizens, it is a matter for you to consider." (19)

In seeking to arouse the anxiety of his fellow citizens about the safety of their sons, Gurlitt made no attempt to tackle the problem scientifically. He wrote for the crowd. His aim was to provoke action. He expected his wealth of examples drawn from his personal experiences to suffice as convincing proof for his assertions. This was not the case, however, with Professor Doctor Eulenburg's statistical study, which soon followed the publication of Gurlitt's polemical pamphlet.

In an article entitled "Childhood and Adolescent Suicide" (*Kinder- und Jugendselfbstmorde*), (20) Eulenburg, a German physician, refutes Gurlitt and accuses the school reformers of obscuring the true nature of the suicide problem. From an analysis of the details of 323 case studies which he has collected covering the period from 1893 to 1905, Eulenburg concludes that the largest number of suicides are not attributable to the schools at all, and that the term "student suicide" (*Schülerselbstmorde*), which has attained such popular currency, is a misnomer. Certainly it is not overwork in schools, as the reformers like Gurlitt allege, that causes suicides, but personality problems—even, perhaps, personality conflicts with teachers. "Using the precise analysis of individual cases," Eulenburg writes, "I have sought to furnish proof to disprove the immediate complicity of the schools in the overwhelming majority of suicide cases." (21)

The statistics that he employs are gruesome and fascinating. First, Eulenburg carefully lists 323 suicide cases, which he has culled from every conceivable source for the period. A typical entry reads as follows: "4. 17-year-old female. Drank lysol. Reason: Jealousy and lover's sorrow." (22) Then he breaks these cases down in several ways for purposes of statistical consideration. This reveals that the largest percentage, 40 percent, of his 132 female cases committed suicide as a result of love affairs, for example because of jealousy, being jilted, parental opposition, seduction, or guilt resulting from "moral failures" (*sittliche Verfehlungen*). Among young males,

more than 40 percent of all 191 suicides stemmed from fear of punishment in either home or school. Affairs of the heart, interestingly, account for only 14 percent of these male deaths. In analyzing the means by which the acts of suicide were committed, Eulenburg discovers that female suicides were normally more impulsive than their male counterparts; young men and boys generally planned their suicides more carefully. By far the largest number of males shot or hung themselves, while the greatest number of females drowned or poisoned themselves or leaped from windows.

What puzzles Eulenburg, as it puzzled so many others, is why so many young people, who do not have to bear the responsibilities of the adult world, take their own lives. He can only conclude that neuroses and personality problems are as common to this age group as they are to adults. Referring to the findings of the Viennese physician, Sigmund Freud, he notes that "the bud of every kind of aberration from the neurotic to the criminal is already present, albeit half slumbering" in young people. (23) With this in mind, Eulenburg cautions against any idealization of childhood or adolescence. School reformers who talk about "freeing the wills of children," when these wills are neither firm nor reasonable, have falsely evaluated the true nature of young people. Such sickening sentimentality about the nature of childhood can only lead to flabby treatment of children with pernicious results. In the end, he offers little constructive advice on how to deal with the suicide problem, only a few platitudes about making youthful spirits "healthier" and "harder."

Whether the schools actually were or were not at fault in the increasing number of suicides is hardly important now. What is important is the appearance of a significant body of literature purporting to deal with the problem of suicide among young people of school age, and especially those between the ages of 14 and 19, where suicide was most frequent. This in turn led to a concern with the peculiar maturational problems of this age group, especially those concerning school and sex. Adolescence began to be widely recognized, explicitly and implicitly, as a stage of development between childhood and maturity. But school reformers and physicians were not the only ones to concern themselves with adolescence and its tribulations. Many of the leading playwrights and novelists of

Germany suddenly began to do so as well. They effectively dramatized the problems of this age group and thereby popularized the new themes until they were well known throughout the land.

## II

Not unexpectedly, Wedekind's play, the first of the adolescent problem plays, excited a heated controversy among German educators. Not only had the author laid bare the problems of sex and suicide among adolescents, but he had pilloried the schools of Germany for complicity in these adolescent tragedies. In one scene, for example, Moritz, a gymnasium student in his mid-teens, searches in vain for sexual enlightenment. His school provides him with nothing but sixty verses of Homer to memorize, his encyclopedia with even less. He yearns for sex education, but gets Greek verbs instead. "What's the good of an encyclopedia," Moritz asks in despair, "that doesn't answer the most pertinent question in the world?" (24)

His best friend, Melchior, finally enlightens him with a written account of the reproductive act—Moritz is too shy to have Melchior describe it to him in person. The description eventually reaches the hands of the boys' teachers. In a scene in which Wedekind bitterly indicts the teaching profession for its senseless self-righteousness and stupidity, Melchior is submitted to an inquisition in the faculty room of his school. On the wall portraits of Rousseau and Pestalozzi hang mockingly. The inquisitors are caricatures of German teachers. The rector of the school, Professor Sunstroke (*Sonnenstick*), presides over the proceedings. Among those present are Professors Bonebreaker (*Knochenbruch*), Stickytongue (*Zungenschlag*), and Fly-killer (*Fliegentod*). Melchior defends himself by claiming that he has written only facts, nothing more. Rector Sunstroke accuses him of indecent behavior: "You are flouting the instinctive human feeling for modesty and discretion!" he charges. "You are flouting the moral order itself!" (25) The others, of course, agree, and Melchior is sent to a house of correction. The tragedy of unenlightened puberty unfolds.

Even before it was ever produced on the stage, Wedekind's play exercised a powerful influence on the German theater. It was the forerunner of a new dramatic style, expressionism, as well as the herald of a new social and intellectual climate. Most important

for this study, it dealt with themes that were soon to gain great popularity. As previously mentioned, in the first years of the twentieth century, an entirely new genre of plays dealing with the problems of secondary school students (*Schülerschauspiel*) appeared. (26) Although some of them, like Max Dreyer's *The Practice Teacher* (*Der Probekandidat*, 1900) (27) and Otto Ernst's "Flachsmann As a Educator" (*Flachsmann als Erzieher*, 1901), (28) concentrated on such problems as academic freedom and the tyranny of school directors, many of them treated the problem of adolescents confronting a society that was virtually unaware of their existence and therefore insensitive to their problems. The 1905 play, *Traumulus*, by Arno Holz and Oskar Jerschke, provides an excellent example of this type of drama. (29)

The central figure of this play is a gymnasium student named Kurt von Zedlitz. Although he is in the most advanced class of the school and approaching twenty, he is prevented from enjoying the liberties of being an adult. When, following a performance in the municipal theater, Zedlitz drinks a glass of champagne with the actress, Lydia Link, and then spends the night with her, he places his position in the school as well as the reputation of his family in jeopardy. Realizing his error, he decides to confess his transgression to the director of his gymnasium, Professor Doctor Niemeyer, the man with whom he boards as well. He is dissuaded, however, by a friend who warns him of the possible consequences: "Think of what it would do to your father if you returned home as an expelled student? And your . . . dear mother? All because of your little amusement." (30)

But the director has already been informed that Zedlitz was seen with the actress in public, an act of indiscretion in its own right. Revealing his own short-sightedness and prudery, he charges the young man with having committed an immoral act that will bring disgrace on all of those who trusted him. "I have watched you since you were in the third class," he tells him. "Your father gave me his fullest confidence. . . . I was proud of you! And now . . . you have spoiled everything by this stupid prank! Everything!" (31)

Zedlitz is forced to lie and deny that he spent the night with Lydia. The truth is finally known, however, and Director Niemeyer immediately expels Zedlitz from his home and the school despite

the errant student's pleas for forgiveness. In a brilliant final act, the Director recognizes that he has acted precipitously, but it is too late. A telephone call reveals the news of Zedlitz's suicide. The curtain closes on the broken and chastened gymnasium director, whose final lines are: "Would that it were my son." (32)

The play condemns more than one man, however. It censures an entire system for making such tragedies possible. Although Zedlitz satisfies his sexual desire, he must forfeit his life as a consequence. The representatives of society are blind and cruel. A single word of forgiveness or understanding would have saved him. But there was none, and another adolescent has died needlessly.

The fictional dramatization of such tragedies was not confined to the stage. Those Germans who preferred to sit comfortably at home reading novels were not spared the torments of adolescence. Novelists seized upon the new themes at the turn of the century and created a whole genre of novels (*Schülerroman*) dealing with the problems of life in the secondary schools. Like the dramatists, their ire was frequently directed against the schools and the teachers as the agents of an oppressive society. As one literary historian observed: "For those growing pains, most insistently felt in the sexual difficulties of adolescence, the boy—through his literary spokesman—blames those in charge of him, especially his teachers, the most visible and obvious targets." (33)

The book that marked the beginning of this new trend was Otto Bierbaum's novel *Stilpe*, which appeared in 1897. (34) The author depicts the life of his hero, Wilibald Stilpe, from his birth until his grotesque self-inflicted death. As so many novels of this type were to do, *Stilpe* dwells on the sordid aspects of adolescent development. The Dresden school, which provides the principal setting, seethes with sexual abnormalities. When the boy is thirteen, the author sardonically informs the reader that "it need hardly be mentioned that [Stilpe] was initiated into the secret art peculiar to boys' schools." (35) Then, lest the reader be left in doubt by this oblique reference, Bierbaum provides enough detailed description of these "secret arts" to inform even the most naive reader of his meaning. The book might no longer shock the mid-twentieth-century free thinker, but it can still startle him with its frankness.

The book describes Stilpe's more conventional sexual develop-

ment as well. When he reaches sixteen and is in the third class (*Tertia*) of the school, he is seduced by the lovely twenty-year-old Martha. Thereafter, he spends his days and nights tormented by the vision of her. He daydreams and writes verses about his experience. In describing Stilpe's newly aroused feelings, Bierbaum writes that although the gods may enjoy the troubled spectacle of human puberty, it is certainly not a time of pure joy for the human being. The author expresses his sympathy and understanding for the "awkward age." (36)

Stilpe's inevitable suicide occurs as the grotesque conclusion to a play in which he is performing and is called upon to hang himself in the final scene. He does, in reality, hang himself after having taken poison to assure his demise. Although his motives for this act are unclear, Stilpe does leave behind a letter containing numerous accusations against his school for not having fully developed his poetic talents. He is a frustrated writer. Certainly, the picture of Stilpe's classroom life, which Bierbaum draws earlier in the book, is a dismal one. What, however, is more important in the final analysis than any indictment of the school is the link that the author makes between the recurring themes of adolescent sexual problems and suicide.

Despite the publication of *Stilpe* in 1897, the true flowering of novels dealing with school life and the problems of adolescence occurred after 1901. Not only did novelists of renown begin to devote their fame and talents to portraying these subjects, but aspiring young writers turned to them as well. In one of the longest chapters of his novel, *Buddenbrooks*, published in 1901, young Thomas Mann did just that.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Mann loathed his education. "I detested school," he bitterly recalled in 1903. "I despised it as a place, criticized the manners of its authorities, and found myself in a kind of literary opposition to its spirit, its discipline, its methods of training." (37) All of Mann's rancor emerges in *Buddenbrooks* when he describes a school day in the life of fifteen-year-old Hanno Buddenbrooks. A sensitive adolescent is pitted against the bestiality and insensitivity of his school and schoolmasters. That the boy dies soon after is due to his frail constitution rather than the harshness of

his formal education, but the author leaves no doubt that the boy's will to live was sapped by his school.

Having overslept, Hanno begins his day by rushing through the snowy streets of Lübeck, hoping to reach the school before morning prayers begin. He stares hopelessly and enviously at the adults he encounters en route. What do they know of the terror that awaits him? "They were going to their offices or about their business; they were in no particular hurry; nothing was threatening them." (38) Arriving just in time, he joins his best friend, Kai, and the two of them experience the horror of a day in the Lübeck *Realschule*. In hourly succession, one misfit teacher follows another to the classroom lectern. The teacher of religion stutters terribly; another spits frequently. Rote memorization of facts and verses is the key to success in every subject. Gottlob Kassbaum receives a good mark ". . . because he knew that Job had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred asses, and a very large number of servants." (39) No teacher makes any effort to stimulate interest in the subject he teaches; the overriding ambition of every boy is merely to avoid humiliation and punishment. When any student cheats successfully during recitation, he is considered by his classmates ". . . a good industrious pupil who fully deserved the mark he got." (40)

By far the greatest stumbling block to academic success is the Latin class. It is presided over by Herr Professor Mantelsack. Not having memorized the required lines of Ovid for the day, Hanno cringes in fear. "I'm so scared, Kai, that it hurts me all over my body," he confesses to his friend. "If this beastly Ovid lesson were only over! If I just had my bad mark, in peace, and stopped where I am, and everything was in order! I'm not afraid of that. It is the row that goes beforehand that I hate!" (41)

Nor is there any escape. Although the boys look longingly at the gate during recess, they cannot leave. They are fully aware that the entire society to which they belong is geared to their success or failure in school. When the new director of the school enters bad marks in a class book, he says threateningly, "I will spoil all your careers for you." (42) His meaning is clear to everyone. Under such pressures, which are in no way mitigated by the mandarins who teach class each hour, the boys suffer miserably. "Oh, Lord, if the institu-



tion would just once let us out of her loving embrace," (43) Hanno says in a moment of complete despair. The only escape is death. Although Hanno does not commit suicide, he clearly dies because he has no will to live. (44)

In the year following the publication of *Buddenbrooks*, Emil Strauss's novel *Freund Hein* appeared. (45) Once again, the theme of adolescent suicide recurs. As with Mann's Hanno, Strauss's Hein, the tragic hero of the tale, has musical talents and artistic sensitivities which are thwarted and unappreciated by society. He runs afoul of his father and his schoolmasters. In the end, he shoots himself in a wood near his home.

This sampling should indicate the nature of the new novels that soon glutted German bookstores. Not only did *Stilpe*, *Buddenbrooks*, and *Freund Hein* go through numerous printings, but a host of others dealing with these themes quickly imitated their success: Felix Hollaender's *The Way of Thomas Truck* (*Der Weg des Thomas Truck*) in 1902; (46) Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger* in 1903; Hermann Hesse's *Under the Wheel* (*Unterm Rad*) in 1905; Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrat* in the same year; Robert Musil's *Young Törless* (*Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless*) in 1906, and Friedrich Huch's *Mao* in 1907. All of these concentrated on the problems of childhood and adolescence. The authors universally detested the school system and its teachers and vigorously attacked both. And in most of these works a sensitive youth either contemplates or commits suicide. Although this is by no means a complete list of this genre of novel, it suffices to illustrate the point: that the theme of youth being crushed by a society and its schools, which were insensitive to his peculiar maturational problems, became a recurrent one in Germany in the first decade of the twentieth century.

### III

Although the middle-class adolescent emerged and was recognized during this period, German state schools never took account of him. Reformers tried in vain to loosen the bonds of the classical curriculum, but secondary schools remained as repressive and as stifling as they had always been. Only those reformers who went outside the state system and founded experimental schools could truly acknowledge the exis-

tence of the adolescent in their institutions. The Country Boarding School Movement (Landerziehungsheimbewegung), for example, founded by Hermann Lietz in the first years of the century, sought to do so. Lietz established special boarding schools for adolescents at Haubinda and Bieberstein in 1903 and 1905 respectively. His follower, Gustav Wyneken, went even further and sought to promote the growth of a unique adolescent culture (*Jugendkultur*) with the founding of the Free School Community of Wickersdorf in 1906. Unfortunately, such men with their small schools hardly affected the official establishment. German schools were too time-bound and too fully integrated into the state bureaucracy for anything short of a revolution to alter them.

More important than any changes in official institutions and curriculum, however, was the founding of the German Youth Movement. Middle-class adolescents discovered their own existence at approximately the same time as their elders. In 1901 a group of gymnasium students in the Berlin suburb of Steglitz founded a hiking club called the Wandering Birds (*Wandervögel*) which soon found imitators and progeny throughout Germany. The German Youth Movement that grew from these humble beginnings became, within a short time, a spontaneous mass movement without peer. Literally thousands of German teen-agers became involved in its activities. Unlike the Boy Scouts, who were having their vogue in other western European states, it demanded adolescent leadership as well as adolescent membership. The Youth Movement developed its own adolescent culture and adolescent life style, consciously rejecting the stuffy and sedentary world of adults and the over-protected world of children. (47)

Although the history of the Youth Movement is not within the purview of this article, it further demonstrates what plays and novels were simultaneously revealing in the first years of the present century: that the uniqueness of adolescence was being asserted and widely recognized for the first time in Germany. (48) A dynamic new age had begun.

## Notes

1. Eric Bentley, "Notes," *The Modern Theatre*, (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), 6, 286.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 287.
3. Quoted from Frank Wedekind's *Was ich mir dabei dachte*, in *The Modern Theatre*, p. 287.
4. Ludwig Gurlitt, "Schüler-Schauspiele" in *Bühne und Welt. Zeitschrift für Theaterwesen, Literatur und Musik* IX, Jahrgang Nrs. 10 and 11 (February and March 1907).
5. See Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1962) for a brilliant discussion of the discovery of childhood. The vagueness of the German terms describing these stages of development is discussed at length in Adolf von Grolman, *Kind und Junger Mensch in der Dichtung der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt Verlag, n.d. [early 30s]), ch. I, sec. 2.
6. See the *Berliner Morgenzeitung* of June 16, 1892, as noted in Gustav Siegert, *Das Problem der Kinderselbstmordes* (Leipzig: R. Voigtländers Verlag, 1893), p. 11.
7. Quoted in *Das Problem der Kinderselbstmordes*, p. 8.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 40.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
16. Ludwig Gurlitt, *Der Deutsche und sein Vaterland.; Politisch-pädagogische Betrachtungen eines Modernen*, 2d ed.; Berlin: Verlag von Wiegandt & Griebner, 1902), pp. 98-99.
17. Ludwig Gurlitt, *Schülerelbstmorde* (Berlin: Concordia Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, n.d.).
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
20. In the *Sammlung zwangloser Abhandlungen aus dem Gebiete der Nerven- und Geisteskrankheiten*, Band X, Heft 6 (1914).
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
24. Frank Wedekind, *Spring's Awakening*, act 1, scene 2, in *The Modern Theatre*, vol. 6, ed. Eric Bentley, pp. 104-05.
25. *Ibid.*, act 3, scene 1, p. 140. Bentley's translations of these names are used here.
26. See Adolf von Grolman, *Kind und Junger Mensch*, p. 44, for an evaluation of the importance of Wedekind's play to this genre.
27. Translated and published as *On Probation*, in *Poet-Lore. A Quarterly Magazine of Letters*, XIV (1902-1903), 40-113.
28. (Leipzig: Verlag von L. Staackmann, 1901).

29. (München, 1905).
30. *Traumulus*, R. Piper & Co., act 2, p. 53.
31. *Ibid.*, act 2, p. 59.
32. *Ibid.*, act 5, p. 160.
33. W. R. Hicks, *The School in English and German Fiction* (London: Soncino Press, 1933), pp. 76-77.
34. *Stilpe: Ein Roman aus der Froschperspective* (4th ed.; Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1902).
35. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
37. Quoted by Hicks (*The School*, p. 107) from *Die Neue Rundschau* of June 30, 1930.
38. Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, trans. H. T. Löwe-Porter (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., n.d.), p. 553.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 560.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 570.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 564.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 580.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 582.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 591.
45. *Freund Hein: Eine Lebensgeschichte* (München: Georg Müller Verlag, 1936).
46. (Berlin, 1902). See especially vol. 2, pp. 31-32, for a bitter description of school life and insensitive teachers.
47. See Walter Laqueur, *Young Germany* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1962), for a good history of this phenomenon.
48. The German language soon reflected this change as well. Whereas in 1880 a popular German educational encyclopedia contained only two entries under the heading of "Jugend," by 1913 a comparable work contained some 50 entries, including such terms as "Adolescent or Juvenile Welfare," "Law," "Associations," etc. See Walter Hornstein, *Jugend in ihrer Zeit* (Hamburg: Marion von Schröder Verlag, 1966), p. 20, for a more complete discussion of this change.