

STUDENT SUICIDE

Is It a Disease or a Symptom?

EDWARD CAMPBELL ASWELL

WHY do college students kill themselves? The immediate causes are obvious enough, — and trivial enough. But, says Mr. Aswell, himself a recent graduate, there is a deeper cause. The modern college upsets old beliefs and puts nothing in their place. Moreover, students lack adequate knowledge and advice when personal problems arise. Adjustment to life is thereby rendered doubly difficult, and suicide is only one of several symptoms of maladjustment which academic authorities too often ignore.

SINCE January 1 of this year twenty-six students in American colleges and secondary schools have taken their own lives, according to newspaper tabulations available at the moment this article goes to press. By the time it appears in print the lugubrious reporter will probably have a still higher figure with which to startle headline readers. As early as the middle of January, when the almost simultaneous suicides of four college students focused attention on the subject, the general public began to believe that here was something more than a simple coincidence. Since then this belief has rapidly hardened to conviction as zealous newsgatherers have dragged into the limelight the school or college affiliation of each youthful self-murderer fortunate enough to have such a connection.

Thus almost over night was created a new disease. Student suicide was no ordinary suicide, but a brand new variety caused by a hitherto unknown bacillus, bred of American education, and working with most deadly effect in the higher branches of the educational body. With characteristic dispatch specialists of every description set to work to isolate the germ, and with more than scientific precision they made their diagnoses and broadcast their findings. That students were victims of a suicide complex was generally admitted; but when it came to defining the nature of this complex the specialists seemed to stray into the woods of dissension, each on his own by-path.

Thus a graduate manager of college athletics is reported as saying: "Athletics can solve the wave of college suicides." Dr. Frankwood Earl Williams, Medical Director of the National Committee of Mental Hygiene, attributes the phenomenon to

"false emotional adjustment." Dr. John B. Watson, father of behavioristic psychology, says of the self-murderer: "He commits suicide because his present environment has become intolerable," and he makes the novel suggestion that the tortured youth run away to a foreign country and begin life over again "under a new name and under new conditions, even . . . learning a new language." Dr. Edward F. Kaempf, psychoanalyst, blames a "fixed emotional state produced by repression." Bernarr Macfadden, physical culture advocate, writes a rousing editorial in his "Evening Graphic" under the inspired heading: "Too Much Brain, Not Enough Brawn, Cause of Schoolboy Suicides." And of course the men of God make no mystery of their opinions. They have been the leading alarmists and were quick to sound the trump of doom in such words as these from Methodist Bishop William F. Anderson: "We must hark back to vital religion and downright godliness or we are lost." Similarly the Catholic journal, "America," takes the occasion to warn Catholic parents against exposing their children "to the almost fatal dangers of the secular college."

When thus examined, the so called student suicide wave breaks up in a wild spray of contending theories which have little relation to any condition outside the mind of the theorist. Government statistics prove, moreover, that no unusual state of affairs can be postulated from the suicides of these twenty-six young men and women. More than twelve hundred young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four take their own lives every year, making an average of about three deaths a day. At this rate one estimates that between January 1 and March 15 there have been two hundred and twenty-two suicides of young people of college age, of whom only twenty-six, or roughly one-ninth, were actually students. From reliable sources at five large universities, four of whom actually reported deaths from this cause, the writer learns that the number of such suicides during the present college year is, if anything, slightly below normal.

If, therefore, we can pass over the charge so frequently made of late that the colleges are developing a new disease amounting to suicidal mania, we still cannot dismiss these twenty-six deaths as insignificant just because they happen to be the normal thing. Indeed, their real importance to the general question of education

may be just that, — that they *are* the normal thing. When one considers that the student group represents the most promising young men and women in the nation, it is a distinct shock to learn that the ratio of one student suicide to nine non-student suicides is fairly constant over a period of years. The recent flurry in the press may prove of benefit, therefore, in bringing this condition to public notice; and such instances of self-destruction as have occurred may be taken as symptoms of a deep-rooted condition, — one which is by no means confined to the colleges, but which may be most successfully studied there, since in student groups the causes can be isolated and examined in bolder relief.

The accessible information shows that the motives advanced for these suicides were various and apparently personal to each student. At the same time one notices the reappearance of certain common elements. Most of these unhappy students were considered above the average in mental attainment, and there is frequently recurring reference to the study of philosophy as a contributing explanation of the cynicism, morbidness, sense of futility, in which the idea of self-destruction was nurtured. Certain it is that each of these students came to the conclusion that life was not worth living. Though such an attitude is common enough in human experience, — there being few persons who have not at some time in their lives suffered temporary moods of despair, — it is strange that it should have become so acute in these young people who were presumably being prepared for useful careers by the aid of the very best that modern education could offer.

One of the unfortunates seems to have sought death because of an incurable illness. In only two instances is there evidence of the commission of some deed which so overwhelmed the doer with shame that he felt he couldn't face the consequences. Apparently the remaining twenty-three arrived in less cataclysmic fashion at the conclusion that life was not worth living. In some cases the motives cited were so trivial as to be ludicrous. Are we to conclude, therefore, that students of more than normal intelligence actually ended their lives for such shoe-string reasons? It seems more logical to suppose that the sense of life's hopeless jumble and futility had been growing on them over an extended period of time. Once his standard of values was shattered, some trifle

might assume an importance in the student's mind quite out of proportion to its real importance, and be for him the last straw's weight needed to push him into the abyss. The causes assigned for most of these suicides are unintelligible unless seen against a background of philosophic doubt and negation.

Such a doubting process is one of the most common phenomena to be found among students. That this is so is, indeed, a tribute to the colleges. It shows that they are on the way to accomplish their purpose. It indicates that students are beginning to think for themselves. But if these suicides prove anything at all, it is that while the thinking process is in its rudimentary, destructive stage, students are being left without the guidance which they then need more than at any other time in their lives.

Before coming to college, the student has only dabbled in the stream of life, and has seldom found himself actually in it. Protected from the buffets of its waves, he has been safely stowed in some authoritative boat, parental, clerical, or otherwise. For the most part, his was the good ship, "Christianity," and he acquiesced in the course others steered for him without asking too many questions. When he comes to college, he does not simply transfer from one craft to another, as is commonly supposed by the uninitiated, — unless, indeed, his misfortune lead him to a denominational institution. One need speak here only of the colleges that deserve the name, those committed to follow truth no matter in what unfathomed channels it may take them. At such a college the student suddenly finds himself thrown out of his boat and immersed in the stream of life.

Here, for the first time, he is caught up in the whirl of ideas with all their cross currents, eddies, and undertows. Study of history and philosophy reveals to him new authorities whose teachings conflict with each other and with the safe precepts of his childhood. He struggles with his religious faith and tries to climb aboard the good old scow again; but new ideas pour through the gaping seams of its hull, and it sinks under his weight. Thus his naive faith deserts him, and with it his former standard of values. For the moment all is meaningless chaos.

As the welling tide of new ideas washes over his head, his teachers exhort him:

"Strike out for yourself! Swim!"

"How?" gasps the much bewildered adventurer. "Where?"

They can't tell him where, for his new instructors are honest enough to admit they don't know. Except for a rare teacher here and there, neither do they tell him how, for they are not themselves swimmers in the current, but tadpoles sunning themselves in some quiet backwash, or frogs croaking contentedly on their own pond lilies. Indeed, with the rare exception noted, he will learn that his teachers are specialists. They have never seen the broad stream of life, or if so, have long since pulled themselves out of it. One sits on a rock in midstream, fascinated by the single eddy that curls at its base. Others stand on the bank, tutelar deities of this and that tiny current; for they know all about currents, each his own.

Thrown upon his own resources, and with only an occasional word of help here and there, the student begins to get his bearings, to coordinate his mental movements, and to strike out on a course of his own choosing. Thus it *may* happen that the student learns how to swim in the new element through which he is to move the rest of his life. Sooner or later most of them develop their own methods of locomotion. Some become vigorous, long-distance swimmers. Others have to take unto themselves a plank. Still others recalk their boats and take up paddling again. It doesn't seem to matter much; each fish to his own school.

But there may be still other complications to encounter. While he is embroiled in the apparently meaningless maze of conflicting ideas, the student may be troubled by some personal problem, some question more immediately concerning the conduct of his own life. It may be some financial worry. Perhaps some question of social adjustment to new situations for which home training was inadequate. It may be a problem of ideals, a matter of trying to reconcile beauty and virtue with the newly discovered ugliness and sordidness of the world. Most likely, it is some question of health or sex. Young men and women of college age are just coming alive to the importance and meaning of sex. They are curious to learn the truth. Freshman courses in hygiene are the standing joke of every campus, and thus avenues of adequate information are closed; for the youth is reticent to discuss such matters with the few older people who might enlighten without judging him.

When a personal problem such as these arises, a distressing

emotional conflict ensues. Colleges have grown too large for any continued personal contact between teacher and student. For the most part, the teaching staff prefer not to be bothered, and are none the wiser as to what may be taking place in the student until some breakdown or other catastrophe forces the matter to their attention. Thus when an emotional conflict is added to the intellectual one, a dangerous situation exists. Any trivial new worry may draw fire from such tinder.

Suicide is only one of several avenues through which these conditions may express themselves. I have learned from physicians at several leading colleges that there is considerable warping of personalities through twistings and perversions of all varieties, both mental and emotional. That strange new cult of Buchmanism, which has been described as "mental indulgence in sex under the cloak of religion," — a cult which was recently ousted from one college campus with great public notice, — seems less inexplicable when viewed in the light of related conditions. At one large university there have been thirty-four cases of insanity since the opening of the present college year. The transient nature of these cases may be seen from the fact that all but two of the students afflicted have now been restored to health by careful, personal treatment. But each of the thirty-four was temporarily a favored candidate for suicide.

Such, in brief, are some of the underlying conditions of which student suicide may be taken as a single symptom. Any proposal to improve the situation, such as that recently advanced by Mr. Louis Untermeyer, can hardly be successful unless it deals with the problem as a whole.

The philosophic problem calls for a new integration and synthesis to give meaning and direction to the maze of facts and conflicting ideas which the college dispenses. In fairness to the colleges, it must be recognized that this condition is not peculiar to them but is general throughout the world. The distinguished French thinker, M. Paul Valéry, bears witness to this fact in *Variety*, just published in America, when he writes:

And in what consists the disorder of our mental Europe? In the free coexistence, in all cultivated minds, of the most dissimilar ideas, the most contradictory principles of life and knowledge. That is precisely what characterizes a *modern* epoch.

The colleges can hardly be held accountable, therefore, for a condition in which they are caught up and whirled along in common with all our other institutions of church, state, and social life. But neither can the colleges afford longer to ignore it. It is a situation to be dealt with, and more imperative is the need among student groups, where, with immaturity and inexperience, thinking is often strenuous and the danger most acute. In a previous article, the writer suggested that the least the college can do is to aid the student mature a philosophy of his own by offering a new course dealing synthetically with important systems of thought. (THE FORUM, November, 1926.)

The second condition mentioned above is one for which the colleges cannot be so readily excused. They make available to the student the best that is known and thought in the world on all matters academic. But when it comes to another kind of knowledge for which students are blindly groping, and which, if made accessible, might enable them to live and adjust themselves more harmoniously to life, the college says: "That doesn't concern us."

Take as a single example the very important questions of general health, mental hygiene, and sex. A recent investigation of this subject at several large universities indicates that matters of this personal nature are rarely given more than casual attention by the governing boards. At several institutions the departments in charge of student health have recognized the necessity of doing something and have attempted to organize and broaden the scope of their work. But they encounter the most unenlightened opposition from their more academic colleagues. At one university the head of the department of hygiene was refused permission to offer an adequate course in his subject. At another where organization has been carried farther, the head of the department writes me that he is having to curtail his program in order not to create opposition; "and this can be very easily done," he adds, "if we become a little too active in our attempts to educate the student."

The time may come when college education will be readjusted with greater solicitude for the total end it ought to accomplish. If one who has so recently received his degree may attempt from his experience to define the purpose of college education, I should state it as follows: to enable the student to make an intelligent adjustment to life, with all the best available knowledge

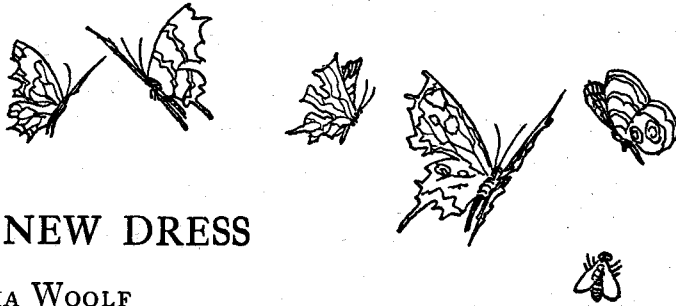
placed freely at his disposal. If such a purpose were ever fully recognized, several important transformations would take place in the colleges. As already indicated, new emphasis would be placed on the integration of facts into a philosophic whole to counterbalance the scientific tendency to analyze and classify them into separate subjects. Moreover, certain activities which are now merely tolerated in the colleges, because the authorities don't know how to go about throwing them out, would be accorded full recognition and made integral parts of the curriculum.

First, the department of hygiene, instead of remaining as it now is, a sort of general practitioner's office for students with physical ills, would also become, through the prestige and personality of its staff, the haven to which those harassed by mental troubles would willingly go to be straightened out. And it would give adequate courses on hygiene and health, imparting vital information about the human body and its care, not evading the important subject of sex.

Second, athletics would be accorded full recognition. The athletic director would not only be a faculty member, as he now is at Harvard, but more important still, the present top-heavy system by which the entire athletic program is made to depend on the gate receipts from football, would be discarded for a plan of endowed athletics for all. Habits of regular exercise would become as important as regular attendance at lectures.

Third, the social life of the college would be expanded. The present club and fraternity systems might remain for those who demand some sort of recognition for wealth, social position, and superabundant idle time. But new units would be added, sufficient in number and open enough, so that every student who wanted to do so would have the opportunity to develop his social nature.

It seems that the problem of education is not so much a matter of discovering the occult meaning of this abstract thing called life. Is it not rather a question of enabling the student to *put meaning into* his own life through intelligent adjustment to the conditions of living? So long as the latter purpose is only vaguely admitted by the colleges, so long as such conditions as here described continue to exist unnoticed, the great cause for wonder is not that student suicides are so many, but so few.



THE NEW DRESS

VIRGINIA WOOLF

MABEL had her first serious suspicion that something was wrong as she took her cloak off and Mrs. Barnet, while handing her the mirror and touching the brushes and thus drawing her attention, perhaps rather markedly, to all the appliances for tidying and improving hair, complexion, clothes, which existed on the dressing table, confirmed the suspicion, — that it was not right, not quite right, which growing stronger as she went upstairs and springing at her with conviction as she greeted Clarissa Dalloway, she went straight to the far end of the room, to a shaded corner where a looking-glass hung and looked. No! It was not *right*. And at once the misery which she always tried to hide, the profound dissatisfaction, — the sense she had had, ever since she was a child, of being inferior to other people, — set upon her, relentlessly, remorselessly, with an intensity which she could not beat off, as she would when she woke at night at home, by reading Borrow or Scott; for oh these men, oh these women, all were thinking, — “What’s Mabel wearing? What a fright she looks! What a hideous new dress!” — their eyelids flickering as they came up and then their lids shutting rather tight. It was her own appalling inadequacy; her cowardice; her mean, water-sprinkled blood that depressed her. And at once the whole of the room where, for ever so many hours, she had planned with the little dressmaker how it was to go, seemed sordid, repulsive; and her own drawing-room so shabby, and herself, going out, puffed up with vanity as she touched the letters on the hall table and said: “How dull!” to show off, — all this now seemed unutterably silly, paltry, and provincial. All this had been absolutely destroyed, shown up, exploded, the moment she came into Mrs. Dalloway’s drawing-room.