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From Goethe to Gundolf

ESSAYS ON
GERMAN LITERATURE
AND CULTURE
Goethe and the Novel

Only superlatives will do for Werther. For Thomas Mann, for instance, it remains ‘ein Meisterwerk’.¹ For this and other modern masters of the theme of death such a reaction might come more from literary mediation than through direct access. For earlier generations, however, it came straight from the experience of the heart. Werther concentrates many of the aspirations and strivings of the Sturm und Drang (‘Storm and Stress’) and is its finest literary expression. It is the textbook from which the German Romantics learn their Weltschmerz (‘melancholy’). Their European counterparts in mal du siècle can create Adolphe, René, Ortis or Manfred² because Werther has shown the way. At home, a succession of tragic heroes, Bonaventura, Roquairol and Danton,³ can pronounce on the futility of existence with an eloquence lent by the earlier model. Yet against such specific literary influence one must set the sheer importance of the text for the whole of German literature — and for Johann Wolfgang Goethe himself as its representative. It is the first

2 Benjamin Constant, Adolphe (1816), François-René de Chateaubriand, René (1802), Ugo Foscolo, Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis (1816), Lord Byron, Manfred (1817).
3 Heroes in, respectively, Jean Paul, Titan (1800–03), [Ernst August Friedrich Klingemann], Die Nachwachen des Bonaventura (1805), Georg Büchner, Dantons Tod (1835).
German novel to gain international fame, and nothing Goethe or any other German writes in this mode will catch Europe’s attention again for well over a century. It is Goethe’s only novel to sustain narrative breath from start to finish. It is his only true tragedy. It might even be said that the young man of twenty-four wrote nothing better. The fame and scandal it attracted to his name, while not inhibiting his creativity, certainly did stamp him in the eyes of many as the author of just one book and as such was an encumbrance and an embarrassment in his middle years — ‘ein Unheil, was mich bis nach Indien verfolgen würde’. But by 1824, fifty years after the first printing and in the year of his poem ‘An Werther’, Goethe — now well over seventy — cannot help admitting that ‘Es sind lauter Brandraketen!’, that the novel still packs an explosive charge. There is pride here at having written Werther at twenty-four, and by implication, at having been a celebrity ever since.

Goethe claimed in a conversation with Johann Peter Eckermann early in 1824 that he had read the novel only once since its first appearance, presumably for the revisions carried out from 1782 onwards. However that may be — and there is no reason necessarily to doubt him — Goethe certainly had little to say about his most famous work until drawn in 1808 by no less an interlocutor than Napoleon Bonaparte. And it was a combination of real circumstances and the reflexion on circumstances once real, that caused him to return again to the work and its implications. The suicide of the stepson of his friend Carl Friedrich Zelter in 1812 brings back the memory of taedium vitae. It was that surfeit of life, that had once gripped his vitals, in the experience leading up to Werther, and that he had escaped (‘den Wellen des Todes [...] entkommen’). The reflexion on his own life, as his autobiography Dichtung und Wahrheit / Poetry and Truth enters into its ‘Werther phase’ in 1813, causes him to pause for thought on how it may have been and now seemed. There could of course be no question of stating how it actually was, but a disparate and confused set of events could now be stylized into the

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4 ‘A misfortune that might pursue me as far as India’. All Goethe quotations are taken where possible from Goethe, Der junge Goethe. Neu bearbeitete Ausgabe in fünf Bänden, ed. by Hanna Fischer-Lamberg, 5 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1963–74) (DfG), and Goethe, Goethes Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe, ed. by Erich Trunz et al., 14 vols (Hamburg: Wegner, 1948–60) (HA); here, HA, VI, 530. The text of Werther is that of the first edition of 1774.

5 ‘Fireworks, the lot of them’. HA, VI, 534.

6 ‘Escaped from the waves of death’. HA, VI, 534.
coherent whole that is conditional on reflective maturity. To protect the integrity of a life so portrayed, Goethe warned against ‘zerrupfen und die Form zerstören’, an injunction to respect both Werther the work of art and the account of its genesis. Later generations of commentators, armed with more factual evidence than Goethe during his lifetime was willing to surrender, do well to remember this warning. But if it is the novel that we wish to understand and appreciate better, the biographical background should enhance rather than detract from it.

Yet care is needed in linking life and work too closely. In writing Werther in the epistolary mode, Goethe was obeying urges that were certainly more literary than personal. Among the extraordinary collection first edited over a century ago as Der junge Goethe, there is the opening of a fragmentary Roman in Briefen/Novel in Letters. No longer attributed to Goethe, it dates from 1770–71, Goethe’s Strasbourg interlude. Its theme of a love just ended and the heart’s ‘Wallendes Sehnen nach Etwas’ suggest an early draft of Werther, or rather of that shadowy web of relationships in the novel’s first page or two, abandoned once it finds its true tone and style. Above all, it indicates that Goethe’s novel-writing is not ‘ naïve’, in the sense that he is fully aware of a current European fashion. He had already displayed an ambition sufficient not only to sum up Shakespeare’s world in his Zum Schäkespear’s Tag/On Shakespeare’s Day but also to write the Shakespeareanizing Götz von Berlichingen; he would not regard the presence of Samuel Richardson’s or Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s epistolary novels as an impediment to fiction-writing. The mode was now so popular that its debasements — those ‘Miß Jennys’ that once occupied Lotte’s few leisure hours — were almost as well-known as its high achievements. The epistolary novel appeals for its very ability to present character, motives and heart’s stirrings as spontaneous and genuine but yet also morally structured. The Roman in Briefen — two letters and a few fragments — seems to conform to that pattern. It is at any rate not yet moving towards the device that gives Werther its uniqueness: the absence of replies. For by denying

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7 ‘Unpicking and ruining the form’ HA, IX, 592.
8 ‘Waves of longing for something’. The fragment is still attributed to Goethe by Ernst Beutler in Goethe, Sämtliche Werke. Artemis-Gedenkausgabe, ed. by Ernst Beutler, 18 vols (Munich: dtv, 1977), and it is quoted here after that edition, IV, 263.
Werther’s correspondents the chance to articulate a counter-position, Goethe seems to present Werther’s heart as the sole moral reference and arbiter, overriding others’ qualifications or tiresome interjections. Thus it is that Werther’s style and presentation, this view of himself and others, are the only ones ‘in character’, and as such they seize us.

Wetzlar

‘Und doch muss man einmal erfahren dass Mädgen — Mädgen sind’.10 Were these words of the Roman in Briefen by Goethe, they would suggest a young man of great talent but considerable emotional instability and egoism. His callous abandonment of Friederike Brion in Strasbourg in 1771 is witness to this. Yet Strasbourg had also stood for legal studies and not just for the heart or letters. At his father’s insistence the young doctor of law was now to gain further legal experience at the ‘Reichskammergericht’ in Wetzlar.11 It was following family tradition, to convey some of that same professional solidity to yet another generation. Despite Joseph II’s reforms, this imperial appeal court was still a circumlocution office, one of those tottering institutions of the old regime waiting only for Napoleon to give it the final push. In 1772, however, delegations from the various sovereign states within the Holy Roman Empire were still representing their interests there; it made Wetzlar the town into a place where the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the people — all knowing their stations — came together and kept apart. In all this, Goethe was a free agent, but he soon found social contact with young men of his own age: Johann Christian Kestner, a secretary with the Hanoverian delegation, Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem from Brunswick, even a fellow-poet, Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter from Gotha. From May to September 1772, Goethe’s pursuits were hardly juridical; he was a member of a burlesque order of chivalry where he bore the name of ‘Götz’, and he enjoyed numerous visits — more than would prove decorous — in the Buff household. Kestner was engaged to Charlotte Buff, the nineteen-year-old daughter of the estate-manager of the ‘Deutschordenshof’,12 who, after the recent death of her mother,

10 ‘And still one has to learn that girls — are girls’. Artemis-Gedenkausgabe, IV, 265.
11 Imperial Appeal Court.
12 Property belonging to the German Order.
was caring for her eleven brothers and sisters. Kestner had every reason to observe this young man, ‘in allen seinen Affecten heftig’, ‘Aller Zwang ist ihm verhaßt’, ‘Er liebt die Kinder’,13 ‘bizarre’. At a ball given in the nearby village of Volpertshausen on June 9, 1772, ‘Dr Goede’ danced with Charlotte and promptly fell in love. It took him some months before he faced the fact that he was very much in the way. He departed precipitately on September 11, without a formal leave-taking from either Kestner or Lotte. Returning on foot to Frankfurt, he spent some time with the La Roche family near Ehrenbreitstein: Sophie von La Roche’s novel Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim/The History of Mademoiselle de Sternheim (1771), with its story of court intrigue and virtue preserved, had made her a celebrity. But Goethe was attracted to their daughter Maximiliane. She however was already promised to the Frankfurt merchant Peter Brentano. Goethe returned abruptly to Frankfurt, which was to be his base for the next eighteen months. On October 30, Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem shot himself in Wetzlar with pistols borrowed from Kestner. As Goethe was to learn in a long account from Kestner, an impossible attachment to a married woman had been but the last in a series of personal calamities that had befallen him. On April 4, 1773, Kestner and Lotte were married; in January 1774, it was Maxe von La Roche and Peter Brentano’s turn. From February to May, 1774, Goethe was occupied with writing his novel, which Weygand in Leipzig published in September as Die Leiden des jungen Werthers.

The Question of Autobiography

These raw facts produce at a basic level a series of coincidences with the text of the novel. Goethe’s first readers were aware of this and Goethe knew that they knew. Thus began the most tiresome aspect of study of this novel, to explore:

Ob denn auch Werther gelebt? ob denn auch alles fein wahr sei?14

as a manuscript variant of Goethe’s own Römische Elegie II of 1795 puts it.

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14 ‘Did Werther really exist? Was it all really true?’ HA, I, 492, VI, 530.
Kestner, who had every reason to believe that he was the Albert of the original, was not long in informing Goethe that he was ‘schlecht erbaut’ by the novel and its mixture of fact and fiction, at the way real persons had been ‘prostituirt’. Yet Kestner was magnanimous: for Goethe, only a matter of weeks after the novel’s publication, was already complaining to him of the ‘Verdacht, Missdeutung pp. im schwäzzenden Publikum’, that ‘Heerd Schwein’. But that ‘herd of swine’ contained many of the soulful fraternity, those who read from the heart and expected the heart to ratify as true any specific or identifiable reference. It embraced others, notably Gothold Ephraim Lessing, for whom the overt associations of Jerusalem’s suicide — not to speak of a copy of Emilia Galotti open on the desk — were a travesty of all that his young friend had stood for. His letter to Johann Joachim Eschenburg of October 26, 1774 has become famous:


Goethe faced the danger of his novel becoming a mere roman à clef. More seriously, however, he might be seen as ghoulishly creating fiction out of the real circumstances of a young man now dead and no longer able to defend himself. The first, and the added suspicion that the novel reflected Goethe’s own views (‘ich fürchte, viele werden glauben,

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15 ‘Highly displeased’.
16 ‘Travestied’. DjG, IV, 381.
17 ‘Suspicion, distortion etc. among my chattering readers’, ‘herd of swine’. DjG, IV, 255.
18 ‘Yes, if our Jerusalem’s mind had been in that state, then I would just about have to — despise him. Can you imagine a Roman or Greek youth taking his life for this cause in such a fashion? Of course not. They knew of other ways of protecting themselves against the flights of love. [...] Only a Christian upbringing could produce such puny and contemptible types, adept at changing a physical need into a perfection of the mind’. Goethe in vertraulichen Briefen, I, 74.
Goethe: Die Leiden des jungen Werthers

daß Goethe selbst so denkt’),  would not outlive initial reactions to the work. The second would not go away quite so easily. For Goethe had requested from Kestner a full and circumstantial account of Jerusalem’s last days and had made extensive use of it in the novel. Genius is not fastidious. Perhaps Goethe’s stress in his later account in Dichtung und Wahrheit (Part Three, Book 13) on the symbolic unity of the work and the impossibility of unravelling the strands of fact and fiction, is designed partly to play down his own involvement in all these events. The atmosphere of taedium vitae described there, has, he claims, been induced more by literature than by real life — by the brooding, melancholic or elegiac poetry of English provenance, into which both novel and remembered experience may be integrated. Instead of a detailed account of Jerusalem’s circumstances, we have a stanza from Thomas Warton’s poem ‘The Suicide’, a ‘case’ that is typical and non-specific. Autobiographical truth, as he wrote in a letter of 1830, stood for ‘das eigentlich Grundwahre’, not objective reality. Thus Goethe can claim that it was Jerusalem’s suicide that first caused the plan of Werther to ‘freeze’ into place as a ‘solide Masse’. It was, however, to be well over a year, after the further distress of the marriages of Lotte and Maxe, that he was to sit down and, as it were, write Werther out of his system. Yet the suicide of Jerusalem did, perhaps in another sense, provide the germ of the novel. On hearing of this shocking event, Goethe wrote the following letter to Kestner in early November 1772:


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19 ‘I fear that quite a few will believe Goethe himself thinks this way’. Goethe in vertraulichen Briefen, I, 85.
21 HA, IX, 583.
22 ‘The basic underlying truth’. Quoted in Goethe, Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche, ed. by Dieter Borchmeyer et al., 40 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klasiker Verlag, 1985–98), II, 2, 209.
23 HA, IX, 583.

Kestner’s long reply was written in response to this impulsive note. Whereas Kestner’s letter adopts a uniform, almost forensic tone in both report and commentary, Goethe’s is notable for the way in which levels of style succeed and overlay each other. It is the characteristic style of the young Goethe’s letters. There are two distinct reactions to the imperative question: why? The first seizes on those whose vanity and idolatry — biblical words — have corrupted human nature, a Rousseauistic response overlaid with the vocabulary and tone of Martin Luther’s Bible. But if they were not the offenders, then Jerusalem’s theologian father was, and, searching the scriptures for a terrible example, Goethe wishes on him the fate of the high priest Eli, whose ‘neck brake’ when he fell at hearing of the deaths of his sons (1 Samuel 4:18, AV). But then perhaps personal experience, in both Leipzig and Wetzlar, may confirm a further reason for the tragedy. Goethe diagnoses a condition: solitary walks in the moonlight, something which the medicine of the century would have called ‘melancolia errabunda’, here with the special manifestation of solitude. The phrase ‘die Einsamkeit hat sein Herz untergraben’ recurs in another letter from about the same time, and it recalls the letter in Werther of August 18 in Part One, in which the experience of solitude amid God’s creation, once the source of well-being and exaltation, in the contemplation of a well-ordered harmony, has become one great open grave, the scene of universal Moloch-like

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24 ‘Poor unhappy Jerusalem. The news was terrible, unexpected, an awful postscript this news was to your so pleasant gift of love. Poor unhappy lad. But the devils, the scoundrels whose whole sustenance is the chaff of vanity and who make lust their heart’s idol, and preach idolatry, and keep back the goodness of nature and push our forces to extremes and pervert them, are to blame, the devil take them their brother. If his damned parson of a father isn’t to blame then God forgive me if I wish he’d break his neck like Eli. The poor lad! When I used to come back from my walk and I met him out there in the moonlight, I said he’s in love. Lotte must remember that I found it amusing. God knows solitude has undermined his heart — and I have known this person for seven years, spoken but little with him, when I left I borrowed a book from him, I will keep it and his memory as long as I live’. DjG, III, 7.
destruction: ‘Mir untergräbt das Herz die verzehrende Kraft, die im All der Natur verborgen liegt’. Does Goethe, in his first, unrehearsed reaction to the news, sense that here was also the stuff of a good novel? The question has been asked, and must be asked again. It may have been the reason for his request from Kestner for more details, some of which actually go verbatim into the text of the novel. Genius is unsentimental and does not draw life and art into neat partitions. Even if Goethe was not planning a novel, let alone writing one, there is already some of the stuff of the novel in the above letter: the biblical style, interspersed with the colloquial, the abrupt transitions, the sentences that do not finish. In the novel, they are conscious devices, symptomatic of one whose heart is indeed consumed and undermined by total solitude. More than that one cannot say.

Another whole series of later statements by Goethe must also be considered. It had been his purpose, he claims, to remain alive in order to leave an account of how it actually was. His creative urge proved to be sufficiently robust to resist the enticements of self-inflicted death and was the ‘Talent, das in mir steckt’ that kept him going through the vicissitudes of life. It is the reverse side of his awareness of being the favourite of the gods, the happy man: instead, he is the one chosen to survive, like Job’s servant (‘Herr, alle Deine Schafe und Knechte sind erschlagen worden, und ich bin allein entronnen, Dir Kunde zu bringen’), like the pelican (‘Das ist auch so ein Geschöpf, […] das ich gleich dem Pelikan mit dem Blute meines eigenen Herzens gefüttert habe’), or best-known of all, ‘An Werther’ (1824):

Noch einmal wagst du, vielbeweinter Schatten,
Hervor dich an das Tageslicht,
Begegnest mir auf neu beblümten Matten
Und meinen Anblick scheust du nicht.
Es ist als ob du lebtest in der Frühe,
Wo uns der Tau auf Einem Feld erquickt,
Und nach des Tages unwillkommner Mühe

25 ‘The consuming force hidden in the whole of nature is my heart’s undoing’. DfG, IV, 139.
26 ‘the talent I have within me’. HA, VI, 534.
27 ‘Lord, all thy flocks and servants are perished, and I only am escaped to tell thee’. Based on Job I, 13ff. HA, VI, 533.
28 ‘That too is such a creature […] that I like the pelican have fed with my heart’s blood’. Ibid.
Der Scheidesonne letzter Strahl entzückt;
Zum Bleiben ich, zum Scheiden du erkoren,
Gingst du voran — und hast nicht viel verloren.29

In every crucial respect, Goethe is not identical with Werther. Goethe runs from the situations that would endanger him, out into self-preservation: the anguish of heart produced is sufficient for the work of art. Werther significantly fails to do this. True, he also feels the need to create, to follow nature, not rules, to observe, to record in word and graphic image. He reflects Goethe’s own thinking in many ways, but Goethe does not wish his hero to appear creative — that would be a betrayal of art. For art — everything Goethe says at the time and subsequently bears out — is a matter of energy and observation, genius and limitation, all in one. Werther’s longings and urges cannot fulfil this. Hence ‘zum Scheiden du erkoren’.

Empfindsamkeit30

How are we to read this novel? Goethe’s immediate contemporaries were in no doubt. Wilhelm Heinse’s response is typical of many:

Das Herz ist einem so voll davon, und der ganze Kopf ein Gefühl von Thräne […] Für diejenigen Damen, die das edle volle Herz des unglücklichen Werthers bey Lotten für zu jugendliche unwahrscheinliche Schüchternheit, und seinen Selbstmord mit einigen Philosophen für unmöglich halten, ist das Büchlein nicht geschrieben.31

29 ‘Again, you much-mourned shadow, you make bold
To step out in the brightest light of day;
You counter me in flowery field or fold,
My eye meets yours, yours does not turn away.
You live, it seems, now in the early dawn
When dew on grass refreshes and restores,
The parting sun’s last rays adorn
And irksome day is over, with its chores.
I stay, you leave, so fate has deemed it fit,
You went ahead, and have not missed a whit’. HA, I, 380 (‘To Werther’).

30 ‘Sensibility’.

31 ‘One’s heart is so full of it, and one’s head one whole feeling of tears. [...] For those ladies who hold poor Werther’s noble full heart with Lotte to be too much youthful bashfulness and not true to life, his suicide impossible, as some philosophers do, this book was not written’. Der junge Goethe im zeitgenössischen Urteil, ed. by Peter Müller, Deutsche Bibliothek 2 (Berlin: Akademie, 1969), 208, 210. There were similar reactions from Gleim, Lavater, Bürger, Voss, Stolberg and many others.
It is also to the man or woman of feeling that Goethe addresses the preface of his novel, with the appeal to ‘Bewunderung’, ‘Liebe’, ‘Thränen’, even that ‘schöpfe Trost aus seinem Leiden’ for the weaker brethren. Interestingly enough, Goethe rejects a more overtly premonitory alternative prefatory statement in favour of the appeal to readers’ sensitivities. In many ways this is surprising, for Goethe could already rely on the culture in which most of his readers were situated to engage those faculties. This culture was ‘Empfundsamkeit’. The strand of sentimentality, the cult of feeling, runs right through the culture of the eighteenth century, never more prominently than when this novel was written. The inward-looking mystical tradition in German religious culture, the insistence of the movement known as Pietism that faith is not merely a question of knowledge, credal statements or articles of faith, but an experience of the heart, that self-analysis is the key to one’s state of soul — all of these elements become in the course of the eighteenth century aesthetic, moral and social postulates. Writing should move the heart. This was essentially the notion of ‘herzrührende Schreibart’ (‘style that moves the heart’) as advocated in the 1740s by the Swiss critics Johann Jacob Bodmer and Johann Jacob Breitinger. Language and aesthetic decorum will make way for ‘Empfindung’, ‘feeling’ or rather, ‘Empfindung’ will create a new set of aesthetic criteria. When seeking to arouse emotion, Christian Fürchtegott Gellert’s Praktische Abhandlung von dem guten Geschmacke in Briefen/Practical Treatise on Good Taste in Letters of 1751 informs us, ‘so lasse man sein Herz mehr reden, als seinen Verstand; und seinen Witz gar nicht. Man wisse von keiner Kunst, von keiner Ordnung in seinem Briefe’. Paramount are the subjugation of the rational powers of discrimination and distinction to the forces of the heart, the identification with the subject, not critical distance from it. In writing, it means effusion, outpouring; in reading, it means a passionate attempt to take the work concerned ‘to heart’. The self-centred sense of joy in feeling will find expression in tears — the manifestation of virtue

34 ‘So let one’s heart speak more than one’s understanding, and one’s wit not at all. One should admit no artifice, no order, in one’s letter’. Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, Sämtliche Werke, Sammlung der besten deutschen Prosaschriftsteller, 9 vols (Carlsruhe: Schmieder, 1774), IV, 64.
and a ‘fühlendes Herz’.\textsuperscript{35} This phrase right at the beginning of the novel (like ‘Fülle des Herzens’, ‘fühlbarkeit’ or ‘ergießen’,\textsuperscript{36} themselves the secularized language of religious emotion) becomes the touchstone of behaviour, that one’s ‘heart is in the right place’.

‘Empfindsamkeit’ creates its own literature, or borrows freely from the poetry of reflective inwardness so favoured by the English. Edward Young’s \textit{Night Thoughts} (1741–45), with its lugubrious and grandiose tedium, becomes a cult book, not just for its nocturnal setting and brooding melancholy, but for its sentiments on ‘Life, Death and Immortality’. It calls on the reader to withdraw into solitude, into creative introspection, to reflect amid tears and the awareness of one’s inner virtue, on the universe and its creator. As the world and its design, set in motion by a benevolent deity, support all life and allow no manifestation of nature to go unexplained, so our lives and relationships do not end with earthly existence. Instead, we may look forward to reunion with our dead friends, who, as Young puts it, are ‘Angels sent on Errands full of Love’.\textsuperscript{37} The poetic cult of love, separation and future union is associated in Germany especially with the name of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. This cult, but also Klopstock’s creative use of the language of the heart and the Bible, are the reasons which underlie one of the climactic passages in the novel: Werther’s and Lotte’s meeting of souls in the invocation of the poet’s name.

‘Empfindsamkeit’ is also a movement of restrained and decorous feeling. There are always warnings against overindulgence or over-identification. Goethe’s contemporary Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, not perhaps best known for reined-in sentiment, draws attention to the ‘leidenschaftlicher Leser’, who reads ‘auf Kosten seiner Vernunft und Moralität’, instead of ‘mit fester Seele’.\textsuperscript{38} It is the danger of making literature into a surrogate for established modes of experience. Solitude,
which Dr Johnson calls the retreat into ‘lonely wisdom’, must, like melancholy, involve only a temporary turning away from human society and friendship. Excess may affect the harmony between body and soul by which the medical and devotional literature of the century lays such store. This is the burden of the standard work on the subject, Johann Georg Zimmermann’s Von der Einsamkeit/On Solitude (1773): the man who cannot live in harmony with himself cannot live without others. The balance of the emotions, the interaction of body and soul, the avoidance of wrong stimuli, are arguments also adduced in the century’s discussion of suicide. In introducing this theme into his novel, Goethe is touching on a subject that preoccupied his age and the one preceding. The European-wide debate sees suicide as the ultimate challenge to a sense of order and reason, an affront to divine and natural law, to design and providence. It opens up a world of chaos and disorder; it undermines social cohesion and moral reference. It can be ‘explained’ only in terms of mental aberration or confusion: Kestner’s account to Goethe does precisely this in referring to those structures and norms that for Jerusalem no longer have validity. Werther quotes the standard arguments in favour. ‘Das süsse Gefühl von Freyheit, und daß er diesen Kerker verlassen kann, wann er will’, is based on Johannes Robeck’s De morte voluntaria/On Voluntary Death of 1736; it is essentially the case propounded by Montesquieu’s Lettres Persanes/Persian Letters of 1721 and in its second edition of 1754, for the preservation of human dignity by putting an end to an intolerable existence. Significantly, Werther’s suicide has nothing ultimately to do with either of these philosophical positions: it is committed in a state of madness, beyond the reach of rational argument and for reasons so bizarrely and tragically deluded as to cancel out so much in him that was both good and dignified.

Goethe was familiar with the culture of Empfindsamkeit and moved freely within it. His letters from the period — emotional, disjointed,

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39 Or, at least, the phrase is attributed to Dr Johnson. See Solitude. Or the Effect of Occasional Retirement […], Originally by M. Zimmermann (London: Verner and Hood, 1800), Preface, ix.

40 ‘The sweet feeling of freedom, and that he may leave this prison when he chooses’. D/G, IV, 111.

41 See Roger Paulin, Der Fall Wilhelm Jerusalem. Zum Selbstmordproblem zwischen Aufklärung und Empfindsamkeit, Kleine Schriften zur Aufklärung 7 (Göttingen: Wallstein; Wolfenbüttel: Lessing-Akademie, 1999), 10f.
parenthetic like Werther’s — take up the language of the heart or the Bible. He shares the cult of Klopstock and absorbs his language, even writing to the poet himself of ‘mit welch wahrem Gefühl meine Seele an Ihnen hängt’. The culture into which he places Werther is thus not alien, but intimately familiar. Goethe, too, was aware that a cult of sentiment is not proof against introspection, anguish and despair. He had sensed it in Jerusalem, and knew it in his worst moments after Wetzlar. He was to make Werther, his creation, experience that the opening up of the self, or the descent into one’s own heart, the search for totality through inward identification, when unchecked and narcissistically indulged, become a ‘sickness unto death’ (‘Krankheit zum Tode’).

Werther’s ‘Leiden’

*Werther* is a novel, not a case history. It is not a mere clinical subject for what in Goethe’s own day was known as ‘Erfahrungsseelenkunde’ (‘clinical psychology’) and what in ours has become psychoanalysis. Goethe, as he was putting the last touches to the novel, did express himself in these remarkably matter-of-fact terms:

> darin ich einen jungen Menschen darstelle, der mit einer tiefen reinen Empfindung und wahrer Penetration begabt, sich in schwärmende Träume verliert, sich durch Speculation untergräbt, bis er zuletzt durch dazutretende unglückliche Leidenschaften, besonders eine endlose Liebe zerrüttet, sich eine Kugel vor den Kopf schiesst.

We should however not overlook the ‘tiefe reine Empfindung und wahre Penetration’. For Goethe’s dilemma (ours rather less) was to keep ‘Bewunderung und Liebe’ in balance with the pathology, the psychopathology, of his hero. For without this pathological dimension,

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42 ‘With what true feeling my heart hangs on you’. *DjG*, IV, 17.
43 *DjG*, IV, 137.
44 ‘Sufferings’ or ‘sorrows’.
45 ‘In which I present a young person who, endowed with a deep and pure feeling and true penetration, loses his way in extravagant dreams, is undermined by speculation, until at last, shattered by unhappy passions newly visited, not least a hopeless love, he blows his brains out’. *DjG*, IV, 22.
46 ‘Admiration and love’. Ibid., 105.
the work, even despite the starkness of the ending, might appear to favour suicide.

In those terms it is easy to overlook Werther’s manifest virtues, just as it is not hard to expect of him things that ‘normal’ behaviour takes for granted. We do wrong to play down his genuine sympathy (‘Mitleiden’) with others, his generosity and openness of mind, affronted as it is by peevishness and niggardliness, his love of children, his quick powers of human observation, his artistic talent that is by no means uncreative. He rails, sometimes rightly, against restriction:

O meine Freunde! warum der Strom des Genies so selten ausbricht, so selten in hohen Fluthen hereinbraust, und eure staunende Seele erschüttert. Lieben Freunde, da wohnen die gelaßnen Kerls auf beyden Seiten des Ufers, denen ihre Gartenhäuschen, Tulpenbeete, und Krautfelder zu Grunde gehen würden...

Above all, we should acknowledge the nobility of his resolve at the end of Part One, to renounce and leave. Were these qualities more in evidence, it could be said that there would be no catastrophe and Part One would end in the style of Rousseau’s famous novel of 1760, La Nouvelle Héloïse, but with an even greater and more generous sacrifice. But Werther cannot ever ‘be himself’, cannot fulfil himself in the terms of ‘normal’ social or psychological conventions: ‘ich soll, ich soll nicht zu mir kommen!’ His ideas of fulfilment are always changing as successive attainments prove to be illusory. He will not listen to others telling him the way to himself, to effectuation and happiness. Perhaps again he cannot be blamed for aspirations that are incompatible with restriction, rules or utility. To do him justice, the excellent and impeccable advice given to him by others never seems to bear fruit, or circumstances prevent it when it appears to be within his grasp.

Other heroes of Goethe’s Sturm und Drang period rebel against restriction: Faust, Prometheus, Götz von Berlichingen. But unique to this novel are the ‘Leiden’, the suffering, the sorrows ‘des armen Werthers’,

47 ‘Sympathy’. Ibid., 103.
48 ‘O my friends! Why does the stream of genius so seldom break forth, so seldom burst out in great floods and shakes your astounded soul to the core. Dear friends, on both banks live stick-in-the-muds whose summerhouses, tulip beds and cabbage patches would be ruined’. Ibid., 112.
49 ‘I shall never, never be myself!’. Ibid., 164.
‘unser Freund’, ‘der arme Junge’, ‘Ihr könnt [...] seinem Schicksaale eure Thränen nicht versagen’.\(^{50}\) All of these references are from the opening paragraph of the novel. They are, to some extent, outside of the main text, in that they represent the commentary of — presumably — the editor of the papers that have survived. Is he reliable? We have to take him on trust and accept that it is as he says: that the mass of papers, some of which never reach their addressees, represent in sequent form accurately and sympathetically the state of Werther’s body and soul over a period of a year and a half. We have to take his word for instance, that Werther’s ‘Verdruß’\(^{51}\) was a contributory cause in his final, rapid disintegration, whereas the hero’s own statements reflect other and more radical preoccupations. We might wish to be told, except by implication and deduction, that Lotte and Albert survive and that somehow life goes on after the catastrophe. But the hero’s words must be left largely to speak for themselves. Werther’s ‘sufferings’ must be evident in the course of his letters; otherwise the editor’s interspersed commentary would assume a weight that the economy of the novel requires it should not. What does Goethe imply by calling the novel ‘Die Leiden’ (pl.)? For the editor also invites the vulnerable reader to draw comfort ‘aus seinem Leiden’ (sing.). Does he wish to distinguish between the hero’s ‘anguish’, his ‘sorrow’ and his sufferings? For the echoes of the Passion, with its sacrificial connotations, are present both in the title and the text itself. They represent the wild regions of a mind that does not scruple to exploit the ultimate Christian association, down to the hero stylizing himself into an offering for others. It is part of the whole theological pathology that assails the reader towards the end of the novel, made compelling because of its perverse logic and deliberateness. ‘Leiden’, singular and plural, both have religious echoes. The singular invites us to read the novel, not as something aberrant and monstrous, but more as a descent into affliction and despair. ‘Das Leiden’ will engage the reader with the process of self-loss and sickness unto death. The plural — reflected in the title — highlights perhaps the acutely deluded nature of Werther’s madness — and to overlook this is to miss the point of the novel at a very basic level.

\(^{50}\) ‘Sufferings of poor Werther’; ‘our friend’; ‘the poor lad’; ‘you cannot keep back your tears at his fate’. \(DjG\), IV, 105, 168f.

\(^{51}\) ‘Vexation’. Ibid., 150.
1. Goethe: Die Leiden des jungen Werthers

‘Die heilige belebende Kraft, mit der ich Welt um mich schuf’

By turning to the inner self, the ‘heart’, as the eighteenth century calls it, to create a world, and by ratifying every experience only by reference to the inner life, Werther has no objective reality beyond himself. The mystics — and Werther uses their language of flowing and fullness and penetration — also look inwards because it is only there that the union with the higher divine force takes place. Werther uses the vocabulary of this experience — notably in the letter of May 10 — without achieving little more than exaltation of spirit. The images pile up: ‘mit ganzem Herzen’, ‘für solche Seelen geschaffen [...] wie die meine’, ‘näher an meinem Herzen’. This is not to deny the dynamic power of that letter and its impulsion towards a state beyond words. Its free borrowings and eclecticism — from Spinoza, the Bible, neo-platonism — need not trouble us, for no image is ultimately adequate to articulate the inexpressible. Werther does not meet the divine in nature; he meets a series of disparate and impalpable impressions in his ‘heart’. He uses the Platonic image of the mirror — also common in Christian mysticism — but it expresses at most the hypothetical, unattainable, the longed-for, the conditional mode of a union between man and nature that might be. The experience lasts as long as the heart or soul can sustain it, and then it fades away. For all his ‘Fülle des Herzens’, he is always in a state of longing. The gesture of arms opened accompanies so many of his actions, but these are arms extended to seize what eludes his embrace. And so nature appears to reject him. But it is no longer nature ‘out there’. It is merely his momentary sensations, overlaid and stylized by so many associations of a literary, sentimental and quasi-philosophical kind.

Thus a nature that is merely the subject of the fugitive disarray of successive fluctuations of ‘Herz’ will lose all structure and congruity. Its

52 ‘The sacred enlivening force with which I created a world around me’. Ibid., 161.
53 ‘With whole heart’; ‘made for souls such as mine’; ‘nearer to my heart’. Ibid., 106f.
54 ‘The heart’s fulness/the heart brimming over’. This expression derives ultimately from Pietist religious writing. Its classic expression is Friedrich Leopold von Stolberg’s dithyrambic essay, Ueber die Fülle des Herzens (1777). See August Langen, Der Wortschatz des deutschen Pietismus (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1968), 22f.
changes will have no sense. Commenting on this, Goethe reminds his readers in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*:

> Der Wechsel von Tag und Nacht, der Jahreszeiten, der Blüten und Früchte und was uns sonst von Epoch zu Epoch entgegentritt; damit wir es genießen können und sollen, diese sind die eigentlichen Triebfedern des irdischen Lebens. Je offener wir für diese Genüsse sind, desto glücklicher fühlen wir uns; wälzt sich aber die Verschiedenheit dieser Erscheinungen vor uns auf und nieder, ohne daß wir daran teilnehmen, sind wir gegen so holde Anerbietungen unempfänglich: dann tritt das größte Übel, die schwerste Krankheit ein, man betrachtet das Leben als eine ekelhafte Last.  

This is encapsulated in the novel in that alarming contrast between May 10 and August 18 in Part One, from an experience of plenitude and perceived oneness to a sense of loss and imperilment and finally universal destruction: ‘Mir untergräbt das Herz die verzehrende Kraft, die im All der Natur verborgen liegt’. An image articulated amid the same plenitude of landscape and vista that produced the May 10 and ‘Klopstock!’ It removes any sense of hope or enjoyment of nature. With it, Werther is turning his face away from order, design and self-preservation, all that his education and reading have taught him. Rejected by nature, he embraces the hope of taking Lotte in his arms, and, denied this, he seizes on the ultimate insane projection, ‘vor dem Angesichte des Unendlichen in ewigen Umarmungen’.

‘Mein Herz hab ich allein’

For Werther the culture of the heart has instead become its tyranny. He speaks self-indulgently of ‘mein Herzgen’, ‘Mein Herz hab ich allein’, ‘dies Herz mein einziger Stolz’. Whatever else others may

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55 ‘Day and night ever changing, with the seasons, the flowers and fruits and what we encounter from epoch to epoch; so that we may enjoy it — as we should — these are the sustainers of earthly life. The more open we are to such enjoyments, the happier we feel; but if we see these things as a mere succession of events and take no part in them, then the very worst happens, the gravest malady; one looks on life as an intolerable burden.’ *HA*, IX, 578.

56 ‘My heart sinks at the consuming power hidden in nature’s all’. Ibid., 139.

57 ‘Before the face of the Infinite in embraces without end’. *DjG*, IV, 182.

58 ‘My little heart’; ‘my heart I have alone’; ‘this heart my sole pride’. *DjG*, IV, 108, 155.
have — preferments, settled existence, limited horizons — Werther has his heart. It is part of that ‘herrlich Ding’, ‘Freude an sich selbst’.\textsuperscript{59} It conditions the ultimate self-indulgence that can declare of Lotte, ‘wie ich mich selbst anbete, seitdem sie mich liebt’,\textsuperscript{60} an enormity of egoism were its consequences not also deeply tragic. Yet Werther’s heart is capable of the noblest of sensations, and his sensitivities often become persuasively ours, the readers’. But too often his heart and its effects are the ‘krankes Kind’.\textsuperscript{61} Like those many images of sickness and malady, real or imagined, they are designed ultimately to draw attention to himself. They become part of the willing surrender of the self to dissolution and chaos. For instance: Werther loves children because he can indulge them, a blessed relief in an insistently pedagogical century. But he also projects that indulgence on to himself. As children grasp after everything (‘Greifen die Kinder nicht nach allem...?’), so he may gratify his every wish (‘Und thu ihm seinen Willen’).\textsuperscript{62} The theme of children, like so many themes and images of the novel, provides no fulfilment: childhood becomes self-love, limitlessness turns into constriction. All flights end where they begin; all is subject to change and decay. Thus in Part Two we see the pathology of childhood — the mad clerk who so unsettles Werther (‘eine Erscheinung, die mich aus aller Fassung bringt. Heut! o Schicksaal! o Menschheit!’)\textsuperscript{63} — that is a collapsed identity resulting from an impossible infatuation (for Lotte). It raises for Werther the overhanging threat of madness, and its terrible corollary, the thought of homicide. It leads him to his ultimate delusion, that of sacrifice. In that, too, he assumes the role of the child, the son who will be cherished in the self-constituted after-life, where God the Father and Lotte’s mother will comfort him — ‘biß du kommst’.\textsuperscript{64}

Thus when he is confronted at several turnings in the story with decisions or moral imperatives to which he cannot or will not accede, he follows his own logic. Hence there can be no real dialogue, one of the most noticeable features of this epistolary novel. The letters have a monologic character: we know of Wilhelm, to whom the letters (except

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{59} ‘That wonderful thing joy in oneself’. Ibid., 150.
  \item \textsuperscript{60} ‘How I worship myself now that she loves me’. Ibid., 128.
  \item \textsuperscript{61} ‘Sick child’. Ibid., 108.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} ‘Do children not reach after everything?’; ‘and do what it wants’. Ibid., 161.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} ‘A sight that shakes me to the core. Today! O fate! O mankind!’ Ibid., 164.
  \item \textsuperscript{64} ‘Till you come’. Ibid., 182.
\end{itemize}
at the very end) are addressed, mainly because Werther rejects his good advice. For Wilhelm, to some extent like Albert, is a point of reference, a propositional bearing, to be countered or disregarded at will.

And so for Werther his own heart is the sole means of self-fulfilment: ‘Ich kehre in mich selbst zurük, und finde eine Welt’. The admission, ‘Ich könte das beste glücklichste Leben führen, wenn ich nicht ein Thor wäre’, states that his relationship with Lotte is absurd, but... There is no hope, but then... He hates qualifications and restrictions, the ‘Zwar’, the ‘modificiren’. Reason and feeling cannot interact as long as it is the heart that determines: ‘gewiß ist’s, daß unser Herz allein sein Glück macht’. Thus Werther has rejected the notion of clear alternatives: ‘In der Welt ist’s sehr selten mit dem Entweder Oder gethan’. He speaks these words to Albert. Albert of course thinks in terms of moral choices, for his is a world circumscribed by order and duty, reflecting the claims of a wider body politic, representing a counter-position to Werther’s. Albert thus demonstrates that an ordered society is one in which moral decisions depend on categorizing human behaviour, a procedure unacceptable to Werther.

It is against this background that we come to Werther’s tragic love for Lotte. He persists in approaching the unattainable ideal. There is nothing new in this, for ‘Empfïndsamkeit’, too, has its Petrarchan streak, the pursuit of the unachievable. She cannot be his; her hand is promised to another; her true element is family, affection, self-sacrifice, self-abnegation. He recognizes these as her true qualities, and he realizes that his own role can at most be that of a spectator. Yet he acts as if what he does not wish to see were not there; his commitment is to an inward response nurtured by the surrogate experience of literature and the cult of feeling. Lotte, however, meets him on much narrower ground. She may join him in ‘Klopstock!’; in sentimental hopes of reunion after death (‘Wiedersehen’) or Ossian; she can indulge the sentiment and ‘Schwärmerei’ that Albert, his feet too solidly on the ground, cannot fulfil. She does not even wish all this away; she would not have it...
otherwise. The ending of Part One, a tour de force of that culture, puts her at the centre of that most ‘empfindsam’ of scenes. Hence, for most of the novel, Lotte tolerates Werther. It is the very passivity of their relationship that leads to tragedy: he will not leave; she will not force him to do so. For there is — until the novel’s last pages — none of the aggressive sexual jealousy one might expect, no hint of a ménage à trois, no attempt to possess the object of one’s desire by force. Werther, to do him full credit, while seeking fulfilment with the only being who is denied him, actually does succeed at the end of Part One in renouncing her. But the tyranny of his heart demands that he return, to continue his previous behaviour after their marriage, to live in a state of infantile dependence on her every favour, imagined look or feeling (‘sie fühlt, was ich dulde’). All three — Lotte, Albert and Werther — seek to avoid hurt, not to precipitate the crisis. When it does come, its anguish is all the greater for that ‘zum erstenmal’ and ‘zum leztenmale’; with Lotte’s first real admission of her feelings for Werther, their first and last embrace, and the lunacy of Werther’s reaction to those words.

It is a measure of the artistry of this novel that what could be potentially absurd seizes the reader in its tragic grip. Themes take on an intensity, attitudes become obsessions, being oneself means losing oneself — all with a narrative inexorability leading towards the final implosion and collapse. It affects the characters differently. Lotte wakes up from an unreal world: it is literature (the reading of Ossian) that is the agent of her awakening. Werther indulges unreality and believes that renunciation can succeed a second time — but this time through the sacrifice of himself. As at the end of Part One, he wishes no hurt on another person: ‘mache den Engel glücklich’ are his last words to Albert. For others, life in the here and now may continue. For him, there can be no sexual union with the beloved, and he sacrifices himself to expiate his carnal lusts. Only in the afterlife will things be ordained differently: the child will become ‘Mann’ and enter into the sexual territory that on earth is forbidden. This time, all the wishes of his sick heart will be fulfilled. These fantasies end in the maimed body and bloody death of

71 ‘She feels what I am going through’. DjG, IV, 163.
72 ‘For the first time’; ‘for the last time’. Ibid., 181.
73 ‘Make the angel happy’. Ibid., 184.
74 This term means both ‘man’ and ‘husband’. Ibid., 162.
the hero and in the disintegration of the extended family of which he felt so much a part. Goethe does not spare his readers, indeed he dare not.

**Society and ‘Verdruß’**

Did society force Werther into the inward life by denying him an outlet for his talents and apportioning him only the terrain of melancholy and solitude? The novel does represent a structured society where, on the face of it, Werther has no clearly ordained place. It is based on the hierarchy of absolutist ruler, court, administration, established religion and university, the family unit representing a microcosm of the larger order. Werther has been trained at university, presumably for useful employment, not merely for private study or literature. He chooses to reject the grand monde of society in which his talents and character might otherwise guarantee him a career. Instead, he constitutes an anti-society, a society within society. Lotte (when time permits) may join him there. There, all is sensitivity, the barriers of society or class fall down, religion may be de-institutionalized, the imagination and nature hold sway. To do him credit, he does try accommodation with the real world, but falls foul of its rules and conventions. These are patently absurd, and we admire his stand against mere class and privilege. We know all the same that Werther is familiar with the charade into whose pretence he no longer wishes to enter. The ‘Verdruß’ — Werther’s being asked to leave the soirée — does reflect society’s inflexibility and arrogance, but it need not spell the end of his career. But does it not suit him all the same? It is employment in that very society, with its pretensions, that stands between him and the return to what he has so nobly renounced. The ‘Verdruß’ and its aftermath occur neatly between the letters expressing the ‘Hölle’ of Albert’s and Lotte’s forthcoming union, and the ‘vergebliche Wünsche’ of a lost possession. He will come back, he must come back: ‘Und ich lache über mein eigen Herz — und thu ihm seinen Willen’.

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75 ‘Vexation’ or ‘mishap’.
76 ‘Hell’. Ibid., 150.
77 ‘Forlorn wishes’. Ibid., 156.
78 ‘And I laugh at my own heart — and do its bidding’. Ibid.