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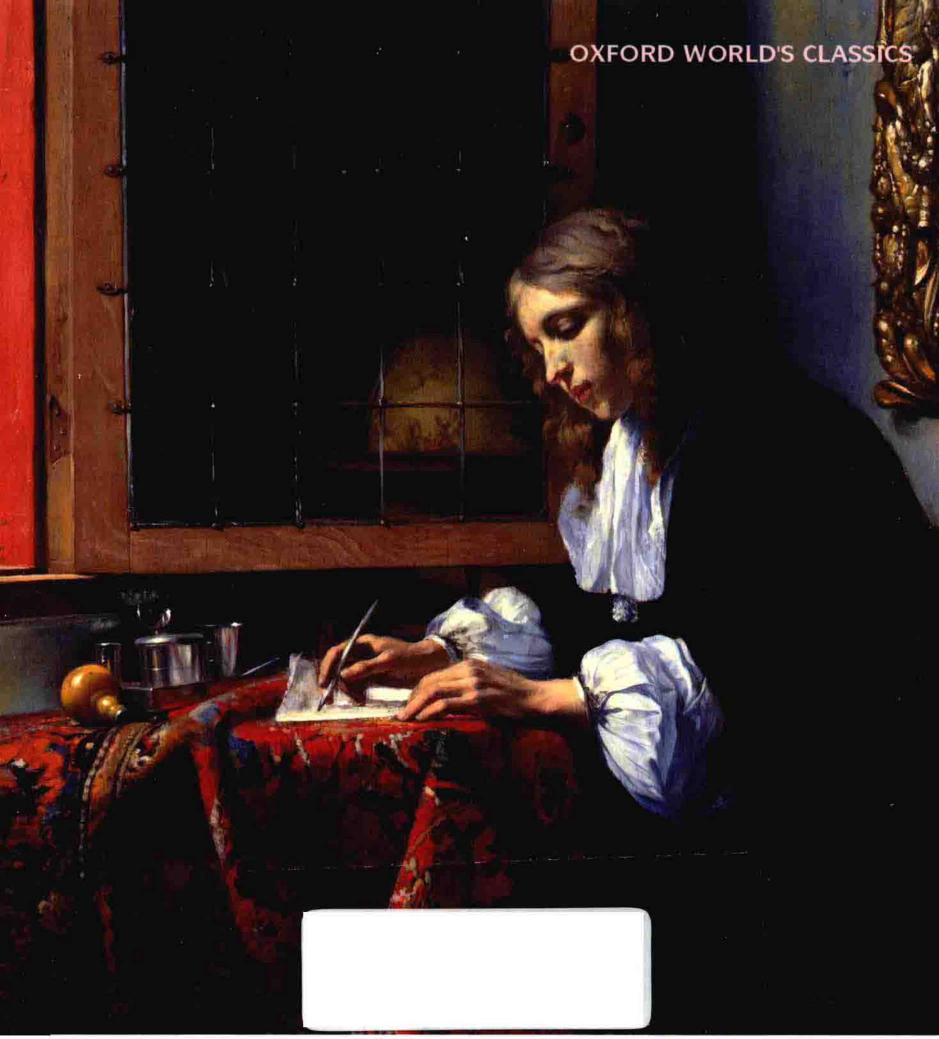

The Sorrows of Young Werther

少年维特的烦恼

Goethe ［德国］歌德 著

Translated by David Constantine

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THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE was born in 1749, the son of a well-to-do citizen of Frankfurt. As a young man he studied law and briefly practised as a lawyer, but creative writing was his chief concern. In the early 1770s he was the dominating figure of the German literary revival, his tragic novel *Werther* bringing him international fame.

In 1775 he settled permanently in the small duchy of Weimar where he became a minister of state and director of the court theatre; in 1782 he was ennobled as 'von Goethe'. His journey to Italy in 1786–8 influenced the development of his mature classical style; in the 1790s he and his younger contemporary Schiller (1759–1805) were the joint architects of Weimar Classicism, the central phase of German literary culture.

Goethe wrote in all the literary genres but his interests extended far beyond literature and included a number of scientific subjects. His creative energies never ceased to take new forms and he was still writing original poetry at the age of more than eighty. In 1806 he married Christiane Vulpius (1765–1816), having lived with her for eighteen years; they had one surviving son, August (1789–1830). Goethe died in 1832.

DAVID CONSTANTINE is a poet and translator, and co-editor (with Helen Constantine) of the journal *Modern Poetry in Translation*. He has published volumes of poetry, short stories, and a novel, and is a translator of Hölderlin, Goethe, Kleist, and Brecht. His translations of Goethe's *Faust, Parts I* and *II* are published by Penguin, and his translation of *Elective Affinities* is in Oxford World's Classics. In 2010 he won the BBC National Short Story Award.

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INTRODUCTION

Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*), published in the autumn of 1774, made Goethe's name; but for three or four years before then he had already been writing with great self-confidence and distinction. Briefly as a young student in Leipzig he adopted the poetic tone and manners of his urbane rococo contemporaries; but moving to Strasbourg in 1770 and meeting the critic and philosopher Herder, he was directed by him into ballads, folk-songs, the deeply congenial world of so-called primitive song. Characteristically, that literary influence conjoined at once with a passionate love—for Friederike Brion—and in poems addressed to her—'Mailied', 'Heidenröslein', 'Willkommen und Abschied'—he broke through into his own poetic voice. With his early work on *Faust* (the so-called *Urfaust*), and the 'Shakespearian' chronicle-play *Götz von Berlichingen* and a dozen more vital and characteristic poems ('Der Wandrer', 'Wandrers Sturmlied', 'Mahometsgesang', 'Ganymed'...), Goethe's achievement by his mid-twenties was prodigious in its originality, force, and variety. *Götz*, written and published in 1773, was first performed in April 1774 in Berlin, and by the end of that year, after *Werther*'s appearance in September, Goethe had become, as Byron said half a century later, 'the first literary character in Europe'.

Goethe was the chief maker of the movement in German literature known as *Sturm und Drang* (literally, 'storm and stress'). There were other gifted and important writers in it too, J. M. R. Lenz, for example, and, at the end of the period, Friedrich Schiller; but Goethe was pre-eminent and, unlike others, moved on, sloughing off one skin for the next (the image is his). *Sturm und Drang* in its language, gestures, forms, was a literature of revolt. Enlisting Shakespeare, the writers sought to uncover a culture of their own from under the dead tradition of the French; to be more natural, more local, achieve an identity. There was a social and political edge to this, most obvious in Goethe's *Urfaust* (not published till 1887), Schiller's *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*), and Lenz's *Der*

Hofmeister (*The Tutor*), but the successful revolt was all literary, benefiting later writers, among them the politically far more definite Georg Büchner and Bertolt Brecht.

Sturm und Drang is usually studied as a distinct period of German literature, separate from Germany's own Romanticism (Novalis, Tieck, Friedrich Schlegel, Brentano) and those of Britain and France; but really, from a larger perspective, it belongs in the context of a European Romanticism beginning in the 1760s. Viewed like that, Goethe was and, despite his later Classicism, remained, a Romantic writer and *Werther* is a Romantic text. In that novel, in his early *Faust*, and in dozens of lyric poems he was already in the 1770s asserting, as Keats would nearly fifty years later, 'the holiness of the heart's affections' in 'the true voice of feeling'. The relative naturalism of his language anticipates Wordsworth's championing, in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798/1800), of the use in poetry of 'the real language of men'. And most strikingly, what Werther suffers and describes in his letter of 3 November, that loss of spirit, is the anxiety and horror in the heart of all Romanticism that Coleridge called, in his ode of that name (1802), 'dejection'—when the genial spirits fail, when the 'shaping spirit of Imagination' cannot sustain any vital connection between the subject and the world.

The Makings of Werther

Goethe was—he said so himself—a 'confessional' writer; that is, what he wrote came in large measure out of the life he lived. How directly and obviously depended of course on the project in hand—poems, fictions, plays have their own determinants—and, somewhat, on the phase of life in which he wrote. *Werther* (1774) and *Elective Affinities* (1809) are both novels. Of the latter he said, 'I lived every word of [it]'; but also, his chronicler Eckermann reports: 'He said there was nothing in his *Elective Affinities* which had not been really lived, but nothing was there in the form *in which* it had been lived.'[1] But when *Werther* came out the people close to it and soon everybody else quite understandably believed that much or even most of it had really been lived *and in that form.*

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[1] J. P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (1837–48), 9 Feb. 1829 and 17 Feb. 1830.

In part it is a matter of genre. Lyric poems may be very autobiographical and many of Goethe's are, in all the phases of his life; but novels and stories are more likely to induce readers to wonder are the characters and situations 'true' because, if written at all in the realist mode, they need more of the real world's details for their existence and effect than poems do. For *Werther*, his first novel, Goethe used the stuff of his own and other people's lives with a quite extraordinary immediacy and ruthlessness.

There are three main contributions of biographical and autobiographical fact to the making of *Werther*: the triangle: Goethe–Christian Kestner–Charlotte Buff (who became Kestner's wife); the life and suicide of Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem; and the triangle: Goethe–Peter Anton Brentano–Maximiliane von La Roche (who became Brentano's wife).

Goethe moved to Wetzlar in May 1772 to get some practical experience of law, the profession he had studied for and in which he took no interest. There he got to know Christian Kestner, a secretary at the courts, and, at a dance on 9 June, the young woman Kestner intended to marry, Charlotte Buff. In March of the previous year her mother had died, leaving her, then aged eighteen, the second-oldest of twelve children, to look after the family and manage the household. Goethe, Kestner, and Charlotte became a close trio; and to her family also Goethe was fondly attached. In a fashion already characteristic, he broke out of the entanglement and left Wetzlar without warning on 11 September, and on foot and by boat made his way down the Lahn to Koblenz, where he met the sixteen-year-old Maximiliane von La Roche. He was back home in Frankfurt by the nineteenth.

In book 13 of his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*Poetry and Truth*) Goethe had this to say about quitting Charlotte Buff and meeting Maximiliane von La Roche: 'It is a very pleasant feeling when a new passion starts in us before the old has quite lapsed—as at sunset when we see the moon rising opposite and enjoy the double radiance of both heavenly lights.' The fictional Lotte, mostly Charlotte Buff, has Maximiliane's black eyes.

Goethe and Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem had been students together for two years (1765–7) in Leipzig and renewed their aquaintanceship, never very cordial, in Wetzlar. Jerusalem, an amateur of the arts and philosophy, held a secretarial post; got on badly with his superior, an envoy at the Court; and was in love with a married woman by the name of Elisabeth Herd who didn't love him and complained about him to her husband. Jerusalem shot himself on the night of 29–30 October 1772. Goethe, back in Wetzlar in early November, appalled by this event, found out all he could about it and his chief source was Kestner who wrote, perhaps at Goethe's bidding, an extraordinarily full account, much of which Goethe utilized for *Werther*. During the rest of November 1772 Goethe busied himself collecting details about Jerusalem rather as the Editor in his novel would about the fictional Werther. He put many of these biographical facts as well as many details of his own relationship with Kestner and Charlotte directly into the novel, as though he were indeed the editor and/or narrator of his own terminated life. Years later in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* he wrote another version. *Werther*, near the beginning of his career, is a particularly drastic example of the compulsive working and reworking of the stuff of life, his own and other people's, that would be Goethe's way of being in the world for the rest of his days.

Kestner and Charlotte were married on 4 April 1773, but neither that nor Jerusalem's suicide was the immediate catalyst for the writing of *Werther*. Goethe saw the La Roches, mother and daughter, intelligent, artistically gifted and lively women, in Frankfurt that August. When he saw Maximiliane next, in January 1774, again in Frankfurt, she was married—to the businessman Peter Anton Brentano, more than twenty years her senior and a widower with five children whom she had to look after. For those two weeks in January Goethe continued his relationship with her. They were like brother and sister, he recalls in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, far closer in age than she and her husband, while he was, Goethe says, 'the only one in her entire circle in whom she could hear an echo of that music of the intellect and the spirit to which in girlhood she had grown accustomed'. But Brentano was no Kestner and did not in the least want Goethe in his family. Maximiliane bore Brentano twelve children (among them Bettina and Clemens, two Romantic writers) and died in 1793, aged thirty-seven.

Maximiliane and her mother left Frankfurt 31 January 1774 and Goethe began writing *Werther* next day. He saw that the three chief biographical ingredients listed above could be made into a novel which would fuse and exceed them. He describes the writing thus in book 13 of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*:

> I had entirely isolated myself, indeed I had forbidden my friends to visit me. Inwardly also I put to one side everything that did not belong to my project but gathered together everything that had any bearing on it. I went over my recent life, the stuff of which I had not yet put to any poetic use. In those conditions, after long and manifold and secret preparations, I wrote *Werther* in four weeks without beforehand setting down any plan of the whole thing or the treatment of any of its parts.

Writing, he understood the figurative life of the characters and circumstances he was so precisely shaping: how they could stand for the society he lived in and were, furthermore (which is why the novel lasts) archetypal in their pattern and their fate.

The project magnetizes certain real details, those it can use, draws them along with it in a shaping process, leaves aside those, perhaps important in ‘the real story’, in which it has no interest, and invents others which were not in that story at all. The project is a novel, it derives from and bears powerfully upon real life but it is a work of fiction, making its own truth as it goes along, taking, shaping, discarding always and only in the interest of—to get closer and more finely to—that truth. It is this mixture of apparent fidelity to some of the facts and apparent indifference to or recklessness with others that people involved in the lived story found so disconcerting when they read the novel that came out of it. Hence Kestner’s touching complaint that ‘his’ Lotte would never have been so forward as to organize a counting game and slap the players when they made a mistake. And quite understandably he did not like the portrayal of himself as Albert. But for the writer all that matters is the truth of the novel, of the fiction he is making; which truth stands in a complex and vital relationship with the factual truth but is not it, is not seeking to be it, seeks only its own. All writers who draw on the lives they live among other people act and must act like this—D. H. Lawrence's friends were often appalled and hurt by what he had 'done to them' in his fictions—and Goethe in *Werther*, his first novel, was already astonishingly aware of his duty, as a writer, to the truth of fiction, and of the fraught and unstable relationship there will always be between a novel and the lived life it springs from. By employing an Editor—a scrupulous collector of the material—Goethe, in a way common among novelists then, ostensibly authenticates his account and encourages readers to feel that these things really happened. At the same time (more of this later), he allows the Editor to exceed his role and to become, in effect, an omniscient narrator; which is to say, to become quite blatantly what he was anyway: an agent of fiction.

And what is the truth even of the 'real' story? The Editor reports that whilst he found general agreement as to the facts, there were differing views as to the ways of thinking and feeling ('Sinnesarten') of the people involved. He diligently collects and presents every scrap of documentary evidence, because, he says, 'it is so difficult to uncover the very particular true motivations of even one action when it occurs among people who are not of the common run'. Even the documents themselves are, of course, by no means unequivocal. The truth is, we live among fictions. All our thinking, feeling, and writing makes up versions of what we like to call reality; and our versions are subject to continual alteration with the passage of time and under the impress of other people's versions. Novels and poems, which are fictions made of the stuff of life, again and again will alter our decided versions of the lives we have lived and are living now. Beyond any doubt, Goethe's *Werther* altered the way its readers viewed their lives; doubtless many lived or wished to live differently because of it. And that effect is latent in the novel still. Any reader may activate it.

The Form of Werther

The story of *Werther* (or most of it) is told in letters. The epistolary novel was well established in European fiction by the time

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Goethe came to use it. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Samuel Richardson before him, Choderlos de Laclos after him, are masters of the form; and comparing *Werther* with their great novels—Richardson's *Pamela* (1740–1) and *Clarissa* (1748–9), Rousseau's *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Éloise* (1761), and Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782)—at once reveals its peculiarity. A story told in letters, presented as real documents, pleases readers who like to think it really happened. Goethe will have chosen the form for its immediacy, its inherent sense of life being lived. Werther writes his letters very soon after the lived events. Or he breaks off a letter to go on with the life he is describing in it. And he writes his last up to the very moment of his death. All these are possibilities inherent in the chosen form. But there is another—a large and abundant resource—which Goethe chooses not to employ. The novels of Richardson and Laclos revel in a multiplicity of perspectives. Letters go to and fro among a whole cast of characters, events are reflected upon from very different angles, and the writer shifts in tone of voice and in judgement according to his or her present correspondent. Goethe does none of that. Apart from the Editor's interventions, the form of *Werther* is a one-sided correspondence. No letters are presented from Werther's main addressee, Wilhelm (a rather shadowy figure), nor are any of the notes Lotte wrote to Werther (we hear of a few) nor any more substantial communication from her. All replies of whatever kind to letters written by Werther must, we presume, have gone into the stove along with much else shortly before his death. Their absence is an ingredient of the fiction; but, before that, Goethe's suppression of them is a masterly violation of the epistolary novel's form.

The letter is an intrinsically dialogic form of writing. It addresses another person in the expectation or hope of a reply. Laclos's novel moves with great force and complexity in that dynamic of address and answer among half-a-dozen correspondents. In *Werther* there are no replies; effectively, in a dialogic form, the young man wanting correspondence conducts a monologue. He also keeps a diary; he alludes to it (p. 38), but we read nothing of it. That too must have gone into the flames. The diary's monologic form would certainly suit the increasingly solipsistic Werther. But as Goethe saw, it would be more expressive of his hero's situation and tragedy to choose a form implying dialogue and use it as a monologue. A one-sided correspondence—not a correspondence at all—is a telling image of Werther's fate. Much of what the novel is 'about' is realized in that master-stroke of form.

One-sidedness, a bad thing in a coroner accounting for a suicide, may be a good thing in a novelist, and in the case of Goethe's *Werther* most definitely is. The complex perspectivism of *Les Liaisons dangeureuses* gives the reader a bewildering number of slants on the story being told. That is not the same as 'a balanced view'. We don't go to novelists for a fair and balanced view of things but for the felt truth, however partial, of being human in particular circumstances. Laclos gives us a variety of perspectives; Goethe quite deliberately limits his. One-sidedness—an achievement, not a regrettable accident, of Goethe's chosen form—is a means to the truth of his hero's situation.

But what about the Editor? To a degree unprecedented in the tradition of the epistolary novel Goethe's Editor affects or seeks to affect the reader's reception of the story in which he is not otherwise a participant. He introduces himself as the diligent collator and presenter of everything he could find concerning Werther's life and death; as the story proceeds he adds the occasional rather pedantic footnote; and he appears in person again towards the end, regretting that the documentation has become fragmentary and telling us that he has done his level best—talking to those closely or at all involved—to gather and assess the facts and the different views of those facts. In that role or pose he sounds like a living corrective to one-sidedness, as though we might expect from him the balanced account. In practice he compromises his position at the outset. Having said that he has gathered together and now lays before us all he could find on the subject of 'poor Werther', he continues: 'and I know that you will thank me. His mind and his character will compel your admiration and your love, and his fate will compel your tears.' The Editor offers us Werther as an object of admiration, love, and pity, and commends 'this little book' to any reader 'feeling driven as he was', as a comforter and a friend. That is not neutral.

The curious marker of this partiality is the occasional elision of the role of the Editor into that of third-person omniscient narrator. Viewed strictly, in keeping with his stated office, he can only know what is in Werther's recovered letters, two being to Lotte, the rest to Wilhelm, and whatever else he has learned from anyone he approached in his researches—talking to them he may get some idea of what thoughts and feelings were at play in the chief characters. In practice he grossly exceeds the brief and scope that any such investigative procedures might have given him. He forgets himself—or Goethe does—and becomes at times, in effect, an omniscient narrator. For example:

> Even as he walked, his thoughts turned to this subject. 'Oh yes,' he said to himself, grinding his teeth—'Close, friendly, tender, and sympathetic in all his dealings with her, a lasting peaceful fidelity! Complacent satisfaction, that's what it is, and indifference. Does not any wretched piece of business engage him more than the woman who is so precious? Does he know how fortunate he is? Can he value her as she deserves? He has her—well then, he has her—I know that, just as I know other things, I believe I have got used to the thought, it will still drive me mad, it will still be the death of me—And has his friendship to me held good? Does he not think my devotion to Lotte a trespass on his rights and my attentiveness to her a silent reproach? I know it full well, I feel it, he does not like to see me, he wishes me removed, my presence is irksome to him.'

Since Werther is alone, this can only be a—quite plausible—monologue invented by the Editor/Narrator. He does the same for Lotte (pp. 95–6): she is alone with her very troubled thoughts which it is not likely she shared as documentary evidence with the diligent Editor. Really, the Editor seems not able to resist the pull into omniscience at those moments when he feels the story needs it. He becomes a narrator, an agent of the fiction, close to the author, driven deeper and deeper by the force of imaginative sympathy. Hard to know whether Goethe in the passion of the first writing of *Werther* even noticed this sliding. I doubt if his first readers did, or cared a jot about it if they did. And when Goethe revised the novel more than a decade later he not only let that mixing of editor with narrator stand, he made further use of it, actually to dwell on Lotte's inner trouble in the passage alluded to above and to adjust the feelings readers might have about Albert.

Allowing the Editor to be pulled out of his role into a narrative sympathy with Werther's life is of a piece with presenting, in an epistolary novel, only Werther's side of the correspondence. Both are expressive techniques. Goethe wrote—made sentences, devised narrative strategies—to ensure that Werther's story would be *compelling*. The Editor reverts to his proper role in the final pages. He says only what he could plausibly have got from witnesses. And from the writerly point of view that too is apt and telling:

> He died at twelve noon. The presence of the Land Steward and the measures he took hushed up any public outcry. At night towards eleven he had him buried in the place he had chosen for himself. The old man followed the coffin with his sons, Albert could not do it. They feared for Lotte's life. Working-men carried him. No priest attended. (pp. 111–12)

The Two Versions

In his letter of 15 August Werther extrapolates the following out of his experience of telling stories to Lotte's brothers and sisters:

> It has taught me that an author who publishes an altered version of his story must necessarily harm the work, however poetically improved it may be. The first impression finds us willing, human beings are made to be persuaded of the most outlandish things—but they hit home in us and stick so fast, woe betide anyone trying to erase or eradicate them. (p. 44)

Goethe retained that passage when he revised *Werther* for publication in 1787. Rather like the allusion to Werther's diary in this novel composed of letters, it is—or after the revision becomes—a self-conscious comment on authorial freedom and ought to deter us from thinking that the second version fixes the truth of the story more definitively than the first.

Comparison of the two versions, tracking and commenting on the changes, is unavoidably bedevilled by the mixing of fiction and biography discussed above. As soon as he read *Werther*, Kestner objected to the characterization of Lotte and Albert, and Goethe promised him he would do something about it within a year for a new edition. Taken at face value that would mean the author had intended his fiction to be a fair account of a situation he and his friends had been in and was prepared to try again to be fairer. It is certainly the case that one strain in the rewriting (through the agency of the Editor greatly exceeding his role) does make Albert more sympathetic. But another, going deeper into the unspoken feelings of Lotte, suggests just as strongly as in 1774 that Werther has grounds for believing, after the reading of Ossian, that she loves him. The second version of *Werther* is not more balanced than the first—balance, as I said earlier, is not what novelists are after—but in the course of the rewriting Goethe slanted his interests differently, he saw aspects he could emphasize or develop but not, I think, to soothe the feelings of Christian and Charlotte Kestner.

For one thing, Goethe did not reissue *Werther* within a year, as he had promised. Not until 30 April 1780 did he even reread it (and marvel at it), and only two years after that did he consider revision. Oddly enough, he had no copy of the first and authorized edition of 1774 to hand. Instead, in June 1782 he borrowed a pirated and unfaithful edition of 1775 (Himburg, Berlin) from Charlotte von Stein, had it copied, and entered his alterations into that manuscript. He wrote to Kestner about it in May 1783; took no notice whatsoever of his wish that Lotte at the ball should behave differently; and completed the revision in the summer of 1786, just before he fled to Italy, breaking with Charlotte, ending their long involvement. This second version of *Werther* appeared in 1787 in Volume 1 of an eight-volume edition of Goethe's works published by Göschen in Leipzig, a single-volume edition of it appearing later that year.

Both versions of *Werther* are in two halves. Both begin with the same address to the reader by the Editor, who in both is the collector and presenter of the material. The chief addition to the second version is the story of the farmhand so driven by love that he commits murder. He joins other figures already in the novel as new letters 30 May and 4 September; while the Editor now takes over the narrative after 6 December (not 17 December as in the first version) to tell us more about Werther and the farmhand. Beyond that, Goethe wrote half-a-dozen more letters, mostly very short, and made short additions to three others. And he redated three letters, without significantly changing the text.

Overall, in his revision Goethe widened and varied the perspective his readers might have on Werther, his chief agent in this being the Editor, who now exceeds his strict role and function even more than in the earlier version. One example may stand for many to show what shifts in our view of the Werther–Lotte–Albert triangle Goethe made possible through his revision. In the first version the Editor makes this comment, as though with complete authority, on Albert's relationship with his wife Lotte: 'little by little his amicable dealings with her took second place to his work.' In the second version Werther mutters the same judgement in a soliloquy the Editor could not possibly have overheard: 'Does not any wretched piece of business engage him more than the woman who is so precious?' Neither has any greater objective status than the other; but the second converts the verdict from a pseudo-fact (passed on by an omniscient narrator) into Werther's opinion ascribed to him by the same narrator.

In the 1787 version this Editor/Narrator spends more time on Lotte's feelings, both for Albert and for Werther, and though his brief (as we might call it) is to shore up her marriage more firmly he also, in a truthful counter-tendency, makes clearer what she has in Werther and does not wish to lose. Fortifying the marriage, Goethe added two paragraphs to the Editor's account of Lotte's state, just after the letter of 20 December (pp. 90–1), in addition deleting some suggestions of real hostility and resentment between husband and wife concerning Werther. In the first version, for example, Albert seems to set off on his business trip only when he has heard from Lotte that Werther will not call: 'Lotte, who knew very well that he had for a long time been postponing this business and that it would keep him away from home for a night, understood the pantomime all too well and was deeply troubled by it.' In the second version, omitting the above, Goethe—through his

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