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GOETHE

The Sorrows of Young Werther

MARTIN SWALES

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Preface

The tradition of the German novel, before the emergence of its 'classic' writers in the first half of the twentieth century (Thomas Mann, Kafka, Hesse, Musil), does not have an assured place in the canon of European literature. Not that it has wanted for spirited advocates; but, despite all efforts, it has remained firmly on the periphery. The one signal exception is Goethe's novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (as the title was given in the first edition) or (as most subsequent printings have it) *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. The title (with or without the genitive form ending in '–s') is usually rendered as 'The Sorrows of Young Werther' – and I shall have a word to say about that translation in the main text. *Werther* was an extraordinary and immediate bestseller both in Germany and abroad. For this reason, one does not have to plead for its importance: it is, as it were, already on the map. But even so, it does pose interpretative problems for us as modern readers. There is, for example, the fact that *Werther* was, as I shall show, very much rooted in contemporary taste: and it may be that some modern readers will find that they can only view it as a quaint museum piece. This has not been my experience in teaching the novel. My students at University College London have found *Werther* an exciting and troubling text – one that produces strongly divergent opinions. I am grateful to them for the enthusiasm and energy with which they have discussed this novel: their contribution to the making of this title in the *Landmarks of world literature* series has been decisive, as has that of my colleague and friend Peter Stern.

The translations given are my own. Because Werther's letters are, for the most part, carefully dated, I have been able to give as the source for any particular quotation the date of the letter from which it comes. Where I have quoted from the editor's narrative, I have always attempted to give a clear indication of where the passage is to be found.

My debt to other critics is acknowledged in the 'Guide to further reading' which forms the last part of this book.

MARTIN SWALES

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Chronology

	Goethe's life and work	*Contemporary events*
1740		Richardson, *Pamela*
1742–5		Young, *Night Thoughts*
1748		First three cantos of Klopstock's *Der Messias* published; Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des Lois*; Richardson, *Clarissa Harlowe*; Voltaire, *Zadig*.
1741–8		War of the Austrian Succession
1749	28 August: Goethe born in Frankfurt on the Main	
1756–63		Seven Years War
1759		Voltaire, *Candide*
1760		First two volumes of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* published
1760–3		Ossian
1761		Rousseau, *La nouvelle Héloïse*
1762		Rousseau, *Le Contrat social, Émile*
1765–8	Law studies in Leipzig	
1766		Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*
1767		Lessing, *Minna von Barnhelm*
1768		*Sterne, Sentimental Journey*
1770	Love affair with Friederike Brion at Sesenheim. Early poems ('Willkommen und Abschied', 'Mailied')	

1771	Translates Ossian. *Rede zum Schäkespears Tag*	Klopstock, *Oden*; Smollett, *Humphry Clinker*
1772	*Von deutscher Baukunst*. Period spent at Wetzlar ('Reichskammergericht'), love for Charlotte Buff	Lessing, *Emilia Galotti*
1772–3	Meetings with Maximiliane von La Roche (later Brentano)	
1773	*Götz von Berlichingen*	
1774	*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, first version; *Clavigo*	
1775	Engagement to Lili Schönemann (but broken off in September). Invited to Weimar by Duke Karl August. Arrives Weimar 7 November. Begins work on *Egmont*	Beaumarchais, *Le Barbier de Séville*; Sheridan, *The Rivals*
1775–83		American War of Independence
1776	Settles in Weimar, takes up official duties, studies botany and geology. Begins work on *Wilhelm Meister*	American Declaration of Independence; Lenz, *Die Soldaten*
1776–88	Relationship with Charlotte von Stein	
1778		Death of Voltaire and Rousseau
1779	Appointed 'geheimer Rat' (privy counsellor)	Lessing, *Nathan der Weise*
1781		Schiller, *Die Räuber*; Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*
1782	Given patent of nobility	Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*
1784	Scientific work – discovery of intermaxillary bone in animal and human jaw. Essay *Über den Granit*	Schiller, *Kabale und Liebe*; Herder, *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*; Beaumarchais, *Le Mariage de Figaro*
1786–8	Italian journey. Sudden, secret departure from Weimar via Karlsbad, 3 September 1786.	
1786		Mozart, *The Marriage of Figaro*. Death of Frederick the Great

	Goethe's life and work	*Contemporary events*
1787	Visits Naples and Sicily. *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, second version. *Iphigenie auf Tauris*	Schiller, *Don Carlos*; Mozart, *Don Giovanni*
1788	*Egmont*. Continues work on *Faust*, *Torquato Tasso*, *Wilhelm Meister*. Returns to Weimar in June. Relationship with Christiane Vulpius, break with Charlotte von Stein.	Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*
1788–1806	Studies of morphology and optics.	
1789	*Torquato Tasso* completed (published in 1790). Birth of son, August	Storming of the Bastille. Blake, *Songs of Innocence*
1789–91		Constituent Assembly in France
1790	*Faust, ein Fragment*, *Über die Metamorphose der Pflanzen*	
1791	Assumes charge of Weimar theatre (till 1817)	
1792–3	Takes part with the Duke in campaign against revolutionaries in France. *Die Campagne in Frankreich*	
1793		Execution of Louis XVI. Reign of Terror in France
1794	Beginning of friendship with Schiller (which lasts until the latter's death in 1805)	
1795–6	*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*	
1795		Schiller, *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung*
1796		Napoleon's campaign in Italy
1797–9		Hölderlin, *Hyperion*
1797	*Hermann und Dorothea*	

1798	*Balladenalmanach*	Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*
1799		Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde*
1800		Schiller, *Maria Stuart*; Novalis, *Hymnen an die Nacht*; Mme de Staël, *De la Littérature*
1801		Schiller, *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*; Chateaubriand, *Atala*
1802		Novalis. *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*
1804		Napoleon crowned Emperor. Schiller, *Wilhelm Tell*
1805		Battle of Trafalgar. Chateaubriand, *René*. Death of Schiller
1806	*Faust. Part One* completed (published 1808). Marries Christiane Vulpius	Dissolution of Holy Roman Empire. Battle of Jena (defeat of Prussia and Austria)
1807	Begins work on *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (published 1809)	
1808	Meeting with Napoleon at Erfurt	Kleist, *Penthesilea*
1808–31	Works on autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit*	
1810		Kleist, *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*; Mme de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*
1811		Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*
1812		Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. Byron, *Childe Harold*
1814		Scott, *Waverley*; Wordsworth, *The Excursion*; E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier*
1814–15	Journeys to Rhine and Main, love for Marianne von Willemer. Begins work on *Der West-Östliche Divan*	

	Goethe's life and work	*Contemporary events*
1815		The Hundred Days, Napoleon defeated at Waterloo
1816	Death of Christiane	Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*; Constant, *Adolphe*
1817		Keats, *Poems*; Byron, *Don Juan*
1818		Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*
1819		Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*
1820		Lamartine, *Premières Méditations*; Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*
1822		Heine, *Gedichte*, Vigny, *Poèmes*
1823	Begins conversations with Eckermann. Love for Ulrike von Levetzow, writes 'Marienbader Elegie'	
1824	Writes 'An Werther'. Takes up work on *Faust. Part Two*, which will occupy him till 1831	
1825		Grillparzer, *König Ottokars Glück und Ende*
1826	*Novelle*	Eichendorff, *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts*; Victor Hugo, *Odes et Ballades*
1827	Death of Charlotte von Stein	Hugo, *Préface de 'Cromwell'*
1828	Death of Karl August	
1829	*Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*	Balzac, *Les Chouans*; Musset, *Poésies*; Hugo, *Les Orientales*
1830		July revolution in France. Hugo, *Hernani*; Tennyson, *Poems*
1831	*Dichtung und Wahrheit* completed, *Faust. Part Two* completed (published posthumously, 1832)	Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir*; Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*
1832	Goethe dies, 22 March	

Contents

Chapter 1

Werther in context

(a) Territories and nationhood

Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which first appeared in 1774 (to be followed by a second version in 1787), was an immediate success: not only was it a bestseller in Germany, in the space of a few years it captured the imagination of European readers as well. One of the aims of this study is to explain why and how *Werther* had this colossal impact. The international success it achieved becomes all the more remarkable when we remember that it emerged from a country that was different in kind from the other European nations. The particularity (in a variety of senses) of Germany has been – and still is – an issue within European historiography.

Historians employ a number of terms to characterize the course of German history prior to 1871. Notions such as 'der deutsche Sonderweg' (the special course of Germany) or 'die verspätete Nation' (the belated nation) recur constantly. They express the idea that the German lands constituted an exception to the (European) historical norm in that Germany only became a unified nation state three decades from the end of the nineteenth century. Before then 'Germany' existed only as a cultural entity defined by a shared language, and not as a political unit. The Holy Roman Empire administered a complex system of rights and privileges which provided a loose administrative and judicial framework within which a profusion of large and small territories could operate (rather than co-operate). Its prevailing ethos allowed a large measure of autonomy to its constituent territories, and that autonomy expressed itself as princely absolutism. This conglomeration of small, largely independent states ('Kleinstaaterei') became

more centrifugal after the Thirty Years War. The settlements of Westphalia, which concluded that war in 1648, permitted the protection of 'German liberties' by non-German powers: in practice this meant that German princes had the freedom to make alliances which further undermined the Empire's role as a unifying force. And this process of political weakening came hard on the heels of the appalling destruction which the war had brought to whole areas of Germany: estimates indicate that the German lands lost some 40 per cent of their rural and 33 per cent of their urban population in the war. Economically, the recovery was slow in coming; and it was not helped by the particularism that generated a bewildering array of currencies and tariff barriers. For the year 1780 the Worms register lists 314 imperial territories and, for the most part, their allegiance to the Emperor was little more than nominal. Administratively, the Empire functioned through three principal institutions: the Imperial Assembly ('Reichstag') at Regensburg, the Supreme Court ('Reichskammergericht') which had met at Speyer until 1684 but then moved to Wetzlar, and the Imperial Tribunal ('Reichshofrat') in Vienna.

It is all too tempting to be dismissive of the Holy Roman Empire, to see it as a ponderous machine which delayed the attainment of German national unity; and to argue that, when that unity finally came, it was so radically out of synchrony with the rapid transformation of late nineteenth-century Germany into an industrial nation that the seeds of catastrophe were already sown. But this is to subscribe to the view which, in hindsight, invests German history from late medieval times to the first decades of the twentieth century with a kind of inbuilt pathology. The Empire may have a number of things to answer for. But to make it responsible for everything, down to and including Hitler, is excessive. Certainly many of the petty rulers in the German lands were tyrants; certainly the administrative institutions of the Empire were ponderous (the Supreme Court was woefully underfunded and could not keep up with the volume of work – Goethe in the twelfth book of his autobiography *Poetry and Truth* speaks of some twenty thousand cases being before the Wetzlar authorities, of which only sixty

could be dealt with in any year); certainly political docility was inculcated into German citizens, and many were content to see freedom as an inward, spiritual entity, as something different from (and, indeed, preferable to) the mundane and outward thing known as political liberty. This brings us to the key notion of inwardness ('Innerlichkeit') which has so often been seen as the besetting sin of the German nation. It is pilloried by Karl Marx with his notion of the 'deutsche Misere'. Behind such arguments, persuasive though they may be, there lurks a kind of (often unspoken) normative thinking: one which decrees that the 'healthy' course of a European nation's political, social, and economic development from the eighteenth to the twentieth century is synonymous with the cumulative self-assertion of the bourgeois class as a motor force for radical social change within the unified nation state.

It can readily be admitted that neither the Holy Roman Empire nor the German Confederation which succeeded it in the nineteenth century accord with such a norm (the 1848 revolution, which promised a measure of political reform, came to nothing). But this does not mean that the Empire and its legacy are to be identified as some malignant growth on the body of European history. The Empire did, after all, enable small, virtually unprotected territories to survive alongside powerful states. Moreover, as the German lands slowly recovered from the consequences of the Thirty Years War, enlightened and progressive energies made themselves felt – even within the essentially absolutist context. However strange it may sound to modern ears, one vital agency of this enlightened thinking was the bureaucracy which sprang up at the various courts. From the second half of the seventeenth century on, many princes were concerned to promote economic and social stability in their domains, and this aim brought with it the need for people with administrative skills. Of course, at the courts the power and prestige of the nobility remained largely unbroken. But for their efficient running the territories depended on new generations of (usually university-trained) administrators, and the civil service began to acquire for itself a measure of influence and respect. The need for academically

trained people produced a veneration for the institutions of learning (both school and university). Universities, academies, botanical gardens, libraries, reading circles, scientific 'cabinets' flourished. And they all opened the way for bourgeois self-advancement. Journalism too acquired a new energy: the eighteenth century witnessed the growth of the moral weeklies ('moralische Wochenschriften'), in which ethical issues were discussed – often in a form that mixed narrative (anecdote) with debate. Admittedly, eighteenth-century Germany has no equivalent of the lively civic atmosphere, the coffee houses, the vigorous journals, pamphlets, and newspapers of contemporary London: such a capital city exuded a degree of self-assurance and disputative sophistication which could scarcely arise in the loose aggregation of territories that was Germany. But even so, it would be a mistake to see the German-speaking lands as belonging to a different planet.

Werther is not a novel that, in any obvious, sustained, or exacting way, takes issue with the society of its time. It tells the story of a young man of great sensitivity, who is sent by his mother on a journey to a small town where he is to clarify the matter of an outstanding legacy. He is enchanted by the beauty of his surroundings. After a few weeks he meets, and falls in love with, Lotte: but she is already engaged to a man named Albert. Werther stays on from May till September 1771, but then tears himself away and takes up administrative employment with a legation at some unidentified small city (which closely resembles Wetzlar). But he is snubbed by one of the aristocrats there, and hands in his notice. Some months later he returns to the town where Lotte lives. Werther is now totally dominated by his hopeless passion, and, seeing no way out of his predicament, he shoots himself. The events of the novel all take place between May 1771 and December 1772.

As this brief summary makes clear, *Werther* is not overtly concerned with social problems; yet it emphatically bears the imprint of its age. When Werther commits suicide, there is on the table before him a copy of Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* (1772). The first act of that play gives a justly famous portrait of the petty prince as absolute ruler – casually and capriciously

dispensing decrees, judgements (even on matters of life and death). Moreover, it is a play that pits against the scandal of princely absolutism the moral seriousness and dignity of bourgeois life. We can assume that Werther aligns himself with the play's perception of class differences, and with its sympathies. He finds himself in a society that offers few outlets for his energies. His one attempt to take employment – significantly in an administrative post attached to a court – ends in humiliation. He is deeply wounded by this experience. He resents the shallowness and snobbery that punishes him for the social solecism of outstaying his welcome in aristocratic company, and above all he is hurt by the offence done to the value and seriousness of his inner life. Not that this rebuff can be made responsible for his tragedy; but the novel does unmistakably see Werther's emotional intensity, his inwardness, his failure to find an appropriate practical channel for his energies as belonging to a particular time and to a particular place. In this novel Goethe offers us not only a timeless drama of the irreconcilability of inner and outer worlds, but also a historical drama in which both worlds are unmistakably identified as belonging to a particular epoch.

Goethe on many occasions lamented the fact that Germany lacked the range and vigour of political and cultural life that would be possible within a unified nation. The ninety-sixth of the bitter epigrammatic poems of satirical import (called *Xenien*) which he and Schiller wrote in the 1790s reads:

> To develop into a nation, that is something you Germans hope for in vain:
> Instead develop yourselves more freely into human beings, that is something you can do.

Werther suggests to us that when someone tries to develop into a full human being – 'ein Mensch' – and finds himself denied the social outlet for his energies, the upshot may be a catastrophic disjunction between self and world. As we shall see, Werther's dilemma was by no means confined to him alone; nor, surprisingly, was it confined to Germany alone.