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978-0-521-31699-6 - Goethe: The Sorrows of Young Werther  
Martin Swales  
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## 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 cooperate). 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

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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### (b) The culture of inwardness

It is one of the paradoxes of German culture in the second half of the eighteenth century that it is dominated by two seemingly antithetical currents. On the one hand there is the complex of energies known as the Enlightenment ('Aufklärung'), and on the other there is the cult of sensibility known as 'Empfindsamkeit' or Sentimentalism. The enlightenment, which is associated in Germany with the names of Lessing, Nicolai, and Moses Mendelssohn, proclaims a belief in reason, in clear, discursive processes of thought and debate as constituting the avenue to truth: whereas sentimentalism upholds both the dignity and cognitive value of feeling. Despite their manifest differences, however, these two cultural trends have one thing in common: both assert the individual's freedom from established doctrine or received wisdom; both assert that any proposition or tenet or value is true in so far as the individual heart or mind recognizes it as true – no external authority can or should usurp the validating role of individual experience. In a famous programmatic essay of 1784, entitled *What is Enlightenment?*, Kant urges man to 'dare to know', and he sees enlightenment as a process in which man comes of age and becomes truly the arbiter of his own experience. Sentimentalism similarly urges man to have the courage to trust the promptings of his own (feeling) selfhood.

Such a challenge to established authority was felt with particular acuteness in the sphere of religion because it was here that the interplay of public (institutional) demands and private responses was most manifest. From the late seventeenth century on Germany witnesses the growth of one particular form of Protestantism known as Pietism. Pietism placed great stress on the inner life, on self-scrutiny, as the true path to godliness. Many Pietists wrote and published records of their introspection: Francke, Oetinger, Petersen, Spener all produced autobiographies. And thereby they asserted the public interest and worth of private, inward experience. Pietists were particularly active in the field of pedagogics: often their communities founded schools and devoted themselves whole-

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heartedly to both the theory and the practice of education. Thereby Pietism contributed significantly to the emergence of the culture of sentimentalism in the eighteenth century.

Such a cult of feeling represents a sea-change in the European sensibility, for it asserts that individual psychological processes are worthy in their own right of the most detailed linguistic – and, by extension, literary – expression. Nowadays we take it for granted that literature may legitimately devote itself to the minute portrayal of individuated psychology. But we tend to forget that this kind of concern only emerges gradually in the course of European literature, and that it is bound up with the complex process that is known as secularization. In explaining this process, we have to bear in mind that for many centuries the Christian religion provided the definition and vocabulary for the portrayal of the inner life. With the waning of religion as the chief arbiter of human affairs, secular concerns came into prominence. As a result, inwardness became a psychological rather than a religious matter. Of course, Pietism saw itself as a religious movement; but its effect was to confer dignity on the inner lives not only of mystics and seekers after God, but also of ordinary men and women with their manifestly human promptings. Yet what strikes us today when we read Pietist writings is just how intense and insistent their religious vocabulary is. This is not the vocabulary of modern psychological discourse as we understand it. Rather, the language of Pietism embodies a kind of two-way traffic: religious experience is made secular, but in its turn secular experience is, as it were, theologized. Time and time again the promptings of the heart are endowed with religious significance; and conversely, religious fervour is equated with emotional intensity.

Goethe's *Werther* is one of the supreme expressions of that strange middle ground in which spiritual and secular meet: we are uncertain where one sphere ends and the other begins, the language of one sphere is constantly employed as a metaphor for the other. Of the strength and sincerity of Werther's feelings there can be no doubt; but as to the nature of those feelings, as to the claims that both are and can be made for them, we will find ourselves in uncertain territory. And this is part of the

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enormous fascination which the novel held for its contemporary readers: for it took issue with the discourse of Pietism and 'Empfindsamkeit'. And still today it obliges us to confront the claims which Werther makes for his experience. Is he simply an overwrought young man? Is he pathologically immature? Does he succumb to the fallacy of confusing strength of feeling with the validity of feeling? Or is it the case that, behind all the self-aggrandizement of his effusive letters, a sombre tragedy of the secularized human spirit is being enacted? Above all, once we enter the extraordinary claustrophobia of his novel, where do we take our stand as we seek to judge Werther, to evaluate the assertions which he unashamedly makes of the dignity and importance of his inner life? Just over two hundred years after its first appearance, *Werther* has lost none of its power to unsettle its readers, to divide them into opposing camps.

Part of the intrusive power of the book derives from the fact that it is written in letter form. We find ourselves buttonholed, cajoled, and harried because Werther seems to be addressing each of us individually. We may despise him or admire him – perhaps, more accurately, we do both. But we cannot remain indifferent.

**(c) The novel and its readership**

In *Werther* Goethe employs the fiction that an editor figure publishes, with an epilogue, the authentic letters of a young man who committed suicide. In other words, private documents (Werther's letters to his friend Wilhelm) are being made public. This fiction, which is magnificently exploited, was intimately related to the contemporary culture that received the novel so enthusiastically. For it was part of the literary climate of the age that letter-writing was a consuming pastime – just as the pietistic autobiography helped to popularize the notion of people keeping records of their own lives in diary form, in memoirs, recollections, confessions.

The market for literature increased markedly in Germany in the course of the eighteenth century. The book fair in Leipzig is a good barometer – not least because Leipzig was situated in



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liberal Saxony. The Leipzig catalogues register the shift in public taste: from 1740 to 1800 the volume of devotional literature declined from 19 per cent of total book production to a mere 6 per cent. In the same period, the total market share of fictional literature rose sharply. Moreover, the novel came increasingly into its own. In 1770 38 per cent of all literary production was devoted to novels: by 1782 the novel's share had risen to 48 per cent. As the novel moved into the ascendant, it underwent marked changes in mode and theme. In the first half of the century adventure novels (so-called 'Robinsonaden' after their original model, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*) were prominent. But in the second half of the century such novels began to wane in popularity. The colourful, exotic, and episodic yarn was replaced by fictional material that invariably claimed to be authentic. The letter form came to dominate – authenticity, it would seem, was both a property of (claimed) documentary evidence (that is, the readers were assured by an editor figure that these were the actual letters written by the main character), and it was also indissolubly linked with intimacy of communication: written material felt truthful, authentic, when it was presented as material written in private. That such private material was made public did not diminish its authenticity – because, paradoxically, the public realm was constituted by the shared acknowledgement of the private realm as being not only truthful but also valuable. The vogue for epistolary novels was initiated by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747–8) and by Rousseau's *La nouvelle Héloïse* (1759). Germany was particularly responsive to the appeal of the novel in letters. Knigge, Miller, Heinse, Jacobi, Gellert, Musäus, Sophie von La Roche all produced such fictions. By the year 1780 the epistolary novel dominated, and it was characterized by a mixture of intense emotion and didacticism. There was a manifest delight in the immediacy of the letter form. The reader is invited, indeed obliged, to eavesdrop on the process of writing in which the self recalls (often in immediate proximity to the events described), sifts, and evaluates its feelings. At the same time, we are told that this intimacy with the human heart will prove invaluable

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and instructive. The motives, it would seem, that have persuaded the editor to publish these letters are not simply gossipy or prurient. Rather, 'private' material can serve the function of 'public' edification.

Gradually the novel began to conquer some of the fortresses of high literary and aesthetic theory, despite the determined opposition of some of the literary law-givers (such as Gottsched). In the same year – 1774 – which saw the publication of the first edition of *Werther*, there appeared the first major theoretical tract in German devoted to the theory of the novel form: Friedrich von Blanckenburg's *Essay on the Novel*. In that work, Blanckenburg presses the claim for the seriousness of the novel by insisting that it is capable of exploring the inner life, the subtle processes of psychological development that occur within the hero. Blanckenburg esteems Wieland's *Agathon* (1766–7) as an example of what the novel can achieve: it is not surprising that *Agathon* should have been grist to Blanckenburg's mill, because it is a novel which scrupulously and overtly distances itself from the long-winded prose romance and the 'Robinsonade' (both of which it sees as psychologically inept and thematically crude). In answer to such outworn narrative modes Wieland seeks to establish the worth of psychologically differentiated fiction. In the Preface to his *Secret Journal* of 1771 the Swiss pastor and physiognomist Lavater writes:

a faithful and circumstantial moral [i.e. psychological] history of the most common and unromantic character is infinitely more important and fitting for improving the human heart than the most extraordinary and interesting novel.

Gradually, the novel was evolving into precisely that moral-cum-psychological history which Lavater was advocating. At approximately the same time Lessing was seeking to establish for the drama an aesthetic based on 'Mitleid' or pity. Once again, it is the reader's (or spectator's) complicity in the inner processes of the character that makes possible an aesthetic and human value which no 'mere' sequence of outward events can achieve.

In a way that contrasted markedly with its English counter-