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Martin Swales
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Landmarks of world literature

Goethe

THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

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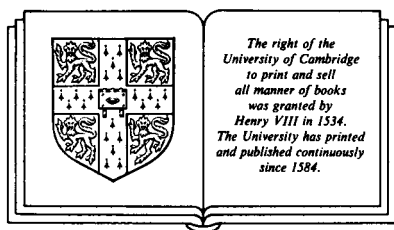
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GOETHE

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

University College London

Chronology

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

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

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

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

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