

**Riddle versus Resolution:
Suicide and Moral Freedom in Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers***

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Abstract

Goethe's Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (1774, 1787) is full of unresolved questions and conflicts, not least of which is the question of Werther's suicide. On the one hand, Goethe is fairly consistent in his sympathetic depiction of Werther, and the suicide is unarguably successful in freeing him from outside limitations. On the other hand, the suicide is botched. In short, we are urged simultaneously to embrace Werther and his approach to life and to keep him at bay. His attempt at achieving moral freedom through a suicide motivated entirely by feeling is pitted against a rationally governed morality enforced by social convention. However, the novel refuses to take a clear stance. In the end, the relationship between moral freedom and suicide is treated more as a riddle than a resolution.

Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774, 1787) is full of unresolved questions and conflicts, not the least of which is the question of morality and its relationship to Werther's suicide. This moral ambiguity is reflected in the author's attitude and approach to the nature of the universe and human existence. Goethe made countless statements to this effect.

In one instance he claimed to be a pantheist in science, a polytheist in poetry, and a monotheist in ethics; in another he described himself as an atheist in science and philosophy, a pagan in art, and a Christian by emotional inclination. In a brief account of his philosophical development, Goethe declared that he had no aptitude for philosophy as such.¹ In his posthumously published *Maximen und Reflexionen* of 1833, he remarks, "Theories are usually the over-hasty conclusions of an impatient understanding which is anxious to get rid of the phenomena and replace them with images, concepts, and often indeed only with words."² For Goethe, no one set of doctrines can do full justice to the complexity of the universe and of human existence, although all of them have their distinct value if they are approached in a sympathetic and non-dogmatic spirit. Indeed, this is exactly how Goethe approaches Werther's moral life.

Goethe adopted various moral stances throughout the stages of his life, never positing one over another. To the extent that Goethe has any cohesive moral philosophy at all, it can be seen in reaction to Kantian (and, to some extent, Schillerian) ethics.

As Friedrich Paulsen notes regarding Goethe's ethics, "The Kantian moral philosophy with its sharply pointed antithesis of duty versus inclination . . . must have sounded to Goethe as empty and dead talk, yes even as presumptuous and wicked talk, as blasphemy against God and nature."³

Goethe's morality, then, is an expression of the deepest human needs and impulses; he leans toward the heart, not the head, and his personal reflections on ethical matters are based in practical situations rather than abstract principles. *Werther* is a prime example of a case study in the ambiguity of moral freedom—feelings unbound by normative social codes based upon rationality and social conventions. Werther's suicide is the most adamant—yet, I argue, wholly inconclusive—attempt to achieve this type of freedom.⁴

The novel tells of a young man who is governed by his feelings. Ultimately, he hopes to become one with the infinite by using these feelings to transcend the limitations of natural and social conventions including—crucially—the rationally driven morality expected of him. This project motivates him to seek validation for his feeling-centered approach to life by projecting these feelings onto facets of external reality: nature, children, literature, art, religion, and, most importantly, Lotte—the engaged woman with whom he falls deeply in love. Although he is aware of the natural and social limits expected of him, he rejects them and becomes increasingly frustrated at the strong resistance that results. A chance discussion of suicide with Lotte's rationally-minded fiancé, Albert, clearly establishes their contrasting moral tendencies; when Lotte finally rejects Werther, the hypothetical discussion on suicide becomes a reality.

As all avenues for the expression of his feelings are cut off, Werther spirals out of control. His decision to commit suicide is his final attempt to establish the centrality of feeling as a basis for action and, finally, to free himself from the suffocating moral and social world of which he has been part.

Goethe is of two minds about whether or not Werther's final act allows him to achieve the moral freedom he so desires. On the one hand, Goethe is fairly consistent in his sympathetic depiction of his protagonist, and Werther's final act is unarguably successful in freeing him from all outside limitations. On the other hand, the suicide itself is a botched one: Werther is found with his brain protruding, his lungs convulsing, and twelve hours pass before his death. The editor who is brought in to describe these events is at times cold, dispassionate, even clinical, yet, at other times, sympathetic. It is as if we are urged simultaneously to embrace Werther and his approach to life and to keep him at arm's length. In short, Werther's attempt at achieving moral freedom through a suicide motivated entirely by feeling is pitted, in the most urgent sense, against a rationally governed morality enforced by social convention. However, the novel refuses to take a clear stance. In the end, the relationship between moral freedom and suicide is treated more as a riddle than a resolution.⁵ The problem of moral freedom in relation to Werther's suicide is foreshadowed throughout the novel in his subtler but no less ambiguous attempts to achieve connections with various aspects of external reality. Each of these attempts is carried out with the noblest intentions. However, Werther's rejection of natural limits leads to critical problems which the novel ultimately leaves unresolved.

From the beginning, Werther expresses a religion of nature consistent with the philosophical positions of pantheism and deism.

The former position holds that the deity and cosmos are identical (i.e. the divine is imminent in all things) while the latter holds that God created the world in such a way that it is capable of existing and operating on its own, which God then allows it to do.⁶ As a character whose essence is based in feeling, it is unsurprising that Werther would be drawn to such positions affording such an immediate and intense experience of the external world.

The first explicit expression of Werther's religion of nature comes in the letter of May 10 where he posits the divinity in everything from sun in the sky to the worms in the ground:

. . . closer to the a thousand different blades become astonishing to me, when I feel closer to my heart the teeming of the small world among the stems, the Innumerable, unfathomable forms of the little worms, the tiny gnats, and feel the hovering presence of the Almighty who created us in His image, the breeze of the All-Loving One who hoveringly bears and preserves us in eternal bliss.⁷

In his letter of May 4 – the first epistle – Werther writes, “Every tree, every hedge, is a bouquet of blossoms, and one would like to be a mayfly drifting about in the sea of heady aromas, able to find in it all one's nourishment” (8). His fantasy of being nourished through physical contact with the natural world suggests an incipient desire to transgress the natural boundaries separating the human from the natural world. While this desire is presented sympathetically, there is the intimation of danger, the sense that Werther's energy of feeling will inevitably lead him to nature's more destructive side.

The much later letter of August 18 anticipates the novel's conclusion as Werther finally casts nature as an incomprehensible and destructive force, “Monstrous mountains surrounded me, abysses lay before me, and torrents rushed downwards, rivers poured beneath me, and forest and mountains resounded” (58). Even before Werther realizes nature's destructive potential, however, the feelings he experiences toward nature interfere with his ability to maintain his connection to the expressive capability of art.

Werther's intense feelings of reciprocity with nature prevent him from using art to express his internal state. In one of the most ambiguous lines of the novel, Werther declares that he is so immersed in nature and the feelings it causes in him that his art suffers from it, “I couldn't draw now, not a line, but I have never been a greater painter than in these moments” (9). Werther seems to recognize his present inability to convey his internal state of feeling to the external world, but he also recognizes and appreciates the storehouse of feeling within him as the essential prerequisite of a great painter. Indeed, in this sense he has never been a greater painter. Still, he is very much aware of the dangers his feelings pose for his ability to express his internal state: “Oh, could you express this, could you breathe onto paper what lives in you as fully and warmly that it would become the mirror of your soul, as your soul is the mirror of infinite God!” (9). Despite this admission, Werther maintains that feelings for nature—not adherence to abstract rules—is what forms the great artist:

A person who forms himself according to the rules will never produce anything tasteless or bad, as someone who follows the model of laws and comfort can never become an insufferable neighbor, never a notable troublemaker; but against all that, all rules, say what you will, destroy the genuine feeling for nature and its true expression! (16)

Werther is presented as a failed artist who is conflicted between his overwhelming desire to follow feeling and his realization that meaningful expression requires strict adherence to rules and limitations. Ultimately, the novel suggests a necessary balance between the two, but one that Werther is unable to achieve: he is able only to produce the occasional sketch and grows increasingly frustrated at his inability to express his true inner feelings.⁸

His dilemma with expressing himself through art is also mirrored in his ability to love. At the end of the May 26 letter, Werther draws an analogy between a lover who is consumed by feeling for his beloved and one who follows the rules.

He recognizes that the latter lover is useful but mocks this usefulness as “over and done with, and if he is an artist, his art as well” (17). Werther ends the letter with the image of feeling triumphing over reason, musing that the day will come when “comfortable gentlemen” are destroyed by the power of feeling which surges like a great flood, destroying everything in its path. The letter points toward his doomed relationship wherein Werther attempts to put into practical application his life of feeling.

Similar to the way in which he tries (but fails) to use art to express and validate his feelings, Werther attempts to seek validation of his feelings from children. He glorifies children for their unabashed expression of feeling yet fails to recognize that children are not tied to the same limits as adults. He fails to recognize that a child’s happiness is an unreasonable gauge of an adult’s and that their significance in his life is mediated rather than direct. He occasionally misinterprets the attention of children for genuine affection rather than childish self-centeredness (“Sundays they never miss getting their coin, and if I am not there after the time for prayers the innkeeper has instructions to pay it out.” (18)).

Moreover, as Burton Pike points out, there are subtle clues throughout the novel which suggest obstacles for Werther’s attempt to project his feelings on to children (ix).⁹ While Werther is waiting for Lotte on his way to the ball, he watches her give bread to her brothers and sisters and notices that “the little ones were looking at me sideways from some distance off” (23). When he kisses her brother, he notices that he has a runny nose. In the July 6 letter, when he picks up Lotte’s little sister Malchen, she screams and bursts into tears. In the end, however, the novel is ambiguous about the children’s reaction to Werther and to the feeling-based approach to life he represents: when he dies, for example, the children react to his death with emotions similar to they way in which they might react to the death of their own father.¹⁰

Werther’s relationship with literature is also problematic. In the same way that he attempts to use nature, art, and children to bridge the gap between his inner feelings and the outer world, Werther appropriates the Homeric vision through his reading of Homer’s *Odyssey*, his constant companion throughout the first half of the novel. Werther likens himself to Odysseus in his sense of purpose and also attempts (unsuccessfully) to use this work to establish a connection to a mythic, infinite realm. However, as Muenzer writes, “...the seductive charms of his diminutive version of Homer’s world can hardly belie his trimming of its ancient concepts to sizes more appropriate to his own situation.”¹¹ Muenzer also points out that Werther’s reading of Homer in the original Greek is analogous to his insistence on expressing his inner state in an awkwardly ancient idiom—one which, in fact, is not understood by the world around him.

In the second half of the novel, Werther becomes captivated by Ossian’s “dim figures in a murky landscape who are swept away by the language of feeling.”¹²

However, rather than seeking validation of his feelings through a connection to a world outside himself as he had sought in Homer, he recognizes precisely the opposite in Ossian. In the author's elegiac rhythms mourning the passing of an heroic age, Werther recognizes his own incompatibility with the world. Ossian recalls for him an irretrievable time of accomplishment and Werther uses him to acknowledge the commemorative power of a song that praises effort as well as deed. In Ossian's vanquished warrior on the Gaelic plain, Werther sees a semblance of himself. If he cannot be redeemed by the world around him, he can at least exert his will upon it. In this way, his reading of Ossian can be seen as a prefatory step in his suicide.¹³

Werther's attempts to connect with and obtain validation from nature, art, children, and literature are certainly significant with regard to his growing resistance against prevailing moral norms and social conventions, but his desire to achieve union with Lotte is undoubtedly the most dramatic attempt to reciprocate and validate his feelings. It is a clear illustration of his conflicted relationship with the external world and is particularly relevant with regard to his eventual suicide. Werther's ultimate failure to achieve a connection with Lotte signifies for him the final rejection of his feelings as a basis for his life. In effect, Lotte's rejection leaves Werther with no alternatives for expressing his feelings. His suicide finally occurs, not as an attempt to achieve another connection, but as a desperate assertion of his feelings against stifling moral norms and social conventions.

The letter of June 16th describes the night of the ball, Werther's first encounter with Lotte. From the moment Werther sees her, she appears to him as the archetype of feeling and he experiences an immediate attraction.¹⁴ However, Lotte is torn between two worlds. On the one hand, she identifies with Werther and demonstrates the importance of feelings in her own life.

On the other hand, she is a product of the social world and feels drawn to it. Werther seems not to recognize the latter; instead, he focuses squarely on her interest in feelings. On the journey to the ball, Lotte makes it clear that she is drawn to books that allow her to recognize her own comfortable world of social convention, but she does not deny that sentimental fiction like *The Vicar of Wakefield* still occasionally enthrall her.¹⁵ The reader gets the sense that Lotte has achieved a balance unobtainable to Werther. Yet he is unable to see and appreciate this. Instead he feels only the exhilaration of his reciprocity of feeling and indulges in activities, such as the dance, which manifest his long desired attempt to achieve wholeness. In describing the dance, he expresses a vision of the body and a consciousness in perfect union.¹⁶ Not insignificantly, Werther interrupts his description of the dance with the promise that if he loses his connection with Lotte he will take his own life. This suggests that his need to achieve reciprocity of feeling with Lotte—validation for his own approach to life—is the most crucial connection of all.

The incident which Werther believes solidifies his connection with Lotte occurs on the night of the dance once the thunderstorm passes. As they watch the remnants of the rain and hear the distant thunder rumbling, Werther revels in Lotte's obvious expressions of feeling. As he sees her eyes fill with tears, she places her hand on his and exclaims "Klopstock!"¹⁷ This reference to the eighteenth-century poet famous for expressing extreme states of feeling confirms, in Werther's mind, a successfully forged connection. However, in the days following the ball (after Werther moves to Wahlheim to be near Lotte) it becomes clear that her feelings for him are decidedly ambiguous. Lotte is obviously fond of Werther, but she does not abandon herself to him the way he does to her. The novel presents several hints suggesting that Werther's connection to Lotte is less than ideal.

For example, he attempts to commemorate his happiness by sketching her, but he is unable to produce the sketch and must settle for an image of her silhouette; when he berates Herr Schmidt for his gloomy moods, Lotte scolds him; Lotte sprinkles sand on her letters which gets into Werther's teeth when he raises them to his mouth. In the letters leading up to August 12, Werther realizes that his feelings are inconsistent with external moral and social norms. Werther's morality of feeling becomes more starkly delineated. For example, when Albert returns, Werther says that no matter how well he knows what he should do ("Albert has arrived, and I shall leave." (46)), his heart will ultimately steer his course.

In the August 8 letter, Werther reacts to Wilhelm's rationalistic "either-or" approach; while he admits that Wilhelm is basically correct and even grants him the basic truth of his argument, he tries to "steal [his] way between either and or" (48). In effect, Werther accepts Wilhelm's rational moral approach as a general (i.e. theoretical) proposition, but rejects it when it is applied to specific situations: "feelings and ways of acting are as variously shaded as gradations between a hawk nose and pug nose" (48). As if to foreshadow his ultimate dilemma, Werther draws an analogy between the rational "either-or" approach and the decision that a terminally ill person must make either to end his life or to continue to live it: "But can you ask the unfortunate person whose life is slowly, inexorably ebbing away in a creeping illness, can you desire of him that he should through a dagger stroke end his misery once and for all?" (49). In a move that foreshadows his own situation, Werther suggests here that the act of suicide is the ultimate revelation of the irrelevance of a rational moral approach to the world. The choice to live or to die, he claims, is one that ultimately resides in the realm of feeling, and this is, after all, the most important choice.

The passing references to suicide in earlier sections become central on August 12 as Werther describes suicide as an example of an act in which reason has failed to satisfy the self, and passion must therefore take over. Of course, in his debate with Albert, Werther is speaking on a very personal level. He is quite comfortable with his suicidal tendencies. In speaking in defense of suicide he is not upholding an abstract argument, but is defending himself. Werther's right to suicide is, in many ways, the basis of his own being. The August 12 letter is significant for a number of reasons: First, it signifies that Werther himself is aware of the intense resistance mounted against his way of life. Second, it establishes an explicit demarcation between his moral approach and that of Albert. Finally, the letter suggests that—now that Werther has been or is soon to be rejected by the external forces to which he attempts connection and validation—his self-inflicted death is the only viable means of expressing his feeling-based approach to the world. A closer look at the August 12 letter is useful for understanding Werther's ultimate act.

The letter describes a conversation Werther has had with Albert about suicide and effectively highlights two opposed moral positions. The conversation begins with Werther noticing two pistols belonging to Albert hanging on a wall. Werther asks to borrow them, and Albert indicates that they are only hanging there *pro forma*. As Werther takes them down Albert begins to tell of how, when his servant once was polishing and loading them, the pistol accidentally went off shooting his maid in the thumb. Albert now acts "prudently" by keeping the pistols out of harm's way. As Albert begins to preach about man's tendency to make exceptions to rules and to justify his actions, "to limit modify, add, and subtract, until nothing remains of the matter" (51),

Werther—in a whimsical action indicative of the fleeting nature of the feeling motivating him (“succumbed to a whim”) – raises a pistol to his head in a gesture of suicide. This seemingly insignificant gesture leads to a discussion of the act which pits Albert’s rationally-based morality against Werther’s feeling-based morality. Once Albert declares that he cannot imagine how a person could be so foolish as to commit suicide and then expresses his repugnance at the thought, Werther reacts to Albert’s harshness and lack of empathy, but he also raises an important question relevant to his morality of feeling. While Albert sees suicide as an abstract “thought,” Werther sees it as a highly particularized action. His moral approach then requires his taking into account specific situations (“inner circumstances...the causes, why it happened, why it happened to happen”) rather than passing judgment based on abstractions, rules, and generalizations. Werther’s central contention is that there are always significant exceptions to rules and that this ultimately shows that rules are essentially useless. Albert expresses one of the dominant eighteenth-century views of suicide: non-religious intellectuals were inclined to regard suicide as irrational; “töricht” (“foolish”) is Albert’s word.

His argument with Albert in defense of man’s right to commit suicide occurs in three distinct phases. Each phase moves closer to an explicit embrace of the individual’s freedom to reject a rationally based morality; his argument culminates in the claim that suicide is the paradigmatic action of moral freedom based on specific situations driven by feeling. In the first phase of the argument Werther explains how certain extreme situations require extreme reactions and that this is an expected result of the experience of intense feeling. After reluctantly granting that certain actions may be “depraved,”

Werther offers two examples of crimes committed because of situations which incite extreme feeling: in the first case, a man steals food to avoid starving; in the second case, a man murders his wife and her lover after discovering their affair. Because these actions are motivated by intense feelings, Werther holds that they are exempt from rational law, moral condemnation, and even criminal prosecution. He goes so far as to refer to civil laws as “cold-blooded pedants” who, when confronted with the potency of feelings, would “let themselves be moved and suspend their punishment.” (52). This comment reiterates two points Werther had made previously in the novel: laws (in this case, civil) are disconnected from human experience and are therefore irrelevant to morality and that, in any case, feelings ultimately have supremacy over rational laws. Albert indicates that a person motivated to commit robbery or murder due to extreme feelings is similar to a drunk or insane person whose rational faculties are completely overcome.¹⁸

Although Werther scoffs at Albert’s elevation of reason over feeling and at his making an immediate moral judgment without studying the specifics of the situation, he does not offer an objection to Albert’s analogy of the drunk and insane. Werther suggests that these states are similar to being overcome by feeling in that, as he himself has experienced, they too can free one from the artificially confining world of rational moral laws: “O you reasonable people! I cried, smiling. Passion! Drunkenness! Madness! You stand there so calmly, so uninvolved, you moral people! You scold the drinker, loathe the weak-minded...I have been drunk more than once, my passions were never far from madness, and I don’t regret either” (52). Werther’s point again is that an abstract moral rule cannot account for, much less judge, specific situations. Rules are cold, aloof, and lead only to the vilification of those who break them.

Werther suggests that great deeds always circumvent the rules in that they are motivated by the vagaries of feeling and are “free, noble, [and] unexpected” (52). Much to Albert’s disagreement, Werther suggests that suicide is just such a deed. Albert’s response to Werther’s implication is predictable: he claims that Werther exaggerates and that one cannot regard suicide as anything but a weakness since, he claims, it is easier to die than to endure a life of agony. However, Werther rebukes this claim by offering specific analogies to suicide wherein feelings motivate resistance to external interference in order to achieve a degree of freedom: “A people that sighs under the unbreakable yoke of a tyrant, can you call that a weakness if they finally boil over and sunder their chains? A man who, gripped by horror when his house has caught fire, feels all his strength tense and easily carries away burdens that he could barely move when he is calm” (53). Far from being weak, Werther claims that the people who mount this sort of resistance are the epitome of strength. Albert’s failure to see the relevance of the examples to suicide is especially notable: his abstract, theoretical style of argumentation trumps an argument comprised of concrete examples and situations. These respective styles of argumentation reflect the constitutive elements of their argument: Werther sees suicide as a particular act, driven by feeling, which resists subordination under generalized moral rules while Albert can only see it as a transgression of these rules.

In short, Werther and Albert each represent fundamentally contrasting moral paradigms. This realization leads Werther to enter a third phase of the argument which utilizes generalizations rather than specific circumstances and examples. He begins by describing how human nature imposes limits on the feelings one can endure and that once these limits are surpassed, one yearns for relief. As he has throughout the novel,

Werther sees the world as a force field of feeling and implies that just as feelings are the basis of all action, they too can result in overwhelming resistance from rational and social forces external to them. Werther means to convince Albert that the person who commits suicide is like one who dies of an illness, and that it is just as absurd to call the former a coward as the latter. When one is “sick” with overwhelming feelings of despair caused by failed connections to the external world, it is absurd to think that the “calm, rational person” is unable to do anything to save him. Not unexpectedly, however, this explanation does not convince Albert, and Werther moves on to the final phase of the argument.

The final phase of the argument begins with the example of a young woman who commits suicide after having been spurned by her lover. The young woman had led a mundane life and “knew no pleasure beyond strolling around the town on Sunday” (54). She was an emotional person at her core, but it was not until she came across a man who evoked “an unknown feeling [which] drew her straight to the goal” (55) that she experienced the intensity of feeling with which Werther himself is so familiar. The woman Werther described can be seen as a version of himself. As is the case for him, at the moment this woman feels the greatest hope of a connection to her beloved – as the woman “stretches out her arms to embrace all her desires” (55)–her lover deserts her and the connection falters. She is then driven to achieve a connection with infinity, unity with cosmic nature (“driven to desperation by the horrible need in her heart, she jumps off in order to suffocate all her torments in an enveloping, embracing death.”) (55), and commits suicide.

By suggesting to Albert that man is governed by feeling and that reason is an artificial human construct imposed on the individual, Werther presents a serious charge against the rational moral approach typical of the Enlightenment.

Albert's reaction to the example of the rejected girl is a case in point. He maintains that someone who is more experienced and more rational would behave differently. In an act of dismissal motivated by extreme frustration, Werther reaches for his hat, replying "...a person is a person, and the little bit of reason that one may have comes barely or not at all into play when passions rage and the limits of mankind press on one" (56).

The language of feeling does not speak the language of reason; foreshadowing this fundamental incompatibility, Werther leaves. The letter ends irresolutely with one paradigm pitted against the other. In light of the rejection he faces from the stifling moral and social worlds of which he is part, he has now set the stage for the use of his self-inflicted death as a means of achieving unity with cosmic nature through the expression of his feelings.

In the months to come, Werther's feelings grow more intense. On the one hand, Lotte seems to empathize with them as indicated by her being overtaken by feeling when Werther reads Ossian to her. She is pulled into his magnetism and seems really to love him. On the other hand, when Werther kisses her, she orders him out of her house, never to see her again. As it turns out, this is the final act of resistance that drives Werther to the only outlet available for achieving freedom from the moral and social restrictions governing the external world.

In the final section of the novel, Werther's mood darkens and an "editor" ["Herausgeber"] is brought in to give order to Werther's often incoherent and undated final jottings. At one level, this editor is a dispassionate onlooker, someone who, for example, gives an account of Werther's suicide and who reports events as facts occurring in a world of outward cause and effect. When the novel shifts from Werther's letters to the narrative of the editor, however, the effect is both shocking and liberating.

At this level of structural statement, then, the text passes judgment on Werther as it moves from inwardness to outwardness. Yet it is important to stress that the editor's attitude is ambiguous: he is anything but a strident or censorious judge, but is rather deeply sympathetic to Werther. He is someone who appreciates the tumult and enthusiasm that Werther represents without letting that appreciation become emulation. In an epigraph before the novel, he introduces himself as an assiduous compiler of Werther's letters, thereby legitimizing both himself as documentary agent and the authenticity of the text that follows (i.e. the fiction is that these are genuinely the letters that Werther wrote). Yet, the documentary mode gives way to a more assertive one: we are told that we will be grateful to have this record of Werther's temperament because we will not be able to deny him our tears and admiration. Notably, the plural mode of address—"ihr"—then contracts to singular—"du"—as the individual reader is urged to make this little book his or her friend, although a note of warning is sounded about allowing the book to replace all other human contact. The "little book" is, as it were, pressed into our hands, but it comes with a warning. We are urged both to identify with Werther and to keep him at arm's length. His feeling-based approach to the world is treated with simultaneous understanding and skepticism.

The suicide itself is carefully stage-managed but botched. In contrast to the long, effusive letter Werther had written to Lotte a few hours earlier, the aftermath of his death is reported in spare, short sentences, utterly factual and unsentimental. The suicide is clearly motivated by Lotte's rejection, but the act itself is Werther's own rejection of the social and moral conventions that have stifled his feeling-based approach to the world.

Whether Werther's suicide finally legitimizes his philosophy of life and achieves success in bringing about his desired freedom is unclear. His calmness is carefully staged—there is the single glass of wine and the open copy of Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* (1772).¹⁹ However, in the end, Werther leaves the world in an utterly inelegant manner. His final Romantic gesture ends unromantically with his messy corpse: “When the doctor came to the unfortunate man he found him on the floor, beyond help, his pulse still beating, all his limbs paralyzed.

He had shot himself in the head above the right eye, the brain was protruding. Pointlessly, a vein was opened in his arm, the blood flowed, he was still gasping for breath.” (Book II, 148) This ambiguous portrayal extends to the last sentences of the novel: he is embraced by the workmen who carry his coffin but is rejected by the clergymen who refuse to attend his funeral. As the actual suicide suggests, the success of his final declaration of freedom from the stifling moral and social conventions that surround him is left an open question.

Notes

¹ See H.B. Nisbet, “Religion and Philosophy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Goethe*, ed. Lesley Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 219-231.

² Maxim 548 in *Goethes Werke* (Hamburger Ausgabe. Hamburg: C. Wegner, 1949-1960). XII, 440. My translation.

³ Friedrich Paulsen, “Goethes ethisches Anschauungen: Festvortrag,” *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 23 (1902). 7. My translation.

⁴ C. S. Muenzer in *Figures of Identity: Goethe's Novels and the Enigmatic Self* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984) explores “the role that failure plays in the evolving reflexivity of the aspiring mind and its culmination in an autonomous sense of self-worth” (148). While Muenzer is right to point out the significance of failure in the novel, he argues that the letters ultimately allow Werther to achieve an autonomous sense of self-worth. However, he overlooks the sustained ambiguity of the novel. In the end, Werther's quest for self-worth—as well as his quest for moral freedom—remains unresolved.

⁵ The ambiguous and ultimately indeterminate position on the success or failure of Werther's attempt to achieve moral freedom through his suicide is even reflected in Goethe's writing two versions of the novel. The first, of 1774, is more passionate and immediate; the second, of 1787 (the version treated in this article) is more withdrawn in tone, and is more sympathetic to the Albert figure. Goethe's attempt to redress the balance of sympathies makes matters more, rather than less, complex. Additionally, it is worth noting that this disquieting ambivalence is reflected in Goethe's uncomfortable relationship to the novel throughout his life: he never read from it in public, and his own responses to the Werther figure ranged from the censorious to the justificatory. Many critics overlook or refuse to accept the ambiguity so essential to Werther's portrayal. For example, W.H. Auden, who is of the opinion that Werther is an egocentric monster (and that Goethe intended us to see him that way) cites Werther's resignation as the preeminent example of his selfishness. In doing so, Auden overlooks the complexity and ambiguity of Werther's portrayal: while he is sometimes depicted egocentrically he is just as often depicted as compassionate, even selfless. Just as the novel resists taking a firm position on the success or failure of Werther's assertion of feelings through his suicide, it resists taking a definitive value-laden position on Werther's character. Even the name “Werther” is unusual as it implies a kind of “value” (“Wert”). Yet, what this value might be is unclear.

⁶ Goethe himself subscribed to a religion of nature that undoubtedly influenced that of Werther's. According to Nisbet, Goethe's pantheism may have been inspired by that of Spinoza's whose *Ethics* (1677) he had studied in 1774, the same year the first version of *Werther* appeared (Nisbet 222).

⁷ Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Burton Pike. (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 10. All translations are from this edition and indicated in parentheses.

⁸ Burton Pike notes an implicit contrast between Werther (“the weak artist”) and Goethe (“the strong artist”) in that Werther is unable to use art to bridge the gap between his self and the external world while Goethe is able to do so through the novel itself: “Goethe is very much in control of a novel about a character who spins increasingly out of control...The letters are constructed to make the feelings they present come alive.” See Burton Pike, Introduction to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Trans. Burton Pike (New York: Modern Library, 2004), x-xi.

⁹ Pike, Burton. Introduction to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Burton Pike. (New York: Modern Library, 2004)

¹⁰ Pike, viii

¹¹ Clark S. Muenzer, *Figures of Identity: Goethe’s Novels and the Enigmatic Self* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984), 19.

¹² Pike, xi

¹³ Of course, even Werther’s empathy with Ossian is ambiguous: The Songs of Ossian which Goethe translated into German from English were a hoax. Goethe was aware of their questionable authenticity which adds another level of ambiguity to Werther’s use of Ossian to understand himself. In some sense, Werther’s use of this literary work to celebrate his own failure to connect with the world—and to take reassurance in his failure—is predicated upon a work which is, in some sense, also illusory.

¹⁴ Lotte’s unique circumstances—being the oldest child in her family, temperamentally suited to child-rearing, and having a mother who died and left her in charge – encourage Werther to idealize her as a virgin mother. She, like the Virgin Mary, plays an intercessional role in her community; the dying Frau M., for example, wants Lotte by her side while she dies.

¹⁵ Goethe’s “editor’s” (“Herausgeber’s”) strange note about the omission of “several German authors” (presumably sentimental authors like Oliver Goldsmith, author of *The Vicar of Wakefield*) implies that those who share Lotte’s taste do not need the names of the authors since they will “feel it in his heart.” “No one else,” he claims, “needs to know it” (25). This suggests that he does not wish others who have not already encountered these sentimental novels to begin to read and be influenced by them. His attitude toward feeling (and, by extension, towards Werther) is reflected later in the cold, clinical tone with which he narrates Werther’s suicide.

¹⁶ As many commentators have registered, the image of the dancer as one with the dance constantly recurs in nineteenth-century European literature as the palpable expression of a desperately longed-for ontological wholeness: “We were delighted for a while with all the diverse interweaving of arms...To have the most charming person in my arms and fly around with her like lightning, so that everything around us vanished...” (26-7). The feeling of wholeness he experiences when he dances with Lotte (made possible by the reciprocity of feeling with her) is contrasted throughout the novel by the feeling of distance and fragmentation he feels when confronted with moral and social conventions. For example, he later writes of feeling like a spectator at a puppet theater: “I play along, or rather, I am played like a marionette and sometimes I grasp my neighbor by his wooden hand in recoil in horror” (25). Indeed, the trope of being “played” is helpful in thinking about Werther’s suicide: it occurs at the moment when he neither can nor will be played no more.

¹⁷ Lotte’s invocation of Klopstock in response to the thunderstorm probably refers to his famous poem *Die Frühlingsfeyer* that contained admiration of a thunderstorm.

¹⁸ Albert’s position on suicide recalls Kant’s who, in the *Lectures*, writes that “. . . the mention of suicide makes us shudder . . . Suicide is the most abominable of the vices which inspire dread and hate . . .” (Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963), 124).

¹⁹ The details of Werther’s suicide, including the inclusion of *Emilia Galotti*, were taken wholesale from the suicide of Goethe’s distant acquaintance Jerusalem. An explanation of its resonance would go far beyond the scope of this article.