

Die Leiden des jungen Werthers

Erste Fassung von 1774

J.W.Goethe

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What sentimental trash! The modern reader may find it hard, at least initially, to sympathize with the plight of the young Werther, who courts a girl, already betrothed, soon to get married. One would surmise that contemporaries would similarly have a hard time, but undeniably the novel set out an epidemic of suicides all over Europe, so it must have had a strong appeal to at least one section of the population, although of course, epidemics are in the nature of chain-reactions, and thus carry on, even when the initial impetus is gone. Nevertheless it is a period piece to be enjoyed due partly to the slightly old-fashioned diction and partly to the glimpses it gives of civilized society of the late 18th century.

The book was written, in haste, by a young Goethe. Whether he himself had had a similar experience to that of his supposed *alter ego* and been able to transcend himself by fictionalizing his trauma, is a matter of speculation. It is written in a sentimental style, which no doubt was rather fashionable at the time. The extended quotes from Ossian at the end, provide a clue to the general atmosphere in which it was conceived. Were women so chaste, and young men so physically constrained at the time? Was it possible to sublimate gross animal desires, no matter how strong and natural, to such idealized poetry? Why not? Can it not be done today?

It is a novel written mostly in the form of letters. This was a common fictional form of that century, and one likes to think, reflecting the preponderance of serious epistolary exchanges among the educated. Still one is rather taken aback by the extensive reporting, including snatches of conversation and dramatization of scenes. Of course then even more than now, the distinction between communication and diary, was fluid. The form has its advantages. It allows an almost telegraphic development of plot and leaves a comfortable space in which the reader's imagination is allowed to roam around. The young Werther seems to be a man of leisure. An enviable, if in the longer run somewhat unsatisfying state. He has apart from the cultivation of his sentiments an interest in sketching and drawing, and much of the text of his letters evokes landscapes by a Caspar David Friedrich. Yet the lasting impression of the novel is less that of majestic oil-paintings than old-fashioned copper-plates to adorn the walls, nostalgic pointers to an epoch for ever gone. An epoch of stiff servants, fragile tones emanating from harpsichords, the rustle of velvet, the smell of damp periwigs, and when courtship dancing was still a refined social amusement.

There is a climax, masterly done. The end is inevitable, and chance forces the hand of Lotte, the object of not such an obscure desire, to relay the pistol with which he will end his life. He blows his brains out by a well-aimed shot through his eye. But the young body is strong enough to live on until the next day, still breathing while life is slowly ebbing away. What a waste! What a waste of youth and promise. A waste which less than 150

years later would be undertaken on an industrial mass scale.

Goethe did not blow his brains out, he went on to live for almost another six decades. Whom would the German *Geist* have chosen, had he gone the way of his protagonist?

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