‘My Bane, My Antidote’: Love, lost and liebestod in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

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When *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was published in 1774 it became the first – and since unparalleled – example of what would later become known as ‘the confessional’ form. Following in its footsteps were such classics as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782), Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1822) and James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). With the exception of Hogg’s gothic masterpiece, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was similar to its successors in its celebrated use of autobiographical and biographical details. Although Goethe would later shun *Werther* in his official autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, the novel achieved a ‘cult’ status among its readership, not only for its ‘kiss and tell’ structure but, more importantly, for its candid approach to suicide. However, after being accused of initiating an epidemic of copycat suicides across Europe, the *Werther* fever fast became *Werther*gate, and the novel was subsequently banned in Italy, Germany and Denmark. Nonetheless, whilst some evidently thought the novel morally corrupt, others have argued that *Werther* successfully taught generations of readers to value spontaneous and intense emotions if, at the same time, to fear and distrust their effects, a claim which this essay seeks to address. The edition of *Werther* referred to throughout, is the translation by Michael Hulse, published by Penguin Classics in 1989. If what Hulse says in his introduction is true, that ‘*Werther* has often been translated into English, but it seems since the first fever of the 1780s it has not been very much read’ (19), then perhaps, following the recent spate of suicides among the young community of Bridgend, South Wales, the time has come for Goethe’s novel to once again take precedence.

Before one can begin to understand how *Werther* ‘taught generations of readers both to value spontaneous and intense emotions and to fear and distrust their effects’, one must firstly appreciate its production as being the forebear of a short-lived1 but prolific literary movement called ‘Sturm und Drang’ (‘Storm and Stress’),2 being an ‘expression of a new irrationalism’ (Gray 1967, 49), which was a reaction against the mainstream ideas of the Enlightenment. In striving to summarise the revolutionary concepts of the ‘Sturm und Drang’ circle, I will demonstrate a close reading of Goethe’s novel whilst endeavouring to display how its features,
especially those which could be defined as quintessentially Romantic (or pre-Romantic), could succeed in convincing the general readership to embrace a more passionate, sensory experience of nature - and ultimately of God – and to reject the rigid epistemology churned out by the *Aufklärung*. Finally, I will address the novel’s potential to encourage a ‘fear and distrust’ of these effects by highlighting significant parts of the novel which are seemingly implicit of Gothic conventions.

It could be said that *Werther* is unequivocally a ‘Sturm und Drang’ novel, even if Goethe was not always a ‘Sturmer und Dranger’ (Gray 1967, 9). Despite Ronald Gray’s assertion that Goethe ‘had scarcely intended Werther to be taken as a model in all his deeds and moods … He had meant to write a novel … not a desirable way of life …’ (*ibid*, 48), it would be an injustice to the movement as a whole not to acknowledge his novel as a noteworthy antecedent to the movement’s early pre-meditations. Indeed from Gray’s statement, one would have to question the very ‘value’ of ‘spontaneous and intense emotions’, if their passionate embrace is not intended to portray a ‘desirable way of life’, for how else would one define valuable other than that which serves a purpose significantly advantageous to our current situation? Yet, the crucial concept for Johann Georg Hamann – a significant contributor to Sturm und Drang’s aesthetical and philosophical exploration – is the experience of God’s revelation through the embrace of nature, propagated by recognition of ‘the independent importance of the non-rational … The passions, emotions and senses’ and a ‘total rejection of the rationalistic tradition’ or Enlightenment (Wessell 1969, 433). Nature then – the ‘signs and expressions’ from God (437) – requires interpretation by man, and ultimately man’s ‘awe-inspiring encounter with nature and God’ (439) must be reflected entirely and devotedly in the work of art or literature. On the 10 May 1771 (*Werther* 26-27), Werther divulges his first ‘real’ experience of nature in all its splendour; the ‘impenetrable darkness’ of the forest and the ‘long grass by the tumbling brook’ (26) (my emphases), noting the significance of nature being in its pure and unkempt form, at liberty from the manacles of civilisation and ‘the restrictions that are placed on the active, inquiring energies of Man …’ (30). Werther further goes on to examine nature ‘close to the earth’, deliberately drawing attention to the world below our feet, ‘the teeming of the little world among the stalks’ and ‘the countless indescribable forms of the grubs and flies’, producing an effectively seducing subversion of the time-honoured Romantic theme of the grand and the
sublime, reminding us that further from the earth does not necessarily constitute ‘closer to the heart’ (27).

But what do spontaneous and intense emotions have to offer? And what does ‘Sturm und Drang’ promise to deliver? Some might say that the prospect of becoming a genius or ‘Genie’ – the ability to ‘experience the immediate as real …’ (Wessell 1969, 436) arising from passionate experience – is considerably desirable. Who could resist the title of ‘untutored genius, educated in passion and feeling’ (Leidner, 180)? Who could shake their head at the crown of Werther’s so called ‘lauded demi-God’ (Werther 105), the potential to ‘perceive where it is all leading’ and ‘create a world from within for himself, and be happy because he is a man’ (31)? This bearing in mind the fact that Werther assigns the principal reason for his sorrows as being because he has ‘lost the sole pleasure in my life, that sacred and inspiring power to create new worlds about me…’ (98).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who at the time was already promulgating many revolutionary concepts concerning the relationship between man and Nature, states in The Social Contract and Discourses (1761) that the passions ‘originate in our wants, and their progress depends on that of our knowledge; for we cannot desire or fear anything, except from the idea we have of it, or from the simple impulse of nature’ (171). Furthermore, Rousseau states that ‘we desire knowledge only because we wish to enjoy’ (171). Therefore from this perspective, it could be said that we value these passions or spontaneous and intense emotions because they originate in our simplest desires and are propagated by knowledge gathered from corporeal nature – the world around us. This desire for knowledge is also, therefore, a desire for a passionate experience.

Yet, Werther also makes it apparent on 10 May that revelation, this ‘presence of the Almighty’, ‘the breath of the All-loving’ (Werther 26-27), even for all its epistemological insights, is not without its predicaments. It is well for Hamann to declare that man’s experience of nature and God should be expressed devotedly in words or art, but how exactly does one go about this? Werther challenges Hamann’s claims by lamenting on the ‘longing’ he is filled with at his inability to express what he has encountered. He bewails his powerlessness or incapability to ‘breathe onto paper in all its fullness and warmth what is so alive in’ him: ‘I have never felt
happier, and my feelings for Nature, down to tiny pebbles and blades of grass, have never been so full and acute, and yet – I do not know how to express myself …’ (Werther 55). It seems that, despite all that is promised from this experience with God, one must ask how exactly this experience can be expressed in art if the greatest painter ‘in these moments’ could ‘not draw now, not a single line’? (26-27) Touching upon this notion directly in Dichtung und Wahrheit, Goethe states:

If, as they say, the greatest happiness is to be found in longing, and if true longing must always be directed to something unattainable, then everything conspired to make the youth whose fortunes we are following the happiest mortal on earth. His affection for a woman who was already promised to someone else, his efforts to make masterpieces of foreign literature a part of our own, and his own, and his endeavours to capture Nature not only in words but also with a pencil and brush, albeit without any proper technique: any of these would have been sufficient to swell his heart and weigh upon his breast (quoted by Hulse in Werther 7-8).

As a result, it could be said that Werther’s inability to express his experience of nature is what ultimately propels him to his catastrophic destruction. Poignantly dwelling on this very fact, Werther compels us to ‘Consider a man confined within his bounds, influenced by impressions, beset by ideas, till one day a growing passion overthrows his contemplative composure and destroys him’ (62). Yet whether this ‘growing passion’ is instigated by his experience of nature is another matter entirely. For towards the end of the novel Werther’s experience of Lotte is consistently defined in a way significantly similar to that of his experience with nature: ‘What kind of man would merely like Lotte, and not have all his senses and feelings dominated by her!’ (51), and on recalling her favourite ode, Werther says he is ‘lost in the sensations that flooded him’ (43). Lotte is distinctively portrayed as a naturally divine entity, experienced purely through the senses and the soul, but, more importantly, in description Werther assigns her power over him in terms exclusive to the immediate senses, the passions and the emotions. However, just as he feels unable to express his experience of nature in art, similarly he is unable to express his love for Lotte in fidelity. In declaring that he is ‘sacrificing’ himself (116), that ‘one of us three
must go’ (117), it is hard to discern any other plausible reason for his tragic exit other than to attribute his actions to insanity or madness.

What does it mean then, to fear and distrust? If distrust constitutes a type of fear, or contributes significantly to its effect, does this suggest that fear is essentially a personal experience, so that something that might seem trustworthy could, nevertheless, instil a sense of fear? Evidently however, there are some things which are frightening for everybody and whether we trust it or not, Werther is undoubtedly a book to be feared. Behind the smoke and mirrors of Empfindsamkeit and pre-Romantic sensibility, it inherently bears the hallmarks of a truly Gothic novel: premonitions, possessions, demons and suicide. Indeed, even from the editor’s opening note, we are met with an ominous vanguard of the novel’s looming Gothic tropes: ‘You cannot deny your admiration and love … nor your tears at his fate … And you, good soul, who feel a compulsive longing such as his … let this little book be your friend whenever through fate or through your own fault you can find no closer companion’ (23). Here, explicit suggestions of ‘compulsive’, undeniable emotions confront us with the unhomely quarters of voodoo and the black arts, mass hypnosis, or even anxieties about dystopian mechanic uniformity. Even anthropomorphically, the book could equally be described as the advantageous practitioner of these maledictions as well as a ‘friend’ when one has ‘no closer companion’.

However, this trend of Gothic conventions continues, and some critics have duly divided the novel into two distinct parts, with Book One considered the joys of Werther, and Book Two subsequently viewed as the sorrows, such is the emotional change in the man unequivocally revealed over the course of the entire novel. Christian Kestner even went so far as to say that each Book biographically represents a different man, noting ‘plainly that in the first part of the novel Werther was Goethe, and in the second [Karl] Jerusalem’ (11). Consequently, it could be said that the novel’s narrative is explicitly implicative of archetypal Gothic doubling, with each distinct Book corresponding to respective alter-egos. Werther himself often refers to his experience as being situated amid one of two emotional extremes, ‘from sorrow to excessive joy, from sweet melancholy to destructive passion’ (Werther 28). Furthermore, Lotte – in recollection of the novels she has read as a child – remembers nothing more satisfying than sharing with her ‘whole heart in Miss Jenny’s happiness and sorrows’ (39, my emphases). Again, prior to
Werther’s heated discussion with young Friederike, he reveals to us that ‘the talk was of the joys and sorrows of the world …’ (47, my emphases). And finally, vindicating the limits of human nature, Werther explains that it ‘can take joys, sorrows and pain up to a certain point, but is annihilated once the threshold is crossed’ (62, my emphases), placing further importance on the established foundations of these binary oppositions.

Yet the stark contrast evoked from Werther’s downward spiral, though explicitly paralleled with the much debated change in biographical interpretation, is marked more in the man himself than in any mimetic correlations. What strikes Werther the most and, in fact, what possibly strikes the reader above all, is not the sanguinary cries for ‘eternal freedom’ (83), or even the clinically indomitable tragedy which ends it all, but the uncanny appearance of a new yet familiar man who seemingly appears – if not in name or face, certainly in mind and manner – to expressively be the polar opposite of his absent predecessor. The editor reveals to us that sorrow ‘struck ever deeper roots in Werther’s soul, had taken a tighter hold, and had gradually affected his entire being’ (106, my emphases), validating his transformation as one implicitly concerned with transmutation and conventional doubling. Our attention is now turned towards Werther’s ‘… other powers lying dormant … mouldering in disuse …’ (28), of which he reminded himself ‘must needs be kept carefully concealed’ (29). Occasionally the hidden Werther is momentarily uncovered, and these brief anachronisms serve as a further chilling reminder of the importance of doubling in Werther’s tragedy. ‘Did it really have to be like this? – that the source of Man’s contentment becomes the source of his misery?’ (65) ‘No, not the blame! – It is enough that the source of my wretchedness lies within myself, as the source of all my joy once did’ (98). It could be said that, much like the body of Jekyll and Hyde serving as both the source of good and evil in Stephenson’s classic Gothic tale The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Werther’s heart serves as both the source of his joys and his sorrows. Ultimately however, neither his joys nor his sorrows can have free rein, and this could go some way to explaining Werther’s reference to his ‘turbulent…changeably unquiet heart’ (28), even suggesting that his inability to be just is tearing his ‘very heart in two’ (110) and that the ‘evil demon’ possessing him ‘threatens to tear his heart asunder!’ (111).
Finally, like any good Gothic novel, it is difficult to address Werther’s fear provoking effects without considering its cultural impact. Surrounding the novel since its publication is the myth of the ‘Werther effect’; reported cases of copy-cat suicides, attributed to the ‘influence of suggestion’ as David P. Phillips concisely puts it in his informative case study (1974), all leading to the novel’s widespread condemnation – and even banning – in countries such as Italy and Denmark. All this without a single valid reason to suggest why – even at the time of its immediate publication – the ‘world’s most famous novel of self-pity’ could even persuade its readers to accommodate the mere thought of imitating Werther’s self-destruction, never mind strike its readers dead before they could even turn the last page (as some early reviews of the novel would have you believe). Yet Werther’s metanarrative is just as important as its narrative when it comes to evoking fear in its readers, and it is these tales compounding the narrative and consistently blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, which place the novel firmly in the realm of the uncanny. However, it would seem that labelling the novel dangerous, as so many critics already have, is not to raise awareness of its precarious nature but to further establish a sense of fear surrounding it. For how else is one supposed to approach a novel that is said to have instigated numerous well documented copycat suicides? Can we ever really be sure that the next time we read the testaments of Werther’s horrific demise; we aren’t going to suffer a similar fate?

Notes

1. ‘…the whole Sturm und Drang movement is not to last for very long’ (Friedenthal 1993, 133).

2. ‘…the so called Storm and Stress period’ (Wessell 1969, 433).

3. German Enlightenment – ‘…the very vanguard of the Aufklärung, the attempt to establish the authority of reason in all walks of life…’ (Guyer 1992, 29).

4. ‘…he [Goethe] felt later on that “Sturm und Drang” had brought him to the brink of insanity’ (Gray, 10). ‘He [Goethe] dons the garb of Sturm und Drang…’ (Friedenthal 1993, 138).

5. ‘Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) made an important contribution to this movement [Storm and Stress], particularly in he field of aesthetics’ (Wessell 1969, 433).

7. ‘...images of melancholy had taken possession of him...’ (*Werther*, 107) ‘A wonderful serenity has taken possession of my entire soul...’ (26).

8. ‘Dear Wilhelm, I am in the condition that those wretches must have been in who were said to be possessed of an evil demon. Sometimes it takes hold of me: not any fear or desire, but an unfamiliar tumult within, which chokes me and threatens to tear my heart asunder! Alas, alas! – and then I go wandering amidst the terrible night-time scenes of a season that is so hostile to Man’ (*Werther*, 111).

9. ‘What the reader may forget at the end is that a great part of the first book could be justly called, like Nicolai’s parody, “The Joys of Young Werther”’ (Feuerlich 1978, 486).

10. ‘Despite the words counselling the reader who felt as Werther did to ‘draw comfort’ from his sorrows, the book remained dangerous...’ (Gray 1967, 48). ‘The man [Philipp Seidel] still maintains that *Werther* is a dangerous book’ (Friedenthal 1993, 130).

11. ‘Not only Werther’s blue coat and yellow breeches were imitated, but also his suicide...’ (Gray 1967, 48). ‘Seeing the disastrous consequences for so many readers, Goethe was inclined, when speaking in his old age, to agree with the Roman Catholic authorities who had banned the book in Italy’ (*ibid*, 48). ‘So long as Werther continued to be thought worthy of admiration, the effects Goethe deplored were likely to continue too’ (*ibid*, 48-49). ‘It is clear now, if it was not then, that Goethe had no firmly conceived intention of justifying and thereby encouraging suicide, however close he may have been at times to taking his own life’ (*ibid*, 49). ‘There was a Werther epidemic: *Werther* fever, a *Werther* fashion – young men dressed in blue tail coats and yellow waistcoats – *Werther* caricatures – *Werther* suicides’ (Friedenthal 1993, 128). See David P. Phillips’s article ‘The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect’ and the Introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Michael Hulse for further information regarding the effect the novel had on European culture both at the time and recently.
References / Bibliography


