THE IMPACT OF GOETHE'S WERTHER - THEN AND NOW

by

KATHARINA MOMMSEN

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About Professor Mommsen

Born in Berlin, Katharina Mommsen began her academic career at the age of 24 as a research fellow at the Academy of Sciences in her native city. She was educated at the Universities of Berlin, Freiburg, Mainz, and the Free University of Berlin. In 1956 Professor Mommsen received her Ph.D. (magna cum laude) from the University of Tübingen. Her active involvement in Goethe research at the academy of Sciences in East Berlin came to a sudden halt in 1961 when the Wall was built. In 1963 Professor Mommsen began her teaching career at the Free University of Berlin. She has held several guest professorships in Germany, Canada and the United States and has taken lecture tours in Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America. She has been a Professor of German Literature at Stanford University since 1974 and now holds the endowed Albert Guerard Chair of Literature.

Professor Mommsen has produced more than 100 publications, many of them about Goethe. She has explored the influence on Goethe of Arabian Nights together with Pre-Islamic Bedouin poetry. Since 1978 she has been the editor of Germanic Studies in America. Professor Mommsen has also been very active in professional organizations. From 1974-79 she served as a member of the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association of America, from 1975-80 she was Vice President of the International Association for Germanic Languages and Literature (IVG).

Preeminent as a Goethe scholar, her works include many other important names from the Pantheon of German literary greats, among them Herder, Schiller, Kleist, Büchner, Heine, Herwegh, Nietzsche, Fontane, Stefan George, Hofmannsthall, Thomas Mann, including the very modern Peter Handke, names ranging through all the literary genre and pivotal literary movements from the 18th to the 20th century.

Professor Mommsen has received numerous honors during her academic career and is listed in many prestigious reference books and registers, such as Who's Who, International Who's Who of Intellectuals, Men and Women of Distinction, Personalities of America, Foremost Women of the 20th Century, and many more. In 1976 she was the recipient of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, and was awarded the Liberal Arts Research Award of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in 1980. From 1980 on she has been a Corresponding Member of the Berliner Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft and the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung in Darmstadt. In 1985 the Federal Republic of Germany awarded her the prestigious Bundesverdienstkreuz I. Klasse—the Officers' Cross of the Order of Merit.
"THE IMPACT OF GOETHE'S WERTHER
——THEN AND NOW"

No other German novel ever achieved the huge and spontaneous success—not only in Germany, but in other countries as well—as did the Sufferings of Young Werther. The book shaped Goethe's image for the rest of his life. Even in old age, he was still known first and foremost as the author of Werther.

This novel is one of the few works of world literature for which we have detailed knowledge of the motives which inspired it. It is based on young Goethe's stay (May 25 - September 11, 1772) in Wetzlar, where he was working as a lawyer for the Reichskammergericht (Imperial Court). In Garbenheim near Wetzlar he found in Charlotte Buff and her fiancé Kestner the models for Lotte and Albert. In addition to this, there was the suicide of a young man named Jerusalem, whom Goethe had known for years and who had been unhappily in love with a married woman. Jerusalem died (October 30, 1772) in the very area where Goethe had stayed while he was in love, and Jerusalem had borrowed the pistol with which he shot himself from Lotte's fiancé Kestner. Upon Goethe's request, Kestner sent an exclusive report about the fatal event to the poet who had returned to his native city Frankfurt. While Lotte was to visit Goethe many years later in Weimar, Goethe avoided seeing Lotte and Kestner after the wedding. Yet all this alone would not have been sufficient motivation for Goethe to write Werther; there later came about almost a repetition of the constellation Goethe had escaped in September 1772. In early 1774 young Maximiliane von La Roche, toward whom Goethe was strongly inclined, married a man twenty years her senior, the Frankfurt merchant Peter A. Brentano. Soon after the marriage, Goethe retreated—stung by the husband's jealousy—and began to write Werther.

There was no long period of composition or careful reworking involved in Werther. The 24-year-old Goethe wrote Werther without any previous outline in the few weeks between February and May of 1774. Even the author was surprised that he did not have to change anything later, for, as he himself said: "I had written the little work rather unconsciously, like a sleepwalker." So Werther was an improvisation, a work of genius recognizable as such by all, and when the work "genius" was mentioned—a word just coming into fashion then—people thought first of the author of Werther.

"Genius," according to the 22-year-old Goethe, "is the ability to lift new ideas up from the depths." If we want to characterize the new ideas in Werther, we should first consider the importance it attaches to emotional life, an area which previously had been all but ignored. Emotion appeared as a reaction against the rules of rationalism, which
had hindered the possibility of true expression in European literature (and especially in German literature) for a long time. This emotion was accompanied by a free feeling for nature and a passionate sensitivity, which together brought about a release from the old era and signaled the beginning of a new one: "The Age of Sensibility."

Before *Werther*, the prose of even the best authors in Germany was rather dry and wooden and had a certain bureaucratic awkwardness about it. One might say that German prose was in a state of early senility, with little hope left for improvement. The "genius" in *Werther* thus lies not only in its new ideas, but also in its discovery of new means of expression and one can maintain that this work marks the beginning of modern German prose. The new breakthrough of emotion in *Werther* can be seen in Goethe's intense concentration on the portrayal of human passions, faults and weaknesses. Before this time, strong expressions of emotion and sensibility were acceptable only in connection with religion. It is true that *Werther*, too, is not lacking in religious touches; the language contains many biblical phrases and comparisons. Strains of pantheistic religiosity have also been found and there are passages in *Werther* reminding of Pietism as well, a movement for revival of piety—distinct from intellectual belief—in the Lutheran Church to which Goethe's family belonged. Nevertheless, *Werther* is not a religious book; it is secular in its main theme and in its point of view. The "sufferings" of young Werther are human sufferings, and religious subjects are included only in so far as these were part of the total human experience of the time. This becomes clear to us when we consider the content of the work.

Werther is in love with a woman who has been betrothed to someone else. For a while he visits Lotte every day and spends many happy hours with her. He realizes, however, that he must not steal the heart of another man's fiancée. On the advice of his friend Wilhelm, to whom he sends his letters, Werther leaves and takes a position at court. After many slights and irritations—some real, some imagined—which he experiences in this situation, Werther finds a welcome reason to resign his post in the scandalous incident in which he is expelled from an aristocratic gathering simply because he is a member of the middle class. A rather long stay with a prince who has befriended him proves just as negative. Werther really only goes along with him in the hope of being sent to war, for the prince is also a general. In judging this episode, we should not rely on lenient observer would find nothing but foolishness and insanity in this great and rational organization of the people.

On the other hand, Goethe does mention valid reasons for suicide which do not depend on overreaction. Here English political life offered him typical examples of many who had killed themselves after having been "exiled, driven away, held in prison or robbed of their gods." Finally, Goethe admits in his autobiography that he had also been infected by the current atmosphere of world-weariness and suicide and that he, too, had considered killing himself. Thus *Werther* reflects Goethe's personal concerns as well.

In his discussion of his own *Werther* period, Goethe also criticized English literature of the 18th century, because, here women are treated with contempt. For his part, Goethe wished to combat this contempt for women. And if we are to deal with the new ideas in his *Sufferings of Young Werther*, one of the foremost which should be mentioned is the new role played here by a woman. Lotte is not a mere object in a man's world but rather an independent personality. One may even say: Lotte stands between two men as the sole ideal human being. Werther with his melting heart is far too much on the side of sentiment, to such an extent
that his feelings undermine his vitality and finally destroy him completely. Albert, on the other hand, is totally on the side of reason, so much in fact, that it is perceived as a deficiency; at least, he is lacking part of Werther's wealth of feeling. Only in Lotte is there a good balance between the powers of reason and emotion. In addition, she is not merely the traditional housewife-mother type, but rather a very gifted person with a genuine affinity for poetry and music. Moreover, she possesses leadership qualities as no other character in the novel. Not only does she manage her own life resolutely and firmly, she also lovingly directs the life of her siblings; and in dangerous situations—such as in the storm during the ball—she encourages others by her brave example and presence of mind. Despite her youth, she knows how to comfort others, including the sick and old. It is remarkable that Goethe in the novel no longer leaves leadership to the man, in the traditional manner, but rather that he gives this trait to a young woman. Goethe has endowed Lotte with so many ideal qualities that both of the greatly differing men, as well as all of the other persons in the plot, rightfully look up to her. This was all quite unusual at that period in time, and it was certainly also this new role of a woman which contributed to Werther's sensational success with the public.

When we consider the novel as a whole, it becomes apparent that most of the book contains nothing other than the reflections of a hypersensitive soul, that fall under the headings Goethe sets up in the commentary on suicide in his autobiography. Even Werther's love for Lotte becomes an exaggerated passion which only serves to intensify his pathological condition. In its portrayal of overreaction, the work is a mirror of Goethe himself. He, too, exhibited a tendency to overreact, a personality trait that originated in his overly passionate temperament, which often proved dangerous for him. Goethe further shared with Werther an inclination toward a negative view of the world, toward protest against everything. But as a poet, Goethe could free himself of such dangerous attitudes, and he tells in his autobiography how happy and free he felt after writing Werther.

The story of Werther's sufferings lasts a year and a half (from May 4, 1771 to December 23, 1772). Slowly but surely his inner decline progresses. His mental state can be gauged at any time by his reading material: as long as he retains a healthy love of life, he carries Homer around in his pocket with him. In Homer he finds the originality, strength, clarity and healthiness of classical antiquity. As Werther's condition deteriorates toward the crisis-point, his dangerous mental state is reflected in the long passages he reads to Lotte from Ossian. The songs of Ossian appeared in 1762 and 1763, allegedly translated from Gaelic by James Macpherson, a Scottish poet. In reality, they were an ingenious forgery written by Macpherson himself. He had created these melancholy, sentimental nature lyrics from tiny fragments of Old Irish legendary ballads and claimed they were the work of the Gaelic hero and bard Ossian. Because they conformed to the sentimental "Weltschmerz" of the time and exemplified what was thought to be ancient poetry, The Songs of Ossian fooled even the most respected minds of an age which had become satiated with rationalistic literature, minds inspired not only to uncritical acceptance, but also to creative imitation. The German Ossian translation of 1768 immediately created a fashion in German literature for the shadowy, nocturnal and ghostly, and it brought about a certain fascination for death. Goethe himself translated passages from Ossian in 1771. The manner in which he integrated them into his novel represents not only a monument to the era of Ossian fanaticism, but it also indicates that the author should not be judged as totally identical with his sentimental hero. In 1829 a visitor from England, Henry Crabb Robinson, noted in his diary the following conversation with Goethe: "Something led him to speak of Ossian with contempt. I remarked: 'The taste for Ossian is to be ascribed to you in great measure. It was Werther that set the fashion.' Goethe smiled and said: 'That's partly true; but it was never perceived by the critics that Werther praised Homer while he retained his senses, and Ossian when he was going mad. But reviewers do not notice such things.'"

After Goethe's hero takes his life, another book is found open on his desk: Lessing's drama Emilia Galotti. (Goethe adopted the motif from Kestner's report about Jerusalem.) The heroine Emilia chooses death when she sees no other possibility of retaining her integrity. Werther thereby indicates that his death should likewise be interpreted in this light.

In a conversation almost fifty years after the composition of Werther, Goethe spoke of his own relationship to the book, remarking: "like the pelican," he had nurtured Werther with his "own heart's blood." The aging poet felt extremely uncomfortable when he talked about it, for he feared he might again be subject to that pathological condition which had given rise to the work in the first place. But he continues: "It would be terrible if each person did not have at least one epoch in his life when it seemed to him as though Werther had been written solely for him."

The book was the greatest success imaginable from the moment of its first appearance. There had been powerful sentimental epistolary novels before Goethe's Werther: Samuel Richardson had started the tradition in England with Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded (1740/41) and Clarissa (1747/48), followed by Jean Jacques Rousseau in France with his Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse (1761). Lively scenes from middle-class life could be found in the works of Goldsmith and Fielding. Rousseau had also depicted a great passion in La Nouvelle Héloïse. But in Werther, Goethe achieved a synthesis of the two elements—great passion and lively scenes from middle-class life—and this was new for Europe and revolutionary for Germany.

The style of the novel was wholly original: completely subjective, composed in a rhythmic prose with strong lyrical characteristics. All of the letters are written by the hero himself. Because there are no replies,
the letters take on nearly the character of diary entries, as though they were for the eyes of the hero alone. In any case, Goethe opened up with his novel the possibility of a new literary genre, that of the diary-novel, the most subjective of all forms of narrative prose. To the audience of the time, the language of Werther seemed like the language of life itself and not at all "literary." Young Goethe himself was of course responsible for this, for, as he reports in his autobiography, he had "breathed into the creation of Werther all of that fire which allows no differentiation between fiction and reality." This fire led to the uniqueness of Werther, but it also gave rise to many misunderstandings.

Goethe's alarm at the effect of the work was so deep that he published nothing of any length for over a decade thereafter. The public manifested a morbid excitement, quite appropriately referred to as "Werther-fever." They read the work with bleeding hearts, gushing tears and dizzy ecstasy. Werther soon became the most widely-read book after the Bible, and it worked its magic on all levels of society, "from the chambermaid to the princess, from the philosopher to the coachman," as a contemporary report states. Men and women viewed Werther and Lotte as their models. An authentic Werther-cult ensued. There were pilgrimages to the localities where the story took place, Wetzlar and Garbenheim. Porcelain and fans were decorated with scenes from Werther. A popular perfume of the day was called "Eau de Werther." The effect of the cult increased to the point that some young men imitated Werther's suicide. In 1775 the work was banned at the book-fair in Leipzig, and in Copenhagen in 1776 it was not even allowed to be printed.

One reflection of the extraordinary influence of Goethe's novel was the fashion of the so-called "Werther-costume." Goethe had dressed his character like Jerusalem used to dress: blue coat with brass buttons, yellow vest and pants, high boots with brown turned-back cuffs, a round felt hat, unpowdered hair—a fashion which had come to northern Germany from England and which was considered simple at the time, especially in contrast to the affectations of the rococo style. After Goethe had decked out Werther in such clothing, he himself wore the same outfit as his hero on a trip to Switzerland he undertook in 1775 with three aristocratic friends, and very soon the young nobles also followed suit. The Werther-costume became a fashion not only among young German intellectuals; shortly after Goethe's arrival at the court in Weimar in 1775, the young ruling duke adopted the style, as did the rest of the court. And a contemporary of the age reports that for those who could not afford a Werther-costume themselves, the duke had one made at his own expense.

A characteristic symptom of the revolutionary effect of Goethe's novel can be found in the fact that during a period when there still existed some dress codes for the members of the different social classes, we suddenly find representatives from the nobility and high aristocracy wishing to attire themselves like the middle class hero of a novel and his middle class author. Socially critical passages—such as the conflict with the nobility which results in Werther's resignation from his position at court—led aristocrats as well as burghers to reflect on the existing social order and ideology. The same can be said of Werther's relationship to the simple people. Socially, he belongs to those "of some status," who "always keep themselves at a cold distance from the common folk." Werther himself does not share this social arrogance. On the contrary, he feels drawn to the simple people. Yet for them, too, he remains an outsider, to be addressed as "mein Herr," and even if he is capable of feeling "the simple harmless joys" of the simple people, he must still carefully conceal his intellectual power from them. There is no bridge to these people either, for they must spend their entire difficult lives at work, earning no more than the bare minimum necessary for existence. The novel thus contained in its protest of social conditions of the 1770's abundant revolutionary fuel.

Many facts attest to the tremendous effect of the novel. Even in 1774, the year of the novel's appearance, Weygand, the first publisher of Werther, had to reprint the work several times. Further printings followed in 1775, at which time the first pirated versions also appeared, thereby making it impossible to account for all the numerous editions. The novel was soon translated into French and Italian. The first translation, which appeared in Milan, was completely bought up by the Bishop and the clergy of Milan in order that not a single copy reach the public. There followed translations into English, Russian, Dutch, Swedish and other European languages. Furthermore, a flood of commentaries on Werther appeared, and there were countless critiques, both positive, enthusiastic judgments and defenses and sharply polemical attacks, the most intense of which came from the orthodox theological camp. Passions ran high on Werther. The enormous interest in the novel also led to imitations and sequels to so-called Wertheriads, from the pens of both recognized and unknown authors, not all of whom were from German-speaking countries. In England, for example, a book soon appeared called Letters of Charlotte during her connexion with Werther; these English letters of Lotte were then translated into German and other languages. Many similar works were written which had little more in common with Goethe's Werther than their sentimentality. European Werther-fever also found expression in poetry: poems which revealed in bombastic style Lotte's feelings at Werther's grave and poems of consolation for Lotte in the voice of the late Werther himself. There also appeared on the market musical compositions alleged to be the songs Lotte had sung to her own piano accompaniment. We know that Werther affected even the lower social classes because of the survival of "Bänkelsänglerlieder," popular ballads performed at carnivals and open markets by a singer standing on a little bench (Bänkel); the singer pointed to pictures portraying the different phases of the story of "how Werther took his own life with a pistol shot. Told as a warning to all young people." Dramas depicting Werther's story as a serious bourgeois tragedy were produced on the German, French and English stages. They had titles like "Les malheurs de l'amour" or "Le Délire de l'amour" or
"Werther, a Tragedy." In addition to the serious dramas, there were comedies, parodies and farces which continued well into the 19th century. In Vienna in 1781 a ballet entitled "Werther's Meeting with Lottchen in Elysium" was staged with elaborate fireworks, and in the Royal Circus in London in 1809 there was a Werther harlequinade. The opera Werther by Massenet, first produced in 1886, is still known today. The 20th century has produced several film and television versions of Werther.

When Napoleon met Goethe in 1808, he confessed to the author that he had read Werther seven times. As General Bonaparte, he had even taken the book with him on his campaign to Egypt. And later on, when the Emperor of France was exiled at St. Helena, Goethe's Werther numbered among his books on the island.

The powerful effect of Werther, an effect that cut across all social barriers, can be largely explained by interpreting the work as the purest expression of the epoch. Tender sentimentality and lively enthusiasm for nature were present in the hearts and minds of the time and needed only a spark to set them off. Goethe emphasized that Werther did not cause an illness, but merely revealed the sickness hidden in young minds. Goethe was shocked when he realized that his book affected people killing themselves. He therefore warned against such imitation in a poem, written in 1775 Zu den Leiden des jungen Werther ("Jeder Jüngling sehnt sich so zu lieben, jedes Mädchen so geliebt zu sein..."), the concluding line of which states: "Therefore, be a man and do not follow me!" ("Sei ein Mann und folge mir nicht nach.")

Another historical factor which made it possible for Werther to seize like a fever a whole generation, a whole country, even a whole continent was that the middle class at this time was just beginning to understand and to exert its role in literature, especially in the novel. Thus literature took on the function of a secularized Holy Writ for the middle class and became a proclamation of the condition of man. At that time, books were the most important instruments of emancipation.

Many critics explain the enormous influence of Werther by seeing in the novel a precise expression of the intellectual-historical situation of the time. They place the work within the history of religious consciousness, within that process of secularization of Christian values which came to fulfillment in the religious life of the eighteenth century. The change through time of man's image of God, as reflected in the literature, offers us a key to the contemporary religious outlook; from a strict dogmatic belief in God, the change ran through the emotional experience of the Pietist movement and the rationalistic Deism of the Enlightenment to the pantheistic experience of God as identical with nature. Werther represents the final stage of this development; his love for Ossian mirrors his experience of the world as nature without a personal God. Werther's identification with the dying Christ shows how Christian symbols, even when stripped of their dogmatic content, can still be called upon to represent earthly life and death; pantheism gives these sacred signs totally new worldly meanings and thus completes their secularization. Werther's pantheistic religiosity appears in some of the most beautiful passages of the novel. At the beginning of the story, Werther's enthusiasm for nature is a source of almost boundless religious happiness (especially in the letter of May 10th, 1771). Only later, when Werther fails in all his attempts to control his own life, does his pantheistic religiosity seem not strong enough to protect him from suicide. Spinoza, the main representative of pantheism—and Goethe's favorite philosopher—had declared emphatically that it is a person's duty to preserve his life (suum esse conservare), because suicide is a crime against nature. When seen from another angle, especially with regard to the idea of unselfishness in love, Werther shows himself to be in agreement with Spinoza's ethics. With his renunciation, Werther is denying Spinoza's philosophy as well as the Bible's command: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife!"

From Goethe's point of view, Werther's inability to become a creative artist is among the causes of his failure, whereas the author himself had the possibility to overcome his emotional crisis by means of creativity. But Werther's tragedy does not belong to any one specific area of life—love, religion, art, learning, science, or society. Rather, it is the tragedy of a man who simply cannot find the will to live, not even in the richness of his own inner life. Werther comes into conflict with the ordained system of social, political and religious life and is destroyed by his inability to control his subjectivity and to lead himself to take decisive action. This individual with his rich emotional life is unable to fit into society; nor can he change himself in its image, so that he might at least live within its dictates. His tragic love for a woman he must renounce, his artistic impotence coupled with his highly developed sensitivity to experience, his rejection of an official career because of inflated ideas of effectiveness and influence, his social isolation in spite of his true love of people, his intellectual eccentricity in spite of his clear knowledge of what is right, his religious uprootedness despite a deep religious need—all these are merely facets of the same problem, the collision of endless striving and highest expectation with the limits of human existence.

After more than two hundred years, Werther still leaves a strong impression, although today's readers certainly react differently than did Goethe's contemporaries, who were totally overwhelmed by the volcanic confession of a young genius and the gripping story of unhappy love. How can we explain that the fate of a person who today would be called a fantasist still reaches people, touches them and moves them, in a period of history where external circumstances, political and social situations, the role of the church, and not least of all the role of deep pure sensitivity are hardly the same? Here we see the truth of another comment of Goethe's, namely, that Werther represents a constant factor in our being, for "prevented happiness, obstructed activity and unfulfilled desire are not the faults of a particular time, but rather of each individual person." This
remark suggests there is something of Werther within each one of us. And in this context, we cannot avoid the concept of frustration, that sigh of emptiness and paralysis which can lead to complete weariness with life.

Of course, a generation of readers will follow Werther's unhappy road more closely, more emotionally and more radically, the more it is itself caught up in the feeling of the inadequacies of life. Thus Werther appeals to the latent needs, yearnings, desires and hopes of such a generation, and also to their critical energy. We can surely see and understand Werther as a victim of the conflict between an unruly personality, whose imagination is unwilling to conform, and the obligatory regulated way of life. We can observe in him a young man suffering from his own compulsions. Today's reader can understand Werther's suffering as the suffering of the individual in his environment, his society and his period of history; he will see Werther as an individual who wants to remain true to his nature and his sensibility, and who therefore turns into himself, where he hopes to find his own world. Today's reader will find in Werther a rebel against the established order, against the soulless society of prestige and competition, and he will be able to sympathize with Werther's vision of a simpler life. Finally, today's reader will see in Werther's suicide not just the consequence of his individual failure but also a powerful and radical demonstration of protest and resistance.
The last meeting of Lotte and Werther
Painting by G. R. Ryley/Engraving by T. Ryder

Lotte handing the pistols to Werther's servant
Painting by Johann Heinrich Ramberg/Engraving by Francesco Bartolozzi
The Christopher Longest Lecture Series

The Christopher Longest Lectures Fund was established 4 March 1960 by the late Mrs. Ann Waller Reins Longest "in recognition of Dr. Longest's long and distinguished service to the University from 1908 to 1951." In the 1985-86 academic year, the University of Mississippi celebrated the Silver Anniversary of The Christopher Longest Lecture, honoring the many distinguished scholars who have visited its campus over the years. Dr. Richard B. Klein, current Chairman of the Department of Modern Languages, continues direction of this important series which began so notably under the direction of former Chairman and now Professor Emeritus, Dr. William E. Strickland, who chaired the Longest Committee from 1960 through 1981. The Committee wishes to thank Professor Mommsen for allowing the University of Mississippi to publish her lecture in monograph form.

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