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# Terminal Genius: Dimensions of Suffering in *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*

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related in *Absalom, Absalom!* hinges at several crucial points on the occurrence of incredibly unlikely coincidences. The ironic justice distinguishable in many of the events in *The Sound and the Fury* (although it exists concurrently, as one might expect of Faulkner, with much ironic injustice) does suggest, as Hunt observes, "a moral order of some kind, an order, Christian in many aspects, of retribution and compensation."<sup>19</sup> And a curious prophecy is fulfilled in *As I Lay Dying*. Cora recalls that Addie had said of Jewel, "He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life he will save me."<sup>20</sup> Jewel literally discharges the terms of this cryptic and unlikely-sounding prediction in rescuing Addie's rotting corpse first from the flooded Yoknapatawpha River and later from Gillespie's blazing barn. Darl seems to have inherited Addie's prescient abilities. Rossky notes that

Darl is the seer; his vision is beyond time — the largest in the book. Faulkner himself remarks that Darl, though mad, may "see more than the sane man," and repeatedly the novel confirms this view of Darl. Although he is not present, he can see Addie's death, and his vision is authenticated by Peabody's account; he knows Dewey Dell's secret and Jewel's true parentage. As Tull says: "It's like he had got into the inside of you, somehow. Like somehow you was looking at yourself and your doings outen his eyes."<sup>21</sup>

While this capitalizing on prophecy or coincidence may in some instances suggest merely that certain of Faulkner's characters believe in an innate oneness of being and experience rather than in any Divine intervention in human affairs, it is only Faulkner's more Christian characters, whether sympathetically or ironically portrayed, who believe in such a unity; his atheists do not. And in many ways Faulkner antithetically suggests that his fictional universe is not only whole and ordered but also fragmented and chaotic — at least in the eyes of those characters who lack faith. Faulkner is as relativistic here as in his implications concerning the nature of God; the world appears disjointed to those who do not believe it is unified, and it appears as one to those who do, just as there is no God for those whose faith is absent, while a God exists for those who think He does and intervenes in the lives of those who think He would in the ways they think He should.

<sup>19</sup>Hunt, p. 82.

<sup>20</sup>Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, p. 160.

<sup>21</sup>Rossky, p. 87. Robert Hemenway also discusses "Darl's clairvoyance" in "Enigmas of Being in *As I Lay Dying*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, XVI (Summer, 1970), 138.

#### TERMINAL GENIUS: DIMENSIONS OF SUFFERING IN *DIE LEIDEN DES JUNGEN WERTHER*

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It is difficult to imagine someone who would not like a character like Werther. He is young, talented, highly imaginative, and artistically inclined. He is generous, sensitive, and, above all, warm-hearted. For decades after the publication of the novel, Goethe was plagued by readers anxious to know about the "real" Werther. He was immediately, and after two hundred years still is, "sympatisch". Recent *Werther* scholarship has done much to illuminate the reasons for Werther's unhappiness and suicide. Klaus Scherpe saw in his sufferings the indicators of a new consciousness emerging against the restrictive blandness of bourgeois society.<sup>1</sup> More recently Ignace Feuerlicht has forged them into a plausible psychological disorder, which can be seen as ending necessarily in self-destruction.<sup>2</sup> But such contentions ignore or downplay significant ironic features of the work. Dirk van Maelsaeke admits there are ironic elements, and, agreeing with Welz, says this indicates Goethe's need to justify his own conformity to social and political realities in Weimar. Werther's "crime" is non-conformity, and the novel's later version signals Goethe's return to "the reactionary outlook of the late Enlightenment."<sup>3</sup>

I would like to consider some of Werther's seemingly innocuous character traits as they betray a plain concern with the problem of achieving immediacy of expression and experience. Reading the novel for signs of this concern, one discerns an ironic mind at work in its construction, and arrives at an interpretation relevant to other works of Goethe. Rather than revealing a discontinuity in the author's sympathies with his character, which van Maelsaeke finds expressed as self-contradiction in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*,<sup>4</sup> this ironic reading suggests that Goethe's position changed very little, if at all, over the years.

It is difficult to say what Werther's real talent is. His

mother wants him to become a civil servant; he is talented as a painter as well. But his real genius is the power of passionate sympathy. He is able immediately to fathom persons and circumstances which flatter and cajole his driving desire to experience nature without mediation, to permeate his own life and surroundings with the meaning of more substantial experiences. His first letter to Wilhelm demonstrates a concern for larger problems. He sees that a good deal of human suffering is caused by lingering over past misfortunes (May 4, 1771). Through his observation of nature he achieves a feeling of the presence of the omnipotent God. But despite the intensity of the experience, and his real need to recreate it in words, he is unable to do so. He very often interrupts his own thoughts with an exclamation of his frustration at his inability to convey to his friend that in which he so naturally and passionately participates.

This feature of his story is significant, for it is primarily in language, specifically in poetry, that Werther seeks adequate resonance for his phenomenal sympathies. He writes that Homer is, to his "unbalanced, unsteady heart", "ein Wiegengesang" (May 13, 1771). Besides reading Greek poetry, Werther imaginatively transforms his surroundings into the patriarchal society of the Old Testament. For Herder, Greek and Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, are more original languages. They are closer to the origins of language itself, and are thus closer to a genuine ontological origin. Throughout the novel, Werther's longings find authority and precedence in the unmediated world of the ancient poets, in the world of Homer and Ossian. He believes in the fundamental power of the language of more primitive peoples to capture fully the substance, meanings, and passions of experience.

Werther's talents as a painter are mentioned several times. One of his most satisfying experiences is painting the two young brothers before the barn (May 26, 1771). He

determines that in the future he will adhere only to nature. He later declares that poetry, too, must learn only from nature. The creativity he seeks is fundamental:

Ach könntest du das wieder ausdrücken  
 könntest du dem Papiere das einhauchen,  
 was so voll, so warm in dir lebt. (May 10, 1771)

It would then be a genuine inspiration, a creation *ex nihilo* through language, which finds its example in Scripture.

Werther believes himself privileged to the insight that the business of satisfying human needs, with which men exhaust their energies, is ultimately pointless. Even so, he can be happy in the knowledge that he is free to shed this existence at will (May 26, 1771). Since for Werther the full significance of one's existence is not readily attainable through ordinary enterprises, he is hesitant to commit himself to a professional position. The smallest foreseeable difficulty is an excuse to defer a decision. His observation of the lowest forms of animal life teaches him that nature's creatures are constantly at work against one another. After a short while in service in D-, he admits that this is equally true of human beings in society. In spite of his talents, he cannot make progress. The shifting hostilities and ambitions of those around him preclude any guarantee of success for just having made the effort. He lays the blame for his failure on others.

Werther falls in love with Lotte because the purposefulness which he sees in her opens to him a healthy, unambiguous, seemingly fulfilled experience of life. In spite of his protestation that attention to human needs is ultimately pointless, Werther is utterly taken by Lotte when he sees her feeding — not herself — but her siblings. What he imputes to her consciousness as she dances is what he himself longs for:

Siehst Du, sie ist so mit ganzem Herzen und mit ganzer Seele dabei, ihr ganzer Körper eine Harmonie, so sorglos, so unbefangen, als wenn sie sonst nichts dabei dächte, nichts empfände; und in dem Augenblicke gewiss schwindet alles ander vor ihr. (June 16, 1771)

Her allusion to poetry, the tearful "Klopstock!" touches in Werther a sympathetic chord and releases a flood of ecstatic tears. According to Herder, this sympathetic effect is one characteristic of language in its primal state: the power to awaken in the hearer similar physical sensations. Poetry, for Herder and Werther, still possesses this power. "Diese Seufzer, diese Töne sind Sprache: es gibt also eine Sprache der Empfindung, die unmittelbares Naturgesetz ist."<sup>5</sup> Lotte tells Werther that her favorite book is that in which she discovers her own world, itself not a paradise, but still a source of unspeakable happiness. This is ambiguous, but not for Werther, apparently.

Werther's own language flatters his sympathetic genius. He dislikes being interrupted after launching into a rhetorical discourse, even though he has been accused before of using a disjointed logic. He can not suffer the constant qualification of a statement in spite of its apparent rectitude. In the letter of August 12, 1771, Werther writes to Wilhelm that Albert is guilty of this, continuing "bis zuletzt gar nicht mehr an der Sache ist." Likewise, it is the envoy's persistent, petty improvements to Werther's style which antagonize him.

Albert sees in the story of the suicidal drowning the act of an ignorant, narrow mind, but for Werther this is an act of heroism. He deplores Albert's readiness to condemn such acts. Werther believes himself capable of discerning a different, more valid causality, and traces the girl's motives for himself. For Albert this is still not quite right, and Werther is upset. He has mistaken his powers of sympathy for understanding and reason.

It is with great care that Werther relates the final episodes concerning the murderous farmhand, even though he is painfully, despairingly aware that he can not express it adequately. He hardly dares compare himself with this simple unfortunate. Here, as throughout the book, Werther does nothing more than take Herder at his word. He is admitting a greater intensity of experience among primitive peoples (who survive in the peasantry) and affirming a distance or "fallenness" from this primitive source. He thinks the fallenness is caused by a lacuna in himself.

Werther stands before two possibilities: the first is that of action and the absolute uncertainty of achieving a lasting fulfillment; the second is that of passivity and the promise of immediacy through the effortless sympathies of poetry and his own genius. He suffers now because he discovers in nature and society an excess of experience which is incommensurate with his power to describe it. Early in the book he scoffs at his own desire to render his experiences in language:

... doch was soll Dichtung, Szene und Idylle? muss es denn immer gebosselt sein, wenn wir teil an einer Naturscheinung nehmen sollen? (May 30, 1771)

Near the end (October 10, 1772) he amazingly relies on a simple dash to express his feelings about Albert.

The sophistication of Werther's thought betrays itself in his awareness of his ruinous equivocation in this choice. Several times he laughs at his passion for Lotte, and also demystifies the futile attempt to experience nature in its immediacy (June 21, 1771). Unable to realize his longing for fulfillment with Lotte, unwilling to brave the uncertainty of decisive action, Werther remains in a state of psychic paralysis. He is not being driven to suicide, not even by himself; it will occur as the necessary consequence of believing that language in any form really does produce sympathetic sensations in others. When he realizes he has failed persistently to effect such sympathy through language, he believes himself incapable of eliciting sympathy at all. This is to him a sign that he can not survive:

Ach die Liebe, Freude, Wärme und Wonne, die ich nicht hinzubringe, wird mir der andere nicht geben, und mit einem ganzen Herzen voll Seligkeit werde ich den andern nicht beglücken, der kalt und kraftlos vor mir steht. (October 27, 1772)

In the absence of certainty and unmediated fulness of being, suffering itself becomes a condition of intensified experience. It is the nearest and most affordable substitute

<sup>1</sup>Klaus R. Scherpe, *Werther und Wertherwirkung: Zum Syndrom bürgerlicher Gesellschaftsordnung im 18. Jahrhundert* (Bad Homburg: Gehlen, 1970).

<sup>2</sup>Ignace Feuerlicht, "Werther's Suicide: Instinct, Reasons, Defence," *German Quarterly*, LI, 4 (November, 1978), 476-492.

<sup>3</sup>Dirk van Maelsaeke, "Experimentelle Romane der Goethezeit: Der Weimarer Werther, Stendhals *Le Rouge et le Noir* und Tiecks *William Lovell*," *Acta Germanica*, X (1977), 220.

<sup>4</sup>van Maelsaeke, p. 222.

<sup>5</sup>Johann Gottfried Herder, "Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache" in *Johann Gottfried Herder: "Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache." Texte, Materialien, Kommentar*, ed. Wolfgang Proß (München: Hanser, 1978), p. 10.

for the unfounded faith required for blind action. Ossian serves this purpose well. In Werther's last meeting with Lotte, as in his first, ancient poetry touches an instinctive chord of sympathy in each of them.

Goethe's own position on his character's problem is far from ambiguous. Werther has tried desperately to win access to unity and immediacy of being, and experiences only failure in his attempts to represent it. Werther shies away from action, but the two persons he admires most are paragons of self-overcoming energy. The narrative does begin with the decisive act of leaving his family and friends. But he abandons the dubious promise of fulfillment through deeds for the seductive promise of self-deluding presence. Passivity now means suffering. The point of departure for his self-destruction is the naive but decidedly conscious desire to believe that he will not be misunderstood. The final attempt to prove this correct is the *act* of suicide. That he should try to assert once and for all his freedom not to act through an act as decisive as

suicide is indeed ironic. That even this act will not be an unqualified success is inevitable. The intended decisive character of the act is lessened by his failure to do a good job of killing himself.

Werther is unaware that even Wilhelm might prove his early prediction that "missverstanden zu werden, ist das Schicksal von unsereinem" (May 17, 1771). Here the significance of the epistolary form becomes apparent. After his death, Werther's evocative, rhetorical language is assembled by an editor and made to say in spite of itself that Werther failed to be understood.

Poor Werther has searched and failed to find the answer to the question: How do we achieve immediacy of being? If we read this novel as an irony, we find that Goethe's response was only a counter-question: *Can* we achieve such immediacy? Perhaps Goethe believed it possible, but it seems likely now that it must have been done in spite of, not by virtue of, the Werther in him.

### SENSE AND TRANSCENDENCE IN EMERSON, THOREAU, AND WHITMAN

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American Transcendentalism was the most important intellectual movement to emerge in America in the mid-nineteenth century, and, as David Bowers pointed out some thirty years ago, "its vitalizing effect upon American art and literature and, indeed, upon the development of American democracy as a whole, remains unrivaled."<sup>1</sup> Because of the obvious importance of Transcendentalism, a multitude of scholars have written about its European and native sources, its cultural, social, and political effects, and its influence upon the writings of the five major writers of the American Renaissance, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville. Nevertheless, most of us will agree that the meaning of the term remains as elusive and problematic today as when it first gained circulation in America in the 1820's. One definitional difficulty arises, of course, from the inherent vagueness of the term itself. This was the obvious point of Hawthorne's satire in "The Celestial Railroad" when he portrayed the Giant Transcendentalist as a foggy, dusky miscreant having form, features, substance, and nature that "neither he for himself, nor anybody for him, has ever been able to describe."<sup>2</sup> Another less obvious difficulty, noted by Charles R. Crowe, stems from the fact that "in a very true sense there were almost as many Transcendentalisms as there were Transcendentalists."<sup>3</sup> This brief essay does not presume to offer any new or final definition of Transcendentalism; however, it does attempt to add new clarity and particularity to its meaning through a close examination of three passages in the writings of America's three foremost Transcendentalists: Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. The focus will be on the famous "transparent eyeball" passage in Emerson's *Nature*, the "Sounds" chapter of *Walden*, and Section Five of "Song of Myself," each of which records a transcendental experience and reveals many of the distinguishing features of its author's individual brand of Transcendentalism.

As is well known, Transcendentalism in America was inspired by dissatisfaction with the emotional and spiritual sterility of Unitarianism, a sterility attributed to the Unitarian acceptance of Lockean "sensationalism." In their attempt to renew the religious idealism of their own Puritan past, the American Transcendentalists turned to contemporary German philosophers, particularly Kant. As

Emerson explained in his famous lecture "The Transcendentalist," "the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them *Transcendental forms*."<sup>4</sup>

While Emerson and others drew upon Kant's formal philosophy, particularly its distinction between intuitive Reason with a capital R and empirical understanding, their system of thought had at its foundation spiritual sentiment rather than logic. As F. I. Carpenter has observed, "American Transcendentalism was primarily religious rather than philosophical," and "when Andrews Norton attacked Emerson's 'Divinity School Address,' he justly compared its sentiment to the earlier mysticism and emotionalism of Edwards."<sup>5</sup> For Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, the act of intuitive perception resulted in a mystical spiritual union between the material world, which included the finite self, and the infinite ideal world; between, in Emerson's terms, the NOT ME and the ME, NATURE and SOUL. This mystical union formed the center of the Transcendentalisms of all three writers, for the ecstasy accompanying it provided experiential confirmation of the validity of their views of man and nature. For each writer the mystical union and the act of intuitive perception initiating it were unique. Turning now to the three selected passages, it is necessary to examine this uniqueness.

What is most interesting in a comparison of the three selections is that in each, one of the five senses initiates the transcendental experience: for Emerson, sight; Thoreau, hearing; and Whitman, touch. Emerson's "transparent eyeball" passage appears in Part One of *Nature* and forms the climax of his introductory statements about the effect of natural objects upon the lover of nature, that is, upon one "whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other." "In the woods," he writes, "we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in