

THE CASE OF WERTHER AND THE INSTITUTION OF LITERATURE

Werther's Subjectivity

“How happy I am to be away!”¹ Ever since Goethe's young protagonist Werther opened his first letter to his friend Wilhelm with this statement, *being away* has become one of the key conditions for gaining subjectivity by objectifying oneself through writing.² Knowing oneself means to have succeeded in establishing a relation to oneself, and this complicated and difficult endeavor is not possible without a medium. Since Goethe's famous epistolary novel, this

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, trans. and ed. Stanley Corngold (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 5.

2. For a recent discussion of the novel's famous beginning, see Ansgar Mohnkern, “Woran leidet Werther eigentlich? Auch ein Beitrag zur Theorie des Romans,” in *Genuss und Qual: Przyjemność i cierpienie: Aufsätze und Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Grzegorz Jaskiewicz and Jan Wolski (Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2014), 21–34.

medium, in a completely new and emphatically modern sense, has carried the name *literature*.

In Western literary history, *The Sufferings of Young Werther* is known as the novel with which a new form of individuality finds literary expression. Goethe's *Werther* is not a traditional epistolary novel as were its famous predecessors, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie*; it does not rely on a dramatic structure; Werther's letters are not supposed to elicit communication. Instead, these letters offer a series of snapshots, momentary and discrete impressions of their author's emotional state and subjective experience. The addressee—whether Wilhelm or Lotte does not make a difference—seems a mere excuse for Werther's relentlessly exhibited self-obsession.

Thus, to be away is not only the reason for Werther's initial happiness but also, in a twofold sense, the condition for his confessional discourse. *Being away* creates the distance that makes it necessary to write letters, and it simultaneously establishes a perspective from which self-observation becomes possible. The form of the epistolary novel serves as a vehicle, translating the discourse of the self into a seemingly communicative structure and successfully turning the incomprehensible individual monad into an apparently readable subject for a contemporary audience.

The beginning of *Werther*, however, leaves its readers with more questions than answers. The speaker is unknown. No time and place are given. And there must have been some kind of individual history that is yet unknown. It has been argued that the novel begins by stating an absence,³ and thus it marks the impossible space from which the desired discourse of the self must originate. *Being away* at once highlights the possibility and the impossibility of the modern project of the auto-formation of the subject. It defines a condition of becoming rather than a particular place; it is a process in the course of which one is supposed to come to terms with oneself. That there is no happy ending for Werther could be understood according to the logic of Friedrich Schiller's antihero Franz

3. See Bernhard J. Dotzler, "Werthers Leser," *MLN* 114, no. 3 (1999): 445–470.

Moor a few years later: "Could respect for my person exist, when my person could only come into being through that for which it must be the condition?"⁴

Although Werther obviously fails on the level of the plot, he nevertheless succeeds in creating a discourse that is built on aesthetic expression rather than a language of reason. The readers of *Werther* did not relate to the protagonist by means of rational understanding but through empathy and identification. David Wellbery declared Werther to be the first romantic subject because he cannot be fully understood: Werther's speech renders subjectivity aesthetically but remains incomprehensible on the level of narrative discourse. That is why the novel cannot provide a final word for the moral or psychological understanding of the protagonist. Rather, it demonstrates the incommensurability of the two modes of discourse that it presents: the objective narrative of the editor and the emotional writing of the protagonist Werther.⁵ In the discrepancy between these two discursive levels, the novel puts forward one of the central problems of modernity: the attempts of individuals to find their own ground within themselves, without relying on the order of the exterior world.

In this regard, the novel *Werther* marks and negotiates a historical threshold. It attempts to come to terms with a new form of individuality that differs from premodern understandings of the individual that were based on a socially specified status. According to the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, the eighteenth century successfully established a concept of individuality that was no longer the result of socialization but was tied to the notion of transcendental subjectivity.⁶ Werther's struggle with the world results, at least partially, from his attempt to be a modern subject in a society that still upholds

4. Friedrich Schiller, *The Robbers*, trans. with an introduction by F. J. Lampert (London: Penguin, 1979), 34.

5. See David Wellbery, "Afterword to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*," in Goethe, *Werther*, 182–187.

6. See Niklas Luhmann, "Individuum, Individualität, Individualismus," *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 149–258.

the values of feudal hierarchy. Werther is introduced as a young man who tries not to be bothered by social boundaries, although his experiences make him painstakingly aware of them. Framed by the societal challenges of the late eighteenth century, the novel *Werther* negotiates the intrinsic value and worthiness (*Wert*) of the individual.⁷ In his letter of November 30, Werther shows evidence of this conflict: “I shall, I shall not come to my senses [Ich soll, ich soll nicht zu mir selbst kommen]! Wherever I turn, I encounter an apparition that destroys my composure!”⁸

Who Tells the Story of Young Werther?

On the level of narrative, a similar conflict is carried between the two discursive modes on which *Werther* operates. The first is what one is accustomed to call the literary mode: the emotional letters of the protagonist who learns to relate to himself through writing. The second is the narrative frame that appears to have made possible the narrative of the protagonist in the first place. On the one hand, therefore, we encounter an emphatic notion of literary discourse; on the other hand, we seem to be presented with a case in the sense in which Michel Foucault referred to casuistic discourse, as the documentary techniques by which the individual—since the end of the eighteenth century—is constituted as “an object of a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power.”⁹ But the novel does not take sides, or rather, it takes both sides. The editor appears twice in the novel, and his two different functions reveal a conflict that accompanied the novel’s perception since its first publication and that, until today, informs its scholarly reception: it embodies a historical shift away from the didactic mode of exemplarity toward a

7. See Dirk Kemper, *Ineffabile: Goethe und die Individualitätsproblematik der Moderne* (Munich: Fink Verlag, 2004), 73–112.

8. Goethe, *Werther*, 69; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Die Leiden des jungen Werther,” in *Werke 6: Romane und Novellen I*, ed. Erich Trunz (München: C. H. Beck, 1996), 88.

9. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 191.

representation of singularity.¹⁰ My discussion of *Werther* will be guided by this tension between exemplarity and singularity in the novel. I will show how this tension unfolds in the contemporary reception of the first version of the novel and how it influences Goethe's significant modifications for the second version of 1787, with which he reacts to the critical debate surrounding the novel's first publication.

The first appearance of the nameless editor in the 1774 version of *Werther* is easily overlooked, as it appears in the first edition on an unnumbered page and does not engage with the plot directly. It has the rhetorical function of emotionally preparing the reader for what is supposed to follow: "I have diligently collected everything I could discover about the story of poor Werther and set it before you here, knowing that you will thank me for it. You will not be able to withhold your admiration and love for his spirit and character or your tears for his fate. And you, good soul, who feels the same urgency as he, take comfort from his sufferings and let this

10. David Martyn has pointed out that such an interpretation must remain insufficient if it does not, at the same time, consider singularity itself just another variation of exemplarity. Following the contemporary reception of the novel from Lessing to Lenz, Blanckenburg, and Moritz, Martyn shows that the novel marks a historical transformation, not from exemplarity toward singularity, but "within the paradoxical dynamic of exemplarity itself." For Goethe's first novel, this means that "the more [its readers] insist on Werther's singularity, the more exemplary he becomes." (David Martyn, "The Temper of Exemplarity: Werther's Horse," in *Exemplarity and Singularity: Thinking in Particulars in Philosophy, Literature, and Law*, ed. Michèle Lowrie and Susanne Lüdemann [London: Routledge, 2015], 170.) Insofar as the novel maintains this tension between singularity and exemplarity without dissolving it, *Werther* must be understood as a case in the modern sense that furthermore embodies, as Susanne Lüdemann has put it, "the paradox structure of subjectivity in the bourgeois society itself." (Susanne Lüdemann, "Literarische Fallgeschichten: Schillers 'Verbrecher aus verllorener Ehre' und Kleists 'Michael Kohlhaas,'" in *Das Beispiel: Epistemologie des Exemplarischen*, ed. Jens Ruchatz, Stefan Willer, and Nicolas Pethes [Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007], 209.) For an in-depth discussion of exemplarity, from the rhetorical example to the exemplary function of the modern case, see Stefan Willer, Jens Ruchatz, and Nicolas Pethes, "Zur Systematik des Beispiels," in Ruchatz, Willer, and Pethes, *Das Beispiel*, 7–59; a discussion of the relation between case and example is included in Johannes Süßmann, "Einleitung: Perspektiven der Fallstudienforschung," in *Fallstudien: Theorie, Geschichte, Methode*, ed. Johannes Süßmann, Susanne Scholz, and Gisela Engel (Berlin: Trafo, 2007), 7–27.

little book be your friend if by fate or your own fault you can find none closer to you.”¹¹

Werther's life story is supposed to give comfort to those who suffer similar fates and are therefore susceptible to the sentimental language of his writing. With these editorial remarks, Werther's suffering is presented as an exemplary tale of a struggle that, although it is being experienced as a unique and individual fate by the protagonist, still provides its readers with a language suitable for the adequate expression of their own sufferings. *The Sufferings of Young Werther* has long figured as one of the most popular examples for the crisis of exemplarity at the end of the eighteenth century, not least because Werther himself is constantly searching for examples in which he can find some orientation for his own life.¹² In the famous letter of August 12, in which Werther reports his dispute with Albert on the justification of suicide, he refers in support of his claim of a “sickness to death,” to the story of a girl “who had recently been found in the water, dead,”¹³ and tells her story, which not only mirrors his own suffering but also foreshadows his own tragic fate. The story of a peasant boy, with whom Werther understandably sympathizes and whom Goethe added to the revised version of the novel from 1787, can be seen as another example and will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

The editor's first appearance frames Werther's story by emphasizing the potential to identify with the protagonist, but his second appearance creates a different relation to the reader.¹⁴ At a crucial

11. Goethe, *Werther*, 3.

12. Paul Fleming, for example, discusses this crisis of exemplarity by analyzing the tension between exemplarity and mediocrity in regard to Werther's artistic attempts that are not blessed with the spark of genius but do not let him accept an average bourgeois life either. (See Paul Fleming, *Exemplarity and Mediocrity: The Art of the Average from Bourgeois Tragedy to Realism* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009], 3–7.)

13. Goethe, *Werther*, 36, 37.

14. For an in-depth analysis of the editor in *Werther*, see Jürgen Nelles, “Werthers Herausgeber oder die Rekonstruktion der ‘Geschichte des armen Werthers,’” *Jahrbuch des freien deutschen Hochstifts* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1996), 1–37.

point in the novel, when Werther's emotional state rapidly worsens, the editor interrupts the stream of letters, addresses the reader directly, and takes over the narrative voice: "How devoutly I wish that enough documents in his own hand concerning the last remarkable days of our friend had been left to us so as to render it unnecessary for me to interpose my narrative in the sequence of remaining letters."¹⁵

As narrator, the editor is part of the text as a visible and active player in the novel's composition. It is now he who directs the reader's attention, he who interrupts not only the flow of letters but also the illusion of an intimate pact between the suffering protagonist and the susceptible reader. With this revelation, it dawns on the reader that from the very beginning, the apparently original journey of Werther had indeed been directed via some kind of outside force. With the appearance of the narrator as a figure of the text, the story of Werther is perceived differently. No longer are the readers in the position of accomplices who suffer with the protagonist, develop feelings of fear and pity, and passionately identify with him. Instead, they now take the perspective of an examining judge. It is here that Werther becomes a case to which the reader no longer relates by means of sympathy and compassion, but by approaching it from the perspective of a more general cognitive interest.¹⁶ The narrator ceases to rely solely on Werther's letters, but refers to witness reports that he gathered from Lotte, Albert, his servants, and others:

I have gone to great lengths to collect accurate reports from the lips of those in a position to be well acquainted with his history; it is a simple one, and all accounts of it are in agreement, barring a few insignificant details; it is only about the cast of mind of the persons closely involved that opinions differ and judgments diverge.

15. Goethe, *Werther*, 116.

16. See Marcus Krause, "Zu einer Poetologie literarischer Fallgeschichten," in *Fall—Fallgeschichte—Fallstudie: Theorie und Geschichte einer Wissensform*, ed. Susanne Düwell and Nicolas Pethes (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2014), 254; Rüdiger Campe, "Von Fall zu Fall: Goethes *Werther*, Büchners 'Lenz,'" in *Was der Fall ist: Casus und Lapsus*, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach and Michaela Ott (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014), 44.

What can we do but relate conscientiously all that we were able to glean after repeated efforts, intercalating the letters the departed left behind, never neglecting the slightest slip of paper we found, especially given the difficulty of discovering the truly genuine, the authentic motives behind even a single action when it is found among persons who are not of the common stamp.¹⁷

Not only does the representation of the life story of young Werther turn into an investigation that, given the novel's ending, has criminological dimensions, but the objective narrative of the editor also reframes and overwrites the initial "sympathetic" reading, when the letters were still the exclusive and unmediated material presented with an exemplary purpose.

It has been argued that the two discursive modes that intersect in Goethe's first novel stand for the historical transition from the traditional model of casuistry to a modern *thinking in cases*. The former presupposes a stable order of things as the common frame of reference while the latter connects the individual life story with a set of descriptive techniques.¹⁸ According to this argument, Werther expresses in his writing the prevailing model of what is considered to be human and he attempts to align his own position with already determined moral principles. Although this interpretation may explain Werther's constant references to the notion of man, it attributes the innovative trait of the novel exclusively to the framework of social institutions and overlooks the self-empowering quality of Werther's own writing. I argue that the two seemingly conflicting discursive modes of writing are two sides of the same coin. Although Werther's letters are driven by the demand to realize his self without any reference to an outside order, the editor's intervention gives the institutional perspective that constitutively provides for this illusion.

Thus, the narrator in *Werther* has a function similar to that of the Society of the Tower in Goethe's second novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, in which the two modes of discourse are already so intertwined that, following Friedrich Kittler's ingenious reading, the protagonist Wilhelm Meister can imagine himself as the

17. Goethe, *Werther*, 116.

18. See Krause, "Zu einer Poetologie literarischer Fallgeschichten," 254.

author of his own life, and his novel can become the archetype for the biographical form of the *Bildungsroman*.¹⁹ The Society of the Tower is the archive and the basic requirement of the novel, in which self-perception and public image correspond to one another and make it possible for Wilhelm to objectify his individual life by means of writing. In book eight of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* one encounters the discursive rules that the Society of the Tower inaugurates and the status of which, as again Kittler writes, must be considered literary.²⁰ Jarno explains in Goethe's novel: "We wanted to make our own observations, and establish our own archive of knowledge. That is how the various confessions arose, written sometimes by ourselves and sometimes by others, from which the records of apprenticeship were subsequently put together."²¹

The Tower anchors the form of the novel, registers its biographical originality, integrates it into an archive of universal complexity, and conveys the contingencies of life in a new form of recording, to which the novel is the poetic equivalent.²² In other words, the Tower represents the institutional framework that creates the conditions for the individual to claim authorship and gain sovereignty over his own life story.²³ Before he dares to report on his own life, Wilhelm

19. "Erst ein Leser und Schreiber des eigenen Lebens, wie Wilhelm Meister es ist, kann zwischen seinem Bild von ihm, dem Bild Anderer von ihm und seinem Bild vom Bild Anderer von ihm trennen. Das Aufschreibesystem der Sekundärsozialisation überführt mithin den Helden, den seine Primärsozialisation zum Individuum machte, in ein Individuum-unter-Individuen. Literarische Positivität aber hat das Individuum als Autor. Dem Leser Wilhelm Meister erlaubt die Trennung der verschiedenen Perspektiven, an seinen Lehrjahren eine Funktion Autorschaft zu statuieren." (Friedrich Kittler, "Über die Sozialisation Wilhelm Meisters," in *Dichtung als Sozialisationsspiel*, ed. Gerhard Kaiser and Friedrich A. Kittler [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978], 102.)

20. "Das paradoxe Tun des Turms . . . produziert eine neue Textsorte. Ihr Status ist literarisch." (Kittler, "Über die Sozialisation Wilhelm Meisters," 101.)

21. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, ed. and trans. Eric A. Blackwell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 336.

22. On the equivalence between institutional and poetological form in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, see Joseph Vogl, "Lebende Anstalt," in *Für Alle und Keinen: Lektüre, Schrift und Leben bei Nietzsche und Kafka*, ed. Friedrich Balke, Joseph Vogl, and Benno Wagner (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2008), 21–33.

23. In this regard, Goethe's novel can be understood as a first step toward the genesis of what Rüdiger Campe has described as the novel of the institution.

Meister requests to take a look into the Tower's recording of his "apprenticeship."²⁴

In contrast to Wilhelm Meister, Werther does not yet have access to his *files*. The biographical and institutional modes of discourse still confront each other as separate narrative entities that do not yet inform each other. What is at stake, then, is not just a new approach to the notion of individuality under the auspices of casuistry but, even more, it is the institutional status of literary discourse. Goethe's *Werther* turns into a case of literature because it claims that literature plays a constitutive role in the institutional framework for the presentation of cases.²⁵ The novel does this by maintaining the tension between the two discursive modes—that of Werther and that of the editor. *The Sufferings of Young Werther* emphasizes the incommensurability of literary narrative with the knowledge it provides; it stages the perspectives from which Werther can appear as a modern individual on the one hand, and as a case on the other.

Campe subsumes a number of novels from the early twentieth century under this term, among them Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten* and Kafka's novels *Der Proceß* and *Das Schloss*. He argues, however, that the novel of the institution had already been built into the *Bildungsroman* from its very beginning in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* in the form of the Society of the Tower. (See Rüdiger Campe, "Kafkas Institutionenroman: *Der Proceß*, *Das Schloss*," in *Gesetz: Ironie: Festschrift für Manfred Schneider*, ed. Rüdiger Campe and Michael Niehaus [Heidelberg: Synchron, 2004], 197–208.)

24. "Having reasoned with himself for some time, he finally decided to tell her as much as he knew about himself. She should get to know him as well as he knew her, and he began to work over his own life story; but it seemed so totally lacking in events of any significance, and anything he would have to report was so little to his advantage that more than once he was tempted to give up the whole idea. Finally he decided to ask Jarno for the scroll of his apprenticeship from the tower, and Jarno said this was just the right time. So Wilhelm got possession of it." (Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 309.)

25. Christiane Frey makes a similar argument when she writes: "Der Roman *Werther* kann also nicht nur als Fallgeschichte gelten, sondern er handelt von Fallgeschichten, die wiederum auf den Romanfall verweisen. Diese Logik, der der Roman hier zu folgen scheint, ist also durchaus kasuistisch zu nennen, wenn man darunter ein Denken in Fällen versteht." (Christiane Frey, "Ist das nicht der Fall der Krankheit? Der literarische Fall am Beispiel von Goethes *Werther*," *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 19 [2009]: 317–329.)

The Case of Literature

The frame of reference that guarantees the success of this operation is, to say it once again, literature. It is only by means of literary language that the question of identity finds a positive answer, and all other attempts to establish firm ground for Werther's project of self-realization are doomed to fail. The kind of individuality that Werther tries to accomplish is based on notions of uniqueness, singularity, and the conviction that the individual's relation to the world must be accomplished within that individual. Thus, Werther's search for identity can hardly rely on society.²⁶ But the other two options that Werther explores remain equally unsuccessful. His attempt to align himself with nature fails when he recognizes destruction as its primary principle and begins to understand that the price for being in accordance with nature eventually means not to be at all.²⁷ The most promising option—to overcome his conflicted

26. This is Niklas Luhmann's argument on modern individuality: "Hier konnte einerseits ein neuartiger politischer Moralismus einsetzen, der sich selbst das Recht zu allen Mitteln zuspricht. Als Reaktion darauf suchte die Restauration nach neuen Formen der Institutionalisierung von Freiheit, fast könnte man sagen: der Institutionalisierung von Individualität. Was 'Individuum' eigentlich heißt, mußte dabei politisch unbestimmt bleiben. Der Deutsche Idealismus liefert dafür die philosophische Formulierung: Das Individuum wird als einmaliges, einzigartiges, am Ich bewußt werdendes, als Mensch realisiertes Weltverhältnis begriffen; und Welt (oder soziale gesehen: Menschheit) ist eben das, was im Individuum 'selbsttätig' zur Darstellung gebracht wird. Seitdem ist es unmöglich (obwohl viele das nicht einsehen!), das Individuum als Teil eines Ganzen, als Teil der Gesellschaft aufzufassen. Was immer das Individuum aus sich selbst macht und wie immer Gesellschaft dabei mitspielt: es hat seinen Standort in sich selbst und außerhalb der Gesellschaft. Nichts anderes wird mit der Formel 'Subjekt' symbolisiert." (Luhmann, "Individuum, Individualität, Individualismus," 212.)

27. One hundred years later, the Goethe-reader Friedrich Nietzsche wrote about the desire that also guides Werther through his experience with nature: "'According to nature' you want to *live*? O you noble Stoics, what deceptive words these are! Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time; imagine indifference itself as a power—how *could* you *live* according to this indifference? Living—is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature? Is not living—estimating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different? And supposing your imperative 'live

self by making love the center of everything—must also fail because unconditional love requires self-abandonment.²⁸ Only literature appears as a successful guide for establishing a foundation for the project of subjectivity. The famous episode in which Werther and Lotte recognize each other as kindred spirits, merely by pronouncing the name of the author Klopstock, can be, and indeed has been, interpreted in this way.²⁹ The reference to *Emilia Galotti* at the end of the novel is further evidence that Goethe's *Werther* places itself in the context of literary discourse, although Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's bourgeois tragedy highlights the irreconcilable distance by which the novel separates itself from the literary tradition of tragedy. Werther is no longer a tragic hero, however much he likes to depict himself as such. He is not subject to a tragic fate from which there is no escape. Instead, Werther attempts to claim authorship over his own life under the conditions of a discursive network called literature. His letters are no longer deeds within a dramatic play that must end tragically, but testimonies of his innermost desires inspired by his readings of “my Homer” and *his* Ossian.³⁰

Friedrich Kittler has pointed out the important link between writing and reading for Werther as the modern hero who would

according to nature’ meant at bottom as much as ‘live according to life’—how could you *not* do that? Why make a principle of what you yourselves are and must be?” (Friedrich Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Modern Library, 2000], 205.)

28. For an in-depth discussion of Werther's attempts to correlate his self with society, nature, and love see Dirk von Petersdorff, “‘I Shall Not Come to My Senses!’ *Werther*, Goethe, and the Formation of Modern Subjectivity,” in Goethe, *Werther*, 202–217; Kemper, *Ineffabile*.

29. “We walked over to the window. Thunder rumbled in the distance, a splendid rain was falling on the land, and the most refreshing scent rose up to us in the fullness of a rush of warm air. She stood leaning on her elbows, her gaze penetrating the scene; she looked up at the sky and at me, I could see tears in her eyes, she put her hand on mine and said, Klopstock!—I immediately recalled the splendid ode that was in her thoughts, and I sank into the flood of feelings that she poured over me with this byword” (Goethe, *Werther*, 20). (For close scholarly analysis of this episode, see Richard Alewyn, “Klopstock!” *Euphorion* 73 [1979]: 357–364; and Friedrich A. Kittler, “Autorschaft und Liebe,” in *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. Friedrich A. Kittler [Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1980], 142–173.)

30. Goethe, *Werther*, 7.

claim authorship over the representation of his life by omitting the poet as a third agent.³¹ But this third agent is indeed still present in the form of the editor. In contrast to Wilhelm Meister, Werther is not a reader of his own story who has already learned to distinguish between his self-perception and others' perceptions of him. Self-observation is not one of Werther's strengths, in spite of his endless musings about his place in nature and society. To attribute consistency and continuity to Werther's life story, the novel requires an editor who collects what Werther writes in order to compare it to the reports of others. The "author function" has not yet completely developed;³² the discourse of the self does not yet master the knowledge it conveys. But the archives of institutions like the Society of the Tower in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* will be made up of texts like *The Sufferings of Young Werther* to teach heroes like Wilhelm Meister how to claim authorship for their own biographies.

It is well-known that initially Goethe's *Werther* had quite a different effect. Apparently, the editor was hardly recognized and readers instead identified almost unconditionally with their hero. "The publication triggered nothing short of a 'Werther-mania,'" Christiane Frey and David Martyn write: "Readers dressed like Werther, read what Werther reads, speaking like Werther in his signature emphatic and sentimental style; and, yes, in a few reported instances, purportedly went so far as to imitate suicide."³³ In his autobiography, *Poetry and Truth*, Goethe himself remembered the effect of the publication of his first novel:

The effect of this little book was great, indeed enormous, mainly because it struck at precisely the right moment. . . . One cannot require the public to receive an intellectual work intellectually. In fact, readers paid

31. See Kittler, "Autorschaft und Liebe," 152.

32. See Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion and Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1998), 205–222.

33. Christiane Frey and David Martyn, "Doubling Werther (1774/1787)," in Goethe, *Werther*, 218; an in-depth discussion of the effects of the publication of Goethe's *Werther* can be found in Martin Andree, *Wenn Texte töten: Über Werther, Medienwirkung und Mediengewalt* (Munich: Fink Verlag, 2006).

attention only to the subject matter, the content, something I'd experience with my friends; and along with this the old prejudice set in, arising from the dignity of a published book: that it must have a didactic purpose. But a true depiction does not have one. It does not condone, it does not condemn; it develops sentiments and actions as they follow from one another, and in so doing it illuminates and instructs.³⁴

Frey and Martyn have pointed out the revolutionary aspect of this statement, which denies that literature has a didactic purpose or fulfills a primarily moral function.³⁵ This does not mean, however, that the novel could not have a didactic effect, which for Goethe was made possible by the realistic depiction of young Werther's story and by the causality with which events and emotions arose from one another. But in fact, Goethe's *Werther* was not very successful in finding such informed readers. Instead of learning from Werther's story, his readers either identified with him and thus failed to establish an objective distance or they simply disapproved of the novel's lack of moral positioning against Werther's immoral decision to commit suicide. Both of these readings belong to the same order of discourse that expects literature to present exemplary heroes as models worth imitating. For *Werther*, a new audience had to be educated that would be able to read novels critically before the "intellectual work" could be received "intellectually."

Causality and Exemplarity (Blanckenburg)

This is one of the tasks that Friedrich von Blanckenburg set before himself in his 1775 review of Goethe's novel. Blanckenburg had published his book-length *Versuch über den Roman* in the very same year that *The Sufferings of Young Werther* appeared and he had found Goethe's novel in line with his theory of the genre that was still widely considered trivial and not worthy of serious aesthetic consideration. For Blanckenburg, the novel was not supposed to

34. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "From My Life: Poetry and Truth," in Goethe, *Werther*, 118.

35. Frey and Martyn, "Doubling Werther," 219.

be judged by the moral exemplarity of its characters, but by the causality with which the poet had linked actions and events. "At the least," he claims, "the novelist must show possible characters in the real world."³⁶ Blanckenburg argued that in real life the inner development of man interrelates with his outer circumstances, so that the novelist must present a tight-knit web of causes and effects.³⁷ The kinds of characters he envisioned for the novel were not supposed to be modeled after certain typical traits. The poet should rather "individualize his characters" to clearly attribute their actions and deeds to their individual features.³⁸

In Goethe's *Werther* Blanckenburg believes he has found an exemplary novel in light of his theory, and his review is meant as an extension and continuation of his *Versuch über den Roman*.³⁹ For Blanckenburg, *Werther* is an exemplary novel not because it presents an exemplary character worth imitating, but because it demonstrates the causal relations between the protagonist's inner constitution and his outer circumstances.⁴⁰ Goethe "wanted to give us the inner history of a man and set out to demonstrate how his fate arose from the basis of his individuality."⁴¹

Even Werther's suicide, as morally problematic as it may be, does not upset Blanckenburg. It is not in his interest to justify Werther and his deeds, but to discover "poetic truth."⁴² From the perspective of moral exemplarity, *The Sufferings of Young Werther* could hardly be seen as a praiseworthy piece of literature. From the perspective of narrative composition, however, the novel appears as an

36. Friedrich von Blanckenburg, *Versuch über den Roman: Faksimiledruck der Originalausgabe von 1774. Mit einem Nachwort von Eberhard Lämmert* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1965), 257.

37. See Blanckenburg, *Versuch*, 263–266.

38. See Blanckenburg, *Versuch*, 277.

39. See Robert Ellis Dye, "Blanckenburgs *Werther*-Rezeption," in *Goethezeit: Studien zur Erkenntnis und Rezeption Goethes und seiner Zeitgenossen (Festschrift für Stuart Atkins)*, ed. Gerhard Hoffmeister (Bern: Francke, 1981), 67.

40. See Martyn, "Temper of Exemplarity," 169–170.

41. Friedrich von Blanckenburg, "Die Leiden des jungen Werthers," in *Texte zur Romantheorie II (1732–1780), mit Anmerkungen, Nachwort und Bibliographie von Ernst Weber* (Munich: Fink Verlag, 1981), 396.

42. Blanckenburg, "Die Leiden," 403.

ideal work of art. “The poet,” Blanckenburg writes about Goethe, “only seen as a poet, has fulfilled his obligation by providing in this story an altogether poetic ideal, i.e. a perfectly intertwined and developing whole.”⁴³ Thus, for Blanckenburg it is the correlation of the presented events and circumstances with the emotions of the protagonist that lead to his final deed and make it comprehensible. He does not share the concern of all-too-eager defenders of moral standards that the novel could invite its readers to follow in Werther’s footsteps. Rather than perceiving the novel as running the risk of promoting suicide as a solution, Blanckenburg understands it as a case history in the modern sense. In his reading, Werther’s story does not reflect back on an already existing law of general moral validity and truth, but instead presents an individual case as a demonstration of possibility. The lesson one should draw from Werther’s life story, then, does not pertain to the realm of traditional casuistry and truth anymore, but to that of possibility and probability.

Blanckenburg specifically emphasizes the uniqueness and singularity of the novel’s events and keeps highlighting the individuality of the protagonist, but it is the causal motivation of the plot, the form of the novel, that lets him present the novel as an instructive example for young and future novelists, and *Werther* as a case from which one can derive useful insights into the human heart. As the novel illustrates the saddening path of young Werther, it teaches its readers to become attentive and alert observers of their fellow human beings. Indeed, Blanckenburg argues that Goethe’s novel is a practical pedagogical tool to foster awareness in parents and educators and to teach them how to better observe their children’s behavior and emotional development:

And parents, teachers, you who have children and subordinates in whom you observe this higher sensitivity develop, do not take the force from this tender soul to move forward and to be strengthened by practicing. Do not constrain this force! Do not kill it! But learn from poor Werther the path it can take; and learn, with the knowledge of its power over him, to guide it more effectively and securely. Who can be a better

43. Blanckenburg, “Die Leiden,” 427.

guide than those who know all the missteps? If you pay attention even to the tiniest movements, as you should, you will now become aware of the smallest disorientation and can detect the first step on the road to ruin.⁴⁴

Following Blanckenburg, Goethe's novel should not be evaluated according to the moral standards it conveys but in regard to the knowledge it provides. In his reading, *Werther* becomes a case by means of its form, which makes possible for the individual what Aristotle thought to be unfeasible: to become the object of knowledge. Indeed, Michel Foucault's definition of the modern case accurately applies to Blanckenburg's review of *Werther*: "The case is no longer, as in casuistry or jurisprudence, a set of circumstances defining an act and capable of modifying the application of a rule; it is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc."⁴⁵

But when literature does not content itself anymore with giving examples for morally good behavior, when it does not confine itself to evoking feelings of fear and pity, and instead presents individual cases as real occurrences in the world, a literary theory becomes necessary that teaches novelists how to write and readers what to make of that writing. This is the reason for Blanckenburg's request to add a lesson to general education on how to read the poets.⁴⁶ At the end of Blanckenburg's reading of Goethe's *Werther* as a case, one finds an appeal for literary education and literary theory, for which Blanckenburg himself had already provided the textbook with his *Versuch über den Roman*. Goethe's *Werther* and Blanckenburg's *Versuch über den Roman* not only appear in the same year of 1774, but in combination, they pave the way to a new understanding of literature as the framework in which individuality can be documented, objectified, and examined for real-world applications.

44. Blanckenburg, "Die Leiden," 438.

45. Foucault, *Discipline*, 191.

46. See Blanckenburg, "Die Leiden," 430.

A Psychological Case

There is no evidence that Goethe took notice of Blanckenburg's review. Considering his emphasis on the novel's intended realism in the passage from his autobiography quoted above, however, one can assume that he would have applauded Blanckenburg's discussion of his novel as an "intellectual" work of art. Blanckenburg responded to the agitated reception of the novel with a theory, but Goethe himself responded by means of literature. Since 1781, Goethe had considered revising his novel and he finally began to execute his plan in 1786 when his publisher Göschen planned an edition of his collected works with *Werther* as the first volume. As Hannelore Schlaffer has pointed out, it was by no means the development of his own poetic proficiency that spurred him on, but the desire to react to the public reception of his work.⁴⁷ Three main alterations contribute to a complete reorientation of the 1787 version of the novel. First, the charismatic idiom of Werther's letters is erased and replaced by the standard High German. Second, the editor now functions as a much more withdrawn, distanced, and omniscient narrator. And finally, Goethe has added the episode of the peasant boy whose story presages that of Werther, and whom his protagonist defends passionately against criminal charges. These three changes serve one main purpose: to distance the perspective of the narrative from that of the novel's characters in order to make it more difficult for the reader to identify with them. By further strengthening the position of the editor, Goethe transforms *Werther* into a psychological case, and Schlaffer thus concludes that the second version of the novel is effectively the cure for the Werther-disease that the first version had spread.⁴⁸

A psychological case requires a perspective that only the second version of the novel provides. In the 1774 version, the editor inter-

47. See Hannelore Schlaffer, "Leiden des jungen Werthers (Zweite Fassung)," in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens* (Münchner Ausgabe), Bd. 2.2., ed. Hannelore Schlaffer, Hans J. Becker, and Gerhard H. Müller (Munich: Hanser, 1987), 844.

48. See Schlaffer, "Leiden," 846.

rupts Werther's meditation at the climactic moment in which crisis leads to the decision of suicide: "Around this time, the decision to leave this world had developed in the soul of the young man."⁴⁹ Preceding this moment, the editor had reported the increasing distrust between Albert and Werther that also affects the trust of their beloved Lotte. Werther's decision to commit suicide, one must conclude, directly results from the development of the liaison with his married friends. As they are cited as witnesses for the editor's narrative, the events are described through their perspective. This changes in the version of 1787. If there had ever been any mistrust between Werther and Albert, the narrator does not leave any doubt that this was solely due to Werther's psychological condition:

Indignation and displeasure became more and more deeply rooted in Werther's soul, growing ever more tightly entangled and gradually taking possession of his entire being. The harmony of his mind was completely devastated, an internal heat and violence, which labored to confuse all his natural powers, produced the most repellent effects and finally left him with nothing but an exhaustion from which he sought to rise with even greater anxiety than when he had struggled with all the woes of his past. The dread in his heart sapped his remaining intellectual strength, his vivacity, his wit; he became a sorry companion, always more unhappy, and always more unfair the unhappier he grew.⁵⁰

By focusing on the internal life of the protagonist and choosing a more psychological perspective, the function of the editor's narrative changes in the novel in general. The editor's interference no longer appears as an interruption in which the internal meditation of Werther is confronted with the reports of witnesses; instead, the editor's narrative now appears as the continuation of a distanced reading of the letters, which was driven by a psychological interest from the very beginning. Instead of presenting Werther's decision for suicide as a sudden incident triggered by outer circumstances, the novel now depicts his story as the gradual development of his

49. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, section I, vol. 8: *Die Leiden des jungen Werther, Die Wahlverwandtschaften, Kleine Prosa, Epen*, ed. Waltraut Wiethölter (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), 208.

50. Goethe, *Werther*, 72.

psychological condition almost inexorably running toward the final deed of suicide.⁵¹ Not only does the second version of the novel disambiguate the story of Werther as a psychological case, it also deals with other cases that refer back to the case of the novel.⁵² To remove any doubt as to how the story of young Werther should be read, Goethe added the case of the peasant boy, with whom Werther identifies almost as unconditionally as the readers of the 1774 edition of the novel had identified with him. Werther mentions the peasant boy for the first time in his letter to Wilhelm of May 30, near the beginning of the novel. The boy who fell in love with the mature widow represents Werther's ideal of innocence, truth, and pure love: "Never in my life have I seen urgent desire and hot, ardent craving in such purity: indeed I can say, a purity such as I have never conceived or dreamed of. Do not scold me if I tell you that when I remember this innocence and truth, my innermost soul glows and that the image of his loyalty and tenderness pursues me everywhere and that, as if I myself had caught its fire, I yearn and languish."⁵³

More than a year later, the story finds a continuation. Werther, who had just returned to Wahlheim from his disastrous attempt to escape the unhappy situation caused by his feelings for Lotte, inquires about the peasant boy and learns that the story had taken an unfortunate turn. Driven by his love and an uncontrollably heightened desire, the boy had attempted to rape the widow, "to take her by force."⁵⁴ Following this incident, he was dismissed and replaced by another chap, to whom, as rumor has it, she would soon be married. Despite his violent behavior, Werther admires the boy even more enthusiastically for the untempered force of "this love, this loyalty, this passion" that was still alive in an "uncultivated"

51. I am following Rüdiger Campe's argument, who writes: "Die Erzählung ist nicht mehr durch den harten Takt des Falls und den Einschnitt der Tat zwischen Krise und Entschluss gekennzeichnet. Sie schildert stattdessen die fortlaufende Sequenz des Falls ab, die wesentlich eine sich zur Tat hin entwickelnde Geschichte ist." (Campe, "Von Fall zu Fall," 46.)

52. See Frey, "Ist das nicht," 321.

53. Goethe, *Werther*, 14.

54. Goethe, *Werther*, 60.

class of people where it had not yet been restrained by the restrictive forces of civilization.⁵⁵ What Werther here considers an expression of the most pristine inner life is otherwise called a criminal act.⁵⁶ It is this discrepancy that is further accentuated in the final episode of the case. Still madly in love with the widow, the boy murders her new boyfriend and alleged rival. Still convinced of the purity of his motives, Werther comes to the boy's defense and advocates for him: "He felt him to be so unlucky, found him so innocent even as a criminal, and put himself so completely in his place that he fully believed he could persuade others as well. He wished he were able to speak at once in the man's defense, the most vivid speech was already rushing to his lips."⁵⁷

It hardly comes as a surprise that Werther's commitment is not rewarded. His defense of the murderer, however, anticipates the debates about legal responsibility that will inform the judicial and criminological discussions of the nineteenth century by means of case narratives. But Werther does not approach his defense legally, just as he dismisses rhetorical speech altogether throughout the novel.⁵⁸ When he speaks for the boy, he speaks for himself. Although in telling young Werther's story the editor speaks for him, Werther speaks not only for the young boy but also, by proxy, for himself. The perspective of the narrator shows how identification and distance are being played against each other. The narrator can take the perspective of the individual Werther and in the next moment fall back into the anonymous position of a merely neutral

55. Goethe, *Werther*, 61.

56. Campe, "Von Fall zu Fall," 47.

57. Goethe, *Werther*, 74.

58. An example of Werther's dismissal of rhetoric can be found in the letter of May 26, where he rejects the idea of rules for artistic production that should solely be guided by nature: "Much can be said in favor of the rules, about the same that can be said in praise of bourgeois society. A man formed by them will never produce anything vapid or in poor taste, just as someone shaped by the laws and decorum can never become an unbearable neighbor or a notorious villain; on the other hand, say what you will, rules will destroy the true feeling of nature and the genuine expression thereof" (Goethe, *Werther*, 11). A few days later, in the letter of May 30, Werther points out that this "holds true for poetry as well" (Goethe, *Werther*, 13), which is then followed by the story of the peasant boy.

narrative mode. This is what distinguishes modern case narratives from mere moral examples: they tell individual life stories in such a way that they disclose the inner motivation behind actions while still guaranteeing a distance that makes it possible to integrate the story into a general system of knowledge. In the first version, one can already speak of *Werther* as a case; in the second version, the novel also shows the conditions necessary to narrate individual life stories as cases.

As Friedrich von Blanckenburg's reading of Goethe's novel shows, his contemporaries read *Werther* as more than a model worth imitating. The novel was also perceived as a case narrative by which observations could be made that could easily be deployed for educational purposes. Goethe's novel takes part in a pedagogical discourse that by the end of the eighteenth century had organized itself around experience and observation. The revisions Goethe made in the 1787 version in preparation for his collected works only underscore this affiliation. The change in perspective and the newly established sovereignty of the narrator document a new standard for the novelistic rendering of observations that had just been introduced by Karl Philipp Moritz in his psychological novel *Anton Reiser*. In fact, Goethe had met Moritz—the editor of the *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde*—in 1786 during his Italian journey, and a letter to his pen pal Charlotte von Stein from the same year gives evidence that he knew and admired the first books of Moritz's novel. We can confidently assume that the Roman conversations with Moritz and his reading of Moritz's novel influenced Goethe in the revisions of *The Sufferings of Young Werther* and were responsible for the psychological focus of the 1787 version. In contrast to Goethe's *Werther*, however, Moritz had placed his own novel explicitly in the context of empirical psychology and had based it on a rigorous regime of self-observation, which chapter 2 will examine more closely.