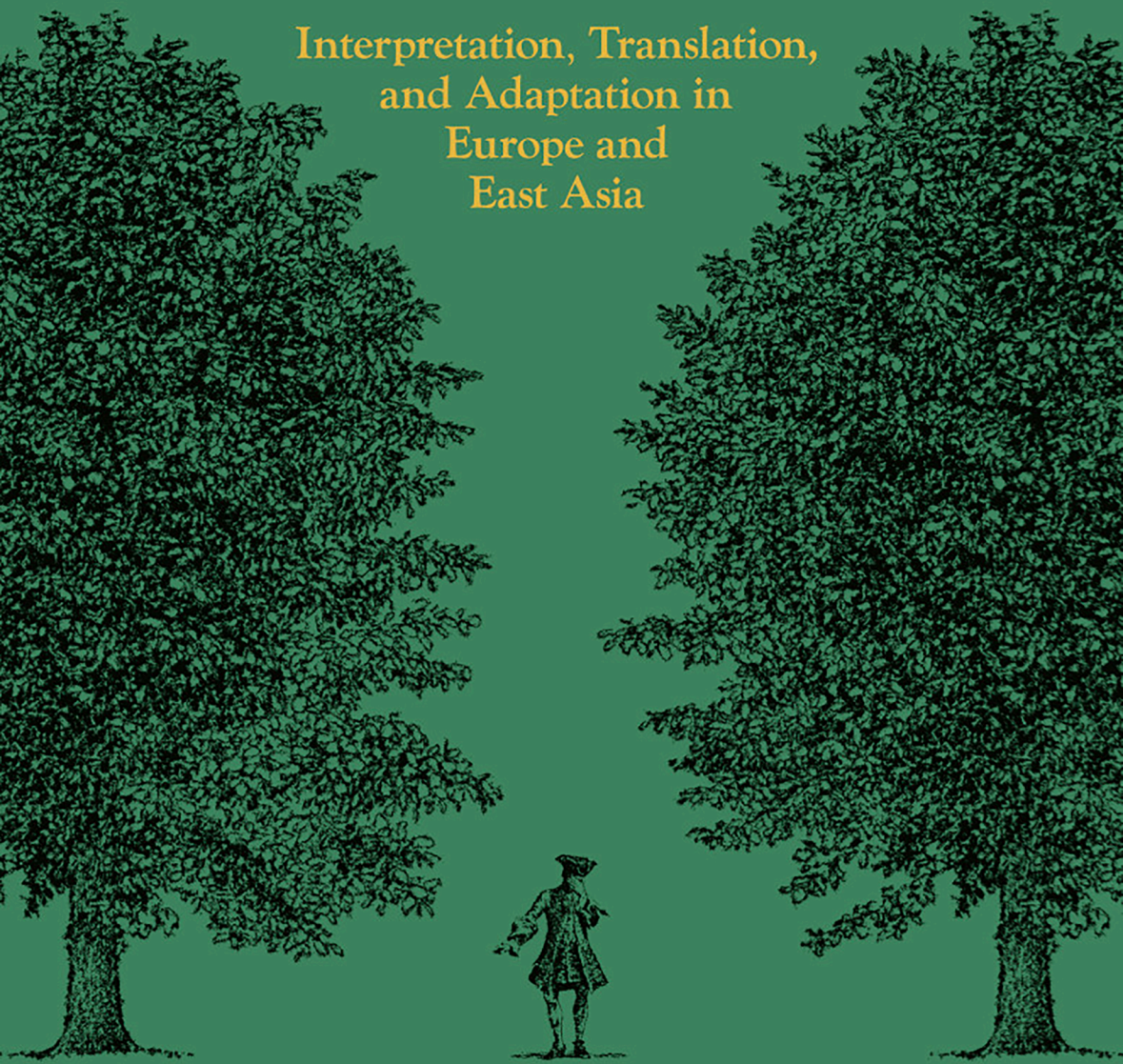
LIVES AND DEATHS OF WERTHER

Interpretation, Translation, and Adaptation in Europe and East Asia



Johannes Kaminski

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To Julia

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Introduction

Today, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* can no longer hope to find enthusiastic audiences as it did on its first publication. In our age of casual dating, the reading public is bound to find Werther's laments boring and the book's tragic conclusion preposterous. One individual reviewer on a popular cataloguing website flippantly sums up her impression: 'Ever wondered what a book written by a niceguy™ with hang ups about friendzones would be like? Go right ahead, this is the book for you.'[1] This one-star review's narrow focus on Werther's mating success appears excessive, and one should also point out that this dismissive review is not representative of the full spectrum of the book's contemporary readership. And yet the reviewer makes an important point: the text does not easily translate into our current world, in which the easy availability of mating alternatives would have, one may cautiously infer, attenuated Werther's despair. Today, goes the implicit assumption, Lotte – provided the feeling is mutual – would not hesitate to dissolve her engagement to Albert, regardless of the promise she made to her dying mother. Should the affection be one-sided, however, Werther should give up and search for someone more suitable, lest he be perceived as a stalker. Faced with the 'abundance of choice and the permanent sense of possibilities',[2] as Eva Illouz describes the current dating universe, he might forget about her soon enough. Consequently, readers report their urge 'to shake Werther by the arm or better so, slap him in the face'.[3]

Possibly, we are currently experiencing what Umberto Eco called 'the loss of congeniality between a work and its intended addressee'.[4] There is no denying that contemporary sensibilities do not correspond to those of the book's original audience. In a late 18th-century setting, being 'friendzoned' or acting the 'niceguy'

[1] Simone, Review of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, goodreads.com, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/16640.The_Sorrows_of_Young_Werther [last accessed 27 February 2022].
[2] Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 79.
[3] Bee, Review of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, goodreads.com, https://www.goodreads.com/sk/book/show/16640.The_Sorrows_of_Young_Werther [last accessed 27 February 2022].
[4] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 38.

corresponded to positive civic virtues such as agreeableness, good manners and etiquette. Today, however, they appear mannered and inauthentic. One could think that the book has ceased to speak to us, is of museal interest only and is confined to world literature syllabuses at universities and German classrooms where high-school students are still required to read Goethe. The latest attempt to bring *Werther* to the big screen appears to underscore its sterility: the text is ironised and remixed but no longer acts as a carrier of new meaning.[5]

Today's sterility contrasts visibly with the vitality that *Werther* inspired among different audiences across the globe in the past. In the German context, the text's initial reception hardly requires any further mentioning. Meanwhile, its afterlives in pre-Risorgimento Italy and French Romanticism offer highly original examples of how foreign contexts distorted and freed *Werther* from canonised reading routines. The novel's East Asian reception proved particularly fertile, as the text was disassembled and made suitable for new contexts. The so-called Werther fever of the Chinese 1920s, for example, is often invoked as a testimony to Goethe's appeal across the world.[6] At the same time, the novel's integration into Chinese letters also marks the threshold moment when literary imitation was eclipsed by a determination to make foreign models suitable for one's own purposes. As a consequence, Werther and his Wertherian revenants appear in Chinese literary history more like native wastrels rather than exotic vagabonds.

Conversely, in Japan, the *Werther* model became a blueprint for melancholic analyses of the socio-political ruptures that followed the country's comprehensive Westernisation since the Meiji period. Seemingly, the further removed readers were from the bombastic memorials erected in the memory of the 'Mastermind of the German People',[7] the greater also the artistic licence to handle the text as a

[5] The screenplay of Philipp Stölzl's feature film *Goethe!* (2010) plays with the overlaps between Goethe's sojourn in Wetzlar and Werther's diary. Here, the solution to the infatuated lover's predicament is Lotte's infidelity, for she grants the young man a one-night stand amid the romantic setting of a ruin. Afterwards, he departs from Lotte to become the great writer. On a similar account, a promotion clip to Bora Dagtekin's comedy *Fack ju Göthe* (2013) features a cocky young girl who reads *Werther* and complains about Lotte's perceived frigidity: 'Stay unfucked at forty, is that what you want? What's your problem!' ('Willst du mit vierzig noch nicht gefickt haben? Geht's noch oder was!'). 'Chantals Klassiker 3: Die Leidn des jungen Wärtha', *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qddR1c8bMjs [last accessed 27 February 2022].

[6] This emphatic reception is exemplified by the following sources: Barbara Ascher, 'Aspekte der Werther-Rezeption in China', in *Goethe und China: China und Goethe*, ed. by Günther Debon and Adrian Hsia (Bern: Peter Lang, 1985), 139–54; Wolfgang Kubin, 'Yu Dafu (1896–1945): Werther und das Ende der Innerlichkeit', in *Goethe und China*, 155–82; Yang Wuneng 楊武能, *Goethe and China* (歌德與中國 Gede yu zhongguo) (Beijing: Xin zhi san lian shu dian, 1991), 101–14; Terry Siu-han Yip, 'The Romantic Quest: The Reception of Goethe in Modern Chinese Literature', *Interlitteraria* 11 (2006), 51–69; Sandra Richter, *Eine Weltgeschichte der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 2017), 128–31.

[7] In 1913, a committee of German-Americans erected a Goethe monument adorned with this inscription in Lincoln Park, Chicago. See 'Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Monument', *Chicago Public Art* (Blog), www.chicagopublicart.blogspot.com/2013/09/johann-wolfgang-von-goethe-monument.html [last accessed 14 February 2023].

tool rather than an invariant artefact. In fact, the weakness and passivity that many readers detest in the protagonist were also the precondition of the text's success among discrete readerships across time. While the novel's experimental linguistics, its ellipses, ejaculations and apostrophes often got lost in translation, its character portrait of a dejected young man transcended cultural barriers with ease.

In studies of world literature, there is a risk of drawing excessive connections between discrete literary figurations. In this sense, Werther was mentioned in one breath not only with Torquato Tasso and Richard Wagner's Tristan,[8] but also with Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, the tragic lovers from the Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢 Hong lou meng, 1759/1791).[9] But while such connections are usually made *en passant*, attentive investigations must take great care not to overstate transhistorical or cross-cultural parallels. In the present case, the classification of novels as 'Wertherian' relates to a number of components that are derived from character traits as well as stylistic and linguistic features. There are five recurring aspects: firstly, as the author of letters or memoirs, the Wertherian character champions vernacular writing styles that reject rhetorical artifice and commonly feature spontaneous outbursts of emotive speech. Secondly, this seemingly carefree mode of expression is coupled with dense intertextual references. Thirdly, Wertherian writing takes its emotional cues from a love triangle, even if such a distressing constellation comprises only one of multiple sources of worry. Fourthly, the Wertherian protagonist contemplates, discusses and – sometimes, but not always – commits suicide. And finally, Wertherian novels emerge at threshold points of national literary histories, with scholars often considering them as starting points of modern literature. Given the transhistorical and cross-cultural range of the present study, which also includes a Chinese revolutionary novel from 1926 and a Japanese existentialist text from 1948, these five characteristics serve as a guide to narrow down the corpus to a reasonable size.

All that said, the five features of the Wertherian novel are themselves a result of the corpus under investigation. Outside the scope of the present study, there exist many contrary but legitimate definitions of Wertherian texts, as scholars may close in on entirely different features, such as a characteristic dependence on romantic clichés or the primacy of specific authorial intentions, for example to warn against emotional excess. In addition, the profile of the present Wertherian hero, for all his malleability, is outlined against those literary protagonists of world

[8] Among the myriad Werther-themed cross-references in critical literature, Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorism stands out for its unapologetic reductionism: 'All jene Wesen, die ihre Leidenschaft verschlingt Werther Tasso Tristan Isolde rufen uns zu: sei ein Mann und folge mir *nicht* nach!' Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Monitari, 14 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), V.1, 507.

[9] See Andrew Plaks, 'Leaving the Garden: Reflections on China's Literary Masterwork', *New Left Review* 47 (2007), 109–29; Yue Hengjun 樂蘅軍, *Will and Destiny: An Overview of the Classical Chinese Novel Worldview* (意志與命運: 中國古典小說世界觀綜論 Yizhi yu mingyun: Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo shijie guanzhong lun) (Taipei: Taiwan National University Press, 2022), 408.

literature whose subjective excess and histrionic attitude suggest a connection to the German suicide. The Wertherian protagonist contrasts with the Byronic hero and the superfluous man for primarily linguistic reasons; irrespective of their wealth of poetic speech, Wertherian novels lack rhyme and metre, a distinguishing feature of Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18) and Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1833). In contrast to the protagonists of the many Russian novels that centre around dejected young men, Wertherian novels lack a comparable satirical perspective. And in comparison with the plethora of romantic novels that end tragically, the Wertherian novel does not merely reproduce a set of well-established literary motifs, but actively shapes the literary repertoire of a specific epoch.

Interpretation – translation – adaptation

Spanning nearly 250 years, ideas about the meaning of Goethe's novel have undergone considerable change. To tell the story of Werther's global transhistorical reception means to follow non-linear paths of influence and to take note of complicated reception histories. The academic consensus about Werther is an unreliable guide to the surprising fertility of the book. Therefore, one may as well speak in horticultural terms of the '*Werther* nursery', in which multiple variants of the same tree coexist at the same time. This *Werther* nursery is governed by a triad of reading practices: interpretation, translation and adaptation. All three types of transtextual encounters are informed by selective appropriations of the reading material.[10] The present study explores re-usability as the crucial feature of classic texts, as they continuously engage in new connections without entirely abandoning previous ones. While the protagonist himself demonstrates an unrelenting commitment to the one woman he loves, Lotte, the text *Werther* deliberately spread its offspring among audiences across the globe. Today, scholarship's task is not to prescribe the text's perfect matching partner but, very much like Leporello's list in the opera *Don Giovanni*, to document the many encounters of the restless seducer.

In the *Werther* nursery, interpretation, translation and adaptation draw on the text's malleability in analogous ways. While conventional accounts concede

[10] According to Gérard Genette's terminology, there are five forms of transtextuality: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality. See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1–2. As Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier noted with regard to the distinction between adaptation and translation, they are both 'part of a generalized cultural activity', as they rework a given text in new contexts. See Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5. In a similar vein, Gideon Toury made the observation that translated texts serve as a point of departure for further acts of translation, including adaptations. See Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies – and Beyond* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1995), 26.

to literary adaptations more liberties than interpretation and translation, I argue that they inhabit a similar position towards the source text: they make it speak. They speak for it. And sometimes, they render it obsolete. In a striking passage in *Palimpsests* (1982), Gérard Genette gives a frank account of reading practices: 'To read means to choose, for better or for worse, and to choose means to leave out. Every work is more or less amputated right from its true birth: that is to say, from its first reading.'[11] And although this statement contrasts with Genette's general faith in competent readers, who engage with text in a truthful manner,[12] such amputations are integral to the *Werther* nursery. In literary adaptations, selective appropriation is inevitable, but the same tendency also shows in the work of translators and even in the work of the supposedly most faithful operators in the literary field, editors. Much of the text's semantic instability results from the differences between the text's 1774 and 1787 versions, which deserve to be accepted as two discrete texts in their own right, a detail that is rarely mentioned outside academic uses of the book.[13] Further plurality results from both texts' subsequent editions that feature orthographical amendments, added mottos, prefaces and paratexts.[14] Even the text's placement within an edition of Goethe's works or an

[11] Genette, *Palimpsests*, 229–30.

[12] On the whole, this stance is at odds with Genette's general ideas about interpretation, for his notion of correct reading tallies with conservative positions that assume the existence of an ideal reader. Accordingly, informed readers can avoid 'erroneous reading'. Since Genette's overarching goal is to establish a neat taxonomy for transtextual phenomena, he is careful not to overemphasise the manipulative aspects of summaries and readerly amputation. See Genette, *Palimpsests*, 309.

[13] As in the case of *Faust*, one could simplify the textual duality of *Werther* by placing them in a chronological lineage to differentiate between an *Urwerther* and the true *Werther*, which is indeed the source of most reprints and translations. But since the difference between the two texts has generated vastly different interpretations, ranging from the grand narrative of personal maturation to complaints about the author's self-censorship, the present analysis concedes the two texts the status of different versions.

[14] The first edition of 1774 leaves much open to interpretation: the principal narrator is Werther, while the editor's report provides a running commentary of his last days, commencing with the letter of 12 December 1772 up to his death on Christmas Day. In contrast to the editor's aloof tone, the original motto dedicates the text to those sensitive souls who – 'due to fate or personal responsibility' (*L* 3) – should find themselves in a similar situation. Although it is reasonable to assume that this motto openly encourages readerly identification, Goethe's first interference was not to elide it, but to add a second one to the Weygand edition in 1775. Here, the ghost of dead Werther implores the reader: 'Be a man and don't imitate me' ('Sei ein Mann und folge mir nicht nach'). See Waltraud Wiethölter, 'Entstehung und Bearbeitung', in *Goethe Sämtliche Werke* (=*FA*), 40 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987–99), vol. 8, 909–25, 917. In preparation of the 1787 edition, Goethe considered a more comprehensive revision. Minding this warning, Goethe's amendments were so carefully integrated into the text that few readers paid attention to them. The latter edition came to dominate the text's subsequent national and international reception. Robert Petsch's synoptic *Werther* edition of 1926 created more awareness of the *Urwerther*. Since then, research has provided meticulous comparative analyses of the 1774 and 1787 editions. One of the finest studies is also one of the earliest: Melitta Gerhard, 'Die Bauernburschenepisode in Werther', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 11 (1916), 61–74. As long as there are no new manuscript discoveries, Dieter Welz's comprehensive monograph will remain state-of-the art. See Dieter Welz, *Der Weimarer Werther: Studien zur Sinnstruktur der zweiten Fassung des Werther-Romans* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1973).

anthology of German literature produces specific reading dynamics. Meanwhile, the reader's circumstances can also have repercussions on the text itself, as seen in the work of the editors, who include commentaries in footnotes or endnotes to provide guidance for their readers. Introductory notes and postscripts enforce further cultural contextualisation, intertextual references and, often enough, plain clichés. In conjunction, the text's instability and the reader's context create a blurry zone that renders the idea of the Original obsolete. Taking all this into account, *Werther*'s interpretations only differ in style rather than substance from invasive literary practices, such as literary adaptations. Reading is always selective and places a text under the curatorship of editors and readers alike.

By elaborating on the tensions within historical and contemporary scholarship, I will show that in the *Werther* nursery, the tree's heredity is subjected to all kinds of manipulations, which in turn form the precondition of its global reach. This study relies on the metaphor of grafting to facilitate a more generous understanding of literary genealogies. After moving to Wahlheim, Werther enjoys spending time at an abandoned garden, vowing to become the 'master of the garden' very soon. It goes without saying that the protagonist abandons his horticultural ambitions as soon as he finds more entertaining recreational activities, such as sketching local children or drinking coffee in an old church yard. From a scholarly perspective – which Werther himself would have certainly dismissed as pedantic – this is a missed opportunity. Acquaintance with some of the fundamental horticultural techniques would have allowed him to draw pertinent metaphorical insights not only into his own engagement of literary models, such as James Macpherson's Ossian cycle, but also into how his own letters would be understood and reused by posterity. On the one hand, the process of pruning, pinching and disbudding, the infliction of small injuries on an organism, leaves a lasting impact on its growth. This process also facilitates its easy reproduction through propagation, as cuttings are placed in moist soil to become autonomous plants in their own right. Most importantly, elements of one tree can also be also combined with elements of other trees to produce entirely new variants that fulfil various intended and unintended purposes. In botany, this procedure is called grafting.

While grafting was brought to prominence by Jacques Derrida's essay 'Signature Event Context' ('Signature événement contexte', 1971), the concept has thus far played a limited role in comparative criticism. This is regrettable, as it entails several benefits vis-à-vis more popular concepts, such as the idea of a text's 'afterlives' or the 'gains' that it makes in translation. When applied to interpretation and reception, such concepts emphasise the linearity and concentric design of the process, thereby reproducing the idea that an Original exists, a reliable, unedited and unrestored entity, against which its transtextual offshoots can be measured. Here used in capitalisation, the Original, in fact a constantly revised idea of the text, forms an important part of the interpretative history of a work, but it would

be quixotic to conflate it with the work's truth. Meanwhile, to stress grafting means to acknowledge the reciprocity that governs the relations between a work and its critical and creative progeny. Similar to the case of today's plants whose genetic make-up was altered considerably through subsequent hybridisation in the past, research can speculate about a specific ancestor plant of, say, the apple tree, collect its fossils or find approximations.[15] Yet the experience of lying in its shade and listening to the buzzing of the bees collecting its pollen – that is, the experience of the Original in the emphatic, unironic sense – remains elusive. In short, interpretations, translations and adaptations have themselves left their marks on the original text, thereby barring the reader from the experience of a pure text. While this even applies to newly discovered texts,[16] the legacy of repeated manipulations presses most heavily on canonical texts.

Analogous to the 'amputations' effected by selective reading, editing and adaptation, similar manipulations facilitate and compromise the task of the translator. Needless to say, translations leave their mark on the text, yet this observation has not resulted in a more generous understanding of textual unfaithfulness thus far. On the one hand, this shows in the endemic omission of translators' names from book covers, as seen in several recent English *Werther* editions, a habit that conceals the innumerable choices those translators made. On the other hand, academic articles on foreign language texts frequently provide original quotes alongside translation, thereby supporting a sceptical attitude towards the translated text. Here, the translation which is provided to the non-proficient reader only serves as an intermediary of the original text. No wonder translators could never shake the suspicion that they were traitors, even when misrepresentation is not simply a matter of skill but forms part of the process.[17]

With regard to the title of the monograph, the 'Lives and Deaths of Werther' are less a nod to the protagonist's reappearance among the undead in contemporary fiction,[18] and more an allusion to two important aspects of the book's legacy: on the one hand, the reception of *Werther* alternates between of periods of lush proliferation and periods of dormancy. While a book's canonical status ensures the forced reading experiences that result in the kind of disgruntled eye-rolling described earlier, a greater awareness of the book's gains and losses of

[15] See Robert Nicholas Spengler, 'Origins of the Apple: The Role of Megafaunal Mutualism in the Domestication of Malus and Rosaceous Trees', *Frontiers in Plant Science* 10 (2019), DOI: 10.3389/fpls.2019.00617.

[16] This applies to Cora Wilburn's *Cosella Wayne: Or, Will and Destiny* (1860). Arguably, there is no escaping from reading Wilburn's book in terms that, legitimately, give primacy to contemporary sensibilities, as the book's reception concentrates on the Jewish female identity of the author. See Jonathan D. Sarna, 'The Forgetting of Cora Wilburn: Historical Amnesia and *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*', *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 37.1 (2018), 73–87.

[17] For a critique of the standard of 'invariant' translations, see Lawrence Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

[18] See Susanne Picard, *Die Leichen des jungen Werther* (Stuttgart: Panini, 2011).

congenial audiences forbodes something much more hopeful than its unshakeable installation in curricula: its potential to, once again, enter a period of lush growth and abundant flowering in a future context. On the other hand, the title of the monograph also accentuates two aspects that, regardless of their mutually exclusive viewpoints, proved particularly fertile in the global reception history of *Werther*: its invigorating perception as a quasi-revolutionary novel, pressing the point that the livelihoods in a given society can and must be changed; and its necrotic effect as a text that unapologetically questions the value of life itself.

Werther and world literature

Like the dissatisfied reviewer mentioned initially, contemporary criticism has also articulated its reservations about a book that is considered over-researched. As an integral part of the Western canon, Goethe's novel participates in 'an old-fashioned and suspect critical practice'[19] that forecloses the appreciation of non-European texts. Today, heralding the global relevance of *Werther* risks falling back into a colonial habit: to insist upon the priority of occidental letters and to shrug off the literary modernity of other cultures as side effect of the former. As Emily Apter has stated, 'the assertion of Europe-based internationalism over minority discourses'[20] is still prevalent in many institutions and departments. Indeed, the status of Goethe's text as a world classic – not just in European and North American curricula, but also in East Asia and beyond – shores up Western dominance. To some extent, Western literary blueprints have shaped the world in their image. In this light, the success of *Werther* speaks not so much for the text itself but for a world system that privileges the cultural products of some nations over others.

Thereby, *Werther* inherits one of the most problematic aspects of world literature as advanced by its doyens. Pascale Casanova, for example, portrayed world literary history as spreading from the European centre to the rest of the world, a movement that mimics the global expansion of European colonial power. Franco Moretti's macroscopic study of the novel, too, follows this trajectory. Accordingly, the evolution of the modern novel proceeds in accordance with a wave of diffusion from European centres to non-European peripheries: '[T]he modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a Western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials.'[21]

[19] John Marx, 'Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. by Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 83–96, 83.
[20] Emily Apter, 'Comparative Exile: Competing Margins in the History of Comparative Literature', in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. by Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 86–96, 93.
[21] Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), 50.

Unsurprisingly, such sweeping macroanalyses of literary history raised eyebrows, with critics objecting to the Eurocentric teleology of such arguments. In response to Casanova's Paris-centric model, Alexander Beecroft noted that her vision of world literature 'is working within a very specific and localized definition of literature, one […] which cannot account for the full range of literary production across all cultures and times'.[22] Similarly, Karen Thornber detects one of the great ironies of comparative literature in its Eurocentrism 'even as it moved from focusing nearly exclusively on European literatures to including literatures from other world regions'.[23] Although Moretti's microhistory is directed at a specific genre, Zhang Longxi cannot help noting that Moretti only invokes non-European material as an obscure and passive factor, when the stylistic forms established by Chinese literary history, for example, represent a decisive influence on modern Chinese novels.[24] Both Thornber and Zhang propose that scholars, when intending to break with concentric routines, should take into account the inner dynamics of non-Western literatures, even during phases of intense Westernisation.

The *Werther* nursery, emanating from Goethe's 1774 work, undeniably reiterates the Eurocentric model that Beecroft and Thornber attack. But while the present study resembles a map of *Werther*'s pollination and seed dispersal across the globe, it rejects chronological unidirectionality and concentric evolution as decisive parameters. The book's transtextual offshoots involve the Original in a circuit, allowing discrete paths of reception to change its essence. Under the gaze of posterity, *Werther* is not condemned to museal sterility but resembles the places which the protagonist revisits after quitting his job as the ambassador's secretary, only to find them thoroughly transformed: 'There I stood, under the same linden tree which used to be the goal and end of my walks. How things have changed!' (*L* 51). Just as the protagonist's journey through life alienates him from the naive worldview of his youth, *Werther* is no longer the same text to the reader after giving in to the forces of interpretative grafting. The book offers new seedlings and cuttings for every reader who, like the protagonist, enjoys reading under the shade of a tree. So while an analysis of the *Werther* nursery cannot offer a true alternative to Eurocentric models, the source material's indeterminacy allows *Werther* to be shaped – in some cases: swallowed up – by local contexts.

[22] Alexander Beecroft, 'World Literature without a Hyphen: Towards a Typology of Literary Systems', in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. by David Damrosch (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 180–91, 188.
[23] See Karen Laura Thornber, 'Rethinking the World in World Literature: East Asia and Literary Contact Nebulae', in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. Damrosch, 460–79, 460.
[24] Zhang Longxi, 'The Relevance of *Weltliteratur*', *Poetica* 45 (2013), 241–7, 244–5.

Plurality

Today, the idea that *Werther*'s literary echoes may outlast the memory of Goethe's Original no longer appears improbable. Instead of exploring a text that is assumed to outshine its progeny forever, this study embraces *Werther* as a node of connection in a decentred network of literary texts. To reclaim *Werther* from its neat incorporation into German literary history and the grand narrative of Goethe's maturation as a writer means to take seriously the non-referential function of literary writing. In this vein, Roland Barthes discussed the classic text as one that spawns in multiple directions: 'To interpret a text is not to give it a […] meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it.'[25] Today, the academic mainstream has started to embrace the democratic value of pluralism, thereby changing the habits of literary criticism, as individual readers can agree to disagree when consensus is not possible.[26] And yet Barthes's stance has become a well-sounding, eminently quotable but ultimately inconsequential phrase.

This is not to say that *Werther*'s plural went unnoticed up to now. Several studies and collections of essays document the polyphony of interpretative frameworks that surround Goethe's works and *Werther* in particular. There are at least four book-length studies that pay attention to the novel's interpretative proliferation, including Karl Hotz's 1974 documentation of the novel's multifaceted reception upon its publication, Klaus Scherpe's *Werther und Wertherwirkung* from 1980 and Hans Peter Herrmann's edited collection of *Werther* essays, which remains indispensable for scholars today. The most recent monograph that pursues a pluralist trajectory is Bruce Duncan's *Goethe's Werther and the Critics*, with each chapter covering a different focus of the book's reception.[27]

Despite the inner tension that results from the juxtaposition of such different approaches, the mentioned authors and editors steer clear of discussing the theoretical conundrums that underlie such proliferation of meaning. Duncan, for example, elegantly circumvents the issue by stating, *en passant*, that 'the variety of responses is less an example of fashion than a testimony to the novel's genius and its interpreters' fertility of mind'.[28] Such generous acceptance of Werther's malleability is certainly the precondition for an unbiased assessment of the text's reception history, yet such offhand concessions only reinforce the validity of interpretations

[25] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 5.
[26] For a discussion of Hannah Arendt's concept of pluralism in relation to the concept of 'agreeing to disagree', see Siobhan Kattago, 'Agreeing to Disagree on the Legacies of Recent History: Memory, Pluralism and Europe after 1989', *European Journal of Social Theory* 12.3 (2009), 375–95.
[27] See Karl Hotz, *Goethes 'Werther' als Modell für kritisches Lesen: Materialien zur Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1974); Klaus R. Scherpe, *Werther und Wertherwirkung: Zum Syndrom bürgerlicher Gesellschaftsordnung im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Gehlen, 1980); Hans Peter Herrmann, *Goethes 'Werther': Kritik und Forschung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994); Bruce Duncan, *Goethe's Werther and the Critics* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2013).
[28] Duncan, *Goethe's Werther*, 3.

that have amassed canonical credibility over time. A general disinterest in the text's non-European reception awkwardly contrasts with the implied openness to conflicting interpretations. The simultaneity of epistemological disinterest in how the text generates different meanings and an unabated Eurocentric focus is no coincidence. Only a thorough reconsideration of what it means to interpret a text, specifically in this multipolar context, can facilitate the kind of interpretative generosity that goes beyond mere pleasantries regarding the value of non-Western sources.

To accept different perspectives on *Werther* means to learn to live with contradiction. Such plurality produces a confusing picture, as the protagonist appears in conflicting roles: he is a psychopathological case, *and* he is also a positive hero who suffers from an unbearable situation. Werther's desire for Lotte is genuine, *yet* he forcefully hastens his own demise and deliberately avoids finding happiness in love. Evidently, such plurality stands at odds with pedestrian conceptions of psychological unity. Arguably, his protean character portrait – to indulge in another botanical metaphor – resembles the chestnut trees described in the novel. To idle visitors such as Werther, the trees offer delightful shade during hot summer days; but according to the wife of the newly arrived parson, a sickly woman, they are blocking all light from entering their lodging, so she has them chopped down. And while Werther reacts with a litany of profanities, it seems perfectly possible that he would have done the same when placed in her position. Similarly, scholars have praised the protagonist or, irritated by his gloomy soliloquies, condemned him. One can draw mutually exclusive conclusions, even if they base their interpretations on the exact same source material.

In criticism and the popular imagination, *Werther* is usually narrowed down to convey only one of the above aspects. This also shows in accounts by readers who are novelists themselves, for example in Thomas Mann's, who has little faith in the author's literary imagination when he states: 'The experience on which Werther is based, the idyllic and painful story of Goethe's love for Lotte Buff, has become just as famous as the novel itself, and deservedly so. Substantial parts of the book fully overlap with reality, they are represented accurately and without amendments.'[29] This interpretation ignores obvious counter-arguments, for example Goethe's lacking determination to end his own life. But while subsequent

[29] Orig. 'Das dem "Werther" zugrunde liegende Erlebnis, die idyllisch-schmerzliche Geschichte von Goethes Liebe zu Lotte Buff […] ist ebenso berühmt geworden wie der Roman selbst, und das mit Recht, denn große Teile des Buches decken sich vollständig mit der Realität, sind eine getreue und unveränderte Abschrift von ihr.' Thomas Mann, 'Goethes "Werther"', in *Goethes 'Werther': Kritik und Forschung*, ed. by Hans Peter Herrmann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 88–101, 91. Even today, as popular biographies continue to reproduce these tropes, critics refer to *Werther* as a testimony to Goethe's triumph over circumstances that would have driven a lesser man to commit suicide. See Stefan Bollmann, *Der Atem der Welt: Johann Wolfgang Goethe und die Erfahrung der Natur* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2021), 141–56.

Goethe biographers have pressed exactly these points to praise the author for being so unlike his protagonist, such readings have resulted in no less restrictive interpretations of *Werther*. Even beyond the biographic paradigm, an apodictic tone prevails in literary criticism, where insights are frequently accompanied by acidic footnotes directed to scholarly rivals.

Fortunately, the *Werther* nursery already contains the kernel to a critical appreciation of the text's plural nature. Guo Moruo, a contemporary of Mann and one of the most productive writers of modern Chinese literature, advanced an argument that welds seemingly contradictory interpretations into one integrated picture. As perhaps the only man of letters who combined the roles of *Werther* critic, translator and writer of literary adaptations, Guo emphatically identified Goethe with Werther, as Mann does, while also appraising the protagonist's suicidal impulses. Tuning his own voice to the protagonist's ecstatic speech, he paraphrases: 'Worrying with one's entire soul! Grieving with one's entire soul! Everything to the utmost! Everything to the end! […] Committing suicide of the ego is actually the highest virtue.'[30] Irrespective of this death-affirmative statement, Guo is equally fascinated by the protagonist's sprightly personality, which he considers equally important:

> He loves nature, adores nature, nature gives him infinite tenderness, infinite inspiration, endless nourishment. Therefore, he is opposed to technical skill, opposed to ready-made morality, opposed to the social class system, opposed to ready-made religion, opposed to superficial knowledge, he thinks of books as rubbish, of words as dead bones and that art is a nuisance.[31]

Admittedly, in his enthusiastic reaction Guo takes on board more aspects of *Werther* than one can process. But as the only reader who fully embraced the book's full spectrum, Guo illustrates the benefits of reading *Werther* out of context: without the cultural baggage of Goethe's life and his tomes of self-commentary, without scholarship's belittlement of the protagonist as a sick man or even worse. Placed under Guo's reading lamp, the book proliferates. Yet this proliferation is not boundless but limited. All the aspects that he raises unwittingly feed into the seed bank that documents Werther's variability. The protagonist's alleged 'suicide of the ego' is not an unreasonable idea of Guo's but connects to a strand of *Werther* scholarship that has not entered the learned canon. Hermann August Korff, a German scholar of the interwar period, and

[30] Orig.'以全部的精神煩惱！以全部的精神哀毀！一切徹底！[…] 完成自我的自殺，正是至高道德——這絕不是中庸微溫者流所能體現的道理。' Guo Moruo 郭沫若, 'Preface' (序 Xu), in *Sorrows of Young Werther* (少年維特之煩惱 Shaonian Weite zhi fannao) (Shanghai: Tai dong tu shu ju, 1927), 1–15, 5. Unless otherwise stated, all translations my own, J. K.

[31] Orig.'他親愛自然，崇拜自然，自然與之以無窮的愛撫，無窮的慰安，無窮的啟迪，無窮的滋養，所以他反抗技巧，反抗既成道德，反抗階級制度，反抗既成宗教，反抗浮薄的學識，以書籍為糟粕，以文字為死骸，更幾乎以藝術為多事。' Guo, 'Preface', 5.

Kamei Katsuichirō, a Japanese literary critic from the same period, considered Werther's suicide a heroic deed. Moreover, Guo's invocation of Werther's love of nature connects to the discussion about Goethean pantheism, which led to heated arguments among German post-war scholars. And finally, Guo's almost casual reference to Werther's protest against the social class system links with Georg Lukács's attempt to positively incorporate the protagonist's situation into a Marxist framework.

Admittedly, Guo is not interested in harmonising these aspects, many of which are indeed contradictory. He paints his ideas about *Werther* with broad strokes, indifferent to clashing colours or blatant contradictions. Placed under the lens of today's scholarship, this brief account certainly lacks attention to detail. And yet his preface is exemplary for its refusal to constrict literary writing and its determination to engage with a canonical text of world literature in a more carefree and unorthodox manner.

Romantic Werther

Regardless of the malleability of *Werther*, the text is held together by a number of stabilising forces. One of its obvious focal points is the theme of romantic love. According to this ideal, a person should strive to establish a life-term bond based on a feeling of deep affection for another person. Amid the transformation of premodern societies into today's liberalism, texts such as Goethe's *Werther* played a pertinent role in illustrating and naturalising romantic love – not only in Europe, but also in East Asia. In this light, the postcolonial legacy of *Werther* lies less in its literary ascendancy over local literature than in its complicity in advancing Western cultural practices. This is especially true when the plot of *Werther* is trivialised, as one often sees in hurried plot summaries. Accordingly, the text boils down to a simple boy-meets-girl story that ends in tragedy. The blurb on the back cover of the Penguin edition reads:

> Visiting an idyllic German village, Werther, a sensitive and romantic young man, meets and falls in love with sweet-natured Lotte. Although he realizes that Lotte is to marry Albert, he is unable to subdue his passion for her, and his infatuation torments him to the point of absolute despair.[32]

Much could be said about the biased assumptions that are contained in this blurb, including the unchecked motifs of Werther's committed love and Lotte's 'sweet-natured' temperament. Suffice to say that the reader of this blurb is encouraged to imagine a just world *ex negativo*, in which a man's affection for his beloved should not only be mutual, but also result in a formal bond. According to this

[32] See Michael Hulse (trans.), *Sorrows of Young Werther* (London: Penguin, 1989), quote on back cover.

framework, the book exemplifies the wholehearted rejection of messy solutions, such as the married woman's seduction, a scenario frequently imagined in French novels of the time, such as Choderlos de Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons* (*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, 1782). Every person should be allowed – or rather is required – to mate with his or her love interest. To a certain extent, the global appeal of *Werther* reaffirms this simplistic summary.

Considering *Werther* from this angle, the text indeed forms part of the socio-political practices that Western modernity has enforced across the world at the expense of alternatives. In Europe alone, the ideal of love marriage only became fashionable during the late 18th century when it slowly started to replace strategic marriage, a feudal practice that divides love and passion from reproductive concerns.[33] Meanwhile, polygamic systems proliferated in East Asia until they were shaken up by the advent of Western modernity. Arguably, one of the reasons behind 'the loss of congeniality' between *Werther* and its intended addressees is that the latter have vanished, at least in Western and East Asian societies where love marriages no longer represent an elusive ideal but are firmly institutionalised. Although there are undisputed advantages to this practice, such as the liberation from parental consent and the possibility of cross-class and transcultural marriage, the history of monogamy is inextricably linked to the rise of Western modernity, as European norms replaced polygamy and other native conjugal practices across the globe. Psychologists such as Herbert Marcuse even argued that the practice engenders uniquely modern pathologies, linking the psychological constraint imposed by monogamous relationships to people's vulnerability to a 'fascist' mindset.[34] Even if one does not agree with Marcuse's strong claim, there is no denying that today, taking into account *Werther*'s prominent if misleading role as an iconic boy-meets-girl story, the book no longer forms part of a socio-political revolution but has become synonymous with a normative discourse.

The simplistic boy-meets-girl account of *Werther*, as imagined by the Penguin blurb, hardly does justice to the complexity of its portrait of romantic love and misses the text's uncanny ability to shapeshift or, to put it more accurately, to inhabit multiple discursive levels simultaneously. Its sympathetic account of

[33] See Joan-Lluís Palos, 'Introduction: Bargaining Chips: Strategic Marriages and Cultural Circulation in Early Modern Europe', in *Early Modern Dynastic Marriages and Cultural Transfer*, ed. by Joan-Lluís Palos and Magdalena S. Sanchez (London: Routledge, 2016), 1–18.

[34] Marcuse also hoped that a sexual revolution would liberate bourgeois love, which he considered an ill-fated compromise between instinctual renunciation and submission to the repressive power of the world. See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1966), 16; Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 106. Recent discussions of polyamory and asexuality have renewed the interest in alternatives to romantic coupling. In this context, however, the link between bourgeois love and militarised subject is abandoned in favour of a critique of oppressive heteronormativity. See Mimi Schippers, *Polyamory, Monogamy, and American Dreams: The Stories We Tell about Poly Lives and the Cultural Production of Inequality* (London: Routledge, 2020).

unfulfilled love can flip and transform into, say, a proxy for the socio-political problems that merely sublimate into romantic love. Alternatively, *Werther* can be – and indeed was – perceived as a cautionary tale to remind readers of the transience of worldly love. Perhaps most irritating to those who are sympathetic to sensitive and romantic Werther, some readers even suggested that the novel advances the idea that self-destruction is the only true moment of liberation. *Werther* contains multitudes.

As a quintessential point of reference for the contradictory sociocultural networks that accompany modernity, copies of Goethe's *Werther* have materialised throughout literary history where they fulfil contradictory purposes. Harrington, the unhappy lover in William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), for example, leaves a copy behind after committing suicide, thereby illustrating his irrepressible passion for Harriet, his sister. In a more uplifting spirit, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Love of Plato* (*Die Liebe des Plato*, 1870) has Anatol, a cross-dressing woman, produce a copy to a different end. Being intent on seducing Henryk, she hopes the physical presence of the book will underscore the spiritual nature of her affections. Meanwhile, *Werther* copies also reveal the impotent or self-absorbed states of mind of their owners. In Gerhard Hauptmann's drama *Before Sunrise* (*Vor Sonnenaufgang*, 1889), Loth acknowledges Helene's favourite book with a condescending sneer: 'It's a book for weaklings.'[35] Ultimately, the girl finds herself trapped in an impossible situation, forcing her to share the fate of 'weak' Werther. Meanwhile, Mao Dun's realist novel *Midnight* (子夜Zi Ye, 1933) places a copy into the hands of Captain Lei, a middle-class careerist in Shanghai, so he can perform the rituals of modern love in front of his former lover, Mrs Wu:

> Captain Lei raised his head, his right hand reaching into his pocket for a book. Opening it hurriedly, he held it towards Mrs Wu with both hands as if to offer it to her. It was an old, well-worn copy of *Sorrows of Young Werther*! The opened page held a dried white rose. And then it came rushing like a flash, the memories of the stormy times of student meetings during the May Thirtieth Movement. The book and the rose struck Mrs Wu, her entire body started to tremble.[36]

As a stand-in for passion, spirituality, weakness or mindlessness, the explicit intertextual uses of *Werther* illustrate its indiscriminate uses, as readers chose those aspects they found most relevant and exploited them in highly idiosyncratic ways.

[35] Orig. 'Es ist ein Buch für Schwächlinge.' Gerhart Hauptmann, *Sämtliche Werke*, 11 vols, ed. by Hans-Egon Hass (Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen, 1962–74), vol. 11, 40.

[36] Orig.'在這裡輸入要轉換的內容雷參謀抬起頭，右手從衣袋裡抽出來，手裡有一本書，飛快地將這書揭開，雙手捧着，就獻到吳少奶奶麵前。這是一本破舊的《少年維特之煩惱》！在這書的揭開的頁麵是一朵枯萎的白玫瑰！暴風雨似的'五卅運動'初期的學生會時代的往事，突然像一片閃電飛來，從這書，從這白玫瑰，打中了吳少奶奶，使她全身髮抖。' Mao Dun 茅盾, *Midnight* (子夜 Ziye) (Beijing: Ren min wen xue chu ban she, 1977), 93.

As these examples demonstrate, *Werther* does not speak to intended audiences alone. The productive readerships of *Werther* comprise a diverse assemblage of critics, translators and authors across Europe, North America and East Asia, who had a limited interest in the book's position within the literary canon of German letters. Their adaptations, interpretations or renderings benefitted from the text's unique ability to absorb readers in multiple ways. Werther's suicide concludes the plot but marks the beginning of his remarkable journey through various national literatures.

Overview

This study marries linguistic analyses with macroscopic perspectives on intra- and transcultural transactions. The argument moves from a discussion of literary theory and Goethe criticism to an account of the book's translations. With a changed focus, as the distance grows between Goethe's text and its progeny, the other chapters address two literary genealogies of *Werther*, its revolutionary and death-affirmative adaptations.

Chapter 1 examines a wealth of Goethe criticism, ranging from the late 18th century to today, in the light of literary theory. This examination dismantles the epistemological frameworks that assign foreign reception histories a marginal status. I propose a framework that takes into account how *Werther* produces a semantic 'plural'. Since the book's first publication in 1774, the text has produced tides of commentary that have largely consolidated around the idea that the epistolary novel fleshes out the inner life of a psychopathological character, albeit a charming one. Meanwhile, *Werther*'s integration into foreign national literatures pursued alternative paths, resulting in their implicit classification as 'misunderstandings'. To challenge the epistemological assumptions that underpin the concept of 'misunderstanding', this chapter examines historical and authoritative *Werther* interpretations, including historic biographic analyses, studies on reader-response dynamics, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis and discourse analysis. Regardless of their vastly different ideas about Goethe's book, they are united by a shared preference for the invocation of singular meaning.

To offer an alternative to critical dogmatism, the present study elaborates on two ways of making sense of such semantic wealth and the atrophy encountered in interpretative practice. On the one hand, the protagonist is introduced as a guide whose acceptance of ambiguity is exemplary. On the other hand, the epistemic metaphor of 'grafting' helps gauge the tensions between the Original and its multiple interpretations in a more nuanced manner. A triad of factors plays out in this process: the *selection of the rootstock* leads to the *elimination of incompatible elements*. Then, the *addition of a scion* facilitates the text's incorporation into a new context. I illustrate this procedure with five different plot summaries that draw radically different conclusions about the truth of *Werther*. Based on isolated

quotes, a plot summary can alternate between ironic accounts of the protagonist and overidentification. In addition, *Werther* can be fitted to suit transcendental, revolutionary or proto-masochist lines of interpretation.

Chapter 2 uses a multilingual corpus of English, Japanese and Chinese translations to survey general tendencies and experimental approaches. My focus on extreme cases reclaims the work of the translator as authorship. The analysis starts out with an account of Werther's own translations from *Ossian*. Amid the text's French, English and Italian translations, William Render's translation of *Werther* stands out for pushing editorial interferences to their extreme, entering a grey area between translation and adaptation. With some delay, *Werther* also reached East Asia. Japanese and Chinese translations document the state of the two languages at the onset of the 20th century, when they were undergoing considerable change. Arguably, the most idiosyncratic East Asian translations are the Japanese by Takayama Chogyū and the Chinese by Guo Moruo. They violate the modern standard, thereby drawing attention to the questionable aesthetic norms that dominate contemporary translations. There is a remarkable feature that can be found in free and conservative translations alike: they implicitly or explicitly take issue with the edition from which the translation is sourced; instead, translators pursue the creation of a Arch-Original, a text that claims to be truer than what others would consider an Original. In replacing the rich complexity of the text, they advance their own vision of an uncompromised Original.

Chapter 3 follows Werther's revolutionary reincarnations from Italy to China, a lineage that departs considerably from Friedrich Engels, who characterised Werther's writing and thinking as the lamentation of a delusional whiner. Georg Lukács's 1936 study and Peter Müller's argument of 1969 attempted to rescue Werther from this verdict by portraying him as a victim of feudal society, but to little effect. The book's literary reception outside Germany, however, jumped at the opportunity to draw on the Wertherian hero to advance a revolutionary cause. Ugo Foscolo's *Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis* (*Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*, 1798/1802) applies the *Werther* motif to pre-Risorgimento Italy, where the protagonist is not just a dejected lover and a victim of his own delusions, but also an exile, whose eyes are opened to the great price his countrymen are paying for appeasing Austria.

During the 1920s, the revolutionary Wertherian hero assumed a central position in Chinese literary modernity. Guo Moruo's Wertherian prose typifies a rather carefree appropriation of Western sources. Meanwhile, the protagonist in Yu Dafu's *Sinking* (沈淪 Chenlun, 1921) abandons his translation of English poetry as he begins to realise that his personal suffering, especially his sexual frustration, is a direct effect of belonging to a weak nation. Two relatively obscure texts further explore the clash between sensual needs and patriotic martyrdom: Jiang Guangci's *The Young Wanderer* (少年漂泊者 Shaonian piaobozhe, 1926) and Ba Jin's *Trilogy of Love* (愛情三部曲 Aiqing sanbuqu, 1931–5).

Chapter 4 takes the death-fixated dimension of *Werther* at face value and asks: what if life is not worth living? After the text's initial damnation by church authorities had already highlighted the novel's problematic attitude to life sustenance, two critics of the interwar period, Heinrich August Korff (1923) and Kamei Katsuichirō (1937), put forward the first affirmative interpretations of the thanatological dimension in *Werther*, portraying the protagonist as an upright man who embarks on a quest to defy the outrageous limitations experienced by the modern subject. On a conceptual level, Arthur Schopenhauer's and Sigmund Freud's elaborations on the human death drive as well as contemporary anti-natalism highlight the validity of this frame of interpretation.

In French *Werther* adaptations, world-weary protagonists as featured in Chateaubriand's *René* (1801), Étienne Pivert de Senancour's *Obermann* (1804) and Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* (1816) transcend the level of individual pathology and adapt Goethe's text to an age in which the increasing aspirations of the individual clash with the disappointments of reality. Taking Kamei's *Werther* interpretation to heart, this section also embraces the protagonist's successors in 20th-century Japan. Central to modern Japanese letters, Sōseki Natsume's *Kokoro* (心, 1914) and Dazai Osamu's *No Longer Human* (人間失格 Ningen Shikkaku, 1948) portray suicide as an ambiguous act that oscillates between virtue and egotism. Here, suicide does not articulate simple protest against society but is embedded in a wide spectrum of death affirmation.

Notes

To make a point about the inevitability of translation, this entire monograph gives primacy to Victor Lange's widely used *Werther* translation over Goethe's German – except where linguistic aspects matter to the argument.

In Japanese and Chinese names, the surname comes before the given name. While English-language texts maintain this convention in view of Chinese names, Japanese names are frequently given the Western treatment. For consistency, the running text of this study sticks to the East Asian convention (e.g. 'Sōseki Natsume' rather than 'Natsume Sōseki'). Bibliographic information proceeds in the same fashion. This rule does not apply when the writer carries an East Asian surname and Western given names or if the referenced text was originally published in an American or European medium of publication (e.g. 'James A. Fujii').

For the sake of clarity, titles published in non-Western languages, primarily Chinese and Japanese, feature detailed bibliographical information. The author name is given in Romanised script, followed by the original hanzi or kanji. Book titles and articles are referenced in English translation, followed by the original title in hanzi or kanji and Romanised transcription, e.g. Guo Moruo 郭沫若, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (少年維特之煩惱 Shaonian Weite zhi fannao).

Minding readability, I have translated original quotes in the main text body. Original quotes in footnotes, however, were left untranslated.

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In contrast to the spurt of creativity that helped Goethe finish the original, now lost, manuscript of *Werther* in just a few weeks, the present monograph is the result of slow growth, even judging by academic standards. When my British Academy Fellowship brought me to Peking University in 2013, I ended up with a curious *Werther* translation in my hands, which got the ball rolling. Afterwards, several studies followed across the years, each one focusing on an isolated aspect of the book's transhistorical and cross-cultural reception.[37] Based on vastly heterogeneous material, the monograph cannot fully conceal its heterogeneous composition but hopefully succeeds at its principal mission: to place examples of foreign reception at the heart of the novel's interpretation.

A string of fellowships allowed me to continue work on the monograph, even if the day-to-day business of contemporary academe prioritises the production of short pieces with greater impact. After the British Academy's generous fellowship allowed me to spend another three years in Cambridge, the following years saw me take up a Postdoctoral Fellowship at Taipei's Academia Sinica and a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship at Vienna. My current post as SASPRO2-Fellow at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava allowed me to finalise a manuscript that was in dire need of trimming and nursing.

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[37] In the following articles, I presented ideas which the present monographs discusses in more detail and nuance: 'Punctuation, Exclamation and Tears: *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in Japanese and Chinese Translation (1889–1922)', *Comparative Critical Studies* 14.1 (2017), 29–48; 'Grafting German Romanticism onto the Chinese Revolution: Goethe, Guo Morou, and the Pursuit of Self-Transcendence', in *Romantic Legacies*, ed. by Shun-Liang Chao and John Michael Corrigan (London: Routledge, 2019), 270–87; 'Zur Kritik der libidinösen Ökonomie: Liebe und Klassenkampf in der Literatur der chinesischen Moderne', in *Literarische Aushandlungen von Liebe und Ökonomie*, ed. by Paul Keckeis et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 271–86; 'Werther's Patriotic Afterlives: The Imaginary of Self-Sacrifice in Works by Ugo Foscolo, Yu Dafu and Jiang Guangci', in *From the Enlightenment to Modernism: Three Centuries of German Literature. Essays for Ritchie Robertson*, ed. by Kevin Hilliard et al. (Oxford: Legenda, 2022), 52–67.

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1

Joys and Sorrows of Interpretation

Werther himself is a paradigmatic reader. His literary diet illustrates the virtues and ills of appropriating classic works to highly idiosyncratic personal needs. In view of Homer's *Odyssey* (8th or 7th century BCE), the protagonist waxes poetic: 'I need a cradlesong to lull me and this I find abundantly in *my* Homer.'[1] Later, he remarks that 'Ossian has superseded Homer in my heart' (*L* 58) and partially translates a section of the faux-Gaelic epic into German. To Werther, reading and translating is an activity that soothes and intensifies his own sentiments. Although this form of assimilating literary texts should appear quite relatable to scholars of literature, his instrumental use of Homer and Ossian has attracted chiding criticism, sometimes even ridicule. His invocation of Homer was called 'grotesque',[2] 'askew',[3] and it was considered an indication of the author's ironic attitude towards the protagonist.[4] What is more, once the poems of Ossian replace Homer in Werther's heart, his reading habits assume the status of Rorschach tests documenting his mood swings. Thorsten Valk sums up the critical consensus: 'While reading Homer allowed Werther to advance his psychological health and regulate excessive passion, he consumes Ossian's poetry like a tempting poison.'[5] Does it follow that Werther fails at reading as he fails in love? As this chapter aims to

[1] Victor Lange (trans.), *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in *Goethe: The Collected Works*, 12 vols, ed. by David Wellbery (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 1–88, 7. My emphasis, J. K. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *L*.

[2] Carol E. W. Tobol and Ida H. Washington, 'Werther's Selective Reading of Homer', *Modern Language Notes* 92.3 (1977), 596–601, 587.

[3] Orig. 'windschief'. See Joachim von der Thüsen, 'Das begrenzte Leben: Über das Idyllische in Goethes *Werther*', *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 68 (1994), 462–89, 474.

[4] See Heinz Schlaffer, 'Exoterik und Esoterik in Goethes Romanen', *Goethe Jahrbuch* 95 (1978), 212–28, 215.

[5] Orig. 'Hat Werther mit der Lektüre Homers seine seelische Gesundheit zu befördern und seine heftigen Leidenschaften zu regulieren versucht, so konsumiert er Ossians Dichtung wie ein verlockendes Gift.' Thorsten Valk, *Der junge Goethe: Epoche–Werk–Wirkung* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2012), 202.

demonstrate, this claim is hypocritical, for interpreters themselves unwittingly replicate the protagonist's idiosyncratic reading habits.

Generations of scholars have proved their inclination to deliver '*their* Werther' in a way that is reminiscent of the way the protagonist invokes '*his* Homer'. Since the book's first publication in 1774, the text has produced a tide of commentary that, as the present study contends, is indicative of its tendency to proliferate in the hands of its readers, growing into shapes and colours that evince a strange correspondence with individual readerly habits and interests. Spontaneous orders of signification emerge from the interplay between a malleable text and overambitious readers who seek singularity of meaning. In contrast to those readers who can keep up the illusion of accessing the text as if one could read it for the first time, the self-conscious, belated reader encounters a paradoxical situation: faced with an impressive spectrum of readings that were assembled across 250 years and among different audiences, one is time and again faced with claims of singularity. Today, the discrepancy between such semantic abundance and obstinate claims has a sobering effect on reading hyper-canonical works such as *Werther*. It has become impossible to uncritically embrace other readers' idiosyncratic ideas of '*their* Werther', let alone to naively discover 'one's own Werther'.

In this vein, this chapter hopes to wrest the book away from its appropriation by narrow interpretations and to search for what Roland Barthes called the 'plural' of the classic text. According to the French critic, '[t]o interpret a text is not to give it a […] meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it'.[6] That said, the quest for singular meaning is not dismissed as a pointless practice. After all, the isolation of meaning, even when it comes at the expense of the text's richness, has produced readings that have inscribed themselves profoundly into the text. In a way, they have become an integral part of *Werther*. Now, the challenge is to forge a generous understanding of a text's latency not by referring to a generic idea of plurality, following the formula *anything goes*, 'the *ultima ratio* of postmodernist theorizing',[7] but by a careful distillation process. The hope is that contradictory interpretations will be placed on an equal footing, so they can form a striking ensemble within the *Werther* nursery.

In search of a fitting framework to address *Werther* in a way that appreciates its 'plural', I first review the interpretative attitudes that have fostered a reductive view of Werther. This begins with Goethe's own account, including exemplary criticism from 19th-century Germany (Georg Gottfried Gervinus, Thomas Carlyle, Carl Gustav Carus) and those 20th-century analyses that have lastingly shaped how the book is read up to the present, as proposed by proponents of biographism, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis and discourse theory. To illustrate how these methods

[6] Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.
[7] Elrud Ibsch, 'The Refutation of Truth Claims', in *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. by Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997), 265–73, 270.

work in practice, I dwell on seminal *Werther* criticism by Kurt R. Eissler, Hans Robert Jauss, Anselm Haverkamp and Friedrich Kittler to see how their literary analyses prevent the acknowledgement of the plural. Following this meta-analysis, I give an account of reading techniques by Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida that seek to unlock the text's inner plural.

Since it is no longer possible to read *Werther* for the first time, this chapter proposes a simple framework to address the contradictory uses of a text across time and cultures. The horticultural metaphor of 'grafting' is not meant to replace conventional ideas of interpretation and reception, but to place an emphasis on both the creative aspects of this process and its destructive ramifications; after all, every successful interpretation suppresses and elides specific aspects of the text. To illustrate the text's independent interactions with different readers, I present five discrete *Werther* summaries that offer contradictory interpretations. This playful approach not only highlights the text's propensity to cater to different readers' needs, but also prepares the ground for the following chapters. The idea is that literary interpretation proceeds along a pathway that is also relevant to translation, interpretation and adaptation. The goal is not to formulate yet another rigid framework of literary interpretation, of which there already exist many, but to produce a mental map to better navigate the *Werther* nursery.

Polyphonic ideal and singular realities

Today, there is a growing consensus to suspend the imperative of fidelity. The introduction to an edited volume on adaptation observes 'that there is not the one and only meaning of a piece of literature which a responsible adaptation will translate into a new work of art. To the contrary, the meaning of the "original" will be enriched and re-actualized by the adaptation.'[8] This change of paradigm also applies to literary interpretations. A text can hold different meanings for different readers, a conviction that tallies with the fundamental tenet of liberal democracy: everybody is encouraged to form their own opinion.[9]

[8] Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner, 'Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation', in *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts*, ed. by Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 1–13, 1.

[9] In contrast to the humanities, where a postmodernist mindset allows rival methodologies to live and let live, political science still regards relativism with scepticism. In this vein, William Galston sharply differentiates democratic value pluralism from value relativism. Political theorists such as Hugh T. Miller portray postmodern relativism as a political virtue, but this is more the exception than the rule. See William A. Galston, 'Democracy and Value Pluralism', in *Democracy*, ed. by Ellen F. Paul et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 255–68; Hugh T. Miller, *Postmodern Public Policy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

William Shakespeare's dramas can serve as exemplary cases that only favour kaleidoscopic interpretation but render insular critical exploitation almost impossible. On the one hand, this effect is generated by the Bard's biographical invisibility, a feature that distinguishes premodern literature from the biographical paradigm in the late modern period. On the other hand, there are formal elements, such as the erratic typesetting of the Second Folio edition of 1623, which force diligent readers and editors to pick and choose among different semantic possibilities.[10] For critical analysis, Shakespeare's ambiguity had far-reaching consequences.[11] As early as 1963, before French theory's celebration of plural meaning, Ernest Schanzer characterised the semantics of *Julius Caesar* as a problem without a solution:

> Commentators have been quite unable to agree on who is its principal character or whether it has one; on whether it is a tragedy and, if so, of what kind; on whether Shakespeare wants us to consider assassination as damnable or praiseworthy; while of all the chief characters in the play contradictory interpretations have been given.[12]

Consequently, the Bard's oeuvre became emblematic of the plurality inherent to literature, an insight that Gary Taylor condensed in the formula: 'We find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him or what others have left behind.'[13]

The same applies to *Don Quixote* (1605/15). According to Miguel de Unamuno's pioneering analysis, the novel belongs to its readers more than to Miguel de Cervantes, the book's author. Even as the latter's traces are more visible than in the Bard's case, Unamuno's essay 'On Reading and Interpreting *Don Quixote*' ('Sobre la lectura e interpretación del *Quijote*', 1905) argues that the protagonist emancipated himself from his locally confined origin:

> Cervantes put Don Quixote out into the world, but Don Quixote himself has resolved to live in it. The good Don Miguel [i.e. the author] thought he had killed and buried him, then had his death certified by a notary so that no one would dare to resurrect him and make him go out again. But Don Quixote has resurrected himself, on his own and without consulting anyone, and now he goes about the world doing his own

[10] See Emma Smith, 'The Critical Reception of Shakespeare', in *New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Margreta de Grazia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 253–69, 253.
[11] *Macbeth* was seen as a play where 'language moves rapidly among many images and many linguistic possibilities'. Albert R. Braunmuller, *Macbeth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 45. Meanwhile, *Julius Caesar* has proven even more vexing with regard to its ambiguity. According to Wolfgang Clemen, the play's main principle lies in its use of enigmatic speech patterns and imagery, thereby generating a text void of moral judgement. See Wolfgang Clemen, 'Introductory Chapter about the Tragedies', in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945–2000*, ed. by Russ McDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 50–62, 50–1.
[12] Ernest Schanzer, *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare: A Study of Julius Caesar, Measure for Measure, Anthony and Cleopatra* (London: Routledge, 1963), 10.
[13] Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 411.

> thing. Cervantes wrote his book in the Spain of the early seventeenth century and for the Spain of the early seventeenth century, but Don Quixote has travelled through all the villages of the world during the three centuries that have elapsed since then.[14]

In this light, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *Don Quixote* appear as volatile entities. The tangible advantage of this approach lies in an epistemological generosity that places historical and contemporary, native and foreign readers on the same plane. When facing Shakespeare's enigmatic plays and the adventures of the Knight of the Sad Countenance, they are all placed at the same distance from the text.

Can the same be said about *Werther*? Do we find in *Werther* only what we bring to him? Has this protagonist, too, resurrected himself, so he can go about the world 'doing his own thing'? The early reception of Goethe's book appears to suggest this is the case. Quite unexpectedly for a text that revolves around a young burgher's love pains, the epistolary novel communicated across different social strata and gender divisions with surprising ease. In Karl Philipp Moritz's *Anton Reiser* (1785–90), for example, the poverty-stricken protagonist positively identifies with Werther's situation as well as his ideas, namely his praise for solitude and his idea that life is but a dream.[15] Meanwhile, English letters abound with female Werthers, whose refined sensibilities clash with the brutal demands of the everyday world.[16] Even the great Mary Wollstonecraft is portrayed as a 'Werther'.[17]

Drawing on such offshoots, Sandra Richter has pursued a Shakespearean approach to *Werther*. Richter emphasises the text's appeal to different groups of readers, including the English Romantics and Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s, and concludes: 'The text does not determine how it is perceived or interpreted; instead, it's the readers, their interests and interpretative habits. Literary

[14] Orig. 'Cervantes puso a Don Quijote en el mundo, y luego el mismo Don Quijote se ha encargado de vivir en él; y aunque el Bueno de Don Miguel creyó matarlo y enterrarlo e hizo levanter testimonio notarial de su muerte para que nadie ose resucitarlo y hacerle hacer nueva salida, el mismo Don Quijote se ha resucitado a sí mismo, por sí y ante sí, y anda por el mundo hacienda de las suyas. Cervantes escribió su libro en la España de principios del siglo XVII y para la España de principios del siglo XVII, pero Don Quijote ha viajado por todos los pueblos de la tierra y durante los tres siglos que desde entonces van transcurridos.' Miguel de Unamuno, 'Sobre la lectura e interpretación del *Quijote*', in *Ensayos V* (Madrid: Residencia de Estudiantes, 1917), 201–30, 213.

[15] See Karl Philipp Moritz, *Anton Reiser: Ein psychologischer Roman* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1979), 251.

[16] Notable examples of female Werthers include Sarah Farrell's poem *Charlotte, or a Sequel to the Sorrows of Werter* (1792), Anne Francis's *Charlotte to Werter: A Poetical Epistle* (1790) and Pierre Perrin's *The Female Werter* (1792).

[17] In William Godwin's memoirs, he takes her to exemplify the Wertherian type: '[W]e not unfrequently meet with persons, endowed with the most exquisite and refined sensibility, whose minds seem almost of too delicate a texture to encounter the vicissitudes of human affairs, to whom pleasure is transport, and disappointment is agony indescribable. This character is finely pourtrayed [sic] by the author of the Sorrows of Werter [sic]. Mary was in this respect a female Werter.' William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2001), 87–8.

reception is comprised of disfigured and modified narratives.'[18] Just as in the case of the Bard, all readers find themselves elevated into a position of equidistance to the text, regardless of their familiarity with historical context and access to sources. As a consequence, the art of interpretation finds itself reduced to episodes of spontaneous agreement between the text and its reader. The problem of unreliable reading, however, must not inaugurate a return to authorial intention, as proposed by E. D. Hirsch, who, 'on purely practical grounds', found it 'preferable to agree that the meaning of a text is the author's meaning'.[19] Neither should unreliable reading motivate the smooth transition from author-centred analyses to similarly rigid frameworks, such as the one proposed by Umberto Eco: 'a system of instructions aiming at producing a possible reader whose profile is designed by and within the text'.[20] Instead, the production of meaning itself deserves due attention. Regrettably, the *Werther* nursery has rarely inspired such curiosity so far.

Contrary to Richter's isolated appraisal of the book's journey across the globe, the text's central position in academic curricula has contributed to a certain *Werther* fatigue, a phenomenon that is intimately linked to the text's singular interpretations, which will be discussed in the next subchapter. According to many scholars, *Werther* is a riddle that was solved long ago and no longer warrants further investigation. This view is prevalent among the doyens of German studies who see their mission in distinguishing between worthwhile and stale topics of inquiry. The late

[18] Orig. 'Denn es liegt weniger am Text selbst, wie er wahrgenommen und gedeutet wird, als an seinen Lesern, ihren Interessen und Deutungsgewohnheiten. Rezeptionsgeschichten sind immer auch Geschichten der Entstellung und Abwandlung.' Richter, *Eine Weltgeschichte*, 21.

[19] E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 24. According to Hirsch, validity in interpretation is established by understanding the writer's intentions: 'Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent' (8).

[20] Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 52. Umberto Eco is a surprising case, for his heightened attention to textual openness comes hand in hand with the affirmation of strict interpretative limits. Eco's original argument, as put forward in *The Open Work* (*Opera aperta*, 1962), highlighted the semantic liberties that can be observed in equal parts in medieval epics and in literary, artistic and musical modernism. Eco argues: 'Every work of art, even though it is produced by following an explicit or implicit poetics of necessity, is effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality in terms of one particular taste, or perspective, or personal performance.' Eco, *Open Work*, 21. At first glance, Eco seems to endorse an atomised form of reading: every reader produces his or her own text, a process that is exacerbated by historical and cultural remoteness. The idea of radical openness, however, is kept in check by a number of factors that limit arbitrariness: the psychological situation of a text, including historical, social and anthropological considerations. As Eco clarified in subsequent studies, openness is a textual strategy that is, in fact, rather closed. It comprises 'a system of instructions aiming at producing a possible reader whose profile is designed by and within the text' and which can be 'extrapolated from it and described independently of and even before any empirical reader'. Eco, *The Limits*, 52. As Eco's Tanner lectures of 1990 demonstrate, his critical work takes cues from his self-awareness as a literary author. In this function, he happily takes note of many interpretations, notably of *The Name of the Rose* (*Il nome della rosa*, 1980), only to applaud their accuracy or to point out misapprehensions.

Gert Mattenklott, for example, regarded the text as so over-researched that he was unconvinced of the prospect of yet another seemingly innovative study of *Werther*. Tasked with writing a discussion of *Werther* criticism, he concludes:

> Every new generation of *Werther* readers claims to make new or discrete discoveries of obscure references, compositional devices or quotes. Time and again, critics readdress the relationship between the literary material and its aesthetics.[21]

Mattenklott's invocation of 'obscure references' and his emphasis on each generation's tiresome attempts at another round of reinterpretation leave no doubt. The overabundance of interpretations does not draw Mattenklott's attention to the text's malleability but culminates in a parochial gesture that reasserts the legitimacy of some interpretative choices over others.[22] Yet the critic's ostentatious disinterest in 'new or discrete discoveries' is difficult to take at face value; after all, his overview only accounts for hand-picked examples of *Werther* scholarship and shies away from documenting more outlandish or exotic interpretations. Mattenklott's preference to shield his own reading from destabilisation by incompatible viewpoints reiterates an interpretative routine frequently observed in the *Werther* nursery: the text is a highly curated entity, just as gardeners do not tire of trimming excess growth and cleaning the bark from moss, lichen and other pests. By pursuing this approach, Mattenklott follows in the footsteps of no less an authority than Goethe, who was also anxious to curate his own text.

Goethean singular

The most influential intervention against the text's multiple appropriations is put forward in Goethe's autobiography, *Poetry and Truth* (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 1811–33). Reflecting on a troubled period in his life, 1773 to 1774, the author recalls having thought about the best ways to end his life. Eventually, he sought to emulate Otho (32–69 CE), the Roman emperor who pierced his own chest with a dagger. Realising he was incapable of doing so, his mood underwent gradual transformation. The autobiographic subject explains: 'Since I never could succeed in this, I at last laughed myself out of the notion, threw off all hypochondriacal fancies, and resolved to live.'[23] This impressive gesture of self-assertion is

[21] Orig. 'Jede neue Generation von Werther-Lesern wirft nach immer neuen oder anderen Entdeckungen von hineingeheimnisten Anspielungen, kompositionellen Kunstgriffen oder Zitaten die Frage nach dem Verhältnis von kolportiertem Stoff und Artistik auf.' Gert Mattenklott, Entry on '*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*', in *Goethe Handbuch*, 4 vols, ed. by Gernot Böhme (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997), vol. 3, 51–100, 61.

[22] Mattenklott himself prefers Anselm Haverkamp's interpretation, which revolves around the text's ironic take on the protagonist's reading habits. See Mattenklott, 'Die Leiden', 76.

[23] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Auto-Biography of Goethe: Truth and Poetry: From My Own Life*, trans. by John Oxenford (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 509.

quintessential for the ethos of renunciation, a recurring theme in the works of the mature Goethe, and represents quite the antithesis to how Werther handles his sorrows. Given to self-pity, he is haunted by indecision until he resolves to die after midnight on Christmas Day. Meanwhile, Goethe moves on to become a celebrated poet and ducal administrator in Weimar.

The author's account of how he wrote *Werther* treats personal grief as marginal to the text. Instead, the central conflict is derived from another extraliterary source, the tragic story of another young man who indeed killed himself, Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem:

> For this purpose I collected the elements which had been at work in me for a few years; I rendered present to my mind the cases which had most afflicted and tormented me; but nothing would come to a definitive form; I lacked an event, a fable, in which they could be [surveyed]. All at once I heard the news of Jerusalem's death, and immediately after the general report, the most accurate and circumstantial description of the occurrence, and at this moment the plan of *Werther* was formed, and the whole shot together from all sides, and became a solid mass, just as water in a vessel which stands upon the point of freezing is concerted into hard ice by the most gentle shake.[24]

Drawing on the metaphor of super freezing, as this process is called, this account ostentatiously presents the genesis of *Werther* as a highly rational process. Hereby, Goethe fought back against the urban legend which had formed not long after the book's first publication in 1774, suggesting that it was in fact based on the author's love triangle in Wetzlar. This emphatically biographical stance fascinated audiences throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. *Poetry and Truth*, however, avoids mentioning the ominous Charlotte Buff and Johann Christian Kestner, instead placing the focus on the toxic effect of English literature, notably Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742–5), and Jerusalem, whose tragic biography indeed lends itself to a comparative analysis.[25] Goethe's belated interference emblemises the quest for literary singularity, even if it failed to satisfy Goethe folklorists such as Thomas Mann. What is more, the passage just quoted from *Poetry and Truth* consistently trims the richness of the text itself, as Goethe barely mentions the most significant legacy of the book, the protagonist's subjective virtuosity.

For academic readers who enjoy tracing intertextual references and self-commentary, this passage from *Poetry and Truth* was a blessing and a curse. While it helped paint a comprehensive picture of Goethe first as a young man, then as a thoughtful autobiographer, this nexus also buried the text under the weight of

[24] Goethe, *Auto-Biography*, 509.

[25] Roger Paulin's study meticulously collects all the information that is available on the young man's case, with the felicitous effect that Jerusalem is elevated from a footnote to Goethe's life to a personality in his own right. See Roger Paulin, *Der Fall Wilhelm Jerusalem: Zum Selbstmordproblem zwischen Aufklärung und Empfindsamkeit* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1999).

the author's narrative of self-conquest and renunciation. Consequently, *Werther* lost its autonomous status, instead becoming an appendix to the life of the author, who elevated himself above the emotional excess that the text so masterfully portrays. This self-interpretation was gladly taken up by the nascent field of literary criticism in 19th-century Germany, whose proponents had no use for Werther's gloomy musings but who were anxious to elevate Goethe to the status of a national cultural icon. Between 1835 and 1842, in the decade after the poet's death, Georg Gottfried Gervinus published one of the most influential studies of German literary history of the 19th century. His reflections draw on the cliché of Goethe's double nature, where self-control trumps sensibility, and incorporates his evolution as a writer into a teleological concept of literary history. To Goethe, Gervinus argues, *Werther* represented nothing but a literary exercise in preparation for the culmination point of German culture: Weimar classicism. Consequently, the epistolary novel only holds documentary value to underscore the tendencies that Goethe learned to suppress in himself: 'Its form and content not only belong to the disruptive and reformatory drive of youth, but also exemplify the restraint of a poet capable of taming exuberant material.'[26] This interpretation founded an academic consensus that remains as valid today as it was then: *Werther* is a novel written about the fate of an unhinged young man, written by another young man who wasn't unhinged at all but was in fact very much in control of his emotions.

The cliché of the author's moral superiority over Werther was not only attractive to Goethe's native readers but was also adopted by Germanophiles such as Thomas Carlyle. Thinking the poet worthy of the kind of literary worship typical of the Romantic generation,[27] Carlyle introduced Goethe to the British audience as a mature author who had moved on from juvenile excess. The preface to his translation of *Wilhelm Meister* (1824) makes a programmatic clarification:

> To such as know him by […] his *Werter* [*sic*], Goethe figures as a sort of poetic Heraclitus; some woebegone hypochondriac, whose eyes are overflowing with perpetual tears, whose long life has been spent in melting into ecstasy at the sight of waterfalls, and clouds, and the moral sublime, or dissolving into hysterical wailings over hapless love-stories and the miseries of human life. They are not aware that Goethe smiles at his performance of his youth.[28]

[26] Orig. 'Form und Inhalt gehören dem wühlenden und reformatorischen Bestreben jener Jugend an, aber beide sprechen zugleich die Mäßigung in dem Dichter aus, dem es gegeben war, die wilden Stoffe zu bändigen.' Georg Gottfried Gervinus, *Neuere Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen*, 5 vols (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann, 1840), vol. 4, 474.

[27] Paving the way for the bourgeois cult of the author, Coleridge drew on Kant's notion of the aesthetic genius. In a chapter on William Wordsworth, he formulated his exuberant idea that also informs Carlyle's enthusiasm for Goethe: 'The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity.' Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), vol. 1, 12.

[28] Thomas Carlyle, 'Translator's Preface', in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels: From the German of Goethe*, 2 vols (Boston, MA: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1865), vol. 1, viii–xiv, vi.

This programmatic rehabilitation of Goethe's persona across the Channel demonstrates how the serene self-assessment featured in *Poetry and Truth* bore fruit, rendering obsolete earlier interpretations of the epistolary novel, as seen in the wave of English female Werthers. Carlyle's preface faithfully reproduces the German poet's account of his spiritual maturation. Unsurprisingly, Goethe was immensely pleased when receiving a copy of his British admirer's translation of *Wilhelm Meister*.[29]

The most curious example of a Werther–Goethe juxtaposition was put forward by Carl Gustav Carus, a highly versatile artist and writer of the Romantic period. In his study on Goethe from 1863, he pursued the idea of measuring Werther's sickness against Goethe's health through a medical lens. Irritated by his contemporaries' contempt for the text, he encouraged them to change their perspective. The book, he argued, is less about a young man's sorrows and more about an author who leaped over an abyss. Other authors would have failed at this task and succumbed to the temptation of committing suicide themselves. During Goethe's Wertherian phase, 'his arch-spiritual nature eventually ejected all miasma, unrelentingly quelling the war waged by those little demons of the earthly realm, who haunt every brave man. Never coming to rest, there was this energy within his inner self, resolved to build something even more meaningful, more beautiful and magnificent.'[30] Since Carus regarded Goethe as an exemplary physiological organism, he speculated about the origins of the poet's health and made a somewhat surprising suggestion: 'Special attention should be placed on furthering our knowledge regarding the build of Goethe's skull.'[31] If his tomb were reopened, he insisted, this would present a great opportunity for craniological research.[32] In spite of Carus's recommendation, phrenology, then a burgeoning field of inquiry, did little to clarify why Goethe did not kill himself like Werther.[33]

[29] On 11 October 1828, Goethe applauds Carlyle's efforts to Eckermann, who then proceeds to elaborate: 'Den "Wilhelm Meister" zumal scheinen übelwollende Kritiker und schlechte Übersetzer in kein günstiges Licht gebracht zu haben. Dagegen benimmt sich nun Carlyle sehr gut.' *Goethes Gespräche*, ed. by Woldemar Freiherr von Biedermann, 10 vols (Leipzig: F. W. v. Biedermann, 1889–96), vol. 6, 348.

[30] Orig. 'auf merkwürdige Weise warf diese urgeistige Natur die Krankheitsstoffe, die das Leben herbeiführte, wieder heraus, mit unausgesetzter Thatkraft dämpfte er den Krieg, den ihm wie jeden Tüchtigen die kleinen Dämonen dieser sublunarischen Welt vielfältig und immer von Neuem erregten, und mit nie ruhendem Bestreben arbeitete es in ihm den Bau des eignen Innern immer bedeutender, schöner und mächtiger auszubilden.' Carl Gustav Carus, *Goethe: Dessen Bedeutung für unsere und die kommende Zeit* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1863), 70.

[31] Orig. 'Ich bemerke dies insbesondere in Beziehung auf die genauere Kenntnis vom Kopfbaue Göthe's [sic].' Carl Gustav Carus, *Göthe: Zu dessen näheren Verständnis* (Leipzig: Weichardt, 1843), 71.

[32] Based on a partial plaster cast of Goethe's head in his possession, Carus mentions having only found one similar forehead among one hundred samples: Napoleon's. Both heads feature the same extraordinary curvature of the frontal bone. Even when compared with people gifted with high intellectual faculties, enthuses Carus, Goethe and Napoleon exceed such measures substantially. See Carus, *Göthe*, 72–3.

[33] In fact, the field was more concerned with identifying an individual's proclivity to commit crimes as well as establishing hierarchies between ethnicities. In this context, Michel Foucault spoke of 'semiologies of crime' that tied physiological appearance to deficient behaviour. See Michel Foucault,

Although this specific interpretation of the author–protagonist dilemma did not leave a mark on the further development of Goethe studies, it can serve as a caricature to exemplify the strange habit of placing author and protagonist in competition with each other – in order to produce singular meaning. This trope was not confined to popular biographies but was also common among the most distinguished commentators, including early readers of the novel such as Georg Christoph Lichtenberg.[34] Conversely, this antagonism was also gladly picked up by those intellectuals who were critical of Goethe. Ludwig Börne, a member of Young Germany, was not only one of the most fanatical polemicists against Goethe but also belonged to the few critics who invoked *Werther* in positive terms. To him, the sentimental protagonist serves as a reminder that the reviled poet had been a free-spirited young man once, 'when he felt that he had a heart, that humanity existed around him, a God above him.'[35] But realising that he took a different turn in life, 'he was alarmed by his own heartbeat and panicked about the spirit of his abandoned youth.'[36]

In Goethe's case, the hunt for the singularity of signification has frequently led to an overemphasis on the author's biography at the expense of the protagonist. The underlying, somewhat contrived argument is that Werther's *Werther* differs from Goethe's *Werther*. The text's sentimental self-indulgence, celebrated by hot-headed readers, stands in opposition to the calm perspective of the writer, whose stern voice holds great appeal for the cerebral demographic that pens studies on *Werther*.

Battlegrounds

Remote as the discussed 19th-century ideas of the novel appear, the further evolution of literary criticism did not quite break with the clichés established in early

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Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1975), 257–92. Carus's *Atlas of Craniology*, his most extensive treatise on the subject, allows for one – quite pointless – conclusion: that the protagonist's skull would have had a different shape than Goethe's. Probably, it would show features similar to the woman who had committed suicide, as documented in Carus's *Atlas*. The back of her head, he explains, is quite prominent, indicating a person's innate determination to carry out extreme acts. Another reference could be Nicolaus Lenau, whose measures he finds inharmonious. See Carl Gustav Carus, *Atlas der Cranioscopie: Enthaltend dreissig Tafeln Abbildungen merkwürdiger Todtenmasken und Schädel* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1864), 93, 117.

[34] Lichtenberg found it unthinkable that Goethe should have thought up a fop like Werther without any ironic intention: 'Wenn Werther seinen Homer (ein albernes Mode-Pronomen) würklich verstanden hat, so kann er sicherlich der Geck nicht gewesen [sein], den Goethe aus ihm macht.' Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, ed. by Wolfgang Promies, 3 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1967), vol. 1, 527–8.

[35] Börne imagines that Goethe felt Werther's spirit for the last time in Venice, where he also penned *Venetian Epigrams* (*Venetianische Epigramme*, 1790): 'Venedig ein gebautes Mährchen aus Tausend und einer Nacht; wo Alles tönt und funkelt […] und vielleicht kam / Werthers Geist über ihn, und dann fühlte er, daß er noch ein Herz habe, daß es eine Menschheit gebe um ihn, einen Gott über ihm, und dann erschrack er wohl über den Schlag seines Herzens, entsetzte sich über den Geist seiner gestorbenen Jugend.' See Ludwig Börne, *Briefe aus Paris: 1831–1832* (Paris: Brunet, 1835), 16–17.

[36] Orig. '[D]ann fühlte er, daß er noch ein Herz habe, daß es eine Menschheit gebe um ihn, einen Gott über ihm, und dann erschrack er wohl über den Schlag seines Herzens, entsetzte sich über den Geist seiner gestorbenen Jugend.' Börne, *Briefe*, 17.

Goethe criticism. After the unification of Germany in 1871 and other historical caesuras had moved the *Goethezeit* into a distant past, the zeal that informed previous contests of interpretation continued unabated. Methodologically, biographism became an end in itself, as Goethe's works were primarily seen as parerga to his exemplary life. This tendency shows in the popular Goethe biographies of the early 20th century, including those of Albert Bielschowsky (1895/1903), Houston Steward Chamberlain (1912), Georg Simmel (1913), Friedrich Gundolf (1916) and Emil Ludwig (1920). These hagiographies warrant a study in their own right but hold little value for the examination of *Werther*.[37] During the second half of the 20th and the early 21st centuries, Goethe biographies continued to mushroom and, owing to their focus, reiterated familiar prejudices about *Werther*. Notable examples include the prize-winning biographies written by Rüdiger Safranski and Nicholas Boyle.[38] Arguably, the general appeal of Goethe's biography owes much to his exemplary double career as literary mastermind and administrator. After the original readership had disappeared alongside the author, readers hastened to reassemble the 'thousand small stones'[39] of his life, to use Bielschowsky's expression, into a new whole.

Published at a time when Weimar classicism began to be exploited for propagandistic purposes, Georg Lukács's *Goethe* study of 1936 attempted the rehabilitation of *Werther* as a text with socio-political significance.[40] Accordingly,

[37] Despite their shared fascination with the great man, internal disagreements among the five biographers could not be greater: Bielschowsky assumed that Goethe's life held the promise of Jewish integration via *Bildung*. See Caroline Jessen, 'Ambivalent Readings of World Literature: Goethe in the Writings of German-Jewish Readers in Mandate Palestine/Israel', *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 90.1 (2021), 72–9. Meanwhile, Chamberlain argues quite the opposite by invoking Goethe as an exceptional being who embodies the destiny of the Germanic people. Ludwig's eminently readable portrait, repurposing the poet as a paragon of democratic and humanist values, stood in contrast to Gundolf's biography, where Goethe was represented as a timeless cultural saviour. See Ernst Osterkamp, 'The Poet as Cultural Savior: Friedrich Gundolf's Goethe', *Telos* 176 (2016), 11–31.

[38] Both Boyle and Safranski endorse the idea that Goethe took an ironic perspective on the narration. Boyle explains: 'It was not in the first instance his recollections on which Goethe drew in writing *Werther* […]: he drew on his formulation of those events […], and he wrote a novel about the mind that wrote those letters, as well as about the man that met Lotte Buff.' See Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991–2001), vol. 1, 178. Meanwhile, Safranski argues: 'Goethe's ridicule of Werther-like sentimentalism could surprise only those who hadn't read *Werther* closely. For the novel presents Werther as a young man who has read too much of such literature.' Rüdiger Safranski, *Goethe: Life as a Work of Art*, trans. by David Dollenmayer (New York: Liveright, 2013), 209.

[39] Albert Bielschowsky's full quotation reads: 'Gerade das Bild von Goethes Leben muß aus tausend kleinen Steinchen zusammengesetzt werden, die allein der Forscher zu finden imstande ist.' Albert Bielschowsky, *Goethe, sein Leben und Werk* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1896), v.

[40] Ferenc Fehér regards the Goethe studies as Lukács's attempt to attack Stalinism and/or rescue German cultural heritage from appropriation by the propaganda of the Third Reich. See Ferenc Fehér, 'Lukács in Weimar', *Telos* 39 (1979), 113–36; Nicholas Vazsonyi, *Lukács Reads Goethe: From Aestheticism to Stalinism* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 1997), 84–134. Other scholars have emphasised the nostalgia present in the criticism of the exiled intellectual. See Wolfgang Harich, *Georg Lukács: Dokumente einer Freundschaft* (Baden-Baden: Tectum, 2017), 27–8.

Goethe's novel is a portrait of the German middle classes in the wake of the French Revolution. The study wrests the text away from its appropriation by bourgeois literary criticism, a line of inquiry which Lukács accuses of deliberately separating the epistolary novel from the political debates of the late 18th century. But instead of elaborating on the paradigmatic shift between biographism and historical materialism, Lukács dismisses the discrepancy between bourgeois criticism and his own, Marxist meta-analysis of *Werther* as a question of sheer intelligence.[41] This polemical stance is deliberate. Instead of acknowledging the semantic nodes that allow *Werther* to simultaneously fork into a Marxist text *and* a bourgeois narrative, he naturalises the former as irrefutable truth. This attitude certainly owes much to the immediate political context of the study, yet it also exemplifies a recurring rhetorical device in criticism: the creation of truth through polarisation.

In the post-war era, this polemical stance continued unabated, as evinced by the critical work of Emil Staiger, then one of the most celebrated literary critics in the German-speaking world. Staiger represented a new avant-garde that celebrated immanent textual meaning and claimed superiority over other methods, especially the kind of historical materialism that was associated with academe in the Eastern Bloc. Without mentioning names, his 1955 study on Goethe features an acidic footnote in reference to Lukács:

> Recently, a certain critic made an effort to consider Werther's critique of the German bourgeoisie to understand the book as belonging to a revolutionary process, as a precursor to class warfare. The book does not fit this purpose. […] Werther is by no means a revolutionary.[42]

Like Lukács before him, Staiger demonstrates little interest in engaging with his rival's methodology and, instead, simply asserts the implausibility of the entire notion.[43]

[41] Without reading *Werther* as an explicitly political text, Lukács argues that the narrative points to the continuities between revolutionary Enlightenment and Weimar Classicism. He belittles those who fail to take note of this connecting thread: 'Freilich ist es für das geistige Niveau der bürgerlichen Literaturhistoriker bezeichnend, daß die Feststellung des literarischen Zusammenhanges zwischen Richardson, Rousseau und Goethe unvermittelt neben der Behauptung des diametralen Gegensatzes zwischen "Werther" und der Aufklärung bestehen kann.' Georg Lukács, 'Die Leiden des jungen Werther', in *Goethe und seine Zeit* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1950), 19–40, 20.

[42] Orig. 'Die Kritik, die Werther sich an der deutschen Bürgerlichkeit erlaubt, hat neuerdings einen Forscher bewogen, das Buch als Phase des großen revolutionären Prozesses, als Wegbereiter des Klassenkampfes aufzufassen. Es eignet sich schlecht für diese Rolle. … So fühlt er sich auch nach der Szene beim Grafen nicht als Bürger zurückgesetzt, sondern als Mensch vom Menschen gekränkt und klagt nicht den Adel als solchen an, sondern jene, die sich so schlecht auf die Würde ihrer höheren Geburt verstehen. Nein, Werther ist kein Revolutionär.' Emil Staiger, *Goethe: 1749–1786* (Zurich: Artemis, 1952), 158.

[43] One does not even have to invoke ideological battlegrounds such as Marxism vs immanence to exemplify scholars' inability to map out the root cause behind interpretative disagreements. The following example, a letter exchange between Staiger and Martin Heidegger, is unrelated to *Werther* discussions, but it documents a situation when even proponents of the same method are at loggerheads

Singular meaning in the late 20th century

The following subsections give an overview of the critical analyses that treated the *Werther* nursery to a heavy dose of trimming and pruning, as the text's richness gradually consolidated in the state that corresponds to Mattenklott's ostentatious disinterest in 'new or discrete discoveries'. The discussed interpretations may date from the 1960s and 1980s but are considered paradigmatic and remain influential. Methodologically they are divided into antagonistic approaches: classic psychoanalysis, hermeneutics and discourse theory. My questions are: how do different methodologies engage with an overinterpreted text such as *Werther*? What do they make of contradictory conclusions? How do they situate themselves within the vast delta of the *Werther* nursery?

Needless to say, this overview cannot account for *Werther* scholarship at large. The primary aim is to evaluate a generation of critics who have, in contrast to exotic or more recent contributions, left a lasting mark on how the book is read up to the present.

Classic psychoanalysis (Eissler)

In contrast to classic biographism, psychoanalytic theory has the freedom to safely ignore author-sanctioned views. Instead, this approach claims to inhabit a higher plane where literary outputs are discussed as symptoms of anthropological fixtures that point at meta-historical patterns of behaviour. In contrast to the bulk of literary production, however, psychoanalysis has elevated isolated literary texts into carriers of universal truths. Kurt R. Eissler, a psychoanalytic critic, published two substantial studies on Goethe, his two-volume biography (1963) and the essay 'Psychopathology and Creativity' (1966). Since the biography uses *Werther* primarily as a cue for a discussion of the poet's encounter with Friedrich Plessing, this section focuses on the essay alone.

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about a poem by Eduard Mörike. 'To a Lamp' ('Auf eine Lampe') of 1846 tells of a ceiling lamp that is praised for its artifice but lamented for its abandoned state. The crux of Heidegger and Staiger's discussion is the polysemic German verb 'scheinen' in the last verse. The meaning of the poem changes depending on the interpretation of this verb, as 'scheinen' can either indicate uncertainty (*to appear like*) or invoke a light metaphor (*to shine*). While Staiger opts for uncertainty, the philosopher insists that the light metaphor is correct. Eventually, Staiger blames their argument on the difference of subject disciplines: 'It seems to me that the controversy between you and me is not a mere coincidence, but points at a salient difference between poetic and philosophic language.' The possibility that the linchpin of the entire discussion rests on the kind of grammatical ambivalence that indeed allows the refraction of meaning does not appear relevant to Heidegger. And while acknowledging the ambiguity itself, Staiger identifies subject specialisation as the source of uncertainty – rather than textual elements themselves. See Emil Staiger, *Die Kunst der Interpretation: Studien zur deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Zurich: Artemis, 1955), 40.

Eissler starts with the observation that while Sigmund Freud's theory is much indebted to the insights provided by poets, it says too little about the genesis of creativity itself. To make up for this deficit, Eissler draws on *Werther*, which supposedly illustrates the complex interplay between memory, daydreaming and writing. From the outset, he emphasises the discrepancy between the text's literary character and its ability to represent an action, as he observes: 'Though *Werther* is written in what may be called lyrical prose, the effect is nevertheless that of a realistic encounter with the world, in terms of absolute despair and the incompatibility of human existence with the world as it is and ever will be.'[44] The book's virtuosity, he continues, stems from the author's repetitive experience of denied love, commencing with the poet's first exposure to a melancholic Italian song, as overheard in his family home during his youth, through to his first rejection by a girl, an episode dating from his student years in Leipzig, up to the famed love triangle in Wetzlar. *Werther* represents the culmination point of a time-consuming process that evinces how the mind of a genius departs from textbook psychopathology. Eissler's idea is that all exceptional works are the products of a complex process that involves three stages: first, a trauma is consolidated through repetition; second, the final repetition triggers a phase of regression; and third, the writer's mind sets free the forces that are indispensable to literary creation. At this point, Eissler conjectures that the poet's conflicted episodes were 'stepping stones toward the organization of highest order, just as the cacophony of an orchestra in process of tuning its instruments is the first necessary step toward the production of polyphony'.[45]

Eissler does mention the possibility that non-psychological factors also play a part in the creative process, as one must consider 'the plurality of causative factors and the absence of a yardstick of completeness of explanation'.[46] Ultimately, however, the decisive factor is not language, plot construction or characterisation, but the inclusion of psychoanalytical truth: 'Without that autoplastic factor, works of art would affect us as beautiful but empty schemata, in the same way as we admire ornaments or the beautiful labyrinthine ambages of oriental tapestry, which arouse our aesthetic sense, without however introducing us into a new universe.'[47] Written at a time when modernism had already reshaped literature, Eissler's account shows how much psychoanalysis remains indebted to a late 19th-century bourgeois aesthetics. After all, Freud already stated that '*all the aesthetic pleasure* which a creative writer affords us has the character of a fore-pleasure […], and our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in

[44] K. R. Eissler, 'Psychopathology and Creativity', *Imago* 24.1 (1967), 35–81, 56.
[45] Eissler, 'Psychopathology', 59.
[46] Eissler, 'Psychopathology', 74.
[47] Eissler, 'Psychopathology', 75.

our minds'.[48] It remains ruled out that the narrative gives away anything else than the story. It is only consistent that Eissler shows no interest in the work itself that allegedly produced 'polyphony'. In contrast to Goethe's letters and diary entries, the novel is not quoted from or referenced in any way. After all, its function is to serve as a token to attest Goethe's autoplastic feat. This observation also extends to Eissler's two-volume biography of the poet. Here, plot elements of *Werther* serve as documents of Goethe's traumatic relationship with his sister, Cornelia.[49]

Classic psychoanalysis reduces literary texts to sophisticated riddles to be solved by the cognisant observer – but otherwise serve little purpose.[50] That said, psychoanalysis underwent substantial transformation in the second half of the 20th century, notably in the hands of theorists who embraced post-structuralism. In psychoanalysis-inspired *Werther* criticism, this development shows in Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus's Lacanian study from 1977, which ignores the text's autobiographical elements in favour of a more general analysis. Accordingly, Werther's fraught relationship with Lotte is caused by his projection of the mother imago onto her, a psychological tendency that is rooted in the epochal upheavals of the period.[51] Despite such developments, Eissler's *Werther* survives in recent contributions on clinical psychology, such as Rainer Holm-Hadulla's argument that Goethe's 'life and work can […] serve as an excellent example enhancing our understanding of the relationship between anxiety, depression and creativity'. The writer's therapeutic strategies should 'reinforce and refine modern views'.[52]

So how does Eissler address the existing body of *Werther* criticism and the possibility of multiple meanings? While he tacitly inherits conventional ideas about the text's genesis, the general assumption is that neither Goethe's biography nor specific passages from *Werther* need further analysis. In a way, Eissler's primary source is Goethe's own autobiography, *Poetry and Truth*, from which he

[48] Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (London: W. W. Norton, 1995), 436–43, 443. My emphasis, J. K.

[49] Accordingly, *Werther*'s core topic is Goethe's loss of Cornelia, who married Johann Georg Schlosser. The impossibility of Lotte's possession derives from her function as an ersatz sister to him. See K. R. Eissler, *Goethe: A Psychoanalytic Study*, 2 vols (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1963), vol. 1, 85–118.

[50] Freud himself expressed doubt about this approach when he addressed the possibility that his *Gradiva* interpretation exemplifies just 'how easy it is to find what one seeks and what one is engrossed with, a possibility of which most strange examples are recorded in the history of literature'. Sigmund Freud, *Delusion and Dream in Wilhelm Jensen's Gradiva*, trans. by Helen M. Downey (Copenhagen: Green Integer, 2003), 281. Such moments of doubt, however, are quickly neutralised by Freud's programmatic assertion that writers and psychoanalysts draw from the same sources of anthropological insight.

[51] See Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus, 'Werthers Krankheit zum Tode: Pathologie und Familie in der Empfindsamkeit', in *'Wie froh bin ich, daß ich weg bin!' Goethes Roman* Die Leiden des jungen Werther *in literaturpsychologischer Sicht*, ed. by Helmut Schmiedt (Würzburg: Könighausen & Neumann, 1989), 85–146.

[52] Rainer M. Holm-Hadulla, 'Goethe's Anxieties, Depressive Episodes and (Self-)Therapeutic Strategies: A Contribution to Method Integration in Psychotherapy', *Psychopathology* 46 (2013), 266–74, 266.

derives the insights that the author himself concealed from himself when writing the text, such as the tripartite genesis of his literary masterwork, and which he finally acknowledged in his autobiography. To argue that there is more to *Werther* than the interplay between conscious and unconscious processes would appear pointless to Eissler.

Hermeneutics (Jauss, Haverkamp)

In the post-war era, Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics offered an alternative to plain biographism and the aesthetic disinterest shown by psychoanalysis. Gadamer rejected the idea that belated readers must put themselves in the place of the original audience of a work, let alone that of the writer. In fact, any work of art contains an essence which benefits from a gradual atrophy of meaning, an effect facilitated by temporal remoteness.[53] At the peak of hermeneutics' dominance of German literary criticism, Hans Robert Jauss presented his *Werther* study as part of his magnum opus, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (*Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*, 1982). Drawing on Gadamer's epistemology, Jauss uses *Werther* to trace a literary dialogue across the French–German border, as Goethe's work enters into a strained relationship with another seminal novel of the time, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie* (1761). Accordingly, the unsuspecting audience of *Werther* expected a text that would conform to the moral standards of *Julie*; instead, they encountered, to their great shock, a text that exhausted the tragic potential of romantic love and gave primacy to aesthetics over exemplary behaviour.

Drawing on this observation, Jauss not only takes issue with Enlightenment critics who argued in favour of more readerly guidance, but also reprimands *Werther* fanatics who idolised the protagonist and mistook him for a model of virtuous behaviour: 'Perfect and vivid presentation *inadvertently* contributed to the idealization of Werther's sorrows, thus creating the impression that the perfectly represented action is also perfect in itself.'[54] The mistake made by early audiences, argues Jauss, was to ignore the implicit instructions that accompanied the text. In the history of art's gradual movement towards aesthetic autonomy, readers of *Werther* found themselves exposed to a form of art they could not process adequately.

[53] According to Gadamer's hermeneutic cycle, the existence of 'positive prejudices', one of the most awkward concepts found in Gadamer's epistemology, saves the belated reader from having to rely solely on his or her own judgement. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2006), 298.

[54] Orig. 'Die Vollkommenheit und vergegenwärtigende Kraft der Darstellung führt *ungewollt* zu einer Idealisierung der Leiden Werthers, die den Anschein erweckt, als ob das so vollkommen Dargestellte an sich selbst vollkommen sein müsse.' Hans Robert Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 632–3. My emphasis, J. K.

This interpretation perfectly illustrates Gadamer's idea that temporal distance can afford the critic a type of authority that asserts itself not only against unexpected audiences abroad, but also against a text's initial readers. Both lack the 'positive prejudices' that facilitate 'the most primordial kind of knowing'. In contrast to psychoanalysis, this kind of analysis ignores the writer by attributing supreme insight to the historian of literature. Jauss's interpretation does not include any polemics against antagonistic contemporary interpretations as seen in those of Lukács and Staiger. His condemnation is reserved for the group of readers that could not take advantage of the atrophy of meaning, the precondition of true understanding.

Also published in 1982, Anselm Haverkamp's analysis of *Werther* showed the compatibility between hermeneutics and deconstruction, an approach that had started to gain traction in German academe. In this vein, Haverkamp understands the text as an elaboration on the problem of transmitting and feigning emotion through writing. His Werther is not part of a 'vivid and perfect presentation' but is first and foremost a reader. Explicitly drawing on Jacques Derrida, Haverkamp regards Werther's letters as supplements of a life that vanishes behind poetic representation, a dilemma that articulates itself in the observation that his feelings dry up as soon as he stops writing. Haverkamp's rather hermetic description of this process reads as follows: 'This epistolary novel presupposes […] an implicit reader as fictional reader who provides the reflexive figure of the implied reader, whose role is feigned rather than firmly established.'[55] In other words, Werther's letters are meant to give away the protagonist's delusions, a process that corresponds to the letter-writing routines of Goethe and his literary colleagues.[56] In a way, this insight rephrases established biographical insights in more abstract terms.

Regardless of Haverkamp's merits as a bridging figure to connect German hermeneutics and French post-structuralism, his interpretation not only recycles a familiar view of *Werther* but also advances a highly idiosyncratic understanding of Derrida's investigation into Jean-Jacques Rousseau's childhood memories, as described in *Of Grammatology* (*De la grammatologie*, 1967). Here, the autobiographer's erotic memories of his caretaker, Mademoiselle de Lambercier, introduce the notion of the supplement, a process that, applied to Rousseau's memories, enforces the subject's separation from the enjoyment of passions. In Jean-Jacques's fantasy, the represented memory will forever outshine the actual erotic event in the past, an observation that Derrida paraphrases as follows: 'I renounce my present life, my present and concrete existence in order to make myself known in the ideality of truth and value.'[57] This stance emblemises a problem that lies

[55] Orig. 'Der im Briefroman implizierte Mitleser ist als ein fiktiver Leser […] die Reflexionsfigur des impliziten Lesers, dessen Rolle er fingiert, nicht festlegt.' Anselm Haverkamp, *Klopstock/Milton–Teleskopie der Moderne: Ein Transversate der europäischen Literatur* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2018), 134.
[56] See Haverkamp, *Klopstock/Milton*, 135.
[57] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 143.

at the heart of logocentric culture, in which real-life counterparts of the signified 'have always already escaped, have never existed'.[58] While Derrida's supplement primarily addresses the relationship between speech and writing – a stance that culminates in his oft-quoted formula: 'There is nothing outside of the text'[59] – Haverkamp turns this wide assessment into a narrow psychological critique. Accordingly, Werther's script-obsessed experience of life is nothing more than a personal pathology. One cannot fail to observe that this selective portrait of Werther is coupled to an equally reductive account of Derrida, whose notion of the eternally supplemented experience results in shaming Werther for getting caught up in a web of words. Arguably, literary history knows of many readers who encounter similar problems – one may think of Don Quixote and Madame Bovary – but who have encountered greater sympathy among critics. Despite such idiosyncrasies, Haverkamp's interpretation informs the consensus among academic *Werther* readers today.[60]

In view of the central idea of the present analysis, both Jauss and Haverkamp are unsuitable candidates for the discovery of the text's diffusion into a semantic plural. Both infer correct reading instructions, Jauss from a transhistorical and Haverkamp from a moral perspective on the text.

Discourse theory (Kittler)

In the case of *Werther*, discourse analysis affords the critic considerable freedom from the often self-referential cosmos of Goethe studies. Alongside Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' ('La mort de l'auteur', 1967), Michel Foucault's essay 'What Is an Author?' ('Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?', 1969) contributed to a revaluation of literature, which is from then on conceived as a network of discursive statements rather than testimonies of heroic individuals. Applied to the *Werther* universe, this means that the poet's self-interpretation no longer needs to be endorsed, corrected or contradicted.

Dating from 1980, Friedrich Kittler's account oscillates between discourse analysis and media theory and has been characterised as 'vintage early Kittler: ingenious, erratic, one-sided and intriguingly abrasive'.[61] The analysis explicitly draws on

[58] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 159.
[59] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.
[60] After Mattenklott canonised Haverkamp's idea of *Werther*, a recent study by Oliver Simons reiterates the idea that the protagonist's epistles are meta-reflections on the genre. In view of the exuberant letter dating from 10 May 1771, Simons argues: 'The entire letter is written as a simile, as it were, one that reflects on its own mode of representation.' In this study, Werther's use of the conjunction 'like' serves to underscore the self-reflexive outline of the text. Oliver Simons, 'Werther's Pulse', *Goethe Yearbook* 27 (2020), 31–6, 33.
[61] Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, 'On Friedrich Kittler's "Authorship and Love"', *Theory, Culture & Society* 32.3 (2015), 3–13, 3.

Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (*L'archéologie du savoir*, 1969), in which the French philosopher argued that arrangements of the enunciative field determine sociocultural formations more than anything else.[62] Taking the cue from this approach, Kittler elaborates on a historical rupture within the love discourse, which he exemplifies by the contrasts between a segment of Dante's Canto V of the *Inferno* and *Werther*. Both texts tell of romantic pairs of readers: in Dante's case, Francesca and Paolo, who read *Lancelot*; meanwhile, Werther and Lotte treat themselves to the poetry of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and James Macpherson. Kittler's analysis embeds *Werther* within a wider network of discourse formation, in which symbolic, social and political dimensions overlap. Global literary themes such as love and self-expression, often invoked as universal themes, in fact conceal the inner contradictions between late medieval Florence and late 18th-century Germany, which materialise in Werther's sexual habits and his medialised experience of the world. Kittler argues: 'Everything is changed. The word *love*, despite its timeless ring, cannot bridge or conceal the discrepancies. The lovers have different bodies with different gestures, different organs and they pursue different adventures. Their encounters take place in different times.'[63]

Kittler highlights the importance of reading culture for Werther: to him, every experience requires representation through the literary form. In contrast to Jauss's argument, this literary sphere is defined not by different reading techniques but by different codes of corporeality. Quite unlike Dante's lovers, Lotte and Werther's sexual encounter must be deferred, as the motifs of spiritual communion – linguistic expressiveness and the silent exchange of glances – suffice to exhaust their love. Yet this kind of disembodied love takes a corporeal toll on the letter writer. Since his only correspondent is the reading public and physical gratification remains unattainable, the letter writer's soliloquy points to masturbation, a sexual practice that, interpreted in pathological terms, received much attention during the late 18th century.[64]

Having clarified the historical rupture that informs *Werther*, Kittler proceeds to deliver a polemical verdict on rival interpretations. He ridicules scholars who failed to see the masturbatory undercurrents in Werther and focused on other aspects instead: 'Werther, a Christ-like figure. Werther, a thwarted revolutionary. Whatever perspectives are brought up in German studies, such apercus are squashed by how Werther appears in Albert's cold gaze: as a loner and just as idiotic (in the Greek

[62] See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Phaeton, 1972), 98.
[63] Orig. 'Nichts also ist dasselbe geblieben. Das eine Wort Liebe, das wir so zeitlos hören, kann den Gegensatz nicht überbrücken und nicht verdecken. Es sind andere Körper mit anderen Gebärden, anderen Organen und anderen Abenteuern, die zu verschiedenen Zeiten zueinander kommen.' Friedrich Kittler, 'Autorschaft und Liebe', in *Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1980), 143–77, 145.
[64] See Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone, 2003).

sense of the word) as any loner.'[65] When Kittler calls Werther 'idiotic', he forcibly opens the semantic field that surrounds the Greek slang word *malakas* (μαλάκας), which also designates someone who masturbates. This is a remarkable interpretation. Lacking any text-internal hints, Kittler draws on the common idea that desire is pathological unless it leads to physical gratification. In Werther's case, it leads to his suicide. Within the love triangle, Albert assumes the unexpected role of the representative of a bygone era of sexual prowess, in which the men of fiction still slept with their women instead of idolising them as Werther does. In diagnosing this historical shift between Dante and Goethe, Kittler puts forward a contrived argument that Geoffrey Winthrop-Young criticises as circular: 'A partition is established and then everything that does not belong on one side – above all, the problematic connection between reading, mimesis and physicality in *Werther* – is transferred to the other.'[66] What is more, Kittler also undermines his own horizontal analysis by heaping ridicule on Werther's celibacy rather than seeking to understand it.

Although it is worthwhile to imagine Albert's side of the story, Kittler's idea of 'squashing' alternative interpretations destroys the hope that discourse theory might help activate the plurality of literature. Nonetheless, this iconoclastic interpretation left a lasting impact on *Werther* criticism. On the one hand, Nikolas Wegmann followed Kittler's example without reproducing the latter's polemics, thereby producing one of the most nuanced portraits of literary sentimentalism.[67] On the other hand, scholars followed in his footsteps by tracing the protagonist's sexuality, though in a more sympathetic way. Notable examples include Günter Sasse and Michael Gratzke.[68]

Uses of the text

Irrespective of their methodologies, individual *Werther* studies seek to displace each other instead of situating themselves within a specific section of the *Werther* nursery. Cursory attacks on rivals and self-assertive gestures choke off attempts to address a text's plurality. The critical juxtaposition of the insights produced by

[65] Orig. 'Werther als Christusfigur, Werther als verhinderter Revolutionär – dergleichen germanistische Einfälle werden zunichte vor der Tatsache, daß er in Alberts kalten Augen der Einzelne und so idiotisch wie (auf griechisch) jeder Einzelne ist.' Kittler, 'Autorschaft', 147.

[66] Winthrop-Young, 'On Friedrich Kittler', 7.

[67] According to Wegmann's study, Werther's quest for authenticity sees him abandon the most integral social institution of sentimentalism: polite conviviality. Excessive expectations towards intimacy render him unable to engage in intimate relationships and suspends him in a self-destructive void. See Nikolaus Wegmann, *Diskurse der Empfindsamkeit: Zur Geschichte eines Gefühls in der Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1988), 105–16.

[68] Günther Sasse, 'Woran leidet Werther?', *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 117 (2000), 245–58; Michael Gratzke, 'Werther's Love: Representations of Suicide, Heroism, Masochism and Voluntary Self-Divestiture', *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 81.1 (2012), 26–38.

biographism, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics and discourse analysis nevertheless reveals a shared outlook on interpretation: they assert a clear preference for the invocation of singular meaning. One may argue that their vastly different insights have little to do with the analysed text but owe much to the immediate context of the interpretation. There is no outsider's perspective on the text, as interpretation is inevitably situated in circumstances that have led up to the act of interpretation and require the critic to broach the text from a certain angle.

In scholarship, to acknowledge the fundamental arbitrariness of literary texts is frequently met with sarcasm. Umberto Eco, for example, finds that the value of literature is compromised altogether once a text is invoked to 'get something else, even accepting the risk of misinterpreting it. […] If I tear out the pages of my Bible to wrap my pipe tobacco in them, I am using the Bible.'[69] For Eco, a firm believer in textual singularity, *use* implies desacralisation, even if his example, the Bible, in fact tells a different story. Like no other example of world literature, this text – or rather anthology – has become impossible to distinguish from its many uses, as reflected in its multi-layered genesis and historical transformations.[70]

While a more generous perspective on the use of literature is hardly controversial today, this approach must pay attention not only to the creative gains of such use but also to the neglect or damage that is inflicted on the original text. To understand the puzzling interactions between the text itself and the authoritative gesturing of belated critics, it is imperative to keep in mind a striking passage in Gérard Genette's *Palimpsests* (1982). Here, the great narratologist conceives of reading as a process that reduces complexity in a manipulative way: 'To read means to choose, for better or for worse, and to choose means to leave out. Every work is more or less amputated right from its true birth: that is to say, from its first reading.'[71] And although this statement contrasts with Genette's general faith in competent readers, who engage with texts in a nuanced manner, this observation fittingly describes the damage that is inflicted on *Werther* in the process of interpretation. This shows when certain aspects of the protagonist's personality are ignored or when biographical details drown out the book's stand-alone qualities. The book also suffers considerable damage when the letter's passionate tone, arguably one of its most outstanding characteristics, is placed in a purely psychopathological context. In a way, the first step of successful interpretation includes the amputation of significant aspects of the text. Then, the truncated material is – sometimes smoothly, sometimes forcefully – integrated into a new network of meaning. The following paragraphs gauge the discussed interpretations with regard to the kinds

[69] Eco, *The Limits*, 57.
[70] For an overview of how biblical texts were read and reread throughout history and how their application changed, see Henry Wansbrough, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).
[71] Genette, *Palimpsests*, 229–30.

of damage they inflict on the text and how they make use of the remaining bits of the text.

To begin with, the biographers took Werther for a hopeless case and had little patience for the lyrical despair of the suffering individual. Further, by taking the book as a mere by-product of fashionable sentimentalism, Goethe amputated all those elements that set the book apart from, say, less exciting examples of literary sentimentalism, such as Johann Martin Miller's *Siegwart* (1776) or Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline* (1788). Allegedly, the answer to Werther's sorrows lies in the author's personal maturation and abstinence from world-weariness and melodramatic moods. Understandable as it is for any writer to invoke their own life experiences – be they authentic or feigned – as intimately connected to their creative work, this narrative was also keenly reproduced by the poet's adulators, such as Gervinus, Carlyle and Carus. In their eyes, *Werther* was not much more than an appendix to Goethe's life. This biography-focused approach connects two highly unstable frames of reference, life and work, to forge the myth of the Great Man.

In Eissler's study, biographism is exacerbated by a refusal to acknowledge the literary character of a text. Here, writing *Werther* is not a way out of one's troubled life circumstances. Instead, emphasis is directed towards the epistolary novel's role in documenting psychological healing through creativity. Once again, this instance of selective appropriation reduces the text to a token of the writer's genius, as the lyrical quality of its prose, its character portraits and even the tragic end itself pale in comparison with the writer's autoplastic healing. Eissler's analysis culminates in the assertion that poetry and psychoanalytic technique are intimately connected. Not Werther, but Goethe is elevated into a position of authority right next to Freud, as psychoanalysis portrays itself as a technique not external to the Western cultural canon but in fact as continuing its commitment to self-knowledge into the 20th century.

Although uninterested in the person Goethe, Jauss also prefers to look at *Werther* from afar. In contrast to the text's original audience, the critic knows better than to consider the protagonist a hero worthy of imitation; instead, he delineates the changed aesthetic norms between Rousseau's *Julie* and *Werther*. This hermeneutic approach invokes a text-external contract that leaves little room for actual observations on Goethe's literary style or Werther's ambivalences. As ethereal as Jauss's belief in temporal distance and semantic atrophy may appear, this methodological preference also reveals a utilitarian aspect: Jauss's desire to establish a sovereign position for himself to avoid moral judgement.[72] The supposed

[72] In academe, Jauss has transformed from one of the most influential figures in Romance studies in Germany into a cancelled author. After the revelation of his stellar career in Nazi Germany, his use of the hermeneutic method is now increasingly understood as driven by a desire to simulate a sovereign position to avoid moral judgement of his own deeds. In Ottmar Ette's analysis, this shows

transcendence of immediate context turns out to be just as embedded in historical contexts as each one of Werther's letters.

Haverkamp's interpretation holds a conventional view of the text's implicit manual, resulting in the portrait of Werther as a keen reader who is quite unable to establish any meaningful interaction with the external world. In contrast to his predecessors, Haverkamp's insights prioritise the protagonist's reading habits, a specific focus of attention that is inspired by a Derridian attention to the deferring function of linguistic signs. In a way, Haverkamp's piece makes the case that deconstruction is not only a French methodology for French texts, but that it can be just as well applied to German canonical texts. Finally, Kittler further transforms Werther from Haverkamp's reader into a solitary man to ultimately reject the protagonist's alleged auto-sexuality as risible. The self-congratulatory undertones of this analysis are a product of the hopes that Kittler's generation placed in sexual liberation for the renewal of gender relations.

The *Werther* nursery, as these examples show, is ruled by interpretative operations that inflict damage on the text. Understanding proper implies the restriction of meaning. When the amputated limbs go unnoticed, it is because an interpretation accords with the rules and conventions established by habit, cliché or a specific school of thought, be it biographism, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, discourse theory or another methodological orientation. It is only when they clash with each other, for example when Kittler scolds other readers for their unwillingness to accept Albert's viewpoint, that readers give in to polemical attacks.

Admittedly, the present meta-analysis of *Werther* interpretations itself reproduces the same techniques that it critiques: the arguments put forward by Goethe, Eissler, Jauss, Haverkamp and Kittler were first selectively appropriated, then embedded into new arguments. To suit the present analysis, these accounts were reduced to their *Werther*-related argument, when it is true that all pursue a more comprehensive mission. Goethe's *Poetry and Truth*, for example, aims to represent his life as a paradigmatic development of the human soul. Eissler advances an inquiry into why Freud stopped short of providing a theory of creativity. Jauss, Haverkamp and Kittler gauge the aestheticised reading experiences that emerged during the late 18th century. And yet there is some benefit gained by those reductive accounts: in isolation from the overall argument, the thinness of their engagement with *Werther* becomes apparent.

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most clearly in *Paths of Understanding* (*Wege des Verstehens,* 1994). Arrogating a morally superior position, Jauss, a former SS officer, decries today's loss of humanist values. See Ottmar Ette, 'Ein hermeneutischer Fall: Jauss und die Zukunft der Romanistik', *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 10.3 (2016), 118–26, 123.

In praise of the plural

To accept the plurality of meaning as constitutive of reading and interpreting means to live with the loss of a basic assumption: the conviction that, crossing oceans of time, readers of *Werther* have the same text before their eyes. No matter how competent the readers, *Werther* will always be truncated and remixed. Since the resulting plural cannot be neatly fitted into a hierarchy with, say, modern interpretation on top and historical ones at the bottom, one has to picture them as coexisting on a horizontal plane.

While the idea of literature's unrestricted use is uncontroversial in view of postmodern *anything goes*, the situation changes when remote audiences come into play, as the text's original cultural frame is replaced by another one. What legitimacy do interpretations possess when they are articulated by individuals who are less knowledgeable about German literary history and its sociocultural specifics? Indeed, the resulting misunderstandings belong to the most frequently discussed themes of old-school comparative literature. Whether Spanish poets are said to have misunderstood Dante or whether Dostoevsky was mistaken for a proto-Sartre in the post-war era,[73] cross-cultural encounters are prone to be dismissed as communication failures. As the geographic and cultural disparity increases, the situation becomes more severe. Sinic ideas of the West, for example, are then summed up as 'failures of imitation or failures of understanding',[74] while their Western equivalents, such as Hegel's idea of China, are compared to 'a sinking raft whose passengers can never be sure what must be tossed overboard next'.[75]

A fabulous anecdote can serve to illustrate the challenge of envisioning literary interpretation in a global world. In I. A. Richards's recollections about teaching English literature at Tsinghua University, Beijing, in the 1930s, the English critic mentions the students' misreading of Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). When discussing the heroine's love affair, her subsequent pregnancy and her cruel rejection by her father, Richards was astonished to see his students applying a completely different value system to the text. In contrast to the common understanding of Tess as a tragic heroine who deserves the readers' sympathy, they showed disdain. To them, having been raised with Confucian values, she was an unfilial daughter who deserved her punishment.[76] Their ignorance of Hardy's ethics, goes Richards's assumption, produced an invalid reading.

[73] See David William Foster, 'The Misunderstanding of Dante in Fifteenth-Century Spanish Poetry', *Comparative Literature* 16.4 (1964), 338–47; see also Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008), 136.
[74] Eric Hayot, 'Vanishing Horizons: Problems in the Comparison of China and the West', in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. by Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 88–107, 102.
[75] Haun Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 186.
[76] See Rodney Koeneke, *Empires of the Mind: I. A. Richards and Basic English in China, 1929–1979* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 66.

This unexpected reading demonstrates that cultural distance often results in a plural, if only accidentally. The students detached the text from its established context and applied it to another. But aside from the curiosity value of this anecdote, the students' reaction brings to light a pertinent feature of Hardy's text itself: that is, the narrator's discretion in not recounting Tess's rape in chapter 11. Researchers have already pointed out the resulting ambivalence, as readers are free to imagine the heroine as being either raped or willingly seduced.[77] This case exemplifies one of the virtues of comparative research: once we strip a text from its canonised reception history, our attention is not necessarily directed at cultural essentials, but at a text's semantic architecture.

Is it possible to apply the same perspective to *Werther*? In the absence of a comparable anecdote told by a German teacher in Beijing, Guo Moruo's preface to his 1922 translation of *Werther*, quoted in the Introduction, may serve as a reference point. While Richards's students advanced an ad hoc interpretation of *Tess*, Guo's meditations on *Werther* are the product of an intense examination of its aesthetic appeal, resulting in an introduction, a full translation and *Werther*-inspired novellas. While Chapter 3 fleshes out the socio-political context of Guo's reading, it must suffice at this point to note that his idea of *Werther* contradicts one of the fundamental tenets of Goethe studies, the sharp distinction between author and protagonist. While some observers would consider this an example of incompetent reading, others may appreciate Guo's determination to explore the text on his own terms. Today, at a time when critical orthodoxy has turned *Werther* into a stale text, it seems worthwhile to take note of such interpretations that, owing to their unusual claims, were previously marginalised by literary studies. Another East Asian reader of *Werther*, Kamei Katsuichirō, went as far as conceiving of the protagonist's suicide as a heroic deed. Writing in 1937, Kamei argued: 'Werther alone wants to be the one who suffers. […] In fact, his love is an act of selflessness.'[78] As Chapter 4 argues, this interpretation taps into a hidden stratum of meaning that was long obscured in criticism, the text's affirmative stance towards death.

Without going into detail, it is safe to say that Guo's and Kamei's *Werther* readings repeat the same process that can also be observed in the interpretations by Eissler, Jauss, Haverkamp and Kittler. The question is not *if* an interpretation is guilty of deliberately using the text, only *how* it makes use of it. This realisation confronts the belated reader with an irritating challenge: is it conceivable to regard, say, Guo's and Haverkamp's interpretations as equivalent and equally

[77] See Christine DeVine, *Class in Turn-of-the-Century Novels of Gissing, James, Hardy and Wells* (London: Routledge, 2005), 99.

[78] Orig. 'ウエルテルは自分ひとりだけが犠牲になわち。[…] すなわち, 彼の恋は無償の行力にほかならぬ。' Kamei Tatsuichiro 亀井勝郎, *Education of Man* (人間教育 Ningen kyōiku) (Tokyo: Mikasa Shobo, 1950), 98.

valuable? Do Lukács and Staiger both speak the truth? If all those rival opinions turn out to be equally legitimate, what kind of text is *Werther*?

Target orientation

To some extent, comparative literature undermined its own *raison d'être* by excessively invoking the paradigm of misunderstanding. Today, it has transformed into one of the academic fields that have learned to live with the malleability of texts. This stance is best exemplified by David Damrosch's influential book *What Is World Literature?* of 2003, in which the author characterises world literature primarily as the result of creative reception processes: '*All* works cease to be the exclusive products of their original culture once they are translated; all become works that only "began" in their original language.'[79] What is more, world literature is defined as 'writing that gains in translation',[80] thus elevating the products of transfer processes over homogeneous intra-cultural appropriations. Texts legitimately change meaning in translation, but in a positive way. Damrosch's approach is affirmative about the decontextualising uses of literature. When held against the paradigm of misunderstanding, this represents nothing short of a transvaluation of values.

For comparative literature with special consideration of Chinese letters, Haun Saussy's *Translation as Citation* of 2017 exemplifies the virtues of directing critical attention away from the Original. This carefully argued book understands Chinese reception histories as autonomous creative feats in their own right. Saussy's starting point is the moment when translation, understood as the search for equivalents, stops and facilitates the coupling of native concepts with foreign imports. Conventional reservations against such appropriations address the corruption inflicted on imported concepts by excessive concessions to familiar ideas. Disguising the foreign behind the familiar may actually result in eliding the foreign, thereby neutralising its disruptive force. In contrast to the expectation of linear flows, Saussy promotes a more generous approach on the basis of macaronic language. Accordingly, languages are never conceived of as being singular but are always mixtures of different languages from the outset.[81] There are no neat boundaries, as Hafez's poetry, sometimes alternating between Arabic and Persian, demonstrates. Such melanges point at the heterogenic composition of culture at large: 'No language actually has a border or a center, although we speak as if they

[79] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 22. Emphasis in the original.
[80] Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 291.
[81] Despite the Derridian ring of this approach, Saussy never cites his work. Derrida's treatise on mono- and bilingualism starts out with a paradoxical double proposition: '1. We only ever speak one language. 2. We never speak only one language.' Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or: The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. by Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 7.

do when categorizing translations as "nativizing", "foreignizing", and the like.' This observation 'should provoke us to restore the macaronic to its rightful place both in literary language and in the process of language change'.[82]

For the present analysis, Saussy's treatment of Xu Zhimo's translation of Baudelaire into Chinese is most relevant. Just like Guo's *Werther*, Xu's translation of 'A Carcass' ('Une Charogne', 1857) is accompanied by a programmatic preface in which Xu's exegesis of the poem invokes the Zhuangzi (3rd century BCE), an ancient text collection, to illuminate the French poem. Despite this apparent incongruence, Saussy takes Xu's approach seriously:

> A study of translation as reception might build the case that Baudelaire is translatable only where there is prior knowledge of Plato, Augustine, Dante, Pascal, and their scales of value; only then can Baudelaire antagonize and pervert. But Xu Zhimo does not have to reproduce the conditions for the existence of a 'Chinese Baudelaire' in order to perform his translation-cum-appropriation.[83]

This reassessment of Xu's Baudelaire not as Baudelaire, but as a 'Chinese Baudelaire', protects the translated text from a patronising assessment that would paint the foreign appropriation as a corruption of the Original. Saussy views the inclusion of Zhuangzi into an interpretation of the French poet not as a case of a forceful interpretation that results in misunderstanding, but as a happy coincidence: 'Accident, collision; nothing to see, no follow-up. On this account, Baudelaire and Zhuangzi, having met by coincidence in an elevator, tip their hats and depart.'[84] Perhaps out of fear of deriving a new transcultural universal from this encounter, Saussy stops here and abstains from a more comprehensive assessment.[85]

Grafting

In exploring the target of a literary transfer at the expense of its source, Damrosch and Saussy inherit the convictions of post-structural literary criticism. Shifting the focus away from the Original, Roland Barthes's influential study *S/Z* (1969) and Jacques Derrida's notion of citational graft articulated an epistemology that frees texts from their commitment to fixed meaning. Aiming to discontinue a fixture of bourgeois culture, the cult of the Original,[86] Barthes described the latter

[82] Saussy, *Translation as Citation: Zhuangzi–Inside Out* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.
[83] Saussy, *Translation*, 39.
[84] Saussy, *Translation*, 38.
[85] Saussy safely steers clear of invoking Daoism as a transcultural reference point, as Joseph Needham did in the 1950s, speaking of 'naturalistic pantheism' as a common denominator in Laozi, Zhuangzi and Parmenides alike. See Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), vol. 2, 37–8.
[86] See Hannah Freed-Thall, 'Adventures in Structuralism: Reading with Barthes and Genette', in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by Matthew Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 61–71, 66.

in purely negative terms: the reader is 'plunged into a kind of idleness',[87] as the ideology of singular authorship 'reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages'. Meanwhile, the conceptual opposite holds great promise: 'To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it. Let us first posit the image of a triumphant plural, unimpoverished by any constraint of representation (of imitation).'[88] The result, a cacophonic plural, defies orderly notions of meaning that can be successfully reproduced across the oceans of time, but is described poetically as 'spread[ing] like gold dust on the apparent surface of the text'.[89] The author fades into the background, while readers 'gain access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing'.[90] Barthes exemplifies this approach by his lengthy running commentary on *Sarrasine* (1830), a novella by Honoré de Balzac. The text's overabundance of codes prevents a conclusive interpretation, proving Barthes's point that 'the text is ultimately unconquerable'.[91]

Jacques Derrida's 'Signature Event Context' ('Signature événement contexte', 1971) first discussed the horticultural metaphor that stands at the heart of the present study, the notion of 'citational graft'. Here, the triumphant plural is defended not against an author-centred literary industry, like in Barthes's case, but against the philosophy of language, notably John Searle's reassertion of representational semiotics. Like in previous works, for example *Of Grammatology*, Derrida makes his case by tracing the decentred workings of language as such. Written signs, he reminds his readers, maintain their readability even after being stripped from their original context and when grafted onto a new one. The salient point is that original writing scenes vanish yet leave the readability of the text unaffected. Its meaning, however, changes amid this process. Abandoned to 'essential drift', written signs are subject to manipulation, can be turned into a quote instantly and turned upside down. The common semiotic practice of citational graft is described as follows:

> [The sign] can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of 'communicating,' precisely. One can perhaps come to recognize other possibilities in it by inscribing it or *grafting* it onto other chains. No context can entirely enclose it.[92]

Writing as grafting is not a means of passing on identical meaning but uses one element, the rootstock, to act as the foundation for another element, the scion. When

[87] Barthes, *S/Z*, 4.
[88] Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.
[89] Barthes, *S/Z*, 9.
[90] Barthes, *S/Z*, 4.
[91] Freed-Thall, 'Adventures in Structuralism', 64.
[92] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. by Alan Bass (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 9. My emphasis, J. K.

pressed together and joined by tape or string, the two elements join their tissues and start to form a single integrated organism.

Applied to language, this concept draws attention to the rupture embedded into the structure of writing. At the bottom of language, Derrida argues, there lies not singular meaning, but citation: 'Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written […], in a small or large unit, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable.'[93] As a consequence, literary interpretation opens a gate into the plural of signification rather than unveiling singular units of meaning. Intended meaning is replaced by the observation of how meaning emerges as an unintentional product of human cognition. As the author-persona disintegrates, there no longer exists a fixed self to be expressed.[94] In literary theory, this approach continues to be discussed to this day.[95]

In transcultural studies, the divestment from the author-scriptor in favour of a text's new audiences also resonates in Jin Huimin's idea of cultural fluidity. Arguing that academe should break away from the 'sedentarism' derived from Martin Heidegger, Jin argues in favour of a fluid notion of culture: 'Culture has never stopped flowing. Culture is always clashing, dividing, merging and looking for new heterogeneities to emerge. No national culture today is born independent, and no nation has one single origin.'[96] According to Jin, once cultures engage in a dialogue, the involved parties are subject to mutual transformation, facilitating mutual exploration as well as self-negation and self-reconstruction.

As an antidote to previous disaffection towards creative reception histories, the strand of inquiry first proposed by Barthes and Derrida and later exemplified by Damrosch, Saussy and Jin can provide helpful examples that legitimise an inquiry into the plurality of *Werther*. In this light, the Chinese students' reading of *Tess* is completely rehabilitated. Such interpretations deserve to be acknowledged as products of the essential drift of literary texts, a factor that orthodox readers consider a threat rather than an opportunity. Today, the epistemology

[93] Derrida, *Limited Inc*., 12. Emphasis in the original.

[94] To Derrida, the outside of the text, including information such as the writer's biography, remain relevant, but only to evince the dispersal and dismemberment of subjectivity in writing. See Maud Ellmann, 'Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis', in *Deconstruction: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Jonathan D. Culler (London: Routledge, 2003), 3–28.

[95] The most prominent discussion of the concept was provided by Jonathan Culler. See Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 134–56. For a more recent discussion of Derrida's grafting, see Uwe Wirth, 'Zitieren Pfropfen Exzerpieren', in *Kreativität des Findens: Figurationen des Zitats*, ed. by Martin Roussel (Paderborn: Fink, 2013), 79–98.

[96] Jin Huimin, 'Existing Approaches of Cultural Studies and Global Dialogism: A Study Beginning with the Debate around "Cultural Imperialism"', *Critical Arts* 31.1 (2017), 34–48, 38. See also Jin Huimin 金惠敏, *Global Dialogism: A Cultural Politics for the Twenty-first Century* (全球對話主義：21世紀的文化政治學 Quanqiu duihua zhuyi: 21 shiji de wenhua zhengzhixue) (Beijing: New Star Press, 2012), 1–26, 97–103.

behind literary criticism has changed in a fundamental way. Now the verdict of misunderstanding – just like the whole idea of linearity – appears like an invalid shortcut, put forward by scholars who did not take the trouble to engage with the messy details of reception processes.

The horticultural metaphor of grafting provides a useful image: an organism that is, after targeted manipulations, transformed into a new entity that interacts with its environment in different ways than the original one. Such focus on the fluidity of language, however, ignores the damage that is incurred in this process. To produce a rootstock, one must discard elements of the existing organism; likewise, the weight of the Original is perhaps discarded too hastily in target-focused approaches. Barthes's appreciation of the triumphant plural produces an intricate index of connotation for *Sarrasine*, yet he cannot accommodate the wealth of Balzac interpretations that already exist. In lieu of recognising the prejudices that have clustered around the text, he uses the text as a mirror of allusions and connotations that he personally finds relevant. There is no regard for those interpretations that lie beyond his personal and cultural archive. Derrida's notion of citational graft also has its shortcomings. While drawing attention to changed meaning, he leaves a pertinent question of the metaphor unaddressed: is there a natural limit to the scale of grafting? Should one distinguish between the theoretical possibilities of the grafted text, many of which will wilt before they bloom, and those that emerged as historically relevant? Finally, Saussy treats Charles Baudelaire and 'Chinese Baudelaire' as two discrete entities, without discussing the orthodox Baudelaire that goes missing in this process. Which elements does Xu appropriate selectively to produce this assimilated figure?

This disregard for the text's history is accompanied with a hesitancy to pursue target orientation to the fullest extent. If world literature indeed indicates texts that 'only "began" in their original language', as Damrosch contends, why not concede to them the status of true autonomy? What hinders us from acknowledging *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Shaonian Weite zhi Fannao* (少年維特之煩惱, the book's Chinese title) and *Juntei rō no hiai* (准亭郎の悲哀, one of the book's many Japanese titles) as unrelated texts? After all, a text – possibly even that of the author – changes every time it is inserted into a new chain of signification. Regardless of the sensible commitment to target orientation, there exist psychological or, perhaps, moral scruples to acknowledge their full autonomy.

Back to Werther: The Either–Or

At this point, it seems fitting to give the floor to one of the most impassioned advocates of the floating plural: Werther himself. Throughout the first part of the novel, he happily acknowledges the plurality of signs. In relation to Lotte, he savours the ambiguity of her affections and also refuses to come to a decision with regard to the

nature of her feelings. Soon after meeting Lotte for the first time, Wilhelm, Werther's epistolary correspondent, urges him to make a firm decision: either to find a way to woo Lotte or to give up. Irritated by this proposition, the protagonist retorts:

> Only remember one thing: in this world it is seldom a question of 'either … or.' There are as many shadings of conduct and opinion as there are turns of feature between an aquiline nose and a flat one.
>
> Thus, you mustn't think ill of me if I concede your entire argument and still contrive to find a way somewhere between the 'either … or.'
>
> I hear you say: 'Either you have hopes of obtaining Charlotte, or you have none. Well, in the one case, pursue your course and press on to the fulfilment of your wishes. In the other, be a man and try to get rid of a miserable passion which will enervate and destroy you.' My dear friend, this is well said – and easily said. (*L* 30)

Wilhelm's well-intentioned recommendation triggers a word salad that appears defensive at first glance. Perhaps he wants neither to test Lotte's love, as the first option suggests, nor to exert self-control, as the other option requires. Yet Werther's answer is not necessarily evasive and deluded; after all, his response also addresses a question of formal logics that endows the Either–Or formula with a philosophical dimension. While in logic the Either–Or option represents an alternation, Werther interprets it as a gradual distinction: the distinction between actively pursuing Lotte or forgetting her is just as impossible as classifying an average nose as aquiline or flat. After all, there exist plenty of nuances in between, including hooked, bulbous and droopy noses. In Werther's argument, his relationship to Lotte corresponds to a spectrum rather than an alternation. His hopes of obtaining Charlotte depend on circumstances that are subject to constant change, including her signals, Albert's presence and Werther's own mood. In the light of such instability, the Either–Or formula represents a conjunction, a situation when both logical operands can be true: he does have hopes, *and* he does not. He longs for Lotte, *and* he does not.

In philosophy, the possibility of double validity has met its most original analysis in Ludwig Wittgenstein's commentaries on bistable perception.[97] Famously, he meditated on the rabbit–duck, a schematic drawing that he regards as representative of ambiguity at large.[98] The image shows a one-eyed head, with two extensions protruding that allow viewers to interpret them as rabbit ears first, then as a duck's bill. Or vice versa. Since the simultaneous perception of both images is

[97] Wittgenstein's elaborations of bistability are scattered across the works *Philosophical Investigations*, *Remarks on Colour* and *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. The core of these meditations can be found in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 194–9, 205–7.

[98] Wittgenstein's example does not address an existential situation like *Werther* does. The philosopher's primary concern is the interpretation of sensory input, not just optic, as in the duck–rabbit problem, but also linguistic. Wittgenstein's example is a German phrase: 'Weiche Wotan, weiche!' This statement

impossible, only one aspect 'flashes up' at a time, while the other one disappears. In Wittgenstein's thought, the solution to this problem lies not in accepting one aspect and rejecting the other one, but in the realisation that perception is itself an act of interpretation. We not only see but also interpret sensory input.

Werther's take on bistability – that is, Either–Or, understood as a conjunction – reiterates this observation. Depending on circumstances, Lotte's gestures can be interpreted as affection or disinterest. Only one aspect 'flashes up' at a time. While embracing bistability does not make life easier, it allows him to savour the situation, tracing nuances in Lotte's and his own behaviour. As she departs in a carriage, for example, he starts to evaluate her signs:

> I tried to catch Charlotte's eye. Her glance wandered from one to the other, but it didn't light on me – on me, who stood there motionless, on me who alone saw her. My heart bade her a thousand adieus, but she didn't notice me. The carriage drove off, and my eyes filled with tears. I looked after her: suddenly I saw Charlotte's bonnet leaning out of the window, as she turned to look back – was it at me? My dear friend, I don't know. And I am suspended in this uncertainty; but it is also my consolation: perhaps she did turn to look at me. Perhaps! (*L* 25)

In this scene, Charlotte's bonnet resembles Wittgenstein's rabbit–duck head. Werther awaits Lotte's reaction but invests little energy to transform the bonnet into a decipherable sign of encouragement or rejection. Instead of forcing a reaction in Lotte, for example by waving frantically (or by giving himself an unaffected air) so that she notices him, he makes sure not to endanger this state of suspension. Lotte, too, is a virtuoso in creating the ambiguous signals that Werther so desires. On the one hand, her inviting behaviour features open flirtation with the protagonist, including touching his feet with her own under the table (16 July 1771), and, in the 1787 edition, exchanging indirect kisses via the canary bird (12 September 1772). Yet Lotte also rejects his advances several times and, after banning him from her home, provides Werther with pistols – which he ostensibly requests for a journey. There remains a tension between what could appear like her intention to ensnare Werther and her commitment to the life she leads as Albert's wife. While such psychological complexity would not be unheard of in 18th-century fiction, the text rarely inspired equally complex accounts of the protagonists' inner lives.

Only towards the end of the text does the protagonist's commitment to Charlotte's ambiguous bonnet give way to definitive resolutions. Now he dreams of possessing Lotte, of murdering Albert, and he abandons his detached attitude to worldly affairs, notably through speaking up in defence of the young farmhand

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can be understood as a command that Wotan, a Germanic God, should back off. Alternatively, it represents the order that Wotan should bring soft-boiled eggs. The latter option, Wittgenstein concedes, is unusual, but not impossible to imagine. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen über die Farben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 23.

who murdered his rival in love. Upon hearing the news, Werther is immediately overwhelmed with sympathy – not for the victim, but for the perpetrator. He even vows to save him from the hand of justice, as the editor explains: 'Werther […] did not give in, and even suggested that the judge look away if someone tried to help the prisoner escape' (*L* 68). A strange proposition coming from a man who had previously hardly considered eloping with his beloved! At this point, Lotte's possession turns into the actual goal. In the text's reception, however, this goal is often considered integral to Werther's desire. The conflict that plays out on the novel's superficial plane, Lotte's marriage to someone else, has inspired many adaptations of the text that solve this impasse, starting with Friedrich Nicolai's prosaic idea of Lotte's divorce from Albert,[99] through to Werther's successors in Goethe's oeuvre, who would ideally avoid rousing their passions excessively. Only recently, attentive readers have raised the radical possibility of Werther's complete disinterest in Lotte's possession. It seems perfectly possible to conceive of him as having never desired her in the first place. But that, one should never tire to point out, only represents one readerly option among many others.

In-betweenness

Before giving in to singularity, Werther positively accepts his suspended status between multiple options and has no intention of changing it. This stance not only contrasts visibly with the fixation on singular meaning as pursued by those who explore a text's true meaning (Goethe, Eissler, Jauss, Haverkamp, Kittler), but also offers an alternative to tracing only those layers of meaning that a text produces among its remote audiences (Damrosch, Saussy, Jin).

As Werther's Either–Or and Wittgenstein's rabbit–duck drawing demonstrate, the reader can happily contemplate both options without having to force a choice. The difference is that with every additional interpretation, the observer can discover new shapes in the drawing. The careful evaluation of the tension between the textual root and its transtextual proliferation inverts the order between primary and secondary texts. Manipulations are performed, not only by invasive editors, unseeing translators and free-spirited literary successors, but also by those readers who firmly insist that they do not simply 'use' but understand the text. The idea that a text should correspond to one correct interpretation presupposes a coherent, immutable environment, one that corresponds with the 'quasi-religious'[100] quality

[99] Friedrich Nicolai's *Sorrows and Joys of Werther, the Man* (*Die Leiden und Freuden Werthers des Mannes*, 1775) tells of their marriage and the subsequent period of marital fatigue. As Werther turns into a new Albert, another young lad steps on the scene to ignite Lotte's feelings and turns Werther into a cuckold.

[100] See Paul Kahl, 'Goethehäuser in Weimar und in Rom und die Geschichte der deutschen "Kulturnation"', *Studi germanici* 6 (2014), 269–81, 271.

of the Goethehaus, but hardly with the cycles of praise, critique and manipulation inflicted on classic texts such as *Werther*. In the end, the text was masterfully penned by Goethe but no less masterfully assimilated by its readers. Protruding like Charlotte's bonnet in the mentioned passage, the text's ambiguity facilitates the work of the reader, namely interpretation, translation and adaptation.

To accept the plural, however, takes effort. Contemplating the text, readers could find themselves sharing Werther's fit of jealousy when, having just finished dancing with Lotte, he declares: 'I vowed at that moment that a girl whom I love […] should never waltz with another, even if it should be my end' (*L* 17). Mimicking Werther, the reader avows: 'I should never waltz with another interpretation, even if it should be my end.' It's *this* interpretation or none. And faced with the text's polyphonic qualities, the jealous reader would also experience Werther's irritation when he complains bitterly: '[Women] can't always succeed in keeping two rivals on good terms, but when they do, they are always the ones who benefit' (*L* 29). While Werther's statement reveals his latent misogyny, such chauvinism is not lost on possessive readers who cannot accept the text's unique ability to keep multiple rivals on good terms – not only Lukács and Staiger, but also Jauss and Guo Moruo, and Kittler and Kamei Katsuichirō. In this light, Mattenklott's angry statement that '[e]very new generation of Werther-readers claims to make new or discrete discoveries of obscure references, compositional devices or quotes' must be understood as a case of interpreter's jealousy. He sneers at a text that went through the hands of too many interpreters. Indeed, when accepting the text's use, one must also learn to live with its wounded appearance.

The impossibility of naive reading reaps a great benefit, as it facilitates greater awareness of how textual transmission operates across time and cultures. A triad of factors plays out in the interaction between the original and its interpretations. The *selection of the rootstock* facilitates the selective appropriation of the text. This is not a simple case of some sections being addressed with more emphasis than others; instead, this process leads to the *elimination of incompatible elements*. At this point, the interpreter may resort to mocking those who take more interest in other parts. Simultaneously, the *addition of a scion* facilitates the text's incorporation into a new context.

Five examples of grafting

Werther not only exemplifies the virtue of indulging in the plural but also demonstrates how grafting works in practice. Arguably, his most successful method of keeping the ambiguity of Lotte's affection at bay is his cultivation of a material fetish. Since encountering her in person leaves him perplexed, he increasingly finds consolation in a material *pars pro toto*: her pink ribbon. Originally, she wore

it during their first encounter at the ball,[101] then on a later occasion, she and Albert gifted him an edition of Homer wrapped with the same pink ribbon. While it is unclear whether this gift is the result of their naive generosity or pure malice – why should they stir Werther's passions with such a personal gift? – the recipient reacts joyfully to their complicated act of kindness: 'You see how they anticipate my wishes, how well they understand all those little attentions of friendship.' From then on, Werther possesses an item that is metonymic of Lotte, allowing him to experience the ecstatic fusion of past and present: 'I kissed the ribbon a thousand times, and in every breath inhaled the memory of those happy and unrecoverable days which filled me with the keenest joy' (*L* 38). Reminiscent of Lotte's ribbon, the reader's fixation on specific scenes also establishes a *pars pro toto* that attributes special signification to isolated segments of the text. They eliminate the perplexing presence of the object of study by establishing a hierarchy between the signifiers. Like dramas and epics, novels comprise dozens, sometimes hundreds of scenes that in sum form the kaleidoscopic plural of a work. The selection of a rootstock keeps such semantic abundance to a limit. When reduced to isolated scenes, the text can be successfully conquered.

The final section of this chapter experiments with a playful approach to literary polysemy that connects curated sets of quotes to grand interpretations. When isolated quotes coagulate into narratives, they result in biased plot summaries. Despite their alleged neutrality, practice shows that the brevity of summaries is afforded by the creation of dominant standpoints and moralising judgement.[102] Consciously building on this distorting effect, the present analysis uses plot summaries as compasses to manoeuvre the ever-changing aspects of the text. The main themes of the following summaries start with *irony* and *overidentification*, two rather familiar views of the novel. Then the polyphonic range of the text is further explored with a focus on socio-political *rebellion*, metaphysical *transcendence* and romantic *masochism*. While *rebellion* can be considered a prelude to Chapter 3 of this book, *transcendence* and *masochism* are primarily experimental summaries based on isolated statements sourced from scholarship. Each case example balances the interplay between rootstock, discarded material and scion differently.

[101] The ribbon epitomises what Barthes defines as the erotic: 'it is intermittence […] which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces.' Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 10.

[102] Gérard Genette's elaborations on the 'reader's digest' also apply to plot summaries. In his analysis, he diagnoses a conflation of different areas of competence in this text genre: on the one hand, they are critical metatexts, which are supposed to elucidate the text's meaning; on the other hand, they are hypertexts, for example parodies or continuations, written as adaptations and corrections of the original. See Genette, *Palimpsests*, 241–5.

Graftage 1: Irony

In contemporary scholarship, one of most widely accepted ideas about *Werther* is the text's supposed irony towards the protagonist. This is convincing because a number of passages create a disjunction between Werther's subjective ideas and a more down-to-earth perspective. The following set of quotes provides the ingredients of an interpretation that endorses distanced reading:

> 21 June 1771:
> When I go out to Wahlheim at sunrise, and with my own hands gather in the garden the sugar peas for my own dinner; and when I sit down to string them as I read my Homer, and then, selecting a saucepan from the little kitchen, fetch my own butter, put my peas on the fire, cover the pot, and sit down to stir it occasionally – I vividly recall the illustrious suitors of Penelope, killing, dressing, and roasting their own oxen and swine. Nothing fills me with a more pure and genuine happiness than those traits of patriarchal life which, thank Heaven! I can imitate without affectation. (*L* 20)

> 8 August 1771:
> Today I found my diary, which I have neglected for some time, and I am amazed how deliberately I have entangled myself step by step. To have recognized my situation so clearly, and yet to have acted like a child! Even now I see it all plainly, and yet seem to have no thought of acting more wisely. (*L* 31)

> 26 November 1772:
> I often say to myself, 'You alone are wretched; all others are happy; no one has ever been tormented like you.' Then I read a passage of an ancient poet and it is as if I looked into my own heart. I have so much to endure! Have men before me ever been so wretched? (*L* 62)

These three quotes give away the protagonist's delusional mindset. There is a discrepancy between the triviality of his actions, such as cooking sugar peas, and the heroic models he invokes. In the third quotation, Werther's ludicrous claim suggests that his suffering exceeds the pain represented in ancient poetry – suffice to say that his situation pales in front of the dehumanising violence depicted in the *Iliad*. The note dating from 8 August is an addition to the 1787 edition, showing a Werther who appears cognisant of his deteriorating mental state but who stubbornly continues to treat, as he says, his heart like a sick child, gratifying its every fancy.[103] The discrepancy between the invoked ideals and the triviality of his woes opens an entrance for interpretation that identifies with the editor's perspective, who regards Werther from a commiserative but sceptical distance.

Many accounts of the novel are informed by this perspective, including those of Goethe himself, his biographers and, of course, Haverkamp and Kittler.

[103] The original quote reads: 'I treat my heart like a sick child, and gratify its every fancy' (*L* 7).

The summary featured in the *Britannica* entry on *Werther* exemplifies this kind of grafting:

> The novel is the story of a sensitive, artistic young man who demonstrates the fatal effects of a predilection for absolutes – whether those of love, art, society, or thought. Unable to reconcile his inner, poetic fantasies and ideas with the demands of the everyday world, Werther goes to the country in an attempt to restore his well-being. There he falls in love with Charlotte (Lotte), the uncomplicated fiancée of a friend. Werther leaves but later returns, feeling depressed and hopeless no matter where he lives. Torn by unrequited passion and his perception of the emptiness of life, he commits suicide.[104]

Although this summary is hardly intended to be provocative, it makes a factual mistake and several problematic assumptions. Lotte's fiancé is not Werther's friend to begin with but they make each other's acquaintance at a later date. This summary also infers its own hypotheses that depart significantly from the text. The first is the assumption that Werther's mental condition already existed before he moved to the countryside. This is plausible but speculative. Moreover, by characterising Lotte as an uncomplicated woman, the summary reproduces a common, simplistic idea of Werther's beloved. It is only on her first appearance that she comes across as uncomplicated and innocent: when she slices bread for her siblings before leaving for the ball.

The *Britannica* summary indicates a perspective on the text that opens it to new fields of reference, thereby coupling the truncated rootstock with new scions. While Kittler draws a historical comparison to Dante, other scholars use the text's irony to place *Werther* in the literary proximity of anthropological novels of the *Goethezeit*. In this light, Werther becomes an overenthusiastic, pathological character reminiscent of Karl Philipp Moritz's Anton Reiser and Christoph Martin Wieland's quixotic heroes Don Sylvio and Agathon. Alternatively, ironic *Werther* complements the positive vision of renunciation, as articulated in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* novels, for example. Here, idiosyncratic pathological tendencies are ideally kept in check through self-cultivation and community guidance, two correctives that Werther lacks.

The subsequent works of Goethe are not the only scions that can be related to *Werther*. The ironic perspective lends itself to a whole range of literary adaptations, including Nicolai's somewhat philistine mini-drama *The Joys of Young Werther* (*Die Freuden des jungen Werther*, 1775). Here, the protagonist's woes are addressed as a problem with a simple solution: why doesn't Albert magnanimously hand Lotte over to his rival? Broached from this angle, the epistolary novel is even compatible with the requirements of secondary school,

[104] Anon., Entry to 'The Sorrows of Young Werther: Novel by Goethe', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Sorrows-of-Young-Werther [last accessed 10 June 2021].

for example, where students are encouraged to imagine alternative, happy endings to the text.[105]

Graftage 2: Overidentification

The second entrance, sympathetic identification with the protagonist, has dominated the reading public's initial response to *Werther* and facilitated a strand of reception that Goethe invokes negatively, thinking of it as a product of literary fashion. The following set of quotes selects those ingredients that allow reader and protagonist to merge into one, as Werther transforms into a paragon of the romantic lover. The focus is on an unspecific feeling of sadness and acceptance of a tragic fate.

> Motto:
> I [i.e. the editor] have carefully gathered together, and present to you here, everything I could discover about poor Werther's story. You will thank me for doing so, I'm sure. His mind and character can't but win your admiration and love, his destiny your tears.
>
> And you, good soul, who feels the same urge as he, take comfort from his sufferings and let this book be your friend if, due to fate or personal responsibility, you can find no closer one. (*L* 3)
>
> 21 June 1771:
> My days are as happy as those God gives to his saints; and whatever be my fate hereafter, I can never say that I haven't tasted joy – the purest joys of life. You know my Wahlheim. I am now completely settled there. It is only half an hour from Charlotte: and there I feel my full self and taste all the happiness which can fall to the lot of man. (*L* 20)
>
> 24 November 1772:
> She feels what I suffer. This morning her look pierced my very soul. I found her alone, and said nothing; she looked at me. I no longer saw in her face the charms of beauty or the spark of her mind; these had disappeared. But I was struck by an expression much more touching – a look of the deepest sympathy and of the gentlest pity. Why was I afraid to throw myself at her feet? (*L* 62)

The editor introduces Werther's letters as hagiographic documents. They should evoke admiration and serve as consolation for readers who go through similar hardships. The text encourages the reader, addressed sympathetically as 'good soul', to identify with the hero whose life experience is about as authentic as the

[105] In Stefan Schäfer's workbook, students are encouraged to write their own diary as a continuation of Lotte and Werther's first encounter. The drastic end is presented as one of many possible endings. See Stefan Schäfer and Wilhelm Borcherding, *Unterrichtssequenzen Abiturlektüre: Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (Augsburg: Auer, 2018), 10.

literary realm allows. To this reader, Werther is an energetic personality who falls in love with his soul mate. His inner turmoil and his deteriorating state of mind do not speak against him, though there is a cautious reservation about Werther's lack of moderation. Since Lotte is already promised to another man when they first meet, he should better have moved on. But then the truth of his feelings shows that he cannot avoid his tragic fate. A summary based on this set of quotes would result in the blurb found on the back cover of a contemporary Penguin edition, which was already quoted in the Introduction:

> Visiting an idyllic German village, Werther, a sensitive and romantic young man, meets and falls in love with sweet-natured Lotte. Although he realizes that Lotte is to marry Albert, he is unable to subdue his passion for her and his infatuation torments him to the point of absolute despair. The first great 'confessional' novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* draws both on Goethe's own unrequited love for Charlotte Buff and on the death of his friend Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem.[106]

Like the *Britannica* entry, this blurb contains several tweaks. A martyr of love, Werther's motifs are left unchecked. Equally, Lotte's 'sweet-natured' appearance again simplifies the matter. Finally, the relevance of the legendary encounter between Goethe and Charlotte Buff is stated quite matter-of-factly, thereby reproducing a common cliché that overemphasises the author's biography at the expense of the protagonist. Nonetheless, this Werther is a charming young man. His honesty, unbiased views and sympathy with his fellow human beings indicate a young man full of potential. But love, being a funny thing, causes his downfall. That said, there remains the idea that the fictional letters, as the editor hopes, will allow the reader to 'take comfort from his sufferings'.

Such grafting was the precondition of *Wertherfieber*. As young fanatics of the text started to gather in cemeteries, where they read Goethe's book in torchlight,[107] even mature writers such as Wieland and Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart acknowledged the text's mastery and the appeal of Werther's personality.[108] Even grey eminences such as the Enlightenment poet Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim, then already in his fifties, praised the book in glowing terms. Among Goethe's peers, the epistolary novel inspired a wave of congenial *Sturm und Drang* texts that

[106] Hulse, *Sorrows*, quote on back cover.

[107] Friedrich Christian Laukhard, a contemporary of Goethe, reports that the citizens of Wetzlar hosted regular recitals of Wertherian poetry in the local cemetery. Eventually, local authorities prohibited further *Werther*-inspired events. See Stefan Bollmann, *Frauen und Bücher: Eine Leidenschaft mit Folgen* (Munich: DVA, 2013), 62–83.

[108] In a review for *Der Teutsche Merkur*, Wieland raves: 'Unzufriedenheit mit dem Schicksale ist eine der allgemeinen Leidenschaften, und daher sympathisiert hier jeder, zumal da Werthers liebenswürdige Schwärmerei und wallendes Herz jeden anstecken müssen.' Schubart stammers: 'der Held, *Er, Er* ganz allein, lebt und webt in allem, was man liest; *Er, Er* steht im Vordergrunde, scheint aus der Leinwand zu springen, und zu sagen: Schau, das bin ich, der junge leidende Werther, dein Mitgeschöpf!' Quoted in Gerhard Sauder (ed.), 'Dokumente', in Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens*, 20 vols (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1985–98), vol. 1.2, 787–8, 790–1.

are populated by like-minded protagonists, such as Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's novels and Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz's dramas. Arguably, this *Werther* is a character who could also appear in a play written by the young Friedrich Schiller. Outside the German-speaking realm, this *Werther* also inhabits a densely populated literary landscape of successors. To limit this literary catchment area to only a few references, the neighbourhood of *Werther* hosts English predecessors such as Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768) and Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771).

Graftage 3: Rebellion

The third example of interpretative grafting accentuates Werther's credentials as an irresistible misfit. The following set of quotes presents a protagonist whose progressive mindset sets him at odds with society:

> 15 May 1771:
> The poor people hereabouts know me already, and love me, particularly the children. When at first I associated with them, and asked them in a friendly way about this and that, some thought that I wanted to ridicule them and treated me quite rudely. I didn't mind this; I only felt keenly what I had often noticed before. People of rank keep themselves coldly aloof from the common people, as though they feared to lose something by the contact; while shallow minds and bad jokers pretend to descend to their level, only to make the poor people feel their impertinence all the more keenly. (*L* 7)

> 12 August 1771:
> I controlled myself, for I had often heard with equal vexation the same observation [i.e. about suicide as weakness]. I answered him [i.e. Albert], therefore, with considerably intensity, 'You call this a weakness – don't be led astray by appearances. When a nation which has long groaned under the intolerable yoke of a tyrant rises at last and throws off its chains, do you call that weakness? […] My friend, if a display of energy be strength, how can the highest exertion of it be a weakness?' (*L* 33)

> 15 March 1772:
> I have just had an annoying experience which will drive me away from here. I am furious. It cannot be undone, and you alone are to blame, you urged and impelled me to fill a post from which I was not suited. […] I talked with some of my acquaintances, but they answered me curtly. I was preoccupied with Lady B., and did not notice that the women at the end of the room were whispering, that the murmur extended by degree to the men, that Lady S. talked to the Count […], till at length the Count came up to me and took me to the window. 'You know our curious customs', he said, 'I gather the company is a little displeased at your presence.' (*L* 48)

The first quote introduces Werther as a person of rank who happily mingles with the lower classes, thus exhibiting the virtues of an unprejudiced man who seems ready for a return to a Rousseauian state of nature. The second quote is taken from an

argument Werther has with Albert. The topic is one's right to commit suicide considering that an unbearable life situation has no prospect of being alleviated. Rebutting his rival's rational arguments, Werther invokes a powerful metaphor in support of his argument: every people has the right to throw off the yoke of tyranny, no matter at what cost. In view of the American Revolution (1775–83) and the forthcoming French Revolution of 1789, this statement is testimony to a new political norm that places emphasis on people's self-determination instead of stability as an end in itself.

The third quote introduces Werther's ejection from a royal gathering. After serving as the Count's intimate friend for a long time, he accidentally – or wilfully (since one cannot quite tell) – overstays his welcome at a gathering attended by haughty aristocrats. Even if the Count's polite reminder does not make him feel wronged at the beginning, Lady B.'s comments make the situation appear humiliating in retrospect. Previously, she seemed likely to become Werther's new love interest, but now she informs him that her family reproaches her for spending too much time with a burgher such as Werther. A summary based on this set of quotes, partly inspired by Karl Grün's study from 1824, would read:

> The novel tells the story of an impulsive young man. Despite his aristocratic origin, he seeks the company of commoners who he regards as his equals. Soon enough, the unprejudiced and cosmopolitan man attracts the attention of a circle of young people who organize a social ball, where he makes the acquaintance of Lotte. She is already engaged but there is nothing special about this situation: a boy falls in love with a girl, only to be rejected by her, so he regretfully hangs his head for a while. The situation changes when he decides to apply his talents in the political realm. Unfortunately, this environment thwarts his attempts to live by a more egalitarian code of conduct. Werther gets caught in the miserable, bourgeois circumstances of society. He finds himself caught in the wild and crooked roots of an old forest, stumbles, falls – into the maw of death.[109]

This summary portrays Werther, a nobleman, as a rebel at heart who breaks the social codes that segregate commoners from nobility and nobility from royalty. Like the assertion of Werther's psychopathological disposition in the ironic interpretation, this summary forces the argument by endowing the protagonist with overblown revolutionary credentials; after all, the first quote (15 May 1771) in fact continues: 'I know very well that we are not all equal, nor can we be' (*L* 8). That being said, except for Moritz's *Anton Reiser*, Georg Büchner's *Lenz* (1836) and Heinrich Heine's *Germany: A Winter's Tale* (*Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen*

[109] This summary paraphrases Karl Grün's sarcastic assessment that the problem of unhappy love pales in comparison with the text's socio-political meaning: 'daß ein Männlein sich in ein Weiblein vergafft, von diesem verschmäht wird, und dann eine Weile bedauerlich das Köpfchen hangen läßt. […] Sondern das meinte Göthe, wie das unglückselige pantheistische Bewußtsein […] sich in den miserablen, bürgerlichen Verhältnissen wie in den wildverwachsenen Wurzeln eines alten Waldes verfängt, und nun stolpert, stürzt – dem Tode in den Rachen.' Karl Grün, *Über Göthe vom menschlichen Standpunkte* (Darmstadt: Leske, 1824), 94.

1843), it is still difficult to conceive of a comparable proto-classic or Romantic text that features a protagonist who so obviously suffers from social oppression. Meanwhile, one of the foundational texts of modern Italian literature, Ugo Foscolo's *Jacopo Ortis* (1798), connects Wertherian misery with the narrative of national humiliation, a trope that was further explored in Chinese letters in the 1920s and 1930s, for example in Yu Dafu's and Jiang Guangci's experimental prose. In criticism, this interpretation was first put forward by Grün in 1846, but to little avail, as Friedrich Engels heaped ridicule on Grün's Goethe apotheosis. In the 20th century, however, Guo Moruo's preface to his 1922 translation and Georg Lukács's essay of 1936 made a strong case for the idea that *Werther* exhibits a quasi-revolutionary quality. Chapter 3 of this monograph is devoted to exploring this line of grafting in more detail.

Graftage 4: Transcendence

The fourth example of grafting takes its cue from Werther's remarks regarding the vanity of worldly affairs. The following three quotes show a protagonist who becomes resigned after a string of setbacks reveal to him the emptiness of human existence:

> 22 May 1771:
> I am ready to admit it, that those are happiest who, like children, live for the day, amuse themselves with their dolls, dress and undress them, and eagerly watch the cupboard where Mother has locked up her sweets; and when at last they get what they want, eat it greedily and exclaim, " 'More!' […] Happy the man who can be like this! (*L* 9–10)

> 18 August 1771:
> It is as if a curtain had been drawn from before my eyes, and, instead of prospects of eternal life, the abyss of an ever-open grave yawned before me. Can we say of anything that it is when all passes away – when time, with the speed of a storm, carries all things onward – and our transitory existence, hurried along by the torrent, is swallowed up by the waves or dashed against the rocks? […] My heart is wasted by the thought of that destructive power which lies latent in every part of universal Nature. Nature has formed nothing that does not destroy itself, and everything near it. (*L* 37)

> 20 January 1771:
> Father, Whom I know not – Who were once wont to fill my soul, but Who now hidest Thy face from me – call me back to Thee; be silent no longer! Thy silence cannot sustain a soul which thirsts after Thee. What man, what father, could be angry with a son for returning to him unexpectedly, for embracing him and exclaiming, 'Here I am again, my father! Forgive me if I have shortened my journey to return before the appointed time. The world is everywhere the same – for labor and pain, pleasure and reward; but what does it all avail?' (*L* 64)

Initially, the novel shows a protagonist whose nonconformist attitude allows him to make chiding observations of others. In the first quote, he regards the realms of society and politics as amusing games without deeper significance. The second quote represents the negative inversion of ecstatic pantheism described in the letter dating from 10 May, and the third features a meditation on the spiritual legitimacy of suicide. The following summary takes borrowings from Jean-Jacques Anstett's 1949 study:

> The novel tells the story of a young man torn by metaphysical speculation. If it were not for the poetry of Klopstock, he would doubt in God. In Lotte, he meets the first person who truly understands him. She will be married to Albert, and while he does not mind their friendship, he is irritated by Werther's paradoxical mysticism. Failing to see his artistic pursuits bearing fruit, Werther enrols in a public career, which turns into another source of frustration soon enough. He starts to doubt in the purpose of life itself. He could become a monk but instead returns to Lotte, where he hopes to communicate his afflictions to Lotte by translating Ossian for her. This attempt fails. After Werther's psychological crisis is solved through his affirmation of religion, he consoles himself that God is a loving father who will allow his and Lotte's souls to meet again in the afterlife.[110]

This perspective is mirrored in literary continuations that built on *Werther*. Miller's *Siegwart*, for example, abounds with religious imagery and culminates in the lovers' reunion in death – even physically, when they are buried together. Although few scholars arrive at the same conclusion as Anstett, the metaphysical saturation of *Werther* was indeed debated in research. While intertextual references to the Gospel of John are easy to detect, they raise more questions than they answer: does Werther's story secularise the Passion of Christ in a quasi-blasphemous manner? Or does it simply reiterate narrative patterns coined by Christian mythology?[111] Furthermore, the protagonist's letters dating from 10 May and 21 June 1771 conjure a unique blend of natural observation and devotion. Consequently, Werther's worldview was frequently linked to pantheism, which as

[110] The last sentence is a paraphrase of Jean-Jacques Anstett: 'Wir möchten darauf hinweisen, daß Werthers psychologische Krise nur durch eine Bejahung der Religion aufgelöst wird. […] Werther unterwirft sich dem Befehl der Ewigkeit, der den er in sich gespürt hat und auf dem sich letztendlich sein ganzes Sein gründet, und setzt ihn in die Tat um.' Jean-Jacques Anstett, 'Werthers religiöse Krise', in *Goethes 'Werther': Kritik und Forschung*, ed. by Hans Peter Herrmann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 163–73, 172.

[111] This nexus was hotly debated in the post-war era. In this line of inquiry, critics chose between interpretations that emphasise the text's blasphemous tendencies or its indebtedness to Christian mythology. Herbert Schöffler initiated this long-held debate, arguing that Werther pursues a secular worldview. In contrast, Albrecht Schöne posited that Goethe and his peers frequently drew on Christian-inspired narratives without seeking to subvert their theology. See Herbert Schöffler, *Deutscher Geist im 18. Jahrhundert: Essays zu Geistes- und Religionsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), 158–76; Albrecht Schöne, *Säkularisation als sprachbildende Kraft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), 248; Hermann Zabel, 'Goethes Werther – eine weltliche Passionsgeschichte?', *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 24.1 (1972), 57–69.

a metaphysical concept is tantamount to atheism. As a vague feeling, however, it is compatible with institutional faith.[112]

Werther's struggle to find meaning in this world testifies to his faith but can be considered in gnostic terms. Hermann August Korff, writing in the interwar period, regarded *Werther* as a tragic love story – not between Werther and Lotte, but between God and his Creation. The protagonist despairs of his miserable existence that cannot satisfy his demands, a diagnosis that allows Korff to read the protagonist's suicide as a triumph: 'Werther's suicide condemns a world that, for all its limitations, cannot prove itself worthy of a truly divine life.'[113] In the absence of any reliable metaphysical convictions, Korff's view is difficult to distinguish from the kind of ecstatic nihilism that contributed to the text's popularity in Japan during the early 20th century. Going far beyond the scope of religious transcendence, this line of grafting stands at the heart of Chapter 4.

Graftage 5: Masochism

The fifth example of grafting focuses on Werther's vexing sexuality, which compels the protagonist to go to great lengths to avoid physical fulfilment. The following three quotes show a protagonist who derives pleasure from substitutes:

> 26 July 1771:
> Yes, dear Charlotte! I will take care of everything as you wish. Do make me more requests, the more the better. I only ask one favor; use no more writing sand with the little notes you send me. Today I quickly raised your letter to my lips, and I felt the sand grinding between my teeth. (*L* 29, amended – J. K.)
>
> 30 August 1771:
> Wilhelm, I'm sometimes uncertain whether I really exist. If in such moments I find no sympathy and Charlotte doesn't allow me the melancholy consolation of bathing her hand in my tears, I tear myself from her and roam through the country, climb some precipitous cliff, or make a path through a trackless wood, where I am wounded and torn by thorns and briars; and there I find some relief. Some! (*L* 38–9)
>
> 8 November 1772:
> Charlotte has reproved me for my excesses – and with so much tenderness and goodness! I have been drinking a little more wine than usual. 'Don't do it,' she said; 'think of Charlotte!' 'Think of you!' I answered. 'Need you tell me that? Whether I think of you

[112] In Goethe studies, the poet's fascination with Baruch Spinoza inspired several studies that investigate the philosopher's legacy in *Werther* and other early writings. Alfred Schmidt relativises such connections and concludes: 'Goethe ist fraglos eher gefühlsmäßiger "Pantheist" gewesen als "Spinozist."' See Alfred Schmidt, *Goethes herrlich leuchtende Natur* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1984), 86.

[113] Orig. 'so richtet der Selbstmord Werthers gleichsam die Welt, die sich mit allen ihren Beschränkungen eines wahrhaft göttlichen Lebens nicht würdig erweist.' Hermann August Korff, *Geist der Goethezeit*, 4 vols (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1957), vol. 1, 306.

> deliberately or not, you are always before me! This morning I sat on the spot where, a few days ago, you stepped from the carriage, and – ' She changed the subject to prevent me from getting deeper into it. My friend, I am lost; she can do with me what she pleases. (*L* 60)

The first quote, an addition of the 1787 edition, documents the strange relationship that develops between Lotte and Werther throughout the text. At the ball, the young man comes across as a cosmopolitan nonconformist who has the upper hand. In fact, he looks back at a number of women whom he has abandoned: he broke Leonora's heart (4 May 1771) and feels vaguely guilty about a mature lady, who is now dead (17 May and 1 July). After falling for Lotte, however, he hesitates and loses momentum, until the carriage scene shows a profoundly changed Werther. Now he prefers the Either–Or philosophy over charming his way into her heart. Although he derives pleasure from running errands for Lotte and, as the third quote shows, even meditates on a spot that she set foot on, his voluntary thraldom reaches another level of intensity once he finds relief by injuring himself. Sourced from the selected diary entries and from snippets from studies by Barthes and Meyer-Kalkus, a summary could read as follows:

> The novel tells the story of a young man who has grown weary of his life as a budding Casanova. After making Lotte's acquaintance at a countryside ball, a complex relationship develops between them, as their limbs repeatedly brush against each other. First, Werther enjoys the physicality of these zones of contact in a fetishistic manner, without concern for her response. But once he learns that she is already taken, his sudden surge of sexual desire triggers traumatic anxieties in him, so he resorts to artificially inflicting pain on himself. At one point, the situation becomes too much for him and he leaves. Although he casually takes up an office and continues where he left off, for example by wooing Lady B., he cannot forget how Lotte struck the right balance between coldness and flirtation. He uses a pretext to return to her vicinity but realises that he can no longer enjoy their games. He reproaches himself for wanting to possess her. After reading Ossian to her, he falls to her feet and waits for her to step on his neck. She is not ready to accept him as her slave and abandons him to his fate.[114]

Despite the unusual focus, this synopsis reiterates the selective appropriation seen in the conventional *Britannica* and Penguin summaries. In the original

[114] This passage paraphrases two quotes. The first one is from Barthes, who pays attention to the skin contact between Werther and Lotte: 'Accidentally, Werther's finger touches Charlotte's, their feet, under the table, happen or brush against each other. Werther might be engrossed by the meaning of these accidents; he might concentrate physically on these slight zones of contact and delight in this fragment of inert finger or foot, fetishistically, *without concern for the response.*' Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 67. The second quote is from Meyer-Kalkus, who states: 'Der Einbruch des sexuellen Begehrens löst traumatische Ängste aus, die nur durch selbstgeschaffene Schmerzempfindungen und Selbstkasteigungen gebannt werden können.' Meyer-Kalkus, 'Werthers Krankheit', 112–13.

text, Werther's philandering prehistory is only hinted at, and his desire to become Lotte's slave is, while not implausible, a mere hypothesis. To assume Werther would enjoy her stepping on him, the ultimate gesture of submission, is a daring suggestion, but it does not exceed the speculative licence of Kittler's interpretation. One should note that Goethe, in answer to Werther's irritating sexuality, penned several satirical pieces, including a fragmentary burlesque,[115] a travelogue, in which shy Werther hires a prostitute to finally see a woman naked[116] and a comic drama on romantic fetishism.[117] In research, Werther's sexuality was addressed relatively late and usually in a negative way: his failure to engage in a normal physical relationship is seen as a deficit, a stance that is entirely compatible with the ironic approach discussed previously.[118]

As subtly coded as the treatment of Werther's sexuality is in the text, modern Chinese adaptations considered it constitutive of his suffering. In Guo Moruo's and Yu Dafu's novellas, self-harm regularly appears as a coping mechanism of libidinally frustrated individuals. As Chapter 3 shows, this nexus forms part of the revolutionary grafting of *Werther*.

Conclusion

The present analysis holds that literature sets into motion a plural. Different aspects flash up at different times, an observation that Wittgenstein derives from the rabbit–duck head but which also applies to literary texts. Applied to our case, the question is whether *Werther* is still *Werther* after having gone through so many transformations, with new aspects flashing up time and again. In the light of this observation, it seems more beneficial to conceive of the dichotomy between the Original and its offshoots as the product of graftage, a horticultural practice that builds on the organism's ability to heal, grow and proliferate, resulting in

[115] In fact, Kittler derives the idea of Albert mocking Werther's self-stimulation from *Hanswurst's Wedding* (*Hanswursts Hochzeit*, 1775). Here, Großhans, a simpleton, boasts about his physical functions, including sleeping with his wife, who during daytime had promenaded with Werther, her spiritual friend.

[116] In *Swiss Letters: First Installment* (*Briefe aus der Schweiz: Erste Abteilung*, 1808), the young protagonist seeks out a prostitute to finally behold a nude female body. After undressing, she ridicules the young man, who is too transfixed by this new prospect to approach her in a sexual manner.

[117] In the finale of *Triumph of Sensibility* (*Der Triumph der Empfindsamkeit*, 1777), Prince Oronaro prefers a doll modelled after his beloved to the beloved herself.

[118] Following Meyer-Kalkus's pioneering study, this line of inquiry became common currency after the millennium. Günter Sasse, for example, finds that Werther cannot reconcile the spiritual and physical dimensions of love, which corresponds to the prominence of the body–soul conflict in late 18th-century literature in Germany. See Günther Sasse, 'Woran leidet Werther?' Philippe Forget highlights Werther's obsession with fetish objects, such as the mentioned ribbon. See Philippe Forget, 'L'être en souffrance de "la pauvre Leonore" (Une relecture du Werther de Goethe)', *Romantisme* 164.2 (2014), 95–105. See also Gratzke, 'Werther's Love'.

the integration of elements that originally formed part of another organism. The desired outcomes of grafting, better resistance against environmental factors or greater yield, however, create expectations that inevitably depart from what the original organism had on offer. Eventually, the manipulation and cultivation of the variant will obfuscate the memory of the original's features. Tracing this process, botanists find themselves surrounded by a plethora of variants and controversial ideas about their genetic lineages.

In this tree nursery of literary manipulation, cultural goods clash, divide and merge. In novels, one of the greatest sources of ambiguity lies less often in single words than in their wealth of scenes. They represent different entrances, allowing the reader to ignore certain aspects while connecting with others. Although academe has given primacy to the idea of ironic *Werther*, the history of the text's reception underscores its ability to invert established interpretations and to expand the book's scope by including new paradigms. In one case, the author's exemplary biography hijacks the text; in another case, the author takes up the role of a faint spectre that only reinforces the glowing ideas expressed by the protagonist. Outside German-speaking countries, this flexibility allowed *Werther* to undergo transformations that were unthinkable among his readers at home. Freed from the original scene of writing, the book allowed 'essential drift' to do its work.

The suggested grafts of *Werther* – irony, overidentification, rebellion, transcendence and masochism – represent just five possibilities among many. Additional entrances that this chapter could not accommodate include the book's evaluation as a novel of manners, documenting the changing behavioural code of the bourgeoisie. This approach stands at the heart of sociological investigations into the 18th century put forward by Niklas Luhmann and Eva Illouz.[119] Recently, it was proposed that Werther's fatalistic view of nature evinces his struggle to come to terms with natural destruction. In her argument, Heather Sullivan concludes that this ecocritical approach 'allows us to read *Werther* yet again with new eyes and also to find a possible textual framework for formulating environmental changes in the Anthropocene'.[120] As long as *Werther* finds new readers, new entrances will emerge, perpetually to the annoyance of other readers. With regard to the following three chapters, special attention will be

[119] Luhmann has emphasised the role of literary models for the development of the language of romantic sentiments, the code of intimacy. Without explicitly drawing on Luhmann's preliminary work, Illouz explores a similar approach to assess the emotional compensation mechanisms in capitalism. See Niklas Luhmann, *Liebe als Passion: Zur Codierung von Intimität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982); and Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 25–47.

[120] Heather I. Sullivan, 'Nature and the "Dark Pastoral" in Goethe's Werther', *Goethe Yearbook* 22.1 (2015), 115–32, 128.

placed on the discrepancy between the possibilities of grafting *Werther* into new contexts, which are infinite in theory, and the grafts that have emerged historically and point to a limited plural. Which preconditions are necessary to read *Werther* productively and meaningfully? After all, literary texts are not free-floating entities that are suspended in a vacuum but are embedded into the limited horizons of historical readers.

2

The Translator, Translated

The Sorrows of Young Werther saw its protagonist meet an untimely death, but the text afforded Goethe literary immortality – not only in Germanophone countries, but also across Europe, North America and East Asia. After its original publication in 1774, the text was first translated into French in 1776, into English in 1779 and into Italian in 1782.[1] For the first time, a German text circulated in multiple translations in other European languages within just a few decades. By 1806, six additional translations had appeared in English,[2] and six in French by 1804.[3] In view of the controversy surrounding the text's alleged complicity in promoting suicide, Goethe was increasingly alarmed by his novel's popularity. In 1787, he published a revised edition which presented the protagonist in a slightly more critical light. For the rest of his life, the author continued to question the merits of his debut novel, portraying it either as pathological or as the product of a literary fashion, namely sentimentalism. Beyond the narrow confines of academe, Goethe's self-criticism found no real echo and had little effect on the text itself. Instead, Werther became a cipher of the self-articulation of the modern soul, demonstrating a unique ability to engage readers in a productive dialogue.

With substantial delay, of roughly a century, the text also reached East Asia. Here, it became a key text for those generations which sought to modernise their national literary traditions. Once Japan and China became exposed to Western

[1] See Siegmund von Seckendorff, *Les Souffrances du jeune Werther* (Erlangen: W. Walter, 1776); Richard Graves and Daniel Malthus, *The Sorrows of Werter: A German Story Founded on Fact* (London: J. Dodsley, 1779); Gaetano Grassi, *Werther* (Poschiavo: Ambrosioni, 1782).

[2] Graves and Malthus, *The Sorrows*; Anon., *Werter and Charlotte: A German Story* (London: J. Parsons, 1786); John Gifford, *The Sorrows of Werter: A German Story* (London: Harrison and Co., 1789); Anon., *The Letters of Werter* (Ludlow: G. Nicholson, 1799); William Render, *The Sorrows of Werter* (London: R. Phillips, 1801); Frederick Gotzberg, *The Sorrows of Werter* (London: T. Hurst, 1802); Samuel Jackson Pratt, *The Sorrows of Werter* (London: Phillips, 1809).

[3] Seckendorf, *Les Souffranges*; G. Deyverdun, *Werther* (Maastricht: Dufour & Roux, 1776); Charles Aubry, *Les Passions du jeune Werther* (Mannheim: Hurepois, 1777); Henri de La Bédoyère, *Werther* (Paris: Colnet, 1804); L. C. de Salse, *Werther* (Basel: J. Decker, 1800); Charles-Louis de Sevelinges, *Werther* (Paris: Demonville, 1804).

ideas, their intelligentsia absorbed not only occidental science and medicine but also literature and thought. In 1889, Nakai Kinjo translated fragments of *Werther* into Japanese; by 1935, ten translations had appeared.[4] In 1902, the novel arrived in China, when Ma Junwu rendered a fragment in Chinese. Twenty years later, Guo Moruo, a celebrated poet, completed the first full translation; within two years, it had been reprinted no fewer than eight times.[5] By 1940, another four alternative translations had appeared.[6]

This chapter starts out with reflections on methodological problems and Werther's own translations from James Macpherson's Ossian – or to be precise: *Fingal* (1761) – which depart considerably from another contemporary German rendering by Michael Denis. The second part addresses the linguistic and cultural threshold between Germany and England at the end of the 18th century. As the first English translation of *Werther*, the focus is on Richard Graves's (or Daniel Malthus's) edition, which is complemented by William Render, who took substantial liberties with the Original. These versions are then compared with the modern translations of Catherine Hutter and David Constantine, respectively. While reliable studies on Werther's European translations already exist, these two sections provide a synthesis and question established assessments of good and bad translation. This provides the intellectual foundation for the third part, which presents a survey of *Werther* translations in Japan and China at the onset of the 20th century. In view of the text's reception in Japan, the analysis concentrates on three early translations, respectively, by Takayama Chogyū, Kubo Tenzui and

[4] The translations are: Takayama Chogyū 高山樗牛, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (准亭郎の悲哀 Juntei rō no hiai), "*Yamagata Daily* (山形日報 Yamagata nippō), July 1891 [fragment]; Noshi Midoridou 緑堂野史, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (わかきエルテルがわづらひ Wakaki Weruteru ga wa dzura hi) (Place and publisher unknown, 1893/1894) [fragment]; Kubo Tenzui 久保天隨, *Werther* (うえるてる *Ueruteru*) (Tokyo: Shūeikaku, 1904); Ōno Hideo 小野秀雄, *Werther* (ウェルテル Ueruteru) (Tokyo: Bunbudō, 1920); Hata Toyokichi 秦豐吉, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (若きエルテルの悲み Wakaki Ueruteru no himi) (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1917); Tsuzumi Tsuneyoshi 鼓常良, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (若きヴェルテルの悩み Eruteru no nayami) (Tokyo: Ōmura shoten, 1925); Takahashi Kenji 高橋建二, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (若きヴェルテルの悩み Wakaki vueruteru no nayami) (Place and publisher unknown, 1928); Katō Kenji 加藤 健兒, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (若きウェルテルの悲しみ Wakaki Ueruteru no kanashimi) (Tokyo: Ei bungaku, 1928); Chino Shoyo 茅野蕭々, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (若いエ゛ルテルの悩み Wakai veruteru no nayami) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1928); Abe Rokuro 阿部六郎, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (若きヴェルテルの悩み Wakaki Vueruteru no nayami) (Tokyo: Daisan shobō, 1935). See Hans Müller, 'Goethe in Japan', *Monumenta Nipponica* 2 (1939), 466–78, 468.

[5] Wei Maoping 衛茂平, 'Inquiry into Chinese Translation of Goethe's *Werther* during the Republican Era' (歌德維特民國時期漢譯考 Gede Weite minguo shidai qi hanyi kao), *Journal of Sichuan International Studies University* (四川外語學院學報 Sichuan waiyu xueyuan xuebao) 20.2 (2004), 84–8, 85.

[6] The translations are Guo Moruo 郭沫若, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (少年維特之煩惱 Shaonian Weite zhi Fannao) (Shanghai: Taidong tushuju, 1922); Da Guansheng 達觀生, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (少年維特之煩惱 Shaonian Weite zhi Fannao) (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1932); Luo Mu 羅牧, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (少年維特之煩惱 Shaonian Weite zhi Fannao) (Shanghai: Beixin shuju, 1931); Qian Tianyou 錢天佑, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (少年維特之煩惱 Shaonian Weite zhi Fannao) (Shanghai: Qiming shuju, 1936); Huang Lubu 黃魯不, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (少年維特之煩惱 *Shaonian Weite zhi Fannao*) (Shanghai: Chunming shudian, 1940).

Hata Toyokichi. Finally, three Chinese *Werther*s will conclude the chapter: renderings by Ma Junwu, Guo Moruo and Qian Tianyou. Inevitably, the present selection cannot account for the numerous translations in existence. The aim is to highlight scenes of translation that facilitate an insight into the delicate balance between source and target language.

Methodologically, this chapter draws on the takeaways from Chapter 1, which are discussed in the light of contemporary translation theory. At the heart of the analysis stand back-translations to illustrate – and further exacerbate – the idiosyncrasy of the addressed translations.[7] The gap that is filled between the languages leads straight into the grafting process, as the original text is deprived of some features while new ones are added. To fully exploit this method, this chapter concentrates on two sample passages that document the text's transformations. The first one, taken from James Macpherson's Ossianic songs, features the lament of Colma, who learns of the tragic result of the duel between her brother and her lover. First rendered by Werther in German, this passage is useful to indicate linguistic strategies of subsequent translations from German into English and Chinese. The second reference passage is Werther's letter dating from 21 June 1772, in which natural ecstasy is rendered in highly expressive language. In Chinese and Japanese translations, such exclamatory clauses put translators at loggerheads with established linguistic norms.

Grafting and translation

When a text moves across linguistic and cultural boundaries for the first time, translation cannot tap into an inventory of established equivalents. Unaffected by the stellar career of the charismatic writer in his native Germany, the text's foreign reception documents the semantic possibilities of a text that is not yet colonised by an 'Author-God'[8] or the belated, saturated perspective of the reader in the 21st century. This situation forced early translators and editors to resort to invasive strategies that allowed the text's meaning to proliferate. They inserted foot- or endnotes and replaced obscure literary references with familiar ones. Prefaces and appendices were added. Such interferences were based on assumptions about the imported text's foreignness or familiarity among the audience, be it semantic, linguistic, cultural or aesthetic. Needless to say, translators and editors thereby inject their own ideas, which inevitably clash with those of other translators and editors.

This situation is analogous to the patterns of literary grafting that were discussed in Chapter 1: the *selection of the rootstock*, the *elimination of incompatible*

[7] See Georg Jäger, *Translation und Translationslinguistik* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1975), 35.
[8] In his critique of biographism, Barthes famously speaks of the 'Auteur-Dieu'. See Roland Barthes, 'La mort de l'auteur', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Eric Marty, 3 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1993), vol. 2, 137–89.

elements and the *addition of a scion*. There is an equivalent to this process in translation studies: the 'filling of gaps'. This concept was introduced by Gideon Toury to capture the uneasy tension between different tongues. Since no translation can 'share the same systemic space with its original',[9] translators bring to light this incongruence and turn it into a virtue. Something exists in the source system (the language from which a text is translated) that is missing in the target system (the language into which it is translated). As translators amend one language by appropriating the other, they create a space between languages that previously did not exist: 'Thus, cultures resort to translating precisely as a major way of filling in gaps, whenever and wherever such gaps manifest themselves […], i.e., in view of a corresponding non-gap in another culture that the prospective target culture has reasons to look up to and try to exploit.'[10] What is perceived as absent in one language already exists in another one and can be incorporated through translation. Toury's approach is representative of an entire generation of translation scholars devoted to the study of translational shifts that avoid flattening linguistic difference by invoking equivalence. At the same time, they also steer clear of obscure concepts, such as Benjamin's much-quoted idea of an interlinguistic progression towards a messianic 'pure language'.[11]

Lawrence Venuti pursues a similar approach by introducing two terms, 'foreignization' and 'nativization', that correspond to polar opposite attitudes in translation. While the former approach allows the source system to maintain some of its idiosyncrasies at the expense of the norms of the host language, the latter addresses the assimilating force of the templates and filters that exist in the target system. Ultimately, translation documents an epistemic process: 'Every step in the translation process – from selecting a foreign text to implementing a translation strategy to editing, reviewing, and reading the translation – is mediated by the diverse values, beliefs, and representations that circulate in the translating language.'[12]

Although Toury and Venuti primarily talk about linguistic phenomena, their focus on gaps and the compensation thereof can be extended to other dimensions

[9] Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*, 26.
[10] Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*, 27.
[11] In 'The Task of the Translator' ('Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', 1932), Benjamin holds that pure language waits for its liberation by means of translation, for it helps to unveil its metalinguistic relatedness: '[A]ll suprahistorical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant.' Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', trans. by Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002), vol. 1, 257. According to Benjamin's eschatological understanding of language, individual tongues are prismatic refractions of a higher linguistic entity. While such unity represents an *a priori* of all languages, this state of singularity was shattered by their historical growth apart. At 'the messianic end of their history', the confusion of tongues will give way to a 'language of truth', where all tension will be eliminated.
[12] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 2008), 266.

of cultural transfer. Toury's and Venuti's observations of how target systems draw on other languages easily connect with François Jullien's recent call to identify cultural products as 'resources' that are freely available to new audiences. He decidedly objects to a notion of culture as a solid unit that must be defended against contamination. Despite being criticised for having overemphasised cultural difference in the past,[13] he argues that awareness of cultural difference is merely part of a dialectical process that results in a productive interaction. Using a terminology similar to Toury, Jullien views the 'gap' between cultures as a starting point to escape conventional modes of thinking: 'The gap means a distance which opens up, places what was once separated into pairs and makes visible the betweenness between formerly separated terms. They are required to face one another.'[14] The observer who becomes aware of what lies between cultures encounters an opportunity to step outside conventional modes of thinking. There is a programmatic dimension to Jullien's study that runs against the assertion of monolithic cultural identities. Caught in such 'betweenness', cultures do not represent a heritage reserved for those who are allowed to identify with it but are understood as resources that are available to everyone who is prepared to reinvest them.[15]

In sum, Toury's, Venuti's and Jullien's appreciation of the gap that opens when a text migrates across linguistic and cultural borders puts forward a generous attitude reminiscent of grafting. Like the reader who creates the text by limiting its plural to a singularity, the translator chooses among a spectrum of possibilities. Since this spectrum consists of equally legitimate variants, a most accurate choice does not exist. That said, convention has it that translations also function as tributaries of the Author-God. Similar to the quest for singularity that shaped the interpretations of *Werther*, the standard of 'invariant'[16] translations asserts appropriateness, plausibility and truth as values that guide the work of translators. Whereas philological translations make this process evident by inserting commentary, glosses and variants, invariant translations limit themselves to explanatory notes in prefaces and postscripts that reproduce the scholarly common sense. Regarding the text itself, such translations are based on the idea that meaning, form and effect can be rendered in another language without offering an interpretation. In English, this approach was popularised by Penguin and Oxford

[13] Jullien was (and continues to be) criticised for constructing an excessively unified image of Chinese thought and, ultimately, contributing to the myth of Chinese otherness. See Jean François Billeter, *Contre François Jullien* (Paris: Editions Allia, 2006), 9 and 32. See also Zhang Longxi, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 30–9.

[14] Orig. '[É]cart dit une distance qui s'ouvre et met en regard, fait apparaître de l'*entre* qui met en tension ce qui s'est séparé et le porte ainsi à se dévisager.' François Jullien, *Il n'y a pas d'identité culturelle* (Paris: L'Herne, 2016), 70.

[15] Amid the current wave of identity politics, Jullien's approach seems to underscore Edward Said's accusation against Western orientalism: that its generosity when it comes to using other cultures as a resource is a product of the Age of Imperialism.

[16] For a critique of the standard of 'invariant' translations, see Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism*.

World Classics editions and was successfully reproduced by similar formats across the world. Invariance in translation offers a reader-friendly, methodologically questionable compromise that observes rules of thumb and caters to the tastes prevalent in the publishing sector. Venuti has critiqued this approach for eliding translators from their works, not only as craftsmen, but also with regard to their creative manipulations of the text.[17] On a global scale, critics have also pointed towards a more comprehensive effect of invariance in translation: as the global library is measured against a norm established by modern realist fiction, cultural difference is flattened out.[18]

Held against a text that has become stale or, as Gert Mattenklott contends, over-researched and excessively familiar, eccentric translations of *Werther* are invaluable tools for its revaluation. Arguably, even mistake-ridden renderings might be preferable to the products of invariance. As the following section demonstrates, the grafting habits of translators can already be observed in Werther's own rendering of Ossian and have continued unabated ever since.

Werther's Ossian

The climax of *Werther*, the protagonist's open rejection by Lotte and his subsequent suicide, is intimately connected to Ossianic song, supposedly written in ancient Gaelic and translated into English by James Macpherson. While the protagonist's polyglot erudition is evinced by many references to ancient and modern letters throughout the novel, his concrete output as a translator is limited to Ossian. Needless to say, these passages are translations made by Goethe from Macpherson's English, yet they differ considerably from Goethe's first renderings dating from 1771.[19] In contrast to those earlier, more academic translations, Werther's are saturated with psychological characterisation. These passages are formed by and inform his portrait as an ingenious and mentally unhinged young man.

For a long time, scholars felt that Goethe's text was tainted by this intertextual insertion. Doubts about Ossian's authenticity were raised as early as 1765, almost a decade before the first publication of *Werther*.[20] While such discussions did

[17] See Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, 1–34.
[18] According to David Joselit, cultural heritage made global is usually shaped by the progressive forces in the Western tradition. See David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 225–6.
[19] See Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh, 'Goethe's Translation from the Gaelic Ossian', in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 156–76, 157.
[20] Hugh Blair's *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1765), although primarily a philological study, already addresses the question of forgery. See Howard Gaskill, *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 27.

not resonate beyond the English-speaking realm for some time, the questionable status of the text could no longer be ignored at one point.[21] It turned out that Macpherson did not just take liberties by inserting his own poems, as Samuel Johnson initially suspected, but that he was 'virtually composing as a "bard"'.[22] While this spoke for Macpherson's literary talent, it was not well received by his audiences across Europe, who felt betrayed. Subsequently, commentators have excused Goethe's insertions as the product of a 'moment of blind enthusiasm',[23] shared by many contemporaries, including Johann Gottfried Herder and Klopstock. More recently, such scepticism has been replaced by an interest in 'Goethe's seemingly modernist technique of incorporating two complementary and creatively modified extracts of Ossian'[24] and in Macpherson as an author in his own right.

Regardless of Macpherson's status as a translator, fraud or gifted writer, Werther uses the text in a manner that is crucial for evaluating the virtues of free translation. In the narrative logic of the book, the intertextual insertions encourage the protagonist, who wants to move away from everyday aesthetics, to pursue more profound and ecstatic forms of expression. After all, he proclaims: 'say what you will of rules, they destroy the genuine feeling of Nature and its true expression' (*L* 11). The selection of Ossianic song is crucial in advancing this mission; after all, Herder characterised the bardic songs as imbued with the poet's 'majesty, innocence, simplicity, activity and blissfulness',[25] which he derives from the specific character of the Scottish mountain people: 'The wilder, that is, the livelier and more active a people, […] the wilder, that is, livelier, freer, more sensual, more lyrical […] also its songs!'[26] Rich in apostrophes and ellipses, full of personifications, archaic formulas and obsolete diction, Ossian's oral style complemented

[21] Samuel Johnson's widely read travelogue *Journey to the Western Islands* from 1775 is replete with chiding remarks about Macpherson's alleged discovery: 'I believe [the poems of Ossian] never existed in any other form than that which we have seen. The editor, or author, never could shew the original; nor can it be shewn by any other; to revenge reasonable incredulity, by refusing evidence, is a degree of insolence, with which the world is not yet acquainted; and stubborn audacity is the last refuge of guilt.' Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* and *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 96.

[22] Thomas M. Curley, *Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18.

[23] Rudolf Tombo, *Ossian in Germany* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 66–7.

[24] Gerald Bär, 'Ossian by Werther; or, the "Respect for This Author"', *Journal for Eighteenth–Century Studies* 39.2 (2016), 223–34, 231.

[25] The original reads: 'Ein Dichter, so voll Hoheit, Unschuld, Einfalt, Thätigkeit, und Seligkeit.' Johann Gottfried Herder, 'Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker', in Herder, *Werke in zehn Bänden*, ed. by Günter Arnold et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993), 447–97, 447.

[26] Orig. 'je wilder, d.i. je lebendiger, je freiwirkender ein Volk ist […] desto wilder, d.i. desto lebendinger, freier, sinnlicher, lyrisch handelnder müssen auch […] seine Lieder sein!' Herder, 'Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel', 450.

a utopian desire for a life untainted by social convention and a less mediated experience of nature and emotions. To Herder and his peers, such primitivism did not point to a state of irretrievably lost innocence, as in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (*Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, 1750), but evoked the tantalising image of an advanced culture that contemporary society should strive to emulate.[27]

To a sanguine person such as Lotte, the allure of Ossian is not entirely relatable at first. Sitting next to Werther in a carriage, she mentions her own book preferences: 'I like those authors best who describe my own situation in life […] whose stories touch me with interest because they resemble my own domestic life' (*L* 16). Given her focus on the familiar rather than the exotic, Werther's Ossian translation ends up in her drawer at first, unread. It is only in the presence of the distraught young man that she turns to these texts: 'There in my drawer […] is your own translation of some of the songs of Ossian. I have not read them yet' (*L* 76). After finishing the passage, he can no longer contain his feelings: 'he threw himself at Charlotte's feet, seized her hands, and pressed them to his eyes and to his forehead.' The sombre tone of Ossianic language intensifies pent-up feelings, even in Lotte, who suddenly releases 'a torrent of tears' from her eyes. At this point, Werther frees himself from his perennial state of sublimation: 'He clasped her in his arms tightly, and covered her trembling, stammering lips with furious kisses', eliciting yet another ambivalent signal from his beloved. She pushes him away, 'casting one last, loving glance at the unhappy man' (*L* 80–1) before bolting the door.

The purpose of the textual insertion of Ossian is twofold: on a narrative level, 'the bardic song is instrumental to the build-up of tension and the development of the themes of love and suicide',[28] as Gerald Bär points out. On a psychological level, the appeal of these poems also lies in a symbolic representation of the triangular relationship between Werther, Lotte and Albert. In *Fingal*'s 'Songs of Selma', the toxic triangle (involving Colma, her brother and her lover) culminates in a duel that ends in death for both men, leaving the girl wailing alone before their lifeless bodies. According to Ehrhard Bahr, the translation of this drastic passage helps Werther and Lotte indirectly address a radical solution to their emotional pain: the possibility of Werther murdering Albert in a duel.[29] Lotte hid those translated verses in the drawer for a reason.

[27] For a characterisation of the utopian appeal of Gaelic culture, see James Mulholland, *Sounding Imperial: Poetic Voice and the Politics of Empire, 1730–1820* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 94.

[28] Bär, 'Ossian', 224.

[29] See Ehrhard Bahr, 'Ossian-Rezeption von Michael Denis bis Goethe: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Primitivismus in Deutschland', *Goethe Yearbook* 12 (2004), 1–15, 8.

Towards the Arch-Original (Michael Denis, Goethe)

The following snippet, taken from the section 'Songs of Selma', serves as a reference passage to compare translations, first into German, then back into English. The Original text spans roughly 2,400 words, and Werther's translation covers most of it, counting approximately 2,100 words. The present analysis concentrates on two paragraphs that contain the song's tragic climax. Amid the nightscape, Colma waits for her lover's return – in vain. To her shock, she realises that the antagonism between Salgar, her lover, and her brother has ended in bloodshed:

> Lo! the calm moon comes forth. The flood is bright in the vale. The rocks are grey on the steep. I see him [i.e., Salgar] not on the brow. His dogs come not before him, with tidings of his near approach. Here I must sit alone!
>
> Who lie on the heath beside me? Are they my love and my brother? Speak to me, O my friends! To Colma they give no reply. Speak to me: I am alone! My soul is tormented with fears! Ah! they are dead! Their swords are red from the fight. O my brother! my brother! why hast thou slain my Salgar? why, O Salgar! hast thou slain my brother? Dear were ye both to me![30]

This snippet from Macpherson's original voices pain and loss. Within the register of linguistic expression, it opts for direct emotive articulation, lamentations and cries. The rivalry between two men is not redirected through the mannerisms of bourgeois law-abiding society but culminates in a deadly duel, as lover and brother take each other's lives. The violence that Shakespearian tragedies save for the fifth act represents the starting point of 'Songs of Selma'. Left alone, Colma directs her speech at the ghosts of the deceased. One crucial element of oral discourse, however, is lacking: rhyme.

Although Macpherson never produced a Gaelic original, the assumption was always that *Fingal* and the other poems that comprised the original Ossian were penned in rhythmic speech. Consequently, Michael Denis's translation into German does not hesitate to reinsert the hexameter and couplets as basic structuring devices:

> Ha! nun erscheint der Mond! Sein Stral [sic]
> Fällt auf den Bach hinab ins Thal.
> Des Hügels Klippen stehn ergraut.
> Ach daß ihn noch mein Aug nicht schaut
> Vom Gipfel! Ach noch billt [sic] kein Hund,
> Und macht mir Salgars Ankunft kund!
> Noch muß ich einsam sitzen hier! –
> Doch wer! wer lieget unter mir
> Dort auf der Haide? – Wärs vielleicht

[30] James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian Translated by James Macpherson*, 3 vols (London: J. Mundell, 1796), vol. 1, 186–7.

Mein Liebster und mein Bruder! – Sprecht
Zu mir, o Freunde! – Beide schweigen! Ach!
Die Furcht zernagt mein Herz! – Ach sie sind todt!
Ihr Eisen ist vom Kampfe roth!
O du, mein Bruder! o warum
Kam Salgar durch dein Eisen um!
Und du, mein Salgar! o warum
Liegt itzt durch dich mein Bruder stumm!
Ihr wart mir beyde werth![31]

This type of rhymed rendering, also found in an early Italian Ossian,[32] evinces that, in contrast to Herder and his peers, many translators 'found nothing inherently attractive about Macpherson's spare, asyndetic and paratactic prose style'.[33] Denis makes up for such (perceived) shortcomings through substantial interferences with the aesthetics of the Original. Hand in hand with the changed form comes a semantic shift, not least due to structuring devices such as rhyme and metre. They tone down the spiritual bleakness of the original Ossian, the feature that makes the text so attractive to Werther.

In rhymed verse, Macpherson's song loses its raw appeal, as a symbolic order places semantically unrelated words in musical proximity and in rhythmic sequence. Once 'todt' (*dead*) rhymes with 'roth' (*red*), and 'warum' (*why*) with 'stumm' (*mute*), the implication is that a higher order overwrites the conflicts that play out on the text's surface. Denis's rhymed version connects Salgar and Colma to other tragic love couples in literary history whose suffering is also articulated in metrical patterns and couplets, notably Dante's Francesca di Rimini and Paolo. In the second circle of Hell, their state of torment – they are caught in an eternal whirlwind – is described in *terza rima*, the interlocking three-line rhyme scheme used throughout the *Divine Comedy*. Such semantic graftage has a drastic effect on Macpherson. As Francesca and Paolo's punishment is testimony to a moral code which punishes illegitimate love and unrestrained jealously, Ossian's spiritual bleakness is toned down and introduces a difficult configuration into the text, Dante's 'ineliminable gap'[34] between rigid faith and aesthetic play.

Werther's translation does not follow Denis's example; instead, he pays heed to Herder's recommendation that Ossian should be translated in a way that is, as

[31] Michael Denis (trans.), *Die Gedichte Ossians, eines alten celtischen Dichters*, 3 vols (Vienna: Johann Thomas Edeln v. Trattnern, 1769), vol. 3, 107–9.
[32] See Melchiorre Cesarotti (trans.), *Poesie di Ossian* (Padua: Giuseppe Comino, 1763/1772).
[33] Johnny Rodger, 'From Slogan to Clan: Three Fragments from the Evolving Scottish/Germanic Literary Relations of the Romantic Period', in *Scotland and the 19th-Century World*, ed. by Gerald Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair Renfrew (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 189–212, 191.
[34] William Franke, *The Divine Vision of Dante's* Paradiso*: The Metaphysics of Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 107.

Herder says, 'livelier, freer, more sensual, more lyrical' than the aesthetic products of classicism. The product reads as follows:

> Sieh, der Mond erscheint, die Flut glänzt im Tale, die Felsen stehen grau den Hügel hinauf; aber ich seh' ihn nicht auf der Höhe, seine Hunde vor ihm her verkündigen nicht seine Ankunft. Hier muß ich sitzen allein.
>
> Aber wer sind, die dort unten liegen auf der Heide? – Mein Geliebter? Mein Bruder? – Redet, o meine Freunde! Sie antworten nicht. Wie geängstet ist meine Seele! – Ach sie sind tot! Ihre Schwerter rot vom Gefechte! O mein Bruder, mein Bruder, warum hast du meinen Salgar erschlagen? O mein Salgar, warum hast du meinen Bruder erschlagen? Ihr wart mir beide so lieb![35]

Werther renders Ossian sentence by sentence. The powerful, allegedly primitive style of the Original shows in exclamations, apostrophes and personal address. In the absence of rhyme and metre, bardic song remains untainted by the metaphysical connotations that come with rhyme.

But since no translation can share the same systemic space with its original, as Toury points out, Werther's text still differs in three aspects. Firstly, there is some stylistic moderation. Archaic terms, such as the exclamation 'lo' and the archaic second-person singular pronoun ('thou hast'), indicating informal familiarity, give way to contemporary German usage. The Original's excessive use of exclamation marks is reduced from ten to five. Secondly, the image of the grey rocks, elided by Denis, is elevated to proto-expressionist intensity, as the adjective 'grau' (grey) is presented in adverbial use: 'die Felsen stehen *grau* den Hügel hinauf" (*The rocks stand* grey-ly *on the steep hill*). In contrast to Denis's translation ('Des Felsen Klippen stehn ergraut'), this endows the rocks with a hostile physiognomy and exacerbates the beholder's desolation. This particular attention to adjectives endows the text with a fashionable feel, as many of Goethe's contemporaries shared such stylistic preferences.[36]

Goethe's third notable amendment is the lack of the critical commentary that typically accompanies Ossian editions, both the English original and most translations. Macpherson introduces 'Songs of Selma' with a brief account of the song's presumed context: 'Minona sings before the king [Fingal] the song of the unfortunate Colma', a rite that forms part of 'an annual custom established by the monarchs of the ancient Caledonian'. In the running text, a footnote elaborates the Gaelic etymology of Colma's name: '*cul-math*, a woman with fine hair'.[37] Following in the footsteps of Macpherson, Denis, also a theologian, kept the commentary, adding further remarks on his choice of metre and other European translations. Worried about

[35] Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, ed. by Waltraud Wiethölter, in *FA*, vol. 8, 11–268, 235.
[36] See Manfred Wacker, *Sturm und Drang* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), 244–8.
[37] Macpherson, *The Poems*, vol. 1, 184–5.

clarity, Denis even adds stage directions in footnotes. After Colma's first lamentation, he notes: 'One should keep in mind that she descends the hill at this point to take a closer look at the two prostrate men.'[38] While such additions appear gratuitous, glosses have an immediate effect on the reading flow: they eliminate semantic uncertainty and embed the text in a supposed historical context.

Embracing Ossianic song as an unmediated form of expression, Werther demonstrates little interest in such historical contextualisation. Werther's pursuit of the supposedly raw sound of the Gaelic Original departs considerably from Macpherson's own ambitions for the epic; after all, its production closely corresponded with the ideas that occupied the Scottish intelligentsia of the time.[39] As Goethe proceeds to graft Ossian on *Werther*, he broadens its scope to suit a universalist agenda that tallies with Herder's vision of a cultural alternative to classicism.

Given this discrepancy, it is important to point out that the protagonist does not adopt Ossianic language as a whole but embraces one of the most effective tools of grafting: the *elimination of incompatible elements*. In contrast to the stolid heroism of 'Book of Fingal', for example, 'Songs of Selma' focuses on grief, despair and desolation. Werther's Ossian is a curated selection, demonstrating a preference for repetitive apostrophes and exclamatory language that sacrifices the inflection of the narrator for a stronger focus on the experience of pain and grief. This applies not only to the introductory words at the beginning of 'Songs of Selma' and the running commentary, but also to the editorial afterword. As Werther's translation reaches the end of the declamatory passages and Lotte erupts in tears, he elides the editor's closing remark: 'Such were the words of the bards in the days of the song; when the king heard the music of harps, and the tales of other times',[40] to jump to yet another declamatory passage, a paragraph from 'Berrathon'.

Denis's and Goethe's Ossian translations evince different uses of grafting. While Denis elides the text's bleakness by reinserting it in an old chain of signification, the holistic unity of rhyme and metre, Goethe's Ossian trims the text's philological layers to underline its desolation and expressivity. Since the discrepancy between the Ossian of Macpherson and its transformation in the hands of Denis and Goethe is programmatic, the tool-like function of the original text becomes apparent. And yet translators are not quite prepared to openly accept

[38] Orig. 'Man muß hier hinzudenken, daß sie vom Hügel herabgestiegen sey, um die beyden Liegenden näher zu betrachten.' Denis, *Die Gedichte*, vol. 3, 107.

[39] Like any true classic, Macpherson's epic has inspired numerous interpretations, and many of them prioritise the author's sociocultural context. Fiona Stafford considers Ossianic song a by-product of Macpherson's rescue of old Gaelic verse and Scottish popular folk mythology at a time when it was threatened by British imperialism. See Fiona Stafford, 'Introduction', in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), v–xxi. Meanwhile, Leith Davis makes a stronger case for Ossian as an expression of Highland cultural nationalism. See Leith Davis, '"Origins of the Specious": James Macpherson's Ossian and the Forging of the British Empire', *The Eighteenth Century* 34.2 (1993), 132–50.

[40] Macpherson, *The Poems*, vol. 1, 194.

their manipulation as an inevitable departure from the Original; instead, the idea is that the translator has access to a truer version of the source text: a truer Original lurks behind the deceptive Original. In Denis's case, the idea is that bardic song must accord with the time-tested norms of metre and rhyme; in Goethe's, that 'the torrent of genius' was compromised by philological commentary. There is an underlying assumption that the Original, on which the translators base their texts, is only an epiphenomenon of a hypothetical entity: the Arch-Original.

Like the reading techniques discussed in Chapter 1, the invocation of this Arch-Original also aims at creating a singularity. To return to the metaphor of grafting, this means to engage in a process that is analogous to the reverse breeding of hybrid plants, a forceful procedure that includes the 'silencing' of the elements that have contributed to crossovers in the first place.[41] Such genetic manipulation eventually results in the re-creation of the 'founder line'. While translators would insist that their return to the Original represents nothing but the elimination of the scions that previous episodes of grafting have added, this factually sets in motion another ground of grafting, with 'silencing' leading to the elimination of the undesired element. The Arch-Original is yet another graft that benefits from the plurality of the text.

Translations into English

If one takes Macpherson, the self-proclaimed translator from Gaelic, at his word, then Werther reads out to Lotte the literary product of translation twice over: first Gaelic to English, then English to German. Considering the emotional impact of the Ossian passage on the protagonist and his beloved, nothing appears lost in this double filtering process. But once Ossian travels from German back to English, through Werther's translation, the directionality of the filtering process is reversed and raises several questions that have impacted the historical reception of *Werther* in English.

Most early English translations of *Werther* concede little room to this intertextual insertion. The first was anonymously published in 1779, variously attributed to Richard Graves and Daniel Malthus. Based on Philippe Aubry's pioneering French rendering from 1777 rather than on the Original, this *Werther* made Goethe known in England and was reprinted more often than other contemporary translations.[42] The translator takes many liberties, especially in view of extravagant phrasings that could cause offence, such as Werther's seemingly blasphemous

[41] See Erik Wijnker, 'Reverse Breeding in Arabidopsis Rhaliana Generates Homozygous Parental Lines from a Heterozygous Plant', *Nature Genetics* 44.4 (2012), 467–70, DOI: 10.1038/ng.2203.
[42] See Orie W. Long, 'English Translations of Goethe's Werther', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 14.2 (1915), 169–213, 177.

comment regarding a child who has washed their face in a well, which prompts the letter writer to compare this solemn scene to a baptism. The preface of the Graves–Malthus edition explains: 'A few expressions […] have been omitted by the French, and a few more by the English translator, as they might possibly give offence in a work of this nature.'[43] The translation also follows a reductive approach in view of Werther and Lotte's emotive reading session. The translator picks the final segment from Goethe's selection from 'Songs of Selma', faithfully reproducing it in Macpherson's original English.[44] This selective approach is representative for early translations and culminates in John Gifford's from 1789, which scraps Ossian altogether.

In the English context, there is a rationale to reducing or omitting the Ossian. On the one hand, it relates to growing suspicions about the text's authenticity. According to Bär, 'the inclusion of Ossianic poetry could have damaged Goethe's reputation in Britain'.[45] It would appear preposterous to think that a suicidal young man should spend his final days with a literary forgery rather than, say, Homer or Klopstock. One who allows himself to be fooled by a faux-Gaelic epic runs the risk of becoming the butt of a joke instead of attracting readerly empathy. That said, scholars have also pointed to the possibility of the exact opposite: for a reader who puts faith in the authenticity of Ossian, its partial inclusion in *Werther* would represent a literary heresy. After all, one should not use ancient poetry for dramatic effect.[46] One way or another, Ossian appears to be an unfitting textual insertion, for its literary status is either too low or too high to facilitate seamlessness.

Conversely, scholars have also protested the corrupting effects that the reduction or omission of Ossian has on *Werther*. In Bär's eyes, the absence of the intertext ignores its function as a compositional device, leaving the psychological change in the protagonist unaccounted for and distorting the novel's build-up.[47] Since all actions in Werther are motivated by multiple chains of cause and effect, however, the result is hardly as dire as Bär suggests. As soon as one weight is removed from the scale, other elements fill the vacuum. In fact, their absence gives the physical aspect of Werther and Lotte's joint reading session greater prominence. In contrast to modern translations, early renderings enjoyed full legitimacy to carry out such interferences. To them, the Original's idiosyncrasies did not hold auratic appeal.

[43] Malthus, 'Preface', in *The Sorrows*, iii–viii, vii.
[44] See Malthus (trans.), *The Sorrows*, 197–9.
[45] Bär, 'Ossian', 228.
[46] In view of Aubry's omission of Ossian, Paul von Tiegheim wonders: 'Ossian est-il déshonoré d' être lu par Werther à Charlotte en cet instant suprême? Les pleurs dont ils inondent ses chants dégradent-ils le vieux barde?' Paul von Tiegheim, *Ossian en France*, 2 vols (Paris: F. Rieder & Cie, 1917), vol. 1, 186.
[47] See Bär, 'Ossian', 223.

The interfering translator (Render)

More than any other early translation, William Render's *Sorrows of Werter* (1801) revels in a unique determination to manipulate the source text. The title page deprives the protagonist's name of the letter H and converts the author's name into 'Göethe',[48] a programmatic idiosyncrasy that foreshadows the many other liberties this translation takes. Although taken directly from German, the text abounds with inaccuracies that violate the expectations of modern readers.[49] Based on Goethe's second version of 1787, the text happily produces its own variants on the subject. Render's interferences cover the full spectrum from grammatical changes, most of which are clearly identifiable as mistakes,[50] to inaccuracies, additions and conspicuous deviations from Goethe's text. As semantic proliferation is given free rein, the original text is transformed into an independent version.

To begin with, this tendency is evident in the incorporation of Ossian. The intertext taken from 'Songs of Selma' is reduced, as the narrator explains, to 'that affecting passage where Armin deplores the loss of his beloved daughter' (*R* 336) – that is, the last three paragraphs of Goethe's selection. In contrast to the Graves–Malthus translation, however, Macpherson's words make space for a rendering taken directly from Goethe's German. The result can be detected not in more explosive language, as one would expect, but in slight alterations of the scenery. In Werther's translation, Macpherson's 'the rain beat hard on the hill'[51] morphs into 'der Regen schlug scharf nach der Seite des Berges'. Render happily follows Goethe: 'the rain beat furiously on the side of the mountain' (336–7). The landscape is more dramatic, as a more violent rain (*hard/furiously*) meets a more imposing geological structure (*hill/mountain*). Such philological detail hardly

[48] Render, *The Sorrows*, title page. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *R*. Early Goethe editions spell the author's name either as 'Goethe' or 'Göthe', never as 'Göethe'.

[49] Render's translation never reached the clout of the Graves–Malthus and Gotzberg editions. Today, it is largely forgotten. When referenced in overviews, its inaccuracies attract more interest than its virtues. See Paul Bishop, 'Goethe', in *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, ed. by Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 315–18, 316; see also Julie Mercer Carroll, Entry on 'Goethe', in *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English*, ed. by Olive Classe, 2 vols (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), vol. 1, 539–45, 540.

[50] Mistakes and translational freedom are often difficult to tell apart. In the following instances, however, mistakes cannot be related to excessive imagination. When Werther says: '[Ich] erliege unter der Gewalt der *Herrlichkeit* dieser Erscheinungen', Render writes '[I] am overawed by the majesty of the *awful* idea' (*R* 10). On the occasion of Werther's conversation with the young scholar, he ends the letter with a condescending remark: 'Ich ließ das gut sein.' Render concludes on a positive note: 'I feel myself *infinitely obliged* by his confidence' (23). Finally, Render's Werther reproaches Lotte for not loving him: 'I am astonished *how she dares love another*' (245). In the original, Werther attacks Albert's right to love her: 'Ich begreife manchmal nicht, *wie sie ein anderer lieb haben kann*, lieb haben darf' (Emphasis mine, J. K.). Such mistakes are also found in other English translations, for example in R. Dillon Boylan's from 1854. See Orie W. Long, 'English Translations of Goethe's Werther', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 14.2 (1915), 169–203, 201.

[51] Macpherson, *The Poems*, vol. 1, 194.

compromises Goethe's text. One of Render's more severe amendments of this passage from Ossian lies somewhere else. Despite orienting the wording after Goethe, he inserts an additional paragraph of Armin's lament into the text. The following segment is found in Macpherson's original but not in Goethe's: 'Will none of you speak in pity? They move on regardless of their father! I am sad, O! mourners, nor small my cause of woe!' (337). This addition produces a stronger invocation of pity, as Armin's complaint that 'none of you speak in pity' relates to Werther's situation: he, too, longs for his pleas to be heard.[52]

Such amendments to the lover's reading of Ossian pale in comparison with Render's most drastic interferences, including his insertion of the full last names of the featured characters. This begins with pseudo-accuracies such as a count's specification as 'Count Metternich, a man of great talents' (6). On another occasion, Fräulein von B. is revealed as 'Miss Bauer' (207), an aptronym that conflicts with her aristocratic descent. Render even amends the story. There is the strange assertion that Leonora, mentioned in Werther's first letter, and his deceased elderly female friend, mentioned at a later point, are in fact the same person. In Goethe's original, the story of Leonora has marginal significance; in Render's version, however, she becomes Werther's first love. A footnote clarifies that she 'died at Brunswick [Braunschweig], which event so much affected him, that he left the place, and came to *Wetzlar*' (2–3). In line with this fusion, Render suppresses the mature age of the elderly friend to further elide differences between her and Leonora.[53] Endowed with this powerful backstory, Werther looks back at his traumatic first love:

> Her dear memory is placed in the deepest recesses of my brain – from which no time nor circumstance shall efface it. – Alas! my friend, it is possible I can ever forget her exalted understanding – her unexampled patience – and her divine resignation in that – but hush! hush! – no more of that. (21)

Although faithfully reproduced in Wertherian staccato, this paragraph is entirely a fabrication on the part of Render. The reinvention of Leonora alters the protagonist's psychological development significantly. While one finds many *Werther* critics who speculate about the origins of the protagonist's death drive – it appears as early as 16 July 1772 – this version relates his mental fixation to a traumatic event: the loss of Leonora, his first love. Here, Werther's reluctance to consistently pursue Lotte is rooted in existential melancholy: how could she replace the person he has irretrievably lost? After Leonora's death, it is no longer surprising that

[52] Render's text deviates from Macpherson's original insignificantly. It reads: 'Will none of you speak in pity? They do not regard their father. I am sad, O Carmor, nor small is my cause of woe!' Macpherson, *The Poems*, vol. 1, 194.

[53] In the letter dated 17 May 1922, Werther reflects on his deceased friend: 'Ach ihre Jahre, die sie voraus hatte, führten sie früher ans Grab als mich.' Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Karl Richter et al., 20 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1985–98), vol. I.2 (1987), 202.

all his subsequent love interests should end in disappointment, as he prefers to indulge in Leonora's memory, which 'no time nor circumstance shall efface'. The enigma of Werther's fickle libido, an observation that inspired modern scholars to speculate about his body–soul conflict,[54] is resolved by means of a plausible backstory.

Render's preference for pseudo-accuracy also extends to Lotte. Drawing on the popular idea that Goethe based his novel on Charlotte Buff, who was betrothed to Johann Christian Kestner, the translator refers to her as 'Charlotte Buff'. Aware that previous editions, including Goethe's original, only reference her surname as 'S', Render adds a footnote, confirming the 'real name of the bailiff's eldest daughter' (49). Although this could be nothing more than a clichéd biographical interpretation, the translator does not leave it at that, claiming his own part in the narrative.

Render in conversation with Werther

Render's translation features an appendix that contains a narrative *mise en abyme*, as the translator claims a place within the original story. He explains:

> The last time the translator had an opportunity of seeing Werter, was at Frankfort on the Mayn [sic], where the former was on some business. […] The translator accordingly waited on Werter at the time appointed. No sooner had he entered the room, than Werter exclaimed, 'My dear friend, I believe I have not seen you since you preached at Wetzlar, which must be almost four months ago'. (361–2)

As their dialogue progresses, the reader learns that the translator is a Protestant pastor who previously delivered a sermon addressing suicide – with Werther among the churchgoers. The occasion was the drowning of a young girl, whose fate was also discussed by Werther and Albert in great detail (12 August 1772). In his sermon, however, the pastor offers a more sympathetic viewpoint than Albert, arguing that individuals must control 'the seeds of destruction' (393) that lie dormant in everyone. During their follow-up conversation in 'Frankfort', the translator shares his personal take on unhappy love with Werther. In fact, he just separated from Sophie, a Catholic girl, whose father objected to his daughter marrying a Protestant. Heroically, he resigned himself to accepting her father's wishes. But the translator's moral example does not produce the intended effect, as Werther reacts with condescension and accuses him of betrayal: 'You who never loved, you who deserted your Sophia' (374). Afterwards, the conversation turns to

[54] According to Günter Sasse, Werther cannot reconcile the spiritual and physical dimensions of love, which corresponds to the prominence of the body–soul conflict in late 18th-century literature in Germany. See Sasse, 'Woran leidet Werther?'

more banal topics, such as coffee and tea consumption, and to the excessive cost of funeral expenses.

One cannot help but notice the tight schedule that Werther would have had to observe to meet the translator in Frankfurt 'a few days preceding his death' (361). Prior to making a case in defence of the country boy who murdered his landlady or reading Ossian to Lotte, Werther would have had to jump on a carriage to meet the translator a day's ride away. Furthermore, the strange cause of their conversation, moving from love to funeral expenses, adds to the awkwardness of this postscript. Despite such narrative hiccups, the effect of the appendix is evident: although it enforces the auratic appeal of *Werther* at first glance, it disturbs the reader's potential identification with the extravagant young man. Render's take on the genesis of *Werther* presents a unique case, differing markedly from clichéd accounts of Goethe and Lotte Buff's relationship. Instead, Render prioritises the idea that Werther is an unhinged, pathological young man. He closes: 'This was the last time I saw him, nor did I hear of him again, till about three months after I learned the dreadful catastrophe which has given rise to the publication of these pages' (375).

Despite the pedestrian sound of this judgement, it is embedded in yet another wild claim. Render's idea is that Goethe – or rather 'Göethe' – was merely the editor who published the man's letters posthumously. What is more, he is portrayed as an unreliable editor who not only suppressed the correct last names and place names, but also abridged some letters and ultimately obscured the crucial reasons behind the protagonist's obsession with death, the fate of Leonora. Once again, a translator professes to reconstruct an Arch-Original that is not yet corrupted by a compromised edition, resorting to eliding some passages and adding new ones.

It remains impossible to say whether Render's hypothesis of a real Werther is simply the product of simple opportunism, with the translator hoping to find a larger audience by making spectacular claims. Or did he just get carried away in the spirit of, say, the narrator of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*? Render's deliberations, however, are not based on the fact that the audience only had a vague idea of the Original;[55] after all, by 1801, the year of Render's publication, the identification of Goethe with Werther had already become a firmly established cliché across Europe, including England. As early as 1787, the author met a pertinacious Englishman in Naples who insisted on seeing the author in person,

[55] This degree of translator's freedom is a common feature of early translations, especially when basic cultural reference frames are lacking between source and target cultures. Although English letters were enthusiastically received in 18th-century Germany, this exchange was not mutual. The only precedent for Werther's success in Britain is Johann Spies's *Faust* (1587), a Protestant fable that travelled across the Channel to inspire Christopher Marlowe's drama (1592). This remained unchanged for at least another two centuries. As late as 1824, Thomas Carlyle still lamented: 'hitherto our literary intercourse with that nation [Germany] has been very slight and precarious.' Carlyle, 'Translator's Preface', in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, vol. 1, 5.

wondering: 'so often as I think of all that was required for the writing of it, I must ever wonder anew.'[56] His assumption was that the protagonist's and the author's *ennui de vivre* are impossible to separate, turning Goethe, the survivor, into a freakish personality. Render does not taint the author with such associations but grants Werther an independent life, which affords him the licence for free fabulation.

Scholarship embraced neither Render's free translation – or rather his adaptation – nor his neat separation between author and literary figure. Instead, the world of letters concerned itself with their interrelatedness throughout the 19th and 20th century. Render offers a rare example of translations outside the Author-God paradigm.

Translations into global English (Hutter, Constantine)

Among early translations, Render's proactive translation was the exception. Most translations tried to maintain fidelity by avoiding excessive interference with the text. Abbreviations for place names and surnames remained intact. Characters that appear irrelevant to the plot were carefully reduced or disappeared as in the Malthus–Graves translation, where the story of Frau M. and her stingy husband (11 June 1772) is omitted. Such translations follow a poetics of invisibility and avoid applying the glowing colours of active interpretative interference.

A tendency for reduction also shows in most back-translations of the Ossian passage. When not elided completely, this quotation is reduced to a few paragraphs. With the exception of Render, early translations into English jump at the opportunity to render the rudiments of Macpherson's lyrical prose in the original, as does Victor Lange's 1988 translation, a translation that is otherwise praised for its accuracy.[57] In translation theory, this approach is called 'natural equivalence', a method that is intuitive to many readers: enunciations that are articulated in foreign languages remain identical when translated back into the original language. Yet sceptics argue that it presents 'an illusion of symmetry between languages which hardly exists beyond the level of vague approximations'.[58] In view of Werther's Ossian, this creates a problem, as John R. J. Eyck points out: 'To neglect – as many have – the product of Goethe's (or, as Goethe presents it: Werther's) translation nearly obliterates critical insight into the character of Werther as well as the overall nature of the story.'[59] Like Bär, Eyck asserts that critical insight can only

[56] Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Goethe's Travels in Italy*, trans. by A. J. W. Morrison and Charles Nisbet (London: Bell & Sons, 1892), 324.
[57] See Bishop, 'Goethe', 316.
[58] Mary Snell-Hornby, *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1988), 22.
[59] John R. J. Eyck, 'Sorrows of Young Werther', in *Encyclopaedia of Literary Translation into English*, ed. by Olive Classe, 2 vols (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), vol. 2, 540–1, 541.

derive from Werther's Ossian, a self-contained entity detached from its English original. Eyck regards Catherine Hutter's translation as exemplary, for it allegedly incorporates Goethe's concessions to his audience. Indeed, the wording of Hutter's Ossian departs from Macpherson, which makes a point about the irreversibility of translation: one cannot just move back and forth between languages without sacrificing their life. But upon closer inspection, the additional value of her back-translation seems limited. The translation of the reference passage reads:

> See … the moon appears, the river gleams in the valley, the rocks stand grey on the hillside – but I do not see him nor do his dogs herald his coming. Here must I sit alone.
>
> But who lies down there on the heath? My beloved? My brother? Speak to me, O my friends! They do not reply, and my soul is fearful. Ah me – they are slain; their swords are red with blood. O my brother, my brother, why hast thou slain my beloved? O Salgar, my beloved, why hast thou slain my brother? I loved you both.[60]

In contrast to Eyck's claim, the effect of Hutter's translation is not to produce a more intense rendering of Macpherson to faithfully incorporate Werther's perspective, but rather the elision of idiosyncrasies of both originals: Goethe's text and *Fingal*. Hutter not only avoids Goethe's exclamatory style and wild use of punctuation, she also dodges old-fashioned, rather cloying terms in English. Her modern usage elides the archaic exclamation 'lo' and replaces 'You were both so dear to me' with a rather plainly worded 'I loved you both'.

Neutralising interferences also inform the most recent translation into English, presented by David Constantine. Here, the aim is to create a sense of historicity without compromising the text's readability:

> See, the moon appears, the waters gleam in the valley, the rocks stand grey on the hillside, but I do not see him on the heights, his hounds ahead of him do not announce his coming. I must sit here alone.
>
> But who are they lying there below on the heather? – My beloved? My brother? – Speak, friends. They do not answer. My soul is sore afraid. – Oh they are dead, their swords are red from the combat. Brother, oh my brother, why have you killed Salgar? Oh Salgar, why have you killed my brother? You were both so dear to me.[61]

Constantine's text barely differs from Hutton's. Where it does, he produces a historic feel that evokes the Victorian era. He avoids the modern 'love' and inserts slightly old-fashioned 'hounds' (where even Macpherson speaks of 'dogs').

Both Hutter and Constantine cater to a readership that assumedly prefers a historical feel to actual archaisms. Excessive punctuation, such as Macpherson's

[60] Catherine Hutter (trans.), *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (New York: Signet, 1962), 113.
[61] David Constantine (trans.), *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 98.

and Goethe's exclamation marks, is reduced to a minimum. The result lacks the kind of accentuation that produces the impassionate declamatory power of both Macpherson and Goethe. In view of Bär's reservations against the elision of Ossian and Eyck's irritation at translators who insert Macpherson at the expense of Goethe's translation, this approach raises a fundamental question: what kind of understanding does a streamlined and toned-down translation facilitate? On the one hand, such changes water down the emotional expressivity of the text. This effect can be evaluated negatively, as seen in Goethe's reaction to Gaetano Grassi's Italian *Werther* (1782), which, the poet finds, alters the protagonist's psychology: 'His translation mainly paraphrases. Gone are the glowing expressions of pain and joy, which constantly move in circles; now it's hard to tell what Werther actually wants.'[62] On the other hand, this effect can also be considered in the light of the myriad complaints about the bad example that Werther sets by giving in to unhinged emotionality, a standpoint that Goethe himself supported to some extent. Even if such translations confuse the protagonist's psychology, one can argue, this could be the price for achieving more readerly guidance.

While such deliberations indeed played a role in the text's first translations, the text's toned-down expressivity in contemporary English translations derives less from a concern for readers' safety and more from commercial considerations that also come with considerable aesthetic repercussions: editors' worries about the accessibility of the text. *Werther* undergoes a certain degree of linguistic transformation to fit into the canon of world literature, as understood from a publisher's perspective: a set of domain-free texts that continue to be consumed for a variety of reasons. To this end, Hutter and Constantine have to conform to the norms of 'global English' based on the present version of English as a universally binding compromise that facilitates the smooth accommodation of foreign literary expressions within a fixed linguistic system.[63] In the light of the arising systemic, let alone stylistic differences, this requires considerable compromise – one is tempted to speak of pruning. As the catch-all for literature written in languages other than English, global English can be greeted as a convenient tool to free classical literature from its enclosure in highbrow contexts, with its confinement to privileged circles who read literature in the original and celebrate historical quirks as an end in itself. In this spirit, David Damrosch argues that

[62] '[S]eine Übersetzung ist fast immer Umschreibung; aber der glühende Ausdruck von Schmerz und Freude, die sich unaufhaltsam in sich selbst verzehren ist ganz verschwunden und darüber weis man nicht was der Mensch [*i.e., Werther*] will.' Letter from Goethe to Charlotte von Stein (12 December 1781), in *FA*, vol. 29, 392.

[63] As Aamir R. Mufti pointed out, 'hidden inside world literature is the dominance of globalized English', an idiom that levels out the linguistic idiosyncrasies that could otherwise be found in other languages, including in dated versions of English itself. Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 22.

'we won't see works of world literature so fully enshrined within their cultural context as we do when reading those works within their own traditions, but a degree of distance from the home tradition can help us to appreciate the ways in which a literary work reaches out and away from its point of origin'.[64] Once a piece of writing is removed from its original language, the reader is meant to encounter a meta-version of the text, facilitating new vantage points that connect more easily to the reader's present.

Damrosch's eulogy of abstraction, however, entails serious implications regarding a text's aesthetic presentation. There is more to maintaining the specific flavour of a foreign text than mere elitism. With regard to the tendency to erase a text's origin, postcolonial scholarship has drawn attention to the not-so-neutral mediating role of English. On this point, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak regrets that '[s]tudents in Taiwan, Thailand, or yet Nigeria will learn about the literature of the world through English translations'.[65] Other languages than English are seen as unable to compete as epistemic instruments to describe the world. According to Spivak, the negative effects of global English are not limited to the reproduction of postcolonial hierarchies; they also interfere with English itself, as academics increasingly lose their ability 'to understand that the mother-tongue is actively divided'.[66] Historic and geographic fault lines disappear and create the misleading idea of a language that no longer needs to fill gaps. Toury's observation that translators often find something missing, 'which should rather be there and which, luckily, already exists elsewhere', becomes obsolete. The inclusion of foreign elements would only stand in the way of Damrosch's abstraction process. Spivak regards such avoidance of interlinguistic nuance as intimately tied to the requirements of world literature's academic audiences. Their focus is on plot summaries, while 'the languages of the cultures of origin [are] invoked at best as delexicalized and fun mother-tongues, as fragments signalling "otherness" '.[67] Eventually, the translated text becomes a mere reiteration of familiar patterns.

Hutter's and Constantine's tame *Werther*-renderings cater to a linguistic hierarchy that ranks some of the world's languages higher than others. Their English makes no concessions, neither to the German original nor to historic forms of English. Given the lowly status of German, it should not come as a surprise that Goethe's text was in no position to colonise English.

[64] Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 300.
[65] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Commonwealth Literature and Comparative Literature', in *Re-imagining Language and Literature for the 21st Century*, ed. by Suthira Duangsamosorn (Amsterdam: Brill, 2005), 15–38, 19.
[66] Spivak, 'Commonwealth Literature', 34. For an analysis of the situation of global English in Japan, see Myles Chilton, *English Studies Beyond the 'Center': Teaching Literature and the Future of Global English* (London: Routledge, 2016), 22.
[67] Spivak, 'Commonwealth Literature', 25.

Translations in East Asia

If the previous paragraph presented German as a language subjected into passivity by English, the situation was different in the East Asian reception of *Werther.* Here, German held substantial cultural prestige. On par with English and French, it was regarded as the language of a nation state worthy of imitation, but unlike the English and the French, the Germans were considered a less threatening imperial force. The Iwase–Harris Treaty of 1858 forced the Japanese administration to open up the harbour of Yokohama to international trade, with American, British and French traders as the primary beneficiaries. For Japan, Germany never represented a colonial threat but was an emblem of cultural modernity sans geopolitical rivalry. In China, the situation was different, as Wilhelmine Germany pushed to acquire colonial possessions towards the end of the 19th century, when the instability of the Qing administration hastened the devolution of port cities. In reaction to the 1897 Juye Incident, when two missionaries were killed by insurgents, Germany sent gunboats to Shandong province and carved out its own protectorate, the Kiautschou Bay concession. Regardless of the questionable legal status of such annexations, the German administration never attracted as much public protest as did Britain, the driving force behind the Opium Wars.[68] Moreover, the German concession ended soon enough, in 1914, when the territory was occupied by Japanese forces. During the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Kiautschou was officially awarded to the Far Eastern island empire.

Consequently, the East Asian situation of the German language differs from the colonial mindset, as described by Edward W. Said. Japanese and Chinese writers did not have to wrest their heritage from German colonisers.[69] As the reception of Marxism in China demonstrates, German letters and thought were, particularly in this case, regarded as universal goods rather than as ideological contraband. The same applies to the reception of *Werther*. Its reception fell into the Age of Imperialism, when occidental values spread across the globe, but owing to Germany's weak position in East Asia, the book was not accompanied by the background noise of gunboats.

[68] After the first Opium War (1839–42), the Qing administration conceded Britain the creation of five treaty ports. In comparison, the Kiautschou Bay concession had a comparably good reputation among the local population. Sun Yatsen, the father of modern China, considered the protectorate a model for China's further development. See Joachim Schultz-Naumann, *Unter Kaisers Flagge: Deutschlands Schutzgebiete im Pazifik und in China einst und heute* (Munich: Universitas, 1985), 184.

[69] Said described the situation of writers under colonial rule as connected to a process of 'remapping': first, the colonised lose their place to the colonisers who chart the territory for themselves. In a second step, a remapping emerges from the maps provided by the colonisers: 'along with these nationalistic adumbrations of the decolonized identity, there always goes an almost magically inspired, quasi–alchemical redevelopment of the native language.' See Edward Said, 'Yeats and Decolonization', in *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. by Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage, 2000), 291–316, 299.

For want of shared cultural references, such as Greek antiquity, Christianity and the Enlightenment, *Werther*'s arrival in East Asia, one can safely assume, required a considerable degree of intertextual and linguistic grafting. The absence of a critical consensus unleashed the spectrum of a text's plurality. Precisely the 'degree of distance' that Damrosch considers essential for the liberation of a literary work from its point of origin appears in its most powerful form, as the aim is not to reimagine the text in accordance with established linguistic patterns. Quite the contrary, the hope is that existing gaps can be closed by granting the source text greater freedom vis-à-vis the constraints of the target language.

Japanese translations

Goethe wrote in a period when native German had already started to replace French as the language of belles-lettres in German-speaking countries. The formative period of the language goes back even further, to the early 16th century, when Martin Luther synthesised an idiom from various dialects and administrative conventions. Despite the protagonist's stylistic idiosyncrasies, the language of *Werther* operates within an already stabilised linguistic system. In contrast, Japanese and Chinese translations of *Werther* fall into a period when their respective vernacular languages were still in flux. In view of their own tongues, translators were confronted with, to use Toury's words, stylistic modes of expression 'which should rather be there and which, luckily, already exis[t] elsewhere'.

During the Meiji era, starting in 1868, Japan started not only to adopt modern warfare and industrial production, but also to adjust its language to the needs of a changing world. The fear was that cultural inertia would entail occupation or even extinction. Prior to that, the official idiom was *kanbun* (漢文), modelled after Classical Chinese. In use since the Nara period (710–94 CE), *kanbun* was never intended as a linguistic system accessible to all social classes but was reserved for cultural and administrative matters communicated among literati and the samurai class. During the phase of government-sponsored modernisation, this disjunction was increasingly viewed as a symptom of a historical backlog: while all European languages were already established as vernacular languages, Japan was still in want of a unified language that would bridge the gap between the elitist written system and the confusing variety of regional dialects. Yeounsuk Lee highlights the artificial nature of this project: 'Therefore, it became necessary to create an image of the language that was spoken by an anonymous "nation people", an indefinite "somebody" who could be anyone from the upper or lower class of samurai, merchants, and peasants.'[70] Although spoken Japanese acted as the prime source for

[70] Lee Yeounsuk, *The Ideology of Kokugo: Nationalizing Language in Modern Japan*, trans. by Maki Hirano Hubbard (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 39.

the new vernacular, European translations also played an important role in its development.[71] The first translations of *Werther* coincided with the advent of the *genbun itchi* (言文一致), which translates as 'reconciliation of spoken and written language'.

Ironically, the emphatic adoption of occidental cultural goods was, with few exceptions, mediated by Japanese translations and scholarship. This changed with language reform, when such texts served as a model alongside translated foreign fiction.[72] At one point, the number of translated books even exceeded that of works written in Chinese.[73]

Translations by Chogyū, Hata, Kubo

In this section, three renderings of *Werther* will be analysed to see how they participated in the process of vernacularisation. Translators found different solutions to mediate the clash between the protagonist's erratic writing and the linguistic possibilities of contemporary Japanese. The present analyses focus on a new reference passage, Werther's letter dating from 21 June 1772. For orientation, the German original is presented alongside Lange's reliable translation:

> Es ist wunderbar: wie ich hierher kam und vom Hügel in das schöne Tal schaute, wie es mich rings umher anzog. – Dort das Wäldchen! – Ach könntest du dich in seine Schatten mischen! – Dort die Spitze des Berges! – Ach könntest du von da die weite Gegend überschauen! – Die in einander geketteten Hügel und vertraulichen Täler! – O könnte ich mich in ihnen verlieren! – Ich eilte hin, und kehrte zurück, und hatte nicht gefunden, was ich hoffte. O es ist mit der Ferne wie mit der Zukunft![74]

> It is so strange how, when I came here first and looked out upon that lovely valley from the hills, I felt charmed with everything around me – the little wood opposite – how delightful to sit in its shade! How fine the view from that summit! – that delightful chain of hills, and the exquisite valleys at their feet! – could I but lose myself amongst them! – I ran off, and returned without finding what I sought. Distance, my friend, is like the future. (*L* 20)

This kind of writing presents a number of obstacles for the Japanese translator. Goethe's text achieves emotional charge by wild syntactic turmoil and is indebted to the linguistic virtuosity Goethe first explored in *Songs of Sesenheim*

[71] See Indra Levy, *Sirens of the Western Shore: The Westernesque Femme Fatale, Translation, and Vernacular Style in Modern Japanese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 39–40.
[72] The influential reformer Liang Qichao became one of the most outspoken early advocates of translating foreign fiction. See Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 178–9.
[73] See Lawrence Wang-Chi Wong, 'From "Controlling the Barbarians" to "Wholesale Westernization"', in *Asian Translation Traditions*, ed. by Eva Hung and Judy Wakabayashi (Manchester: St Jerome, 2005), 109–35, 124–5.
[74] Goethe, *Die Leiden*, *FA*, vol. 8, 57.

(*Sesenheimer Lieder*, 1770–1). According to Hans Peter Herrmann, Werther successfully channels the silent activity of nature into the swaying rhythm of this sentence, as 'nature itself claims active agency'.[75] Uncritically reproducing *Storm and Stress* aesthetics, this claim emphasises that a loss of subjective control results in an effect that can be identified as poetic inspiration. Emil Staiger's analysis is much more concise, as it links this loss of control directly to breaches of grammatical rules: 'When Werther finds himself unable to take a breath, […] he deliberately ends the subclauses with full stops.'[76]

Werther's heavy use of exclamation marks, interjections and dashes presented a substantial problem for translators; after all, punctuation is not a cultural universal. Unknown to Latin and medieval European languages, the exclamation mark is a modern typographic invention which first entered English in the 16th century, prompting spelling reformers such as John Hart to explicitly advise against its usage.[77] In German, the exclamation mark started to appear around 1600.[78] As English translations of *Werther* demonstrate, aesthetic considerations continued to rein in its excessive use, not only in the late 18th century but up to the present. This situation was exacerbated in the Japanese context. Prior to their exposure to the West, East Asian languages had no systematic punctuation at all. Japanese texts written in *kanbun* style lacked punctuation altogether, and vernacular texts were only sketchily and inconsistently punctuated. Nanette Twine explains: 'No spaces separated words, which rendered the mainly hiragana classical Japanese style particularly difficult. To extract the sense of the passage, the reader had to recognize sentence finals and other grammatical signals indicating function.'[79]

Next to the editors of Meiji-era school textbooks, novelists became the greatest driving force behind the adoption of Western punctuation. In contrast to official documents, narrative texts require more punctuation to separate dialogue and narrative, for example. Efficient use can make a text more accessible to less versed readers. According to Twine, Yamada Bimyō's colloquial-style works counted among the first texts that comprehensively embraced Western punctuation. *Ridiculing a Vain Novelist* (嘲戒小説天狗 Chokai shōsetsu tengu), a fragment from 1886, included ellipses to indicate lingering memory, quotation marks for

[75] The original reads: 'die Natur ist zum handelnden Subjekt geworden.' Hans Peter Herrmann, 'Landschaft in Goethes "Werther": Zum Brief vom 18. August', in *Goethes 'Werther': Kritik und Forschung*, ed. by H. P. H. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 360–81, 365.

[76] The original reads: 'Werther ist imstande, Nebensätze mit Punkten abzuschließen, wenn sein Gefühl gezwungen ist, in einer Pause Atem zu schöpfen, so in dem Brief vom 10. Mai.' Staiger, *Goethe*, 151.

[77] See Vivian Salmon, 'Orthography and Punctuation', in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, ed. by Roger Lass et al., 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), vol. 3, 13–55, 22.

[78] See Hugo Moser, *Deutsche Sprachgeschichte* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1969), 167.

[79] Nanette Twine, 'The Adoption of Punctuation in Japanese Script', *Visible Language* 18.3 (1984), 229–37, 230.

dialogue and exclamation marks for agitated speech.[80] From this point onwards, the use of punctuation accelerated and eventually attained literary dignity through its prominent use in Sōseki Natsume's modern classic *I Am a Cat* (吾輩は猫である Wagahai wa neko de aru, 1905).[81]

Werther translations are embedded in this process during which the expressivity of Japanese increased through use of punctuation and colloquial speech. Takayama Chogyū's translation (准亭郎の悲哀 Juntei-rō no hiai), published in 1891, first introduced the German text to a wider Japanese readership. As in the case of *Werther*'s early reception in Britain, this translation was based on another translation, Gotzberg's rendering into English.[82] This English translation removes many difficulties of the original, including Werther's meandering style and most exclamations. The result is surprisingly brief:

> The first time I beheld this charming spot I became attached to it, the beauties of nature, the delightful prospects of woods, of mountains, and of rocks. Oh! couldst thou but see them! yet I was dissatisfied, and left them with as many wishes as before. Alas! distance, my friend, resembles futurity.[83]

Gotzberg's *Werther* is comparatively sober and detached, and one should expect that it made Takayama's task easier. Nonetheless, his text stands out for odd juxtapositions of archaic and modern elements:

> 頭れば已に數歳の昔、予の此樂しき土地に來りしざ、予は自然の美、森の面白き景色、山の絕間なき變化、岩の奇怪なる狀態を愛したりき。お、御身が此の景色を見たらんには！。きれど予はにも滿足せず、徒らに架空の望を抱きて之を去りしなり。嗚呼我友よ、遠方は尚ほ未來の如きなり[。][84]

In this passage, different linguistic conventions of modern Japanese in the 1890s collide. Instead of indicating emotiveness via punctuation, indigenous forms of Japanese use exclamatory particles, for example *ka na* かな, *zo* ぞ or *yo* よ. Takayama's translation, however, defies this convention and smuggles the exclamation mark across the linguistic border. Towards the end of the second sentence, an exclamation mark and a full stop (*kuten* 句点) appear in succession: (！。) Originally, Japanese did not feature non-phonetic signifiers for exclamations, so the translator used it as a cue without syntagmatic function, like dynamic

[80] See Twine, 'The Adoption', 235–6.
[81] Sōseki Natsume 夏目 漱石, *I Am a Cat* (吾輩は猫である Wagahai wa neko de aru) (Tokyo: Hattori, 1905).
[82] See Katō Kenji 加藤 健司, 'The Young Takayama Chogyū as Translator' (翻訳者としての若き高山樗牛 Hon'yaku-sha to shite no wakaki Takayama Chogyū), *Bulletin of Yamagata University: Humanities* (山形大学紀要: 人文科学 Yamagata daigaku kiyō: Jinbun kagaku) 17.4 (2013), 27–46, 46.
[83] Frederic Gotzberg (trans.), *The Sorrows of Werter* (London: Cassell & Company, 1886), 49.
[84] Takayama Chogyū 高山 樗牛, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (准亭郎の悲哀 Junteirō no hiai), in *Collected Works* (全集 Zenshū), 7 vols (Tokyo: Hirofumi-kan, 1928), vol. 6, 43–150, 64. National Diet Library Digital Collections, website: http://kindai.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1137124 [last accessed 1 June 2023]. My underline, J. K.

markings in musical notation. For the completion of the clause, however, another full stop is inserted. This odd juxtaposition is a symptom of the gap that is filled in this text. In contrast to this innovation, Takayama's use of the *nari* copula – なり, underlined in the above passage – indicates formality and relates to the *kanbun* writing style. Such stiltedness combines poorly with the conventions that govern the vernacular.[85] To illustrate its reduced readability, the following back-translation reproduces the effect of this translation in English. Since Takayama's translation features both dated and modern elements (exclamation marks and the *nari* copula), the following passage keeps Gotzberg's archaic 'thou' while adding redundant modern punctuation, an exclamation mark followed by a full stop:

> The first time I beheld this charming spot I became attached to it, the beauties of nature, the delightful prospects of woods, of mountains, and of rocks. Oh, couldst thou but see them ！. Yet I was dissatisfied, and left them with as many wishes as before. Alas, distance, my friend, resembles futurity.

This English translation sounds plain yet appears typographically compromised. The dilemma of Takayama's *genbun itchi* is that no blueprint existed for how to represent Werther's emotive outbursts. After the elimination of what were perceived as incompatible elements deprives the text of its expressivity, the addition of a scion – in this case, formal language – generates a graft that gives away the systemic difference between the source text and a changing Japanese vernacular.

Such heterogeneity does not gloss over the choices of the translator by invoking an Arch-Original or hide behind the conventions of a stylised idiom; instead, the reader is confronted with the ghostly presence of a foreign text that is not yet assimilated to readerly conventions. As a consequence, Japanese scholars label this translation stilted and unreadable.[86] For the purpose of the present study, however, Takayama's text offers a welcome alternative to the norm of invariant translation, where the plural of the source text is replaced by the gesture of singularity.

Foreignisation

Kubo Tenzui's translation from 1904 opts for more foreignisation. Based on an unidentified English translation that fully reproduces Werther's twists and turns, it shows more appreciation for Werther's breathless form of speech. Although its register is still informed by conventional literary language, the *nari* copula is

[85] Speaking as a modern user of the language, Tsutsui relates this copula to the 'now obsolete Classical Literary style'. Michio Tsutsui, 'The Japanese Copula Revisited: Is *da* a Copula?', *Japanese Language and Literature* 40.1 (2006), 59–103, 60.

[86] See Naoji Kimura, 'Werther in japanischer Übersetzung', in *Sprache und Bekenntnis*, ed. by Wolfgang Frühwald et al. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1971), 57–77, 60.

omitted. What is more, dashes and exclamation marks are preserved and produce the chaotic feel of stream-of-consciousness narratives:

> 訝しいかな、そも如何にして予は此地に來り、如何にして山上より、この美しき谿谷を眺め、如何にして四邊の景象、わが心をば惹きたりけむ。– 其處に森あり！あはれ、我よく其蔭に身を委ね得べきか！– かしこに山の巓見ゆ！あはれ、我よく其處より遠方を見渡し得べきか！– 起伏連亘せる丘あり、谿あり！あはれ、我よく其中に分け入り得べきか！– 予は急ぎ行きぬ、やがて歸りぬ。而かも、わが望を遂ぐること能はざりき。げにや、遠き彼方は尚ほ未來の時の如し。[87]

The choice of words is somewhat old-fashioned but the prose reads elegantly, skilfully reproducing Werther's lively tone. The style of this rendering can be compared to Lange's safe English translation and requires no re-translation.

Hata Toyokichi, who published his translation in 1917, is regarded as one of the most accomplished translators of his generation.[88] His knack for smooth writing also shows in the translation, which reflects further developments of *genbun itchi*. Being much closer to modern Japanese, it uses the adjectival ending *i* (い) instead of *ki* (き) when modifying a noun:

> 實に不思議ではないか。どうして私はこゝへ來て、此の丘の上から美しい谷を見てゐるのだろう。あたりの景色は皆な私の心を牽きつける。あゝ彼處に小さな森がある。あの蔭にこの體を隠す事ができるであろうか。彼處には山の頂が見える。あの頂からは廣いあたりが見渡せるであろうか。おゝ連なれる山、懐かしい谷よ。この體はその山その谷に分け入る事ができようか。私は急いで行って歸って來た。しかも私の望んだものはついに發見することができなかったのである。あゝ遠い彼方は丁度未來のようだ。[89]

Even though the grammar follows most conventions, the short sentences and the frequent omission of a subject engender a colloquial writing style that no longer lives up to the standards of formal Japanese.[90] Instead of Takayama's irritating exclamation marks, this rendering opts for the mere use of the question denominator *ko* か, indicating a sense of doubt. The translator also opts for the modern copula *de arou* (である), which is based on the established translation for the verb 'to be' and which had entered literary language during the

[87] Kubo Tenzui 久保 天隨 (trans.), *Werther* (うえるてる Ueruteru) (Tokyo: Kinkōdō, 1905), 47–8, National Diet Library Digital Collections, website: http://kindai.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/896670 [last accessed 1 June 2023].

[88] Hata also wrote extensively about life in Berlin, where he was posted for business. See Ricky W. Law, *Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German–Japanese Relations, 1919–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 109–11.

[89] Hata Toyokichi 秦 豐吉 (trans.), *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (若きエルテルの悲み Wakaki Ueruteru no himi) (Tokyo: Shūeikaku, 1927), 47, National Diet Library Digital Collections, website: http://kindai.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1086009 [last accessed 1 June 2023]. My underlines, J. K.

[90] See Kimura, 'Werther', 63.

1890s.[91] With regard to Toury's metaphor, Hata's translation has to fill fewer gaps than Kubo's.

While there is no direct English equivalent for any of these features, the following back-translation imitates Hata's text by replacing the archaic second person pronoun (thou) and the second person verb (couldst) with their modern equivalents. Furthermore, the exclamations are replaced with rhetorical questions:

> Wasn't it wonderful? How I first came here and looked out upon that lovely valley from the hills? I felt charmed by everything around me. How delightful would it be to visit that little wood opposite and to sit in its shade? Wouldn't I see everything from that summit: that delightful chain of hills, the exquisite valleys at their feet? Could I but lose myself amongst them! I ran off and returned. What did I hope to find? Distance, my friend, is like the future.

On the whole, Japanese *Werther* translations between Takayama and Hata mirror the move from a heterogeneous approach that leaves linguistic hiccups unresolved to more invariant translations. With regard to the use of foreign punctuation, for example exclamation marks and dashes, no clear tendencies can be detected. These Japanese translations, while participating in the radical shifts of *genbun itchi*, never go as far as imitating the syntax of the source language. A sensitivity for stylistic purity and syntactic correctness kept Werther's erratic language at bay. Altogether, the translators did not wish to extend *genbun itchi* too far. This careful and scrupulous attitude towards potential foreign influence is complemented by a literary genre which circumvents the necessity to engage with excessively foreign features: *hon'an* (翻案), adaptations rather than translations of foreign literature.[92]

Despite the Japanese language's alleged openness to foreign interference during the Meiji era, the three translations do in a way resemble European translations. With the exception of Takayama's awkward juxtaposition of exclamation mark and *kuten* (！。), Werther's language does not drive a wedge into a fluid language system but is carefully adapted. Indeed, the relevance of *Werther* in Japan is less connected to its stylistic expressivity than to its iconic representation of literary and behavioural codes that served as templates for modern literature. Since Japanese translators privileged syntagmatic clarity, the protagonist's letters were never read as the ramblings of a delusional young man who gets entangled in a self-inflicted situation; rather, he was seen as an exponent of the modern love discourse. He exemplifies, as Kayo Yamamoto argues, how a man should feel towards his beloved.[93] As Werther, the martyr of love, solemnly puts his unrequited feelings into words,

[91] See Levy, *Sirens*, 39 f.
[92] See Scott J. Miller, *Adaptations of Western Literature in Meiji Japan* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 3–4, 9–21.
[93] See Kayo Yamamoto, 'Sturm und Drang in Japan: Die Werther-Rezeption und die Liebesanschauung in Japan', *Doitsu Bunkaku* 114 (2003), 150–9, 153.

his orderly prose evinces a man in full possession of his mental powers. In the European context, scholars such as Niklas Luhmann and Eva Illouz have emphasised the role of literary models for the development of romantic sentiments.[94] The same can be stated for the Japanese context, where the notion of free love gradually replaced the practice of arranged marriages.

Naming names

In the analysis of stylistically challenging passages, such as Werther's letter dating from 21 June, the effect of translational grafting shows in the use of historical linguistic patterns that changed in quick succession during the early 20th century. As regards the elisions and replacements of the protagonists' names, the case is much simpler to analyse. Takayama's text, for example, features wholesale nativisation: Lotte's name is translated as *sha-musume* (紗娘) and Werther as *juntei-rō* (准亭郎), 'Ms Sha' and 'Mr Juntei'. Both names are written in kanji, the usual format of Japanese names, reflecting Takayama's ambition to cast the protagonist as Japanese. This changes with Kubo's rendering, which introduces a fair level of foreignisation also with regard to names. 'Werther' is rendered phonetically in hiragana and without an honorific: *Weruteru* (ゑるてる). 'Lotte', meanwhile, is also translated phonetically, but this time in katakana, the script often employed for transcribing foreign-language words: *Rotsute* (ロツテ). The novel's status as a foreign text is underlined by the appearance of protagonists with explicitly foreign names.

Furthermore, the translators embrace *Werther* as a gateway to occidental culture. This is most evident in the Ossian passages that English translations tend to abbreviate or elide. While Takayama based his text on Gotzberg's rendering, which only gives a small part of Macpherson's intertext, both Hata and Kubo cover Werther's entire translation of the bardic song.[95] Ossian is seen as an integral part of the novel, and the names of Macpherson's heroes are also rendered in foreign-sounding katakana transcription. In one instance, however, Takayama strongly interferes with the source text, when he elides Werther and Lotte's reference to Klopstock, then a fashionable German poet.[96] In this translation, the window scene instead culminates in Lotte and Werther's invocation of Homer – or rather *Hōmā* (ホーマー).[97] While the Greek epic poet is mentioned repeatedly throughout the text, he primarily appears in scenes of solitude to mark Werther's naive

[94] See Luhmann, *Liebe*; Illouz, *Consuming*.
[95] See Hata, *The Sorrows*, 214–39; Kubo, *Werther*, 211–25.
[96] Lessing, the literary critic, jokes: 'Wer wird nicht einen *Klopstock* loben? / Doch wird ihn jeder lesen? Nein.' Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1970), vol. 1, 9. Emphasis in the original.
[97] See Chogyū, *The Sorrows*, 62.

appreciation of antiquity as a source of enjoyment. After Takayama's amendment, the two lovers appreciate Homer as a means of communication that nurtures a pleasing prospect: like Odysseus and Penelope, they will have to go through hardship but will be reunited eventually. The heroic narrative serves as a template for the present.

The first Chinese Werther (Ma Junwu)

In China, formal vernacularisation started later than in Japan, and so did the import of European letters. Despite the use of vernacular *baihua* since the Ming dynasty, there existed no convincing solution to reconcile the different dialects of Chinese in the north, notably in the capital, Beijing, and in the country's commercial centres, Shanghai and Canton. Next to the cultural depth of Classical Chinese, its success as an administrative and literary idiom also rested on its perceived geographical neutrality. After reformers of the Qing dynasty failed in their attempts to transform Chinese from a single-word unit to a phrase-unit language, a tangible proposition came only a few months prior to the Revolution of 1911, when the Central Congress of Pedagogues discussed formalising the vernacular. The joint statement read: 'In order to function as a national language, Guoyu [i.e. Chinese] cannot be based on any "natural" local dialect but must be a standardized "artificial" language.'[98] Eventually, the New Culture Movement (新文化運動 xin wenhua yundong) used their socio-political clout to establish their version of the vernacular as the only legitimate written language.[99] Regardless of the artificiality of the idiom, literary reformers placed great hopes in its ability 'to destroy those restrictive shackles and chains'[100] of established linguistic conventions and to engage the wider public more actively with the products of intellectual activity.

The reform of punctuation had already started in 1904, when Yan Fu, a prolific translator, suggested a system modelled after European languages. His proposition eventually caught on, at least in the intellectual sphere, when Hu Shi and Zhu Yuanfang presented a punctuated edition of *Outlaws of the Marsh* (水滸傳 Shui hu zhuan, 14th century CE). In spite of the text's historic aura, their 1920 edition featured full stops, commas, colons, semicolons, question marks and exclamation points to provide better readerly guidance. Responding to scholarly

[98] Quoted in Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, 'The Origins of Modern Chinese Literature', in *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, ed. by Merle Goldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 17–37, 24.

[99] See Gang Zhou, *Placing the Modern Chinese Vernacular in Transnational Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 104–17.

[100] Orig. '打破那些束縛精神的枷鎖鐐銬。' Hu Shi 胡適, *Works* (作品集 Zuo pin ji) (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1986), 181. Hu Shi's essay 'On New Poetry' (談新詩 Tan xin shi), dating from 1917, inaugurated the backlash against classic forms of expression.

protestations,[101] Hu argued: 'We believe that the absence of punctuation creates all kinds of difficulties. Once there is the help of punctuation, the effect of the words is especially wholesome, especially great.'[102] Applied to literary prose, punctuation did not simply make writing more efficient by eliminating ambiguous meaning but also changed the rhythm of the narrative.

Goethe's novel was first introduced to Chinese readers in 1902, before language reform had taken root, when Ma Junwu published a fragment within a compilation of German texts.[103] Interestingly, Ma's excerpt centres around the reading of Ossian rather than Werther's monological letters. After a brief account of Goethe's special status in European letters, the translator relates the protagonist's infatuation with Lotte and how it collides with her commitment to Albert. Ma seamlessly switches from editorial voice to his translation and continues:

> 沙婁曰。是篋內有「歐心之詩」Song of ossing[!]君所譯也。 予尚未讀若使其出於君之唇。則誠善矣。威特笑。取而視之。意忽動。坐而淚涔涔下。以最哀之聲歌之。是阿明Armin哭其女初喪之詞也。其詞曰。
>
> 莽莽驚濤激石鳴 溟溟海岸夜深臨
> 女兒壹死成長別 老父余生剩此身
> Along [!] the sea-beaten rock,
> My daughter was heard to complain
> Frequent and loud were her cries.
> What could her father do?[104]

Ma renders the segment taken from 'Songs of Selma' bilingually, in Classical Chinese and English, basing the latter text on the Malthus–Graves or the Gotzberg translation. Yet the text is not attributed to Macpherson or Ossian, but to Goethe, since Ma was under the impression that the textual insertion was an integral element of the text. One can safely assume that the spelling mistake ('Ossing' instead of 'Ossian') and the amendment of the English original ('Along' instead of 'Alone on') are errors introduced by the typesetters.

[101] See Liu Yongqiang 劉勇強, 'Punctuated Editions: A Text Type of Ming and Qing Vernacular Novels' (標點本:作為明清白話小說的一種文本樣式 Biaodianben: Zuowei mingqing baihua xiaoshuo de yizhong wenben yangshi), *Classical Chinese Literature* (中國古代小說研究 Zhongguo gudai xiaoshuo yanjiu) 2 (2006), 347–64, 349.

[102] Orig. '我們以為文字沒有標點符號，便發生種種困難；有了符號的幫助，可使文字的效力格外完全，格外廣大。' Hu Shi 胡適, 'Motion for New Poetry with Punctuation' (請頒行新詩標點符號議案 Qing banxing xinshi biaodian fuhao yi'an), in *A Compendium of the May Fourth New Literary Cycle* (五四新文學輪戰集彙編 Wusi xin wenxue lunzhan jihuibian), 2 vols, ed. by Hu Shi (Taipei: Changge chubanshe, 1984), vol. 2, 123–37, 135.

[103] Those fragments were part of the anthology 'Six German Literary Biographies' (德意志文豪六大家列傳 Deyizhi wenhao liu dajia liuzhuan). See Wei, 'Inquiry', 84.

[104] Ma Junwu 馬君武, 'Amin Lamenting His Daughter by the Seaside' (阿明臨海岸哭女詩 Aming lin hai'an kunü shi), in *Poetry Manuscripts* (詩稿 Shigao) (Shanghai: Wenming shuju, 1914), 35–41. Ma's indirect quote transforms Macpherson's original prose into verse: 'Alone on the sea-beat rock, my daughter was heard to complain. Frequent and loud were her cries. What could her father do?' James Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian* (Boston, MA: Phillips, Sampson & Company, 1851), 291.

Ma's translation uses Classical rather than vernacular Chinese, combined with minimal punctuation. The circular *judian* (。) stands indiscriminately for the functions of the English full stop and colon. In combination with the dignified tone of the classic idiom, this passage is indicative of the few concessions Ma was prepared to make. The scene culminates in Werther's Ossian recitation in *lüshi* style (律詩 lü shi), a metric choice that draws on traditional poetry. He specifically uses seven-character regulated verse (七律), a form often found in elegies that address personal misfortunes, as seen in Qu Yuan's 'Encountering Sorrow' (離騷 Li sao, 3rd century CE).[105] In contrast to Denis's *Werther* rendering in hexameters and couplets, there is something congenial about this stylistic archaism; after all, the narrator's fate in *Encountering Sorrow* resembles Werther's to some extent, both biographies featuring strained relationships with courtly authorities. Indeed, the generation of Chinese writers who discovered European Romanticism also encouraged the rediscovery of Qu Yuan and other nonconformist poets of Chinese antiquity.

As regards language, Ma's translational graft is more subtle than expressive. Instead of focusing on the protagonist's 'glowing expressions of pain and joy', as Goethe demanded, Werther and Lotte's encounter takes place in a somewhat chilled atmosphere. They address each other in highly formal language that endows Ossianic poetry with a high degree of linguistic sophistication. Although it is impossible to render the literary reverberations of *lüshi* poetry into English, the following back-translation adds rhyme to give the text a historic feel. Furthermore, since Ma added the English original, the back-translation also adds faux Gaelic at the cost of producing unintelligible sentences:

> Lotte said: In this chest you will find the *Songs of Ossian* in your translation. They remain unread because I wanted to hear those lines enunciated by you. It seemed the right thing to do. Werther smiled. He took the paper, rested his eyes on her. He felt moved, sat down and started to weep. With the most sorrowful voice, he started his recitation of Armin's lament over his daughter's loss. The words were:
>
> Alone on the sea-beaten steep,
> My daughter was heard to weep.
> Frequent and loud were her tears.
> What if her father despairs?
> *Gu h-aonar air an cas mara,*
> *Chualas mo nighean a 'caoineadh.*
> *Glè thric agus àrd bha na deòir aice.*
> *Dè ma tha a h-athair a 'dèanamh dìmeas air?*[106]

[105] Anna Shields, entry to 'Chuci', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 245–9, 245.

[106] These four lines were translated by a machine translation service, *DeepL*. Given the mistakes found in Ma's English quote, which exhibits a certain degree of indifference towards the original language, the supposedly Gaelic quote has not been corrected by a proficient translator – to create a similar effect.

Ma's choice of where to end the text is surprising. In the original, after Lotte's sobbing fit, Werther continues to read the 'Berrathon' passage, then the excerpt ends. Here, however, Werther's breakdown, commonly considered the narrative climax of the entire novel, is left to the reader's imagination. This elision is indicative of Ma's indebtedness to traditional Chinese aesthetics, where indirectness is preferred over drastic imagery, a feature that late Goethe indeed cherished in Chinese novels.[107] Despite such restraint, nothing is lost on the reader. Werther and Lotte's shared literary experience resonates with Chinese tropes about secret love, notably the tragic story of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, the main characters from *Dream of the Red Chamber*.[108]

In the light of such linguistic amendments and intertexts, Ma Junwu's Chinese rendering falls short of linguistic innovation but remains a document of a careful transfer that incorporates European literature into those literary tropes and modes of expression that were available around 1900. Grafting led to the creation of a text that loses its exotic appeal amid a seamless integration into a new chain of signification. Rarely has transcultural 'misunderstanding' produced such a smooth reinvention of the source text in a foreign tongue.

Radical Wertherism (Guo Moruo)

The task of the translator underwent drastic change in 1909, when Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren published their pioneering work *Stories from Abroad* (域外小說集 Chengwai xiaoshuo ji). This collection of mostly Russian and Eastern European prose set the tone for a radical translational method: 直譯 *zhiyi*, that is, 'direct translation'. This approach seeks to maintain a text's original flavour rather than making concessions to Chinese, the target language. Zhou Zuoren explains:

> I think we should make allowance for foreign literary elements in our translations […] and seek to retain the social customs and language order. It is best to translate word for word, or at least sentence by sentence. We would rather make our translations neither Chinese nor Western than make adaptations.[109]

More popular among academics than the wider public, this approach differs considerably from previous examples. According to Venuti, direct translation treats

[107] See Heinrich Detering and Yuan Tan, *Goethe und die chinesischen Fräulein* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 11–38.

[108] Baoyu and Daiyu enjoy reading *Romance of the Western Chamber* (西廂記 Xi xiang ji, 13th century CE) in secret before drawing the ire of their parents. Ultimately, this shared moment of intimacy is a mere prelude to their tragic fate, as Daiyu dies of consumption on the night of Baoyu's arranged wedding.

[109] Zhou Zuoren's essay 'Literary Reform and Confucianism' (文學改良與孔教 Wenxue gailiang yu kongjiao) from 1918 is quoted in Limin Chi, *Modern Selfhood in Translation: A Study of Progressive Translation Practices in China (1890s–1920)* (Berlin: Springer, 2019), 102.

the tension between languages in a way that registers rather than removes the linguistic and cultural differences of foreign fiction,[110] an effect that perfectly suits Lu and Zhou's emphasis on the attractive strangeness of modern ideas and forms in the Chinese context of the time.

The first full translation of *Werther* responds to this challenge and is intimately connected to the foundation of the 'Creation Society' (創造社 Chuang zao she), a literary circle that aimed to overthrow literary conventions. Its members, among them Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu, envisioned 'an ardent affirmation of an expansive, libidinous, and tormented self',[111] which shows in both plot and stylistic preferences. Guo Moruo's rendering of 1922 aims to channel the genius of Werther and emphatically embraces the German original as a source of inspiration. Regardless of his knowledge of German, Guo probably worked with a compilative source text, using German and Japanese sources at the same time. The translation is a product of Guo's ten-year sojourn at the University of Fukuoka (1914–23) in Japan, where he noted the text's immense popularity among the student population. Guo's translation uses the modern vernacular rather than Classical Chinese and even transgresses the conventions of established speech patterns of the vernacular. The translation of the second reference passage (21 June 1772) reads:

> 我到此地，從小丘望入環媚著我的優美的溪壑，洵可驚嘆！—那兒的林子！—啊，我能隱身其蔭中呀！—那兒是山峰！—啊，我能從那兒眺望四方的景物呀！—這互相連鎖的山丘和這可親的山谷！—唉，我能置身其中呀！我忽忽走去，又回來，走沒有找著我所希求的。唉，地之遠方猶如時之未來！[112]

On the one hand, Guo follows time-tested conventions of *baihua* literature, using two-character words instead of compact classical style. The verb *shi* 是 replaces the formal *wei* 為; *de* 的 replaces *zhi* 之 as a possessive modifier, except in the last sentence, where it indicates a certain degree of pathos (如時之未來). His forceful use of exclamation particles, however, such as *a* 啊, *ai* 唉 and *ya* 呀, makes this translation deeply idiosyncratic.[113] Here, exclamation particles tower Werther's impressions of the forest, as if to rival the mentioned mountain peak and the valley. In Chinese vernacular literature, such use is unprecedented. Guo enters the scene of translation with poetic aplomb.

Late Qing novels feature exclamations to express wonder, relief or shock, either at the beginning of a sentence or at the end, but are never followed by

[110] See Venuti, *The Scandals*, 184.
[111] Xiaobing Tang with Michel Hockx, 'The Creation Society (1921–1930)', in *Literary Societies of Republican China*, ed. by Kirk A. Denton and Michel Hockx (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2008), 103–36, 107.
[112] Guo (trans.), *Sorrows*, 32. My underlinings, J. K.
[113] While Classical Chinese has particles at its disposal, for example *zhi* 之, *hu* 乎, *zhe* 者 and *ye* 也, they attained a very negative connotation in the Republican era and even invited mockery, as exemplified by Lu Xun's famous short story *Kong Yiji* (孔乙己) of 1919.

an exclamation mark, only by a full stop, or its Chinese equivalent, the *judian* (句點). The reason why vernacular fiction uses exclamation particles, the Chinese equivalent of English interjections, was the general lack of punctuation. When the protagonist of *The Travels of Lao Can* awakes from a shocking dream, no punctuation is necessary. An early non-punctuated edition reads: '呀原來是一夢.' In English: '*Ya* so this was just a dream.'[114] His surprise is indicated through a word (呀 ya) rather than punctuation. Guo's contemporaries continued this practice but combined particles with modern punctuation. In *Somebody's Tragedy* (或人的悲劇 Huoren de beiju, 1922), Lu Yin's suffering heroine cries out: '唉！天乎！不可治的失眠病.'[115] In translation, this passage reads: 'Ai! Oh Heavens! This incurable insomnia!' Notably, Lu Yin still uses vernacular (唉 ai) and classic particles (乎 hu) side by side. Such texts combined exclamation and exclamation marks for the first time, thus creating double exclamation. The typographic innovations '唉！' and '呀！' are not cases of redundancy, as in Takayama's sequence of exclamation mark and full stop ('！。'), but create double emphasis, a phenomenon that is comparable to multiple exclamation points in contemporary English (!!!). While Western punctuation needs such typographic markers due to the lack of onomatopoeic expressivity, Chinese particles attain a certain over-expressivity in this specific combination. Still uncommon in the 1920s, this juxtaposition was soon naturalised. In today's usage, '呀！' is seen as grammatically correct and stylistically unproblematic.

Before the formalisation of such exclamations, however, their stylistic oddity was programmatic for the mission of the Creation Society. Other than Hu's praise for the advantage of punctuation in eliminating ambiguity, Guo's aim was to amplify the expressive register of the vernacular. Consequently, his translation even exacerbates Werther's ejaculatory style by adding an eighth to the original's seven exclamations in the reference passage. In the following back-translation, the foreign appearance of the text is emphasised through the insertion of the Chinese exclamation mark, which has a weightier appearance than its Western equivalent. The exclamation particles at the beginning of sentences are rendered as the interjection *oh*, the particle towards the end as *ahhh*:

> When I first came here, from the hills I looked out on that lovely valley, I truly wanted to shout in astonishment！ – That little wood！ – *Oh*, I could sit in its shade *ahhh*！ – That summit over there！ – *Oh*, I could watch the entire landscape from there *ahhh*！ – That delightful chain of hills and the valleys！ – *Oh*, I could lose myself amongst them *ahhh*！ I ran off, and returned without finding what I sought. *Oh*, distance is like the future！

In addition to Guo's preference for anything associated with expressivity, his translation treats the text as a gateway to occidental letters. Its heavy appendix provides

[114] Liu E 劉鶚, *Travels of Lao Can* (老殘遊記 Lao Can you ji) (Taipei: Lianjing, 2015), 12.
[115] Lu Yin 廬隱, *Collected Works* (選集 Xuan ji) (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1985), 181.

detailed explanations, including even an incidental reference to 'Kreuzer', a German unit of currency. Similar to modern critical editions, Lotte's exclamation 'Klopstock!' is elucidated with a full ten-page translation of 'The Spring Festival' ('Die Frühlingsfeier'), the poem often associated with the morning scene at the ball. Yet Guo's attention to detail does not result in a nuanced philological introduction to another foreign literary text, the German poet whom Takayama had elided in his translation; instead, the translator-cum-editor pursues an idiosyncratic aesthetic programme, as the sound of Klopstock's poetry becomes difficult to tell apart from Werther's prose.

The same phenomenon can be observed with regard to the Ossian passage, which Guo also treats with a complete translation. The scene that served as a reference passage for English *Werther* translations, Colma's tragic soliloquy, reads as follows:

> 哦，月兒現了，流泉在谷中反射，岩頭暗淡地立在山上：但是我不見他在岩上，他的獵犬不先跑來報告他來。我定要在這兒獨坐。
>
> 哦，那是誰？睡在那下面的野地上的。—我的愛人嗎？我的兄弟嗎？—哦，朋友，你們告訴我罷！他們不應聲。我是怎樣地心懸懸喲！—啊，他們是死了的！他們的寶劍染著了鮮血！哦，我的兄弟喲，我的兄弟喲！作為甚麼把我的沙格爾刺了？哦，我的沙格爾喲！你為甚麼把我的兄弟刺了？你們兩人都是我所深愛的！[116]

In Guo's translation, Ossianic song becomes indistinguishable not only from Werther's letters, but also from Klopstock's poetry. Colma's lamentation is free from allusions to archaic language, creating the opposite effect of that intended by Ma's earlier translation; the mythical figures are presented in a comparably casual setting. Using the same indicators for modern expressivity as in the previous back-translation, this passage reads in English back-translation:

> Oh, the moon is out, the flood reflects in the valley, the rocks stand grey on the steep: yet I cannot behold him on the steep, his dogs don't announce him. I must sit here alone.
>
> Oh, who is over there? Who lies there on the heath? – Is it my lover? Is it my brother? – Oh, friends, speak to me ! They do not reply. I am so anxious *ohhh* ! – Ah, they are dead ! Their swords are covered in fresh blood ! *Oh*, my brother *ohhh* ! Why have you slain my Salgar? Oh, my Salgar *ohhh* ! Why have you slain my brother? You both were so dear to me !

In Macpherson's original, there is something theatrical about Colma's surprise at the sight of her lover's dead body: 'Who lie on the heath beside me?' Goethe's Werther maintains this tone: 'Aber wer sind, die dort unten liegen auf der Heide?' Guo, however, opts for a simple question: 'Oh, who is over there?' (哦，那是誰？ O, na shi shei?) This colloquial tone reduces the scene's epic weight. The focus is on subjectivity

[116] Guo, *Sorrows*, 161–2.

and the immediacy of experience, a tendency that culminates in the second paragraph which gives voice to the unmitigated expressiveness of enthusiastic youth.

Defying notions of translational humility, Guo did not aim at imitating *Werther* in Chinese in a way that would require him to diversify his register. Instead, he regarded the text as a canvas for his own poetic style. In fact, the stylistic blur between Goethe, Klopstock and Ossian results from Guo's own style. By 1922, he was already regarded as the 'most provocative voice in modern Chinese literature.'[117] His poetry collection *Goddess* (女神 Nü shen, 1921) abounds with apostrophes, ellipses and double exclamations, among them 'Morning Peace' (晨安 Chen an), counting thirty-eight lines that contain no fewer than sixty-five exclamation particles. Like in his translations, *ya* 呀, *a* 啊 and *ba* 吧 are invariably followed by exclamation mark. 'Climbing the Mountain' (登臨 Deng lin) could be a paraphrase of Werther's 21 June letter: the individual addresses an anthropomorphised nature – apostrophe follows after apostrophe.

Summoning the God-Author

Guo's carefree translational ethos exacerbates and inverts Eyck's demand that translators should respect 'the product of Goethe's (or, as Goethe presents it: Werther's) translation'. What Eyck would not have expected is an author who assimilates the Wertherian tone to such a high degree that it blends with Ossian, Klopstock's odes and the translator's own poetry. As Guo's poetic voice drowns out their nuances, *Werther* plays a secondary role in his grand literary vision of a universal language of the soul.

Prior to Guo's work as a translator, he addressed the relationship between occidental letters and their practical use for the present in hyperbolic terms. A letter to Zong Baihua, a collaborator, reads:

> I believe that our poetry should be nothing but a direct articulation of the poetic meaning and poetic mood in our heart, […] containing the vibration of life, the cry of the soul; only that alone is a true and good poem. Poetry is the source of man's joy, the origin of euphoria, the heavens of consolation. Every time I come across such poetry, in new and classic, contemporary and ancient, Chinese or foreign letters, I wish I could devour every character and page, blend it with my every tendon and bone. […] I believe poetry cannot be just 'produced.'[118]

[117] David Wang Der-Wei, 'Chinese Literature from 1841 to 1937', in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, 2 vols, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), vol. 2, 413–564, 481.

[118] Orig:'我想我們的詩只要是我們心中的詩意詩境底純真的表現，[…] 生底顫動，靈底喊叫；那便是真詩，好詩，便是我們人類底歡樂源泉，陶醉底美釀，慰安底天國。我每逢遇著這樣的詩，無論是新體的或舊體的，今人的或古人的，我國的或外國的，我總恨不得連書帶紙地把他吞了下去，我總恨不得連筋帶骨地把他融了下去。[…]我想詩這樣東西似乎不是可以

As a manifesto of *Sturm und Drang* aesthetics, Guo's declaration does not need to shy away from comparison with Goethe's speech *On Shakespeare's Day* (*Zum Schäkespears Tag*, 1771) and Lenz's *Remarks on Theater* (*Anmerkungen übers Theater*, 1774). Just as he identifies with Goethe, he assumes that Goethe himself identified with Werther:

> During the process of translating, I sympathised with many aspects of Goethe's thought. The character of Werther, the protagonist, corresponds with the character of young Goethe during his Storm and Stress period. Werther's thinking also corresponds with young Goethe's own thinking. Goethe is a magnificent subjective poet, for all of his famous works are derived from his own experience and feelings.[119]

Guo's translational enthusiasm for a text steeped in autobiographic resonance is part of a larger project: the introduction of the Author-God into Chinese letters. While this literary simulacrum was firmly established in the West (only to be questioned in the post-war era), authorship was largely anonymous throughout East Asian literary history. Since authors such as Guo aimed to establish themselves as genius figures in the literary scene, they pointed to the elevated status of genius in occidental literature. The hope was that the special status of European writers would also catapult East Asian poets from obscurity into the limelight. In view of this apotheosis of authorship in the 1920s, Haun Saussy argues: 'The emergence of the author […] is part and parcel of the consolidation of modern Chinese literature. It is an event that […] saturates both "literature" and "criticism", both textual and social formations.'[120]

For Guo, the emphatic notion of being a writer starts with the scene of writing itself. After quoting from Percy Shelley's apotheosis of genius, he references an episode from Goethe's youth:

> Goethe also said: every time he felt like writing a poem, he would run to his writing desk, grab whatever paper he could find without even setting it straight, and then he would jot the whole poem down hastily while standing upright.[121]

"做"得出來的。' Zong Baihua 宗白華, Tian Han 田漢 and Guo Moruo, *Trifolium* (三葉集 Sanyeji), ed. by Dong Longkai and Wang Jingfen (Hefei: Anwei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2006), 11–12.

[119] Orig. '我譯此書，於歌德思想有種種共鳴之點。此書主人公維特之性格，更是 「狂飆突進時代」 (Sturmund [!] Drang) 少年歌德自身之性格，維特之思想，便是少年歌德自身之思想。歌德是個偉大的主觀詩人，他所有的著名，多是他自身的經驗和實感的集成。' Guo, 'Preface', 2–3.

[120] To be precise, Saussy only addresses the situation of classical texts that are attributed to biographic personalities in hindsight, notably *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Hu Shi establishes Cao Xueqin as the biographical subject of the author. Paradoxically, this speculative Cao transformed into the ultimate authority on the text's intention. See Haun Saussy, 'The Age of Attribution: Or, How the "Honglou meng" Finally Acquired an Author', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 25 (2003), 119–32, 132.

[121] Orig. 'Goethe也說過：他每逢詩興來了的時候，便跑到書桌旁邊，將就斜橫著的紙，連擺正他的時候也沒有，急忙從頭至尾地蠢立著便寫下去。' Guo, 'Preface', 11–12.

The original reference is taken from the passage in Johann Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe* (*Gespräche mit Goethe*, 1836/1848) in which the poet looks back at his earliest poems and gives an account of his erratic writing, which he soon abandoned.[122] Guo isolates Goethe's self-portrait as a young man and remains unimpressed with the mature poet's general aesthetics of moderation, a point that is made repeatedly throughout the *Conversations*.

Although Guo does not claim privileged insights into Werther's personal life as Render does, the appendix features a number of wild claims. In a commentary on Werther's brief Leonora reference in the first letter (4 May 1772), Guo provides a biographic key, stating plainly: 'Leonora is Lucinde's nickname.'[123] In contrast to Render, who gave himself to free fabulation, Guo's commentary is based on German scholarship of the late 19th century, which drew this biographical key from a segment of Goethe's *Poetry and Truth*, where the autobiographer describes how he found himself caught in a rivalry between two sisters, Emilie and Lucinde. From today's perspective, such claims appear incidental and gratuitous; in this context, however, they point to the wide appeal that positivism had across the world at the onset of the 20th century. It is likely that Guo acquainted himself with such interpretations, specifically Woldemar von Biedermann's scholarship,[124] in foreign-language libraries during his studies in Japan.

Despite the glory attributed to the literary hero, Goethe, the paradoxical situation of the Author-God is that he is perpetually subjected to the whims of readers who, like Guo, claim privileged insight. The complexities of poetic productions are streamlined to suit the immediate needs of cultural activists who looked for specific characteristics in the literature they translated. Guo's treatment of *Werther* and the *Conversations* exemplifies literary grafting, as he selects specific information like a gardener who picks a specific twig to become a scion in an organism that outshines the original. Guo's identification with Werther's ejaculatory prose comes at a price, as the translator elided the different narrative voices that Goethe incorporated into his text.

[122] On 14 March 1830, Goethe recalls the trance-like states of mind that preceded poetic production: 'In solchem nachtwandlerischen Zustande geschah es oft, daß ich einen ganz schief liegenden Papierbogen vor mir hatte, und daß ich dieses erst bemerkte, wenn alles geschrieben war, oder wenn ich zum Weiterschreiben keinen Platz fand.' Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1982), 625.

[123] Orig. '落諾麗即此路青德之戀名。'; Guo, 'Explanatory Remarks' (註釋 Zhushi), in Guo (trans.), *Sorrows*, 188–212; 188.

[124] In typical positivistic fashion, Biedermann presents his wildest claims as the most irrefutable facts, as he proclaims: 'Ja, wir können der leidenschaftlichen Lucinde ihren bürgerlichen Namen Leonore wiedergeben, denn im Werther, wo Lotte Lotte […] heißt, spielt gleich der erste Brief auf das Straßburger Erlebnis an.' Erich Schmidt, *Charakteristiken*, 2 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1886), vol. 1, 276–7. See also Woldemar von Biedermann, *Goethe-Forschungen* (Leipzig: Biedermann, 1886), 382. This cliché is also found in British scholarship; see George Henry Lewes, *Life of Goethe* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1890), 77.

Toned-down translations

Although Guo Moruo's curious translation was reprinted many times and remains in print to this day,[125] the Chinese vernacular consolidated in ways that did not reflect Guo's quest for expressivity. Subsequent *Werther* translations toned down the protagonist's emotionally charged lyrical speech. Published in 1936, Qian Tianyou's translation is representative of this development. The reference passage reads:

> 真奇妙呀！當我初來這哩，從山旁看那可愛的山谷，就覺得我四周的景物，使我神往！對面是一座小樹林，— 小坐在樹蔭之下，多麼有趣！山頂的風景多麼美麗！更有可愛的山脈和美妙的溪谷！我只願能終身遊息其間了！好友啊，距離和未來是一樣的[。][126]

The exclamation marks remain, but the exclamation particles are reduced to a minimum. In the back-translation, the weighty exclamation marks are replaced by ordinary ones; after all, they were firmly established in contemporary use in the 1930s and had become a common feature of written speech:

> How strange *ya*! When I first came here, looking out upon that lovely valley from the hills, I felt charmed by everything around me! The little wood opposite – how delightful to sit in its shade! That fine view from that summit! That delightful chain of hills and the exquisite valleys below! I just want to enjoy myself endlessly over there! My friend *ah*, distance is like the future.

This translation demonstrates that Guo's double exclamation was primarily a gesture rather than a means of more succinct communication. The particles can be omitted without diminishing Werther's fits of enthusiasm. In other passages, however, Qian Tianyou's conservative approach is reminiscent of Grassi's Italian translation, where Werther's erratic prose is replaced with orderly sentences, making it 'hard to tell what Werther actually wants'. His characteristic aposiopeses, interruptions in the middle of a sentence (e.g. the onset of the letter dating from 16 June 1772), are converted into full clauses.

The removal of exclamation particles reflects the waning appeal of literary experimentation, as language reformers increasingly perceived the proliferation of the vernacular as a problem. The more authors insisted on regional dialects or highly personal literary styles, the greater the risk of linguistic fragmentation. Although Shanghai, Guo's base, was the unquestioned cultural centre of China, where the film, music and publishing industries flourished, the decisive steps towards linguistic unification were taken at Beijing's universities. This became clear in the 1930s, when the Beijing dialect was declared the national standard in

[125] The most recent edition is Guo Moruo, *Sorrows of Young Werther* (少年維特之煩惱 Shaonian Weite zhi fannao) (Shanghai: Dongfang chuban zhongxin, 2019).
[126] Qian (trans.), *Sorrows*, 87.

terms of both grammar and pronunciation: 'for the first time in the history of the Chinese language […] instead of retaining historical distinctions that no longer existed in modern vernaculars […] the phonology of the contemporary vernacular of Beijing should be adopted as its standard pronunciation.'[127]

The reception of Guo Moruo's poetic voice, especially among scholars, shows how divided his readership was. Despite the success of his *Werther* translation, Liang Junqing, a literary critic, took issue with its style: 'Its language is often too tiresome, not only failing to draw readers in but even giving them headaches as well.'[128] The disjunction between Liang's critical sensibility and the favourable opinion of the general audience also showed in Zhang Wentian's comprehensive ridicule of Guo and his peers:

> [E]ver since vernacular poems, prose, and novels became the rage, most young people clamor to write poems, compose prose, and produce novels. It is not because they have any special interest in the literary arts, but because they can use the least effort to gain the greatest result. Because it is harder to write long poems, these days everyone is switching to compose short poems. Our society is full of countless young poets! There are the essayists, and then the novelists! […] But I loathe young people who use the literary arts as a shortcut![129]

This bad reputation followed Guo well into the post-war period, when the conservative critic C. T. Hsia, one of the most influential US historians of Chinese literature, emphatically dismissed the latter's literary output as mediocre writings that only appealed to untrained readers: 'the seeming vitality […] is not nourished by any inner wealth of feeling: both its mechanical rhythm and its overuse of exclamatory sentences betray a lack of poetic sensitivity.'[130] Such damning criticisms may have contributed to Guo's falling silent in literary matters after 1926. At the time, the realist faction among progressive writers established a sober narrative tone as the norm. The aesthetic excess of Guo's Creation Society was increasingly seen as an anti-revolutionary force that gave preference to subjective individualism over revolutionary action.[131] Henceforth, exclamatory speech acts were reserved for ridiculous characters who placed too much emphasis on their own petty feelings. At this point, *Werther* was no longer embraced as a symbol of modernity but became an emblem of the kind of subjectivity that prevents a person's maturation.

[127] Ping Chen, *Modern Chinese: History and Sociolinguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 21.
[128] Orig.'累贅的話實在太多, 不但不能引人閱讀, 而且使人看了頭疼。' Quoted in Wei, 'Inquiry', 85.
[129] Quoted in Sang Bing, 'The Divergence and Convergence of China's Written and Spoken Languages: Reassessing the Vernacular Language during the May Fourth Period', *Twentieth-Century China* 38.1 (2013), 71–93, 84–5.
[130] C. T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 96.
[131] See Jinhua Chen, *Revolution and Form: Mao Dun's Early Novels and Chinese Literary Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 228.

Conclusion

In the history of translation, critics often invoke Ezra Pound's quasi-translations in *Cathay* (1915), a selection of Classical Chinese poetry from Li Bai, Wang Wei and Tao Yuanming, as an instance of felicitous linguistic transfer, even if the preconditions were set to produce plenty of misunderstanding. Himself ignorant of both modern and Classical Chinese, the American poet drew, with considerable freedom, from posthumous sketches left behind by Ernest Fenollosa, an Anglo-American scholar of Japanese studies. Although the latter's manuscript abounded with imperfections – for example grammatical misprisions – Pound amended Fenollosa's mistakes. Wai-lim Yip observes that 'even when [Pound] is given only the barest details, he is able to get into the central consciousness of the original author by what we may perhaps call a kind of clairvoyance'.[132] For lack of a better framework, T. S. Eliot called the *Cathay* poems not translations, but 'translucencies',[133] indicating that Pound had access to some sort of poetic interlingua.[134]

Held against the concept of grafting, translucency taps into layers of meaning that one would assume to be hidden from the translator, causing the tension between source and target text to give way to spontaneous unanimity and mystical oneness. The Arch-Original, a hypothetical text inferred by the translator, coincides with the real text. Granted that the concept can also be playfully applied to the non-linguistic realm, the history of *Werther* translation also features translucency in regard to many translators' hesitation to imitate the protagonist's expressivity. Like Goethe's 1787 edition of the novel, which limited readerly identification, many translators of the first edition unwittingly created the same effect by adhering to the rules and conventions of the target language. One could consider Render's refusal to consider Goethe the author of Werther's letters as another translucency, by which the translator enforces the kind of distance between author and protagonist that Goethe was desperate to establish among his readers. In a way, the Englishman even surpasses Goethe's intended effect as the translator assumes authorship himself – and even befriends Werther in person. In Ma Junwu's case, Ossianic lyricism, translated into Classical Chinese, displaces the original prose of *Werther*, eliciting a different kind of translucency. Ma enters – unbeknownst

[132] See Wai-lim Yip, *Ezra Pound's Cathay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 88.
[133] T. S. Eliot, 'Introduction', in *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 7–21, 14.
[134] Such observations stand at the heart of transculturalism, a strand of inquiry that assumes anthropological universals to act as glue between different cultures. Notably George Steiner encouraged scholars of comparative literature to 'elucidate the quiddity, the autonomous core of historical and present "sense in the world" '. George Steiner, 'What Is Comparative Literature? An Inaugural Weidenfeld Visiting Professorship of European Comparative Literature, 1994–5, University of Oxford', in *Spaces: Cities, Gardens and Wilderness*, ed. by Elinor Shaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 157–72, 164.

to him – into a dialogue with Macpherson. While such translucencies indicate a mysterious correspondence between the original and its translations, most of the surveyed translations document a more pedestrian process, in which foreign literature is seamlessly incorporated into existing linguistic conventions. One may speak of trimmings rather than grafts.

Neither Takayama nor Guo can claim to follow in Ezra Pound's footsteps, especially Guo, who so clearly prioritised his own appetite regarding expressive language. Arguably, their awareness of the systemic differences between the original and their target languages was too great to facilitate such spontaneous agreements. Instead, they emphasised the awkwardness that was inevitable once *Werther* was fitted into modern Japanese and modern Chinese. Their Arch-Originals represent a step into an abyss rather than a safe retreat into a framework replete with familiar clichés. Takayama's juxtaposition of exclamation mark and full stop (！。) and Guo's successions of exclamation mark and particles (呀！) exploit the tension between source and target text in a way that was unthinkable for their peers, let alone for the European context, in which the similarity of Latin-based systems thwarted such stylistic experimentation. One wonders what kind of interlinguistic system would have emerged had voices such as Takayama and Guo played a greater role in the consolidation of modern Japanese and Chinese.

3

Revolutionary Afterlives

Is *Werther* a political text? For some readers, the answer is obvious. After all, Werther's snub at the aristocratic assembly indicates that he suffers not only from unrequited love, indecisiveness and pathological moods, but also from social alienation. Upon his arrival in Wahlheim and, later, when he takes a position as an attaché to an ambassador, he eagerly communicates a haughty disdain for societal norms and conformity. This attitude transforms into bitter resentment once he learns that, owing to 'curious customs', his company is not welcome at an assembly graced by the presence of noblemen. Learning of the subsequent gossip about his ejection, he scornfully declares: 'I detest the whole breed' (*L* 48) and quits an employment that he only took up three months earlier.

Heinrich Heine argued that, had the book been published a few decades later, this passage would have become central to the book's reception.[1] In the wake of flaring social tensions in Germany, Werther appeared like a misfit whose suffering derived from rigid social conventions. Readers in the early 20th century made analogous observations, including Guo Moruo, who noted that Werther 'opposes the social class system',[2] and Georg Lukács, who considered the text a literary symptom of the class contradictions that fuelled the revolution in neighbouring France. This is arguably a classical case of grafting: Werther's letter dating from 15 March 1772 is first cut out, then connected to socio-political narratives of emancipation and suppression. Even if today's scholarship does not concede such interpretations anything more than historic value, reminiscent of excessively politicised scholarship, the history of Wertherian writing demonstrates how easily the novel lends itself to being appropriated to revolutionary settings. In combining the emotive depth of sentimentalism with a political agenda, literary adaptations of Goethe's book advanced original variations that respond to the core conflicts of the modern novel. According to G. W. F. Hegel's

[1] See Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. by Klaus Briegleb, 6 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1968–76), vol. 1 (1975), 431.
[2] Orig. '反抗階級制度。' Guo, 'Preface', 5.

aesthetics, it is informed by the 'conflict between the poetry and the heart and the opposing prose of circumstances and the accidents of external situation'.[3] And while most protagonists of the *Goethezeit* balance this conflict by learning the ways of the world, the Wertherian hero embraces a less conciliatory resolution. Here, the clichés of maturation and personal growth crack under the pressure of existential struggle.

This chapter first elaborates on the principal reason why Germany was – and remains – such a hostile ground for the revolutionary line of interpretation, then asks what the attribute 'revolutionary' means, especially in view of the French Revolution and the birth of the nation state. While a limited corpus of academic literature exists that discusses the text's socio-political dynamics, the most substantial contributions to this nexus exist in narrative literature itself, as *Werther* transformed into a blueprint for texts that explicitly pursue a revolutionary agenda. This was primarily an effect of the book's reception outside Germany, where it had not been colonised by an author-sanctioned and depoliticised interpretation. In pre-Risorgimento Italy, Ugo Foscolo's *Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis* (*Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*, 1802/1817) drew on multiple aspects of *Werther* to pioneer an innovative blend of sentimentalism and the revolutionary cause. At the onset of the 20th century, Werther's career among patriotic revolutionaries continued among those Chinese writers who pursued a paradoxical project: the creation of modern Chinese letters through the assimilation of foreign – that is, Western – literary models. Love-sick, despairing and angry characters populate the literature produced in the wake of not only the May Fourth Movement in China, but also the March First Movement in Korea, both of which took place in 1919. Foscolo's selective appropriation of *Werther* continues in the early novels of Guo Moruo, Yu Dafu's *Sinking* (沈淪 Chenlun, 1921), Jiang Guangci's *The Young Wanderer* (少年漂泊者 Shaonian piaobozhe, 1926) and Ba Jin's *Trilogy of Love* (愛情三部曲 Aiqing sanbuqu, 1931–5). This also applies to one of the core texts of Korean modernity, Yi Kwangsu's *Heartless* (무정 Mujong, 1919).

Such a diverse corpus inevitably raises questions about the texts' comparability and their slippery relation to the source text. While scholarship has linked most of the discussed texts to *Werther* already, they are undoubtedly originals in their own right, with generations of authors using them as source texts for further literary exploration. In adaptation studies, the focus has, similar to translation studies, shifted from analyses that emphasise fidelity to a self-conscious approach. As the narratological mastermind who coined much of the terminology currently in use, Gérard Genette has elaborated on scenarios of intertextual connectivity. When a narrative text corresponds to an older one that serves as its model, this

[3] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T. M. Knox, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), vol. 2, 1092.

nexus is ideally singled out by paratextual signals, as seen in the work's title, subtitle or preface. In the absence of such signals, however, text-external forces have the last word when it comes to establishing a relevant connection between two texts. By the term 'hypertextuality' Genette understands 'the general notion of a text in the second degree […]: i.e., a text derived from another preexistent text'. In this case, the adaptation remains indebted to the original text, 'from which it originates through a process I shall provisionally call transformation, and which it consequently evokes more or less perceptibly without necessarily speaking of it or citing it'.[4] While Genette invokes the relation of Virgil's *Aeneid* (29–19 BCE) to Homer's epics as perfect examples of such hypertextuality, the *Werther* nursery rarely features such obvious lineages. The criteria for a 'more or less perceptible' connection is up to the eye of the beholder. Genette's invocation of an ideal reader conveniently solves this problem, for such a reader may flag erroneous cases of hypertextuality and indicate valid ones. In the absence of such authority, hypertextuality risks becoming a product of sheer habit: some textual pairings, such as *Werther* and, say, Rousseau's *Julie*, appear legitimate, while others, especially those including non-European texts, appear far-fetched.

In answer to this untenable epistemic frame, Linda Hutcheon has pursued a more self-aware approach to literary succession by speaking of 'adaptation *as adaptation*'.[5] Accordingly, the act of choosing such a comparison already implies a degree of generosity, as one no longer expects to gauge the successful transmission of the 'spirit', 'tone' or 'style' of a work; instead, the task is to trace the process by which a text is transposed and subjected to transcoding. Hutcheon proposes a minimum threshold for the classification of a text as adaptation, such as the use of stories, themes, characters or merely 'specific units of a story'[6] that are taken from an existing work. In the absence of explicit references to the source texts, Hutcheon's case examples include many instances that Genette would classify as merely paratextual. The risk is in broadening the definition of adaptation excessively, since too many texts could be read as adaptations of too many preexisting works.

To counterbalance excessive imprecision, one can keep in mind four fundamental features that determine a text's inclusion into the *Werther* nursery: firstly, they use subjective prose genres such as epistolary novels, diaries or memoirs. Secondly, they are written in vernacular styles that emphasise stylistic naturalness or local flavour. Thirdly, they are interspersed with intertextual references, taken from either national classics or foreign letters. And fourthly, they inevitably feature a Wertherian hero – usually male – whose linguistic articulations contrast markedly with the protagonists of the novels that are commonly associated with

[4] Genette, *Palimpsests*, 5.
[5] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 21.
[6] Hutcheon, *A Theory*, 11.

revolutionary themes in world literature. While he shares a personal prehistory of oppression and persecution with Jean Valjean from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), he never manages to escape his predicament by becoming a powerful man himself. Jean's central conflict, the difficulty of concealing his miserable family background, is irrelevant to a Werther. And while Pierre Bezukhov, the socially awkward protagonist of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), is no stranger to the frustration and anger caused by a beautiful and indifferent beloved, a Werther is never driven to actually kill his rival in a duel. For the greatest part of the narrative, a Wertherian hero remains trapped in a situation that in the mentioned novels is transitory. This is also the reason why only he contemplates, discusses and – sometimes, but not always – commits suicide with such effect. Regardless of all socio-political scope, the entire world shrinks to form a tight skin around the suffering individual.

This chapter explores the plural of *Werther* by connecting one specific strand of interpretation, which emphasises the protagonist's rebellious traits, to those literary adaptations that feature Wertherian protagonists who rebel against their surroundings.

Post-1789 Werther

Goethe's *Werther*, published in 1774 and revised in 1787, is separated from its revolutionary revenants by the political caesura of the French Revolution. Upon its publication, readers would relate the protagonist's displeasure with the 'curious customs' to an immutable world in which feudal relations determined the sociocultural order. After the political earthquake in Paris, however, the changed equilibrium encouraged political subjects to question the rule by divine right and hereditary monarchy; instead, freedom and equality became fundamental categories of legitimate rule. Most importantly, the French Revolution demonstrated that the principles of the American Revolution (1775–83) – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – could also be applied to the European context. This included not only civil rights, but also the prerogative to overthrow despotic rulers.[7]

In Germany, the initial wave of enthusiasm for the developments in Paris included Kant's and Hegel's much-discussed admissions that revolutionary movements possess legitimacy.[8] Amid the bloodshed of the Reign of Terror, however,

[7] Thomas Jefferson argues that 'when a long train of abuses and usurpations begun at a distinguished period and pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government and to provide new guards for their future security'. Thomas Jefferson, 'Declaration of Independence (Engrossed Copy)', in *Works*, ed. by Paul Leicester Ford, 12 vols (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), vol. 2, 202.

[8] On the one hand, Kant asserted that the revolution had a moralising effect on its observers, for it encouraged individuals to picture the further evolution of the legal system. See Peter Burg, 'Kants

German enthusiasm was dented. In the case of Goethe, who opposed the French Revolution from the start, there was no change of mind at all. Having been elevated into peerage in 1782 and leaving his mark as one of the leading bureaucrats in the Duchy of Weimar, he had become part of the *Ancien Régime*, an ideological choice that inevitably brought him into conflict with the following generation of writers.[9] This biographical nexus is also the principal reason why Friedrich Engels reacted with such strong words when another socialist critic, Karl Grün, asserted the revolutionary credentials of Goethe's works, including *Werther*. According to Grün, the epistolary novel features a 'pure, fresh concept of true humanity'[10] by portraying the misery of bourgeois reality prior to the storming of the Bastille. Dismissing this reinterpretation as complete nonsense, Engels characterised the poetic voice of Goethe's protagonist as the 'lamentation of a delusional whiner who decries the disjunction between bourgeois reality and his nonetheless bourgeois illusions of reality'. Werther does not answer the revolutionary call for insubordination against usurpers, nor can he grasp the antagonistic forces playing out in society; after all, his 'halfhearted lamentation […] merely originates in the lack of any basic experience of life'.[11]

Engels's judgement conforms to the theory of reflection, which argues that material reality can only be adequately reflected through the lens of a fully developed social consciousness – that is, of the writer. Conceived by Engels and later refined by Lenin, reflection theory regards literature as the voice of the people, which is typically also represented through positive characters.[12] It is easy to see that Goethe and the product of his imagination, *Werther*, do not fit such criteria.[13]

Deutung der Französischen Revolution im "Streit der Fakultäten"', in *Akten des 4. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 656–67, 661. On the other hand, Hegel noted that the extravagance of French aristocracy and its unrelenting oppression of the population could not fail to set a historical process in motion to replace a moribund system: 'The fearfully heavy burdens that pressed upon the people, the embarrassment of the government to procure for the court the means of supporting luxury and extravagance, gave the first impulse to discontent. […] The change was necessarily violent, because the work of transformation was not undertaken by the government.' G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 446.

[9] See Karl Robert Mandelkow, *Goethe in Deutschland: Rezeptionsgeschichte eines Klassikers*, 2 vols (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1980), vol. 1, 61–5.

[10] Orig: 'Reine, durchlüftete Begriffe von wahrem Menschenthum.' Grün, *Über Göthe*, 95.

[11] Orig. 'Dieser Jammerschrei eines schwärmerischen Tränensacks über den Abstand zwischen der bürgerlichen Wirklichkeit und seinen nicht minder bürgerlichen Illusionen über die Wirklichkeit, dieser mattherzige, einzig auf Mangel an der ordinärsten Erfahrung beruhende Stoßseufzer.' Friedrich Engels, 'Deutscher Sozialismus in Versen und Prosa', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, 44 vols (Berlin: Dietz, 1956–68), vol. 4 (1959), 207–47, 236.

[12] See R. H. Stacy, *Russian Literary Criticism: A Short History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1974), 186.

[13] In fact, such criteria are difficult to reconcile with the literary heritage of most countries – not only with texts such as *Werther*. After all, poetry and epics were primarily produced by bourgeois or aristocratic authors with a limited enthusiasm for emancipatory politics. Yet the pressure to build national literary canons was strong enough to encourage complex critical manoeuvres to mediate between an ideologically informed norm and the existing literary heritage, such as the discovery of hidden emancipatory layers in otherwise non-emancipatory letters. In this vein, Lenin emphasised Leo Tolstoy's

Although the classical theory of reflection never gained hold in ambitious literary criticism, the biographical paradigm of Goethe studies culminated in a verdict on the book that is identical with Engels's judgement: Werther's complaints are merely the noise produced by the inconsequential sorrows of a misguided man.

Despite the authoritative condemnation by Engels, the early 19th century also saw a handful of emancipatory critics launch a positive revaluation of *Werther*. As already discussed in Chapter 1, the democratic writers associated with Junges Deutschland attempted to untangle protagonist and author in a way quite different from the pedestrian Werther–Goethe juxtaposition. After Heine's hypothetical revaluation of the ejection scene, which if published in the 1820s would 'have enraged readers more than the whole suicide bombshell',[14] Ludwig Börne also invoked *Werther* in glowing terms in 1831. When these reassessments were written, the changed socio-political mood displaced the dominant narratives provided by sentimental and psychopathological interpretations. This window of opportunity, however, closed rapidly. This interpretation did not receive much attention, nor did Heine and Börne seek to promote their views with greater vehemence. Subsequent attempts by Georg Lukács in 1936 and Peter Müller in 1969 shared the same fate. Both considered the text a literary symptom of the class contradictions that connect Werther's individual suffering with the social superstructure.[15]

Although the interpretative lineage of Heine–Börne–Lukács–Müller remained obscure to readers outside Germany and was not even taken seriously by most native readers, their claims about the text were unwittingly reproduced by literary authors who used the text as a blueprint for revolutionary prose. The absence of Goethe's oppressive presence as an Author-God afforded the protagonist a semantic possibility that was denied him at home: the rebellion against reactionary politics.

The invention of a politicised Werther (Foscolo)

As a seismograph of socio-political tension, Wertherian suffering became a crucial resource for writers who sought to advance the idea of national self-determination, one of the historical by-products of the French Revolution. Originally, popular

admirable portraits of peasants, which he set apart from the writer's 'immature dreaming' and 'political inexperience'. Vladimir I. Lenin, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967), 32. Had it not been for Engels's early intervention, Werther could have easily joined the ranks of Anna Karenina.

[14] Orig. 'Es liegt aber noch ein Element im Werther, welches nur eine kleine Menge angezogen hat, ich meine nämlich die Erzählung, wie der junge Werther aus der hochadeligen Gesellschaft höflichst hinausgewiesen wird. Wäre der Werther in unseren Tagen erschienen, so hätte diese Partie des Buches weit bedeutsamer die Gemüter aufgeregt, als der ganze Pistolenknalleffekt.' Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 1, 431.

[15] What stands out most notably in Müller's assessment is his original reassessment of Lotte, whom he considers a nearly utopian character, exhibiting an altruistic and genuine attitude towards her environment. See Peter Müller, *Zeitkritik und Utopie in Goethes Werther* (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1969).

protest against the injustices committed by the *Ancien Régime* was nurtured by universalist ideals, yet the revolution took a different turn after the 'Declaration of Rights and Duties' (1793), which gave preference to national, specifically French, rights over universal ideals.[16] In the following decades, the nationalisation of the revolution spread across French borders, also in reaction to Napoleon's invasion of neighbouring countries. A new source of political legitimacy was consolidating itself first across Europe, then also in East Asia: the nation state. According to Benedict Anderson, this imaginary gave rise to a new sense of belonging, for 'the nations to which they give political expression loom out of an immemorial past, and […] glide into a limitless future'.[17] Werther never became a sans-culotte but he did join the ranks of those who sought to protect their nationhood against foreign aggression.

The earliest literary text that uses the malleability of *Werther* to craft an unmistakably political text is Ugo Foscolo's *Last Letter of Jacopo Ortis*, first published in 1802 and revised in 1807. Foscolo's literary career predates the Risorgimento, a movement that transformed Italy from a political and ethnic patchwork into a united nation state. As the 'true initiator of Romantic literary criticism and aesthetics in Italy',[18] the author was eulogised by his direct successors, Giuseppe Pecchio and Giuseppe Mazzini. Isolated contributions in Romance studies and comparative criticism took note of the threads connecting *Werther* and *Ortis*.[19] Both are epistolary texts in which the narration is dominated by the musings of young men who despair of their cruel environments. Both men see their beloveds married off to other men and commit suicide towards the end of the text. Furthermore, both texts' initial reception was shaped by an assumed autobiographical connection between the protagonists and their authors. Despite such similarities, *Werther* and *Ortis* differ widely in terms of their political saturation.

In Foscolo's text, Jacopo Ortis is not just a dejected lover and a victim of his own delusions; he also sees his fate sealed by power politics. The text opens with a passionate lament, as the Venetian exile wails:

> The sacrifice of our motherland is complete: everything is lost; whatever life is conceded to us, it will only serve us to mourn our misery and infamy. My name is on the

[16] See Krishan Kumar, 'Nationalism and Revolution: Friends or Foes?', *Nations and Nationalism* 21.4 (2015), 589–603, 591–2.

[17] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 7, 11.

[18] Peter Brand and Leo Pertile (eds), *Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 445.

[19] See Ulrike Kunkel, *Intertextualität in der italienischen Frühromantik: Die Literaturbezüge in Ugo Foscolos 'Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis'* (Tübingen: Narr, 1994); Enzo Neppi, 'Le origini del romanzo "modern" secondo Foscolo: la "Juli", il "Werther" e … "Jacopo Ortis"', *Quaderni Gargnano* 1 (2018), 29–48; Stefan Lindinger and Maria Sgouridou, 'Looking for Love in Werther, Jacopo Ortis, and Leandros: A Comparative Analysis of Three Romantic Epistolary Novels from Germany, Italy, and Greece', *Primerjalna književnost* 39 (2016), 91–104.

> list of the banished persons, I know it. […] And to make things worse, we Italians ourselves wash our hands in the blood of other Italians.[20]

Jacopo finds himself caught in the geopolitical rivalry between the Habsburg monarchy and Napoleonic France, which occupied large parts of the Italian peninsula in 1796. Patriotic-minded men originally greeted the French general as a liberator but soon found themselves disappointed by the Treaty of Campo Formio, when Bonaparte agreed that the Venetian Republic, including its maritime fleet, should be handed over to Austria. In the novel, the ensuing political persecution of Italian nationalists is exemplified by Jacopo's ban from Venice and his expulsion from the University of Padua, events that are indeed mirrored by the author's biography. Foscolo was forced to emigrate to the Cisalpine Republic, a short-lived political state in northern Italy, and ultimately settled in political exile in Britain.

At the novel's onset, it appears that Jacopo can ease his political frustration with two palliatives: the study of classical literature, primarily Plutarch and Petrarch, and his amorous infatuation with Teresa. Reminiscent of Werther and Lotte's Klopstock epiphany, the couple experience a type of love that departs from the culture of gallantry of the early 18th century and aims instead at establishing harmony between the souls. In the letter dating from 14 May 1798 – arguably the equivalent of Werther's 16 June epistle – Jacopo describes their discussion of their favourite poets in an idyllic setting:

> As if by command, we stood still there and beheld the star of Venus which was sparkling in our eyes. 'Oh!', she said with her sweet enthusiasm, 'don't you believe Petrarch also visited this solitude, longing in the silence of night for his lost beloved?'[21]

After their poetry recital moves to Sapphic odes, arguably a more fitting choice than ethereal Klopstock, they share a passionate kiss under a mulberry tree. Afterwards, Teresa backtracks and warns him: 'Never can I belong to you!'[22] After all, she is already promised to Odoardo, a boring and pedantic man whose political connections ensure that her father, also a patriot, will not be persecuted. Although Jacopo and Teresa's love is mutual, it is tragic by design.

The relationship between Jacopo and Teresa's fiancé, Odoardo, mirrors the spiteful animosities that also inform the interactions between Werther and Albert.

[20] Orig. 'Il sacrificio della patria nostra è consumato: tutto è perduto; e la vita, se pure ne verrà concessa, non ci resterà che per piangere le nostre sciagure, e la nostra infamia. Il mio nome è nella lista di proscrizione, lo so; […]. E noi, pur troppo, noi stessi Italiani ci laviamo le mani nel sangue degl'Italiani.' Ugo Foscolo, *Ultime Lettere di Jacopo Ortis*, in Foscolo, *Opere Scelte* (Paris: Baudry, 1837), 1–141, 3. Where not indicated otherwise, translations are my own. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *F*.

[21] Orig. 'E là ci siamo quasi di consenso fermati a mirar l'astro di Venere che ci lempeggiava su gli occhi. – Oh! diss'ella con quel dolce entusiasmo tutto suo, credi tu che il Petrarca non abbia anch'egli visitato sovente queste solitudini sosirando fra le ombre pacifiche della notte la sua perduta amica?' (*F* 56–7).

[22] Orig. 'Non posso essere vostra mai' (*F* 58).

One day, Odoardo provokes his rival by applauding the Treaty of Campo Formio, causing him to lose his temper. Despairing about his countrymen's lack of resistance against Austrian rule over Venice, Jacopo runs off and attempts to find solace in nature. At once, he finds his perception altered: 'Where is her sublime beauty? […] I only see naked rocks and precipices.'[23] The situation in which the natural sublime no longer facilitates the individual escape is also a visible nod to Werther's analogous experience in his letter dating from 18 August 1771. But in contrast to his German predecessor, Jacopo's growing pessimism has the sobering effect of making him more susceptible to the misery of his compatriots. Prior to his breakdown, he had already taken note of the plight of a destitute girl whose family was affected by hunger, violence and poverty, as told in the letter dating from 22 January 1798. But at that point, he did not draw general conclusions from this case. Now, fleeing from the maddening presence of his beloved, he learns that such fates are emblematic of the widespread misrule. Like Werther before him, he loses faith in the country's elites: 'Among Italy's cultured people, I have anxiously tried to approach those who are emphatically praised as *il bel mondo*; yet everywhere I met vulgarity, among noblemen, literati and the great beauties. All of them, they are nothing but nincompoops, scoundrels and villains. All of them.'[24] In this environment of misrule, peasants are hanged for minor transgressions. Wherever he goes, Jacopo finds evidence of the great price his countrymen are paying for appeasing Austria:

> So we Italians are all exiles and strangers in Italy. […] Our harvests have enriched our oppressors; yet our lands offer neither abode nor bread to the many Italians whom the revolution has driven out from their familiar sky. Now, dying of hunger and exhaustion, they keep hearing the voice of the only, supreme friend of the destitute and the abandoned, criminality![25]

After paying a final visit to the graves of Dante, Galileo and Michelangelo, he returns to Teresa – and kills himself.

Deification of the beloved

Foscolo's *Jacopo Ortis* is steeped in Wertherian sentiment, starting with the protagonist's all-or-nothing stance towards life through to stylistic features that, as Chapter 2 mentioned, contemporary Italian *Werther* translations failed to

[23] Orig. 'Dov'è la sua immensa bellezza? […] mi sembrano rupi nude e non veggo che precipizi' (*F* 67).
[24] 'Nella Italia più culta […] ho cercato ansiosamente *il bel mondo* ch'io sentiva magnificare con tanta enfasi, ma dappertutto ho trovato volgo di nobili, volgo di letterati, volgo di belle, e tutti sciocchi, bassi, maligni; tutti' (*F* 26).
[25] Orig. 'Così noi tutti Italiani siamo fuorusciti e stranieri in Italia […]. Le nostre messi hanno arricchiti i nostri dominatori; ma le nostre terre non somministrano nè tugurii nè pane a tanti Italiani che la rivoluzione ha balestrati fuori del cielo natio, e che languenti di fame e di stanchezza hanno sempre all'orecchio il solo, il supremo consigliere dell'uomo destituto da tutta la natura, il delitto!' (*F* 88).

reproduce. A notable distinction from the original is that in Foscolo's work, 'political, economic and sexual repression go together'.[26] While this nexus is left to the reader's imagination in Goethe's text, its literary adaptation in the Italian context makes the connection unmistakably clear. Given the dominance of political concerns, however, scholars have also speculated about the gratuitous nature of the tragic love story in *Ortis*. According to Glauco Cambon, the protagonist's affection for Teresa only functions as a distraction from the hero's greater pain, the loss of his motherland. Consequently, there is no organic development: 'in *Ortis* […], the chips are down from the start. […] The opening clause of the novel […] already hints at the final sacrifice'.[27] Teresa can only help delay the predetermined catastrophe. In this light, the love story comes across as a concession to a literary fashion of the time, sentimentalism, that allows Foscolo to stage a political conflict for an audience that prefers tearful letters. According to this line of argument, the Wertherian echoes are just a means to conceal ideological contraband.

Jacopo's final address to Teresa, dating from 20 March, only a few days prior to his voluntary death, appears to confirm Cambon's stance:

> No, precious maiden, you are not the cause of my death. [The causes are:] All my desperate passions; the misfortune of all those people who I need in my life; mankind's criminality; the conviction that I will be enslaved eternally and the continuing disgrace of my sold-out motherland – all that has become apparent for a long time. You, angelic woman, could alleviate my fate. But to provide comfort, oh! you could not.[28]

His love for Teresa, he confesses, was just a surrogate for his frustration with living in a country that suffers under the yoke of foreign rule. This interpretation, however, risks leaving out the novel's most distinctive feature: its revision of the role of the beloved. As Jacopo's letter continues, his tone changes. Suddenly, he looks at Teresa as someone who transcends the role of a mere romantic love interest. She becomes a mirror image of his own virtue:

> Read those last words of mine often, as I can assure you that they are written with the blood of my own heart. Memories of me will possibly save you from the sorrow of vice. […] The world's flattery will conspire to ruin you. It will rob you of your self-respect, lower you to the ranks of those other women, who trade in love and friendship after having abandoned their chastity, who triumphantly celebrate their sacrifice of perfidy. But not you, Teresa: Your virtue radiates from your celestial face,

[26] Brand and Pertile, *Cambridge History*, 417.
[27] Glauco Cambon, *Ugo Foscolo: Poet of Exile* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 55.
[28] Orig. 'No, cara giovine, non sei tu cagione dell amia morte. Tutte le mie passioni disperate; le disavventure delle persone più necessarie alle vita mia; gli umani delitti; la sicurezza della mia perpetua schiavitù e dell'obbrobrio perpetuo dell amia patria venduta – tutto insomma da più tempo era scritto; e tu, donna angelica, potevi soltanto disacerbare il mio destio; ma placarlo, oh! non mai' (*F* 129).

> and I have venerated your virtue. You know it, I have loved you like one worships something that is holy.[29]

In this startling passage, Teresa, no longer a biographic subject, has become a cypher of nationhood. First of all, Jacopo's horror at her hypothetical transformation from saint into whore appears rather far-fetched; after all, the prospective loss of her dear friend, Jacopo, might leave her sad and dejected, but the newly-wed bride does not look inclined to join the 'ranks of those other women' whom Jacopo has in mind. Instead, she yields to a metonymic function that connects the individual and the nation. Here, the beloved, an otherwise powerless political subject, transforms into the allegorical virtuous virgin whose chastity is synonymous with the country's fortune. Jacopo no longer strives for spiritual intimacy but turns the 'holy' woman into a proxy who is valuable only in her relations with other men (or armies) who seek to corrupt her.[30]

Jacopo's deification of Teresa is inspired by the rise of the feminine civic allegory, a symbolic device first celebrated by the National Convent in Paris, which conceived of 'the Marianne' as an allegory of the French people.[31] Such allegories became closely associated with the budding nationalist movements across Europe, as in Italy where *Italia turrita* appeared, a female figure whose head is graced by a mural crown.[32] Laying the foundation for the artistic tropes of the Risorgimento, Foscolo's novel pioneers the substitution of the physical female idol promising marital bliss for the abstract construct of the nation foreboding patriotic awakening.

For patriotic Jacopo, the transmutation of Teresa is advantageous, even exceeding the bliss that the lover Jacopo could have enjoyed. While the real person

[29] Orig. 'Rileggi sempre queste mie ultime parole ch'io posso dire di scriverti col sangue del mio cuore. La mia memoria ti preserverà forse dalle sciagure del vizio. […] Quanto mai v'è di lusinghiero nel mondo congiurerà alla tua rovina; a rapirti la stima di te; ed a confonderti fra la schiera di tante altre donne, le quali dopo d'avere rinnegato il pudore, fanno traffico dell'amore e della amicizia, ed ostentano come trionfi le vittime della loro perfidia. Tu no, mia Teresa: la tua virtù risplende nel tuo viso celeste, ed io la ho rispettata: e tu sai ch'io t'ho amato adorandoti come cosa sacra' (*F* 129–30).

[30] According to Simone A. James Alexander, the feminine civic allegory is an indication of the female body's 'subjugation, colonization, and bodily theft' in patriarchal symbolic systems. See Simone A. James Alexander, 'M/othering the Nation: Women's Bodies as Nationalist Trope in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*', *African American Review* 44.3 (2011), 373–90, 376.

[31] Conceived by the painter Jean-Michel Moreau in 1775, the 'Marianne' was elevated into a national symbol by the National Convention in 1797. During the *terreur*, however, she was temporarily replaced by Hercules, who stood for a more assertive and aggressive self-understanding of the republic. And although Napoleon replaced Marianne with his own image, for he regarded himself as the personification of the French nation, her abstraction and impersonality ensured her appeal throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. See Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 93.

[32] Although the allegory of Italy can be traced back to Roma, the city goddess, her modern afterlives commence with Petrarch's canzone 128, Canova's statue *Crying Italy* (*Italia piangente*) and Machiavelli's portrait of Italy as a leaderless and beaten woman in *The Prince* (*Il principe*, 1532). See Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (Ann Arbor, MI: Sheridan, 2008), 190.

only alleviates his fate, the deified woman provides comfort as an elevated image of nationhood, a spiritual ideal that renders all other forms of existence secondary. By sacrificing himself to '*Teresa turrita*', Jacopo performs a private ceremony that pursues a political project through spiritual means: the liberation of Italian territory from foreign troops. In highly symbolical terms, the Wertherian hero finally achieves what any budding revolutionary hopes for: salvation through martyrdom. There is also a practical dimension of his exemplary action, as such symbolical acts inevitably aim to inspire imitation. If the Italians follow Jacopo's exemplary self-sacrifice but, unlike him, find the support and encouragement of other countrymen, they can change the fate of the people.

In contrast to Giacomo Leopardi's early patriotic poems, which will be discussed in the next subsection, Foscolo avoids the pathos of directly addressing Italy itself. Through the pragmatic marriage of Teresa to Odoardo, Foscolo reproduces one of the immutable rules of the Wertherian nursery, in which romantic love is not meant to blossom. In *Ortis*, this impossibility is not put into place by the overused tropes of sentimentalism, such as the assumed sanctity of the beloved's marriage; instead, the protagonist finds himself embroiled in a conflict without solution. In contrast to Goethe's Original, which caused some readers to raise their eyebrows at Werther's reluctance to pursue Lotte, Foscolo's conflict is transparent. Hegel's 'conflict between the poetry of the heart and the opposing prose of circumstances and the accidents of external situations' is reconciled in Jacopo's tragic patriotism. His downfall implies the promise of a better world achieved through national rejuvenation. Should Italians finally join forces instead of collaborating with foreigners, they will have achieved something more comprehensive than whatever scenario Jacopo and Teresa dreamed up under the mulberry tree where they first kissed. At the onset of the 19th century, love is replaced by nationhood.

Digression: dissolution of the graft (Leopardi)

At one point, after his snub and subsequent resignation, Werther dreams of sacrificing himself on the battlefield. The letter dating from 25 May 1772 reads: 'I had a plan in my head of which I did not want to speak to you until it was accomplished; but now that it has not materialized, I may as well mention it. I wanted to go off to war, and had long been thinking about it' (*L* 52). When he discusses the idea with the Prince, he is quickly talked out of it. Nevertheless, the dream of dying on the battlefield holds a seductive promise for the Wertherian hero, who longs to be cleansed of his personal sorrows. While Werther could have only joined the ranks of a regiment commanded by a German feudal warlord in 1774, when the novel was first published, the situation changed after the invention of the modern nation

state. Werther's successors took up arms in pursuit of a nobler goal: the protection of their motherland.

First of all, this possibility was embraced by the poetic personas conceived by Giacomo Leopardi, another writer who is frequently linked to *Werther* and *Ortis*.[33] In the case of Leopardi, the poet who lastingly shaped the Italian language, to claim linguistic indebtedness to Goethe's epistolary novel would be preposterous. However, a non-linguistic aspect of Leopardi's work is indeed deserving of such comparative scrutiny: the motif of unconsummated love, as explored in both *Werther* and *Ortis*. The *Canti*, a poetry collection written between 1818 and 1836, juxtaposes this theme with martial heroism in an intricate manner. In scholarly literature, the heterogeneity of the *Canti* is often discussed in the light of the poet's changing aesthetics, as he moves from his early heroism to multi-layered explorations of cultural memory and strokes of fate.[34] Yet the dualism of love and nationhood continues a conceptual link that could already be observed in Foscolo: the analogy between the nation and the beloved.

On the one hand, Leopardi's collection revolves around Wertherian scenes of frustrated love. The elegy 'Consalvo', for example, features the confession of a dying man who finally opens up to his beloved on his death bed and asks for a single kiss. Upon obtaining his humble request, he raves: 'I was happy above all happy men. / Ah, but heaven does not permit / any being on earth to be blessed this way. / We can't love this deeply and with joy.'[35] In 'To His Lady' ('Alla sua donna') and 'To Sylvia' ('A Sylvia'), the situation is reversed, as bereaved male lovers mourn their deceased beloveds. The latter are addressed like benevolent ghosts who now inhabit a happier sphere, inspiring the speakers to further withdraw from worldly life and prepare for their own deaths. Throughout the *Canti*, love and death are as inseparable as in Ossianic song, but the author follows in the footsteps of *Werther* by transferring Macpherson's archaic imagery into the realm of muted, private suffering. There is no bloodshed, just the conviction that 'the law of love / inclines toward death' (*C* 229).

On the other hand, Leopardi's *Canti* yield to Ossianic heroism in a way unseen in *Werther*, as the collection is spearheaded by two patriotic canzones, 'To Italy' ('All'Italia') and 'On the Monument to Dante Being Erected in Florence' ('Sopra il monument di Dante che si preparava in Firenze'). Despite their nostalgic tone, both poems depart significantly from the theme of lost love. Instead,

[33] Enzo Neppi goes as far as presenting a genealogy that spans Werther's letter dating from 18 August 1772 to Foscolo's *Ortis* and Leopardi's *Zibaldone*. That said, according to Neppi's genealogy, the thread that connects the three texts is nihilism, as his argument emphasises Jacopo's atheist mindset over his hopes of national rejuvenation. See Neppi, 'Le origini', 131.

[34] See Fabian Lampart, 'Zeit, Gedächtnis, Erinnerung: Überlegungen zu einer Denkfigur bei Hölderlin, Leopardi und Keats', in *Lyrik im 19. Jahrhundert: Gattungspoetik als Reflexionsmedium der Kultur*, ed. by Steffen Martus et al. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 387–404, 395–9.

[35] Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. by Jonathan Galassi (London: Penguin, 2010), 137–9. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *C*.

they invigorate the reader's patriotic sentiment. 'To Italy' tells of a nation that has fallen into decay and disgrace. Calling on the national allegory, the speaker wonders:

> [Y]ou were a lady, and now you are a slave.
> Whoever speaks or writes about you,
> who, remembering you in your pride,
> wouldn't say: She was great once; but no longer?
> Why? What happened to our ancient strength,
> the arms, the courage, the resolve? (*C* 5)

Her sons, the speaker laments, are recruited to die in wars fought far away from home, probably as mercenaries for foreign armies. This portrait of Italy's lamentable present recalls Jacopo's observations about the miserable living conditions of his countrymen, including Teresa, who he fears could be ruined and robbed of her self-respect. Instead of invoking suicide as a solution to such suffering, Leopardi's speaker looks for inspiration in antiquity. In this spirit, the second part of the poem invokes the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE) to illustrate the Greeks' exemplary resistance against foreign aggression when 'battalions / raced to die for their country' (7). The speaker praises the courage of the Spartans, who overpowered the Persian aggressors despite the prospect of certain death. Such heroism contrasts unfavourably with Leopardi's fellow Italians. Yet the speaker hopes his people will feel galvanised by meditating on 'how, drenched / in barbarian blood, the hero Greeks, / […] defeated by their wounds, fall on one another' (11). The drastic image of the raped nation and its rejuvenation inspired by a glorious past are rare ingredients in the poetry of Leopardi, who never returned to such themes. Meanwhile, such imagery became common currency in nationalist poetry throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Leopardi's patriotic canzone 'To Italy' dates from 1818, a time when anti-Napoleonic sentiment swept the country. Around the same time, Alessandro Manzoni's unfinished poem 'Rimini Proclamation' ('Il proclama di Rimini', 1815) also invoked the allegory of Italy, calling for Italian unification.

After Foscolo contaminated romantic love with notions of patriotic awakening, Leopardi's collection advanced the dissolution of the graft by, once again, separating the two motifs. Even if sad lovers cannot transform into heroic soldiers overnight, both the romantic and the patriotic gestures share a rhetorical feature: their quintessential use of apostrophe. Lonely speakers invoke addressees who cannot answer back but offer redemption in a conceptual space outside the real world. To invoke Foscolo's words, the dead maidens and Italy herself are meant to not only 'alleviate' the speaker's fate but also 'provide comfort'. There is a clear tendency towards self-aggrandisement in this gesture. When a typical line in the love poems invokes the self as the ultimate subject of grand suffering, 'Another love like this will never be' (139), the patriotic poem addresses Italy in the same

absolutist manner: 'Weep; for you have reason to, my Italy, / born to outdo others / in both happiness and misery' (3).

Why does Leopardi separate the voices that Foscolo so successfully combined? Possibly, the answer lies in the structural dynamics of the *Canti*. While Jacopo moves from individual love to patriotic ecstasy, the *Canti* invert this chronological sequence. The patriotic poems, penned between 1818 and 1820, come first and are followed by the poetry of *ricordanza*, in which the Romantic lament for lost youth and love exemplifies the inevitable fate of human experience. The overarching structure of the *Canti* infers a speaker who is carried away by the hopes of political awakening at first, then retreats into the world of individual grief. The link is retracted.

After Foscolo contaminated the Wertherian novel with explicit politics, poets such as Leopardi used the conceptual pair of romantic love and national rejuvenation for pathos-laden invocations of salvation and self-sacrifice. Within the love–nation complex, amorous passion and patriotic ambitions appear interchangeable. Werther, Ortis and the speakers in Leopardi's poetry are ready to die for their beloved – or their country. Such continuities, however, should not gloss over a significant rupture between the kind of nationalism that is articulated in poetry and its equivalent in prose. Once literary realism started to dominate the aesthetics of the novel, as seen in Manzoni's *The Betrothed* (*I promessi sposi*, 1827), tragic pairs of lovers found themselves embedded in more down-to-earth settings, leaving little room for the deification of the beloved and the high-strung pathos of self-sacrifice.

East Asian Werthers

In reaction to Goethe's sensational debut novel, the poet Matthias Claudius issued an unsolicited piece of advice, suggesting that a change of scenery would have sufficed to alleviate Werther's suffering: 'Poor Werther! Had he only travelled to Paris or Beijing!'[36] While Paris was a common destination of European grand tours, Claudius's idea about an East Asian extension is somewhat eccentric but predicted the actual history of the novel's reception.

The plight of Foscolo's Italy arguably evinces some similarities to the colonial situation in China and Korea, thereby providing an ideal ground for further reinterpretation and rewriting. As in Foscolo's fragmented pre-Risorgimento Italy, foreign aggression had eroded territorial integrity during the 19th and the early 20th centuries. Despite their rich local cultures and highly stratified societies, East

[36] Orig. 'Wenn er doch eine Reise nach Pareis [sic] oder Peking getan hätte!' Matthias Claudius, *Werke in einem Band* (Munich: Winkler, 1976), 44.

Asian empires had to rethink their relations with the world after feeling the effects of Western gunboat diplomacy. But while Japan quickly modernised in reaction to the Perry Expedition (1853), China and Korea felt the yoke of foreign domination and fell under semi-colonial and colonial administration respectively. Across East Asia, literati embraced occidental literature as a tool to modernise the three territories – with *Werther* playing a prominent role. In contrast to their Japanese peers, who placed more emphasis on the subjective sentiment in *Werther*, Chinese and Korean authors pursued the book's patriotic reinterpretation, thus reasserting the lingering connection between love and the nation. While *Ortis* figures as a unique case in Italian letters and only assumed canonised status after the book's endorsement by Risorgimento literati, Chinese Wertherian texts emerged from a broad cultural movement that set out to reform social and cultural norms between the end of the Great War and the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. Since the Korean situation is addressed in a separate subchapter, the following overview focuses primarily on China.

While the imperial Qing administration never thought of its subjects as Chinese nationals, political figures such as Sun Yatsen, Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei began to promote the idea of China as a self-governing and unified nation state at the end of the 19th century, primarily as a reaction against both the perceived incompetence of autochthonous imperial rule and continued foreign interference.[37] Their idea was that only China's immediate modernisation, modelled after Western and Japanese examples, could prevent their country's collapse, even if it would come at the expense of cultural loss. In addition to the linguistic shifts during the first decade following China's transformation into a republic in 1911 (which were discussed in Chapter 2), socio-political movements became a powerful force that shaped the cultural self-understanding of the country at the same time. Confronted with the results of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, students and literati reacted strongly to their administration's apparent failure to advance the country's territorial interests. Following pressure from Japan, the Kiautschou Bay concession, a Chinese territory previously governed by Germany, was awarded to the island empire instead of being returned to China. Throughout the 19th century, China had gradually lost its status as an important geopolitical power, as its port cities were successively split up among American, European and Japanese authorities. Much to the chagrin of students and literati, the Paris Peace Conference suggested that this trend would only continue.

In reaction, the 'Manifesto of all the Students in Beijing' (北京學界全體宣言 Beijing xuejie quanti xuanyan) called for radical action and painted a bleak picture of the country's future: 'Today we swear two solemn oaths with all our

[37] See Guoqi Xu, 'Nationalism, Internationalism, and National Identity: China from 1895 to 1919', in *Chinese Nationalism in Perspective: Historical and Recent Cases*, ed. by C. X. George Wei and Xianyuan Liu (London: Greenwood, 2001), 101–20.

countrymen: 1) China's territory may be conquered, but it cannot be given away; 2) the Chinese people may be massacred, but they will not surrender. Our country is about to be annihilated! Up, brethren.'[38] The second point articulates a fear that indicates the social Darwinist concerns of Chinese intellectuals, who saw a struggle for survival playing out between nations, races and civilisations.[39] In reaction to this threat of extinction, some resorted to direct political action, as evinced by the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. Meanwhile, others continued the transcultural work started by late Qing reformers. In a country where only a small minority had completed the minimum schooling necessary to master the administrative language, Classical Chinese, it became imperative to develop a vernacular.

In this context, introductions to modern Chinese letters typically reference Lu Xun's preface to his seminal short story collection, *Call to Arms* (吶喊 Nahan, 1922), where the author elaborates on the troubling scene that shaped his ideas about popular education through literature.[40] During his sojourn in Japan, where he was supposed to read for a medical degree, he watched footage from a Chinese site of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5). It showed a handful of Japanese soldiers parading a captured local man who was accused of spying for Russia. The whole crowd of spectators idly stands watching their countryman's execution. According to Lu Xun, this was the moment when he realised that physical health means nothing if the population lacks the ability to detect injustice and to step in:

> However rude a nation was in physical health, if its people were intellectually feeble, they would never become anything than cannon fodder or gawping spectators […]. The first task was to change their spirit; and literature and the arts, I decided at the time, were the best means to this end.[41]

Although the pessimistic undertones that permeate Lu Xun's prose contradict this emancipatory proclamation, the preface places great hopes in the revolutionary power of literature. Hoping to enhance the relevance and mass appeal of literary writing, many writers modelled their texts after Western examples, which were considered less elitist than the domestic tradition. The great scepticism towards the Chinese literary heritage was rooted in a somewhat simplistic juxtaposition: while

[38] Quoted in Colin Mackerras, *China in Transformation 1900–1949* (Harlow: Pearson, 2008), 126.
[39] This idea conforms with the concepts coined by German thinkers of the early 20th century such as Fritz Lenz. In Japan, where many Chinese intellectuals studied, *Rassehygiene* theory was disseminated by Ukita Kazatami. See John Whittier Treat, 'Choosing to Collaborate: Yi Kwang-su and the Moral Subject in Colonial Korea', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71.1 (2012), 81–102, 92.
[40] The following two monographs are representative for both Western and Chinese scholarship: Wang Keping, *Spirit of Chinese Poetics* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2008), 225; Michael Gibbs Hill, *Lin Shu, Inc.: Translation and the Making of Modern Chinese Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 225.
[41] Lu Xun, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China*, trans. by Julia Lovell (London: Penguin, 2009), 17.

no Chinese commoner existed who spoke in a way that resembled Tang poetry, an aesthetics that continued to inform contemporary poetics, many Norwegians used the language of Ibsen's characters. This programmatic rejection of old forms led to a creative explosion. Between 1919 and the outbreak of the Chinese Civil War (1927–37), writers enjoyed unprecedented freedom to navigate new modes of expression, ranging from popular romance to realist portraits of contemporary society and from psychological diaries to quasi-Romantic poetry.

Werther was received most enthusiastically by the members of the Creation Society, a literary circle founded in 1921 and largely based in Shanghai, the country's publishing centre. While strongly identifying as Romantics,[42] Gou Morou and Yu Dafu pursued a free interpretation of the term. Next to Goethe's epistolary novel and British household names, their preferred readings also included Ibsen's dramas and the poetry of Walt Whitman, thus expanding conventional – that is, European – notions of Romanticism considerably. By focusing on complex psychological issues and contextualising them socio-politically, the Society promoted, in Xiaobing Tang and Michel Hockx's words, a 'potent admixture of nineteenth-century German Romantic discourse and a more amorphous fin-de-siècle neo-Romanticism that could range from aestheticism to proto-socialism'.[43] In addition, Guo and Yu's interest in non-canonical strands of the Chinese literary heritage allowed them to imagine continuity between European cultural artefacts and Chinese modernity.

The following sections consider the early narrative works of Yu Dafu, Guo Moruo, Ba Jin and Jiang Guangci. Although their narrative texts follow a highly specific aesthetics, the Werther trope is integral to their literary celebration of the linkage between complex subjective emotions and ecstatic visions of national rejuvenation. After the first full translation of Goethe's book in 1922, Wertherian protagonists started to populate Chinese modernist texts, reaching a saturation point during the 1930s when Werther transformed from hero into caricature.

Postcolonial Werther

In retrospect, the proliferation of Chinese Werthers led to a confusing situation: during a time when Goethe was celebrated as an icon of national culture in Wilhelmine Germany, an empire with considerable colonial possessions, *Werther* was embraced as an emblem of the struggle for national liberation in China, a country that was partially colonised by Germany. Between 1898 and 1914, Berlin administered the Kiautschou Bay concession, covering a third of today's

[42] In its Chinese translation, Romanticism was *langman zhuyi* (浪漫主義), a term adopted from the Japanese phonetic translation *rōman* (浪漫).
[43] Tang and Hockx, 'The Creation Society', 108.

Shandong province in eastern China. Although English, French, American and Japanese powers were certainly perceived as greater threats, German troops carried out punitive expeditions in Shandong not only against the rebels of the Boxer Rebellion, but also against the broader civilian population.[44]

In the light of Werther's warm reception in China, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the novel originates in an intellectual tradition that conceived of the Sinic realm as culturally inferior and in need of foreign rule. Herder, who exerted a considerable intellectual influence on the young Goethe, contradicted Leibniz and Voltaire, who had nothing but praise for Confucian rationalism, and insisted that Chinese culture and society were hopelessly backward. Accordingly, the country's culture and its people were caught in a state of eternal paralysis: 'This empire is an embalmed mummy, adorned with hieroglyphs and clad in silk. Its inner circulation resembles the life of hibernating animals.'[45] According to Adrian Hsia, Herder's disregard of the Sinic realm stands out negatively among his comments on non-European peoples, for its people and culture evince inferiority in both physical and spiritual terms.[46] Foreshadowing the cultural chauvinism of the 19th and 20th centuries, Herder established an image of China that would become common currency at European universities, with Hegel and Friedrich W. J. Schelling further elaborating on the country's deplorable lack of development. Although in later life Goethe would develop an interest in Chinese literature,[47] his early poem 'A Chinese in Rome' ('Der Chinese in Rom', 1797) reiterates Herder's clichéd views that Orientals are so used to their eternally repetitive patterns that they cannot even appreciate the superiority of Western antiquity.[48]

[44] See Klaus Mühlhahn, *Making China Modern: From the Great Qing to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 184.

[45] Orig. 'Kann man sich wundern, daß eine Nation dieser Art nach Europäischem Maßstabe in Wissenschaften wenig erfunden? Ja dass sie Jahrtausende hindurch sich auf derselben Stelle erhalten habe? Selbst ihre Moral- und Gesetzbücher gehen immer im Kreise umher und sagen auf hundert Weisen, genau und sorgfältig, mit regelmäßiger Heuchelei von kindlichen Pflichten immer dasselbe. Astronomie und Musik, Poesie und Kriegskunst, Malerei und Architektur sind bei ihnen, wie sie vor Jahrhunderten waren, Kinder ihrer ewigen Gesetze und unabänderlich-kindischen Einrichtung. Das Reich ist eine balsamierte Mumie, mit Hieroglyphen bemalt und mit Seide umwunden; ihr innerer Kreislauf ist wie das Leben der schlafenden Wintertiere.' Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Wiesbaden: R. Löwith, 1969), 284.

[46] See Adrian Hsia, *China-Bilder in der europäischen Literatur* (Würzburg: Könighausen & Neumann, 2010), 51–8.

[47] See Leslie O'Bell, 'Chinese Novels, Scholarly Errors and Goethe's Concept of World Literature', *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 87.2 (2018), 64–80.

[48] It is commonly accepted that Goethe's 'The Chinese in Rome' invokes the Chinese person to stand in for Jean Paul. In this poem, both Goethe's literary rival and China represent a shared tendency to embrace unnatural and perverted art forms. See Uwe Japp, 'Geistges Schreiben: Goethes lyrische Annäherung an China', in *China in der deutschen Literatur 1827–1988*, ed. by U. J. and Aihong Jiang (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 11–21; Hendrik Birus, *Vergleichung: Goethes Einführung in die Schreibweise Jean Pauls* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2016), 12–15.

Notwithstanding Herder's cultural chauvinism and racism, these elaborations articulate concerns that were in fact shared by the activists of the May Fourth era. But where the German thinker only saw immaturity, ignorance and even animality at work, Chinese literati saw the long-term effects of an oppressive culture, Confucianism, that had joined forces with foreign aggressors to subjugate the population. Their pronounced antipathy to the lingering cultural heritage is most strikingly articulated in one of Lu Xun's most celebrated short stories, *Diary of a Madman* (狂人日記 Kuangren riji 1918). In view of the institutional and interpersonal cruelty legitimised through tradition and habit, the narrator accuses Chinese society of systematic cannibalism.[49] In a toned-down way, the same hostility towards an ossified heritage also informs Hu Shi's recommendation for modern writers: 'Don't imitate the ancients.'[50] It appears that Herder's chauvinism was, to some degree, vindicated by modern Chinese thinkers.

Despite such superficial parallels between Herder and May Fourth writers, the latter departed considerably from Europe's distorted image of China. After all, they embarked on a revaluation of the Chinese tradition by de-emphasising the Confucian tradition, supposedly the force behind cultural stagnation, in favour of less orthodox letters, ranging from the Zhuangzi, an ancient Daoist text full of 'contempt for social values, hierarchies, and conventional reasoning',[51] to the poetry of Tao Yuanming, through to the vernacular classics, which have become synonymous with the literary canon up to the present. In contrast to Herder's verdict about the 'embalmed mummy', China's critics were the most enthusiastic promoters of the 'other' China.

As the intellectual forays of Hu Shi and Lu Xun demonstrate, the adaptation of Western models and the revaluation of the classical heritage were simultaneous operations. At the same time, when Hu introduced Ibsen to the Chinese audience, he also issued modernised editions of vernacular novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Only a few years after 'Diary of a Madman', Lu published his *Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (中國小說史略 Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe, 1925), a text written in Classical Chinese. In sum, May Fourth writers used the prestige attributed to Western letters to shake up their own literary heritage, but instead of advocating their native tradition's wholesale replacement, they pursued a nuanced programme of transcultural integration.

[49] When the protagonist takes to reading the Confucian classics, he hallucinates the imperative 'Eat people!' written between the lines. For an analysis of this wholesale statement, see Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 72–3.

[50] Orig. '不摹仿古人.' Hu Shi 胡適, 'A Constructive Literary Revolution' (建設的文學革命論 Jianshi de wenxue geming lun), in *May Fourth Intellectual Debates* (五四思想論戰 Wusi sixiang lunzhan), ed. by Chen Chanyun 沈展雲 (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press), 268–80, 269.

[51] Martin Kern, 'The Texts of Warring States Philosophical and Political Discourse', in *Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, ed. by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), vol. 1, 66–76, 74.

Arguably, such factors distinguish the Chinese situation from the prominent cases analysed by classical postcolonial criticism. In the light of China's linguistic continuity, the established concepts of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak or Homi K. Bhabha fail to make sense of the country's situation. In contrast to the fate of English in Ireland and India, the Chinese language remained the unquestioned means of communication, a language considered in need of reform but not risking replacement. Instead of writers reappropriating the coloniser's language, the Chinese situation allowed literati to put transcultural and transhistorical sources to use at the same time.

In Guo Moruo's preface to *Werther*, the translator returns to his idea of a universal language of the soul, claiming that *Werther* articulates the same insights that inform the Zhuangzi. Referencing the letter of 18 August 1771, Guo regards the protagonist's view of the universe as an 'all-consuming, devouring monster' (*L* 37) as indication of a quasi-Daoist philosophy: 'If you embrace this force, then you will only see life and no more death, then you will only see permanence and no longer mere changes. You are surrounded by paradise everywhere, the heavenly kingdom commences anytime, there is eternal joy, the heart overflows.'[52] From an occidental perspective, this sounds like a forceful interpretation of pantheism, but Guo's free associations integrate Werther's enunciations into a native Chinese framework. Indeed, Lü Tongzhuang has argued that one must not overestimate the role of Western learning in Guo's aesthetics; after all, his early essays evince stronger connections to the Zhuangzi than to Goethe or other Western writers.[53]

In comparative scholarship, the deliberate adaptations of foreign concepts in 1920s China have already received considerable attention, for example in Haun Saussy's study of Xu Zhimo's interpretation of Baudelaire, which was discussed in Chapter 1. Guo's conceptual toolkit contains the idea that discrete cultural sources tap into a universal aesthetic source: spontaneous inspiration. Werther's eruptive literary style and Zhuangzian epistemic scepticism have, to equal extent, the ability to shake up ossified structures. In this light, what Engels considered the 'lamentations of a delusional whiner' no longer indicate a solipsistic trait of bourgeois self-pity; here, Wertherian writing forms part of a larger socio-political movement that has the values of liberty and the pursuit of happiness as fundamental points of reference. While such values first appeared in the North American political context, they later also spread to France and Europe. Eventually, they also arrived on Chinese soil.

[52] Orig. '能與此力冥合時，則只見其生不見其死，只見其常而不見其變。體之周遭，隨處都是樂園，隨時都是天國，永恆之樂，溢滿靈臺。' Guo, 'Preface', 4.

[53] See Lü Tongzhuang 侶同壯, 'Guo Moruo's Reception of Zhuangzian Aesthetics' (郭沫若對莊子美學的新開拓 Guo Moruo dui Zhuangzi meixue de xin kaituo), *Guangxi University Journal: Philosophy and Sociology* (廣西大學學報: 哲學社會科學版 Guangxi daxue xuebao: zhexue shehui kexue ban) 1 (2010), 90–4, 91.

From sexual frustration to patriotism

Once grafted into a new cultural context, the Wertherian protagonist moved beyond his narrow scope of self-pity. Other than Jacopo Ortis's straightforward patriotic awakening, his Chinese peers would only express patriotic sentiments after first taking a detour into a realm of human experience that, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, was difficult to address in direct terms: the individual's wayward sexual desires. The prominence of libidinal frustration became emblematic of the frictions between socio-political oppression and the individual's desire for a fulfilled life. This subsection holds Guo's novella *Caramel Girl* (喀爾美蘿姑娘 Ka'ermeimeng guniang, 1924) against one of the most celebrated texts of the Creation Society, Yu Dafu's *Sinking* (沈淪, 1921), which is routinely compared to Goethe's *Werther* in criticism.[54] There is a smooth transition between expressions of subjective grief that do not move beyond the individual's scope and those that envision personal frustration as metonymic for the nation itself.

Wertherian themes and motifs permeate most of Guo Moruo's early prose. Alongside tragic love triangles and the eroticism of repressed passion, these novellas feature Guo's trademark monological style, jotted with exclamation marks and particles. The narrator of *Caramel Girl* is an unhappily married Chinese man who lives in Japan and despairs about his love for a young shopgirl. Although they never exchange a single word, her sudden disappearance sets into motion the breakdown of his life. Being neither a poet to describe her beauty, nor a painter to draw her features, he complains that he cannot find the right means to sublimate his passion. As a consequence, he finds himself caught in a moral conflict: should he reveal his feelings to the shopgirl and elope with her? Or must he fulfil his duty as a husband and father? Failing to make up his mind, his imagination runs wild:

> She sells *karuméra*, and the word, I guess, comes from Spanish: *caramelo*. This is such a pleasant-sounding word, so I gave her a Spanish name, I called her 'Donna Caraméla.' […] My friend, did you know? Spanish girls are the most vicious. I read in some book a story about a man who wanted to marry a Spanish girl. She would only agree after applying twenty-five whip lashes on him. The man wholeheartedly agreed and exposed his back for the whipping. After she whipped him twenty-four times, the shivering man was preparing for the last stroke and was looking forward to the joys of love, but she refused to whip him for a last time. If she cannot complete twenty-five strokes, she would not have to agree.[55]

[54] See Kubin, 'Yu Dafu'; Chenxi Tang, 'Reading Europe: Writing China European Literary Tradition and Chinese Authorship in Yu Dafu's *Sinking*', *Arcadia* 40.1 (2005), 153–76.

[55] Orig. '她賣的是Karumera，這個字的字源我恐怕是從西班牙文的Caramelo來的。我因為這個字的中听的發音，我便把她仿著西班牙式的稱呼，稱她為 Donna Caramela。[…]。朋友，你可知道嗎？西班牙的女人是最狠毒的。我在甚麼書上看見過一段故事，說是有一位男子向著一位西班牙的少女求婚，少女要把馬鞭舉起打他二十五下然後才能承認。男子也心甘情願把背部袒了出來受她鞭打。她打過二十四下不打了，男子戰慄著準備受最後的一鞭並且豫想到鞭打後的戀愛的歡樂。但是第二十五下的馬鞭終竟不肯打下。沒有打到二十五鞭，少女是不能承應的' (*K* 62).

In the protagonist's oblivious imagination, the shy shopgirl undergoes an absurd transformation when he attributes qualities to her that would befit a heroine in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novels. In the end, he abandons his wife and children to embark on a pointless search for the girl. After a first unsuccessful attempt at suicide by drowning, he departs for the capital, half-determined to take his life there. His only regret is the loss of the fetish he kept in remembrance of her:

> I carry a bottle of sleeping pills and a gun with me. When I am in Tokyo, I will kill someone – at least I will kill myself!
>
> My greatest regret is that when I went into the water, the note with the two characters she had attached to the door got wet and now I cannot read it anymore. I have not seen her for a year now, her posture is fading from my memory, now I can only remember her eyes, her pupils. They are branded into the deepest corners of my soul. I fear I will not see her again in this life! […]
>
> So that's it, I will now stop writing. The grave is already closing in on me.[56]

In Wertherian fashion, the protagonist follows the spontaneous stirrings of love but, unable to talk to the girl, shirks from any step that could lead towards fulfilment. As the promise of erotic love turns sour, the unhinged individual is left with no other outlet for his sorrows than sleeping pills and a gun. Here, the successful emulation of Western models heralds the suicidal impulses that also played such a pertinent role in the French and Japanese reception of *Werther*, as discussed in Chapter 4. Although the preface to Guo's 1922 *Werther* translation celebrates the protagonist as a rebel, the narrator remains committed to the portrait of highly subjective grief and despair.

Meanwhile, the self-destructive trajectory of the protagonist in Yu Dafu's *Sinking* moves beyond the realm of subjective sentiment. Acting as a catalyst of psychological suffering, the lure of sensual fulfilment exacerbates his suffering, until a powerful compensatory idea emerges that promises comprehensive relief: national rejuvenation. The narrative perspective of the text differs markedly from Guo's first-person narrative, as Yu opts for an ambiguous personal narrator who switches between the protagonist's meandering thoughts, hurried descriptions of his actions and distanced judgement. *Sinking* is steeped in intertextual references to occidental authors but treats their potential for salvation critically. After moving to Japan at the age of nineteen, the Chinese protagonist is initially portrayed as a loner who passionately reads and translates Romantic poetry, such as William Wordsworth's ballad 'The Solitary Reaper' (1807). Soon, however, he arrives at the realisation that there is a clash between European languages and Chinese.

[56] Orig. '我隨身帶得有一瓶息安酸，和一管手槍，我到東京去要殺人——至少要殺我自己！我最遺憾的是前年在她門上揭下來的兩張字條在我跳海時水濕了，如今已不見了。一年多不見，她的姿態已漸漸模糊，只有她的眼睛，她的睫毛，是印烙在我靈魂深處。[…] 好了，不再寫了，墳墓已逼在了我的面前' (*K* 81–82).

Instead of Guo's emphatic use of Western tropes, such as the sensuous vision of Spanish girls, Yu uses English poetry to address the communication failures that accompany such cross-cultural encounters. In Wordsworth's 'Solitary Reaper', the speaker travels the countryside where he hears a beautiful song enunciated by a solitary maiden. But since he cannot find out more about the song's context, purpose or origin, this experience remains deeply unsatisfactory.[57] Inserted into *Sinking*, 'The Solitary Reaper' fulfils an analogous function, as the aspiring translator realises that Wordsworth's and his languages cannot meet. In the end, he dismisses his efforts as entirely pointless:

> After orally translating these two stanzas in one breath, he suddenly felt that he had done something silly and started to reproach himself: 'What kind of translation is that? Isn't it as insipid as the hymns sung in the church? English poetry is English poetry and Chinese poetry is Chinese poetry; why bother to translate?'[58]

In Yu's original Chinese publication, the cultural designations 'English' and 'Chinese' are rendered in their national equivalents (中國詩 Zhongguo shi, 英國詩 Yingguo shi), thus invoking the fundamental polarity of two antagonistic nations, China and the West. Since Wordsworth does not have anything else to offer than English words for English readers, the protagonist must give up translation altogether. He is fated to write in Chinese for a Chinese audience.

The protagonist subsequently turns to a new outlet for his tormented soul: torturous eroticism. His excursions into the realm of the senses only exacerbate his situation. As a Chinese man in Japan, he feels like a second-class citizen, a status that thwarts all attempts to relate to other people, especially women. When he walks past two local girls and registers their interest in him, he is suddenly paralysed by fear and runs away. At home, he has second thoughts about their interest in him: 'Oh, the girls must have known! They must have known that I am a "Chinaman"; […] Why did I come to Japan? Why did I come here to pursue my studies? Since you have come, is it a wonder that the Japanese treat you with contempt?' Switching from Chinese to English, he reproaches himself: 'You coward fellow, you are too coward!' (*S* 35). One day, he seizes the opportunity to peep at the

[57] In Wordsworth scholarship, this situation has been interpreted as a breakdown of communication between the reading public and the poet. That said, researchers disagree about what kind of sender the maiden represents. According to Don Bialostosky's study, she represents the deracinated bourgeois poet. See Don H. Bialostosky, *Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 144–52. Contradicting Bialostosky, Scott Hess argues that the opposite is the case: 'The author takes complete control in interpreting the reaper's song and dictating the terms of the poem's reception.' Scott Hess, *Authoring the Self: Self-Representation, Authorship, and the Print Market in British Poetry from Pope through Wordsworth* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 219.

[58] Yu Dafu, 'Sinking', trans. by Joseph S. M. Lau and C. T. Hsia, in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. by Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 31–55, 47. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *S*.

landlord's daughter while she washes herself. Now the narrative accelerates: after nearly fainting from excitement, he feels so ashamed that he runs away, leaving his rented room for good. He then moves into a remote hut deep in the woods, hoping to find peace in natural surroundings. Finally, the place's tranquillity appears to soothe his tormented soul. He experiences Wertherian ecstasy in the greenery of Japan's countryside for some time, then old habits reappear; this time, he eavesdrops on a couple making love out in the open. He rushes to the city's harbour, where he enters a demi-monde establishment. Left alone with a pretty girl, probably a prostitute or lowly geisha, he is transfixed by her attractive features: 'He wanted to look closely at her and confide in her all his troubles. But in reality he didn't even dare look her in the eye, much less talk to her. And so, like a mute, all he did was look furtively at her delicate, white hands resting upon her knees' (51). After Lotte's multiple transformations, from national allegory to shop girl, Yu dramatises her most dejected incarnation, as a demi-monde figure. She still remains out of reach.

As this cascade of scenes comes to a halt, the protagonist makes a significant mental connection. He not only establishes a direct link between his frustrated libido and his nationality, but also proposes a remedy. First, he finds that the girl's behaviour reaffirms his observation that 'the Japanese look down upon Chinese just as we look down upon pigs and dogs' (51–2), a situation that will remain in place as long as his homeland remains weak. And so he complains: 'O China, my China, why don't you grow strong!' He concludes his meditation by pledging to himself: 'Oh, let it be, let it be, for from now on I shall care nothing about women, absolutely nothing. I will love nothing but my country, and let my country be my love' (52). The nation replaces tangible objects of carnal desire. Leaving the establishment, he finds himself facing a starry night over the sea. As melancholia starts to cloud his mind, he resolves to drown himself:

> After a while, he paused to look again at that bright star in the western sky, and tears poured down like a shower. […] Drying his tears, he stood still and uttered a long sigh. Then he said, between pauses:
>
> 'O China, my China, you are the cause of my death! … I wish you could become rich and strong soon! … Many, many of your children are still suffering.' (55)

The reader is left to imagine whether he really drowns himself.

There are obvious connections between *Sinking* and its literary precursors: solitary walks, bookishness, ecstasy in nature and subjective monological style. In Goethe's original, sexual repression is latent but never addressed directly. Meanwhile, in Foscolo's work, political and sexual repression go together but are resolved through the erotic neutralisation of Teresa as *Italia turrita*. In Yu's text, the crushing experience of sexual rejection culminates in the hero's desperate invocation of a nation that is worth dying for. Expressed after the protagonist feels

rejected by a lowly Japanese attendant, Yu's text advances the birth of nationalism from the spirit of frustrated libido.

Can this call for national rejuvenation be taken seriously? In fact, the consensus of Western scholarship is that Yu's novella contains a psychopathological argument rather than a patriotic tale.[59] Despite the protagonist's irritating behaviour, the canonisation of Yu Dafu in modern Chinese literary history cemented *Sinking* as a tale of heroism. Up to the present, the protagonist is singled out as a martyr who dies for his motherland.[60] Kirk Denton, one of the few Western scholars who positively reiterate this approach, argues: 'For Yu Dafu, the libidinous act is the critical site at which national identity is in crisis.' The inner realms of both Yu and the protagonist are no longer cut off from the social environment or enclosed within an isolated ego but represent the node where self and society meet. The author's patriotism emerges from his 'realization that his individual identity is profoundly threatened by the collapse of the cultural whole'. Longing for his motherland, he establishes the absent cultural and national whole as the true desideratum of his metaphysical desire: 'Suicide executed may stand either as a form of sexual union with, or a complete rejection of, the object.'[61]

According to Denton, *Sinking* contains two socio-political propositions. Firstly, there is the idea that sexual perversion is not a question of individual psychology but connects to the realm of geopolitics. Secondly, sexual frustration can be cured by the patriotic rejuvenation of one's motherland. Embedded into the grand narrative of national humiliation, this nexus holds the prospect of a comprehensive liberation, spanning the political and the sexual realms. These propositions are highly contestable but created an ideological amalgamation that had a lasting effect on Chinese Wertherian texts. *Sinking* is one of a long series of texts that embrace the heroic subject and consciously reject a psychological reading of the subject's sorrows – in favour of their solution in the political sphere.

[59] Drawing on a pathological interpretation of Goethe's novel, Wolfgang Kubin reads Yu's protagonist as a Chinese 'Werther'. See Kubin, 'Yu Dafu'. Similarly, Pin P. Wan emphasises the text's 'psychological conflicts and sexual frustration' as central to the narrative, without mentioning Yu's political solution. See Pin P. Wan, 'Sinking (Chenlun) by Yu Dafu, 1921', in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, ed. by Thomas Riggs (Detroit, MI: St James Press, 1999), 1025–6, 1026.

[60] In the People's Republic of China, scholarship continues to feature patriotic interpretations, for example Shi Xiaoshi 施曉詩, 'The Development of Yu Dafu's Patriotism in *Sinking*' (從沈淪看郁達夫在愛國主義題材上的新開拓 Cong Shen Congwen kan Yu Dafu zwi aiguo zhuyi ticaishang de xin kaituo), *Yalüjiang Literary Monthly* (鴨綠江 Ya lü jiang) 1 (2015), 56–63. For a more differentiated argument, see Fu Zhiwei 傅智偉, 'Differentiation between Patriotic and Individualist Affect in Sinking: A Genesis of Ennui and Suppression' (沈淪的愛國情感與個人情感之辯 —憤世之情與被壓迫感的產生 Chenlun de aiguo qinggan yu geren qinggan zhi bian: fenshi zhi qing yu bei yapogan de chansheng), *Comparative Literature and Transcultural Studies* (比較文學與跨文化研究 Bijiao wenxue yu kua wenhua yanjiu) 1 (2017), 45–51.

[61] Kirk A. Denton, 'The Distant Shore: Nationalism in Yu Dafu's *Sinking*', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 14 (1992), 107–23, 113, 114.

Second digression: the first modern Korean novel

Before this chapter turns to the patriotic revenants of the Werther who took up arms in China, it is worthwhile to consider the inception of literary modernism in a country where intellectuals faced a similar situation: Korea. Here, the intersection between romantic love and patriotism is best exemplified by Yi Kwangsu's *Heartless* (무정 Mujong), a novel from 1917, commonly regarded as the first modern Korean novel.[62] It is fair to say that it occupies a position in the national literary canon similar to *Werther* in the German, *Ortis* in the Italian and *Sinking* in the Chinese contexts. Although *Werther* and *Heartless* have been discussed in tandem in critical literature,[63] the text is not strictly Wertherian. In Yi's novel, an omniscient narrator dominates the text and relates the fate of three characters whose lives intersect with historical events. Nonetheless, there are features that make *Heartless* worthwhile to consider in the present chapter. There are two Wertherian characters, one male and one female, with the latter pondering suicide throughout the text. Despite the text's lack of subjective prose, the novel's language, modelled after Japanese *genbun itchi*, was also considered ground-breaking at the time and continues to be described as 'easy-flowing and natural, free of stylistic mannerism and classical allusions'.[64] Sexual desire and patriotism, the game-changing additions of Yu's text, also take centre stage.

The narrative is set on the Korean peninsula, where the native population finds itself in an even worse position than those in Foscolo's Italy or Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu's China. In Korea, foreign rule intensified throughout the 19th and the early 20th centuries: in 1876, a coalition between Japan, France, the United States and Russia forced the dynastic kingdom of Joseon to open several ports to international trade.[65] As Japan increased its territorial claims, the peninsula was formally annexed by its aggressive neighbour in 1910. As in the case of the Kiautschou Bay concession, the Paris Peace Conference brought no geopolitical compromise and only confirmed Japanese claims to power. In response to the perceived injustice, Korean literati turned to direct action and publishing. The antagonism between the Japanese colonial masters and the Korean people's search for a national identity culminated in the short-lived March First Movement of 1919, when protest

[62] See Michael D. Shin, *Korean National Identity under Japanese Colonial Rule: Yi Gwangsu and the March First Movement of 1919* (London: Routledge, 2018), 83.
[63] See Chin Sang-Bum, 'A Comparative Study of Relationship to the Narrative Structure between Goethe's Literature and Lee Kwang-Soo's Literature' (괴테문학과 이광수 문학과의 서사적 구조의 상관성 비교연구 Goetemunhakgwa igwangsu munhakgwaui seosajeok gujoui sanggwanseong bigyoyeongu), *Hesse-Forschung* (헤세연구 Heseyeongu) 12 (2004), 201–28.
[64] Beongcheon Yu, *Han Yong-Un and Yi Kwang-Su: Two Pioneers of Modern Korean Literature* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 107.
[65] See John Rennie Short, *Korea: A Cartographic History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2012), 106.

leaders gathered in Seoul to read out the Declaration of Independence. At the same time, popular protests spread across the country, turned violent and embroiled the police in deadly battles. Taken by surprise, the colonial forces put down the uprising by force, resulting in tens of thousands of casualties.[66] Today, this period is regarded as a major turning point in Korea's cultural history. Responding to the crushing political reality of Japanese colonial rule, members of the March First Movement took advantage of modern print, thereby hastening the development of modern literature. Translations from Western languages, often mediated through Japanese, played an important role in this process. The first full translation of *Werther* into Korean appeared in 1922 and became so popular with Korean readers that up to fifty additional translations have followed up to the present.[67]

The discovery of *Werther* coincided with the politicisation of literature. In an essay reminiscent of Lu Xun's quest to change the spirit of Chinese citizens, Yi asserted that literature should be understood as a crucial tool for Korea's liberation:

> No matter how much money we store away in our vault, how many millions of clothes flood into our nation, and what kinds of warships, guns, and missiles we possess, if people do not possess ideals, if their thoughts are not nurtured adequately, these materials are useless. In other words, the rise and fall of one nation depends on its people's ability to uphold ideals and thoughts, which cannot be obtained through a school education alone. All we gain at school is knowledge. It is literature that nurtures our ideals and thoughts.[68]

Heartless answers this lofty proclamation by arranging the text's political conflicts around a love triangle. On the one hand, the Werther role can be identified in Yi Hyeongsik, an English instructor with a keen interest in Western learning. When his mentor's impoverished daughter Youngchae reappears in his life, he is torn between her, to whom he was promised when they were children, and the daughter of a wealthy merchant. On the other hand, the Werther role can also be identified in Youngchae, a young girl who is, also owing to Hyeongsik's indecision, caught in a vortex of interpersonal abuse. Still in her teens, she witnesses the unjust arrest of her father and her brothers. To earn the money for her family's bail, she becomes a courtesan, with the effect that her hypocritical father renounces her and, convinced that his honour is lost, commits suicide. Despite her

[66] According to Michael Shin, between half a million and two million people were involved in the protests. There were 23,000 casualties and 46,000 people were arrested. See Shin, *Korean National Identity*, 2.

[67] See Cha Bonghi, 'Zur Rezeption deutscher Erzählliteratur in Korea', in *Interkulturalität: Theorie und Praxis: Deutschland und Korea*, ed. by Bonghi cha and Siegfried J. Schmidt (Münster: Lit, 2004), 189–220, 199; Seok-Hee Choi, 'Zur Rezeption der deutschen Klassik in Korea', in *Klassik-Rezeption: Auseinandersetzung mit einer Tradition*, ed. by Peter Ensberg and Jürgen Kost (Würzburg: Könighausen & Neumann, 2003), 257–70, 264.

[68] Yi Kwang-Su, 'The Value of Literature', trans. by Jooyeon Rhee, *Azalea: Journal of Korean Literature & Culture* 4 (2011), 287–91, 291.

disreputable employment, she manages to protect her virginity, putting illusory hopes in a future reunion with her fiancé, Yi Hyeongsik, whom she has not seen in years. Her situation goes from bad to worse when she is kidnapped and brutally raped by two men. Realising that she has now become impure in her fiancé's eyes, she plans to drown herself in the river Taeyang. In a final note, she bids farewell to this world:

> Mr. Yi [Hyeongsik]! I am leaving. I have lived my short life of nineteen years in sad tears and vile sin. I am too ashamed to behold the birds and the beasts, and the grasses and trees, and fear punishment from heaven if I allow this body to remain in the world another day. I am going to cast myself into the blue waters of the Taedong River, waters full of lingering resentment and bitterness, and let the waves wash my unclean body. I want the heartless fishes of the water to tear this body to pieces.[69]

Dotted with references to impurity and shame, her farewell letter exemplifies the mindset of old Korea, as she nevertheless clings to Confucian values. Since Youngchae's only reference system is two ancient texts, *Biographies of Virtuous Women* (列女傳 Lie nü zhuan, 18 BCE) and *Elementary Learning* (小學 Xiao xue, 1127–1279 CE), she is unequipped to address, let alone critique, her social environment. If it were not for a timely intervention on the part of a representative of a renewed Korea, Pyeongyuk, her life would have culminated in suicide. Confronted with a new set of values, she can break away from her past.

The other Wertherian figure is Hyeongsik. Stylistically, the chapters that centre around him primarily paraphrase his repetitive thoughts that oscillate between his frustration with the society he lives in and the social norms that he cannot help but reproduce. With a dose of irony, the narrator introduces Hyeongsik as 'a pioneer with the most advanced thinking in Korea. Within his modesty was a pride and arrogance towards Korean society. He had read Western philosophy and Western literature' (*M* 229). Yet his intention to 'bring the Korean people to the same level of civilization as that of all of the most civilized peoples in the world' (129) clashes with his actual behaviour. Torn between traditional values and modern individualism, he not only fails to prevent Youngchae's suicide but also accepts it as a fait accompli when he receives her farewell letter. All of this is reminiscent of the Wertherian Either–Or impasse, with the notable difference that his deluded sense of self-worth prevents him from harbouring suicidal thoughts.

With Hyeongsik immobilised by his aimless thoughts, the role of the saviour falls to another person. Just before the dejected girl throws herself into the Taedong River, the novel departs from the Goethe–Foscolo thread, as Pyeongyuk, a female student, enters the narrative. Taking note of Youngchae's self-inflicted scars, she strikes

[69] Yi Kwang-su, *Mujong*, trans. by Ann Sung-hi Lee (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 188. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *M*.

up a conversation with the desperate girl about life and death. She challenges the girl's Confucian code of ethics and also questions the validity of her engagement to Hyeongsik. Pyeongyuk insists:

> There are many ways [a woman] can fulfill her role in life, whether through religion, science or art; or work for society or the state. […] We must be women, but we must first be human beings. There are many things for you to do. You were not born only for the sake of your father and Mr. Yi. You were born for the tens of millions of Koreans of past generations, our 1.6 [m]illion fellow countrymen in the present, and the tens of millions of our descendants in future generations. (271–2)

During a prolonged stay with Pyeongyuk's family, a growing awareness of her own value manifests in her plan to attend university. But before she can actually proceed to realise her dreams, her resolve is tested during the novel's climax, when she encounters her ex-fiancé and his new wife on a train. Her pent-up feelings resurface and threaten her new-found rationality, when an extraordinary event neutralises the love triangle, as the train is caught in a thunderstorm. Looking out of the windows, the four young people witness how mudslides destroy the fields of a nearby village. The misery of the helpless villagers, they realise, mirrors the fate of the Korean nation, and it sets a transformative process in motion in them. The four young citizens forget about their petty individual feelings and organise a charity concert for the villagers. Strengthened by the success of this operation, the four are now determined to devote their lives to a new purpose: 'Let us work so that when we are old, we will see a better Korea' (342). During the final quarter of *Heartless*, the narration suspends all irony in favour of an unmistakably educational tone. The text closes with an upbeat exclamation: 'now, with happy smiles, and cries of "long live Korea!" let us bring to a close this novel […] and its mourning for a world of the past' (348). Overall, this turn of events in the final quarter of the text is somewhat surprising but establishes a clear progression from the lowly realm of individual subjectivity to salvation through patriotism.

This narrative node, connecting the individual and the nation, is reminiscent of Yu's *Sinking*. The basic assumption that informs *Heartless* is, as Michael D. Shin points out, 'that the discovery of interiority and the recovery of national identity were one and the same thing'.[70] Like the protagonist of *Sinking*, Hyeongsik is a loner who experiences sexual frustration. While he initially feels that he has to accept social convention in order to get along in life, the thunderstorm allows him to pursue a more proactive approach in regard to his place in the world. In the face of the mudslide, the unsolvable complications of the love triangle disappear alongside the characters' egocentrism. In the four young people's quest for collective

[70] Shin, *Korean National Identity*, 88.

rejuvenation, nationalism facilitates their transformation from confused individualists to mature idealists.

In literary history, the lives and works of authors are rarely consistent. This applies not only to Goethe's rejection of Werther's subjectivism, but also to the political optimism of Yi Kwangsu's *Heartless*, which conflicts drastically with the author's political career; after all, he became a collaborator with the Japanese colonial government. Since the discrepancy between Yi's role as inventor of modern Korean literature and his pro-Japanese writings, especially the derogatory 'Theory of Reforming National Character' (국가전환론 Minjok kaejoron) from 1921, is so difficult to reconcile, Yi's complicated career is the object of lengthy discussions. Peter Lee's explanation suggests that this shift was triggered by the defeat of the March First Movement. Infatuated by the cultural advances of Japan, Yi had second thoughts about his optimism for Korean rejuvenation and started to fall for 'quietistic cynicism'.[71] In the same vein, John Withier Treat argues that Yi perceived Japan positively as the beacon of enlightenment, believing that the annexation was the only way for Korea to modernise.[72] Regardless of Yi's intentions, his change of mind contributed to the violent end to his life: North Korean forces abducted and probably executed him in 1950.[73] Unimpressed by his complex legacy, there are scholars who argue that his pro-Japanese convictions are completely unrelated to his literary production.[74]

Placed in the context of revolutionary Werthers, Yi Kwangsu's *Heartless* connects to the other texts in three ways. Firstly, while the text reaffirms the love–nation nexus, it exhibits a transformative patriotism that channels an individual's determination to commit suicide into the task of nation building. Secondly, the love triangle articulates the sociopolitical transition from traditional mores (Youngchae, Hyeongsik) to modern notions of love and individualism (Pyeongyuk, transformed Youngchae). Contrary to expectations, the aim of individualistic self-discovery is the creation of a positive affiliation with the national collective. And thirdly, political Wertherian texts, including *Heartless*, are inevitably evaluated against the lives of their authors. Sometimes, the comparison leads to positive judgements, as in the case of Yu, who was canonised by Chinese literary criticism. At other times, however, the tension between life and work invites criticism or even condemnation, as evinced by Yi's fraught status in Korean literary history.

[71] Peter H. Lee, *Modern Korean Literature: An Anthology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 1–2.
[72] Treat, 'Choosing to Collaborate', 90.
[73] See Ann Sung-hi Lee, 'Yi Kwangsu and Korean Literature: The Novel *Mujong* (1917)', *Journal of Korean Studies* 8 (1992), 81–137, 81; Treat, 'Choosing to Collaborate', 89.
[74] See Ann Sung-hi Lee, 'Introduction', in Yi Kwangsu, *Mujong*, 1–76, 2.

Revolution, not love (Ba Jin, Mao Dun)

In the works of Yu Dafu and Guo Moruo, the Wertherian hero remains aloof from actual political struggle. This changes in the 1930s, when his revenants channel their passion for justice into violent action – as terrorists or soldiers.

One of the most successful authors of the 1930s, Ba Jin committed to a realist aesthetics in which subjective experience never threatens the integrity of the narration. *Trilogy of Love* (愛情三部曲 Aiqing sanbuqu, 1931–5) focuses on the lives of several individuals who have set out not only to interpret the world in various ways but to change it. The story is set in the Shanghai International Settlement and its surroundings, where the three protagonists, Renmin, Peizhu and Rushui, form part of a group of young anarchists who come from a petit-bourgeois background. This loose group is comprised of men and women who regularly meet to plan revolutionary activities and discuss their personal philosophical viewpoints. Some of them are quite ready to sacrifice their lives for a brighter future for China. One of Renmin's soliloquies reads:

> Our dream can be realised. It is tragic that we will not live to experience the New Life. When I imagine that our posterity will witness the joys of freedom while we must face our inevitable tragic fate on our path of destruction, then I feel the pain pulsating through my bone marrow. We cannot resign ourselves. Perhaps we must die, but when I think about our long-standing bitter fight, I know: We cannot shirk from our fate of destruction.[75]

Renmin's hard-boiled pledge invokes the 'New Life', a cipher for a rejuvenated China.[76] Nevertheless, *Trilogy of Love* lives up to its title, as Renmin soon falls in love with a girl and takes a break from his revolutionary career. When he asks his revolutionary colleagues to lend him money for his wedding, however, they have a good laugh and wait for his misguided passion to dissolve. Indeed, the girl's premature death does not inaugurate Renmin's transformation into a dejected Wertherian hero; instead, he saves his life for a patriotic mission.

In contrast to Renmin's heroism, the misguided Rushui, another member of the group, exemplifies the flaws and delusions of the Wertherian character. Instead of spending his time pondering the improvement of society, he is permanently

[75] Orig. '我們的理想並不是不可實現的夢。可悲的是我們也許會得不到新生。想到將來有一天世界上所有的人都會得到自由的幸福，而我們卻在滅亡的途中掙扎終於逃不掉悲慘的命運，這真叫人感到痛徹骨髓。真叫人不甘心。也許我們應該滅亡，但是想到我們這許多年的艱苦的奮鬥，我們對這個滅亡的命運絕不能甘心。' Ba Jin 巴金, *Works* (文集 Wen ji), 14 vols (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1958), vol. 1, 178. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *B*.

[76] The term started to circulate after the turn of the century, inspiring various journal titles, such as Zhou Zuoren and Lu Xun's literary journal *Xinsheng* (新生) in 1907. During the 1930s, the Kuomintang appropriated the term for their promotion of cultural reform and Neo-Confucian social morality, a clear departure from the concept's reformist origin.

distracted by his love interests. The first part of the trilogy, 'Fog' (霧), relates his hesitation to dissolve an arranged marriage in order to marry his beloved, the beautiful Ruolan. Irritated by his inability to act, Ruolan eventually loses patience and marries another man. In the second part, 'Rain' (雨), Rushui overcomes this humiliation by falling in love with Peizhu, one of the female revolutionaries. Like many tragic relationships in literature, their encounters revolve around the exchange of books. The narrator observes:

> Zhou Rushui was at a loss about his situation. When he saw her read avidly, he was happy and unhappy at the same time. Happy because Li Peizhu benefitted from those books and he had the opportunity to be at her service […]; but also unhappy because it also deprived him of the opportunity to talk to Li Peizhu. Her heart was wholly occupied by those books. Rushui understood that those intense reading sessions removed her from him. He wished that she would articulate her emotions and ignore those books, but he also did not wish to restrict her. Besides, he was naive and did not take liberties with her.[77]

Following in Werther's footsteps, Rushui pursues a woman who is already taken. In Peizhu's case, however, what stands in the way of his success is not her engagement to another man but her commitment to the improvement of society. In contrast to the classic scenario in which the beloved remains positive or ambiguous about her suitor, Peizhu is wholeheartedly devoted to the revolutionary cause and completely renounces romantic love.

Peizhu's transformation from common girl to revolutionary fighter is inspired by Vera Figner's autobiography, which she reads religiously. Figner's aristocratic origins did not prevent her from joining a group of revolutionaries who planned the assassination of Emperor Alexander II.[78] Taking inspiration from this historic figure, Peizhu wants to transcend her petit-bourgeois class horizon: 'I refuse to be sedated by love. I want to draw satisfaction and strength from having a cause.'[79] Initially, the other revolutionaries do not take her seriously. After one of her passionate proclamations, a cynical colleague remarks: 'Women belong to the most passionate supporters of private property.'[80] According to this assessment, Peizhu's revolutionary enthusiasm is expected to evaporate once she finds a husband. One night, her peers keep teasing her: what if a young man threatens to commit

[77] Orig.: '這個情形是周如水所不瞭解的。他看見她忙著讀書也高興，也不高興。高興的是這些書對李佩珠有益處，而且他也有了機會給她服務 […]；不高興的是李佩珠多讀書就少有時間和他談話，她的時間、她的心都給那些書占去了。[…] 周如水知道她讀那一類的書愈多，離他便愈遠。他願意她改變心思不再讀那些書，但是他也不想阻止她。而且他是一個老實人，又不會暗中搗鬼' (*B* 214).

[78] Their complot was discovered and Vera Figner was sentenced to death. Later, her sentence was reduced to twenty years' solitary confinement, during which she wrote her memoirs. See Wera Figner, *Nacht über Russland. Lebenserinnerungen* (Berlin: Malik, 1926).

[79] Orig. '我不想在愛情裡求陶醉。我要在事業上找安慰，找力量' (*B* 254).

[80] Orig. '女人是私有財產制度的最熱心的擁護者' (*B* 169).

suicide? Wouldn't she drop everything for him? After she repeatedly insists that it really would not affect her, Rushui, her admirer, is shocked. He pulls her aside to ask:

> 'Earlier on, you said that in case someone confesses his love to you and insists that he would kill himself otherwise – you would reject him even under such circumstances. Are you sure?'
>
> She looked surprised and did not know what he was trying to say. Then she looked away and answered in a low voice: 'Of course that's how I think. I don't need love. If he likes to kill himself, that's none of my business. I do not bear any responsibility for it.'[81]

When Rushui continues to doubt her determination, she finally loses her temper:

> 'Rushui! Why do you keep bothering me with such questions all the time? Would you prefer me to become a housewife who serves her husband? Don't you think that women should have a mind of their own?' When she realised that her disdain only shamed him, she changed her tone and said: 'All I want is to do something meaningful.'[82]

For Rushui, her diehard Wertherian lover, this statement boils down to a death sentence. Walking back home, he drowns himself in the Huangpu. At this point, the narration abandons Rushui and only cites a news report: 'The next day, the evening news featured a notice that was placed so marginally that nobody took notice: "anonymous young man drowned himself."'[83] Although Rushui and Yu's protagonist opt for the same mode of death, the status of their deaths differs radically: one dies longing for a motherland, the other one merely dies of frustrated love.

Anti-love

Throughout Ba Jin's novel, the characters keep repeating an anti-romantic credo: 'Love is a game played by the Leisure Class. We have no right to enjoy it.'[84] In an original take on Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), the protagonists identify love as a social game comparable to the consumption

[81] Orig. '"你說過，倘使真有人向你求愛，甚至拿自殺的話要挾你，你也會拒絕。你真是這樣想法？" 她的兩隻發光的眼睛驚訝地注視著他的臉，她不明白他為什麼要問這些話。然後她移開眼睛，淡淡地回答道："當然是真的。我並不需要愛情。他要自殺，當然跟我不相干。我不負一點責任"' (*B* 265).
[82] Orig. '"周先生，你為什麼總是拿這些話來問我？難道你要我做一個伺候丈夫的女子嗎？難道你不相信女人也有她自己的思想嗎？" 她先帶笑地問他，後來看見他受窘的樣子，她就改變了語調解釋道："我現在只想出去做一點有益的事情"' (*B* 265).
[83] Orig. '第二天的晚報上在一個不被人注意的地方刊出了一段小消息[…]："無名青年投江自殺"' (*B* 274).
[84] Orig. '愛情本來是有閒階級玩的把戲，我沒有權利享受它' (*B* 232).

of luxury goods. After the initial wave of *wertherisme*, where the symptoms of frustrated love sufficed to characterise a protagonist as a rebel, authors such as Ba Jin popularised a dismissive account of such visions of salvation. This tendency is also evinced by the text that lastingly shaped Chinese realism, Mao Dun's realist novel *Midnight* (子夜 Ziye). Written in 1933, the text features sardonic intertextual references to *Werther*, no longer understood as a *chiffre* for advanced literary aesthetics but seen instead as a manual for the empty 'games of the Leisure Class'. In *Midnight*, Captain Lei, a middle-class careerist, plays the Werther role when he is overwhelmed by self-pity before joining a military campaign. Paying a last visit to his former lover, Mrs Wu, he hands her a dried rose inserted into a copy of Goethe's book:

> Captain Lei lifted his head and drew out a book from his pocket. Opening it quickly, he extended it toward Mrs Wu with both hands.
>
> It was an old, worn copy of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*! A specific page was marked by a pressed white rose!
>
> Instantly, Mrs Wu recalled her student days during the May Thirtieth Movement. Both the book and the rose struck Mrs Wu like lightning, her body starting to tremble. With one hand she fetched the book, anxiously regarding Captain Lei and not saying a word.
>
> Captain Lei smiled bitterly and sighed, then went on: 'Mrs Wu! You can keep them as a present. Or, if you wish, just keep them for now. I am without father or mother, I have neither brother nor sister. I have no intimate friends. The only things that provide comfort in my life are this old, worn copy and this pressed white rose. Before I go to the frontline, I would like to give those precious things to the most trustworthy, the most suitable person …'[85]

Contrary to Lei's claim that he will die in battle, he returns unharmed. What is more, he is promoted, which allows him to become an associate at the factory owned by Mrs Wu's husband. Transformed from penniless soldier to associate, Lei does not think twice about his beloved. While Mao Dun's *Midnight* regards Wertherian love as a social practice that exhausts itself in grandiose statements, Ba Jin's *Trilogy of Love* highlights a different danger: that love can serve as a dangerous distraction for budding revolutionaries. Falling in love means contributing to the continuation of the status quo.

[85] Orig. '雷參謀抬起頭，右手從衣袋裡抽出來，手裡有一本書，飛快地將這書揭開，雙手捧著，就獻到吳少奶奶面前。 這是一本破舊的《少年維特之煩惱》！在這書的揭開的頁面是一朵枯萎的白玫瑰！ 暴風雨似的"五卅運動"初期的學生會時代的往事，突然像一片閃電飛來，從這書，從這白玫瑰，打中了吳少奶奶，使她全身發抖。她一手搶過了這本書，驚惶地看著雷參謀，說不出半個字。 雷參謀苦笑，似乎嘆了一口氣，接著又說下去：'吳夫人！這個，你當做是贈品也可以，當做是我請你保管的，也可以。我，上無父母，下無兄弟姊妹。我，又差不多沒有親密的朋友。我這終身唯一的親愛的，就是這朵枯萎的白玫瑰和這本書！我在上前線以前，很想把這最可寶貴的東西，付托給最可靠最適當的人兒——.'' Mao Dun 矛盾, *Midnight* (子夜 Ziye) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1977), 92.

Ba Jin's works call attention to a substantial problem. While Yu Dafu's membership in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as his early death facilitated his swift canonisation, Ba Jin remained a professed anarchist until 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established and the new administration required him to renounce his philosophical heroes, Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. From the perspective of the CCP, anarchists were dangerous because of their rejection of Leninist avant-garde politics; after all, anarchists regarded the centralised party as a mere continuation of Tsarist autocracy. Even after Ba Jin paid lip service to the new regime, literary critics remained sceptical and subjected his works, which remained popular among the wider audience, to ideological rectification. Indeed, Renmin and Peizhu do not answer to any central authority; instead, they follow an intuitive approach when planning acts of sabotage or assassinations. Yao Wenyuan, one of the most influential critics of the 1950s, launched a series of articles that refuted Ba Jin's claim that anarchist ideals could be reconciled with state socialism. Drawing on the unruly character portraits in *Trilogy of Love* and *Destruction* (灭亡 Mie wang, 1928), Yao argues:

> Comrade Ba Jin admits that at the time he wrote this novel, he was under the deep influence of foreign anarchist ideology. As he says, 'nowadays there is no avoiding speaking of my ideological limitations.' This is good. However, merely admitting one's ideological 'limitations' in the abstract is not the same as admitting to the reactionary nature of the anarchist ideology in the specific points of view embodied in a specific work of literature. […] Comrade Ba Jin is still engaged in beautifying anarchism and beautifying *Destruction*, a work that has at its heart promotion of the ideology of anarchism.[86]

According to Yao, Ba Jin's revolutionaries are petit-bourgeois individualists whose rage makes them blind to the true class relations in society. Taking them for embodiments of bourgeois individualism, Yao fears that their portraits could seduce readers into resisting collectivisation:

> Nowadays, there are few people who openly advocate anarchist theory. Nevertheless, because the bourgeoisie and bourgeois intellectuals still survive, the class origin that produced anarchist ideology still survives. […] Nowadays, then, when young people read this book, they must be sure to take a discriminating stance […] and see the extreme individualism that masquerades as revolutionary 'leftism' for what it truly is.[87]

Yao finds that Ba Jin's text seduces readers into forming opinions that deviate from the comprehensive political instrumentalisation of literature, as laid out in Mao Zedong's

[86] Yao Wenyuan, 'On the Anarchist Ideas in Ba Jin's Novel Destruction', trans. by Daniel M. Youd, *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 46.2 (2015), 56–69, 57,
[87] Yao, 'On the Anarchist Ideas', 67.

Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art (延安文藝座談會 Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui), held in 1942, which required literature and the arts to be repurposed for propagandistic aims.[88] Isolated writers who pursued individualist visions of justice overstepped their competence and threatened the goal of comprehensive centralisation.

Ba Jin's text is at odds with the official party line in the passages where Renmin and Peizhu (and Du Daxin in *Destruction*) act on their personal dissatisfaction with the existing system. Although anarchists and members of the CCP long fought a common enemy, the reactionary military government of the Kuomintang, their united front broke in 1949 when anarchists became the target of purges. From a party perspective, Wertherian figures such as Yu Dafu's protagonist represent a lesser evil because their case is rather simple: they lack guidance. This interpretative frame can even be applied to Rushui, the dejected lover who commits suicide. Such belated Wertherian echoes presuppose that individuals require the leadership of party officials, and that otherwise their individual efforts will lead them to self-destruction.

The battlefield as liberation (Jiang Guangci)

In the early 19th century, the invocation of death on the battlefield remained vague. Leopardi's nostalgia for the Battle of Thermopylae does not flesh out the new political alliances that could roll back the country's foreign rule. Chinese novels from the early 20th century such as Yu's *Sinking* and Ba Jin's *Love Trilogy* also remain somewhat vague, even as resentments against Japanese society and the desire for heroic action dominate the narration. Jiang Guangci's *The Young Wanderer* (少年漂泊者 Shaonian piaobozhe) from 1926, however, breaks with this kind of vagueness. Here, the protagonist learns to identify his country's oppressors and maps out a path of direct action.

Considered the first example of proletarian revolutionary literature in China,[89] *The Young Wanderer* actively invokes Goethe's *Werther* by echoing the title of Guo Moruo's translation: *Shaonian Weite zhi fannao*.[90] In contrast to Werther and Jacopo Ortis's aristocratic and Yu Dafu and Ba Jin's petit-bourgeois backgrounds, Jiang Guangci's protagonist has roots in the lowest echelon of society. The first-person narrator is, in fact, the son of peasants. Zhuzhong's infancy

[88] See Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 63–7.
[89] See Wang-chi Wong, *Politics and Literature in Shanghai: The Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers, 1930–1936* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 11.
[90] The noun *shaonian* (少年) as a designation for late adolescence or young adulthood – rather than the age spanning childhood and pre-adolescence, as in modern Chinese – is an idiosyncrasy of the early 1920 and 1930s.

takes place during the difficult period following the fall of the Qing dynasty, when the abolition of feudal privileges failed to change the living conditions of ordinary people, as warlords ruthlessly confiscated their land. In *The Young Wanderer*, the protagonist first experiences life through the lens of a passive subject. Like Youngchae in Yi Kwangsu's *Heartless*, Zhuzhong's story abounds with abuse. When a harvest fails and his parents cannot afford their lease, the cruel landowner simply murders them. Left on his own, the orphan seeks refuge at a Buddhist temple, where he is promptly molested by a lustful priest. After contemplating suicide for a while, he starts living on the streets and survives on alms. Closing in on scenes of cruelty and injustice, the letter writer rarely allows himself to engage with his own feelings in more depth. There are episodes of sorrow and despair, but the pace of the narration is steadily approaching the turning point in Zhuzhong's life, his patriotic awakening. The only exception is his lament about Yumei, his lover.

The Wertherian routine that sees initial happiness thwarted by external interference commences when the protagonist takes up an apprenticeship at a shop and falls in love with the owner's daughter. Unfortunately, her father has already arranged for her to marry the son of a land-owning bureaucrat. In protest, Yumei, who had hoped to marry Zhuzhong one day, falls severely ill. Hoping to save her, Zhuzhong confesses their secret love to her father, who reacts by promptly sending him away with a recommendation for a placement in a distant city. Brokenhearted, Yumei dies.

Still in mourning, the letter writer laments in retrospect:

> I will never forget her. Not just because of her beauty or her talents, but because she was the only friend I ever had. She was the only person who ever understood me. Of course, it's a blessing to have met a true female friend in one's lifetime, that's a source of pride and a consolation in itself. But it also brought me endless sorrow, a sea of pain as deep as the ocean! Oh, my dear Weijia, the hot tears of sorrow keep streaming down my face. My soul is inscribed with a deep wound that will never stop quivering …[91]

Yet Zhuzhong is still far from committing himself to the revolutionary cause because he still connects his lot to a metaphysical agent. Unable to blame anyone for this tragedy, the young man directs his anger at the demiurge who created this unjust world: 'You devil, you ruthless thing, you creator of all the darkness in this world! Your crimes are deeper than the ocean, greater than the highest mountain,

[91] Orig. '我所以永遠地不能忘卻她，還不是因為她貌的美麗和才的秀絶，而是因為她是我唯一的知己，唯一的瞭解我的人。自然，我此生能得著一個真正的女性的知己，固然可以自豪了，固然可以自慰了；但是我也就因此抱著無涯際的悲哀，海一般深的沉痛！維嘉先生！說至此，我的悲哀的熱淚不禁涔涔地流，我的刻上傷痕的心靈不禁搖搖地顫動 …' Jiang Guangci 蔣光慈, *Works* (作品 Zuopin Ji) (Kaifeng: Henan daxue chubanshe, 2000), 37. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *J.*

they burn hotter than fire!'[92] Since there is little he can do about it, he simply endures the pain and starts a new life. Unlike Werther after his first departure from Lotte, who remains caught in the vortex of his own thoughts, the change of scenery exposes Zhuzhong to new social circles.

After he takes up employment in a large city, students reproach his boss for selling Japanese merchandise. With large segments of the population calling for a boycott, a student delivers an incendiary speech:

> Aren't you Chinese? China is about to die, Chinese lives are at stake, and you are still talking about financial loss and profit? Our motherland will soon perish, we all will soon become slaves of a dead nation. If we don't rise up against it, we will share the fate of the Koreans and the Vietnamese! Sir! You are Chinese as well![93]

Vietnam has already been turned into a French colony and Korea into a Japanese one, and the world powers appear determined to subdue China next. This catastrophic scenario awakens Zhuzhong's political consciousness and prepares him to internalise the students' message. Quitting his job in protest against his boss's opportunism, his frustration starts to translate into concrete social analysis and a patriotic consciousness. He joins a labour union, becomes an activist himself and organises a strike at an English-owned silk factory.

The apostrophes and exclamations discussed in Guo's *Werther* translation evince an original connection between sentimentalism and linguistic innovation. In Jiang's *The Young Wanderer*, one can observe something similar when the hero's verbal expressiveness blends with chanted slogans. Zhuzhong's isolated voice becomes part of a larger body, as he exclaims:

> 'Long live the Central Trade Union of Jinghan Railways! Long live the liberation of the Chinese working class! All workers of the world unite!' These slogans rolled like thunder, when its gloomy and strong sound reached a climax! […] At this moment I shouted with all my strength at the top of my lungs, I even shouted my throat hoarse.[94]

After being imprisoned as one of the main instigators of the strike, Zhuzhong makes the first self-determined decision in his life: he joins the Whampoa Military Academy, a newly established institution for budding revolutionaries. Having spent a lifetime at the mercy of the land-owning class and opportunistic

[92] Orig.'你這魔鬼，你這殘忍的東西，你這世界上一切黑暗的造成者啊！你的罪惡比海還深，比山嶽還高，比熱火還烈！' (*J* 43).
[93] Orig. '你不是中國人麼？中國若亡了，中國人的性命都保不住，還說什麼損失，生意不生意呢？我們的祖國快要亡了，我們大家都快要做亡國奴了，倘若我們再不起來，我們要受朝鮮人和安南人的痛苦了！先生！你也是中國人啊！…' (*J* 51).
[94] Orig. '"京漢鐵路總工會萬歲！中國勞動階級解放萬歲！全世界勞動者聯合起來啊！" 一些口號，聲如雷動，悲壯已極！[…] 我在此時真是用盡吃奶的力氣喊叫，連嗓子都喊叫得啞了' (*J* 71).

capitalists, he is galvanised by the idea of self-sacrifice for the nation. Concluding his life confessions, his final letter reads:

> Having witnessed adversity and sorrow, death does not mean anything to me anymore. If I get the chance to kill a few enemies, if I can eradicate some of the vermin among humanity, then my life's goal has been achieved. My dear Weijia [i.e. the addressee]! I don't mean to sound like a thug, I was not born with such an unyielding mind. It's just this evil society that forces me to give my life away.[95]

Although Zhuzhong does not elaborate on whom he considers 'vermin', the novel suggests that the enemy is comprised of foreigners in the international settlements, local collaborators of the Japanese government and capitalists in general. Eventually, the narration is taken over by the recipient of Zhuzhong's letters. Intrigued by the young man's further career, an investigation brings his premature death to light. As expected, Zhuzhong fell on the battlefield.

As a novel, *The Young Wanderer* makes for reliable propagandistic reading. The melancholic and decadent hero of old, as portrayed in Yu Dafu's work, is replaced by a revolutionary martyr. Instead of waxing poetic about heroic deaths like Ba Jin's male heroes, he vows to do something meaningful with his sorrowful life. What is more, there is a notable difference to Ba Jin's anarchism, as *The Young Wanderer* emphasises the importance of joining centralised institutions: first the Central Trade Union of Jinghan Railways, then the Whampoa Military Academy. The novel portrays the idealised development of an unenlightened peasant boy into a revolutionary fighter, a linear development that is afforded by a loss of psychological complexity. The fateful love triangle, the root cause of many literary suicides, is neutralised by active participation in the revolution. This inaugurates a new phase of May Fourth-inspired writing. Once Zhuzhong detects the origins of life's misery – capitalism and imperialism – he joins the revolutionaries, fights oppression by joining the army and dies a heroic death. Finally, the martial gestures of Leopardi's early poetry translate into a socio-political reality.

In spite of *The Young Wanderer*'s revolutionary fervour, the book has received a mixed assessment in Chinese literary history. Irrespective of his novel's commercial success and critical acclaim upon its publication, Jiang Guangci's heterodox political views stood in the way of the book's canonisation. Jiang studied at Moscow's Oriental University and became a lecturer in Marxism in 1924 after his return to China, which left him better informed on the orthodox position than most of his peers, including members of the CCP. Certainly, *The Young Wanderer*

[95] Orig. '我幾經憂患餘生，死之於我，已經不算什麼一回事了。倘若我能拿著槍將敵人打死幾個，將人類中的蟊賊多剷除幾個，倒也了卻我平生的願望。維嘉先生！我並不是故意地懷著一腔暴徒的思想，我並不是生來就這樣的倔強；只因這惡社會逼得我沒有法子，一定要我的命' (*J* 67).

anticipated communist literary discourse for years to come,[96] especially after the foundation of the Republic in 1949, when Jiang's novel continued to serve as a blueprint for revolutionary novels. This applies to popular texts such as Yang Mo's *Song of Youth* (青春之歌 Qingchun zhi ge, 1958) and Luo Guangbin and Yang Yiyan's *Red Cliff* (紅岩 Hong yan, 1961). At the time of their publication, however, Jiang's own follow-ups to *The Young Wanderer* had made him suspicious in the eyes of party officials. They departed from the optimistic model of his early novel, for example *Lisa's Sorrows* (麗莎的哀怨 Lisha de aiyuan, 1929) and *The Moon Forces Its Way Through the Clouds* (衝出雲圍的月亮 Chongchu yunwei de yueliang, 1930). In the light of the failure of the communist insurgency in 1927, the ideological confidence of characters such as Zhuzhong gave way to ambiguous protagonists. Instead of heroic resistance against imperialists and capitalists, these texts dwell on decadence, prostitution and syphilis. Eventually, Jiang's ideological unreliability contributed to his exclusion from the CCP and his elision from histories of modernist literature in China.[97]

Conclusion

Over the course of 150 years, authors detached Werther's frustration from a purely personal tragedy, transforming it into longing for national rejuvenation. In this process, Wertherian novels moved from Engels's 'halfhearted lamentation' to blunt calls to action. In Foscolo's elegy for Italy's lost greatness, the answers were exile and death; Yu Dafu's observation of China's weakness and Yi Kwangsu's portrait of Korean misery indicated the possibility of national rejuvenation; finally, Jiang's enlisted protagonist completed the semantic nexus that *Werther* set in motion in 1774 by sending him off to the battlefield. Revolutionary Werthers stand in pronounced opposition to the German reception of the text, which was dominated by readers who found the socio-political implications of the texts negligible. Benefitting from the cultural remoteness of the Original, Italian and Chinese Werthers depart from conventional positions in three ways: firstly, these novels posit that there is dignity in Wertherian suffering; secondly, the heroes' desperation is often transformed into martial aggression; and thirdly, the entire corpus, beginning with Foscolo and ending with Jiang, regards revolution as a patriotic project.

To end this chapter, I will discuss three outstanding features of the novels – their ideas about dignity in suffering, martial aggression and patriotism – to unsettle the cliché of Werther as the 'delusional whiner'.

[96] See Liu, *Revolution Plus Love*, 75.
[97] See David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 88.

Dignity in suffering

After 1789, the suffering of an individual indicated that the body politic was in disarray, turning literary characters, especially lachrymose ones such as Werther, into barometers for societies that were undergoing radical change. Jacopo Ortis's lamentations about his sad fate do not stand in the way of meaningful political observations. On the contrary, his tragic love story sharpens his awareness of the social ills caused by Austrian occupation. While 'nincompoops, scoundrels and villains' are rewarded, he sees that the common people are dying of hunger and exhaustion. With Foscolo unable to propose a political solution for the predicament of his nation, Jacopo elevates Teresa, his beloved, into a paragon of female virtue, convinced she will, somehow, herald the country's return to glory. In this sense, Foscolo uses Wertherian sentimentalism as a rootstock and adds the glorification of violent self-sacrifice as a scion. Together, they form a new literary constellation. While the patriotic tone of *Jacopo Ortis* was championed by the cultural masterminds of the Risorgimento, Giuseppe Pecchio and Giuseppe Mazzini, the protagonist's fate is still a far cry from the heroic deaths of, say, the Belfiore martyrs, whose execution in 1852 and 1853 marked the climax of the Italian independence movement. Jacopo remains confined to the limits of personal tragedy, which is metonymic for the fate of Italy without actively participating in a political movement.

In the East Asian context, *Werther*'s revolutionary reinterpretations are unrelated to Foscolo. In fact, the reception of Goethe's text skips European strands of reception altogether, allowing readers to simply ignore the text's most dominant lines of interpretations, namely its narrow identification with sentimental tropes and biographical detail. Readers such as Guo Moruo pursue reinterpretations that can be called, depending on the viewpoint, hopelessly naive or uncompromisingly creative. Free from irony, suffering is elevated into a rite of passage that heralds greatness. This affirmative attitude also informs Yu Dafu's *Sinking*, a text in which a self-centred young man sacrifices himself for his country – by drowning outside a brothel. According to canonical Chinese criticism, his final words have a cleansing effect that overrides all previous follies and idiosyncrasies. In Yi Kwangsu's *Heartless*, the protagonists also act in a self-absorbed manner but are redeemed by their belated commitment to 'the tens of millions of Koreans of past generations, our 1.6 [m]illion fellow countrymen in the present, and the tens of millions of our descendants in future generations'. Once again, in the absence of narrative irony, the protagonists embed their individual fates into a comprehensive vision of national rejuvenation. The same also applies to Jiang Guangci's Zhuzhong, whose moral enlightenment, resulting in his unapologetic death on the battlefield, is considered worthy of imitation. Reiterating this pattern, Ba Jin's *Trilogy of Love* also features plenty of admirable characters who overcome their isolated individual

lives in order to pursue a higher goal. Renmin and Peizhu strive for martyrdom, supposedly to the benefit of a future generation of free citizens; meanwhile, the suffering of the loner Rushui remains void of socio-political meaning, as he dies without articulating a grandiose statement regarding China's future. In a way, he is the only suicide in this cohort who does not bring himself to believe in a higher purpose for his death.

In contrast to Engels's chiding remarks on Werther, the protagonist's victimhood was enthusiastically embraced in China. Here, the delusions of victims had a different currency. The young Mao Zedong, for example, interpreted suicide as a legitimate form of protest against inhumane living circumstances. Prior to his political career, when he was working as a journalist for a newspaper in Changsha, he discussed a woman's suicide as the symptom of a perverted social order. Even if the victim's self-murder was motivated by outdated Confucian prejudices, he understood her act as an expression of psychological vitality.[98] This stance endows the suffering individual with a kind of dignity that also explains why the gritty psychological detail in Yu Dafu's *Sinking* does not put his proclaimed ideals into jeopardy. Psychological imbalance is always also an effect of social phenomena.

In the Chinese context, the nexus between individual and collective psyche appears with great clarity: in geopolitically weak countries, young men's libido is frustrated; only in strong ones is sexual desire fulfilled. While European or Japanese letters feature no literary work analogous to the positive nexus that Yu establishes, German literature indeed features critical analyses of the psychosexual ramifications of collective identity. Yet Heinrich Mann's biting satires of Wilhelminian society, such as *Man of Straw* (*Der Untertan*, 1918), claim precisely the opposite: that collective identities are in fact sources of sexual repression. In psychoanalytical theory, Wilhelm Reich and, later, Herbert Marcuse placed great emphasis on the libidinal dynamics between sexual repression and people's vulnerability to a 'fascist' mindset.[99] In the light of this contradiction, one can see that

[98] A series of articles from 1919 engages with the gruesome case of Miss Zhao Wuzhen from Changsha who was forced into a marriage with an elderly businessman. On the way to the wedding ceremony, the bride took her own life – by slicing her throat. While the general reaction to this incident consisted in condemning the bride's lack of character, Mao made a case for her moral integrity. Three main culprits are singled out as having driven her to take such desperate means: Chinese society, the parents-in-law and her own parents. Together they produced an inescapable situation for Miss Zhao: 'These three factors erected an iron net. Miss Zhao, when facing blockades in all three directions, could not find a way out of her situation, no matter how hard she tried to carry on living. The opposite of life is death, and therefore Miss Zhao had to die.' (Orig. '這三件是三面鐵網，[…] 趙女士在這三角形鐵網當中，無論如何求生，沒有生法。生的對面是死，於是乎趙女士死了。' Mao Zedong 毛澤東, *Early Essays* (早期文稿 Zaoqi wengao) (Changsha: Hu'nan remin chubanshe, 2008), 376.

[99] See Gordana Jovanović, 'How Lost and Accomplished Revolutions Shaped Psychology: Early Critical Theory (Frankfurt School), Wilhelm Reich, and Vygotsky', *Theory & Psychology* 30.2 (2020), 202–22, 209–11.

sexual frustration inspires spectacular visions of salvation, even if they cannot deliver on their promise to save the modern individual from psychological alienation: Yu's protagonist requires a collective identity, but once in place, it would infallibly become the source of new libidinal frustration. Werther knows: 'Only remember one thing: in this world it is seldom a question of "either … or."'

Martial aggression and patriotism

In Goethe's Original, the use of violence only appears at the margins of the text, in the story of the farmhand who murders his rival. Realising how quickly frustrated libido can transform into violence, Werther sympathises with the farmhand, even tries to defend him, but is in the end just as shocked about the murder as the narrator, who reflects: 'Love and attachment, the noblest feelings of human nature, had been turned to violence and murder' (*L* 67). Goethe's text includes reveries about rage and murder, for example when Werther confesses to Lotte that his 'heart, excited by rage and fury, has often had the monstrous impulse to murder your husband – you – myself!' (*L* 73). Overall, however, the narrative stresses that violence must be avoided, even if it means directing such rage and fury against oneself.

Among Werther's revolutionary offspring, the latency of violence is brought to centre stage, as the connection between frustrated libido and the call of the battlefield provides orientation for the troubled individual. Foscolo's synthesis of love and nation steers clear of the battlefield and confines itself to the privacy of solitary death, but this changes in Leopardi's poetry. Here, the themes of love and patriotic sacrifice are juxtaposed in a single volume of poetry, allowing bereaved lovers and imitators of Spartan courage to engage in a troublesome dialogue. As mouthpieces for oppressed nations, Werther's continuations in East Asia imagine suffering from unrequited love and dying for one's nation as intimately connected factors. Yu Dafu's *Sinking*, Ba Jin's *Trilogy of Love* and Jiang Guangci's *The Young Wanderer* protest against injured personal dignity and deprivation of love. Aside from the literary genealogy that connects *Werther* with Chinese modernism, the protagonists' excursions to the battlefield also have some significance in the German context. As grand heroic gestures came into fashion, the currency of liberty-minded suicide only increased in value.[100] This nexus places Goethe's text in an unexpected vicinity with Friedrich Hölderlin's 'Death on the Battlefield' ('Der Tod fürs Vaterland', 1800), possibly also with Friedrich Schiller's tragedy *The*

[100] The poetic imagination of self-sacrifice contributed to a mindset that would eventually culminate in the *Freikorps* spirit in the German army in the Great War. Scholars such as Klaus Theweleit and Thomas Macho have already mapped the connection between suicidal impulse and death on the battlefield. See Thomas Macho, *Das Leben nehmen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2017), 163–99; Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2020), 83–9.

Maid of Orleans (*Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, 1801), in which Joan of Arc is mortally wounded on the battlefield. Was it a mistake that German soldiers kept a copy of *Faust* (1808), Goethe's most acclaimed drama, in their knapsacks during the Great War?[101] As this chapter demonstrates, *Werther* would have possibly been a more befitting choice.

In the 1920s, when Goethe's novel was enthusiastically received by the intellectual avant-gardes of China, little was known of the verdict that spoiled the text's revolutionary interpretation in Europe. This changed when orthodox Marxist positions, in particular Engels's remarks on *Werther*, placed a strain on Chinese intellectuals' enthusiasm. Given Guo Moruo's unscrupulous handling of Western cultural heroes, it does not come as a surprise that his opinion of Goethe then changed from raving adulation to sweeping slander. In his memoir *The Ten Years of Creation Society* (創造十年 Chuangzao shi nian), written in 1932, he contrasts Goethe unfavourably with Karl Marx, in whose light the former appears like a 'firefly in the daylight'.[102] Emulating the grand gesture of the intellectual historian, Guo argues:

> As a poet, Goethe marks the transition from feudal to capitalist society. At the beginning, he played the trumpet for the bourgeois revolution, but after becoming a minister in Weimar, he naively reverted to the feudal camp. His aristocratic taste and imperialist thought is a bit offensive. Heine, the poet, chided him, saying that all he knew was kissing women.[103]

Goethe's degradation from worshipped poet to opportunistic kisser has important ramifications for the Chinese wave of popular Wertherian writings. Guo's comment follows a larger trend: Mao Dun's *Midnight* reserves the role of the sentimental young man for an aloof portrait of schmaltzy love talk; Jiang's *The Young Wanderer* keeps its borrowings from the Wertherian cosmos in check by a reduction of psychological complexity. Only Ba Jin, the anarchist, continues to place subjective outbursts of feelings at the centre of his politics.

Although the revolutionary interpretation of *Werther* is primarily put forward by Marxist critics, one cannot fail to note the dominance of patriotic themes over class analysis in this corpus. For Foscolo, social injustice is only of tangential relevance; in Yu's *Sinking*, such concerns are completely absent. While Yi Kwangsu's and Ba Jin's texts indeed ask how individuals can contribute to the progress of

[101] See Franziska Bomski and Anja Oesterhelt, 'Nazifizierung', in *Faust-Handbuch: Konstellationen–Diskurse–Medien*, ed. by Carsten Rohde, Thorsten Valk and Matthias Mayer (Berlin: Springer, 2018), 427–38, 427.

[102] Orig. '太陽光中的一個螢火蟲.' Guo Moruo, *Collected Works* (全集 Quan ji), 20 vols (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue chubanshe, 1992), vol. 12, 78.

[103] Orig. '他在德國是由封建社會轉變到資產社會的那個階段中的詩人，他在初期是吹奏著資產階級革命的一個號手，但從他做了隈馬（魏瑪）公國的宰相以後，他老實退回到封建陣營裡去了，他那貴族趣味和帝王思想實在有點熏鼻。詩人海涅罵過他，說他只知道和女人親吻。' Guo, *Collected Works*, 78.

society, they prioritise the nation over class solidarity. Evidently, this contrasts with orthodox socialist positions on nationalism; after all, Marx regarded nationality as an irrelevant category for the international working class and Engels hypothesised that the nation state would 'wither away' once communist society was established.[104] The course of the 19th and 20th centuries, however, was difficult to reconcile with Marx's underestimation of nationalism.[105] In the 1920s, Lenin abandoned the internationalism of early socialist utopianism, a development that Joseph Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin further elaborated in the theory of 'socialism in one country'.[106] After 1945, when the colonies of the Global South turned against foreign rule, revolutionaries also relied on idiosyncratic blends of nationalism-cum-socialism, regardless of the inner contradictions that arose from such conceptual amalgamations.[107]

Like a foreign guest who easily blends in with local customs, *Werther* played a significant part in the marriage of revolutionary zeal with patriotic projects. According to Lukács, Goethe's novel documents the tension between revolutionary commitment and the deferral of political action. This is not the case with Foscolo's Jacopo Ortis and Werther's East Asian revenants. They press for the immediate suspension of the status quo. The pursuit of national sovereignty dominates and provides the missing piece that embeds the protagonists' personal delusions into realities that were still in the making.

[104] The 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' assumes that national distinctions disappear in the course of history. What is more, the working classes are per se international, for they have no nationality. Once a classless society is established, the states simply wither away. Engels specifies: 'Der Staat wird nicht "abgeschafft", er stirbt ab.' Friedrich Engels, 'Anti-Dühring', in Marx and Engels, *Werke*, vol. 20, 239–303, 261. That said, both thinkers softened their positions on inevitable internationalism at a later stage in their life.

[105] According to Isaiah Berlin, Marxism's disregard of nationalism represents the greatest weakness of socialist materialism. See Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 188.

[106] See Eric Van Ree, 'Socialism in One Country: A Reassessment', *Studies in East European Thought* 50.2 (1998), 77–117.

[107] See Sara Salim, '"Stretching" Marxism in the Postcolonial World: Egyptian Decolonisation and the Contradictions of National Sovereignty', *Historical Materialism* 27.4 (2019), 3–28.

4

Thanatological Revenants

In *Werther*, the protagonist's death coincides with the novel's narrative conclusion. During the last hour of Christmas Eve, as two pistols lie ready on his writing desk, he jots down his final words: 'They are loaded – the clock strikes twelve. So be it! Charlotte! Charlotte, farewell, farewell!' (*L* 86). Demonstrating outstanding restraint, the narrator packs the final events into a single page, including the gritty detail of Werther's protruding brains and his denied burial on hallowed ground. Despite the coincidence between the ends of the narrative and the protagonist's lifeline, to claim that Werther's suicide also marks the culmination of his inner development, a happy ending of sorts, departs considerably from contemporary academic reading habits. Is it possible to conceive of him as a man who positively embraces his own demise rather than as someone who simply succumbs to a sad fate?

This chapter unearths the death-fixated aspects of *Werther* and Wertherian literature. To emphasise their discursive embeddedness, it seems advisable to speak of 'thanatological' literature instead of their death fixation, a term that highlights subjective and pathological impulses. When *thanatos*, the Ancient Greek term for 'death' in the broadest sense, encounters the *logos*, designating 'reason' and cognition, profound meditations on the human condition follow. When the ideals of modern love connect with morbid themes such as self-destruction, incest and murder, the great project of modernity, the realisation of freedom and the pursuit of happiness, appear as ill-fated strategies that only exacerbate man's miserable lot. Arguably, the prospect of salvation through romantic love, which only became common currency in the late 18th century, exposes the individual to greater peril than a morality designed to dismiss the worldly realm as deceptive and ultimately disappointing. The heroes of sentimentalism suspend the advice issued by Stoic and Christian treatises for centuries, warning against worldly sources of delight, for they should be treated like 'an earthen pot […], or a glass cup, that when it has been broken, you may remember what it was, and may not be troubled'.[1] Romantic love means to do the exact opposite: to place all one's hopes in that fragile 'earthen pot'.

[1] Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus*, trans. by George Long (London: George Bell and Sons, 1888), 281.

The tangible risk is that the destructive aspects of love undermine its uplifting effects – a mechanism that texts such as *Werther* perfectly illustrate.

Moving beyond prescriptive notions of how individuals should reign in their passions, post-Wertherian literature is unafraid to address the allure of death. This dimension of the text reiterates the crushing realisation that non-being could be preferable to being, after all. Or, as Oedipus famously laments in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (401 BCE): 'Not to be born at all / Is best, far best that can befall.'[2] Such classic references, invoked across the ages,[3] clash with the life-affirming consensus of modern societies where cases such as Werther's are dismissed as pathological; after all, his actions go against what Christopher Belshaw considers in rather abstract terms the 'widespread and natural tendency to link life and value, death and disvalue'.[4] Instead of treating death-fixated Wertherian texts from a moral perspective that objects to world-weariness as such, the present chapter takes them at face value and takes their sinister line of thinking seriously: what if life is not worth living?

The chapter first addresses scholars' reactions to the thanatological musings in Werther's letters. After a review of rare instances of death-affirmative *Werther* criticism in early 20th-century Germany and Japan, such arguments are placed within wider philosophical discussions on the human death drive, including the thought of Arthur Schopenhauer and Sigmund Freud. The aim of this conceptual digression is to lend more credibility to a segment of the *Werther* nursery that is too easily dismissed as excessive and bizarre. Equipped with a suitable framework to detect the thanatological underpinnings of Wertherian literature, the argument then moves to an analysis of the five rewritings of Goethe's book. As in the case of revolutionary rewritings, they appeared outside the German context. The first strand of death-fixated reinterpretations emerges from the text's hypertextual transformations and transcodings in French Romanticism, including in Chateaubriand's *René* (1801), Étienne Pivert de Senancour's *Obermann* (1804) and Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* (1816). Here, death is the unflinching answer to the individual's frustrated quest for romantic love. Death fixation also comes to the fore in Japanese letters during the early 20th century, as in Sōseki Natsume's *Kokoro* (心, 1914) and Dazai Osamu's post-war classic *No Longer Human* (人間

[2] Sophocles, *Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*, trans. by Francis Storr (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1981), 261.

[3] Sophocles' tragic lament resounds across Western letters, beginning with Plutarch's 'Letter to Apollonius', in which he consoles his friend with the words: 'That not to be born is the best of all, and that to be dead is better than to live.' Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. by Frank Cole Babbit, 16 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), vol. 2, 179. In English poetry, this thought informs William Blake's poem 'Infant Sorrow' and Thomas Hardy's 'To an Unborn Pauper Child', for example. For a discussion of its echoes in contemporary literature, see Brian Zigler, 'Born Under a Bad Sign: On the Dark Rhetoric of Antinatalism', *Empedocles* 9.1 (2018), 41–55.

[4] Christopher Belshaw, *Annihilation: The Sense and Significance of Death* (London: Routledge, 2014), 12.

失格 Ningen Shikkaku, 1948). As in the preceding chapter, the heterogeneity of this corpus raises the question of the texts' comparability. Again, *Werther*-inspired prose follows familiar stylistic patterns, including a commitment to subjective articulation, as seen in diaries, letters and memoirs. In contrast to the discussed revolutionary novels, thanatological rewritings, owing to their fatalistic worldviews, do not occupy an equally central position in the respective literary histories. Although the Wertherian hero reappears alongside his preference for contemplating suicide, he differs substantially from the troubled characters who also despair of humanity and life, and who occupy a more central position within world literature. In contrast to Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1894–5), a Werther may suffer from financial and sexual constraints but never exhibits an affirmative view of a cultural and intellectual Parnassus like Christminster. Other than Emma in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856/1857), who also suffers from a break-up and eventually takes her own life, the Wertherian perspective forces the reader to consider the protagonist's inner perspective – without flashes of irony. And in contrast to Kochan in Mishima Yukio's *Confessions of a Mask* (仮面の告白 Kamen no Kokuhaku, 1949), the most iconic Japanese thanatological novel, a Werther infallibly conforms to the norms of heterosexual love and is spared direct confrontation with the destruction of war.

This sprawling history of rewritings helps unearth strata of meaning in *Werther* that have disappeared amid the canonisation of the text. To reclaim a Werther who willingly embraces death means to undo this process. This chapter approaches the corpus to answer the following questions: are the findings of thanatological *Werther* criticism compatible with the novel's subsequent transformations in French and Japanese literature? Do theoretical reflections on the death drive refine the reader's judgement of its representations in narrative? What is the point of drawing on the *Werther* model when well-established equivalents, usually sourced from religious or ancient wisdom, articulate analogous tropes of transience?

Werther's denied agency

In principle, to highlight Werther's death drive is to make a trivial observation. From the onset, Werther's letters are imbued with references to the vanity of existence. As early as 16 July 1771, the young man feels 'like shooting a bullet into my head' (*L* 27). One month later, he playfully holds the muzzle of a gun against his forehead, defending suicide as a glorious alternative to living in oppression. Even during his happy days of self-contentment, his thinking gravitates towards death. For scholars, the bone of contention is the level of lucidity that readers can – or should – attribute to his actions. He is commonly taken for a fool who carelessly indulges in harmful thoughts and unwittingly finds himself caught in

a dead end. But alternatively, one can also perceive him as a radical human being who, unable to accept the frustration of his goals and desires, consciously accelerates his own demise.

In the existing scholarship, Werther's self-aware comment on 8 August 1771 often serves as a touchstone to gauge his lucidity. The letter marks his decision to depart from Wahlheim in reaction to Albert's return, an occasion on which he reflects on his deteriorating state of mind:

> Today I found my diary, which I have neglected for some time, and I am amazed how deliberately I have entangled myself step by step. To have recognized my situation so clearly, and yet to have acted like a child! Even now I see it all plainly, and yet seem to have no thought of acting more wisely (*L* 31).

Regrettably, this diary is not included in the book. The passage itself gave rise to two different interpretations. According to Dieter Welz, the letter is of less psychological than editorial significance. Forming part of the amendments that Goethe introduced to the 1787, it manifests the aesthetic trajectory of the rewritten version: the enforcement of greater distance between reader and protagonist.[5] Welz's argument culminates in a firm defence of the first edition's explosive style, thereby neutralising Werther's most palpable instance of lucidity as exterior to the novel's true shape. Meanwhile, other critics took the second edition at face value, reading the added notice as an indication of the protagonist's inner struggle between head and heart. Accordingly, Werther's surprise at his diary marks a rare episode of clarity amid general darkness.[6] Powerful metaphors such as Werther's early reference to a 'noble race of horses that instinctively bite open a vein when they are hot and exhausted' (*L* 50) are mere aperçus that emerge at the scene of writing but that disappear seconds later without leaving a trace in his mind. In short, Werther's authorship erases itself once the ink is dried. Both interpretations choose to ignore his programmatic assertion: 'Even now I see it all plainly, and yet seem to have no thought of acting more wisely.' He accepts that he has put himself in a desperate situation but does not intend to change it.

Given critics' preference to look at Werther through the lens of mature condescension, they also regarded his deliberate indecision as immature or pathological, indicating that he is a perverse person in need of healing. While critics of the 19th century conjured the image of a pathological Werther in order to enforce the edifying appeal of Goethe's works, this stance, later transformed into an interpretative cliché, which critics reproduced throughout the 20th century. In this vein, Rolf Zimmermann's 1979 study asserts: 'Werther himself is the cause of his ills. […] Werther's frailty is caused not by external affliction, but by

[5] See Welz, *Der Weimarer Werther*, 54–5.

[6] Inger Brody argues: 'The part of Werther that sees clearly also writes clearly, while the part of him that feels most keenly inclines him towards silence and self-destruction.' Inger Sigrun Brody, *Ruined by Design: Shaping Novels and Gardens in the Culture of Sensibility* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 102.

his inner constitution.'[7] There is nothing heroic about this inner constitution, a stance that Nicholas Boyle would agree on. Since Werther is trapped in a 'ghastly delusion', the moral logic of the narrative is straightforward: 'Werther has lived by feeling and must die by it.'[8]

In more general terms, criticism has interpreted Werther's thanatological musings as indications of the protagonist's 'mortal disease' (*L* 34), a phrase borrowed from Werther's own musings on the case of a girl who drowned herself.[9] The notion of Werther's 'mortal disease' assumes a tacit understanding between author and readers: while both are fully aware of Werther's unfolding tragedy, he himself is not.[10] Although the exploration of the creative exchanges between pathography and literature can yield fascinating results,[11] this form of interpretative grafting hardly exhausts the wealth of the text. To dismiss Werther as a sick man raises more questions than it answers. It also completely ignores the text's most outstanding legacy: its wide popularity, especially among non-German audiences. Why should the sick musings of a fictional man have attracted so much interest across the world, while the work of mature Goethe, with the exception of *Faust*, barely attracted attention outside academic circles?

Before Goethe had a chance to disseminate his dismissive self-interpretation, Hamburg's Pastor Goeze called for a ban, arguing that 'the novel's sole aim is to cleanse the disgrace from a young hothead who commits suicide by revaluating his misdeed as heroism'.[12] Johann August Ernesti, a member of Leipzig's divinity school, also accused the novel of promoting suicide: 'This piece of writing is an apology and recommendation of suicide. Composed in a witty and

[7] Orig. 'In Werther selbst liegt der Grund des Übels. […] Nicht eine äußere Notlage: – es ist seine seelische Konstitution, die Werther bedürftig macht – und unersättlich!' Rolf Christian Zimmermann, *Das Weltbild des jungen Goethe*, 2 vols (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1979), vol. 2, 167–8.

[8] Boyle, *Goethe*, vol. 1, 172, 174.

[9] In research, the notion of Werther's 'mortal disease' functions as a convenient frame to emphasise his passiveness. See Meyer-Kalkus, 'Werthers Krankheit'.

[10] Another argument to de-emphasise Werther's lucidity points to the text-external source after which the novel is modelled, the tragic biography of Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, an acquaintance of Goethe who committed suicide after falling in love with a married woman. Relying on the persuasiveness of the real-life case, Robert Leventhal recently considered *Werther* 'a double fictional-historical hybrid case history, braiding the narratives of Jerusalem's suicide […] into the first truly psychological novel in Western literature'. Robert Leventhal, *Making the Case: Narrative Psychological Case Histories and the Invention of Individuality in German 1750–1800* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 31.

[11] The epistolary novel coincides with a wave of medical journals in the late Enlightenment period. Johann Caspar Lavater claimed that Goethe had spelled out to him the novel's true intention. It was intended as a warning that contends: 'Siehe das Ende dieser Krankheit ist Tod! Solcher Schwärmereyen Ziel ist Selbstmord!' Johann Caspar Lavater, *Vermischte Schriften*, 2 vols (Winterthur: Steiner, 1781), vol. 2, 127. At the same time, anthropologists such as Karl Philipp Moritz also drew on *Werther* to break new ground in pathography. See Volker C. Dörr, *'Reminiscenzien': Goethe und Karl Philipp Moritz in intertextuellen Lektüren* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999), 49–116.

[12] Orig. '[ein] Roman, welcher keinen andern Zweck hat, als das Schändliche von dem Selbstmorde eines jungen Witzlings […] abzuwischen, und diese schwarze That als eine Handlung des Heroismis vorzuspiegeln.' Johann Melchior Goeze, 'Kurze aber nothwendige Erinnerung über die Leiden des

sympathetic manner, it appears particularly dangerous.'[13] In criticism, such calls for literary censorship stand accused of lacking aesthetic sensibility; indeed, Goeze's and Ernesti's assessments subscribe to a premodern concept of literature that stipulates edification as the primary aim of literary production. In their fanaticism, however, they took Werther's death fixation more seriously than those critics who sang its praises but effectively neutralised the text's destructive force.

Tracing Werther's death drive

Isolated critics in the present, Benjamin Bennett and Michael Gratzke, have considered the possibility that Werther's actions are lucid through and through – yet both critics remained unconvinced in the end. Meanwhile, two scholars whose work dates from the interwar period, Hermann August Korff and Kamei Katsuichirō, wholeheartedly embraced the idea of a Werther who is fully cognisant of what is happening to him.

According to Bennett, the protagonist consciously manoeuvres himself into self-enslavement. While Werther embodies the modern psychological tendency to explore extremes, he also seeks to escape from the 'dizzying experience of freedom'. His frequent invocation of fate only serves as 'an excuse for […] deliberately letting himself go'.[14] Werther chooses to die because he embraces one kind of freedom, to die by his own hand, in reaction to another kind of freedom, modern individualism, which causes him to suffer from psychological alienation. This choice places Werther's aporetic conflict within the discourse of post-Enlightenment disenchantment, a concept discussed by Odo Marquard.[15] *Ex negativo*, Bennett's interpretation is informed by a questionable assumption: the implication is that Werther would have fared better in more constricting surroundings.

Gratzke also puts forward a cautious appreciation of Werther's thanatological lucidity. Both his antisocial behaviour and his obsession with Lotte's image – rather than the woman herself – raise the possibility 'that behind Werther's fetishistic obsession […] there is the death drive at work on a much more profound level'.

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jungen Werthers', in Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers: Erläuterungen und Dokumente*, ed. by Kurt Rothmann (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1971), 125–8, 127.

[13] Orig. 'Diese Schrift ist eine Apologie und Empfehlung des Selbst Mordes; und des ist auch um des Willen gefährlich, weil es in witziger und einnehmender Schreib Art abgefaßt ist.' Johannes August Ernesti, 'Verbotsantrag der Theologischen Fakultät', in Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Karl Richter, 20 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1985–98), vol. I.2, 786–7, 786.

[14] Benjamin Bennett, *Goethe as Woman: The Undoing of Literature* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 31.

[15] See Odo Marquard, *Aesthetica und Anaesthetica: Philosophische Überlegungen* (Munich: Schöningh, 1989), 12.

After mentioning this possibility, however, Gratzke backtracks: 'On closer inspection of the literary text, this does not appear to be the case.'[16] Striving to meet his beloved below the benevolent eye of God the Father, his death fixation is levelled out by conventional religious imagery as well as conventional piety. Both Bennett's and Gratzke's interpretations ultimately remain unconvinced of Werther's self-aware demise.

Death as salvation (Korff)

In contrast, the interwar period allowed for a more generous appreciation of the thanatological aspects of *Werther*. Korff's four-volume study *Spirit of Goethe's Age* (*Der Geist der Goethezeit*, 1923–53) portrays the poet as the first modern German pagan; after Christianity grew obsolete, goes the argument, Goethe lived up to the task of pioneering a new morality beyond conventional dogma. In Korff's first instalment, the *Sturm und Drang* movement is portrayed as a historical rupture: Goethe's protagonists explore the cartography of a world in which all boundaries and limitations have been thoroughly redrawn. Amid such spiritual rupture, Werther emerges as the mouthpiece of pantheism, understood as the individual's spontaneous awareness of the Almighty. While this general approach is fairly uncontroversial, it leads Korff to draw highly original conclusions. Accordingly, the protagonist's affection for Lotte is a metaphor for something more comprehensive: 'the *unhappy love of the soulful man for the world at large*, a world that "fails" to satisfy the infinite aspirations of his [i.e. Werther's] inner God.'[17] In Korff's eyes, Werther prefigures not only Faust, Goethe's other iconic suicidal hero, but also one of the tenets of German idealism: 'In Werther, the poet anticipates what the philosopher would later discover in its full transcendental scope in the critique of reason: *the worldbuilding power of the subject*. What is the world? The world is my imagination.'[18] Korff endows Werther's meditations with a philosophical dignity that is usually withheld from *Sturm und Drang* characters.

Like most forceful interpretations, Korff's argument makes ample use of interpretative grafting. The lover's miserable wailings and the editor's empathic commentaries fall by the wayside, as the critic endows all conflicting

[16] Gratzke, 'Werther's Love', 32.

[17] Orig. 'die *unglückliche Liebe des seelenhaften Menschen zur Welt* überhaupt, die gegenüber den unendlichen Ansprüchen des innern Gottes überall "versagt." ' Korff, *Geist der Goethezeit*, vol. 1, 296. Emphasis in the original.

[18] Orig. 'Im Werther antizipiert der Dichter, was späterhin in der Kritik der Vernunft der Philosoph in seiner ganzen transzendentalen Bedeutung entdeckt: die weltschöpferische Kraft des Subjekts. Was ist die Welt? Die Welt ist meine Vorstellung.' Korff, *Geist*, vol. 1, 297.

inner tensions with steadfast intention. Werther's vow, 'My mind is made up, Charlotte: I am resolved to die!' (*L* 73), is seen as consistent with his radical metaphor of self-mutilating horses. In Korff's study, such snippets are incorporated into an interpretation that stands in opposition not only to the assumption of Werther's delusional mindset, but also to Bennett's idea that the protagonist's death drive represents an escape from modern freedom. Quite the contrary, for Korff, Werther's renunciation of the world gives evidence of his uncompromising intellectual freedom. Instead of accepting his tragic role as a broken man, he embraces death as salvation from final disappointment, a stance that allows him to emerge as an enlightened victor from the conflict between boundless subjectivity and finite objectivity: 'Werther's suicide judges a world full of limitations, one that is unworthy of truly divine life.'[19] Unperturbed by Goethe's fraught relationship with his early literary creation, this analysis puts forward a headstrong defence of Werther as an upright man who wages war against the lowliness of the material world. Korff's case for Werther inherits one of the most notorious tropes of German idealism, the disjunction between ideal and reality. This Werther could as well be a protagonist in a fanciful novel by Novalis or a comic novella by E. T. A. Hoffmann, in which young men regularly find their expectations of bliss and ecstasy at odds with the iron laws of the everyday world. But while these men can hope to find salvation in transcendence and art, Werther has no prospect of finding an adequate substitute. It remains unclear to what extent Korff believes that Werther's 'infinite aspirations' represent tragic gestures or if he assumes that metaphysical transcendence is in fact attainable.

Within the German context, Korff's take on Goethe's novel was idiosyncratic. Despite holding a chair position in Leipzig's prestigious department of Germanistik between 1925 and 1954 – a curious example of continuous employment in rather eventful years – he could not establish a lasting counternarrative against the pathological or biographic paradigms.[20]

[19] Orig. 'so richtet der Selbstmord Werthers gleichsam die Welt, die sich mit allen ihren Beschränkungen eines wahrhaft göttlichen Lebens nicht würdig erweist.' Korff, *Geist*, vol. 1, 306.

[20] Korff's career awkwardly spans three disjoined periods of history: Wilhelmine Germany, the Third Reich and the German Democratic Republic. Ludwig Stockinger found that *Spirit of Goethe's Age* defies the historical ruptures placed between the publication of the four volumes, with Korff following a consistent argument from beginning to its end. The implication is that Korff's study of the spirit (*Geist*) of a specific epoch appeared congenial to different ideologies that otherwise had little in common. See Ludwig Stockinger, 'Hermann August Korff: Geistesgeschichte in drei politischen Systemen', in *Leipziger Germanistik: Beiträge zur Fachgeschichte im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Günther Öhlschläger et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 193–232, 196.

Beauty in death (Kamei)

Outside Germany, Korff's work attracted considerable interest, especially in Japan, where, in the 1930s, it was considered exemplary.[21] During this period, Japanese scholarly discourse was shaped by intensified intellectual exchange between the newly forged Axis powers. In East Asia, Goethe's work held the promise to build cross-cultural bridges. Interestingly, this transcultural bond was made possible less by the figure of the mature Goethe, whom Wilhelmine Germany adored, than by the potential of *Werther* for literary grafting.

According to Stefan Keppler-Tasaki and Seiko Tasaki, the extraordinary side-effect of Goethe's cross-cultural reception in Japan was 'the stunning overshadowing of the Goethe image by death, more precisely the obsession with the interconnection of beauty and death in a larger framework of the "suicide nation" self-image'.[22] This cross-cultural bridge shows most convincingly in Kimura Kinji's programmatic essay 'Goethe in Japan', published in a journal specifically dedicated to cultural exchange between Axis powers.[23] In Japan, where suicide was traditionally conceptualised as a historical act rather than a psychiatric condition,[24] literary figures such as Werther and Faust attracted great interest as suicidal role models. As a consequence, Goethe's characters found themselves in the unexpected company of local icons of ritual suicide, for example Saigō Takamori, the Samurai rebel leader of the late 19th century whose heroism and sense of honour became a fixture in Japanese nationalism.

Kamei Katsuichirō's *Education of Man* (人間教育 Ningen kyōiku, 1937) is arguably the most ambitious thanatological interpretation of *Werther*. In this treatise, the Japanese literary critic assigns to Goethe a central role as an exceptional educator of mankind, who serves not only as a guide for Japan's future, but also as a mediator to reconsider the country's glorious past. The entire first chapter is dedicated to Werther, who is characterised as a tormented individual in pursuit of a self-determined transformation from a hapless man into someone who resolutely accepts death. Kamei invokes the possibility of transcendence through death:

> When reading *Werther* today, the book's fascination appears to lie in his refusal, if not his decisive rejection of reality, in his continuous escape from reality and in his deeply felt sorrow. In fact, such flight from reality is a form of escapism that goes as far as taking revenge on reality without mercy. This can only be found in the epoch

[21] According to Hans Müller, a professor of German studies in Tokyo in the 1930s, Korff's work influenced Japanese Goethe studies from their inception. See Hans Müller, 'Goethe in Japan', *Monumenta Nipponica* 2.2 (1939), 466–78.
[22] Stefan Keppler-Tasaki and Tasaki Seiko, 'Goethe, the Japanese: National Identity through Cultural Exchange, 1889 to 1989', *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik* 51.1 (2019), 57–100, 76.
[23] See Kimura Kinji, 'Goethe in Japan', *Berlin – Rom – Tokio* 4.6 (1942).
[24] See Francesca Di Marco, 'Act or Disease? The Making of Modern Suicide in Early Twentieth-Century Japan', *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 39.2 (2013), 325–58.

> of Storm and Stress. Ultimately, this moment signifies one's surrender to death. Arguably, only young people can uncompromisingly sense that the most beautiful moment of life – that is, love – blossoms in the proximity of death.[25]

Like Korff, Kamei finds that sentimental love leads the tragic individual into a confrontation between imagination and reality. Since no compromise is possible, the suffering young man's rebellion culminates in the transcendence of his desires and in an act of revenge against reality. This bleak vision, however, is mollified by the Buddhist undertones that appear in Kamei's interpretation. His smooth integration of death and 'the most beautiful moment of life' is rooted in traditional Japanese aesthetics, where the tragic beauty of transience occupies a special place.[26]

Furthermore, Kamei presents a hard-nosed assessment of Werther's life options. Faced with Lotte's supposed marital misery as the wife of Albert, a more reckless Werther could transgress social conventions by committing adultery or killing Albert. Instead, Werther restrains himself, which leads Kamei to the following judgement: 'Werther alone wants to be the one who suffers. […] In fact, his love is an act of selflessness.'[27] Kamei's Werther is neither the unhinged pathological young man that German criticism has in mind nor Korff's pantheistic genius, but a master of self-control. Mindful of his disposition, he accepts that he is too weak to transgress social norms or, alternatively, to accept the task that fate has given him. Kamei cannot detect any moral failings in Werther's weakness; instead, his passivity is the precondition of a radical insight: 'Perhaps truth lies in one's own annihilation.'[28] There is no prospect for spiritual salvation but only the immanent beauty of self-murder.

As in Korff's case, Kamei's account leaves Werther's endemic indecision unmentioned, as it would distract from the radical statement articulated in one of his last letters: 'Yes, Charlotte, why should I not say it? One of us three must go: it shall be Werther' (*L* 73). Basing his interpretation mostly on this strong-willed proposition, Kamei finds numerous points of connection with Japanese ideas about worldly transience, notably the thought of Kitamura Tōkoku, an early

[25] Orig. 'われわれがいまウエルテルを読 んでまず第 一に感動することは，現実への強烈な反撥，断乎たる拒絶，"上へ上へとのがれ行く" ものの痛切な悲哀ではなかろうか。この現実からの逃避——真に逃避と呼ぶに価するほど苛烈に現実へ復讐を企てる刹那は，お そらく疾風怒濤の時代を除いてはないであろう。それはやがて破滅の，死の刹那である。恋愛という人生の最も美しい瞬間が，死に近く開花するものであることを，お そらく青年のみが純粋に体得する。' Kamei Katsuichirō, *Education of Man* (人間教育 Ningen kyōiku) (Tokyo: Mikasa Shobo, 1950), 93.

[26] The *wabi-sabi* (侘寂) aesthetic in the Buddhist-influenced tradition reminds the individual to accept the natural cycle of growth, decay and death. See A. Minh Nguyen et al., 'New Contributions to Japanese Aesthetics', in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. by A. Minh Nguyen (New York: Lexington, 2018), xlix–lxxv.

[27] Orig. 'ウエルテルは自分ひとりだけが犠牲になわち。… すなわち，彼の恋は無償の行力にほかならぬ。' Kamei, *Education*, 98.

[28] Orig. 'お そらく真実は身を滅ぼすがゆえに真実である のかもしれぬ。' Kamei, *Education*, 99.

Romantic Japanese poet who took his life at the age of twenty-five. According to the famous suicide, love culminates not in a lowly physical union but in the spiritual journey of the individual who fails to patch the disjunction between imagination and reality. In line with the idea of Goethe's presumed compatibility with Japanese thought, Kamei regards *Werther* as an extension of native poetry, such as that of Kitamura. As in China's revolutionary rereading of Werther, Japanese grafting implies a highly selective appropriation of the text in dialogue with highly culturalised ideas about life as such.

While Korff's study remained confined to the realm of historical analysis, Kamei also made a strong case for applying a suicide-affirmative approach to the realm of geopolitics. In 1942, after the outbreak of the Pacific War, Kamei penned a pamphlet titled 'A Note on Contemporary Spirit' (現代精神に関する覚書 Gendai seishin ni kansuru oboegak). Here, he attacks the dominant influence of the Anglo-American West on Japan:

> I believe that our greatest enemy is that swiftly changing mode of civilization that, ever since the influx of the West's dying culture of 'modernity', has steadily violated the deepest recesses of spirit while producing all manner of daydreams and garrulity. My fear is that all thought might be permeated by this poison and thereby homogenized and mechanized.[29]

In the vision of Kamei and like-minded Japanese nationalists, the so-called Japanese Spirit (日本精神 Nihon seishin) sets itself apart from the individualism of the Anglo-American world through its emphasis on harmony between the individual and the collective. Kamei's impulse goes well beyond merely cultivating literary heritage. Instead, he calls for direct action:

> These texts [i.e. the literary heritage] teach us that it is only through sacrifice that we can prove what the future will be like. There is nothing so foolish as the delusion that, without dirtying one's hands, the spirit of the classics will achieve something in the future entirely of its own accord.[30]

Kamei's pamphlet recommends a two-fold struggle, one outward and one inward: 'Externally, the war that we are currently fighting represents the overthrow of British and American Power, while internally it represents the basic cure for the spiritual disease brought about by modern civilization.'[31]

Although the pamphlet abstains from mentioning *Werther*, Goethe's hero enters Kamei's apotheosis of self-sacrifice as the invisible guest who provides moral support in his quest for a thanatological Japanese national identity. The stated

[29] Kamei Katsuichirō, 'A Note on Contemporary Spirit', trans. by Richard Calichman, in *Overcoming Modernity: Cultural Identity in Wartime Japan*, ed. by Richard Calichman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 42–50, 43.
[30] Kamei, 'A Note', 50.
[31] Kamei, 'A Note', 49.

antagonism between a local community-based society and Anglo-American individualism reiterates the idea of a struggle between fundamentally different civilisations, an idea that was also popular among German intellectuals of the time.[32] United in their rejection of both Western individualism and materialism, the Axis powers, united in their defence of cultural essentialism, embarked on an existential struggle for cultural survival.[33] In Japan, Werther enters the Second World War as a Germano-Japanese role model.

In sum, Korff's and Kamei's takes on Werther exhibit the characteristics of conceptual grafting: they connect the protagonist's inner struggle with an absolutist worldview in which death can serve as an end in itself, thereby endowing him with the kind of spiritual grandeur that critical consensus denies him. They conjure in *Werther* the idea that his struggle allows him to transcend the everyday world. The Wertherian hero, an exemplary individual, mends the disjunction between the poetic aspirations of the modern era and its limitations amid a prosaic reality.

Genealogy of the Death Drive

Supposing the protagonist is fully cognisant of his predicament, is it possible to isolate Werther's death drive while avoiding the unattractive aspects of Korff's and Kamei's interpretations? After all, it sounds overblown to speak with Korff of Goethe's post-Christian paganism. Worse still, Kamei's proto-fascist ideas compromise his enthusiasm for Werther. Can one understand the protagonist's realisation that he has 'entangled himself step by step and yet seems to have no thought of acting more wisely' as a valid reaction towards the unbearable weight of being alive? Since the answer cannot be found in *Werther* criticism alone, this subchapter will turn to the concept of the death drive as presented by Arthur Schopenhauer and Sigmund Freud. In contrast to Korff's and Kamei's contributions, to engage with their works may not bring to light previously ignored material, yet the marginal status of Schopenhauer and specific elements of Freud's thought underscore the critical prejudices that reproduce, as Belshaw argues, the widespread tendency 'to link life and value, death and disvalue'. The aim is to better understand the cultural undercurrents that criticism largely rejects but which a group of literary successors have embraced so wholeheartedly.

[32] In Germany, the opposition between American individualism and German community-based society goes back to the proponents of social pedagogy (*Sozialpädagogik*). Neo-Kantian philosophers such as Paul Natorp further consolidated this antagonism. See Michael Opielka, *Gemeinschaft in Gesellschaft: Soziologie nach Hegel und Parsons* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004), 131–3.

[33] See Hans-Joachim Bieber, *SS und Samurai: Deutsch-japanische Kulturbeziehungen 1933–1945* (Munich: Iudicium, 2014), 866–87.

Even if Korff steers clear of mentioning Schopenhauer explicitly, his mention of '[t]he world is my imagination' is a clear nod to the German philosopher. This link is far from self-explanatory and is, with the notable exception of Flávio Rocha de Deus's study, rarely mentioned in scholarship.[34] In *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, 1819/1844), the novel is mentioned alongside Rousseau's *Julie* to illustrate a central tenet of Schopenhauer's philosophy, as the protagonist's passion is compromised by the blind will that governs all life. When directed at an ephemeral beloved, such supposedly noble feelings only mask a deeper-seated drive: sexual desire as a means to create progeny. Consequently, the novels' celebration of the mutuality of feelings between two partners infallibly gravitates towards reproductive sex: 'This is confirmed first of all by the fact that the essential thing is not perhaps mutual affection, but possession, in other words, physical enjoyment. The certainty of the former [i.e. mutuality of feelings], therefore, cannot in any way console us for the want of the latter [i.e. reproductive sex]; on the contrary, in such a situation many a man has shot himself' (*W* II, 535). In this light, the death drive results from the denied prospect of fathering a child. The situation is exacerbated when a triumphant third person comes into play:

> [T]he loss of the beloved through a rival or by death is also for the passionate lover a pain exceeding all others, just because it is of a transcendent nature, in that it not merely affects him as an individual, but attacks him in his *essentia aeterna*, in the life of the species, into whose special will and service he was summoned. (552, emphasis in the original)

The *Werther* triangle easily comes to mind. The successful union of Lotte and Werther is thwarted by a successful rival, resulting in Werther joining the ranks of the many men who shoot themselves in reaction to denied fatherhood.

In the light of the novel's ambivalence regarding the hero's desire for Lotte, however, it is important not to forget the other possibility that is contained in the novel. Werther's case is more complex than the denial of fatherhood. Although he dreams of Lotte's 'possession' once (16 July 1771), he commits suicide without having consistently and obsessively desired her. There exists an intimate connecting thread between Goethe's text and Schopenhauer's work: the idea of renunciation.

[34] In the light of these connections, Rocha de Deus comes to the surprising conclusion that, for Schopenhauer, Werther's suicide does not represent an act of renunciation but the affirmation of life itself: 'Werther embodies a specific type of suffering that belongs to the most intense kinds: the impossibility of fulfilling the loving will.' (Orig. 'O que vemos é que o sofrimento intenso é aquilo que direciona o nosso querer a eliminação de nossa ponte de acesso ao mundo […]. Sendo no caso de Werther, para Schopenhauer, um tipo de sofrimento específico que também é um dos mais intensos: a impossibilidade de realização da vontade amorosa.') Rocha de Deus, 'Schopenhauer's Philosophy', 173. See Flávio Rocha de Deus, 'Schopenhauer's Philosophy in the Narrative of the Young Werther de Goethe' ('A Filosofia de Schopenhauer na narrativa do jovem Werther de Goethe'), *Voluntas: Revista Internacional de Filosofia* 11.3 (2020), 164–77, 173.

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer portrays human existence as tied to the will-to-live, even if the world holds nothing but 'unspeakable pain, the wretchedness and misery of mankind, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and the innocent' (*W* I, 253). In some people, this experience results in a discovery of the only freedom accessible to humans: resignation. Since Schopenhauer rejects suicide as such,[35] he places great faith in sublimated forms of existence to make human existence more bearable. They can be found not only in Indian and Christian philosophy, but also in different forms of art, such as Greek tragedy. Schopenhauer claims that the protagonists of the dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides achieve transcendence by turning their backs on the force of life itself:

> It is the antagonism of the will with itself which is here most completely unfolded at the highest grade of its objectivity […]. The *motives* that were previously so powerful now lose their force, and instead of them, the complete knowledge of the real nature of the world, acting as a *quieter* of the will, produces resignation, the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will-to-live itself. Thus we see in tragedy the noblest men, after a long conflict and suffering, finally renounce for ever all the pleasures of life and the aims till then pursued so keenly, or cheerfully and willingly give up life itself. (*W* I, 253, emphasis in the original)

Although Schopenhauer's list of tragic heroes who embody the free self-abolition of the will includes Shakespeare's Hamlet, Schiller's Johanna and Segismundo in Calderón's *Life Is a Dream* (*La vida es sueño*, 1635), the list bypasses Werther, whose story is related in prose rather than in the dramatic form. Werther represents a pertinent borderline case. In particular, the letters dating from the period after his departure from Wahlheim evince his exhaustion with human affairs, as he declares: 'Not one single moment of happiness: nothing! Nothing touches me. I stand before a puppet show and see the little puppets move, and I ask myself whether it isn't an optical illusion' (*L* 45). If articulated in a humorous tone, this statement could befit Hamlet; and if pronounced with more gravity, it would betray Segismundo's confusion, as he can no longer tell what role he is playing in whose scheme.

In contrast to this illustrious group, however, Werther gradually loses his detached attitude towards worldly affairs in the course of the narrative, especially during the last days before his suicide. When he visits Lotte to read Ossian to her, he 'clasped her in his arms tightly, and covered her trembling, stammering lips with furious kisses' (*L* 80), an act that conforms to Schopenhauer's idea that suicide in fact represents an unworthy affirmation of the will-to-live. Just minutes before he shoots himself, he proclaims that Lotte's pink ribbon should

[35] Although Schopenhauer regards self-murder as an unworthy affirmation of the will to live, modern scholars find it difficult to reconcile his rejection of suicide with his overall philosophy. See Dale Jacquette, 'Schopenhauer on the Ethics of Suicide', *Continental Philosophy Review* 33 (2000), 43–58.

be buried with him. Strangely, his ardour arrives belatedly, then keeps intensifying. Without question, such behaviour defies Schopenhauer's '*quieter* of the will' and does not befit those men who 'cheerfully and willingly give up life itself'. To arrive at Korff's and Kamei's conclusion about Werther's clarity means to overlook his final days: there is a distinction to be made between lucid renunciation and the kind of emotional turmoil that features spells of renunciative moods. Thanatological Wertherian rewritings, however, pursue a different agenda, as they isolate the protagonist's general exhaustion with human affairs from such lowly fits of passion.

In the 20th century, Schopenhauer's elaborations on the death drive have arguably found their most relevant echo in Freud's study *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (*Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, 1920). While the first edition only implicitly refers to Schopenhauer, the 1921 edition makes these references explicit. In the conclusion, Freud invokes the authority of the German thinker, pointing out that he has 'unwittingly steered our course into the harbour of Schopenhauer's philosophy. For him death is the "true result and to that extent the purpose of life", while the sexual instinct is the embodiment of the will to live.'[36] Since *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* reacts to the experience of the First World War, Freud's interest in pessimistic philosophy documents his departure from the epistemic optimism that connected early psychoanalysis with the modern belief in progress. The inconsistencies that arise from this intellectual borrowing are secondary to the text's determination to find answers.[37]

Beyond the Pleasure Principle starts out by asking why traumatised individuals, notably those who suffer from repetition compulsion (*Wiederholungszwang*), behave in a way that is counter-intuitive: they forcefully recreate a situation that has caused them great pain in the past. Within the paradigm of conventional psychoanalysis, this phenomenon would count as an unexpected, masochistic effect of the pleasure principle, but Freud finds this explanation unsatisfactory.

[36] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 44. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *P*.

[37] In view of Freud's borrowings from *Parerga and Paralipomena* (*Parerga und Paralipomena*, 1851), most scholars agree that the two authors are united in their paradigmatic questioning of conventional rationality and anthropocentrism. See Matthew C. Altman and Cynthia D. Coe, 'Wolves, Dogs, and Moral Geniuses: Anthropocentrism in Schopenhauer and Freud', in *The Palgrave Schopenhauer Handbook*, ed. by Sandra Shapshay (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 447–72. Yet Alfred Schöpf insists that Freud's references to Schopenhauer suffer from imprecision. While the psychoanalyst's pleasure principle is indeed congruent with the philosopher's will-to-live, their ideas of the death drive differ considerably, as Schopenhauer's death drive indicates an intellectual process rather than a force hidden from conscious volition. The 'quieter' of the will applies to individuals who, 'after a long conflict and suffering, finally renounce for ever all the pleasures of life', and thus stands in opposition to Freud's observations on the organism's tendency to reduce tension, a phenomenon inaccessible to subjective experience and which only reveals itself to psychoanalytical acumen. See Alfred Schöpf, *Philosophische Grundlagen der Psychoanalyse: Eine wissenschaftshistorische und wissenschaftstheoretische Analyse* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2014), 38.

Subsequently, he relates the pathological profile of, say, combat stress to everyday life situations, for example when individuals are convinced they are pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some daemonic power. Freud argues:

> [W]e have come across people all of whose human relationships have the same outcome: such as the benefactor who is abandoned in anger after a time by each of his *protégés* […]; or the man whose friendships all end in betrayal by his friend; […] or, again, the lover each of whose love affairs with a woman passes through the same phases and reaches the same conclusion. (*P* 16)

According to Freud, such repetitions – which are indeed reminiscent of Werther's psychology – create a protective shield around the individual. Their purpose is to isolate the subject against further stimuli of the kind which, in the past, have breached the barrier of self-protection. Drawing on this observation, Freud formulates an abstract principle that allegedly applies to all living organisms: their behaviour is determined not only by the pleasure principle, but also by '*an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things* which the living entity has been obliged to abandon' (30, emphasis in the original). Aiming to return the subject's inner experience to the time prior to the traumatic shock, the impulse is to remove internal tension. But since all life can be considered in a state of constant tension, the death drive finds its fullest articulation in its tendency to restore an even earlier state of being – that is, the neutralisation of all life forces. Hence Freud's rather unconventional take on the goal of life:

> It must be an old state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*' and, looking backwards, that '*inanimate things existed before living ones*'. (32, emphasis in the original)

The aim of life is not simply to return to a more peaceful state in comparison with the present but death proper. As a consequence, Freud also characterises the death drive as the 'Nirvana principle' (50), a conceptual borrowing from Buddhist philosophy that reiterates Schopenhauer's invocation of historical death-affirmative philosophies. As a complement to the self-destructive aspects of the death drive, Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1930) envisions a different trajectory of the death drive, when the organism rids itself of inner tension by externalising such tensions. In this case, 'a portion of the instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness and destructiveness'[38] – that is, through death and murder. Overall, Freud's

[38] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953–74), vol. 21, 119.

conception of the death drive challenges psychoanalytic orthodoxy by relativising the pleasure principle, resulting in much controversy among his readers.[39]

Becoming inorganic

To explore the Wertherian death drive, the wide spectrum offered by Schopenhauer's and Freud's elaborations facilitates a more nuanced appreciation of the protagonists' self-destructive paths. When a character gravitates towards death, this can mean many things. According to Schopenhauer, the death drive finds expression in an intellectual process. Meanwhile, Freud portrays it as a hidden force that operates outside human cognition. In view of this incongruence, Korff's and Kamei's ideas about Werther's lucidity are easier to reconcile with Schopenhauer's concept. The implication is that the hero experiences a moment of quasi-anagnorisis, as he becomes cognisant of his own predicament. That said, the narrative does not justify the wholesale application of Schopenhauer's model, which would entail a precise moment in the narrative when Werther comes to this realisation. Is it after Lotte storms out from their embrace and he collapses on the floor? Or does he come to this conclusion in a much earlier passage, for example when Albert's return destroys his illusions of uncomplicated love? Or does the moment of anagnorisis even precede Werther's arrival in Wahlheim? Neither Korff nor Kamei elaborates on this point. Werther's dissatisfaction with his surroundings grows in intensity but never reaches a true threshold moment.

Perhaps in the absence of an explicit moment of anagnorisis, most portraits of the protagonist are more compatible with Freud's observations about the kind of behaviour that is guided by a hidden thanatological force, the so-called Nirvana principle. This drive, due to its muteness, precludes insight into one's actions. In particular, Freud's discussion of repetition compulsion features an example that is reminiscent of Goethe's hero, namely 'the lover each of whose love affairs with a woman passes through the same phases and reaches the same conclusion'. Indeed,

[39] In Freudian criticism, Freud's speculations have resulted in considerable disagreements. On the one hand, there is no consensus about how Freud conceives of the relationship between the death drive and the pleasure principle. Paul Ricœur's classical study speaks of them as the 'overlapping of two coextensive domains'. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 292. Meanwhile, Fátima Caropreso and Richard Simanke find that the two converge in a 'monism in which all instinct finally turns out to be death instinct'. Fátima Caropreso and Richard Theisen Simanke, 'Life and Death in Freudian Metapsychology: A Reappraisal of the Second Instinctual Dualism', in *On Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. by Salman Akhtar and Mary Kay O'Neil (London: Routledge, 2011), 86–107, 106. Furthermore, philosophers such as Havi Carel have criticised the concept as inconsistent. Accordingly, the organism's 'return to an earlier state' and aggressiveness relate to discrete drives that have nothing in common. Carel professes to salvage the explanatory power of the death drive by eliminating the former nexus: 'I suggest separating the Nirvana principle from aggression, discarding the obsolete Nirvana principle, and reconstructing the death drive as aggression with a particular emphasis on self-destructiveness.' Havi Carel, *Life and Death in Freud and Heidegger* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 5–6.

Lotte forms part of a series that also includes Werther's elderly friend, who dies prematurely, and Lady B, who complains that her mother advises her against mingling with him. His amorous choices reliably produce disappointments. Unknowingly, Werther gravitates towards self-destruction.

Regardless of the degree of lucidity underlying Werther's will to die, to highlight its impact on the narrative means to imagine him as inhabiting a world without salvation. It is true that his sufferings are also linked to an unyielding environment that thoroughly frustrates a sensitive soul such as Werther. In such cases, Werther's sufferings can transform into a positive force, as in the revolutionary *Werther*-inspired novels discussed in Chapter 3. Yet from the thanatological perspective, such hopes are just as pointless as the idea of finding happiness in love. After all, the ultimate source of suffering is Werther himself. The young man who proclaims, 'I turn within myself and find there a world […], and I smile and dream my way through the world' (9) must soon revise his harmonised ideas. The world resembles an abyss, a metaphor that indeed dominates the second part of the novel.[40] Inevitably, he also confronts an abyss during his melancholic wanderings, as a stormy, rain-soaked landscape perfectly aligns with his inner experience:

> With arms extended, I looked down into the yawning abyss, and cried, 'Down! Down!' For a moment I was lost in the intense delight of ending my sorrows and my sufferings by a plunge into that gulf! […] Oh, Wilhelm, how willingly would I have given up my human existence to merge with the wind, or to embrace the torrent! (*L* 70)

Viewed from the perspective of philosophical pessimism, this passage implies the idea of becoming inorganic once again. Transformed into wind, as he fantasises, he would be freed not only from corporal limitations, but also from emotional turmoil and pointless longing. Werther's fantasy of an incorporeal existence advances a poetic image of absolute freedom that implies the total annihilation of the self. In contrast to the banality of his theological views,[41] the mentioned passage offers an original take on the kind of mysticism that is difficult to discern from nihilism, as he hopes to become an inanimate object. In sum, the protagonist functions

[40] Werther's favourite metaphor, the abyss, reappears several times throughout the second part. See the letters dating from 12 and 18 August 1772, 15 November 1772 and 6 and 12 December 1772.

[41] Werther's theological views do not follow a coherent vision. Does he attribute the origin of disharmony in the world to the cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil, as Manichaean religions hold, or to a chaotic universe that lacks divine agency altogether? The answer does not matter. At the end, he finds solace in an Augustinian idea of salvation, hoping to release his 'imprisoned soul' (*L* 70). The implication is that all darkness originates in the human soul alone. Finally, the protagonist's improvised cosmology also includes the naive idea of God as a loving father to whom one can return after death: 'Here I am again, my father! Forgive me if I have shortened my journey to return before the appointed time!' (*L* 64).

as a vessel for a broad thanatological spectrum, where Schopenhauer's conscious volition and Freud's unfathomable drive coexist. In the light of the protagonist's fascination with death and his lukewarm faith in an afterlife, the criticism of the German clergy, Goeze and Ernesti, appears entirely plausible. Their idea that the book is 'an apology and recommendation of suicide' leads into the heart of the text, perhaps more so than sanguine readers, convinced by the protagonist's misconceptions about life, are willing to admit. From a Schopenhauerian perspective, Werther is a paragon of the dilemma that life, while full of allure and beauty, is not worth living. And from a Freudian perspective, he appears like a living example of man's innate desire to become inorganic, once again.

It is evident that Korff's and Kamei's thanatological interpretations, despite their shortcomings, are not outlandish examples of misunderstanding or over-interpretation but rather connect the book to a philosophical discourse on the questionable value of life. Criticism's uneasiness with this aspect is hardly a unique feature of Goethe studies but conforms with the questionable status of death-focused philosophies at large. In psychoanalysis, the death drive was – with the exception of Melanie Klein – rejected by analysts, who found its clinical applications highly contentious and criticised its bleak outlook on life.[42] The same tendency also shows in the legacy of Schopenhauer's work, as pessimism's fatalistic acquiescence to the wretchedness of existence conflicted with the grand projects, both liberal and socialist, concerning the transformation, development and progress of mankind in the 19th and 20th centuries.[43] The obvious exceptions to this rule are E. M. Cioran, who openly praised enlightened death as salvation;[44] Michel Foucault, who considered suicide both an act of political empowerment and an art form;[45] and David Benatar, who describes the act as possibly 'more rational than continuing to exist'.[46]

[42] See Carel, *Life and Death*, 3–4.

[43] For a brief portrait of the criticism heaped on Schopenhauer's pessimism, see Gerard Mannion, *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality: The Humble Path to Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2016), 12–15.

[44] In a representative passage, Cioran praises those individuals who assent to their own demise to neutralise the agony of their existence: 'No defeat, no victory disturbs them. Independent of the sun, they are self-sufficient: illuminated by Death.' See E. M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Arcade, 2013), 207–8.

[45] According to Foucault, suicide represents a form of resistance against the 'power of death which the sovereign alone […] had the right to exercise'. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 138. At the same time, he adopted a neo-Stoic perspective by claiming that there is 'no more beautiful form of conduct […] than suicide. It would be a case of working on one's suicide for all of one's life.' Michel Foucault, 'Conversation avec Werner Schroeter', in *Dits et Ecrits*, ed. by Daniel Defert and François Ewald, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), vol. 4, 251–60, 256.

[46] David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 219.

The French Romantics

The pessimism inside *Werther* became a key ingredient of the text's rewritings that subjected it to a grafting process that rendered the protagonist's death-driven behaviour starkly visible. This section discusses the strand of letters written by French Romantics, a lineage that includes Chateaubriand's *René* (1802), Senancour's *Obermann* (1804) and Constant's *Adolphe* (1816). Although comparative studies dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, intent on documenting Franco-German transcultural encounters, devoted considerable attention to this lineage, they show little inclination to focus on thanatological elements.[47] In recent years, the lineage has also been discussed by Bernard Dieterle, who elaborates on the continuity between Werther and different strands of reception in France, and Anna Sennefelder's study, which focuses on leisure as their overarching theme.[48] To emphasise the continuity between Goethe and authors such as Senancour challenges a habit that stands at the heart of German Germanistik, to place Goethe in pronounced opposition to the Romantics. From a European perspective, however, the poet plays a central role in the movement. Next to *Faust*, *Werther* is considered integral to its inventory of themes and motifs. Within this diffuse body of texts, however, an important distinction must be made between sentimental and thanatological *wertherisme*.

In Madame de Staël's case, borrowings from Goethe reveal themselves in the author's aesthetic ideals as well as in the tropes of her own novels, such as *Delphine* (1802).[49] Meanwhile, Stendhal's essay collection *On Love* (*De l'Amour*, 1822) also avoids taking note of the book's pessimism. The focus is on the protagonist's personal fulfilment in his pursuit of the sublime spectacle: 'Love *à la* Werther […] causes man to find happiness even without riches.'[50] The following three texts go

[47] Dating from the 1870s, Karl Hillebrand's study compares *wertherisme* to a disease that spread from Germany to France, two societies that were susceptible to this disease for different reasons. See Karl Hillebrand, 'Die Werther-Krankheit in Europa', in *Völker und Menschen: Auswahl aus dem Gesamtwerk 'Zeiten, Völker und Menschen'* (Strasbourg: Karl J. Trübner, 1914), 283–320. Meanwhile, Georg Brandes identifies them as 'literature of émigrés' (*Emigrantenliteratur*), a genealogy that is related to the emergence of political conservativism. See Georg Brandes, *Die Litteratur des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts in ihren Hauptströmungen*, 6 vols (Berlin: Veit, 1900), vol. 1, 5–117.

[48] See Bernard Dieterle, 'Wertherism and the Romantic Weltanschauung', in *Romantic Prose Fiction*, ed. by Gerald Gillespie, Manfred Engel and Bernard Dieterle (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008), 22–40; Anna Karina Sennefelder, *Rückzugsorte des Erzählens: Muße als Modus autobiographischer Selbstreflexion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

[49] De Staël exhibits an attitude towards *Werther* that is, while sympathetic to the protagonist's beautiful mind, dominated by a fascination with the book's author. Such replacement of Werther with Goethe – or, in de Staël's words, 'Werther-Goethe' – reiterate tropes that were discussed in Chapter 1 and are of little relevance for the study of thanatological Werthers. See Susanne Mildner, *L'Armour à la Werther: Liebeskonzeptionen bei Goethe, Villers, de Stael und Stendhal – Blickwechsel auf einen deutsch-französischen Mythos* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012), 128–88.

[50] Stendhal, *On Love*, trans. by Philip Sidney Woolf and Cecil N. Sidney Woolf (New York: Brentano's, 1915), 260–1, 254–5.

quite the opposite way. They put forward a grafted idea of Goethe's novel, in which interpersonal love plays a subordinate role. Instead, Ossianic moods, the tragic end and the protagonist's ennui take centre stage, thereby coupling the text with Catholic narratives of worldly transience and spiritual salvation.

René, a Catholic Werther (Chateaubriand)

Chateaubriand's *René* stands at the beginning of the text's thanatological reinterpretation. While the short novel 'updates *Werther* in an American setting',[51] the New World does not recommend itself as a refuge of liberty as seen in other French novels of the time.[52] With a protagonist who suffers from unfulfilled love, harbours suicidal thoughts and articulates his lamentation in highly aestheticised prose, Chateaubriand isolates familiar elements from the German text. This also applies to the typical blurring between literature and life, as the public imagination merged François-René (the author) and René (the protagonist) into a striking and colourful image, which Eléonore Zimmermann's 1959 study outlined as 'the classical picture of a short, elegant Chateaubriand with beautifully chiselled features and wind-blown hair, who stands alone, amidst the rocks, facing the ocean'. As a consequence, the 'lonely, misunderstood genius in dialogue with vastness'[53] dominated the reception of a text that is more complicated than this image suggests. In addition, the short text has a complex editorial history. First published independently in 1802, it was also included in the late prose poem *Les Natchez*, published in 1826. The author also provided a piece of self-commentary on *René* in his Christian treatises of the 1800s. As the following analysis will demonstrate, the author's editorial efforts were guided by the ambition to neutralise the kind of Wertherian death-fixation that makes the text relevant for the present study.

René commences with a mournful protagonist, who takes a ship to Louisiana, hoping to find spiritual refuge among the Natchez, an indigenous tribe. In the company of a European missionary and a local chief, he reflects on the extraordinary circumstances that nurtured his 'strange resolution to bury himself in the wilds of Louisiana'.[54] René's life confession consists of a nearly uninterrupted soliloquy

[51] Jean-Marie Roulin, 'François-René de Chateaubriand: Migrations and Revolution', in *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*, ed. by Paul Hamilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 52–68, 55.

[52] According to Seymour Drescher's classic study, the American Declaration of Independence 'aroused an almost religious fervor among French intellectuals and young nobles between 1775 and 1800'. This observation applies to Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, George Sand and many more. Seymour Drescher, 'America and French Romanticism during the July Monarchy', *American Quarterly* 11.1 (1959), 3–20.

[53] Eléonore M. Zimmermann, 'Re-Reading "René"', *The French Review* 32.3 (1959), 247–53, 248.

[54] Orig. 'l'étrange résolution de s'ensevelir dans les déserts de la Louisiane.' François-René de Chateaubriand, *Atala–René: Les Aventures du dernier Abencerage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 141. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *Ch*.

in front of a small audience, in which the first-person narrator's voice mimics the tone of sober reflection. But as he dives into his own past, the tone starts to oscillate between pathetic self-accusation and self-pity. He starts with his parents' early death and his separation from his sister Amélie. Unaware of her incestuous love for him, he is taken aback by her ostentatious coldness and departs for Greece and Rome, where, facing the ruins of the past, he finds the vanity of worldly life confirmed. After an unspecified change in politics – probably the overthrow of the Directory in 1799 – he returns to Paris, a decision he soon regrets: 'I willingly threw myself into a society which had nothing to say to me and could not figure me out. […] Neither elevated language, nor profound sentiment was asked of me, I was occupied with nothing else than shrinking myself to fit society's standard.'[55] Eventually, he realises that he has not a single friend and moans: 'Alas! Every hour spent among people opens a grave and makes tears flow. Soon that life which had at first delighted me became unbearable.'[56] Ennui overwhelms the young man, forcing him to retreat into the countryside, where solitude provides some distraction until the abyss of existential boredom opens again:

> That disgust toward life that I had felt since childhood returned with new force. Soon my heart no longer uplifted my thoughts, and I could not think about my own existence without a profound feeling of ennui.
>
> For some time, I struggled against my sickness but indifferently, lacking the firm resolve to overcome it. At last, unable to find a remedy for this strange wound in my heart, which was nowhere and everywhere, I resolved to end my life.[57]

Made aware of her brother's suicidal state, Amélie rushes to meet him. After she wrings the promise from him that he would never commit the sin of suicide, they rekindle their friendship until he learns that Amélie is about to take her vows. The ceremony of her initiation as a nun sends both into a paroxysm, as a quasi-erotic scene develops between them. Then, after her premature death, René realises: 'God had sent Amélie both to save and to punish me.'[58] This painful state of sorrow, however, gradually transforms into a sober mindset that allows him to accept life's misery as an unchangeable fact. René's confession ends abruptly. After patiently hearing out the young man's soliloquy, the priest scolds him for his excessive emotionality. The old native, the other listener, joins in and reminds

[55] Orig. 'Je voulus me jeter pendant quelque temps dans un monde qui ne me disait rien et qui ne m'entendait pas. […] Ce n'était ni un langage élevé, ni un sentiment profond qu'on demandait de moi. Je n'étais occupé qu'à rapetisser ma vie, pour la mettre au niveau de la société' (*Ch* 154–5).

[56] Orig. 'Hélas! chaque heure dans la société ouvre un tombeau, et fait couler des larmes. Cette vie, qui m'avait d'abord enchanté, ne tarda pas à me devenir insupportable' (*Ch* 156).

[57] Orig. 'Ce dégoût de la vie que j'avais ressenti dès mon enfance revenait avec une force nouvelle. Bientôt mon cœur ne fournit plus d'aliment à ma pensée, et je ne m'apercevais de mon existence que par un profond sentiment d'ennui. / Je luttai quelque temps contre mon mal, mais avec indifférence et sans avoir la ferme résolution de le vaincre. Enfin, ne pouvant trouver de remède à cette étrange blessure de mon cœur, qui n'était nulle part et qui était partout, je résolus de quitter la vie' (*Ch* 160).

[58] Orig. 'Dieu m'avait envoyé Amélie à la fois pour me sauver et pour me punir' (*Ch* 175).

René: '[Y]ou must renounce this freakish life which is filled with nothing but sorrow. There is only happiness in following the ordinary path.'[59] After the young man's assurance that he will change his ways, the reader learns that René and his two interlocutors died during an unspecified massacre.

Minding the allure of Rene's pitiful laments, Chateaubriand published his *Defence of the Genius of Christianity* (*Défense du Génie du Christianisme*, 1803)[60] with the intention of providing an authoritative interpretative frame for his novel. To counterbalance its death-besotted mood, this interpretation quite forcefully places the text within the context of the Christian doctrine of salvation. According to the author, *René* evinces 'a clear tendency to make readers cherish religion and to show its benefits',[61] specifically the benefits of monastic life for troubled people such as the protagonist and his sister. This is a surprising claim, especially in the light of the fate of Amélie, who falls terminally ill after only a few months as a nun. Chateaubriand also asserts his novel's connection to *Werther*, a novel that he dismisses as morally dubious:

> [In *René*] the author fights […] the weakness of young people of this century, a weakness that directly leads to suicide. Jean-Jacques Rousseau first introduced us to those disastrous and sinful reveries. By isolating himself from others and by surrendering to his dreams, he lured a crowd of young people into believing it is desirable to abandon oneself to the ripples of life. Afterwards, the novel *Werther* further developed this poisonous germ. The author of *The Genius of Christianity* [i.e. Chateaubriand] is obliged to include an apology for fleshing out a few scenes in this spirit. In fact, his intention was to denounce this kind of new vice and to elaborate on the sinister consequences of love that is exacerbated by solitude.[62]

Chateaubriand characterises people such as Werther and René as weak and in need of a cure. They are the products of the moral corruption pioneered in Rousseau's *Confessions*, the book that inaugurated the cult of aesthetic individualism, a malady that Chateaubriand finds can only be remedied by religion. Placed into the pious narrative of the individual soul's journey towards grace and salvation, René's aimless wandering is reframed as a quest for God. The protagonist thus becomes

[59] Orig. 'il faut que tu renonces à cette vie extraordinaire qui n'est pleine que de soucis: il n'y a de bonheur que dans les voies communes' (*Ch* 182).

[60] The text is a commentary on his own work *Genius of Christianity* (*Génie du Christianisme*) of 1802.

[61] Orig. 'une tendance visible à faire aimer la religion et à en démontrer l'utilité.' François-René de Chateaubriand, *Défense du Génie du Christianisme,* in *Œuvres complètes*, 4 vols (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1828), vol. 2, 699–718, 707.

[62] Orig. 'L'auteur y combat […] le travers particulier des jeunes gens du siècle, le travers qui mène directement au suicide. C'est J.-J. Rousseau qui introduisit le premier parmi nous ces rêveries si désastreuses et si coupables. En s'isolant des hommes, en s'abandonnant à ses songes, il a fait croire à une foule de jeunes gens qu'il est beau de se jeter ainsi dans le vague de la vie. Le roman de Werther a développé depuis ce germe de poison. L'auteur du Génie du Christianisme, obligé de faire entrer dans le cadre de son apologie quelques tableaux pour l'imagination, a voulu dénoncer cette espèce de vice nouveau et peindre les funestes conséquences de l'amour outré de la solitude.' Chateaubriand, *Défense*, 707.

emblematic of French society which, having lost its spiritual moorings in the wake of the revolution, is now in need of a Catholic renaissance. In this light, eccentric individuals such as René and Werther must not be regarded as exceptional humans but are, as Jean-Marie Roulin proposes, '*exempla* of the greatness and benefits of Catholicism'.[63]

Inserted into the *Natchez* cycle of 1826, Chateaubriand further advanced his Catholic interpretation of *René*. Rousseauian idealisations of nature – evident in René's exclamation: 'Happy Savages! Oh! Why can't I enjoy the peace that ever accompanies you!'[64] – are now replaced with Augustinian dualism. As both Indians and settlers are portrayed as possessed by evil, the fall of man dominates the narrative.[65]

Satanic rage

Chateaubriand does little to ironise the subjective excess of René. Addressing a reticent audience, the priest and the elder, in his self-imposed North American exile, the protagonist cannot blame the heat of the moment for nurturing the self-indulgent tone of his confession. Temporal distance from the events did not sober him up; on the contrary, he has cultivated a solipsistic worldview that persistently inverts inner reality and external observations. This shows most clearly in his description of Mount Etna. Recalling the travels of his youth, which also included the customary stay in Sicily, René waxes poetic about his own resemblance to the volcano:

> One day, *I* climbed to Etna's summit, a volcano burning in the middle of an island. *I* saw the sun rise in the immensity of horizon below *me*. Sicily was narrowing to a point at *my* feet, and the sea stretching into distant space. […] [T]his scene offers you an image of *his* character and *his* existence. That is how throughout *my* life *I* have envisioned a creation: at once immense and imperceptible, and an abyss yawning at *my* side.[66]

Strikingly, René's speech oscillates between first and third person. This effect not only facilitates the typical inversion of self and landscape, as the volcano's crater resembles the inner abyss and vice versa, but also marks René's determination to cast himself as an exceptional personality. Such fits of vanity are an

[63] Roulin, 'François-René', 60. Emphasis in the original.
[64] Orig. 'Heureux sauvages! Oh! que ne puis-je jouir de la paix qui vous accompagne toujours!' (*Ch* 152).
[65] See Roulin, 'François-René', 55.
[66] Orig. 'Un jour *j'*étais monté au sommet de l'Etna, volcan qui brûle au milieu d'une île. *Je* vis le soleil se lever dans l'immensité de l'horizon au-dessous de *moi*, la Sicile resserrée comme un point à mes pieds et la mer déroulée au loin dans les espaces. […] [C]e tableau vous offre l'image de *son* caractère et de *son* existence: c'est ainsi que toute *ma* vie *j'*ai eu devant les yeux une création à la fois immense et imperceptible et un abîme ouvert à mes côtés' (*Ch* 151–2). My emphasis, J. K.

integral effect of the text's aesthetic programme, which in fact undermines the author's alleged intention 'to elaborate on the disastrous consequences of love'. Surprisingly, critics rarely find this tension problematic. According to Sébastien Baudoin, Chateaubriand's literary style captivates the reader through an overload of imagery that aims to re-enchant the world: 'By invoking, summoning and transcribing reality according to his inner world, Chateaubriand achieves an alchemy of style that facilitates enchantment.'[67] Moreover, '[t]he poet knows how to grasp the totality of reality'.[68] Even the poet's references to Catholicism are discussed in affirmative terms, for example in Jean-Baptiste Amadieu's recent study.[69]

The text's unironic marriage of narrated self and narrator, however, has also attracted chiding criticism among historical readers of *René* who were more sceptical of the author's grandiloquent rhetoric. Speaking as one of the foremost commentators of French Romanticism, Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve addressed the 'charlatanesque' elements in Chateaubriand's literary work. Refusing to separate the author from literary personas such as René, Sainte-Beuve diagnosed the former's propensity to conceal his destructive impulses behind a cover of piety.[70] Chateaubriand's literary personas, argues the critic, are self-obsessed to a point that they are incapable of even acknowledging the existence of other individuals than themselves:

> M. de Chateaubriand's idea of love is directed at turmoil and dreams rather than at feeling affection toward such or such particular woman; there is no regard for a person who he pursues, his sole interest is in regret, memory, eternal dreaming, the cult of his own youth, the kind of adoration where he himself is the object, the renewal of a fantasy about a dear situation. What is considered *l'égoïsme à deux* is a solitary affair for him.[71]

There are considerable differences between René's alleged Christian awakening, which Sainte-Beuve safely ignores, and the morbid framework, which the critic considers central to understanding the Romantic's work. Under a thin layer of

[67] Orig. 'Invoquant, convoquant et retranscrivant la réalité à l'aune de son univers intérieur, Chateaubriand réalise une alchimie du style de l'ordre de l'enchantement.' Sébastien Baudoin, 'Écriture et magie dans l'œvre de Chateaubriand', *Les lettres romanes* 66.3/4 (2012), 529–46, 545–6.

[68] Orig. 'le poète sait saisir la totalité du réel.' Roulin, 'François-René', 546.

[69] See Jean-Baptiste Amadieu, 'Chateaubriand et la censure ecclésiastique', *Société Chateaubriand* 57 (2015), 105–17.

[70] For a nuanced analysis of Sainte-Beuve's inquiry into Chateaubriand's Romantic characters, see Christopher Prendergast, *The Classic: Sainte-Beuve and the Nineteenth-Century Culture Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 260–90.

[71] Orig. 'Ce que voulait M. de Chateaubriand dans l'amour, c'était moins l'affection de telle ou telle femme en particulier que l'occasion du trouble et du rêve, c'était moins la personne qu'il cherchait que le regret, le souvenir, le songe éternel, le culte de sa propre jeunesse, l'adoration dont il se sentait l'objet, le renouvellement ou l'illusion d'une situation chérie. Ce qu'on a appelé *de l'égoïsme à deux* restait chez lui de l'égoïsme à un seul.' Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, 'Chateaubriand romanesque et amoureux', in *Causeries du lundi*, 15 vols (Paris: Garnier frères, 1851–62), vol. 2, 143–62, 151. Emphasis in the original.

spirituality, argues Saint-Beuve, hides a deluded character who is not simply pathologically weak, like his German predecessor, but reveals a diabolic narcissism that goes as far as desiring the apocalyptic destruction of the world. Drawing on a particular scene in the sequel *Les Natchez*, in which René urges his native wife to follow him into death, Sainte-Beuve observes a typical pattern: 'That's how he [i.e. Chateaubriand] adds a new touch to passion, a new connotation that is fatal, mad, cruel but singularly poetic: he always brings in a pledge, a burning desire for the destruction and ruination of the world.'[72] The author's habit of returning to his favourite themes, death and destruction, and reverting to a 'specific satanic rage'[73] with epicurean joy represent the central ethos of his works. Chateaubriand's ostentatious Catholicism, argues Sainte-Beuve, conceals an *idée fixe*: death less as a gateway to salvation than as a source of joy.

Polemics aside, Sainte-Beuve's take on *René* is compatible with Freud's assertion of a universal death drive, a mute and unrelenting force. Condensed in a biographic tale, René's death drive sets into motion a spectacular project that involves both self-destructive impulses and aggression against the external world. On closer inspection, René's alleged piety becomes a mere distraction from his deeper-seated conviction that humans have little reason to praise God's creation. And that there is glory in its erasure.

At this point, one can detect an important distinction between the assessment of *René* and *Werther* in literary histories. Although both protagonists gravitate towards death and barely manage to conceal their death drives through hasty references to the Almighty, critics have judged their subjective excess differently. Observations that in Werther's case frequently incur negative judgement, especially in consideration of his solipsistic subjectivity, are a positive factor in the analysis of René. Only sardonic readers such as Sainte-Beuve spotted the traces of a sinister core that stubbornly resists integration into religious redemption. A possible explanation for this discrepancy is the lingering appeal of author-sanctioned interpretations, as both Goethe and Chateaubriand retrospectively sought to reclaim their texts' meaning: while the German poet condemned his early novels, his French successor asserted its compatibility with his later convictions. But there is also another reason for the greater tolerance for René's self-indulgent subjectivity. As the following subchapter shows, Chateaubriand and subsequent French Romantics built on an intellectual tradition that attributed more credibility to the pain of the suffering individual than the austere climate of the German Enlightenment.

[72] Orig. 'c'est ainsi qu'il a donné à la passion un nouvel accent, une note nouvelle, fatale, folle, cruelle, mais singulièrement poétique: il y fait toujours entrer un vœu, un désir ardent de destruction et de ruine du monde.' Sainte-Beuve, 'Chateaubriand', 153.

[73] Orig. 'une certaine rage satanique.' Sainte-Beuve, 'Chateaubriand', 155.

Ennui

On the surface, René's happiness is thwarted by the incest taboo which forbids him to consummate his love for Amélie. Amid the global success of sentimentalist letters, incest frequently resulted in tragic constellations, causing the promise of fulfilled love to turn into bitterness. Another example is William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy, or: The Triumph of Nature* (1789), an American epistolary novel that centres around the lovers Harriot and Harrington. First unaware of their kinship, they belatedly learn of the illicit nature of their bond. After their forced separation Harrington kills himself with a copy of *Werther* lying by his side.[74] The example of *The Power of Sympathy* highlights the lack of an exhaustive explanation for René's pain. For long periods, the protagonist does not occupy himself much with Amélie, supposedly the source of his sorrows. Only belatedly does he become aware that 'her soul possessed the same innocent graces as her body',[75] an observation that stirs his feeling so violently that he faints during her ordination as a nun. Since the bleakness of René's outlook on life cannot be explained away with linear cause and effect, it is worthwhile to relate his suffering to a cultural trope that precedes the love discourse of the late 18th century: ennui.

The cultural history of French ennui starts with Blaise Pascal's *Thoughts* (*Pensées*), above all Fragment 131, which reads as freshly today as in 1670, when the text was first published:

> Nothing is so insufferable to man as to be completely at rest, without passions, without business, without diversion, without study. He then feels his nothingness, his forlornness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his weakness, his emptiness. There will immediately arise from the depth of his heart weariness, gloom, sadness, fretfulness, vexation, despair.[76]

In Pascal's eyes, this dire situation applies to privileged and wretched members of society alike. As a Christian thinker, he arrives at the conclusion that ennui serves the higher purpose of guiding the godless back into the arms of God. Meanwhile, those who refuse to seek spiritual consolation are condemned to distract themselves with worldly entertainment. While Pascal's diagnosis of ennui passed the test of time, the growing secularisation of intellectual life, especially after the upheavals of the French Revolution, made his solution questionable and

[74] German 18th-century letters are also replete with tragic incest bonds. For a corpus of incest-related novels, see Michael Titzmann, 'Literarische Strukturen und kulturelles Wissen: Das Beispiel inzestuöser Situationen in der Erzählliteratur der Goethezeit und ihrer Funktionen im Denksystem der Epoche', in *Erzählte Kriminalität. Zur Typologie und Funktion von narrativen Darstellungen in Strafrechtspflege, Publizistik und Literatur zwischen 1770 und 1920*, ed. by Jörg Schönert, Konstantin Imm and Joachim Linder (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1991), 229–81, 278–81.

[75] Orig. 'son âme avait les mêmes graces innocents que son corps' (*Ch* 163).

[76] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. by W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 38.

left a vacuum that was filled by the aestheticism of the 19th century. According to Richard Scholar's analysis of the term, 'ennui mutated thereafter with succeeding shifts in literary sensibility all the way to the *fin de siècle*'.[77] While the treatments of such symptoms vary considerably between Pascal and the Romantics, the symptoms indicate a continued experience of existential pain. As Georges Minois's comprehensive study of *mal de vivre* demonstrates, the dismissive view of existence goes by many terms, including *taedium vitae*, melancholia, *acedia*, pessimism, ennui, spleen, despair, depression, nihilism and nausea. Ultimately, all these terms address a shared phenomenon across time and cultures.[78] As the quote from *Oedipus at Colonus* already suggested at the beginning of this chapter, there lies considerable discomfort in being human.

Despite these general terms, the ennui of the Romantics features a number of specific traits. In contrast to Chateaubriand's self-interpretation, which follows in Pascal's footsteps, Senancour and Constant hesitated to invoke Catholicism as an answer to the spiritual crises of the 19th century. To them, ennui is the emotional marker of a crisis that goes unmitigated for a lack of convincing solutions. In contrast to the political agitation seen in revolutionary *Werther* reinterpretations, this set of texts abstains from committing to any socialist or patriotic agenda.

Obermann's ascetic nihilism (Senancour)

Next to *René*, the other French text that most visibly transplants Wertherian motifs into a dark Romantic setting is Senancour's *Obermann*. The epistolary novel features the letters of a young man who retreats from social life at the tender age of twenty-one. Reminiscent of Werther's escape from the city and René's frustration with Paris, he can no longer bear society: 'I saw that I was out of harmony with society, that my needs were not in touch with its handiwork. I checked myself with terror, feeling that I was on the verge of giving up my life to intolerable weariness, to a loathing without aim and without end.'[79] Following Rousseau's solitary walker, as prefigured in *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (*Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, 1776–8), to Switzerland, he hopes to revel in nature's 'romantic effects

[77] Richard Scholar speculates: 'How is the writer to respond to the threat of ennui? While one response is to lapse into an exhausted silence, of course, another is to search for expressive forms for coming to terms with that threat.' Richard Scholar, 'Ennui', in *Émigrés: French Words that Turned English* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 130–64, 139.

[78] See Georges Minois, *Histoire du mal de vivre: De la mélancolie à la depression* (Paris: Éditions de la Martinière, 2003).

[79] Etienne Pivert de Senancour, *Obermann: Selections from Letters to a Friend*, trans. by Jessie Peabody Frothingham, 2 vols (Cambridge: Riverside, 1901), vol. 1, 6. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *O*.

[which] alone keep fresh in our hearts the bloom of youth and the springtime of life' (*O* II, 9). Here, he finds in the Alps' icy peaks the perfect emblem of his desire to choke off his will to live. After a while, however, the charm of this spectacular backdrop wears off. Time and again, his disgust for the world reappears, and so he laments: 'Why is the earth thus disenchanted to my eyes? It is not satiety that I feel; on all sides I find a void' (*O* II, 6). The text repeatedly discusses suicide as an option but, perhaps lacking an immediate occasion, ultimately eschews this drastic solution. The last pages of the book conclude with the complaint that already inaugurated Obermann's journey: 'Nothing occupies me, nothing interests me; I still feel as though I were suspended in the void' (*O* II, 187). There is certainly a comic aspect to such repetitiveness, yet the text features no stylistic signals that hint at humorous undercurrents.

The narrative takes the form of a diary that remains consistently unfazed by recent events. Obermann also observes great restraint when relating the events that shaped his life. While the first part abounds with meditations on life's pointlessness in rather abstract terms, the second part warily starts to address the tangible reasons behind Obermann's retreat from society. In his happy days, the reader learns, he pursued the girl who would later become Madame Del***. Despite the harmony of their souls, life had different plans for both. The letter writer reflects on their first re-encounter after the separation: 'We did not refer to her husband; you may remember that he is thirty years her senior, and that he is a financier, very wise on the subject of money, but wholly ignorant of everything else. Unfortunate woman! Hers is a wasted life' (*O* II, 20). But the reader would be mistaken to take Monsieur Del*** for the equivalent of Albert, the 'worthy man' (*L* 18) to whom Lotte is tied for good. In fact, during their second visit, Obermann learns that her life circumstances have changed considerably: she is now a widow. Technically, this should allow them to rekindle their love, but for Obermann this is not an option because disenchantment with life has taken on a life of its own. He wonders:

> Can the deceptive allurement of a fruitless love be worthy of man? By devoting the faculties of our being to pleasure alone, we abandon ourselves to eternal death. […] Are we made to enjoy in this life the allurements of our passions? After the gratification of our desires what boast could we make of the pleasure of a day? If that is life, then life is naught. One year, ten years of indulgence is a profitless amusement, and too swift-coming bitterness. (*O* II, 187)

Such sententious declarations are representative of the literary style of Senancour's book. Like Chateaubriand's *René*, an elegiac tone dominates the narration but without indulging in the same grandiloquence. That said, there are isolated passages that stylistically depart from this dejected tone and invoke the style of *Werther*, for example when the letter writer recalls his own mindset prior to his renunciation of the world in the 75th letter. His melancholy description of spring is suddenly

interrupted by an explosive passage. In Peabody Frothingham's 1901 translation, this segment is rendered nearly word for word:

> Season of joy! For me the beautiful days are profitless, the soft nights are full of gall. Peace of the shadows! dash of the waves! silence! moon! birds that sang in the night! sentiment of youth! [whither] have ye flown? (*O* II, 104)[80]

After this passage, the letter writer restrains his register again, returning to his habitual statements about the vanity of existence. In contrast to Werther, Jacopo and René, Obermann successfully keeps all upsurges of hopefulness and passionate longing in check.

Facing so much bitterness, one wonders which solution Senancour has in mind for his protagonist's *mal du vivre*. Obermann does not end his life but spends his joyless days writing letters to the anonymous recipient and in the company of Fonsalbe, the brother of his beloved who himself is a victim of disillusion. This pair of dejected young men finds solace by reminding each other to carry on in the face of nothingness. United by their shattered hopes, they vow to renounce every impulse that could create a bond between themselves and their surroundings. Like Werther and René, their favourite landscape spot is a precipice, in this case a viewpoint that overlooks the rapids of a river. To them, this scenery is an emblem of life as such, reminding them of the imperative to exert self-control:

> [Fonsalbe and I] walked to and fro between the cataract and the road. We agreed that a man of strong organization may have no actual passion […], and that men thus organized have often existed, sometimes among rulers of the people, or among magi and gymnosophists, sometimes among true and faithful believers in certain religions, such as Christianity, Islamism, and Buddhism. (*O* II, 145)

Obermann invokes the ideal of a disillusioned state of mind, as pursued by the mystic strands of the world religions, though without seeking solace in transcendence. Senancour's protagonist stresses that he has no interest in discussing the 'incomprehensible questions' (*O* I, 132) of religion, such as the scandalous dissonance between God's perfect creation and its wretchedness. Unfazed by the soothing prospect of salvation, Obermann regards ascetism, a value more commonly found among the faithful than among worldly-minded people, as a formidable way of inhabiting the world. Despite the Stoic ring, his view steers clear of the positive values that are commonly associated with personal virtue ethics, such as bravery and justice. Obermann focuses on self-control merely to avoid disappointment. Werther's desire to achieve oneness with the world transforms into the asceticism of a nihilist.

[80] The original reads: 'Saison heureuse! Les beaux jours me sont inutiles, les douces nuits me sont amères. Paix des ombrages! brisement des vagues! silence! lune! oiseaux qui chantiez dans la nuit! sentiniens des jeunes années, qu'êtes-vous devenus?' Etienne Pivert de Senancour, *Obermann: Édition critique* (Paris: Hachette, 1913), 147.

Senancour's unvarnished portrait of the individual's dire prospects of reaching a tolerable state of mind is reminiscent of Schopenhauer, who also claimed that resignation, 'the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will', is desirable. Schopenhauer also highlighted the continued relevance of Christianity and Buddhism without subscribing to their metaphysical speculation. In view of such parallels, scholars have drawn attention to the philosophical correspondences between the German thinker and the French poet, even though they never met and probably were ignorant of each other's works.[81] Regardless of the world's provision of eternal pain and disappointment, both applaud those who withdraw from human affairs or, alternatively, lead an ascetic life far from the bustle of the city. Senancour knows: 'A great man not only has not a passion for woman, for play, for wine, but I hold that he is not even ambitious' (*O* I, 147).

Senancour's novel stands at odds with the stylistic features that make *Werther* such a remarkable read. Those isolated passages of passionate exclamation in *Obermann* – 'Peace of the shadows! dash of the waves! silence! moon!' – cannot compensate for the book's sententious gravitas. Addressing its tranquil, if not boring, tone, Joseph Moreau argues that 'reading *Obermann* requires patient attention, which discourages many readers. After having no success in its first edition and only reaching a wider audience after 1830, the book is nearly forgotten today.'[82] Yet Obermann's ascetic nihilism represents an opportunity to appreciate an aspect of Werther that is often ignored – his personality at the onset of the novel. After taking refuge from city life in rural Wahlheim, he reflects on the passions that he has abjured, notably the traumatic loss of his elderly female friend. Writing his letters in a hermitage amid natural surroundings, his worldview oscillates between hopeful tranquillity and misanthropic indifference. His distanced comments about his environment articulate a pessimistic anthropology:

> [T]hose are happiest who, like children, live for the day, amuse themselves with their dolls, dress and undress them, and eagerly watch the cupboard where Mother has locked up her sweets; and when at last they get what they want, eat it greedily and exclaim, 'More!' These are certainly happy creatures; and so are those others who dignify their paltry employments, and sometimes even their passions, with high-sounding phrases, representing them to mankind as gigantic achievements performed for their welfare and glory. Happy the man who can be like this! (*L* 9–10)

This meditation culminates in Werther's idea of a man who 'preserves in his heart the sweet feeling of liberty, and knows that he can quit this prison whenever he

[81] See Joachim Merlant, *Sénancour (1770–1846): Sa vie, son oeuvre, son influence* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), 104.

[82] Orig. 'La lecture d'Obermann demande une attention patiente, qui décourage bien des lecteurs, de sorte que l'ouvrage, qui n'eut pas lors de sa première édition un succès éclatant, auquel il n'atteignit qu'après 1830, est de nos jours à peu près oublié.' Joseph Moreau, '"Obermann" de Senancour: De la critique rationaliste à l'ouverture métaphysique', *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé Année* 2 (1980), 218–30, 218.

likes' (*L* 10). This mindset prefigures the worldview that ennui-afflicted Romantics across the Rhine would later cultivate: renunciation of the world *sans* transcendental escape routes. Life is only bearable as long as one can remind oneself of the substances, ropes or pistols that can end it. A few days later, however, Werther's detached perspective is interrupted by the sight of Lotte cutting bread. What distinguishes him from Obermann is not so much a different outlook on the world but temperament. Although he has already tasted the bitterness of life, Werther cannot resist immersing himself in yet another passion.

Adolphe's postcoital ennui (Constant)

At first glance, Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*, written around 1806 and published in 1816, does not fit the profile of a Wertherian novel. At its conclusion, it is not the eponymous hero who commits suicide but Ellenore, his beloved. And yet Adolphe's memoirs abound with self-reproach and indecisiveness alongside a characteristic *fascination pour soi-même*. As one of the most poignant rewritings of Goethe's novel, it faces the protagonist with a scenario that is rare within the *Werther* nursery: the coincidence of sentimental love and sexual fulfilment.

As in Chateaubriand's René, the first-person narrator indulges in lengthy reflections on his circumstances. Even as the narrative follows the events as they occur, the general tone is one of self-pity, self-accusation and loss. Adolphe's initial misanthropy resembles that of the freshly arrived visitor in Wahlheim in many respects. He is a twenty-two-year-old aristocrat who, having just graduated from university, speaks from a perspective of precocious maturity and melodramatic solitude. At such a tender age, he already looks back at a life marred by self-doubt, missed opportunities and, as he repeatedly states, extraordinary vanity. He traces his long-standing melancholy to an early experience of loss: 'This universal apathy of mine had been deepened by the thought of death which had haunted me from my earliest years. [….] When I was seventeen I had witnessed the death of an aged woman whose remarkable and highly original mind had begun to influence my own.'[83] Like Werther's elderly female friend, who also passed away prematurely, this woman had a lasting impact on Adolphe's inner development. Devastated by her loss, he started to derive aesthetic enjoyment primarily from 'the poets who dwelt upon the transitoriness of human life' (*A* 40). It is safe to assume that Ossianic song formed part of his reading list. In contrast to Werther, however, who falls in love with Lotte rather spontaneously, Adolphe purposely seeks someone to love, hoping that amorous feelings will remedy his melancholic state of mind: 'In my state of vague emotional torment I decided that I wanted to be loved, and

[83] Benjamin Constant, *Adolphe*, trans. by Leonard Tancock (London: Penguin, 1985), 39. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *A*.

looked about me. But I saw nobody who inspired love in me or looked likely to feel any' (*A* 39). The situation changes when Count P—, a relative, introduces him to his mistress.

Ellenore, at the beginning of the novel already in her thirties and the mother of two children, is the daughter of deceased Polish aristocrats, who had lived in exile before their deaths. When she meets Adolphe, she is living in concubinage with Count P—, but since their relationship is on an unequal footing, Ellenore soon warms to Adolphe's advances. His affection offers the promise of a more balanced relationship. Eventually, she leaves the count and their illegitimate children, somewhat to the embarrassment of Adolphe, who had thought of their affair in less absolute terms. Anxious not to hurt her feelings, however, he complies, and they elope together and settle down in Poland. Eventually, after years of endless quarrelling, he resolves to leave her. Shocked by his betrayal, she suffers a breakdown and dies a few days later. In his concluding remarks, the editor points out that 'Adolphe has since been punished for his character by his very character, that he has kept to no fixed path, adopted no useful career, that he had used up his gifts with no sense of direction beyond mere caprice'. The story of Adolphe's life, argues the editor, illustrates the idea that '[c]ircumstances are quite unimportant, character is everything' (*A* 125). How this snippet of Stoic wisdom should provide a satisfactory explanation for the hero's life, however, is left to the reader's imagination. Conversely, Adolphe's ceaseless stream of self-doubt and irresolution provides little information about the text's purpose.

In view of Adolphe, critics have established a positive connection between his personal affliction and socio-political issues. Joshua Landy, for example, argues that Constant sets out to expose the incompatibility of Rousseau's confessional project and the soul's inner dividedness, placing the 'relentless, comprehensive, paralyzing doubt'[84] at the heart of the narration that befalls the individual in the post-revolutionary world after 1789. In the same vein, Melanie Conroy wonders how Constant's political treatises, such as *On Political Reactions* (*Des réactions politiques*, 1796), relate to the novel. She finds that Adolphe, who rejects all social norms and tries to be utterly modern, is unable to find a moral compass outside traditional systems.[85] Instead of treating the protagonist's mental state of doubt and paralysis as an indication of an incurable, pathological deficit, both Landy and Conroy find that it points to something more comprehensive. After the collapse of the *Ancien Régime* and the value systems that accompanied monarchic rule, the world has become destabilised for good. While Chateaubriand could make himself believe that a return to the certainties of the past is desirable, Constant's

[84] Joshua Landy, 'The Abyss of Freedom: Legitimacy, Unity, and Irony in Constant's *Adolphe*', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 37.3/4 (2009), 193–213, 193.
[85] See Melanie Conroy, 'Spontaneity and Moral Certainty in Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 40.3/4 (2012), 222–38, 223.

Adolphe is a truer inhabitant of the new secular age. Not having yet reached an Obermannian detachment, he still hopes that salvation lies in the promise of sentimental love. While Constant's political thought certainly plays a role in *Adolphe*, the protagonist's struggle with the modern condition deserves to be taken at face value – as a question that concerns the possibility of love.

At first, it appears that the greatest source of this-worldly happiness, sentimental love, is attainable to Adolphe. To this end, he observes a set of routines of amorous rapture. When not reading English poets with Ellenore or going for walks with her, he writes passionate letters in which he addresses her in sacred terms. He also resorts to melodramatic gestures, such as throwing himself to the floor in protest against her indifference. In retrospect, Adolphe notes that he purposefully immersed himself in the customary activities of lovers, such as writing passionate letters:

> My long drawn out battle against my own character […] and my doubts about my chances of success all combined to tinge my letter with an emotional colour scarcely distinguishable from love. And indeed, warmed up as I was by my own rhetoric, by the time I had finished writing I really felt some of the passion I had been at such pains to express. (*A* 51)

Constant's emphasis on the fragility of amorous feelings – resembling faint embers rather than blazing fires – recalls Werther's letter dating from 29 July 1772, when he starts to wax melodramatic about his love for Lotte, then closes abruptly: 'I have been interrupted by an insufferable visitor. I have dried my tears; my thoughts are elsewhere' (*L* 53). Haverkamp, as discussed in Chapter 1, granted this scene a central role, concluding that the lover's feelings are a mere product of letter-writing.

For Constant's novel, this observation is of great value. In view of the dynamics of the protagonist's inner life, Tzvetan Todorov has already singled out that Adolphe merely talks himself into his passion, to the effect that his shaky infatuation spoils the triumph of his courtship.[86] At first, Adolphe celebrates his conquest, exclaiming triumphantly: 'I loved and respected Ellenore a thousand times more after she had given herself to me. […] I eagerly went out to meet nature and thank her for the immense and unhoped-for gift she had deigned to bestow on me' (*A* 62). After some time, however, he shares the satiety of Don Juan, though without the latter's ability to move on after each conquest. Instead, he finds himself dragged into a vortex of self-reproach and pity for Ellenore. At this point, Adolphe's meandering thoughts emulate a familiar pattern of indecision, the Either–Or formula. In the case of Werther, this formula indicated a situation when two logical options are true: he does have hopes, *and* he does not. Adolphe's case is different: he must leave Ellenore, *and* he cannot bring himself to hurt her.

[86] See Tzvetan Todorov, *Benjamin Constant: la passion democratique* (Paris: Hachette, 1997), 135–9.

While Werther's Either–Or situation causes unhappiness by preventing him taking choices, Adolphe arrives at this bifurcation *after* taking action – that is, after becoming Ellenore's lover. From then on, his thoughts are caught in a vortex:

> And so I went back to Ellenore, thinking I was unshakeable in my determination to […] declare my love for her was dead. 'My dear', I said, 'we can struggle on for a time against our destiny, but in the end it has to be accepted. The laws of society are stronger than the will of men […]. I cannot go on keeping you in a situation as humiliating for you as for me. I cannot do this for your sake or mine.' While I was speaking, without looking at Ellenore, I could feel my ideas getting more and more confused and my resolution weakening. […] She made as if to leave me, but staggered. I tried to hold her, but she fell senseless at my feet. I raised her up, kissed her, and brought her back to consciousness. 'Ellenore', I cried, 'come back, back to yourself and me. I love you with true love, with the most tender love.' (*A* 85–6)

Conroy's study considers such sudden changes of mind as an integral structural feature of Adolphe's inability to think logically. The cascading syntax of his writing follows a repetitive pattern: 'First Adolphe thinks of his current emotions, then "les sentiments contraires." […] Even when it builds to a crescendo, another shift in perspective cannot be far off. More worryingly still, it embeds multiple points of view without synthesizing them.'[87] Implicit in Conroy's diagnosis is a cure for the young man's paralysis. Drawing on a concept that Constant has articulated in his philosophical writings, she recommends that Adolphe mediate between abstraction and everyday life through intermediary principles ('principes intermédiaires'). This proposition reinforces the perspective of the text's fictional editor, who asserts that 'character is everything', yet this viewpoint ignores the anthropological problem that discussions of ennui capture so well. Certainly, for someone who subscribes to Enlightenment values and who believes in the advancement of civilisation through rationalism alone, intermediary principles could provide sufficient guidance. But for someone whose reality is grounded in Pascal's observation that '[n]othing is so insufferable to man as to be completely at rest, without passions, without business, without diversion, without study' and that in such circumstance 'he then feels his nothingness, his forlornness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his weakness, his emptiness', intermediary principles will have little effect on his mental ability to act more prudently. After all, Adolphe's original motivation to throw himself into a vortex of contradictory emotions serves the purpose of distraction. Aware of his own morbid fascination with death, his career as a lover gravitates around the observation that desperate measures, such as suicide, are possibly the only solution for human disquiet.

Against this backdrop, it becomes evident that the protagonist's affair with Ellenore helps to prevent the young man from falling back into a 'universal apathy'

[87] Conroy, 'Spontaneity', 227.

and the recurring 'thought of death'. For the duration of their relationship, he must no longer browse through tomes of melancholic poetry. Towards the end of their relationship, however, his death-fixated thoughts reappear, proving that there is no escape from the insights that have driven Obermann to abandon all hopes of finding happiness. Adolphe sighs: 'Ah, enough of these useless struggles! […] The thought of death has always had great power over me. In my keenest afflictions it has always sufficed to calm me at once, and now it produced its usual effect upon my soul' (*A* 97). After Ellenore's pitiful death, the narrative ends but Adolphe's life continues. Will he now pay heed to the editor's voice or transform into a dispassionate 'man of strong organization' who sublimates all ambition? Since the editor assures the reader that Adolphe was 'punished for his character by his very character', this is unlikely. Instead, he seems prone to repeat the initial situation of the novel once more. Given to melancholy after the loss of his greatest love, he hopes to overcome his sorrows by falling in love with another woman. In this light, it could appear that ascetism and one's commitment to distraction are not that different after all. They both articulate the same kind of existential despair.

Observations on the French lineage

According to French Wertherian texts, one should not overstate the relevance of romantic love for a joyful life. In fact, a person's prospect for happiness is lastingly compromised by giving in to false hopes. In Chateaubriand's novel, René is driven to despair by his incestuous love for Amélie; in Senancour's novel, Obermann's widowed Madame Del***, who had been married off to another man, cannot remedy past injury; and Adolphe despairs over his fickle feelings for Ellenore that provide mere distraction instead of salvation. Possibly the most shocking aspect of Constant's novel is the insight that it makes no difference whether a lover succeeds or fails to fulfil his desire. It turns out that a successful suitor suffers from the same weariness of life that plagues the others. Love can only temporarily prevent those young men from realising the meaninglessness of life. After Pascal's pious solution to this dilemma became obsolete, the hope for a joyful existence could no longer be deferred to an afterlife but needed to be situated within this-worldly immanence. According to French Wertherian writing, whether one follows Werther's example by cutting the thread of life or hangs on to it like a dying person is simply a matter of personal preference. To overcome suffering is not simply a question of waiting until personal growth renders such questions obsolete, as the later Goethe made his readers believe, but rather of accepting life in a barren world.

Apart from such uncompromising insights, thanatological *Werther* rewritings evince a somewhat surprising conservatism. Regardless of the changed circumstances after 1789, Chateaubriand, Senancour and Constant do not contaminate

their plots with socio-political agendas. While Foscolo's rewriting embedded Jacopo's suffering in a programmatic pre-Risorgimento setting, Chateaubriand's René does not mention the circumstances that facilitate his return to Paris. He would not dream of digressing from his self-centred laments by elaborating on the 'nincompoops, scoundrels and villains' whom Jacopo accuses of betraying Italy. Neither Obermann nor Adolphe connects their individual lives with the fates of their nations. The only indication that things are not well in the protagonists' homelands is that they consistently recede from Paris, the centre of French cultural and intellectual life, in favour of rural surroundings, such as René's America, Obermann's Switzerland and Adolphe's Poland. That said, those young men do not simply form part of toxic peer groups, penniless aristocrats with a hang-up for narcissistic monologue, but are metonymic for post-revolutionary society at large.

Such abstinence from socio-political commentary is surprising in the light of the biographies of all three authors, whose lives were defined by the experience of political exile. Senancour found himself exiled during the French Revolution, and Constant was banned from Paris during the reign of Napoleon. In the case of Chateaubriand, who as a nobleman also found himself exiled during the French Revolution, Roulin goes as far as stating that his Romanticism is 'inseparable from [his] political life and history'.[88] Chateaubriand's return to France would eventually culminate in the opposite ascetic withdrawal: he was appointed the Foreign Minister of France. Yet all three authors carefully avoid referencing political events; instead, they portray suffering in the world as the *conditio humana*. Since there is no escape from the iron laws of reality, one can only seek alleviation, not salvation.

In literary history, the topical nexus of retreat from society, suicidal thoughts and relentless ennui did not end with Werther's French revenants but developed a life of its own in *décadence* literature. In this context, Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Against the Grain* (*À rebours*, 1884) and André Gide's *Notebooks of André Walter* (*Les Cahiers d'André Walter*, 1890) represent the final ripples of *Werther*'s impact on the French lineage. In these texts, the editorial frames disappear along with the flimsy moral messages of the discussed novels, facilitating a luxuriant aestheticism replete with irony and elitist gestures. Inheriting the grandiloquence of René, Obermann's serenity and Adolphe's stubbornness, Huysmans and Gide redeem Korff's notion of a Werther who embraces 'the world-building power of the subject'.

The lineage that connects *Werther* to French Romanticism ends here, as the set of shared features thins out considerably. Jean des Esseintes, Huysmans's ennui-ridden aesthete, no longer retreats from society into wilderness but creates his splendid refuge on the margins of the bustling city of Paris, where he embarks on bizarre intellectual and artistic projects. Rather than tiring himself writing letters,

[88] Roulin, 'François-René de Chateaubriand', 58.

a third-person narrator puts an end to the confessional project. And most importantly, *décadence* writers depart from the rational order that, despite all subjective excesses, holds together the *Werther* nursery. From this point on, the disintegrating forces of the death drive find new modes of aesthetic expression and dissolve into proto-surreal scenes that no longer observe the unity of action.

Modern Japanese suicides

In Europe, the success of *Werther* in French and English letters came with exoticist undertones. Stendhal, for example, considered 'love *à la Werther*[,] in which a man has no idea where he is going',[89] as an ideal that contrasts favourably with the type of love practised elsewhere. Unafraid of generalisations, Stendhal stated that while Italians exhaust their feelings in mere passion and the French in plain vanity, 'the good and simple descendants of the ancient Germans are assuredly creatures of imagination'.[90] Considering German love to be the most congenial, the French author ostentatiously identified with the protagonist of Goethe's novel.[91]

One can expect that the book's exotic appeal was even more pronounced in Japan. And yet it was consistently read in a way that ignored the frictions between the German novel and the Japanese literary field. According to Kamei Katsuichirō's *Education of Man*, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, *Werther* shows that 'the most beautiful moment of life – that is, love – blossoms in the proximity of death'; after all, 'truth lies in one's own annihilation'. Regardless of scholarly reservations about such idiosyncratic views, Kamei's interpretation is consistent with the general trajectory of literary adaptations and continuations of *Werther* by Japanese writers during the 20th century. One of the most obvious choices for a comparison, Yoichi Nakagawa's *A Moonflower in Heaven* (天の夕顔 Ten no yūgao, 1938), relates a tale of unfulfilled love, in which a lover waits for twenty years for the consummation of his relationship with his beloved, only for her to die on the day of their awaited reunion. Since the purity of their love is not challenged at any point, Yoichi's book resembles German or English sentimental rewritings of Goethe's book. The texts that are most congenial to the French thanatological lineage are Sōseki Natsume's *Kokoro* (こころ, 1914) and Dazai Osamu's *No Longer Human* (人間失格 Ningen shikkaku, 1948), which provide compelling variations on the bleak themes and motifs of Wertherian literature.

[89] Stendhal, *On Love*, 113.
[90] Stendhal, *On Love*, 184.
[91] After reading the book in French translation, Stendhal writes in Franco-English macaronic: 'Si j'osais writ as I pense, I did writ as this youngman.' Stendhal, *Oeuvres intimes*, 2 vols (Paris: Pléiade, 1981–2), vol. 1, 194.

Just like in China and Korea, *Werther* was embraced as an integral part of the Western literary canon in Japan. Amid the dizzying speed of reform enforced across the country after 1868, the works of foreign poets and writers entered the country as a by-product of administrative and military reform.[92] Unlike their East Asian neighbours, Japanese writers had no great interest in identifying the sorrows of Werther as a cue for socio-political reform. Instead, foreign works offered the possibility to address the psychological conflicts that typically play out in a modern society in a more direct way than traditional Japanese literature allowed.

In Japanese studies, the tension between Western models and their local appropriation has received considerable attention. Generally speaking, there exist three possibilities for framing this encounter. On the one hand, scholars such as Rachael Hutchinson have found that Japanese writers developed a sense of unease with occidental influences early on: 'Far from being a discourse dominated by […] exoticist yearning for the Other in terms of "gap theory", Meiji literature is often very critically aware and distanced from the supposed "object of desire." '[93] On the other hand, individual accounts of the reception of *Werther* in Japan highlight the novel's impact on Japanese audiences. Miyashita Keizo states:

> Like young people of all ages they felt an agonising thirst for mental liberation because the superficially dizzying speed of modernization remained tied to tradition and pragmatism, despite all those new trends. […] Immersed in a feeling that can be called *Weltschmerz*, students read *Werther* and identified with the young hero.[94]

The mentioned students – one can think of Kamei – eventually turned into critics and writers. In view of the text's success among the Japanese Romantic School (日本浪曼派 Nihon romanha), Kevin M. Doak makes a similar argument: 'Werther's dilemma is not the exclusive property of the West […] but belongs to every Japanese who has tried to come to terms with the origin of his own modernity.'[95]

[92] The aim of Meiji Restoration, condensed in the formula *fukoku kyōhei* (富国強兵), initially emphasised the assimilation of occidental law, state theory, economics and statistics. Criticising such one-dimensional intellectual transfer, personalities such as Fukuzawa Yukichi insisted that modernisation should also coincide with a fundamental change in values and ways of thinking. See Roy Starrs, *Modernism and Japanese Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 23–4; Inoue Katsuhito, 'The Philosophical World of Meiji Japan: The Philosophy of Organism and Its Genealogy', *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* 1 (2016), 9–30.

[93] Rachael Hutchinson, 'Who Holds the Whip? Power and Critique in Nagai Kafu's Tales of America', in *Representing the Other in Modern Japanese Literature: A Critical Approach*, ed. by Rachael Hutchinson and Mark Williams (London: Routledge, 2007), 57–74, 58–9.

[94] Orig. 'Wie junge Leute aller Zeiten verspürten sie [d.i. Universitätsstudenten] einen quälenden Durst nach geistiger Befreiung, weil die an der Oberfläche schwindelerregend rasche Modernisierung bei allen neuen Strömungen im Grunde von Traditionen und Pragmatismus beherrscht war. […] Mit einem Gefühl, das man wohl Weltschmerz nennen darf, las man den "Werther" und fühlte sich mit dem jungen Helden geistig identisch.' Miyashita Keizo, 'Die Attraktivität von Poesie und Bildung: Wie die Japaner den Zauber der deutschen Literatur entdeckten', *Doitsu Bungaku* 100 (1998), 36–45, 38.

[95] Kevin Michael Doak, *Dreams of Difference: The Japan Romantic School and the Crisis of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 18.

There is a considerable discrepancy between Hutchinson's postcolonial stance, which plays down direct Western influences, and Miyashita and Doak's stress on the impact of *Werther* on Japanese letters. Arguably, both claims are excessively reductive and fail to take into account the bidirectional complexity of cross-cultural grafting. The saturation of Japanese literature with intertextual references to Western novels and poetry clashes with Hutchinson's idea of their firm rejection; likewise, to claim that Werther holds universal appeal for 'young people of all ages' ignores the book's malleability, which allowed different audiences to hold vastly different ideas of *Werther*.

The late Donald H. Shivley proposed a third view on Japanese transcultural products that also corresponds to the proposed idea of grafting. In view of the tension between aesthetic imitation and assimilation to native traditions, Shivley observes: 'Japanese literature was transformed, in large measure under the influence of Western models; we find, however, that the products are more Japanese than they seemed at first glance.'[96] This observation is consistent with a typical feature of transcultural migration, suggesting that literary reception on the island kingdom is not that exceptional after all. As the French *Werther* lineage demonstrates, such imports inevitably suffer some damage – at least if one agrees with the orthodoxy that dominates a text's reception in its original culture.

While the distorting effects of cross-cultural grafting go unnoticed often enough, one Japanese writer did justice to the changes inflicted on migrating texts, describing them as a positive selection process. In 1907, Sōseki Natsume argued in *Theory of Literature* (文学論 Bungakuron) that a full understanding of foreign literature is impossible and even undesirable. The problem is not that Japanese critics can miss the nuanced shades or tones of foreign literature, but that Western ideas must be revised upon their arrival in Japan, for example authoritative ideas that English critics have on English literature. Sōseki posits:

> Somewhere at the back of their minds Japanese people believe that the English people's evaluation of the work is correct because they are taking up a work produced in England and offering a native evaluation of a native product. Evaluating a Japanese work is one thing, but they think that there can be no mistake in what the English say about English literature. It is like believing, without giving it a second thought, the words of a kimono shop clerk because one knows nothing about kimonos.[97]

While Sōseki leaves the value of Western letters unchallenged, he rejects the general assumption that a text's native audience – its so-called intended audience – has better access to a text's meaning. Invoking the turbulent reception of

[96] Donald H. Shively, *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 503.

[97] Sōseki Natsume, 'Preface to *Literary Criticism*', trans. by Atsuko Ueda, in *Theory of Literature and Other Critical Writings*, ed. by Michael Burdaghs et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 214–38, 234.

Macpherson's *The Works of Ossian*, he argues that literary histories do not provide reliable assessments. After the bardic text originally attracted eminent readers in Europe – Sōseki points out that Goethe and Napoleon both loved it – it eventually fell into disgrace. Considering such fickle judgement, Sōseki is adamant that Japanese readers should avoid emulating established aesthetic judgements; instead, the point of reading foreign literature is to 'evaluate it based on our own feelings (insofar as our feelings are actually provoked by it)'.[98] Sōseki's proposition is entirely congenial with the present methodology of grafting, as it places emphasis on selective appropriation without forgetting about the ruptures incurred by this process.

Sensei's mythology of self-murder (Sōseki)

Critical analyses of *Werther* and Sōseki's *Kokoro* have asserted their comparability in many ways. Evelyn Zgraggen, for example, states that 'it is probable that he [i.e. Sōseki] read the whole *Werther* when he wrote *Kokoro*'.[99] Yet this kind of speculation seems gratuitous when one keeps in mind that classics such *Werther* had inscribed themselves in confessional literature by the early 20th century in the most general terms. Its combination of motifs – unrequited love, misanthropy, loneliness and suicide – had reappeared in multiple variations throughout the 19th century, not least in French literature, and this literary figuration was eagerly reproduced and transformed by Japanese modernists who set out to portray the lifeworlds of culturally uprooted individuals.

In addition to parallels on the level of theme and structure, A. Owen Aldridge points to the two texts' transhistorical and transcultural similarities, arguing that both protest against the optimistic spirit of political reform: 'It has frequently been said that Goethe's intention was to combat the notion of the 18th-century Enlightenment that all is right with the world. Sōseki delivered the same message over a century later.'[100] Doris Bargen also draws on this assumed compatibility when she describes the suicide of K, one of Sōseki's protagonists, as 'a typically romantic Werther-like response to unrequited love'.[101] Such analogies

[98] Sōseki, 'Preface', 237.

[99] Orig. 'こゝろ』執筆時までには『ウェルテル』全編を読んでいたと思われる.' Evelyn Zgraggen ツグラッゲン・エヴェリン, 'Relevance and Comparison between Sōseki Natsume's *Kokoro* and Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*' (夏目漱石の『こゝろ』とゲーテの『若きウェルテルの悩み』との関連性と比較), *Sōka University Humanities Conference* (創価大学人文論集 Sōka daigaku jinbun ronshū) 31 (2019), 71–86, 72.

[100] A. Owen Aldridge, 'The Japanese Werther of the Twentieth Century', in *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, ed. by Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 75–92, 92.

[101] Doris G. Bargen, *Suicidal Honor: General Nogi and the Writings of Mori Ogai and Natsume Sōseki* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 168.

are helpful to place both texts within a shared thanatological framework, in which the wishes of the individual collide with the demands of society. But in order to move beyond a trivial comparison, one must also carefully distinguish between the two protagonists in *Kokoro*, Sensei and K. Their unhappy biographies inherit the complex legacy of thanatological discourse in different ways, a distinction that marks the transition from honour-based to more subjectively motivated suicides.

The story of *Kokoro* is told by an anonymous narrator who befriends Sensei, a middle-aged man who bears within himself a dark secret. While the first two parts of the novel relate the narrator's evolving friendship with the secretive man, the last part contains the latter's life confession, a detailed suicide letter. Sensei looks back at many disappointments with the world and himself. His first setback is when he loses his parents, an event that exposes the young man to the schemes of his uncle, who cheats him out of his inheritance. As a student in Tokyo, he feels repelled by the upbeat community at the students' dormitory, so he boards with a mature woman and Shizu, her daughter. He develops feelings for the young girl but cannot bring himself to open up to her at first: '[M]y heart was by now deeply ingrained with distrust. I opened my mouth to speak, then stopped and deliberately shifted the direction of the conversation elsewhere.'[102] Later on, K, a friend from the university (who bears no relation to Kafka's eponymous character), moves in with them. K also falls for Shizu, turning the two friends into fierce competitors, before Sensei can eventually secure the consent of the girl's mother. A few days later, he discovers the lifeless body of K, who has taken his own life. Sensei carries on with his marriage plans with Shizu nonetheless. As time passes, he finds it increasingly difficult to come to terms with his friend's death, feeling he is now fated to live as a 'walking mummy doomed to remain in the human world' (121). He further withdraws from society, also keeping this episode a secret from his wife. The purpose of his testament is 'to present both the good and bad in my life, for others to learn from' (233). As a belated atonement for his betrayal, Sensei vows to kill himself upon finishing his confession.

Sōseki's text is an elaborate adaptation of *Werther*'s love triangle with a notable twist. After young, hot-headed K has committed suicide, a more profound tragedy unfolds in the life of the supposedly lucky man who marries the beloved. Sensei, a melancholic revenant of Albert, is haunted by the events that led up to the supposed joys of love. Regardless of such remarkable connecting threads, Margaret Hillenbrand finds it somewhat 'disturbing'[103] that such comparisons gloss over the vastly different socio-historical situations that have shaped the two texts. Indeed,

[102] Sōseki Natsume, *Kokoro*, trans. by Meredith McKinney (London: Penguin, 2010), 157. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *K*.

[103] Margaret Hillenbrand, *Literature, Modernity, and the Practice of Resistance: Japanese and Taiwanese Fiction 1960–1990* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 37.

if we assume that *Werther* and *Kokoro* are documents of epochal tensions, as Aldridge asserts, this comparison merely states that history repeats itself – and literature as well. In the present study, *Werther* and *Kokoro* are placed in dialogue nevertheless. The idea is that their shared attention to world-weariness and suicide offers a unique opportunity to explore the congeniality between a non-orthodox strand of *Werther* criticism (Korff, Kamei) and the novel of an author who proposed to 'use' Western literary models without concern for what the 'English say about English literature'. Arguably, this also applies to what the 'Germans say about German literature'.

Kokoro's treatment of suicide allows readers to pursue different lines of argument for why exactly K and Sensei kill themselves. While one of the most original interpretations assumes that both men suffer from repressed homosexual feelings,[104] Sensei himself places his friend's and his own tragedy in the context of the cultural shock of modernity. When K falls for Shizu, romantic love serves as a catalyst of a complex inner struggle that shapes his decision to take his own life. Raised in the sect of Pure Land Buddhism, K's self-image is committed to ascetic ideals. Sensei explains: 'Brought up on tales of worthy monks and saints, he tended to consider flesh and spirit as separate entities: in fact, he may well have felt that to mortify the flesh was to exalt the soul' (*K* 167). Consequently, his sudden desire for a woman places him in a conflict between elevated ideals and sensual reality. In one of the most intense passages of Sensei's confession, he reports a conversation he had with K only a few weeks before his suicide:

> 'You have to resolve to put a stop to [those feelings] in your heart as well. What about all those fine principles of yours? Where's your moral fibre?'
>
> At these words, his [i.e. K's] tall frame seemed to shrink and dwindle before my eyes. He was, as I have said, incredibly obstinate and headstrong, yet he was also far too honest to be able to shrug it off if his own inconsistency was forcefully brought home to him. Seeing him cowed, I at last breathed a sigh of relief. Then he said suddenly, 'Resolve?' Before I could respond, he went on, 'Resolve – well, I'm not without resolve.' He spoke as if to himself, or as if in a trance. (205)

In reaction to his friend's admonishment, K decides to overcome his lowly passions. It is consistent that K's suicide letter makes no mention of Shizu at all but references an abstract struggle. K paraphrases its content: 'He was committing suicide […] because he was weak and infirm of purpose, and because the future held nothing for him. […] With the last of the brush's ink, he had added that he should have died sooner and did not know why he had lived so long' (217).

[104] Bargen references Doi Takeo, a psychiatrist, as the scholar who first brought up this idea. See Bargen, *Suicidal Honor*, 170. In *Werther* criticism, Günter Sasse also addresses the homoerotic dimension of the protagonist's refusal to make an advance to Lotte. See Sasse, 'Woran leidet Werther?', 249.

Liberation through suicide

According to Sensei's account, K found himself at odds with a society that was embracing egotism and materialism. His conflict, however, was not the experience of the simpleton who, lacking intellectual curiosity or ability, fell behind the advances of modernity. Quite the contrary, K diligently expanded his horizon by studying non-Japanese belief systems, such as Christianity and Islam. His quest for transcendental meaning, however, exacerbated his alienation from an environment that had, in contrast to himself, abandoned spiritual meaning altogether. Confronted with Shizu's seductive presence and his friend's treachery, he falls into a void: 'With his eyes fixed on the past, he had no choice but to continue along its trajectory' (206). But is K really the passive agent in a process that drives him to commit suicide?

Criticism on *Kokoro* usually follows the interpretative guidance provided by Sensei's testament. David Pollack, for example, links Sōseki to the post-war writer Yukio Mishima, who also regretted the breakdown in human relations in the wake of the country's modernisation.[105] In the same vein, Hosea Hirata finds that *Kokoro* documents the suspension of the traditional social structure of home.[106] Although it is impossible to overestimate the effects of Japan's rapid modernisation on the individual psyche, literary suicides do not automatically indicate a person who fails to face up to a cruel environment. The opposite may be true, as Korff's and Kamei's interpretations of Werther indicate.

Within K's value system, suicide is an appropriate response to the unbearable challenge of living in an evil age. K looks at the world through a prism of an anti-sensualist doctrine that celebrates the individual's heroic triumph over the *samsara* (輪廻 rinne), the karmic cycle of the lowly material world.[107] His unabated spiritual inclinations are revealed when he visits the birthplace of Nichiren, one of the most important figures of Japanese spirituality, and promptly engages the head priest in a long conversation. In the light of this background, his decision to take his own life is not the 'typically romantic Werther-like response to unrequited

[105] See David Pollack, *Reading Against Culture: Ideology and Narrative in the Japanese Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 54.

[106] See Hosea Hirata, *Discourses of Seduction: History, Evil, Desire, and Modern Japanese Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 199.

[107] The Pure Land tradition has its own tradition of voluntary death. According to the practice of *jigai ōjō* (自害往生), self-destruction affords the believer rebirth in the Pure Land. See Mark L. Blum, 'Collective Suicide at the Funeral of Jitsunyo: Mimesis or Solidarity?', in *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, ed. by Jacqueline I. Stone und Mariko Namba-Walter (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 137–74, 139. The tradition's central text, the ancient Sanskrit *Lotos Sutra* (法華経 *Hokke-kyo*, 406 CE), prizes self-mutilation and suicide as exemplary acts of faith. Subsequent holy biographies abound with similarly positive accounts of suicides, for example Genshin's *Essentials of Salvation* (往生要集 Ōjōyōshū, 895 CE), a treatise in which similar acts also ensure a favourable rebirth.

love', as Bargen argues, but points to a rigid metaphysical project. So is K an exemplary Buddhist believer?

If we go by Sensei's account, K is more interested in ascetism itself than in the promised rewards of a virtuous lifestyle. One is reminded of Schopenhauer and Senancour, who found that many world religions converge in their recommendation of ascetism in reaction to the pain of existence. In this context, the idea of metaphysical salvation appears secondary to the true purpose of religion. Reminiscent of the German philosopher's views, K appears convinced that the world holds nothing but 'unspeakable pain, the wretchedness and misery of mankind, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and the innocent'. One may also speculate that K, like Senancour's Obermann, is inclined to think that a 'great man not only has not a passion for woman, for play, for wine, but I hold that he is not even ambitious'. Taking K's convictions seriously, it becomes clear that the usual culmination of boy-meets-girl narratives, the consummation of love, would only place K in an even greater dilemma. After all, the only freedom accessible to humans is resignation. While modern readers will object to his values, K's story relates the positive tale of how the young man overcame his passion for Shizu so that he could free himself from the material world. Rather than failing in life, K fulfils the central purpose of Buddhist philosophy, as he attains a spiritual state in which suffering stops.

In contrast to K's suicide, which is vindicated by his spiritual ambitions, Sensei's death is more difficult to relate to a philosophical conviction. Indeed, Alan S. Wolfe points out that the clarity of purpose typical of traditional forms of suicide in Japan is here replaced by obscurity.[108] In view of his behaviour towards K, it appears that pragmatic self-interest guides his actions, a trait that makes him a perfect exponent of modernity's egotism and materialism. He certainly feels guilt about his involvement in his friend's suicide, but he keeps his self-recriminations hidden from his environment, possibly hoping that they will disappear with time. For some time, Sensei manages to live a somewhat muted but tranquil life alongside the dutiful Shizu, who accepts his guarded personality without complaint.

After holding back his remorse over K's death for decades, Sensei finds that he can no longer bear this state of suspension. Once he learns the news that Nogi Maresuke, a disgraced military general, committed *seppuku*, an inexorable mental process of transformation begins. Although Sensei does not identify with traditional martial values – in fact, he finds the general's reasons hard to grasp – he is moved by his inner struggle. Nogi killed himself to atone for a martial defeat that he oversaw thirty years earlier, proving that self-murder must not always result

[108] See Alan Stephen Wolfe, *Suicidal Narrative in Modern Japan: The Case of Dazai Osamu* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 35.

from visceral impulses but can also result from profound meditation. Under the spell of Nogi's belated atonement, Sensei's sense of self-preservation vanishes. Like K, he is quite uninterested in the rewards that are promised to those who are willing to sacrifice themselves; but unlike K, he is not driven by ascetic ideals but simply seeks to neutralise the tension that torments him – not only since his friend's suicide, but also since the death of his parents. Being cheated out of his inheritance, causing a friend's death, consummating a marriage with a woman who forms part of this tragedy – Sensei comes to the realisation that the pain of existence overshadows the benefits of remaining alive. In writing down his testimony, he becomes the creator of his own ascetic creed. Told to the anonymous narrator, Sensei's story will live on in the imagination of the next generation and provide a blueprint for future acts of self-sacrifice.

Interlude: suicide, nostalgia and the 'I-novel' (Mori, Akutagawa)

In the previous sections, Kamei's celebratory account and K's ascetic values were situated within the cultural paradigms that surround suicide in Japan. In the light of Sōseki's enormous impact on Japanese modernism, it is not surprising that subsequent generations of writers also embraced this motif as a means of discussing the individual's changing role in society. Such literary accounts of suicide do not present self-murder as the sweeping climax of an unhappy life but rather as part of a wide spectrum of motives. This spectrum ranges from ritualistic types of self-murder, such as *seppuku* (切腹), the 'cutting of the abdomen', to *jisatsu* (自殺), the 'murder of the self', a neutral expression that does not imply personal honour. Sōseki's protagonists reconcile their individual desire to end their lives with collective ideas of honour-based suicide, but such holism is rare. The great majority of suicide-themed narratives feature examples that highlight either the collective or the psychological significance of the deed.

Mori Ōgai's suicide stories, for example, celebrate the heroic death of warriors in the most un-Wertherian way. 'The Last Testament of Okitsu Yagoemon' (興津弥五右衛門の遺書 Okitsu Yagoemon no isho) of 1912 is a sober account of a man who resolves to kill himself because, as he believes, he must atone for the death of a warrior he killed in a duel. Similarly, 'The Incident at Sakai' (堺事件 Sakai jinken), first published in 1914, tells of eleven samurai who fulfil an ultimatum made by the French imperial army. Instead of waiting to be shot, they perform *seppuku* in front of their shocked audience. Set in a nostalgic version of the country's historical past, Mori's texts avoid psychologisation, the crucial element that Japanese modernist writers sought to assimilate from Western models.

While Mori's stories contributed to what Keppler-Tasaki calls the '"suicide nation" self-image' in modern Japan, the 'I-novel' (私小説 shishōsetsu) went to

the other extreme. Emerging in reaction to epistemic uncertainty, the genre was characterised by the first-person narrator's retreat from society to pursue uncompromising autobiographical accounts. With regard to Katai Tayama's *The Quilt* (蒲団 Futon, 1907), the first representative novel of this kind, critics took note of the genre's resemblance to European Romantic literature. Writing in the 1930s, Kobayashi Hideo observed that Katai borrowed from European classics, such as Goethe's *Werther*, Senancour's *Obermann* and Constant's *Adolphe*. Regarding this lineage, Kobayashi identified all four authors' confessional mindset as central to the genre.[109] Indeed, there are many parallels between European Romantic literature and the Japanese I-novel, such as their meandering writing style and recurring motifs such as tragic love triangles.[110]

In I-novels, the literary treatment of suicide differs markedly from Mori's heroism. Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's *Life of a Stupid Man* (或阿呆の一生 Aru aho no isshō), a short text from 1927, serves as an apt example to illustrate the growing obsoleteness of traditional norms to legitimise self-murder. In contrast to K's and Sensei's ambition to restore their personal integrity and honour, *Life of a Stupid Man* advances the idea of self-murder as an end in itself. After several failed attempts, the narrator relates his suicide pact with a new female acquaintance as if it were a matter of pride:

> 'I've heard you want to die', she said.
> 'Yes – or rather, it's not so much that I want to die as that I'm tired of living.'
> This dialogue led to a vow to die together.
> 'It would be a Platonic suicide, I suppose', she said.
> 'A Platonic double suicide.'
> He was amazed at his own sangfroid.[111]

In Akutagawa's text, global feelings like Sensei's disappointment with mankind are replaced by incurable ennui. The preface categorises the text as a testament: 'I am living now in the unhappiest happiness imaginable. Yet, strangely, I have no regrets. I just feel sorry for anyone unfortunate enough to have had a bad husband, a bad son, a bad father like me. So goodbye, then.'[112] Apparently, the fifty-one

[109] See Tae-Hyeon Song, 'Rousseau's Confessions, the I-novel of Japan, and the Confessional Novel of Korea, Focusing on *Futon* by Tayama Katai and *Mansejeon* by Sang-seop Yeom', *Forum for World Literature Studies* 8.4 (2016), 630–42.

[110] Katai's seminal *The Quilt*, for example, tells of a married writer who falls for a young female admirer who becomes his disciple. When the unsuspecting girl tells her confidant about her secret encounter with another man, the jealous writer takes revenge by informing her father about her unsavoury life. As the humiliated girl departs, the writer is overwhelmed by a complex set of emotions when sniffing her left-behind items: '[s]exual desire, grief and despair seized his heart in no time. […] He cried aloud with his face buried under the stained and chilly velvet neckband.' Katai Tayama, 'The Quilt (Futon)', trans. by Kenshiro Homma, in *Doshisha Literature* 24 (1966), 41–98.

[111] Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, 'Life of a Stupid Man', in *Rashōmon and Seventeen Other Stories*, trans. by Jay Rubin (London: Penguin, 2006), 186–205, 203.

[112] Akutagawa, 'Life', 186.

fragments of the novel must be read as a highly stylised suicide letter. In contrast to the fictional status of Sōseki's protagonists, Akutagawa stresses the autobiographical momentum of his text by signing the preface with his own name. And indeed, *Life of a Stupid Man* was published posthumously, after the writer took his own life at the age of thirty-six.

While the reception of *Werther* teaches that author and narrative voice should not be mixed up, the I-novel is a special case. Edward Seidensticker already stated that this genre centred on its authors 'to an extreme that would not […] be tolerated elsewhere',[113] giving considerable credence to its autobiographical momentum. Further elaborating on this problematic connection, Miyoshi Masao made a pertinent observation about the genre's teleological trajectory: 'The I-novel reaches a dead end once the author's life is completely exposed. [… [T]hus the *shi-shōsetsu* writer is never free of the temptation of suicide.'[114] Indeed, extraliterary evidence supports Miyoshi's observation. Akutagawa belongs to the dozens of prominent modern Japanese writers who committed suicide throughout the 20th century.[115] This autobiographical nexus, however, should not distract from an inquiry into the spiritual crisis that contributed to the rise of literary suicide. In contrast to Sensei's soul-searching, Akutagawa's suicidal narrator does not single out specific events in his life that nurtured his *taedium vitae*. Only in passing does an acquaintance of the narrator, a madman, mention: 'You and I are both possessed by a demon, […] the demon of the *fin de siècle*.'[116] First published in 1927 and replete with references to French writers, Akutagawa's 'demon of the *fin de siècle*'[117] evidently points to a European trope that was absorbed in Japan with some delay.[118]

For Japanese writers of the early 20th century – and, as the next section will show, even more so of the post-war era – the invocation of European predecessors was not as playful as their Chinese contemporaries' cross-cultural references, such as Guo Moruo's ecstatic invocations of Western novels (as described in Chapter 3). At a time when all certainties started to break away, Akutagawa's 'demon of the *fin de siècle*' indicated that there exists an analogous experience in

[113] Edward Seidensticker, 'Recent Trends in Japanese Literature', *The Oriental Economist* 27 (January 1959), 34–5, 34.
[114] Masao Miyoshi, *Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 139.
[115] Not all of them took to writing I-novels. The list of writers who committed suicide includes Kawabata Yasunari, Mishima Yukio and Dazai Osamu. Alan S. Wolfe's study of suicidal narratives in Japan features an entire chapter on writers' suicides in the 20th century. See Wolfe, *Suicidal Narrative*, 48–78.
[116] Akutagawa, 'Life', 205.
[117] The Japanese original reads: '世紀末の悪魔.' Akutagawa Ryūnosuke 芥川 龍之介, *Life of a Stupid Man* (或阿呆の一生 Aru aho no isshō) (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1968), 67.
[118] Akutagawa's self-professed identification with French decadence fits the lineage that begins with *Werther* and also includes *René*, *Obermann* and *Adolphe*. After all, Charles Baudelaire, the towering figure of decadence, held Romantic figures, especially Chateaubriand, in great esteem. They are all united by a fascination with idiosyncratic self-expression and a sense of inner superiority. See Andrea Schellino, '"Decadence" et "style cosmopolite": Note sur Chateaubriand et Baudelaire', *French Studies Bulletin* 34.2 (2013), 23–5, 23.

the West. But in contrast to Guo's artistic apotheosis, there lies no sense of salvation in Akutagawa's discovery.

In his meditations on nihilism, Nishitani Keiji analyses the specific intellectual mood that befell writers in the post-Meiji period. Although he argues that nihilism is primarily a product that emerges from the Western philosophical tradition, Nishitani stresses that European nihilism had a profound impact on Japanese thought. After having turned itself into an 'offshoot of European culture',[119] Japan failed to take this legacy seriously enough for two reasons. Firstly, the crisis of Western thought, first diagnosed by Friedrich Nietzsche and Baudelaire, was late in reaching modern Japanese literati, who had by then already rested their thinking and aesthetics on shaky foundations. Secondly, while Western philosophers consciously inherited the crisis of their own philosophical tradition, Japan acquired those flawed foreign foundations in exchange for abandoning its own cultural heritage, Buddhism and Confucian thought. Amid this situation of cultural loss and exposure to corroded imports, the Japanese felt 'a mood of resignation about having been born Japanese' (177). Regardless of its European echoes, Akutagawa's 'demon of the *fin de siècle*' indicates a uniquely Japanese experience of nihilism.

Yōzō's nihilistic monism (Dazai)

Dazai Ozamu's final novel, *No Longer Human* from 1948, is little known outside Japan but occupies, alongside Sōseki's *Kokoro*, canonical status in modern Japanese literature today. Although it would be bold to assert a direct lineage between *No Longer Human* and French Romanticism, let alone *Werther*, Eugene Thacker's book on pessimism mentions Dazai's protagonist and Werther as analogous figures on a list of the twelve most representative books of pessimist writing.[120] And indeed, significant Wertherian elements reappear in this novel: highly subjective prose, a poetics of suffering, the hope in salvation through the beloved and the individual's apotheosis in death.

The Decadent School (無頼派 buraiha), among them Dazai as one of its 'most nihilistic'[121] members, emerged after Japan's capitulation that ended the Pacific War (1941–5). By that time, the public had witnessed the dropping of two nuclear

[119] Nishitani Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. by Graham Parkes and Aihara Setsuko (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 174.
[120] Thacker's list of pessimist writing spans writers from vastly different ages and origins. Next to *Werther* and *No Longer Human*, the other titles are Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, Kafka's diaries, Mela Hartwig's *Am I a Redundant Human Being?*, Ladislav Klíma's *The Sufferings of Prince Sternenhoch*, Pär Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf*, Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude*, Thomas Bernhard's *Extinction,* Jang Eun-jin's *No One Writes Back* and Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*. See Eugene Thacker, *Infinite Resignation: On Pessimism* (London: Repeater, 2018), 65.
[121] Matteo Cestari, 'Nihilistic Practices of the Self: General Remarks on Nihilism and Subjectivity in Modern Japan', in *Contemporary Japan: Challenges for a World Economic Power in Transition*, ed. by Paolo Calvetti and Marcella Mariotti (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2015), 141–60, 150.

bombs, aerial firebombing and the collapse of the martial spirit that was so integral to Japan's mythological self-image.[122] Critics often note that the intellectual climate of the immediate post-war era was defined by resignation, nihilism and spiritual disorientation. Such sentiments placed writers in opposition to the country's reorientation towards high-speed economic growth, making them weary of the 'facade of buoyant optimism and progress that had so quickly taken hold after the war and defeat'.[123] But beyond concrete observations of Japanese society's failings, the novels of the Decadent School articulate the conviction that something is fundamentally wrong with human nature itself.

The principal narrator of *No Longer Human* is Ōba Yōzō, who writes his memoirs after being released from a madhouse. His meditations begin with his amazement at how people can go on living despite the dire circumstances in which they live:

> I don't understand: if my neighbors manage to survive without killing themselves, without going mad, maintaining an interest in political parties, not yielding to despair, resolutely pursuing the fight for existence, can their griefs really be genuine? Am I wrong in thinking that these people have become such complete egoists and are so convinced of the normality of their way of life that they have never once doubted themselves?[124]

To answer this question, Yōzō begins with an unvarnished account of his childhood, when he experienced a world governed by lies and hypocrisy. This applies not only to his surroundings, but also to himself when he devises a superficially goofy persona to hide his fright before his family members. Later in life, when his father denies him the prospect of going to art school, the frustrated young man falls under the spell of Horiki, who introduces him to Tokyo's demi-monde: 'I soon came to understand that drink, tobacco and prostitutes were all excellent means of dissipating (even for a few moments) my dread of human beings' (*D* 63). This phase culminates in his acquaintance with Tsuneko, an unhappily married woman, with whom he resolves to commit double suicide. They go into the water together – she dies but Yōzō survives.

[122] One of the central texts of the movement, Sakaguchi Ango's 'Discourse on Decadence' (堕落論 Darakuron, 1947), exemplifies this selection of themes. Sakaguchi tells of young men who had set out to become kamikaze pilots but who found themselves earning their living as black-market dealers a few years later. The text invokes familiar Japanese thanatological motifs – *junshi*, love suicide, *seppuku* – culminating in the vague articulation of an ethics that supposedly carries the spirit of the samurai into the post-war era: 'And as with people, so Japan, too, must fail. We must discover ourselves, and save ourselves, by failing to the best of our ability.' Sakaguchi Ango, 'Discourse on Decadence', trans. by Seiji M. Lippit, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 1.1 (1986), 1–5. It is difficult to decide if this injunction in fact marks a caesura between old and new Japan or if it indicates the unwavering continuity of values, such as the idea that there lies great beauty in death.

[123] Wolfe, *Suicidal Narrative*, 87.

[124] Dazai Osamu, *No Longer Human*, trans. by Donald Keene (New York: New Directions, 1973), 25–6. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *D*.

In the aftermath of this event, he is expelled from college and disowned by his family. For some time, he earns a meagre living by drawing cartoons for magazines and leads the life of a kept man, until he finally meets Yoshiko, a simple girl. Tragically, her innocence also makes her vulnerable to rape, as a ribald editor takes advantage of her unsuspecting personality. Unable to come to terms with this event, Yōzō attempts to take his own life by taking sleeping pills. Later, he becomes a morphine addict, again attempts to commit suicide and ends up in a madhouse.

Dazai's Yōzō experiences human misery in gritty detail that clearly departs from Romantic writing. In view of his inner disposition, however, Yōzō's alienation from basic human norms follows the Wertherian narrative in which the protagonist increasingly conceives of himself as a mere spectator of life. Yōzō's tragic interactions with the other sex suit the profile of those unhappy young men who search for emotional turmoil, notably in passionate relationships, to distract themselves from inner emptiness and to counter the other source of consolation, the thought of death. Ultimately, they are condemned to wander through a world in which no one can be saved.

It is somewhat surprising that scholars have consistently asserted the constructive trajectory of *No Longer Human*. In a study dating from 1974, Hijiya Yukihito finds that Dazai portrays 'an era of confusion, a "no-longer-human" age that had come, an age governed solely by self-interest, in which true human concerns were being ignored'.[125] This is particularly true after Yoshiko's rape, when Yōzō finds the destructiveness of man's nature confirmed. And yet Hijiya also argues that *No Longer Human* is 'Dazai's summation of his view of life as well as the manifesto of his faith in the beauty of humanity'.[126] Accordingly, redemption can be achieved, despite everything, through trust and compassion for one's fellow man. Alan S. Wolfe's study also finds that a hopeful subtext underpins the apparent bleakness of the text, stating that Dazai's protagonist critiques 'the ease and superficiality with which even the most ardent supporters of the war effort made the switch'[127] from military heroism to democracy and individual freedom. At the heart of *No Longer Human*, argues Wolfe, stands a utopian impulse to change society by advancing sexual, political and psychological liberation.

This assessment is certainly true of Dazai's somewhat more sanguine novel *The Setting Sun* (斜陽 Shayō, 1947). And unlike the protagonist of Dazai's short story 'Villon's Woman' (ヴィヨンの妻 Viyon no tsuma, 1947), Yōzō does not give in to

[125] Yukihito Hijiya, 'A Religion of Humanity: A Study of Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human*', *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 15.3 (1974), 34–41, 41.
[126] See Hijiya, 'A Religion', 34.
[127] Wolfe, *Suicidal Narrative*, 95.

sarcasm to become an unrepentant rascal.[128] In contrast, *No Longer Human* gives an unflinching account of life's joyless wretchedness. Only isolated studies have placed Dazai's text in the context of nihilism. According to Ştefan Bolea, the novel resonates with Cioran's pessimism as it culminates in the conviction that 'being alive expresses death better than death itself would'.[129] This striking formula highlights Dazai's inheritance of the thanatological legacy found in Japanese and European letters. As the following subchapter shows, this becomes most evident in a guessing game that Yōzō playfully devises but which traps him in a philosophical impasse.

Nihilistic monism

During Yōzō's blissful days with Yoshiko, he receives an unexpected visitor, Horiki. The visitor asks for money but Yōzō himself is cash-strapped, so he asks Yoshiko to pawn some of her clothes. Ever the dutiful wife, she complies and is also sent to buy gin with that money. After a while, the two men start entertaining themselves by playing fanciful games, such as guessing antonyms. First, they discuss poetic pairings, such as 'flower' and 'wind'. Both agree that the wind strips the flower of its petals, thereby representing its opposition. But as they get more inebriated, the host asks a more abstract question: 'What's the antonym of crime?' (*D* 144). Horiki, an everyday man, makes a number of obvious propositions, such as 'law', 'God' and 'virtue', then loses interest in the question. Meanwhile, Yōzō is shaken to the core by this question, as it points to something more comprehensive:

> Actions punishable by jail sentences are not the only crimes. If we knew the antonym of crime, I think we would know its true nature. God … salvation … love … light. But for God there is the antonym Satan, for salvation there is perdition, for love there is hate, for light there is darkness, for good, evil. Crime and prayer? Crime and repentance? Crime and confession? Crime and … no, they're all synonymous. What *is* the opposite of crime? (146, emphasis in the original)

The implication of this thought game is radical: if 'crime' has no antonym, then it is an absolute category. In contrast to a Manichaean worldview, in which good and evil are suspended in an equilibrium, Yōzō's world is governed by a monistic principle. Baseness is the single determining factor of creation. In *No Longer Human*, Yōzō is bound to find out what this theoretical observation means for his own life.

Donald Keene's translation of the term in question as 'crime' conceals its ambiguity. The Japanese original is *tsumi* (罪),[130] a term that in Confucian philosophy

[128] The premise of 'Villon's Woman' is similar to *No Longer Human*. An artistic young man turns to drinking and visiting prostitutes, but since the story is told from the perspective of his abused wife, he comes off as a scoundrel rather than prompting the reader's empathy.
[129] Ştefan Bolea, 'The Nihilist as a Not-Man: An Analysis of Psychological Inhumanity', *Philobiblion* 20.1 (2015), 33–44, 41.
[130] Dazai Osamu 太宰 治, *No Longer Human* (人間失格 Ningen shikkaku) (Tokyo: Shinchō bunko, 1985), 255.

refers to social actions that injure the moral order established among humans. But *tsumi* is also the Japanese translation for the Christian term 'sin', an influential theological import to East Asia, which implies something more fundamental. According to Christian eschatology, human sinfulness is representative of the broken image of God in mankind. Only by acknowledging that one is a sinner separated from God can one be forgiven in Christ Jesus.[131] In line with the philosophical optimism that informs Dazai scholarship, Massimiliano Tomasi assumes that Yōzō's meditations on *tsumi* follow Christian rather than Confucian usage. Even in the absence of biographical evidence for Dazai's Christian faith, he argues that *No Longer Human* reacts against the lingering heritage of Meiji Protestantism 'that had preached man's innate depravity and his predestination for either salvation or damnation'. Ultimately, the novel advances a 'coherent salvific discourse of protest',[132] a gesture that Tomasi also finds among other Japanese post-war writers of Christian faith who argued in favour of a less sinister faith. The implicit assumption is that, in theory, Dazai's protagonist could embrace the opposite of 'sin' in the sacrament of forgiveness, baptism. Thus, should Donald Keene's translation, which opts for the secular term, be corrected from 'crime' to 'sin'?

Contrary to Tomasi's assumption, the existence of Christian allusions in Dazai's work does not necessarily entail the presence of Christian convictions. After all, trust in God is impossible for Yōzō, who states: 'I could not believe in His love, only in His punishment. […] I could believe in hell, but it was impossible for me to believe in the existence of heaven' (*D* 117). This declaration does not result from the ravings of a madman but reiterates one of the most poignant diagnoses of the inner corrosion of Western metaphysics, Nietzsche's hypothetical scenario: 'God is refuted but the devil is not – ?'[133] In contrast to scholarly attempts to find a positive message in *No Longer Human*, the present thanatological interpretation of the novel draws attention to its consistent rejection of constructive ideas about the world – both as it is and in view of its perfectibility. Next to Yōzō's meditations on the opposite of *tsumi*, this monistic view also shows in his disregard for emancipatory politics. While attending a secret communist meeting, he takes issue with the simplistic role that historical materialism attributes to greed. He feels that nothing would be gained by erasing greed from society: 'I felt sure that something more obscure, more frightening lurked in the hearts of human beings. […] I felt that there was something inexplicable at the bottom of human society which was not reducible to economics' (66). Like Christianity, the promises of Marxism only remind him of the fundamental wretchedness of human existence.

[131] See K. K. Yeo, *Musing with Confucius and Paul: Toward a Chinese Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 41–2.
[132] Massimiliano Tomasi, '"What Is the Antonym for Sin?": A Study of Dazai Osamu's Confrontation with God', *Japan Review* 36 (2022), 111–38, 134.
[133] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil / On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. by Adrian Del Caro (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 40 (section 37).

Yōzō only suspends his nihilistic monism during a short interval. After a heavy night of drinking, he collapses on the street where he is found by a female stranger, his future wife Yoshiko, who rushes to help him. The embarrassed man pledges to quit drinking that night. Inevitably, he is intoxicated the next time he comes across Yoshiko, yet she firmly believes that he has kept his promise. This simple encounter leaves him in a state of shock and embarrassment, as he cannot quite accommodate her 'immaculate trustfulness' (151) within his dark outlook on life. With her innocence acting as a counterweight to his cynicism, his monistic view transforms into a vision of polarity, in which light and darkness strike a balance. He raves: 'What a holy thing uncorrupted virginity is, I thought. […] We would get married. In the spring we'd go together on bicycles to see waterfalls framed in green leaves' (*D* 132). And indeed, at this point, the story takes an unexpected turn. They marry, he actually gives up drinking and they start enjoying the simple pleasures of life, such as going to the movies. Tragically, Yoshiko's rape ends this blissful phase. Now he realises that innocence forms an integral part of human misery rather than its opposite: 'Yoshiko was a genius at trusting people. She didn't know how to suspect anyone. But the misery it caused' (150). Apart from the event's drastic impact on the girl, it also triggers Yōzō's final collapse: 'Now that I harbored doubts about the one virtue I had depended on, I lost all comprehension of everything around me. My only resort was drink' (152). Unable to see how he and Yoshiko can put up with this vile world, he resorts to drugs and narcotics.

Yōzō does not find fulfilment in a conclusive act of self-murder, which he attempts repeatedly without success. He is condemned to remain a perpetual guest in the vicinity of death. Unlike his predecessors who successfully killed themselves or developed a Stoic attitude towards enduring the bitterness of life, Dazai's hero witnesses the disappearance of life before his own eyes: 'Now I have neither happiness nor unhappiness. *Everything passes*. That is the one and only thing I have thought resembled a truth in the society of human beings where I have dwelled up to now as in a burning hell. *Everything passes*' (169, emphasis in the original). Despite the Buddhist undertones of this quote, Yōzō's language painstakingly avoids the classical formulas that would connect his statement to ancient wisdom.[134] After all, there is a significant difference between ancient spirituality and the modern condition: while the former allows for the communal rejection of worldly life in the company of fellow believers, the latter emanates from a lonely psychological process.

The spiritual vacuum of Yōzō's joyless life has considerable implications for the strand of Japanese philosophical nihilism that Nishitani addresses in his study. Accordingly, the devaluation of all values stems from the import of Western philosophic paradigms that, although corroded from within, were overzealously

[134] The original wording is plain and simple: 'ただ、一さいは過ぎて行きます。' Dazai, *Ningen*, 307.

assimilated. As Akutagawa's *Life of a Stupid Man* shows, this philosophical import also facilitated positive identification, such as the writer's invocation of the 'demon of the *fin de siècle*'. His intertextual references to French poetry created an awareness for the transcultural community among poets. As a young man, when Yōzō still had high hopes of becoming a painter, he was also intrigued by Amadeo Modigliani and the Impressionists; but when he gives up on art, he becomes indifferent to the connection between his personal story and larger socio-political phenomena. His focus is solely on human nature, which prevents sensitive individuals like him from finding peace, let alone happiness. And while Nishitani points out that Japanese nihilism can be overcome by developing new patterns of modern subjectivity, notably through Zen Buddhist practices of the self,[135] Dazai's Yōzō has no use for his cultural roots. They appear like everything else that promises to mitigate the senselessness of human existence – only to turn into a source of further grief and pain.

In comparison with Yōzō, his literary predecessors appear as unstable but ultimately life-affirming individuals. Werther's and Sensei's suicides articulate the hope that life's misery can be undone by self-murder. René flees into foreign lands to die in exotic surroundings. Obermann endures stoically, Adolphe rushes away. Only Yōzō's death drive is so comprehensive that it suffocates all impulses to act decisively. In Dazai's cosmos, impulsive acts such as suicide are deceptive, as they presume a polar world that also provides relief from life's misery. According to Dazai's nihilistic monism, one must bear with the grinding slowness of the death drive. Before the suffering individual can thoroughly internalise the idea that '*everything passes*', they will have died infinite times. Schopenhauer's idea of resignation, 'the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will-to-live itself', finds its purest articulation in this Japanese Werther. The constant presence of the death drive is not an obscure force that acts in the shadow of conscious volition, as Freud has it, but results from unprejudiced experience of human life.

Conclusion

This chapter followed up on the findings of thanatological *Werther* criticism and traced the novel's subsequent transformations in French and Japanese literature. To arrive at Korff's and Kamei's conclusion about Werther's triumph means to practise interpretative grafting, since the novel lacks a clear moment of anagnorisis, as is the case in Schopenhauerian renunciation. Yet Freud's definition of the death drive – the '*urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things*' – suggests

[135] According to Nishitani, 'everything is possible in a person in whom the nature of emptiness arises'. Nishitani, *Nihilism*, 180. See also Cestari, 'Nihilistic Practices', 154.

another definition of the death drive, one that eschews conscious volition altogether. This dormant drive is compatible with Werther's continuous oscillation between passive melancholy and lucidity. Self-destructive impulses that remain hidden under the surface of consciousness can also be found in Chateaubriand's René, who is disappointed with life even before his incestuous afflictions commence. In contrast, Senancour's Obermann and Constant's Adolphe are relatively cognisant of their disposition, and this also applies to Sōseki's protagonists and Dazai's Yōzō.

These findings allow for general observations about three aspects of Wertherian literature: their visions of nature, questions of genre and Japanese particularities.

Visions of nature

On 21 June 1771, Werther finds the perfect words to describe his oneness with his surroundings: 'How fine the view from that summit! – that delightful chain of hills, and the exquisite valleys at their feet! – could I but lose myself amongst them! – I ran off, and returned without finding what I sought. Distance, my friend, is like the future.' A few months later, as he finds his hopes disappointed, his sanguine perception of the natural world undergoes a drastic change. Suddenly, the river rapids suggest to him the presence of a cosmic, 'all-consuming, devouring monster'. Despite these swings between the extremes of ecstasy and visions of annihilation, he continues to perceive the world as an integrated whole. Werther's all-encompassing visions transcend the limitations of individual subjectivity: as a happy man, he feels the presence of the Almighty in every worm and insect; as an unhappy man, he strives to return to the all-loving father. Although he harbours doubts about the Creation's design, he trusts that suffering can be redeemed. Or, to speak in more Korffian terms: with absolute confidence about his own ability, he demands to be saved from a world that is 'unworthy of truly divine life'.

While Chateaubriand's René also revels in such grand visions, he does not transcend his own self but exacerbates the solipsistic tendencies that modern critics often castigate in Werther's views. In René's account of Mount Etna, the shift between first and third person blurs the distinction between confession and third-person narrative. Ultimately, this rhetoric reveals an individual who feels, as Sainte-Beuve argues, a 'burning desire for the destruction and ruination of the world'. René's fellow French Romantic protagonist, Obermann, also feels drawn to dramatic landscapes, such as the icy peaks of the Swiss Alps and the cataract which he contemplates on his wanderings with Fonsalbe. In contrast to Werther and René, Obermann's nature fulfils a completely different purpose, as it reminds the suffering individual to exert self-control.

Constant's *Adolphe* displays a striking indifference to the metaphorical appeal of natural surroundings. Immersed in the vortex of his own thoughts, he takes no interest in external projections of his own feelings or ideals outside the microcosm of his relationship with Ellenore. A cynical observer could argue that, as a successful suitor who consummates his love, he has no need to sublimate his sexual passion in the contemplation of the shapes of nature. Yet Werther's revenants in Japan also display the same kind of indifference to landscape. When the two celibates, Sensei and K, travel along the Bōsō peninsula, their long, exhausting walks along the rocky beaches offer no spectacular vistas and hardly serve as a distraction from their bitter rivalry. And in Dazai's novel, the only vision of nature that comes to mind is Yōzō's walk through wintry Tokyo, when he suddenly vomits blood: 'It formed a big rising-sun flag in the snow' (*D* 157). Since the mentioned flag is closely associated with Japanese militarism, this scene marks the disappearance of the naive appreciation of nature that was first explored in Goethe's *Werther*. From now on, nature is irretrievably compromised by the baseness of human society.

Genre

This chapter started out from the same premise as Chapter 3, positing that *Werther* adaptations can be loosely defined by subjective prose styles, stylistic naturalness, intertextual references and the presence of Wertherian heroes. In addition to such characteristics, thanatological *Werther* adaptations include a fifth element, the emotionally distanced editorial frame. Such a frame is already present in Goethe's novel, and scholars have debated whether the editor provides reliable guidance or if his account gives away the voice of the philistine. In the discussed novels, the frames range from frosty commentary, such as the postscript of *René*, to denunciation, as in the case of *Adolphe*, where the editor grumbles that the protagonist has 'adopted no useful career, that he had used up his gifts with no sense of direction beyond mere caprice'. The Japanese novels use such frame narratives as well. While Dazai's editor restricts himself to distanced commentary, Sōseki's *Kokoro* embeds Sensei's testament in the main narration, which is told by an introverted young man and which comprises two-thirds of the total text. The notable exception is *Obermann*, a text that lacks such a narrative device altogether.

The presence of the editorial frame, regardless of its length and reliability, is a crucial means with which to put the suffering of the Wertherian hero in perspective. To elaborate on the thanatological dimension of the selected texts, the present study chose to de-emphasise the relevance of the frame. This choice as such can serve as an example of the act of interpretative grafting, as one loses a central point of reference within the narrative order. After all, the main function of such editorial frames is to put the protagonist's bleak outlook on life into perspective.

In line with Aristotle's doctrine of the Mean, the editors suggest that moderate behaviour is commendable to everyone, even hot-headed young men, who should not embrace their self-destructive drives but observe restraint. The old native in Chateaubriand's *René*, who knows that '[t]here is only happiness in following the ordinary path', ultimately raises a point that Lotte already made in Goethe's original: 'Whenever anything worries me, I go to my old squeaky piano, drum out a quadrille, and then everything's all right again' (*L* 16).

The presence of this sanguine and life-affirming perspective also explains why sophisticated interpretations of Chateaubriand can insist on the positive trajectory of their novels, as when Roulin asserts that Chateaubriand 'knows how to grasp the totality of reality'. In view of Adolphe's lack of an inner compass, Conroy also recommends that the young man consider the intermediary principles between abstraction and the reality of everyday life. In line with this kind of interpretation, Hijiya can also speak of Dazai's 'faith in the beauty of humanity'. The problematic aspect of such frames, however, is that they impose a predefined result on such texts, a tendency that accords with educational purposes but which compromise literature's ability to describe the world in uncompromising terms. And while there lies great value in taking a positive attitude towards life, the editors' ostentatious affirmations of life do not necessarily help in this regard.

Japan's Wertherian heroes

The present study referenced Schopenhauer and Freud to make a stronger case for Korff's and Kamei's analyses, which stand at odds with general scholarship. In French Romantic literature, to claim compatibility between Wertherian novels and philosophical pessimism also appears to disrupt established assumptions about Chateaubriand and Constant. Only the mysterious correspondences between Senancour and Schopenhauer have aroused scholarly interest before.

By contrast, it seems unnecessary to discuss the relevance of the death drive in the Japanese context. The thanatological texts by Sōseki, Mori, Akutagawa and Dazai leave little doubt about the power of self-destructive drives; instead, they are treated as an integral force in the individual's quest to make sense of the world. In Keppler-Tasaki's study of Goethe's unusual reception in Japan, this awareness is portrayed negatively as 'the obsession with the interconnection of beauty and death in a larger framework of the "suicide nation" self-image', yet this alleged obsession also allows writers to elaborate on self-murder with far more nuance than their European peers. This starts with Sōseki's two suicides, K and Sensei, whose motivations to die have little in common. Arguably, Mori's heroic tales naturalised suicide to such a degree that Dazai can envision non-death as the peak of human suffering: Yōzō is condemned to fail at self-murder and endure his miserable human life.

Regardless of the sophistication of Sōseki's and Dazai's texts, their appraisal of resignation is afforded by a specific type of historical amnesia, as James A. Fujii has already explained. Accordingly, *Kokoro* must be read in the context of Sōseki's Manchurian travelogues, in which he shows little sensitivity to Japan's military expansion: '*Kokoro*, like virtually every other text from the modern Japanese literary canon, refuses or is unable to address the imperialist dimensions of Japanese modernity.'[136] As a consequence, the novel's striking portrait of modern society comes with a bitter aftertaste. As Fujii's quote already indicates, the same also applies to other texts, such as the novels of the Decadent School, which also steered clear of discussing Japanese guilt even when scores of war crimes, committed by the Empire's armies, came to light. The singular focus remained on the isolated individual who is cut off from the collective but is also freed from all responsibility towards his fellow humans.

Although the label 'pessimism' unites Wertherian novels, Schopenhauerian renunciation and modern Japanese Wertherian writing, this label latches on a number of isolated motifs that say little about the corresponding world visions. While metaphysical ideas feature prominently in the work of the German philosopher, modern Japan's young men inhabit a world in which their suffering cannot be redeemed by a higher reality. In this sense, they depart from Schopenhauer as much as they reject native Buddhism. Dazai's monistic nihilism posits that the wretchedness of the material world cannot be transcended. Yōzō captures the idea of non-transcendence in the striking image of the tattered kite that hangs outside his lover's apartment: 'blown about and ripped by the dusty spring wind, it nevertheless clung tenaciously to the wires, as if in affirmation of something. […] It haunted me even in my dreams' (*D* 113). Of course, such poetic figurations of nihilism can also be found in Western literary fiction of the 20th century – one may think of Albert Camus or Samuel Beckett – but only Japanese letters have situated them within the characteristic nexus of ideas, motifs and narrative features that are prefigured in Goethe's text.

[136] James A. Fujii, 'Writing Out Asia: Modernity, Canon, and Natsume Sōseki's *Kokoro*', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 1.1 (1993), 171–98, 176.

Closing Remarks

In 2015, when I spent a brief stint at the Goethehaus in Weimar, I saw the plural of Werther exemplified by a failed encounter. The managing director of the legendary building had just received a delegation from Korea, a meeting that she said left her thoroughly confused. 'They came from *Lotte*, I suspect?', I asked with reference to Lotte Corporation, a multinational conglomerate corporation. 'Yes, how could you tell? Now guess what they wanted from us. A statue of Lotte!' She shook her head indignantly: 'So I told them, there's no Lotte, she's just a fictional character. The best we can do is a Goethe statue.' Unfortunately, the director had little sympathy for the simple task that the delegation was assigned to fulfil. The idea was to honour the corporation's founder, Shin Kyuk-ho, with a plaster cast of a Lotte statue – after all, he had named his small company after the beloved in Goethe's novel.[1]

Today, Lotte Corporation has moved away from its humble origins, as it owns a chain of exclusive hotels, a string of shopping malls and entertainment and industrial subdivisions. There is a certain discrepancy between the literature-inspired name and, for example, the company's mission to create shareholder value: 'Building on the 50 years of growth we achieved through our ceaseless efforts to push ever further and pursue innovation.'[2] And while *Werther*'s Lotte in fact embodies a set of congenial values, including her lauded industriousness and sense of duty, the company's mission clearly departs from the sentimentalist ideals which likely inspired Shin Kyuk-ho, then a young man, to draw on this literary reference.[3]

[1] See Jonathan Cheng, 'You Know What This Company Needs? More Sturm und Drang', *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 April 2017.

[2] Lotte Profile 2021: 'Lifetime Value Creator', http://www.lotte.co.kr/upload/brochure/2021_lotte_brochure_en.pdf, 78 [last accessed 27 December 2022].

[3] Although the delegation had to abandon its original mission, the delegation's trip resulted in the erection of multiple *Werther*-related statues. Today, the courtyard of Lotte Seoul Hotel features a full-sized copy of Franz Schaper's Goethe Monument, erected in 1880 near Berlin's Tiergarten, as well as two *Werther*-themed bronzes that were produced independently, for a lack of German help.

Even without delving into the long-winded arguments of academic discussion, the failed encounter at the Goethehaus exemplifies the enigmatic plurality of certain classical texts. With regard to their semantic malleability, novels such as *Werther* exemplify the characteristics of avant-gardist writing, as readers find themselves encouraged to project their own views and preferences on the text, often to the great displeasure of the authors themselves. As it turns out, *Werther* is not quite the stable entity that generations of readers had in mind when formulating their authoritative, seemingly conclusive views on the book's intention, purpose and appeal. To emphatically acknowledge such plurality, however, must not result in a predictably postmodernist answer, contending that there are as many interpretations of the book as there are readers. As this study argues, the process in which a text changes amid new contextualisation requires a delicate feedback loop between the Original and its new readers. The graft only comes to life under highly favourable conditions.

The most common interpretations of Goethe's novel – overidentification, autobiographical confession and authorial irony – did not result from arbitrary reading practices but corresponded with socio-historical and cultural imperatives that successfully reshaped the text to suit specific expectations. *Werther* rose to the occasion when German readers consulted the book: first by encouraging tearful sentimentalism amid a wave of bourgeois self-exploration, then by transforming into a negative foil to highlight the maturity of Goethe. In the same vein, *Werther* also rose to the occasion when Italian and Chinese writers drew on the book to articulate revolutionary patriotism and when French Romantics and Japanese modernists explored a thanatological perspective on human existence. *Werther* is different *Werther*s, but not everywhere at the same time.

Literary grafting, it must be pointed out, does not open the door to infinite possibilities. Most of the time, the text remains sterile until a socio-historical and cultural matrix emerges to facilitate another round of rereading and rewriting. Each element of the triad of grafting – *selection of the rootstock*, *elimination of incompatible elements* and *addition of a scion* – requires readers to let go of established modes of interpretation. As became evident in the discrepancy between Heine's hesitation and Foscolo's determination to embrace the text's political connotation, a certain degree of cultural and geographical distance is beneficial to creative reinterpretation. While such distance is maximised in the East Asian context, one should not overstate the freedom of Chinese and Japanese writers; in the end, reading always operates within fixed boundaries. Guo Moruo's revolutionary interpretation does not float in free space but evinces significant overlaps with Lukács's ideas, indicating that the text facilitated a similar reading experience in two unrelated situations. Placing emphasis on the same textual elements incurs comparable results. Likewise, Korff's and Kamei's congenial thanatological readings have also emerged independently of each other. Their results appear to

be prestabilised, as both pay attention to the same features and derive analogous conclusions from the book. In the end, readers can only follow the signposts that the text provides.

This study focused on three different kinds of transtextual encounters – interpretation, translation and adaptation – which allowed for a comprehensive panorama of *Werther*'s echoes in world literature. The advantage of this integral approach is that it does not prioritise one kind of encounter over the others. After all, all three kinds of texts often appear in close succession, especially during an initial wave of reception. The concept of literary 'grafting' served as an umbrella term to test a more affirmative view of the liberties that critics, translators and literary writers take and, at the same time, to insist on the continued relevance of the Original, but as a compromised entity rather than a sacred text. The hope was to challenge concepts such as 'misunderstanding' or the deceptively generous idea of 'writing that gains in translation'. It goes without saying that the use of grafting as a guiding metaphor also came with a drawback, as it prevented a more nuanced typological discussion of transtextual encounters. Inevitably, interpretations, translations and adaptations implement the procedure of grafting in discrete ways. Critics paint with broader strokes. They can safely leave large amounts of text uncommented, as they relate isolated phrases to the entire text's meaning. It is a commonly held assumption that the task of the translator differs radically, as they transpose isolated sentences, the literary text's smallest unit, to the rules of a different linguistic system. And yet translators also selectively appropriate the Original, for example when providing only a selection of it, such as in the case of Werther's 'Songs of Selma'. In the case of full translations, the translators' power to amputate a text includes the omission of isolated sentences, such as Graves and Malthus's decision to elide Werther's seemingly blasphemous comment, and their interference with a text's register and stylistic features, as seen in most Japanese and English translations of *Werther*. The pursuit of the Arch-Original is no less invasive than the truths of the critics.

While the relationship between criticism and translation is defined by different notions of closeness to the text, adaptations evince a much higher degree of freedom and are more difficult to pinpoint. Since they require no explicit reference to the Original, the challenge is to identify scions that were grafted onto new material in the past but which have grown into indivisible organisms now. Consequently, the assertion of a lineage always requires a leap of faith on the part of the reader. In Chapters 3 and 4, several features were singled out to define the core elements of the Wertherian text. And yet, the Foscolo–Guo–Jiang–Ba and the Chateaubriand–Senancour–Constant–Sōseki–Dazai lineages are artificial constructs, based on reductive summaries that make them suitable for a comparative investigation. It turns out that a study that elaborates on the epistemic limitations of established scholarship cannot avoid succumbing to the same pitfalls that it criticises.

At this point, it seems appropriate to situate this study within the *Werther* nursery. Rather than championing a true meta-analysis, the present monograph forms part of the tree nursery that hosts all the *Werther* grafts of the past, present and future. If its insights can generate better orientation in this strange orchard, then much will have been accomplished.

Obviously, the metaphoric image of 'grafting' is only a tool, intended to capture the highly abstract process that plays out between the Original and other texts that are, in one way or another, related to it. Alternatively, one could also invoke Plutarch's Ship of Theseus, a ship that was preserved over centuries because the crew kept replacing old planks with new timber.[4] Or one could also resort to a maritime metaphor, conceiving of *Werther* interpretations, translations and adaptation as situated within the branches of the vast river delta where semantic plurality flows. Mattenklott's lament that '[e]very new generation of Werther-readers claims to make new or discrete discoveries' would then indicate an overfished, muddy waterway within this delta, where the fleets of criticism should stop casting their nets. Meanwhile, the underexplored turquoise branches in other sections of the delta promise new fishing opportunities.

Probably, this is where Werther would be sitting, stringing his sugar peas and reading his Homer. When it seems that he has finally found peace, he suddenly jumps up and starts waving frantically at the horizon. He has spotted the container ship that carries plaster casts of Lotte: from Germany to East Asia.

[4] In the history of philosophy, the Ship of Theseus became an emblem of the epistemological situation of human perception. Otto Neurath's reinterpretation reads: 'We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction.' Otto Neurath, *Empiricism and Sociology*, trans. by Paul Foulkes and Marie Neurath (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973), 199.

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