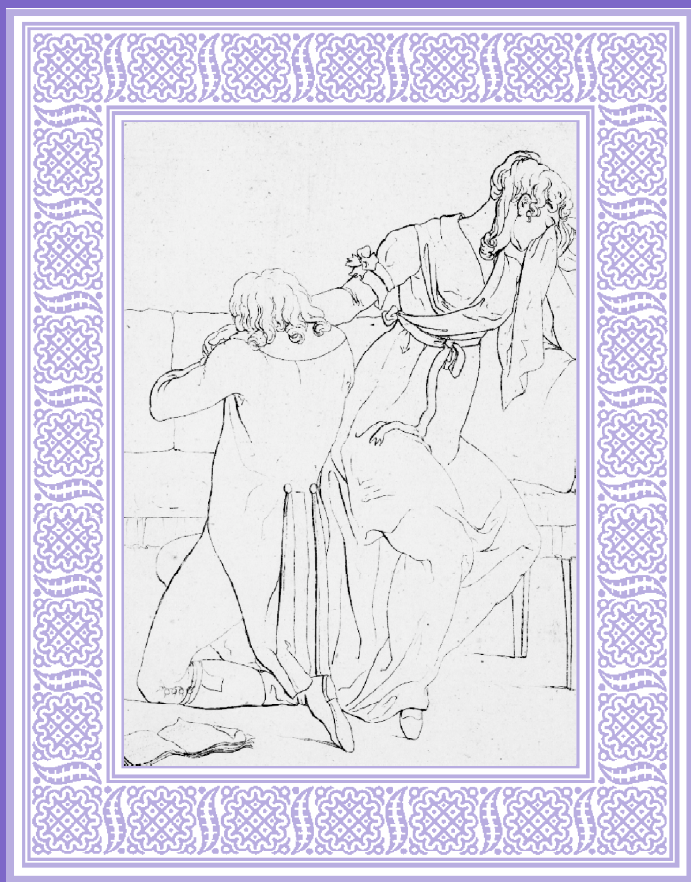


# Goethe's *Werther* and the Critics



**Bruce Duncan**

*Goethe's Werther and the Critics*

*Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture:*  
*Literary Criticism in Perspective*

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# Goethe's *Werther* and the Critics

Bruce Duncan

CAMDEN HOUSE

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## Introduction

WHEN SHE HEARD the plans for this book, my 91-year-old mother remarked that “it doesn’t sound like much of a page-turner.” She’s right, of course. Few people will take *Goethe’s Werther and the Critics* along to the beach. Students and scholars, on the other hand, might find it a useful tool. As part of the Camden House series *Literary Criticism in Perspective*, it seeks to trace the critical reception of Goethe’s first novel. “One of the primary purposes of the series,” the editors state, “is to illuminate the nature of literary criticism itself, to gauge the influence of social and historic currents on aesthetic judgments once thought objective and normative.” Goethe’s *Werther*, which has inspired well over two centuries’ worth of criticism, turns out to be a particularly good subject for just such an investigation. The book’s age, textual richness, and sustained popularity, combined with its author’s canonical, even mythical status, have invited a broad range of interpretations by critics of all stripes.

When it appeared in 1774, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, traditionally translated as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, created a possibly unique sensation in the history of publishing. “Werther-Fever,” a phenomenon that included not just enthusiasm for the novel, but also a desire to emulate its hero, spread throughout Europe and then to America. There was even a translation into Chinese, a first for a German book. So influential was *Werther* that nineteenth-century social critics later designated any romantic overindulgence as “Werther-sickness” or “Wertherism,” and twentieth-century psychologists adopted the term “Werther effect” to describe imitative suicides. This last assertion, that the book inspired numerous people to take their own lives, is largely a fiction invented by overly zealous social guardians, but one that still clings stubbornly to the novel’s history and underscores its cultural significance. Undeniable, on the other hand, is that a whole generation of young men adopted Werther’s blue swallow-tail coat, high boots, and yellow waistcoat and breeches, not to mention his emotionality, while young women donned Lotte’s white dress with pink bows and sought to emulate her feminine virtues. Even after such clothing fads passed, *Werther* continued to function as an icon. Forty-four years after its original publication, it was the first book that Dr. Frankenstein’s monster read in order to learn what it means to be human.

The novel succeeded commercially, as well, although the absence of effective copyrights meant that much of the profit went to the rogue



publishers of pirated versions. Indeed, the first edition to identify Goethe as the author was the unauthorized “first volume” of Goethe’s works, printed by Christian Friedrich Himburg in Berlin in 1775 — the original edition of 1774, published by Weygand in Leipzig, appeared anonymously. It is telling that when Goethe set about writing the second version of 1787, the only copy that he could find to work from was a pirated one full of errors. Nor did the author benefit financially from products like *Eau de Werther* or the images of Werther and Lotte that were sold as porcelain figures or on fans, gloves, bread boxes, and jewelry.

The novel did bring Goethe lasting fame, however. When Napoleon visited him in 1808, it was to meet the author of *Werther*, a book he claimed to have read seven times. Over the past two and a quarter centuries, the novel has also spawned countless imitations, parodies, and sequels, including nine Italian operas, in addition to Jules Massenet’s more famous French one. The best-known modern retelling, Ulrich Plenzdorf’s *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* (The New Sufferings of Young W., 1973), caused a major sensation in the German Democratic Republic, where it seemed to define the longings of yet another generation. Even the travel industry still benefits from *Werther*; tourists continue to flock to Wetzlar to view the home of Charlotte Buff, who inspired the figure of Lotte, while visitors to Goethe’s house in Frankfurt want to see the desk at which he composed his first novel. In another measure of continuing interest, a recent web search on “Die Leiden des jungen Werther” turned up 51,000 hits.

Perhaps most extraordinary of all, however, is *Werther*’s enduring popularity with readers. There are still twenty-eight German editions and nine English translations in print, not to mention various audiocassettes and on-line versions. Commercial interest in the novel has moved with the times, of course. Eighteenth-century illustrators took some liberties with the plot by showing, for example, Lotte distributing bread to her siblings in a garden setting (see Göres 1972, 183–200; Assel 1984), but the cover on the latest American translation (Pike 2004) features a close-up of a young man kissing a woman’s bare midriff — something that Werther never even dreamed of doing, despite what some of the studies discussed below in chapter 6 might claim.

The present volume, however, is concerned not with reception in the broader sense, but with the history of literary criticism. Here, too, various trends come into play. Scholars, like booksellers and other purveyors of fiction, are creatures of their times, and their methods and results reflect social forces and literary tastes. Not only do the many interpreters discussed here choose to focus on different elements in the text — or, in some instances, *not* in the text — they also approach these elements in different ways and arrive at surprisingly different conclusions. This observation could easily lead to a cynical dismissal of the whole enterprise of literary

criticism as a branch of the fashion industry. And, as we will see, it is not difficult to find interpreters so given to one vogue or another that they become cavalier about the finer points of evidence and logic. But the bulk of the studies considered here lead to just the opposite conclusion: both Goethe's novel and the history of its criticism are extraordinarily rich; the variety of responses is less an example of fashion than a testimony to the novel's genius and its interpreters' fertility of mind.

A strictly chronological ordering of these interpretations would require a crisscrossing of themes that would soon become chaotic; I have instead chosen to organize each chapter around a particular approach, or set of approaches. Within those categories, the various investigations then appear roughly in the order of their composition. This means that some multifaceted studies are treated more than once, often in different chapters. In such cases, readers should use the index in order to assure complete coverage of individual interpretations. This listing of names provides some historical orientation by adding dates of birth and death or, when the exact information was not readily available, at least the century in which the person was born.

As prescribed by the publisher, each chapter is followed by its own alphabetically arranged bibliography. A comprehensive chronological listing of sources is found at the end of the book. This chronology is based upon the year of a study's first appearance, which often differs from the date of the edition cited. Georg Lukács's essay on *Werther*, for example, was originally published in 1936 and reissued many times. I consulted and cite the version in Hans Peter Herrmann's 1994 anthology, but the bibliographical entry appears under 1936. This arrangement seemed to be the best way to establish the essay's historical context. For the same reason, I have included the original year of publication when first citing a reference within the text; for example, "(Lukács 1936, 42)." I have not, however, attempted to list every edition of these studies. Thomas Mann's essay on "Goethes *Werther*," for example, began as a talk in 1939, was broadcast on the radio in 1940, and is now available in at least five subsequent printings. I have listed only the one from which I cite (again, Herrmann), while still referring to it as "Mann 1939." Sometimes, however, the original source seems to deserve its own mention; I include, for example, the information that Matthias Claudius's review of *Werther* appeared in his periodical, *Wandsbecker Bote* (Wandsbeck Messenger), even though my citations come from a modern anthology. In other words, students using the bibliography will find what are intended to be useful, but not complete, listings of each study. Finally, I should add that the final bibliography contains some works that I consulted but did not specifically cite.

References to *Werther* itself include the dates of his letters, on the assumption that readers might be consulting any of a number of editions. References to other works by Goethe are from the Hamburg edition, here

designated as *HA*. I assume, by the way, that readers are already familiar with Goethe's story, and so I make no attempt to summarize scenes within it.

To accommodate readers who do not know the language, I have used German quotations sparingly and then included translations in parentheses, usually my own. In several cases, I refer directly to readily available translations, citing, for example, Thomas Burger's translation from 1989 when discussing Jürgen Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1965).

A further caveat: this survey may seem exhausting, but it is not exhaustive. Neither the publisher's guidelines nor my own endurance has permitted a truly comprehensive review. It was with gratitude that I acceded to the editors' request that I limit myself primarily to publications written in German and English. There are, of course, a great many French, Italian, Japanese, and Slavic contributions to *Werther* scholarship, but even within the German and Anglo-American traditions there is far too much material to treat fully. I have therefore included those items that seem to illustrate the major critical approaches to *Werther*, although I frequently try to point readers to still others that deserve attention. The most daunting prospect of all, however, has been to try to do justice to each study that is treated: to present its arguments fairly, without too much reduction. Encountering others' distortions of my own prior investigations of *Werther* has been both a humbling and an irksome aspect of this research. I have tried especially hard not to be vindictive in such cases.

This history of *Werther* studies, then, attempts to achieve two purposes: on the one hand, to serve as a useful first stop for those planning research on *Werther* by characterizing for them what their predecessors have already chosen to tackle; on the other hand, to provide what I hope is an instructive diachronic slice of literary criticism. In this latter role, the survey reveals some dross, but mostly it shows a rich tradition in which recent studies continue to break new ground, and older ones prove to be worth a further visit.

I would like to thank those who aided me in this undertaking. Dartmouth's Presidential Scholars program enabled me to employ two undergraduate assistants: Alexia O. Huffman, who combed nineteenth-century literary histories for discussions of *Werther*, and Peter C. Hughes Jr., who gathered information for the index. Patricia A. Carter and Reinhart Sonnenburg, Dartmouth librarians, helped to locate elusive resources. Professors Lynn A. Higgins, Susannah Heschel, and Konrad Kenkel shared their erudition and interest, and Steven P. Scher and Ellis Shookman, always important sources of support, read the manuscript and provided valuable editorial advice. I am also grateful to Jim Hardin and Jim Walker of Camden House for their patient guidance and Susan Innes for her superior copy editing.

Finally, I dedicate this study to Wat and Max.

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# 1: First Responses

**W**ERTHER'S EXPLOSIVE EFFECT, wrote Goethe thirty-eight years after the fact, was a matter of timing: at this particular point in history, a disaffected but inarticulate younger generation suddenly found its concerns expressed (*HA* 9: 589–90<sup>1</sup>). As Peter Hohendahl reports, the novel uncovered a rift between the adherents of the optimistic-sentimental doctrine of virtue and the exponents of *Weltschmerz* (world-weariness; 1977, 81). The novel's appearance coincided with another less dramatic but nevertheless significant schism that marked the tail end of a profound paradigm shift in German literary criticism. Pre-Enlightenment critics had assessed a work's literary value on the basis of classical models, invoking what were considered timeless and immutable rhetorical prescriptions that conformed to courtly expectations. Wit and power of expression were of course crucial ingredients, but these qualities, too, had to match the fixed standards of cultivated learning. That way, a literary work exemplified its author's erudition and inventiveness; it also reflected these qualities back onto the author's patron. Readers, too, in appreciating a work appropriately, were giving public witness to their own refinement and good breeding.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, German critics gradually developed a new notion of criticism's purpose.<sup>2</sup> Many of the former desiderata remained, but they received a radically new basis: the authority of tradition was now replaced by an inductively defined efficacy. The new theories might still give traditional poetics the benefit of the doubt, but even established judgments ultimately had to withstand the scrutiny of reason. Another new consideration was the growing recognition that evaluative criteria once thought to be universal were in fact influenced by historical context: as readers' expectations changed over time, so did the notions of how to meet them. Enlightened critics, for all their differences, shared an assumption that the location of a work's value, the source of its legitimacy, had migrated from a set of supposedly timeless rules to the emotional effect that it exercised on contemporary recipients. With this shift came an increased emphasis on an individual reader's experience. When older critics speak of a work's "truth," they mean either its representation of external reality or its articulation of acknowledged verities — such as the unacceptability of suicide. For the younger critics, on the other hand, "truth" refers to individual readers' encounter with something in the text that seems to mirror a part of themselves (Flaschka 1987, 253–54).

This new emphasis on emotional reception still devoted primary attention to the author, who was seen as speaking from the heart, but the reader's role as an active recipient grew in importance. Critics increasingly stressed that the connection between novelist and reader was a private, individual, and necessarily sincere bond. Although reading aloud in groups was still common, eighteenth-century readers now tended to consume literary works in isolation, feeling as they did so that they were engaged in a privileged relationship with the author. And it was from this perspective that the earliest enthusiasts judged *Werther*.<sup>3</sup> An anonymous review in the *Neueste kritische Nachrichten* (The Latest Critical Reports; May 20, 1775), for example, describes the novel as a product of Goethe's genius, "das ganz aus der Fülle eines warmen, gefühlvollen Herzens entsprungen sich wieder ans Herz drängt, allmählig eine jede Sehne erreicht, und zuletzt alles mit Jammer und Herzleid erfüllt" (P. Müller 1969, 162; which, springing forth from a warm heart full of feeling, in turn presses itself upon [another] heart, eventually reaching each of its fibers and finally filling everything with lament and heartache). Goethe, according to such critics, has fulfilled his part of the literary bargain; it is now up to his readers to open their hearts to his. As Johann Jakob Wilhelm Heinse writes in *Iris*, the women's literary quarterly that he and Johann Georg Jacobi published from 1774 to 1776, it is inappropriate to subject *Werther*'s literary features to analysis, much less to suggest any deficiencies; it is not a novel, says Heinse, but rather a simple, natural expression of its hero's sufferings, originating from its author's innermost heart (Heinse 1774, 209). Readers who fail to appreciate this genuine emotion and instead get tangled up in tertiary questions of literary form or merit simply disqualify themselves as judges by revealing their own lack of heart. The book, he stresses, was not written for those young ladies who consider *Werther*'s overflowing heart to be immature, or who join the philosophers in condemning his suicide. It is intended for nobler hearts, those who will savor the novel more than once. Heinse claims to speak for such readers when he extends heartfelt thanks to the genius that gave them this gift of *Werther*'s sufferings (210).

As these reviews assume, the reading experience establishes an individual connection between author and reader; but there is a further effect that is produced among readers themselves, creating a group of kindred souls who partake of the general fervor for the work, its characters, and its author. *Werther*'s and Lotte's shared enthusiasm for the poetry of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (letter of July 16) is an obvious example, but the phenomenon extended beyond *Werther* and constituted a widespread and even self-conscious attempt to form a literary public. An enthusiasm for Goethe — or Rousseau or Klopstock or Shakespeare — brought together people of feeling who were eager to join hearts (see Lenz 1775, 673). In welcoming Goethe's sudden influence on the national literature,

Christian Heinrich Schmid describes him as eschewing theoretical issues and instead forging sympathetic bonds with Herder and others through a shared reverence for Shakespeare (1774, 61). This emotional affinity would then, such critics hoped, expand to embrace additional authors, a sense of nationhood, and ultimately bourgeois values in general. Jürgen Habermas tells how the “relations between author, work, and public changed. They became intimate mutual relationships between privatized individuals who were psychologically interested in what was ‘human,’ in self-knowledge, and in empathy” (1965, 50). Indeed, the whole literary enterprise justified itself in the end by its goal of educating, even creating, a republic of readers that would form the new public sphere.

Literature assumed this role not only because a true political forum for the rising middle class was lacking, but also because the later eighteenth century assumed that human worth in general, and morality in particular, lay in the emotions (Duncan 2003). The traditional dual purpose of literature, *prodesse et delectare*, now gained a new emphasis; a work’s pleasure derived from the reader’s empathetic response, but its utility stemmed from tying its reader emotionally to communal values. In this model, the arousal of fear and pity became a training session in moral sensibilities. Literature educated the heart and in doing so created a community of readers who were sensible — in both meanings of the term (see Schings 1980).

The enlightened critic’s goals changed accordingly: now the point was to encourage works that would speak to readers through profound emotion, and conversely, to open up readers to such aesthetic experiences. The ultimate hope was to produce an enlightened literary public that would be ready to assume the role of advancing the human condition. These ambitions had a national component, as well, for reading German works both required and promoted a German sensibility. An explicit appeal to nationalism, so prominent in the critical response to Goethe’s *Götz von Berlichingen* (1772), is largely missing from the published reviews of *Werther*, but the critics’ personal correspondence shows that the novel, too, exerted a patriotic appeal (Flaschka 1987, 256).

Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart was particularly devoted to encouraging such feelings. His journal, *Deutsche Chronik* (German Chronicle), begun in 1774, promoted Klopstock and the Sturm und Drang writers because he hoped that an emotional identification with these geniuses, as he saw them, would help to build a German national character (see Honolka 1985). Schubart’s rhapsodic review of *Werther*, which addresses readers familiarly and employs colloquial elisions, is an especially clear appeal to a community of feeling — note that in his ecstasy, he does not forget to tell his audience where to buy the book:

Da sitze ich mit zerfloßenem Herzen, mit klopfender Brust, und mit Augen aus welchen wollüstiger Schmerz tröpfelt, und sag dir, Leser, da



ich eben *die Leiden des jungen Werthers* von meinem lieben *Göthe* — gelesen? — Nein, verschlungen habe. Kritisieren soll ich? Könnt ichs, so hätt ich kein Herz. [. . .] Kauf's Buch, und lies selbst! Nimm aber dein Herz mit! — Wollte lieber ewig arm seyn, auf Stroh liegen, Wasser trinken, und Wurzeln essen, als einem solchen sentimentalischen Schriftsteller nicht nachempfinden können. Ist bey Stage zu haben. (Schubart 1774, 205–6)

[Here I sit with melted heart, with pounding chest, and with eyes from which tears of voluptuous pain fall, and tell you, Reader, that I have just read *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by my beloved Goethe — read? — no, devoured. I should write a critique? If I could, I'd have no heart. [. . .] Buy the book, and read it yourself! But take your heart along! — I'd rather be poor, lie on straw, drink water and eat roots than not be able to empathize with such a sentimental writer. Can be bought at Stage's.]

The anonymous reviewer in the *Frankfurter gelehrte Anzeigen* (Frankfurt Learned Reviews) on November 1, 1774, similarly congratulates those readers who can emotionally identify with Werther or Lotte: “Glücklicher Mann! der du mit Werther sympathisiren — fühlen kannst, [. . .] sey mir begrüßet unter den wenigen Edeln! — Und du verehrungswürdige Schöne, die du mit Lotten den ganzen Werth unsers Werthers zu schätzen weist, [. . .] mögest du doch in den Armen deines Gatten, jetzt oder in Zukunft, alle die Seligkeiten einathmen, die Dein und mein unglücklicher Freund nur in der Ferne schimmern sah” (P. Müller 1969, 193–94; Happy man! you who can empathize — feel — with Werther, [. . .] I bid you welcome among those few noble souls! And you, admirable, beautiful woman, who shares with Lotte an appreciation of Werther's complete worth, [. . .] may you, in your husband's arms, now or in the future, breathe in all of those blessings that your and my unhappy friend only saw shimmering in the distance).

Enthusiasm for Werther was far from universal, however. Two weeks after the *Frankfurter gelehrte Anzeigen* printed its review, its publisher, J. K. Deinet, stepped in to announce that he had only now read the novel himself and was definitely *not* among the fortunate few who identified with its hero. Another presumed ally, Matthias Claudius, whose journal *Wandsbecker Bote* (Wandsbeck Messenger) was normally open to newer writings, was even more critical, skewering Werther's emotionality with sarcasm, mocking his style and labeling him weak (1774, 163–64).

These contemporary critics tend to divide along generational lines that also separate attitudes toward suicide. While younger enthusiasts revel in Werther's rich inner life and express understanding for the forces that led to his death, older defenders of the social order protest against the book's apparent justification, even encouragement, of suicide. These detractors managed to get it banned in Denmark and Leipzig — although not always effectively; Weygand's second edition of 1775 was featured at the Leipzig

book fair that year (see Hertling 1963, 404). Students of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing will not be surprised to learn that the Hamburg pastor Johann Melchior Goeze led the way, excoriating not only the novel itself, but also those critics who gave it so much as faint praise. Even he, however, subscribes in his own way to the new critical assumptions. While convinced that any reasonable reader who is sufficiently girded with a knowledge of Scripture will find *Werther* at best ridiculous, he recognizes the power of its emotional appeal and fears the sympathy of inadequately equipped enthusiasts who, like Werther, feel warm blood in their young hearts (1775, 122).

Goeze's fellow cleric in Hamburg, Christian Ziegra, voices a similar complaint:

Alles dieses wird mit einer, die Jugend hinreissende Sprache, ohne die geringste Warnung oder Misbilligung erzählt: vielmehr schimmert die Zufriedenheit und Achtung des Verfassers für seinen Helden allenthalben durch. Natürlich kann die Jugend keine andre als diese Lehren daraus ziehen: Folgt euren natürlichen Trieben. Verliebt euch, um das Leere eurer Seele auszufüllen. Gaukelt in der Welt herum; will man euch zu ordentlichen Berufsgeschäften führen, so denket an das Pferd, das sich unter den Sattel bequemte, und zu schanden geritten wurde. Will es zuletzt nicht mehr gehen, wohl an ein Schuß Pulver ist hinlänglich aller eurer Noth ein Ende zu machen. (1775, 128)

[All this is told without the least warning or approbation in a language that overwhelms the young; indeed, the author's satisfaction with and admiration for his hero shine through everywhere. Young people can of course draw only one lesson from it: follow your natural drives. Fall in love to fill up the emptiness in your souls. Flit about the world; if someone tries to lead you to take up a proper career, just think about the horse that grew used to a saddle and was ridden to death. If things don't work out in the end, then a bit of gunpowder is all it will take to end your misery.]

When, from the perspective of 1970, Klaus Scherpe characterizes such criticisms as ignoring questions of the novel's literary value, he somewhat simplifies the case (1970, 16). Even Goeze's and Ziegra's attacks, however benighted they seem today, address central aesthetic issues of the time: the relationship between feeling and reason and the consequences of that relationship for the social order. The earliest critics' quarrel about *Werther*, as Hans-Jürgen Schings points out, was in important ways an extension of the ongoing struggle between "rationalists" and "enthusiasts" that had been fought on many fronts since the late seventeenth century (1977, 270–78). Even the moralists who took strong exception to Werther's suicide accepted certain nuances and did not necessarily object in principal to that act's portrayal in literature. Numerous plays, including Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* and Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*, employed suicide without controversy as a convention to usher in the traditional conciliatory death

scene (see Meyer-Kalkus 1977, 114–19). What disturbed these critics most was Goethe's effective depiction of suicide from within, a portrayal that could arouse similar feelings in his readers.

Friedrich Nicolai, normally a reliable supporter of new literature, shared Goeze's and Ziegra's concern and in 1775 published a short alternative version entitled *Die Freuden des jungen Werthers* (The Joys of Young Werther), together with a sequel, *Leiden und Freuden Werthers des Mannes* (The Sorrows and Joys of Werther, the Man). In Nicolai's version, Albert foils Werther's attempt to kill himself and then, moved by the depth of the young man's despair, steps aside to allow the two lovers to marry. This union almost founders on Werther's emotional instability, but Albert helps out again. All turns out well when Werther finally achieves maturity by accepting the boundaries of reason. Nicolai was appalled when a number of contemporaries, including Goethe himself, took this piece to be a malevolent parody. Indeed, their reaction, strengthened by Goethe's own later counter-parodies, has colored most literary historians' views of Nicolai, unfairly denigrating his important contributions to the development of eighteenth-century literary culture. Nicolai in fact intended no diminution of the novel's worth. He wrote *Die Freuden des jungen Werthers* not to discredit the entire original, but only to remind more fragile souls not to follow Werther's example (Nicolai 1775, 146). As Eckhardt Meyer-Krentler reminds us, Nicolai adds only an alternative ending; he does not change Werther's character, just the nature of his friendship with Albert (1982, 83–91). Furthermore, he brackets this version with what is meant to be a humorous dialogue that acknowledges the greatness of Goethe's achievement. Other evidence suggests that this admiration was genuine, tempered only by a perceived need for societal concerns: "Darf ich meine Meinung nicht über eine wichtige moralische Frage sagen? Oder ist das Wohl der Gesellschaft gar nichts werth?" (Nicolai 1775, 145; May I not give my opinion on an important question? Or is society's well-being of no worth?). In 1775, while announcing a French translation in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* (Universal German Library), the literary review that he published from 1765 to 1806, Nicolai describes *Werther* as possibly the only true German novel (Hertling 1963, 411). His own copy of the book is annotated with spontaneous expressions of delight (Müller 1965, 296), and his private correspondence also stresses his enthusiasm for the spirit, fire, and truth of the novel's characters. It should be noted, however, that not all modern commentators would agree with this assessment of Nicolai. Matthias Luserke, for example, considers his protestations disingenuous and calls *Die Freuden des jungen Werthers* and *Leiden und Freuden Werthers des Mannes* nasty parodies that mark the critic's general turn toward a reactionary literary stance (1995, 277–94).

Wieland, not normally inclined to take Nicolai's side in literary matters, did so in this case, pointing out that *Die Freuden des jungen Werthers*

satirized only a certain kind of reader, not Goethe's novel itself. Picking up on Schubart's assertion that he had "devoured" *Werther*, rather than read it, Wieland writes, "Hr. Nicolai hat (. . .) dem Publikum bloß ein kleines Digestivpülverchen eingeben wollen, um den Folgen der Unverdaulichkeit zuvorzukommen, welche sich manche junge *Hansen* und *Hänsinnen* durch allzugieriges Verschlingen der Werke des Hrn. Goethe zugezogen haben möchten" (1775, 167; Mr. Nicolai [. . .] merely wanted to administer a little digestive powder to the public to combat the possible effects of indigestion that some Johnnies and Janies might suffer after all-too greedily devouring Mr. Goethe's works). The anonymous reviewer in the *Neueste Critische Nachrichten* also, after praising *Werther*, suggests that Nicolai's version has its virtues and calls upon those discussing the issue to use a more measured tone (Anonymous 1775, 162–63).

Despite such support, Nicolai was stung by the attacks mounted by *Werther*'s more enthusiastic admirers. Most such assaults were in unpublished form, but Schubart, never one to shy away from controversy in his *Deutsche Chronik*, accused him in print of wanting to turn *Werther* into a bloodless fop and Goethe's genius into cold reason. Consistent with his own project of promoting a German sensibility, he describes Nicolai as lopping off *Werther*'s head to set "ein französisches Milchgesichtlein" (a little French milksop) in its place (1775, 206).

Such rebukes led Nicolai to prevail on his friend Johann Heinrich Merck to defend him in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*. Also a friend of Goethe, Merck found himself in a difficult position, and it took some prompting to get him to finish his essay. Hartmut Schmidt describes this undertaking as finding the lowest common denominator between the two quarreling parties (1988, 100). Merck prefaces his defense of Nicolai with a paean to Goethe's genius, which has not only imbued *Werther*'s character with profound feeling, but has also given the work poetic shape. Only gossips and others of ill will, he says, will care whether or not the story is based on true events; of sole importance is the poetic truth that comes from within the author. At this point, however, Merck seems to become caught in a contradiction. On the one hand, he urges up-and-coming authors to take an example from Goethe's "unnachahmlich" (inimitable) art — advice that is itself an incongruity. On the other, they should find in it a warning not to write about even the most insignificant subject without having first viewed "a fixed point" [*einen festen Punct*] of its true existence in nature, whether in the outside world or within oneself (1775, 198). Does Goethe have such a point? Merck does not give a clear answer. He tells us that any writer incapable of recognizing "den Epischen und Dramatischen Geist" (198: the epic and dramatic spirit) in the most common scenes of domestic life and of capturing this spirit on paper has no business venturing out into idealized worlds of fantasy. "Ist er ein Mann, und hat sich seine eigene Denkart gebildet, so mag er uns die bey gewissen Gelegenheiten in seiner

Seele angefachte Funken von Gefühl und Urtheilskraft [. . .] wie helle Inschrift vorleuchten lassen” (199; If he is a man, and has developed his own way of thinking, then he may allow the feeling and power of judgment that have on certain occasions ignited in his soul [. . .] to shine forth to us like a bright script).<sup>4</sup>

Again Merck seems to be inviting us to ask: Is Goethe such a man? And again he remains ambiguous: “Der V. hat seinen Helden wahrscheinlichweise zum Theil mit seinen eigenen Geistesgaben dotirt. Aus der Fülle des Gefühls, vereinbart mit dem natürlichen Trübsinn der Werthern von Jugend auf bezeichnete, entsteht das interessanteste Geschöpf, dessen Fall alle Herzen zerreißt.” (199; The author has apparently invested his hero in part with his own gifts of spirit. From this fullness of feeling, combined with the natural melancholy that distinguished Werther from his early youth, emerges the most interesting creation, whose case tears apart all hearts.) But Merck’s next sentence suddenly shifts the responsibility over to the reader: “Die Jugend gefällt sich in diesem Sympathetischen Schmerz, vergißt über dem Leben der Fiktion, daß es nur eine *Poetische Wahrheit* ist, und verschlingt alles im *Gefühl* ausgestoßene Sätze als *Dogma*” (199; Youth takes pleasure in this sympathetic pain, and in the liveliness of this fiction forgets that it is merely a *poetic truth*, and devours as *dogma* all the sentences that are ejaculations of *feeling*). When such a text treats suicide positively, he goes on to say, reading it can become problematic for those hearts that already bear within themselves an inclination toward such an act. At this point, Merck begins his defense of Nicolai, suggesting that his *Freuden des jungen Werthers* was intended to give these immature readers of Goethe’s novel aesthetic distance by reminding them that Werther was a fictional construct, not a real figure with which to identify uncritically. Nicolai himself, Merck assures us, was as sensitive as anyone else to Werther’s emotional appeal. Any satirical impulses in his text are directed not toward the novel itself, but toward those readers and critics who are unable to distinguish between primitive self-identification and aesthetic experience.

Merck, in other words, in trying to defend both Goethe and Nicolai simultaneously, does not differentiate so much between their texts themselves as between the two types of people who will read them. To those readers who possess the necessary autonomy, Goethe’s *Werther* offers a profound and uplifting emotional experience; to immature readers, however, Nicolai’s *Werther* provides a corrective that militates against the deleterious effects of overenthusiasm.

The rest of Merck’s review (200–201) defends *Werther* against those who call the book immoral. They have, he points out, at best confused a sympathetic portrayal of suicidal impulse with an apology for suicide. At worst — and here he reserves special venom for Goeze — they have engaged in self-righteous stupidity.