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Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*: An Epistolary Novel, Or A Stage Drama in Disguise?

Ilona Klein

Photography of the late 1920s generated repercussions in other fields of the arts. It sparked an interdisciplinary interest in critics who balked at viewing the frozen images as merely one moment's reality, and who wanted, instead, to recompose and integrate underlying cultural, literary, or political discourse within the photographic frame. This fertile interdisciplinary backing guaranteed an in-depth interpretative dissection of artistic expression which had not been previously possible. The small photograph, a still visual image, became connected to the larger visual images of stage sets—these, a series of visual, immobile backgrounds which framed the characters acting within.

Within this scope, August Langen investigated the connections between the principles of the original, less sophisticated, camera obscura and eighteenth-century German literature. Analyzing correlations and interrelations between artistic and literary systems, he discussed how the former had come to serve literary purposes. Langen showed that a clear diachronic development was traceable from pre-Romantic literature (with its still rather fixed literary genres) to the structurally more elaborate and supple literary boundaries found in later eighteenth-century works. His treatments of blending of genres (“Verschmelzung der Gattungen” 85), and of the slight overstepping of boundaries in the novel (“leichte Grenzüberschreitung im Roman” 82) became seminal in his quest for artistic creations capable of connecting novel, drama and etching together in early romantic manifestations. Langen wrote that “novel, theatrical pieces, and series of etchings . . . embody the principle of image-framing and the structure of image-sequencing” (“Roman, Schauspiel und Kupferfolge . . . verkörpern das Prinzip der Rahmenschau, und die...“).
Struktur der Bilderkette" 83). All three artistic media represent creative expressions and interpretations of sequential images. They were finally connected through the workings of a lanterna magica.

Niel Flax's studies on Faust II (1979) and on Faust (1983) furthered these ideas more than just tangentially while also applying some of their concepts directly to Goethe's works. In the former essay, Flax treated, among others, popular usage of lanternae magicae and the lasting impact of these slide-projector prototypes upon dramatic entertainment in general (romantic, fantastic, phantasmagoric effects), and upon the literary structure of Faust II more specifically. Flax's latter study analyzed the use of semiotic and non-semiotic signs as means to transcend "arbitrary and motivated representation" (185) and discussed the general problem of allegory vs. symbol.

Both Langen and Flax, although for different reasons, treated the seminal importance of logos and of logocentricity: Langen regarded conversation (Gespräch) as the connecting factor between drama and novel; Flax pointed to metalinguistic signs as the necessary bridge between Goethe's theory of poetry and the use of language itself.

Through an analysis of the textual language, I will show in this study how Goethe's Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (Werther, henceforth) contains and surpasses the common structure of coeval epistolary novels, for it carries innumerable theatrical elements within its pages, hence bridging traditional literary genres. Expanding upon Langen's theoretical observations on the interdisciplinary relations between stage performance and other visual artistic expressions, and applying some of Flax's parameters to a close structural reading of Werther, I propose that Goethe—who was already thinking "dramatically" anyhow (Goethe's puppet theater comes to mind)—consciously embedded in this work dramatic elements, for he was influenced by the powerful imagery of fashionable contemporary raree-shows, or show-boxes. This study will highlight evidence of theatrical elements (stage effects, settings, scenes) embedded within the text, and of dramatic plot (sub)divisions which Goethe incorporated into his "script."  

Technically speaking, lanterna magica, Guckkasten (peep-show), Zauberlaterne (magic lantern), and Zauberlampe (magic lamp) are not identical objects. However, here they are treated synonymously because their creative principle is strikingly similar, and because this textual analysis of Werther is not affected by whether the artistic image is projected on a wall (as per prototypes of slide projectors) or is formed within the rotating device itself (as per a raree-show to be viewed through a peep-hole of a show-box). At any rate, the common underlying principle of these objects consists in showing the decodification of a narrative text
through a sequence of visual images mechanically set in motion. In fact, any perceived void between the reader and a plot would be filled by the visual (de)signs representing the text.

Langen postulated that similarly in theater, the physical space which encapsulates a stage represents an enlarged show-box whose characters perform in the middle and whose sets exemplify the changing images of a *lanterna magica* on a much larger scale. Langen's references connected plots and scripts with sequential images, as he theorized striking resem­blances between stage sets and fixed images of *camerae obscures*. He concluded that “often, especially in novels, directors’ annotations are added in parentheses or in small print and correspond to the stage directions of a stage play” (“Oft, besonders im Roman, sind Regiebemerkungen beigefügt, die den Bühnenanweisungen des Theaterstücks entsprechen und eingeklammert oder auch in kleinerem Druck geboten werden” 83). That stage directions and acting suggestions often may be hidden between the lines of a novel is a concept seminal to my study.

Infinite different styles and *topoi* are employed in writing literature and the spectrum of genres does not span only from drama to novel. However, let us speculate for one moment that in the case of Goethe’s *Werther*, drama and novel indeed stand at the antipodes of an imaginary literary scale: drama, a script whose traditional nature and intrinsic monologic or dialogue form requires an audience and a stage to come alive; and novel, whose linguistic canon and codes are varied and whose pages call for a reader asked to penetrate not only the words and actions of the characters but to unravel their silent thoughts as well.

In his autobiographical *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*Poetry and Truth*) written several decades after *Werther*, Goethe discussed the genesis of poetry, drama and novel at great length, together with the employment of different possible linguistic registers for traditional literary genres. Referring back to the development of *Werther*, Goethe wrote that drama had not been its author’s sole occupation, for while it was being conceived, written, rewritten, printed and distributed many other images and ideas were stirring in his mind. Those meant for dramatic treatment had the advantage of being thought through most often and nearly completed, but simultaneously a transition developed to a different kind of presentation, which is not ordinarily considered dramatic and yet has a great relationship to drama. This transition was brought about mainly by the author’s peculiar habit of recasting even soliloquy as drama (transl. Heitner 424).

During the creative process, thus, an author first chooses a literary form suitable to the theme of the composition, then selects style(s) of speech
monologue, dialogue, third-person narration, etc.), and finally writes the actual plot including characters’ discourse. As Goethe successfully argued, for each literary creation which materializes, there exists also a myriad of other plots, characters and ideas which remain unexplored to a certain degree in the writer’s mind. Assuming a literary polarization between drama and novel, then, the argument could be made that Goethe’s Werther bridges these two genres, for even though formally his work conforms to the codes of an epistolary novel, it carries structurally within characteristics of a stage drama. Did Goethe intentionally disguise a theater “script” in Werther?

Again in Dichtung und Wahrheit, Goethe unveils the key for a close connection between dramatic monologue and epistolary novel:

It is quite clear that such thought-conversations are closely related to correspondence, except that the latter responds to an established familiarity, while the former creates a new, ever-changing familiarity for itself, with no reply. Thus, when the author had to depict that ennui with life . . . , it immediately occurred to him to portray his sentiments in letters . . . . Other people’s enjoyment of life is a painful reproach to him and so the very thing that ought to draw him out actually turns him back upon his innermost self. If he cares to discuss this at all, it will be through letters (transl. Heitner 424-5).6

Even though these two passages by Goethe in Dichtung und Wahrheit did not directly address the composing phases of his Werther, such observations are certainly applicable to this work. As other critics have noticed, Goethe may have disclosed here his conscious effort to bridge drama and novel.7

Traditionally, Die Leiden des jungen Werthers has been treated as an epistolary novel. However, it is a peculiar kind of epistolary novel, for it contains no exchange of letters. Werther represents the earliest widely-recognized example of this type, and is contrary to coeval models represented by Richardson’s and Rousseau’s epistolary novels where the reader is privy to both ends of the correspondence. In Werther, the reader only imagines Wilhelm’s words and actions, as no words are ever written by Wilhelm in reply to his friend Werther’s letters.8

Other aspects of Werther’s uniqueness become evident at a closer examination of the text. When looking at the capacity which this epistolary novel assigns to Wilhelm, a few dramatic elements in Werther come to light.9 Even though the reader can assume that Wilhelm responds to Werther, and he interacts with his friend, we do not “hear” him. In fact, his character (a silent addressee of Werther’s correspondence) mirrors the role of a likewise passive/silent theater audience watching this drama
unfold on stage. In other words, notwithstanding the readers' imagination to fill in the blanks, effectively Wilhelm maintains his silence vis-à-vis Werther throughout the book, similar to the way in which a spectator normally would only observe a traditional performance, by not interacting with the actors on stage. And while in a few passages of the novel Werther describes his own emotional reactions to Wilhelm's suggestions, it is also true that Goethe's readers can only imagine how Wilhelm may be carrying out his role, for Werther never shifts the focus away from its homonymous character's self-centeredness. In fact, Werther contains no "first-hand" dialogues at all. Words relating to others are reproduced without exclusion through the filter of the protagonist's sole memory. It is Werther alone who "narrates" others' words in his own monologues.

Monologues recited on stage connect characters and their innermost thoughts immediately, passionately and intimately to an audience. In other words, in Werther the use of long monologues (disguised in prose passages) reveal the presence of a work which avails itself of stage elements within its text. A monologue also accentuates egocentricity (Werther's, in this case), for when it is recited, the stage's focus is narrowed solely onto the character who is speaking.

By postulating that Werther may be a stage drama in disguise, or—more reasonably—that it contains numerous dramatic performing elements in its structure, we recognize that this "play" is the performance of a long monologue in a one-man show.

Besides its monologic form, other clues to theatrical elements, stage imagery and drama are embedded in the text. These literary strategies can confirm Goethe's creation of a work in which the boundaries between drama and novel withered.

Werther's imaginary letter of 20 January 1772—which, chronologically and structurally speaking, appears at the exact center of the novel—contains a statement clearly referring to the importance of theatrical elements within the text: "I am amused by these puppets, or rather, I am myself one of them; I sometimes grasp my neighbor's wooden hand, and withdraw with a shudder" (transl. Lange 45). In yet other passages of Werther, a stage curtain is mentioned: "To lift the curtain, to step behind it" (transl. Lange 71) ["Den Vorhang aufzuheben und dahinter zu treten!" (WA I, 19: 153)], and also a stage: "A curtain has been drawn before my soul, and the stage of never-ending life has transformed itself into an ever-open grave before me" ["Es hat sich vor meiner Seele wie ein Vorhang wegezogen, und der Schauplatz des unendlichen Lebens verwandelt sich vor mir in den Abgrund des ewig offnen Grabs" (WA I, 19: 75)]. Werther regards himself as a puppet on a stage, being made to act
out in a play about his own life, and feeling alternately empowered and powerless.

Goethe's creation of Werther as a character who knowingly acts out the story of his own life on stage was not a particularly new conception: to mention two examples among the most obvious, both Calderón de la Barca and Shakespeare recovered the classical Latin motif of "life as a play," of life on stage. However, Goethe's original touch was to include the topos in a new setting. In other words, in Werther Goethe experimented with a traditionally established genre (drama) by setting it within a relatively new frame (epistolary novel). He approached the epistolary novel within the proven literary pattern of a dramatic work. When considering the dramatic, theatrical core of Werther's epistolary novel in this context, then young Werther can be regarded not only as protagonist of a novel, but also as a main character (actually, the only character) reciting on stage his life story through a long monologue.

The story in Werther is totally subjective. The homonymous protagonist filters all external contingencies before revealing them to the (epistolary novel’s) reader/ (drama’s) spectator/ (fictional) addressee. With the exception of the two-paragraph “introduction” and of the concluding section in the novel “the Editor to the Reader” (“der Herausgeber an den Leser”) where a few letters carry fictional editorial glosses, as readers we can safely assume that most of what is recounted by Werther does not necessarily depict reality, but merely reflects his perception of reality.

Given the monological form of the novel/drama and the focus on the protagonist Werther, it follows that the other “characters” are relegated to secondary and background positions. Lotte, Albert and the other figures do not seem to be entitled to an independent existence, for it is Werther alone who stands in the middle of the stage, acting out his one-man show. Through his egocentered self-consciousness, he absorbs and re-elaborates narratives of events as though they were shadows projected on a wall, as if images of a lanterna magica. Werther analyzes, interprets and relates the story created by these projections in his own subjective way for the reader/spectator.

To a certain extent, then, the images temporarily told the story before Werther could elaborate logocentrically upon their meaning. Images were important during the eighteenth century, both when projected and when drawn on paper. As far as the illustrations go, Langen studied the artistic role of Chodowiecki’s engravings for Werther—Kupferstichfolge, a sequence of images embodying the metalinguistic narration of a text. In Werther, Lotte, Albert and other characters are corollary shadows for Werther’s act; they are the puppets who play for his own Guckkasten and imagination. They represent the foundation of Werther’s ego-filtered
narration: "I stand before a puppet show and see the little puppets move, and I ask myself whether it isn't an optical illusion" (transl. Lange, 45) ["Ich stehe vor einem Raritätenkasten und sehe die Männchen und Gaulchen vor mir herumrücken und frage mich oft, ob es nicht optischer Betrug ist" (WA I, 19: 96)]. It is of course no coincidence that Werther should express doubts about reality, describing it as an optical illusion. This uncertainty is revealed again in that same letter of 20 January 1772 in which he compares his life to a puppet’s. But such clues are not the only ones which Goethe expects his readers to decode.

There is yet an earlier passage in Werther where lack of love in the world is compared to a spent lanterna magica whose functional core is missing. Again, Werther laments his isolation, for he can relate his life only to a “plot” which materializes when others’ images become visible to him, like visions projected on a wall:

Wilhelm, what is the world to our hearts without love? A magic lantern without light. You have but to set up the light within and the brightest pictures are thrown on the white screen. And if that is all there is, fleeting shadows, we are still happy, when, like children, we behold them and are transported with the wonderful sight (transl. Lange 27).13

Later in this essay, I will propose and justify a division of Goethe’s Werther in acts and scenes. For the moment, however, suffice it to consider “erstes Buch” as “Act I” of this “play.” Structurally so far, the two passages in which metaphors of lanterna magica appear, surface in the middle of the novel (letter of 20 January) or, so to speak, in the “center” of “Act I.” This pivotal positioning emphasizes their symbolic importance.

Werther stands in front of his lanterna magica, delighted like a youngster by the images in front of him, and invents his own story, told in his own words, to go along with the illustrations. The characters projected (Lotte, Albert, etc.) do not have, in turn, their own story to tell: their actions, intentions and words are all filtered by the protagonist’s mind before being shared with the reader/audience of this epistolary novel/play. Sometimes Werther appears to realize the total subjectiveness of his interpretation:

If only I were a moody person, I might blame the weather, or an acquaintance, or disappointment, for my discontented mind; then at least this insupportable load of trouble would not rest entirely upon me. But ah! I feel all too clearly that I alone am to blame for my woe. To blame? No, my own heart contains the source of all my
sorrow, as it previously contained the source of all my bliss (transl. Lange 59-60)\textsuperscript{14}

Unsuccessfully, Werther tries to overcome the inner conflicts stemming from his dichotomous view of imagination vs. reality. Ultimately, Werther is doomed to succumb to this schism between subjectivity vs. objectiveness, and between what Friedrich Schlegel would define "Romanticism" vs. "Classicism."\textsuperscript{15}

Show-boxes were so popular during the eighteenth century that the "principle of image-framing" ("Prinzip der Rahmenschau"), and the "miniature images" ("kleinformatigen Bildchen") became what we would regard today as household objects: “often, the engravings would be observed through the show-box, this most important psychological symbol of the time” and “in this period of geniality, the young Goethe was foremost in recapturing an artistic value in the raree-box”.\textsuperscript{16}

When a \textit{lanterna magica} casts shadows upon the wall, the images are flat. Likewise, when secondary characters play a role only corollary to the protagonist’s, their psychological development remains superficial and peripheral, that is, “flat.” Langen explained thus:

The mini-situations in question differ little from a contemporary stage image. In both cases, it is that which is cut from view, the frame around the situation which is decisive and didactically of value.\textsuperscript{17}

Engravings (illustrations of books) or shadows (artistic projection on a wall) alone are incapable of portraying the complexity of life’s nuances. However, as in the case of story-telling, when images and words come together, joined they have much more to offer.

Besides some of the stage references indicated above, Goethe’s \textit{Werther} presents other allusions pertaining to drama. First, let us consider the structure of the text. It is similar, in fact, to a traditional play. The literary corpus is divided into three main sections preceded by a brief fictional editorial introduction. Goethe does not actually label the “introduction” as such, but he identifies the other sections as “first book,” “second book,” “the editor to the reader” (“Erstes Buch,” “Zweites Buch,” and “Der Herausgeber an den Leser”). The sections are consistent with the traditional divisions found in dramatic tragedies, where their counterparts would be labeled: Prologue (for the short preface, which in this case is \textit{a posteriori}), Act I, Act II and Act III—the latter operating simultaneously as Epilogue (again, \textit{a posteriori}). Each of these sections ("acts") can be subdivided further into shorter segments ("scenes"), reflecting the text’s natural partition, according to the dates of Werther’s letters and/or
following the different settings he describes. When viewed in this way, a reading of Werther as stage script could be justified.

To clarify further:

The Prologue: a brief, two-paragraph introduction (a posteriori) which precedes Werther's first letter of 4 May 1771.

Act I (or, erstes Buch in Goethe's words), subdivided into three scenes:

Scene 1: 4 May-30 May 1771. Werther's time spent in serenity before meeting Lotte.

Scene 2: 16 June-26 July 1771. Time spent together with Lotte until Albert's arrival.

Scene 3: 30 July-10 September 1771. Werther, with Lotte and Albert.

Act II (or, zweites Buch in Goethe's words), also subdivided into three scenes:

Scene 1: 20 October 1771-5 May 1772. At the Ambassador's service (Am Hofe).

Scene 2: 9 May-18 June 1772. Werther visits his home town and decides to return to Lotte.

Scene 3: 29 July-6 December 1772. With Lotte again.

Act III (or, Der Herausgeber an den Leser in Goethe's words): an Epilogue of sorts (also a posteriori) which concludes the story of Werther's life. There is one scene to this act:

Scene 1: 12 December 1772-until Werther's death.

It would appear that Goethe adopted classical literary means to delineate and separate the sections of this novel/play, while experimenting with new theatrical strategies.

Not only structurally, but also linguistically and syntactically, the text reveals peculiarities which reconfirm its subdivisions into "acts" and "scenes." For instance, both the Prologue and the Epilogue are written from an omniscient author's point of view. In them, the (fictional) editor details past facts now concluded, and all main verbs in these two sections appear in the past tense (except, of course, for when the editor reports direct speeches). The reader notices how Wilhelm, the narrator/editor, benefits in his cathartic, temporal and spatial distance from the events, so
that his narrative can follow a linear pattern, based on logic and chronology, rather than reacting to the circumstances themselves.

It becomes apparent that in Werther, the Epilogue mirrors the traditional role of a “Greek Chorus.” In classical drama, the Chorus represented a vox populi—the conservative animus of the play expressing popular wisdom and conventional tradition, for it opposed the passionate texture of a dialogue or a monologue. Here, the narrative voice of the editor may fulfill the same role of the traditional Chorus, in that it seeks to balance the protagonist’s impulse with the Epilogue’s grounded voice in the background.

By contrast, the main body of Werther sharply contrasts against the Prologue and the Epilogue. The plot of the “play” develops while the images of Werther’s lanterna magica are projected onto the wall/stage and his thoughts are expressed through present-tense verbs only. In Werther, the Prologue and Epilogue (structurally, the peripheral/external sections of text) reflect a classical dramatic model and employ a peripheral/external voice to present narratives. Instead, the central “acts” (or, erstes Buch and zweites Buch) focus on the main character and on his egocentric narrative voice. In essence, the past tenses of the Prologue and Epilogue have transformed into “historical present” tenses in the central sections of the text.

It is at the end of what I have here defined as “Act II, Scene 3,” that Goethe shows yet another classical dramatic strategy: by now, readers/audience’s identification with the protagonist’s tragedy is almost complete. So, Goethe applies the principles of Aristotle’s catharsis by rapidly converting Werther’s passionate narration into a detached omniscient author’s voice, suddenly shifting from present-tense pathos to past tense verbs. Of course, this kind of proto-Brechtian Verfremdungs technik serves to caution the readers/spectators about the fictional nature of the novel/drama which is absorbing their attention.18

If one carefully observes the internal structure of the play, both “Act I” and “Act II” reveal circular patterns, in contrast to the straightforward narrative structures of the “Prologue” and of the “Epilogue.” To be more specific, “Act I” and “Act II” begin with the protagonist’s arrival (at Wahlheim and at the residence of the Ambassador, respectively) after running away from his authoritarian mother at the beginning of the novel, and leaving Lotte and Albert behind—at the end of “Act I.”19 The theme of Werther’s escape from his surroundings has been recently studied by scholars who emphasize the parallels between Werther’s need for physical freedom and his breaking away from hierarchical social constraints (Furst 147).
Besides showing parallel beginnings, “Act I” and “Act II” also both end with similar scenes: as Fetzer pointed out, erstes Buch terminates with an “empty hug” in the darkness, zweites Buch finishes with Werther’s desire of annihilation. More specifically, at the end of “Act I,” Albert and Lotte exequunt the scene, disappearing into the darkness, as the protagonist is left behind, helpless and alone, watching the couple vanish in the Ossianic landscape of moonlight and lengthening shadows. “Act II” ends comparably, but here what vanishes are not the images of Lotte and Albert, rather the very foundation of the protagonist himself: it is Werther’s consciousness which evaporates as he longs for self-annihilation into the darkness of infinity:

What is man—that much praised demigod? Do not his powers fail when he most requires their use? And whether he soar in joy or sink in sorrow, is he not inevitably arrested? And while he fondly dreams that he is grasping at infinity, is he not at that moment made doubly aware of the dull monotony of his existence? (transl. Lange 65).

Thus, “Act I” and “Act II”—the lanterna magica’s projections s(t)imulating Werther’s interpretation of the shadows—have circular patterns with recurring motifs. This rotation and repetition of themes mirrors the same circular movement of images projected in sequence onto the wall to create a story of shadows through a Zauberlampe.

Narratively and structurally speaking, these circular motions lead nowhere. To give a conclusion to Werther, Goethe had to break away from the rotary pattern and carry his narrative into a linear conclusion. There is, earlier in “Act II,” one unsuccessful attempt to do just this. Zweites Buch begins on 20 October 1771 in medias res at the Ambassador’s service, but the reader/audience knows that Werther has not seen Lotte since September 1771. He will see her again in July 1772, when he returns to her after nine months, a long hiatus. This nine-month period (a gestation of sorts) should have allowed Werther to “deliver” the strength needed to break away from his circular pattern and launch himself into a linear structure which could bring a resolution to his life. Metaphorically speaking, however, his “gestation” is fruitless as he cannot create a new life for himself. Thus, as Werther returns to Lotte, he does not modify his monologic code, and he continues to stare at the shadows and interpret them in his own isolation, concluding “Act II” with yet another empty embrace.

Instead, the tragedy comes to an end through the abrupt change in narrative voice (from Werther’s to the editor’s), the abandonment of the lanterna magica devices, and the substitution of verb tenses from present to past, all pointing to the linear structure of the “Epilogue.”
In addition to analyzing the structural patterns in this novel/script when considering dramatic elements in Werther, the reader will also look for other theatrical codes. For instance, the exaggerated ("theatrical") gestures which actors would adopt in a stage performance and which Goethe emphasized in his characters. "Theatrical" are the somewhat extravagant and overstated emotional mo(ve)ments found in the text. Werther abounds with such mo(ve)ments which substitute for a more traditional stage blocking:

... when Charlotte asked the coachman to stop and told her brothers to get down. They insisted upon kissing her hand once more, which the eldest did with all the delicacy of a youth of fifteen, but the other in a lighter and more impetuous manner. She asked them again to give her love to the children, and we drove off (transl. Lange 15);

and

One wisely sat down in a corner with her back to the window, and held her hands over her ears; a second knelt down and hid her face in the other's lap; a third pushed herself between them, and embraced her sisters with a thousand tears (transl. Lange 18);

and

I put my handkerchief to my face and left the room; I was recalled to my senses only by Charlotte's voice, reminding me that it was time to go home (transl. Lange 24);

and

They walked down the avenue. I stood gazing after them in the moonlight, then threw myself on the ground, and wept, sprang up, and ran out on the terrace, and there below me in the shade of the linden trees I saw her white frock gleaming as she disappeared near the garden gate. I stretched out my arms, and she vanished (transl. Lange 41);

Moreover, of course, the "kiss-scene":

Werther's eyes and lips burned on Charlotte's arm; she trembled, she wanted to go, but grief and pity lay like a leaden weight upon her. She took a deep breath, recovered herself, and begged Werther, sobbing, to continue—implored him with the very voice of heaven! He trembled, his heart ready to burst; then taking up the sheets again, he read in a broken voice (transl. Lange 80).23
Exaggerated and “theatrical” (albeit movingly tragic) is the scene of Werther’s death, in which his groaning and suffering continue for twelve hours until his demise (a long stage scene it would be indeed!). Included, for the same reasons, are the overstated emotional reactions of Lotte’s father and of her siblings:

At six in the morning, the servant enters Werther’s room with a candle. He finds his master stretched on the floor, blood about him, and the pistol at his side. He calls to him, takes him in his arms, but there is no answer, only a rattling in the throat... The bullet had entered the forehead over the right eye; his brains were protruding... The old judge hastened to the house upon hearing the news; he kissed his dying friend amid a flood of tears. His eldest boys soon followed him on foot. In speechless sorrow they threw themselves on their knees by the bedside, and kissed his hands and face. The eldest, who was his favorite, clung to his lips till he was gone; even then the boy had to be taken away by force (transl. Lange 86-87).

Moreover, the employment of a dramatic topos or deus-ex-machina in the “play” must be considered “theatrical” too. In fact, nature represents an important topos/metaphor, as exemplified in the case of the storm in “Act I” (on this topic, more in Ryder and, especially, in Ricks). Rather predictably, the tempestuous weather mirrors Werther’s feelings of confused anticipation before he and Lotte get to know one another better. Indeed, the function of nature in Werther conforms to this topos’ traditional role in Renaissance plays, when it can represent either a locus amoenus or a selva obscura. Loci amoeni and selvae obscurae were heavily borrowed in Germany following the tradition of late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian pastoral plays and chivalric poems. These models, in turn, stem from Latin classical dramatic production. To take again Shakespeare’s theater and Italian Renaissance epic poetry as two examples, the themes of both A Midsummer Night’s Dream and of Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso are heavily influenced by selvae obscurae metaphors. In both cases, the protagonists are so confused by the labyrinths of woods (i.e., by the confusion of their own minds) that they lose their discrimination. Eventually, they fail to see any other point of view but their own, and their focusing on themselves, their central position on the “stage of life,” their madness become the very obstacle to the overcoming of their unsalvageable serenity. In their madness, a reasonable perception of the external world is lost.

Goethe employed the topoi successfully: the selva obscura reflects the confusion of the protagonist’s mind, love as a crisis of the mind in neo-Platonic terms (for example, the storm at the end of 16 June 1771—
the episode ending with the well-known reference to Klopstock). In his labyrinthine confusion, Werther experiences reality only through extremes and opposites; thus he is unable to conceive, let alone reach, an *aurea mediocras* either in his private life or in his interactions with other characters. Already in his first three letters to Wilhelm, Werther presents his view of the world as bipolar: *past vs. present, city vs. country, worms/small vs. Allmighty/big, deceptive spirits vs. benign spirits; more generally, Werther vs. Albert, and the Ossianic conception vs. the Homeric tradition.*

It comes as no surprise that the only instance in which Werther is temporarily able to establish some sort of *aurea mediocras* for himself and overcome dichotomies is when he temporarily establishes his residence at Wahlheim (where else?, the *Heim* of his *Wahl*, the place and *home* of his choosing).

Appropriately and not coincidentally, Wahlheim is located about half-way between the unbearable city (*civilization*) and the edge of the forest (*nature*) where Lotte lives. Apart from this exception, however, Werther generally views reality through polarities.

In Goethe’s novel, Werther loses his mind and loses himself, quite literally, through suicide. He kills himself by blowing his brains out, his very center of thought, thus disintegrating his egocentrical narration. Werther shoots himself because his brain/center cannot be free from its fixation on Lotte, on her image, on her shadow.

Also from a structural point of view, Goethe clues his readers about Werther’s obsession for Lotte. In fact, all of the protagonist’s letters are addressed to Wilhelm except one—the very central one—which is sent to Lotte. And it is exactly again in this central letter of 20 January 1771 that Werther writes how his very essence of life is missing, that “the leaven which set my life in motion is missing” (“der Sauerteig, der mein Leben in Bewegung setzte, fehlt” (WA I, 19: 97)). Midway through the drama, Werther is already lost in his confusion, in the rotating labyrinth of his own *selva obscura* which forces him to move in circles between his egocentric possessiveness and his desire to obtain the unobtainable.

The protagonist’s greatest need is to love Lotte, but in the sense of possessing her. More specifically, Werther views her like a shadow projected on the stage’s wall from his *lanterna magica*, hence he can manipulate her image and essence, and deny her a personality and life of her own. As a shadow, she can never develop into a woman for Werther, who will ultimately lose her *because* he coerces her into being no more than a silhouette.

Character Albert, on the other hand, represents Werther’s alter ego from several standpoints: even though the reader/spectator of *Werther* knows nothing about Albert’s own life previous to his entrance on “scene”
in the “play,” he has given up his own sense of possessiveness vis-à-vis Lotte in order to accept and love her more dispassionately. In literary tradition, the “happy medium” was reached by those people capable of finding their way out of the selva obscura without losing their fortitude (Aeneas and Dante, for instance, but not Orpheus). Or, mankind’s peace might be found in the benevolent influence of nature as set in idyllic pastoral landscapes (locri amoeni—typical of plays in Arcadia). That which Werther perceives as Albert’s coldness and detachment in his relationship with Lotte is merely Werther’s own interpretation of Albert’s actions. We might assume, instead, that Albert has achieved a psychological balance, that he has reached his own aura mediocritas. Whatever the reason for Albert’s inner balance, it is clear—after readers’/audience’s filtering of Werther’s point of view—that he deeply cares for both Werther and Lotte. Albert is well aware of the awkward emotional triangle in which the threesome is caught. Yet, Albert respects Lotte profoundly, he does not directly interfere with her life, he does not manipulate her as a shadow when he expresses his desire that the encounters with Werther be less frequent. Albert appears to be immune to jealousy, perhaps because he is himself immune to possessiveness. His aura mediocritas, dignity, and moderation are that which Werther will never attain, as Werther’s view is too narrow and the perception of himself too ephemeral. Werther turns hopelessly in circles, while Albert’s path is straightforward.

The purpose of this study has been to point out that there are numerous theatrical elements in Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers. The unveiling of such metatextual dimention in Goethe’s epistolary novel reveals the possibility of a new or amended reading that further enriches Werther’s text. While at first glance, Goethe’s work appears to be an epistolary novel, its internal structure reveals close resemblances to a stage drama. The book’s division in sections could be interpreted as acts and scenes of a play. Linguistically, its contrasting narrative techniques (omniscient author’s point of view vs. the voice of an “I-narrator”) create the frame for the final catharsis of Werther’s “audience.” To this effect, Wilhelm’s (the fictional editor) strategy mirrors one of the functions of the classical Greek choir. Stage direction and dramatic effects such as chiaroscuro, curtain falls, scene changes, actors’ exaggerated gestures and monologues are embedded within the text/script. The psychological traits of Werther and of Albert are partially based in the dramatic canon. Within the frame of an epistolary narration, Goethe created a dramatic structure as core for the narration. Overall, Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers shows an intriguing and balanced mixture of novel and drama.
Why, then, did not many coeval epistolary novels savor the same kind of literary success that Werther enjoyed? Perhaps the intricacies and novelty of Goethe’s creation can reveal some of the reasons for which Werther survived as a masterpiece for over two-hundred years. Goethe’s work is still valid today because Werther is a carefully structured novel which contains just as many traditional literary devices as it holds innovative ones.

If Werther really were to be performed on stage divided into the three “acts” suggested in this study, some of the subdivisions into “scenes” might be technically difficult to accomplish due to the variety of scenographic effects required in each segment. This holds especially true when considering the brief interval of real-time allowed on stage for changes of scenes within an act. When treated only as a novel, instead, certain time fractures within the text (for instance, the two weeks preceding the June 16 letter in erstes Buch) do not disturb the flow of narration: actually, the lack of letters for weeks or even months enhances the work’s structure, in that it engages readers’ sensitivity and intuition. If performed on stage, temporal lacunae would probably interfere with the cohesiveness of the “script.” In essence, the stage execution might suffer from a plot divided too rigidly. And it certainly would take an exceptional stage direction to manage such innovative work filled with shadows and fleeting images in the background. To perform Werther on stage would entail technical stage effects which would be very complicated to achieve, coupled with a script which would have been deemed too experimental to be performed at the time. Or, even if performed as a one-man show, the lengthy monologue with laterna magica projections in the background would have put to test the endurance of any eighteenth-century audience. Goethe must have realized the more advantageous flexibility of an epistolary form.

In conclusion, while Goethe must have consciously embedded numerous dramatic elements in his Werther, he gave his work the literary form of an epistolary novel, emphasizing its theatrical kernel. Goethe’s Werther is, formally speaking, an epistolary novel; however, scholars should not dismiss the benefits of a different critical approach when studying Werther.

In light of this stage analysis, the character Werther is no longer seen as only a poor, desperate, hapless poseur who manipulates himself and others into self-deceptive depression leading to suicide. Instead, the tremendous amount of control which the protagonist exercises upon himself and upon Goethe’s text, and the fact that Werther effectively thwarts and impedes any effort of self-existence in any of the other characters show to the reader/audience that Werther is in fact a strong, egocentric, egoistic, centripetal force in the text. A “black hole” of sorts,
all elements rotate around him and his vicissitudes, and eventually are captured and sucked into his “gravitational” literary field. Werther is not a weak victim as postulated by many critics, rather he is so imbued of himself and sees nothing beyond his own world, that he can only color the other characters with his own words. Since the whole novel/play is nothing but a Werther-monologue, no character other than Werther has a chance to survive the text itself. Werther does so by monopolizing the narration, and he is, in the end, terminated by his own power within the text. He is effectively killed by his own monologue: the “black hole” has sucked itself up.

The obvious hints to theatre, to acting and to stage direction hidden within its text/script, enhance our understanding of the incredibly rich texture of this work.

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Notes

1. My gratitude goes to Sante Matteo of Miami University (Oxford, OH), Valters Nollendorfs (University of Wisconsin-Madison), and to the staff of Scholarly Publications at Brigham Young University for their insights and suggestions on an earlier version of this manuscript. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

2. Ernst Feise also noticed possible dramatic elements in Werther. In one paragraph of his study, he went so far as to call the traditional divisions of the epistolary novel “Akte” (22). However insightful his reading, he failed to recognize the whole theatrical texture and dramatic elements present in Goethe’s work.

3. Langen writes that “the stage is nothing more than the natural form of an unframed cut-out image, a show-box on an enlarged scale . . . Drama . . . basically offers only a sequence of images . . . which equate the theater stage with the principle of image-framing” (“Die Schaubühne ist nichts anderes als die natürliche Form des unrahmten Ausschnittbildes, ein Guckkasten in vergrößertem Maßstabe . . . Das Drama . . . bietet im Grunde nur eine Bilderkette . . . diese [ist die] Gleichsetzung von Schaubühne und Prinzip der Rahmenschau” 83).

4. Abbott points out correctly that Dichtung und Wahrheit “concentrates most heavily on the period in which Werther was written” (42).
5. Goethe’s works are quoted in German from the Weimarer Edition, henceforth WA, followed by volume number, and page(s). “Jenes Schauspiel ... beschäftigte bisher den Verfasser nicht allein, sondern, während es ersonnen, geschrieben, umgeschrieben, gedruckt und verbreitet wurde, bewegten sich noch viele andere Bilder und Vorschläge in seinem Geiste. Diejenigen welche dramatisch zu behandeln waren erhielten den Vorzug, am öftersten durchgedacht und der Vollendung angenähert zu werden; allein zu gleicher Zeit entwickelte sich ein Übergang zu einer andern Darstellungsart, welche nicht zu den dramatischen gerechnet zu werden pflegt und doch mit ihnen große Verwandtschaft hat. Dieser Übergang geschah hauptsächlich durch eine Eigenheit des Verfassers, die sogar das Selbstgespräch zum Zwiegespräch umbildete.” (WA I, 28: 206-7)

6. “Wie nahe ein solches Gespräch im Geiste mit dem Briefwechsel verwandt sei, ist klar genug, nur daß man hier ein hergebrachtes Vertrauen erwidert sieht, und dort ein neues, immer wechselndes, unerwidertes sich selbst zu schaffen weiß. Als daher jener Überdruss zu schildern war, ... mußte der Verfasser sogleich darauf fallen, seine Gesinnung in Briefen darzustellen: ... Der Lebensgenuß anderer ist ihm ein peinlicher Vorwurf, und so wird er durch das, was ihn aus sich selbst herauslocken sollte, in sein Innerstes zurückgewiesen. Mag er sich allenfalls darüber äußern, so wird es durch Briefe geschehn” (WA I, 28: 208-9).

7. Critic Buch wrote that “Goethe alluded to the relationship between this narrative technique and drama in Dichtung und Wahrheit. The technique is expressed in the illustrations of Chodowiecki—they themselves reminiscent of stage images. In the beginning he has a dramatic treatment of the material in mind ... Today we would speak of discourse based on experience or inner monologue. The modern montage technique is also anticipated in Werther. Just as he did in the Lehrjahren, Goethe joins together heterogeneous material, which arises from a completely different context” (“Goethe hat, wiederum in ‘Dichtung und Wahrheit’, auf die Verwandtschaft dieser Erzählweise mit dem Drama hingedeutet, wie sie in den an Bühnenbilder erinnernden Illustrationen von Chodowiecki zum Ausdruck kommt; anfangs schwebte ihm selbst eine dramatische Behandlung des Stoffes vor. ... wir würden heute von erlebter Rede oder innerem Monolog sprechen. Auch die moderne Montagetechnik ist im ‘Werther’ vorweggenommen; ähnlich wie die eingeschalteten Novellen un Maximen in den ‘Lehrjahren’. ... hat Goethe auch heterogenes Material zusammengefügt, das einem ganz anderen Kontext entstammt,” Buch 37-38).
And critic Graham notices "What a fascinating transition from the most objective of all literary genres, the drama, to the monologue of the letter, and from Goethe's own inclinations of life to those of the 'pupil of loneliness,' which have fallen prey to taedium vitae and to Werther especially... Werther's letters written in this vein enjoy such a manifold charm, remarks Goethe in conclusion, because their varied content had been discussed in such ideal dialogues with several individuals, but in their composed form appear finally to only one friend and participant" ("Welch ein faszinierender Übergang von dem objektivistischen aller literarischen Genres, dem Drama, zu dem Briefmonolog, und von Goethes eigener Lebenszgewandtheit zu jenen 'Zöglingen der Einsamkeit', die dem taedium vitae anheimgefallen sind, und zu Werther im besonderen!... 'Jene in diesem Sinne geschriebenen Wertherischen Briefe haben nun wohl deshalb einen so mannigfaltigen Reiz', bemerkte Goethe abschließend, 'weil ihr verschiedener Inhalt erst in solchen idealen Dialogen mit mehreren Individuen durchgesprochen worden, sie sodann aber, in der Komposition selbst, nur an einen Freund und Teilnehmer gerichtet erscheinen'." (Graham 291).

8. See studies by Kowohl, Müller-Salget and Wellbery on the role of traditional epistolary novels in Werther.

9. See also Doke 22.


11. For an excellent, intelligent analysis of Werther's self-centeredness in Lacanian terms, see Kuzniar.

12. Chodowiecki and Berger created the portraits of Lotte and Werther for Himburg's editions of 1775 and 1776.

13. "Wilhelm, was ist unserem Herzen die Welt ohne Liebe! Was eine Zauberlaterne ist ohne Licht! Kaum bringst du das Lämpchen hinein, so scheinen dir die buntesten Bilder an deine weiße Wand! Und wenn's nichts wäre als das, als vorübergehende Phantome, so macht's doch immer unser Glück, wenn wir wie frische Jungen davor stehen und uns über die Wundererscheinungen entzücken." (WA I, 19: 55).

14. "O daß ich launisch sein könnte, könnte die Schuld auf's Wetter, auf einen Dritten, auf eine fehlgeschlagene Unternehmung schieben, so würde die unerträgliche Last des Unwillens doch nur halb auf mir ruhen. Wehe mir! Ich fühle zu wahr, daß an mir allein alle Schuld liegt
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— nicht Schuld! Genug daß in mir die Quelle alles Elendes verborgen ist wie ehemals die Quelle aller Seligkeiten.” (WA I, 19: 127-8).

15. Moreover, as Doke pointed out, the very structure of Werther is based upon the subjectiveness and ego-centeredness of the main character (12). Without these, the novel as is would not exist.


18. This essay does not intend to claim that Goethe is proto-Brechtian!

19. The very suggestive theory of a tyrannical mother from whom Werther flees is only outlined by Spann: “As far as can be ascertained, none of the commentators in the past have realized that Werther did not leave home in the way that one would expect of a man in his twenties, but that he had, literally, run away from his widowed mother. In fact, he communicates with her only about business matters and money; he does not notify her about the important events in his life, e.g., the acceptance of a position at court and his resignation half a year later. He does not even leave a last note for her before his suicide, but includes the few words: ‘Liebe Mutter, verzieht mir!’ in the last note to his friend. . . . As soon as his father died she had taken her son, still a child, away from the little town he calls ‘lieb und vertraulich’ in order to lock herself up in the city which to Werther is ‘unertraglich’ . . . Werther too shows his protest in his attire: a simple blue coat, a yellow waistcoat, breech and riding boots” (77).

20. The theme of “empty embrace” has been studied by Fetzer who shows the differences between the two empty hugs at the end of erstes Buch and of zweites Buch, and compares them to the unsuccessful hug which Werther tries to give to Lotte after they kiss. Fetzer views Lotte not as a woman, rather as the projection of the woman whom Werther wants to see in her, hence his title: “Schatten ohne Frau” (“Shadows without Woman”). I propose that Fetzer’s point can be taken further by postulating that Lotte’s shadow is the only part of her that appears on “stage.” She is merely a projected image (cfr. letter of 20 Jan., 1772: “Wie ich herein trat, überfiel mich Ihre Gestalt, ihr Andenken, o Lotte!” “[The moment I entered, your image came to my mind—O Lotte—your memories!”), or incipit of letter of 6 Dec., 1772: “Wie
mich die Gestalt verfolgt!” [“How her image haunts me!” transl. Lange 65]).

21. “They walked down the avenue. I stood gazing after them in the moonlight, then threw myself on the ground, and wept, sprang up, and ran out on the terrace, and there below in the shade of the linden trees I saw her white frock gleaming as she disappeared near the garden gate. I stretched out my arms, and she vanished” (transl. Lange 41).

22. “Was ist der Mensch, der gepriesene Halbgott! Ermangeln ihm nicht eben da die Kräfte, wo er sie am nöthigsten braucht? Und wenn er in Freude sich aufschwingt oder im Leiden versinkt, wird er nicht in beiden eben da aufgehalten, eben da zu dem stumpfen kalten Bewußtsein wieder zurückgebracht, da er sich in der Fülle des Unendlichen zu verlieren sehnte?” (WA I, 19: 140).


“Die Lippen und Augen Werthers glühten an Lottens Arme; ein
Schauer überfiel sie; sie wollte sich entfernen und Schmerz und Anteil
lagen betäubend wie Blei auf ihr. Sie athmete sich zu erholen, und bat
ihn schluchzend fortzufahren, bat mit der ganzen Stimme des
Himmels! Werther zitterte, sein Herz wollte bersten, er hob das Blatt
auf und las halb gebrochen.” (WA I, 19: 175).

24. What has been ascribed to Goethe, in this depiction of Werther’s
death, is to a great extent Goethe’s quotation from a letter that Kestner
wrote to him, describing details of Jerusalem’s death. Goethe did
make some significant changes, but the often-cited cryptic ending and
the Emilia Galotti reference are straight out of Kestner.

“Morgens um Sechse tritt der Bediente herein mit dem Lichte. Er
findet seinen Herrn an der Erde, die Pistole und Blut. Er ruft, er fällt
ihn an; keine Antwort, er röchelte nur noch ... Über dem rechten Auge
hatte er sich durch den Kopf geschossen, das Gehirn was
herausgetrieben ... Der alte Amtmann kam auf die Nachricht herein
gesprengt, er küßte den Sterbenden unter den heißesten Thänen.
Seine ältesten Söhne kamen bald nach ihm zu Füße, sie fielen neben
dem Bette nieder im Ausdrucke des unbandigsten Schmerzens, küßten
ihn die Hände und den Mund, und der alt’ste, den er immer am
meisten geliebt, hing an seinen Lippen, bis er verschieden war und
man den Knaben mit Gewalt wegriß” (WA I, 19: 190-91).

Allmächtigen, täuschende Geister vs. wohltätige Geister.

26. See also Furst 149.

27. “All this passes away, but no eternity could extinguish the [glowing
life] which was kindled yesterday by your lips, and which now burns
within me. She loves me! These arms have embraced her, these lips
have trembled upon hers. [This mouth stammered on her] She is mine!
Yes, Charlotte, you are mine forever!” (transl. Lange 82, with some
corrections by me) “[Alles das ist vergänglich; aber keine Ewigkeit
soll das glühende Leben auslöschen, das ich gestern auf deinen Lippen
genoss, das ich in mir fühle! Sie liebt mich! Dieser Arm hat sie umfaßt,
diese Lippen haben auf ihren Lippen gezittert, dieser Mund hat an dem
ihren gestammelt. Sie ist mein! du bist mein! ja, Lotte, auf ewig”
(WA I, 19: 179-180)).

And, as Lotte’s correctly observes: “O why were you born with that
excessive, that ungovernable passion for everything that [you ever
touch]? ... I fear, I fear that it is only the impossibility of possessing
me that makes your desire for me so strong” (transl. Lange 72, with a
correction by me) [“O, warum mußten Sie mit dieser Heftigkeit, dieser
unbezwinglich haftenden Leidenschaft für alles, was Sie einmal anfassen, geboren werden! ... Ich fürchte, ich fürchte, es ist nur die Unmöglichkeit mich zu besitzen, die Ihnen diesen Wunsch so reizend macht.” (WA I, 19: 156-57).

Works Cited and Consulted
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