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Bedecke deinen Himmel, Zeus! Goethe and the Quest for Individual Sovereignty

Anthony D. Magestro

Minnesota State University - Mankato, anthony.magestro@gmail.com

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Anthony Magestro

Dr. Nadja Krämer

GER490

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Bedecke deinen Himmel, Zeus! Goethe and the Quest for Individual Sovereignty

“Wie froh bin ich, daß ich weg bin! Bester Freund, *was ist das Herz des Menschen!*”¹ (*Die Leiden* 2). Just as Werther once exclaimed to his friend Wilhelm, his story begins with a question that has been asked for centuries: *what is the heart of man?* In a contemporary understanding, perhaps a better question would be to ask what comprises the very essence of one’s existence. As the Enlightenment spread across Western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, many age-old institutions were called into question, namely absolutist monarchy and the Catholic church. With this question came many others as people of every class began to challenge their station. Rationalism, skepticism, and scientific pursuit gave way to a newfound intellectual independence that was no longer satisfied with so-called divine right being justification for kings to rule. Though some enlightened rulers reframed their houses’ tenure as social contract—that it was their moral obligation to rule their people wisely—without God’s blessing, monarchy became merely another mortal construct akin to the trading republics and free cities that had already existed throughout Europe. If power ultimately came from the people, then anyone, in theory, could have the right to rule or to claim their own their own sovereignty.

¹ Translated from the book’s first edition: “How happy I am that I am gone! Best of friends, what is the heart of man!”

The Enlightenment was an era that celebrated the pronouns of *I* and *me* instead of *God* and *country* as many began to follow pursuits outside of the lot their family was given generations prior: the son of a blacksmith could become a scholar, families could own their own land, and governments and their people became more tolerant of other religious practices, in part mending the schism of the Reformation centuries prior. Even the United States and other republics were founded on these ideals of freedom of expression and creativity, to choose one's own path. As society evolved and old traditions faded, the values of self-reliance and preservation—of individual sovereignty—were introduced to a population weaned on feudalism and blind obedience.

Near the end of the Enlightenment period, a young German author named Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was one of many who took up the call of a philosophical and literary movement later known as *Sturm und Drang* (most commonly translated as “Storm and Stress”) which lasted between the years of 1760-1785. Though the philosophy prized reason much like other European schools of thought like rationalism and empiricism, where the latter two believed reason was derived from the objective, logical observation of the world, Goethe and other *Stürmer und Dränger* argued that reason could be more reliably attained from one's own subjective understanding.

Indeed, *Sturm und Drang* was a parallel movement to rationalism, not one of stark and complete opposition. Goethe and his fellow *Stürmer und Dränger* had many credible critiques on the society they found themselves in, though their observations were often lost, dismissed as ravings of uninformed youth. As Pascal states:

The importance of *Sturm und Drang* as the first flowering of the greatest period of German literature cannot be contested...With

some justification, but much over-emphasis, it is usually treated as a stage in a development, but is then subsumed under some such heading as ‘irrationalism’, ‘the German spirit’, and is frequently treated as a mere preparation for German romanticism. It was a movement of young men; but, unjustly, juvenile rebelliousness has been taken to be a predominant characteristic. (129)

Most young men of the movement were “of burgher families, and academically educated; the Germany in which they grew up was split into innumerable principalities and free towns all governed by absolute rulers or hereditary patriciates” (Pascal 131). Though they were young, they proved that youth is not always synonymous with ignorance.

All perceived adolescent angst aside, *Sturm und Drang* was an important counter-friction to the European status quo of rationalism, proving—at the very least—the need for balance between logical and emotional empathy. Goethe’s works carry with them important lessons of individual sovereignty that are still applicable today: *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* shows that not everything is as obvious as one may perceive, especially the inner workings of the soul; “Prometheus” extolls the virtue and power of creative passion and the need to nurture (as well as discipline) it; and “Ganymed” warns of the dangers of blind, passionate faith, that adherence to tradition and institution may be one’s own undoing. Regardless of their own lessons, these three texts exemplify Goethe’s answer to the question concerning what is the heart of man: the force of creation, granted by our creator, formed by education and reason, and practiced and honored by those who take hold of it.

Where the *Stürmer und Dränger* were initially critical of the society they found themselves in, their moral ambiguity also shifted inward towards the flaws of their own class: “They overthrow the ‘reasonable’ compromises, the caution of the realists, and the half-heartedness of ... their European contemporaries” (Pascal 131). If not to their rulers or even their

own class, they then swore allegiance to themselves and to their creative *Dränge*—their drives of passion (and even alleged madness)—marching to the beat of their own drums. In Goethe’s case, his *Dränge* manifested in his literature. His earliest works such as “Prometheus” (1772-4) and “Ganymed” (1770-5)—sister poems that took the form of ancient Greek hymns—and *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774)² are all exemplary of *Sturm und Drang* philosophy, rich in the tone and language of adolescent rebelliousness that challenged the status quo of Enlightenment Europe.

Especially when read as a pair, “Prometheus” and “Ganymed” paint a vivid allegory of Goethe’s stance on religious institutions and their effect on self-identification and self-reliance. Where “Prometheus” symbolizes hallmark values of enlightened thinking—that is, of education, rationality, and, in Prometheus’ case, defiance of the gods themselves—“Ganymed” warns of shunning enlightenment in favor of clinging to old faiths blindly. It is important to note that Goethe does not make a case for atheism or against the existence of God, but instead, encourages questioning the rationale of the religious institutions one may belong to and to explore the following question: does one owe their loyalty to the church, the deity it is meant to worship, or the deity’s creation (oneself)?

By invoking the Greek myth of Prometheus who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity against Zeus’ will (in turn, allowing them to become less reliant on the Olympic pantheon), Goethe likens the search of self-fulfillment and creative, expressive freedom to a battle between Prometheus and Zeus himself. As Jølle suggests, the myth of Prometheus offered

² Though *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* was initially published in 1774, the passages presented in this text are from Goethe’s second edition released in 1787 after the *Sturm und Drang* movement. While both editions have virtually the same text, the second edition contains a few extra sections that provide Goethe’s hindsight on the initial edition, illustrating a slight ideological shift between the two. Any differences, when present, will be noted.

cultural identification in the late eighteenth century: much as Prometheus brought fire to humanity, the Enlightenment ignited a mental and academic flame within the Western world (394). If Prometheus is Goethe's champion against Zeus and his pantheon (the church and its clergy), his fire represents knowledge and wisdom, an elemental symbol for enlightenment, a term that, in and of itself, implies a bright flame, a light. Goethe's poem of the same name uses this imagery to give literary life to his own critiques of the church and one's relationship with God. Though both poems are written as hymns which are "traditionally [used to] invoke gods by listing their attributes and relating stories of their cult," both do so ironically (Jølle 395).

"Prometheus"³, for example, is a work of condemnation masked as praise both in text and form. From the very beginning, Prometheus challenges Zeus' authority and relevance now that fire has been brought back to the earth. Though the metering and language of the poem mirrors that of a song of worship, the tone of speaker does not:

Bedecke deinen Himmel, Zeus,
Mit Wolkendunst!
Und übe, Knaben gleich,
Der Disteln köpft,
An Eichen dich und Bergeshöh'n!
Mußt mir meine Erde
Doch lassen steh'n.

("Prometheus" I. 1-7)

While Zeus is both the god of the sky and the ruler of Olympus (and thus, of the gods above and mortals below), Prometheus not only dismisses these titles, but belittles Zeus' powers as childlike ("Und übe, Knaben gleich, // Der Disteln köpft, // An Eichen dich und Bergeshöh'n!")⁴. Though various Greek gods and even mortal heroes recognize Zeus as Father—if not through

³ I have translated both "Prometheus" and "Ganymed" and can be found in English in the appendix, though short translations may be included for ease of reading.

⁴ "And practice, boy who beheads, like the thistles, the oaks and mountain peaks!"

direct lineage, then through his own rebellion against the Titans who came before—Prometheus (a Titan himself) does not share this reverence. Tying this stanza to Christian tradition, these first few lines are Goethe's challenge to God. While he recognizes God as the original creative force of the universe (the "Almighty Father" as he refers to Him across most of his works), Goethe shows awareness that humanity, made in the image of God, is also a creative force in and of itself. Where Christianity teaches that God works through all beings and, thus, everything one creates, God has created, Goethe challenges that belief:

Und meine Hütte,
Die du nicht gebaut,
Und meinen Herd,
Um dessen Glut
Du mich beneidest.

(I. 8-12)

Goethe here claims his own creations, specifically shelter and the glow of his hearth, and God's envy for such things ("Und meinen Herd, // Um dessen Glut // Du mich beneidest")⁵. Where God has created mankind, mankind has, in turn, created technologies such as the hearth in order to survive. In this case, the hut and the hearth are what allow humanity to settle and adapt nature to their needs, rather than relying solely on Zeus' lightning for fire and warmth.

From Goethe's perspective, it is important to recognize this creative power (or, in other terms, artistic passion) for what it is: godlike. Jølle argues, too, that "the division of heaven and earth, on Prometheus' terms, is stated almost as a historical necessity that Zeus will have to come to accept in time" (396). In addition to the connection between fire and education, the hut is another allegory for mortal independence from the gods:

⁵ "And my hearth whose glow you envy."

On a very practical level, the hut will protect humans from the vagaries of weather and thus from the last manifestations of divine power. On a different level, the construction of huts and domestication of fire suspend the physical necessity and allow humans to carve out an existence for themselves. From being subject to nature—and in this case the gods’—will, humans now become the lawgivers of nature. (Jølle 398)

As the fire-bringer, Prometheus asserts himself as “a figure of identification for the European Enlightenment,” that this academic “fire” will push humanity to a new generation of self-reliant, resilient beings who hold their own fates in their hands (Jølle 398).

In the second stanza, Prometheus continues to berate Zeus, his tone almost pitying as it is condescending:

Ich kenn nichts ärmers
 Unter der Sonn’ als euch Götter!
 Ihr nähret kümmerlich
 Von Opfersteuern
 Und Gebetshauch,
 Eure Majestät,
 Und darbtet, wären
 Nicht Kinder und Bettler
 Hoffnungsvolle Toren.

(I. 13-19)

Following the form of an anti-hymn, instead of praising the gods, Prometheus condemns them and criticizes the way they desire to be worshiped and nourished (“Ihr nähret kümmerlich, // von Opfersteuern // Und Gebetshauch”)⁶. Despite Olympus being an other-worldly paradise and home of the gods themselves, Prometheus observes that despite their opulence, the gods’ strength fades when their human disciples stop praying to them or making sacrifices in their honor. Not only does Prometheus assert that humans need self-reliance, he claims that it is the

⁶ “You are barely nourished by sacrificial offerings and whispered prayers.”

gods who need humanity to survive, only currently being sustained by children and fools (“Kinder und Bettler”).

Though this can be easily interpreted as an argument reflecting on whether God created man or if mankind created God, it is important to note that “the existence of the gods is nowhere expressly denied in the poem, which in Enlightenment fashion, traces the origin of religion in human nature and the ensuing development of institutionalized worship” (Jølle 402). Therefore, the idea of God is not necessarily what Goethe (and Prometheus) is condemning, but organized religion and its exploitation of God and religion for the sake of tithing, offerings, and blind obedience rebranded as faith. In contrast, Prometheus’ new generation of humans (the enlightened) are much more resilient rather than the “Kinder und Bettler” who still cling to the pre-Enlightenment understanding of God.

The third stanza, while grounded in the Prometheus myth, echoes this acknowledgment of the Christian God, specifically in its first line:

Als ich ein Kind war,
Nicht wußte, wo aus, wo ein,
Kehrt’ ich mein verirrt’ Auge
Zur Sonne, als wenn drüber wär
Ein Ohr zu hören meine Klage,
Ein Herz wie meins,
Sich des Bedrängten zu erbarmen.

(I. 20-26)

As Jølle observes, the first line is almost directly derived from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: “Da ich ein kind [sic] war, da redet ich wie ein kind, vnd [sic] war klug wie ein kind, vnd hatte kindische anschlege”⁷(403). Following along with Goethe’s authorial irony,

⁷ 1 Corinthians, 13. 11 (Bibel 1546), “When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child.”

where the verse from the Bible speaks to man's humility in service to God, putting away childish things in favor of a devout adulthood, its usage in the poem is one of Prometheus' defiance and disappointment. The stanza retells Prometheus' childhood and his own loneliness, looking up to the sky and hoping that there is someone or something else out there with "Ein Herz wie meins⁸." In comparison, Prometheus' coming of age is likened to Goethe's (and humanity's) own intellectual maturation. "In Goethe's poem, human ontogenesis and phylogensis of humankind are collapsed into a single narrative—that of Prometheus' way from childhood to manhood" (Jølle 404).

Prometheus continues telling his story:

Wer half mir wider
 Der Titanen Übermut
 Wer rettete vom Tode mich
 Von Sklaverei?
 Hast du's nicht alles selbst vollendet
 Heilig glühend Herz?
 Und glühtest jung und gut,
 Betrogen, Rettungsdank
 Dem Schlafenden dadoben?

(I. 27-35)

His questions become rhetorical, directed inward to his "heilig glühend Herz." Moreover, his retelling of his own myth lends "uncanny human authenticity" (Jølle 405). Just as Prometheus recognizes the part he played in his own rebellion against the other Titans, Goethe asserts his own strength of will, that his creation (be it his writing or his livelihood) is not, in turn, God's. "What [Prometheus] discovers, along with growing disillusionment with the gods, is the self-sufficiency of his own heart, which he addresses as the pulsating centre [sic] of his individuality" (Jølle 406). Again, Prometheus not only represents Goethe, but mankind, in his search for self-

⁸ "A heart like mine."

sovereignty, claiming independence from nature and the gods. If Prometheus is a symbol for humanity, then his glowing heart becomes synonymous with a human need for autonomy:

“Addressing his own heart, Prometheus is discovering and articulating his individuality” (Jølle 406). Prometheus’ identification with humanity is secured in the following fifth stanza:

Ich dich ehren? Wofür?
Hast du die Schmerzen gelindert
Je des Beladenen?
Hast du die Tränen gestillet
Je des Geängsteten?
Hat nicht mich zum Manne
geschmiedet
Die allmächtige Zeit
Und das ewige Schicksal,
Meine Herren und deine?

(I. 36-44)

Redirecting his attention to Zeus, he calls into question the necessity to honor the gods at all (“Ich dich ehren? Wofür?”)⁹; despite Zeus’ station as the father of the Olympic pantheon, Prometheus, being a Titan himself, knows that the gods are not the most powerful entity in existence: the eternal Fates (“das ewige Schicksal”).

In comparison to Christianity’s dualism of good and evil and acknowledgement that God is the source of both (being the ultimate creator), the fluidity of the Greeks’ gods and the numerous ranks of living beings—both mortal and immortal—allows for a greater abstraction of the divine. As Prometheus existed before Zeus, he finds himself in a position to challenge the god of the sky’s contributions to those he claims responsibility for, including humanity. Despite his own rank as a Titan, Prometheus shows concern for Zeus’ lack of empathy with humanity (“Hast du die Schmerzen gelindert // Je des Beladenen? // Hast du die Tränen gestillet / Je des

⁹ “And I should honor you? For what?”

Geängsteten?“)¹⁰: “No longer an immortal god who hovers above mortal cares, but a human who suffers on human terms, Prometheus seems to have internalized the traditional punishment on the Caucasian rock” (Jølle 408). In turn, this stanza also gives shape to Prometheus’ loneliness, having found himself alone amid the younger gods and even younger humanity. However, he takes comfort in knowing that those he is isolated from hold no true sway over him. The idea of God in the Christian imagination is one of omnipotence, yet Goethe, through Prometheus, entertains the idea of another force greater than God; where the myth refers to the Fates ruling over all creation (“*Meine Herren und deine?*“)¹¹, the urge to create itself may as well be the one force that governs even God, and thus, the holiest of drives one may possess.

Despite his loneliness, Prometheus remains confident that in the end, he will survive his conflict with Zeus:

Wähntest du etwa,
Ich sollte das Leben hassen,
In Wüsten fliehn,
Weil nicht alle Knabenmorgen-
Blüenträume reifen?

(I. 45-9)

As Jølle duly notes, “the initial *Wähntest*¹² reveals Prometheus’ defiant, if not triumphant, optimism that he has, contrary to expectation, survived the ordeals” (411). If Prometheus is again likened to the importance of Enlightenment, the illuminating fire that has brought humanity from the dark ages, these lines parallel the rivalry of scientific progress and rationalism with the Catholic church. Much like Prometheus rebelling against Zeus’ will, Goethe takes an almost-explicitly blasphemous stand against the religious leaders of Western Europe, encouraging

¹⁰ “Have you ever eased the suffering of the oppressed? Have you ever stilled the tears of the anguished?”

¹¹ “My masters and yours?”

¹² to imagine; to believe wrongly

people to no longer be afraid; this stanza is as damning of Zeus (and the church) as it is encouraging of Prometheus and his humans (the Enlightenment and its followers).

The final stanza, however, is one mixed with both pride and humility; though Prometheus claims joy in the creation of his new generation of enlightened humans, the choice of words Goethe uses suggests Prometheus less as a creator as he is, a sculptor or “shaper” of humanity:

Hier sitz' ich, forme Menschen
Nach meinem Bilde,
Ein Geschlecht, das mir gleich sei,
Zu leiden, weinen,
Genießen und zu freuen sich,
Und dein nicht zu achten,
Wie ich!

(I. 50-6)

Although *schaffen* would be a more direct translation of creation, Goethe uses *formen* instead, more akin to forming or moulding. Whether this was a simple artistic choice in language or a way for Goethe to continue his critiques of the church without being accused of outright blasphemy is dependent on this translation. However, Jølle cleverly notes the similarities between this stanza's first three lines and a passage from the book of Genesis¹³: “[...]Gott schuff den Menschen Jm [sic] zum Bilde [...] ein Bild das vns [sic] gleich sey [sic]” (412). Based on this interpretation, Goethe—like Prometheus—wishes not to replace God, but empower the next generation to stand on their own, without the need for God to survive. Following rationalist doctrine, it is important that this view does not disprove God's existence or to champion atheism, but to acknowledge that, given humanity's powers of reason, one is equipped to adapt to the hostilities of nature and the universe, that God's influence over our own actions is more or less indirect.

¹³ Genesis, 1. 26-7 (Bibel 1545), “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness’ [...] [And] God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him.”

Where “Prometheus” is more explicit in its critique of organized religion and one’s relationship with God and the church, “Ganymed” remarks on blind faith, albeit through concise contradiction. In contrast to Prometheus’ defiance, Ganymede (a Trojan prince taken by Zeus to Olympus to serve his wine) glorifies his “Alliebender Vater,” his praise edging on sarcasm or helpless obsession. Even in the first section, the language can be interpreted not only as love between father and son, but an intimate love poem:

Wie im Morgenglanze
 Du rings mich anglühst,
 Frühling, Geliebter!
 Mit tausendfacher Liebeswonne
 Sich an mein’ Herz drängt
 Deiner ewigen Wärme
 Heilig Gefühl,
 Unendliche Schöne!

(“Ganymed” I. 1-9)

Though Prometheus’ use of the informal address in second person singular (du/dich) is disrespectful and scorning of Zeus, the usage of this form throughout “Ganymed” implies a close relationship, surrounded by the rest of the flowery praise in his hymn. This is further implied by the following two lines: “Daß ich dich fassen möcht’ // In diesen Arm’!” (I. 10-11).

Moreover, where Prometheus suggests that the gods require human worship and sacrifice to sustain themselves, Ganymede is easily identified as one of the “Kinder und Bettler” Prometheus mentions. In his hymn, Ganymede’s love for God and all His creation bring him comfort, safety, healing, and grace:

Ach, an deinem Busen
 Lieg’ ich, schmachte,
 Und deine Blumen, dein Gras
 Drängen sich an mein Herz.
 Du kühlst den brennenden

Durst meines Busens,
Lieblicher Morgenwind!
Ruft drein die Nachtigall
Liebend nach mir aus dem Nebeltal.

(I. 12-20)

Recalling that Prometheus' hut and fire is enough to sustain him and allow him to claim independence from Zeus and the rest of the Olympic pantheon, Ganymede finds comfort and safety in his undying love for his deity ("Du kühlst den brennenden // Durst meines Busens,")¹⁴.

The nightingale is also an interesting choice of symbol, though one that readily fits in Goethe's theme of authorial irony. Where the nightingale in the imagination of classic Greek mythos is the messenger of Zeus (Suksi 652), the bird in early English, Latin, and German poetry is "repeatedly linked with spring and the swelling of the buds, with the pleasures of love, [and] with the cruelty of desire" (Shippey 47). This duality of pleasure and pain leaves the last stanza to be interpreted as one or the other:

Ich komm! Ich komme!
Wohin? Ach, wohin?
Hinauf! Hinauf strebt's.
Es schweben die Wolken
Abwärts, die Wolken
Neigen sich der sehnenen Liebe.
Mir! Mir!
In eurem Schosse
Aufwärts!
Umfangend umfängen!
Aufwärts an deinen Busen,
Alliebender Vater!

(I. 21-33)

If "Ganymed" was to be read at face-value—that is, as a hymn glorifying Zeus—the last lines echo the rest of the poem in adoration and longing to be reunited with one's heavenly father. The

¹⁴ "You cool the burning thirst of my bosom."

love, the desire of Ganymede to ascend speaks to his devotion and loyalty to Zeus and Olympus and the invocation of the nightingale signals the beginning of Ganymede's ascent. However, if the myth of the nightingale aligns with its classical understanding, this messenger of peace could easily be a harbinger of self-destruction: "the nightingale [is] a piercing reminder of the *danger* of love, the suddenness made more sweet by the realization of fated disaster" (Shippey 49).

This warning is eerily reminiscent of the fate of another one of Goethe's characters: Werther of *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*¹⁵. Werther's last words in his suicide note mirror the last lines of "Ganymed":

Ich gehe voran! Gehe zu meinem Vater, zu deinem Vater. Dem will ich's klagen, und er wird mich trösten, bis du kommst, und ich fliege dir entgegen und fasse dich und bleibe bei dir vor dem Angesichte des Unendlichen in ewigen Umarmungen. (*Die Leiden* 190)

With that, the reader is left uncertain as to whether or not Ganymede (in the poem) might have taken his own life or was summoned by Zeus himself, carried up into the clouds. Then, is "Ganymed" a hymn of devotion and love or a dirge, mourning the loss of life or one's connection to the mortal realm? In the context of Goethe's writing, this serves as his own warning to the dangers of blind faith, both in one's passions as well as in God. Simply put, to follow blindly is to consent to blindness.

Where these two poems highlight Goethe's view of individual sovereignty in the religious realm, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* shows not only the value of this sovereignty within society, but the importance of critical and empathetic thinking. Semi-autobiographical in nature, the book is presented as a collection of letters Werther wrote to his best friend Wilhelm

¹⁵ Shorter quotes from *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* with Stanley Appelbaum's translations will be referenced here, for ease of reading.

back home, most of which detailing his relationships with the new people he meets, chiefly Lotte (a woman with whom he becomes enamored) and her betrothed Albert. Werther, a young German aristocrat (albeit of lower standing), sought a new life after the fallout of his own engagement. As he forges his own path, he retells the subsequent events to Wilhelm, though the reader never sees Wilhelm's letters and responses. While a *Briefroman* usually contains a dialogue between two characters (Werther and Wilhelm, in this case), the reader comes to find that Werther has been dead prior to the writing of the book, supposedly having killed himself from being driven mad with obsession for Lotte. The curator's first note which serves as the book's prologue offers both foreshadowing of Werther's demise, and a warning to its readers:

Was ich von der Geschichte des armen Werther nur habe auffinden können, habe ich mit Fleiß gesammelt, und lege es euch hier vor, und weiß, daß ihr mirs danken werdet. Ihr könnt seinem Geiste und seinem Charakter eure Bewunderung und Liebe, seinem Schicksale eure Tränen nicht versagen.

Und du, gute Seele, die du eben den Drang fühlst wie er, schöpfe Trost aus seinem Leiden, und laß das Büchlein dein Freund sein, wenn du aus Geschick oder eigener Schuld keinen nähern finden kannst. (*Die Leiden 2*)

While the prologue is hopeful in that Werther's tale will bring comfort to those who read it, the last sentence warns that one's own hardships might be their own fault ("oder eigener Schuld"). Though the prologue does not explicitly state the *Leiden* Werther endures, it speaks to the book's usefulness as a cautionary tale—which, as argued here, is learning to conquer one's loneliness in a world that does not always make sense. Much like the two earlier poems, Goethe fundamentally urges his readers to take comfort in their own thoughts and rationale.

Goethe's employment of this style of writing not only allows for creative liberties (though Werther commits suicide, Goethe himself lives well into the 19th century), but by having Werther as his representative, he could present his philosophical arguments for *Sturm und Drang*

from a distance, allowing those familiar with his views a sense of moral ambiguity while making comparisons his beliefs with rationalism and other conflicting philosophies. Moreover, through the wisdom and detachment of the curator, Goethe can comment on Werther's actions in a way that seems more like a reflection on hindsight to his own life, rather than critiquing the actions of another. As Hasty remarks: "Werther, is not Goethe's mirror image but rather his pathological shadow. [...] [He] is the one, it is thought, who had to fail so that Goethe could succeed" (164). Even in practice, Goethe attempts to remain leveled with his readers rather than to speak down as a moral authority. In essence, Werther proves Goethe's own humanity. Regardless of how irrational Werther might have been, Goethe positions himself to argue not necessarily solely for *Sturm und Drang* ideals, but a balance between the logical and the emotional and the importance and separation between the two.

A number of key arguments can be derived from *Werther*, most notably the distinction between objective and subjective rationality. This distinction is important in later German philosophy with the concept of *Weltbild* and *Bildwelt*¹⁶, which refers to an individual's projection of one's (subjective) self to the world, and how the world (objectively) perceives them. This argument is framed within a conversation between Albert and Werther one afternoon as the two discuss an unfortunate incident: some time ago, one of Albert's servants accidentally shot a ramrod through her eye after attempting to clean a loaded pistol. Since then, the pistols that hang in his room are kept unloaded. With this knowledge, Werther picks one up and places the barrel above his right eye jokingly, though Albert is not amused:

Sie ist nicht geladen, sagte ich. – Und auch so, was solls? verstetze
[sic] er ungeduldig. Ich kann mir nicht vorstellen, wie ein Mensch

¹⁶ Loosely translated, "world image" and "pictorial world", referring to objective and subjective reality respectively.

so töricht sein kann, sich zu erschießen; der bloße Gedanke erregt mir Widerwillen. (*Die Leiden* 68)

It is during this discussion that the two begin to represent the philosophies of rationalism and *Sturm und Drang*. From his perspective, Albert reacted rationally to Werther putting the (albeit unloaded) gun to his head. Logically, if a weapon's sole purpose is to kill whatever it is directed at, therefore, who of sound mind, would want to direct a weapon at themselves? Naturally, this would explain his disgust and inability to comprehend why someone would even joke about that ("der bloße Gedanke erregt mir Widerwillen"). Werther, minding subjective perception, suggest that it is not a matter of an object's purpose, but its actor's intent:

Habt ihr [sic] deswegen die inneren Verhältnisse einer Handlung erforscht? Wißt ihr mit Bestimmtheit die Ursachen zu entwickeln, warum sie geschah, warum sie geschehen mußte? Hättet ihr das, ihr würdet nicht so eilfertig mit euren Urteilen sein. (*Die Leiden* 68)

To Werther, the gesture was just that: a gesture that meant no harm, for reasons he found amusing. To him, both of the men understood that the gun was unloaded and, thus, not an immediate threat. A gun's purpose might be to kill, but it cannot do so without the consent and instigation of its user. Moreover, Werther argues here that by attempting to make such objective judgments and labelling other's reactions as good or bad, one begins to lose empathy for their fellow human beings ("Habt ihr deswegen die inneren Verhältnisse einer Handlung erforscht?")¹⁷.

On the contrary, Albert believes that certain actions are inherently good or bad regardless of one's personal interpretation (an objective statement): "Du wirst mir zugeben, daß gewisse Handlungen lasterhaft bleiben, sie mögen geschehen, aus welchem Beweggrunde sie wollen"

¹⁷ "Have you studied the deep-lying reasons for [a] person's actions?"

(Goethe 68)¹⁸. Keeping in mind the *Stürmer und Dränger* stance that emotional and experiential (subjective) understanding provides situational context, Albert's response shows an intrinsic weakness to objective rationalism: absolutism. Ironically, Werther suggests that when it comes to moral rightness, there are no true absolutes:

Doch mein Lieber, fuhr ich fort, finden sich auch hier einige Ausnahmen. Es ist wahr, der Diebstahl ist ein Laster; aber der Mensch, der, um sich und die Seinigen vom gegenwärtigen Hungertode zu erretten, auf Raub ausgeht, verdient der Mitleiden oder Strafe? Wer hebt den ersten Stein auf gegen den Ehemann, der im gerechten Zorne sein untreues Weib und ihren nichtswürdigen Verführer aufopfert? Gegen das Mädchen, das in einer wonnevollen Stunde sich in den unaufhaltsamen Freuden der Liebe verliert? Unsere Gesetze selbst, diese kaltblütigen Pedanten, lassen sich rühren und halten ihre Strafe zurück. (*Die Leiden* 68)

Emotional understanding, from this argument, may be akin to one's intuition (or *Drang*). Every situation, every reality perceived, is unique, regardless of precedent—that is to say, two people might be thieves, but one might have a better motivations (as a last ditch effort to fend off a child's starvation) than another (purely greed). Werther argues that despite the establishment of law and order, there are always exceptions, especially if the guilty can appeal to their judge and jury emotionally.

Albert is unmoved by this answer, suggesting that those blind with passion lose all sense of judgment, strengthening the rationalist platform that regardless of how one feels, one must take the act for what it is (in reference to the earlier example, thievery is thievery and thievery is always bad, no matter one's reasoning). "...ein Mensch, den seine Leidenschaften hinreißen, alle Besinnungskraft verliert und als ein Trunkener, als ein Wahnsinniger angesehen wird" (Goethe

¹⁸ "You'll grant me," said Albert, "that certain actions remain blameworthy no matter from what motives they are performed"

70)¹⁹. Where Albert shrugs off passion as a form of weakness, Werther believes passion is the ultimate source of strength:

Ach ihr vernünftigen Leute! rief ich lächelnd aus. Leidenschaft!
Trunkenheit! Wahnsinn! Ihr steht so gelassen, so ohne
Teilnehmung da, ihr sittlichen Menschen! scheltet den Trinker,
verabscheut den Unsinnigen, geht vorbei wie der Priester und
dankt Gott wie der Pharisäer, daß er euch nicht gemacht hat wie
einen von diesen. (*Die Leiden* 70)

While advocating his stance, Werther implies his own rejection of objective rationalism (“Ach ihr vernünftigen Leute!”)²⁰. By judging others, the rationalists are merely boring prudes in Werther’s eyes, unwilling to acknowledge the deeper states of humanity (*Leidenschaft*, *Trunkenheit*, and *Wahnsinn*). He continues, admitting his own “weakness” to emotion to his friend:

Ich bin mehr als einmal trunken gewesen, meine Leidenschaften
waren nie weit vom Wahnsinn, und beides reut mich nicht: den ich
habe in meinem Maße begreifen lernen, wie man alle
außerordentlichen Menschen, die etwas Großes, etwas
Unmöglichscheinendes wirkten, von jeher für Trunkene und
Wahnsinnige ausschreien mußte. (*Die Leiden* 70)

Traditionally, it is considered masculine for a man to maintain his composure or to betray any semblance of emotion. To be in such a sensitive or altered state such as drunkenness or insanity implies weakness of will and character, even in the contemporary expectation of masculine expression. As the conversation continues, its subject shifts to each philosophy’s belief on personal strength. Where Werther believes that it is by giving into one’s genuine passion and accepting all of one’s traits that allows one to become successful and lead a fulfilling life, Albert

¹⁹ “because a person who’s swept away by his passions loses all of his judgment and is looked upon as being intoxicated or insane”

²⁰ “Oh, you rational people!”

suggests the opposite is true, that it's by one's ability to discipline oneself and control these impulses that makes a person strong.

With both sides equally matched, Werther reframes the discussion's perspective on human constitution:

Die menschliche Natur, fuhr ich fort, hat ihre Grenzen: sie kann Freude, Leid, Schmerzen bis auf einen gewissen Grad ertragen und geht zugrunde, sobald *der* überstiegen ist. Hier ist also nicht die Frage, ob einer schwach oder stark ist, sondern ob er das Maß seines Leidens ausdauern kann – es mag nun moralisch oder körperlich sein. (*Die Leiden* 72)

Werther argues that a person's resilience is not tested in strength—short bursts of great action in response to life and its trials—but in the ability to endure pain throughout the entirety of one's existence. He also asserts one's state of mental health is just as important as one's physical health, a claim that is still discussed today. As Ignace Feuerlicht stated: “It is no wonder that psychology, psychoanalysis, and social psychology have been applied...to Goethe's novel, which has been called the forerunner of the modern psychological novel, in order to find out about Werther's innermost feelings...and particularly the motives for his suicide” (476). Werther continues:

Du gibst mir zu: wir nennen das eine Krankheit zum Tode, wodurch die Natur so angegriffen wird, daß teils ihre Kräfte verzehrt, teils so außer Wirkung gesetzt werden, daß sie sich nicht wieder aufzuhelfen, durch keine glückliche Revolution den gewöhnlichen Umlauf des Lebens wiederherzustellen fähig ist.

Nun, mein Lieber, laß uns das auf den Geist anwenden. Sieh den Menschen an in seiner Eingeschränktheit, wie Eindrücke auf ihn wirken, Ideen sich bei ihm festsetzen, bis endlich eine wachsende Leidenschaft ihn aller ruhigen Sinneskraft beraubt und ihn zugrunde richtet.

Vergebens, daß der gelassene, vernünftige Mensch den Zustand des Unglücklichen übersieht, vergebens, daß er ihm zuredet! (*Die Leiden* 72)

Where the previous excerpt highlights both philosophies' interpretations of resilience, Werther shows that despite passion being a force that propels innovation and is the source of joy in one's work, if one cannot control one's passion, he might lose his grasp on reality and descend into madness ("...endlich eine wachsende Leidenschaft ihn aller ruhigen Sinneskraft beraubt und ihn zugrunde richtet")²¹. Therefore, in this example, just as a person would succumb to a mortal illness, one also succumbs to suicide; both are ultimately beyond the individual's control: "Ich finde es ebenso wunderbar zu sagen: der Mensch ist feige, der sich das Leben nimmt, als es ungehörig wäre, den einen Feigen zu nennen, der an einem böartigen Fieber stirbt" (*Die Leiden* 72)²². In the case of suicide, though a rationalist would argue that a person is not naturally inclined to take one's own life, it is again a question of endurance (the long-term effects), not one of strength (the short-term action). As Werther suggests, when a person falls into such a deep, perhaps terminal, depression, a calm, rational person cannot give a depressed person advice or will them to feel better, much like how a healthy man at a sick man's bedside cannot lend the sick man any of his strength: "Ebenso wie ein Gesunder, der am Bette des Kranken steht, ihm von seinen Kräften nicht das geringste einflößen kann" (*Die Leiden* 72)²³.

Werther's own demise was catalyzed by a broken heart and a shattered mind, both products of his unyielding love for Lotte. However, where young Werther saw his feelings as infatuation, those around him witnessed lustful obsession. Unknown to Lotte, her utterance of a single word at a ball the pair attended proved to Werther that the two shared an intrinsic bond:

²¹ "...finally a growing passion robs him of all calm judgment and destroys him"

²² "I find it just as odd to say that a man who takes his life is a coward as it would be inappropriate to call someone a coward if he died from a malignant fever"

²³ "Just as a healthy man at a sick man's bedside can't lend him the slightest amount of his own strength"

Sie stand auf ihren Ellenbogen gestuetzt, ihr Blick durchdrang die Gegend, sie sah gen Himmel und auf mich, ich sah ihr Auge tränenvoll, sie legte ihre Hand auf die meinige und sagte: – *Klopstock!* – Ich erinnerte mich sogleich der herrlichen Ode, die ihr in Gedanken lag, und versank in dem Strome von Empfindungen, den sie in dieser Losung über mich ausgoß. Ich ertrugs nicht... (*Die Leiden* 36)

As the rain hit the window panes, Werther was astonished that Lotte had made the same connection he would have made, likening the weather to Klopstock's *Die Frühlingsfeier*, a work dear to him. Recognizing her as a kindred spirit, Werther fell in love at first sight and realized that despite her betrothal, they shared something special beyond anything else fathomable. After the storm subsided the following morning, Werther asked if he could see her again:

Da verließ ich sie mit der Bitte, sie selbigen Tages noch sehen zu dürfen; sie gestand mirs zu, und ich bin gekommen; und seit der Zeit können Sonne, Mond und Sterne geruhig ihre Wirtschaft treiben, ich weiß weder, daß Tag noch daß Nacht ist, und die ganze Welt verliert sich um mich her. (*Die Leiden* 38)

Though Werther's first encounter with Lotte is retold to Wilhelm rather poetically, his tone begins to change, exposing his loss of ambition and focus for everything else besides this woman whom he loves with his entire being—whom he just met. The more he interacts with her, the happier he feels, and the more obsessive he becomes: “Und sah nach ihrem Auge wieder – Edler! Hättest du deine Vergötterung in diesem Blicke gesehen, und möchte ich nun deinen so oft entweihten Namen nie wieder nennen hören” (*Die Leiden* 36)²⁴.

A string of letters written later that summer illustrate Werther's descent into madness. Starting from an afternoon where Werther meets Lotte at a fountain with her younger siblings, he begins to show inappropriate signs of affection: he picked the child up and kissed its face until it cried (Goethe 50). Werther, however, seemed unbothered by Lotte's reaction. Later he describes

²⁴ “And I looked at her eyes again—Noble poet, if you could have seen how her gaze deified you! May I never again hear others speak your name, which has so often been profaned!”

the experience to Wilhelm as Lotte urges the child to finish washing her face and leave: “Ich sage dir, Wilhelm, ich habe mit mehr Respekt nie einer Taufhandlung beigewohnt, und als Lotte heraufkam, hätte ich mich gern vor ihr niedergeworfen wie vor einem Propheten, der die Schulden einer Nation weggeweiht hat” (Goethe 50)²⁵. In but a few days’ time, the poetry in his words that once displayed gentlemanly affection have devolved and shifted into lust (“hätte ich mich gern vor ihr niedergeworfen wie vor einem Propheten”). Moreover, this is not the last time Werther deifies Lotte, his worship akin Ganymede’s obsessive praise of his holy father.

Much as the tone of Werther’s words reflect a regression back into adolescence (and, perhaps, animal instinct), so too does his choice of words as he writes a number of short, sporadic letters back to Wilhelm in the following days. On July 8th, Werther’s language seems childlike as he expresses disappointment in Lotte’s lack of attention paid to him at another gathering:

Was man ein Kind ist! Was man nach so einem Blicke geizt! Was man ein Kind ist! [...] Ich suchte Lottens Augen; ach sie gingen von einem zum andern! Aber auf mich! mich! mich! der ganz allein auf sie resigniert dastand, fielen sie nicht! (*Die Leiden* 52)

Two days later, his affection turns to anger when asked by a friend on how he feels about Lotte: “Die alberne Figur, die ich mache, wenn in Gesellschaft von ihr gesprochen wird, solltest du sehen! Wenn man mich nun gar fragt, wie sie mir gefällt – Gefällt! das Wort hasse ich auf den Tod” (Goethe 52)²⁶. It is this brief letter that Werther wrote on July 10th that exhibits Werther’s ignorance to his own passionate obsession. In both a conversation with a local parson’s wife as well as later, in his discussion with Albert, Werther dismisses the idea that absolutes exist

²⁵ “I tell you, Wilhelm, I’ve never attended a baptism with greater reverence. When Lotte came back up, I would have gladly prostrated myself before her as if she were a prophet whose sacrament had expunged the sins of a nation”.

²⁶ “The foolish figure I cut when I’m in company and people talk about her—you should see it! Whenever they go so far as to ask me how I like her—‘Like!’ I hate that word mortally

(recalling the example of thievery being bad, regardless of purpose or reasoning). Where Werther condemns Albert for his cold assertions on the stark contrast of good and bad, Werther's perspective is not as gray as he believes. Instead, Werther exhibits that, though he approaches external situations with a flexible perspective, he only is able to love something completely, or not at all, becoming frustrated with this intrinsic limitation: "Was muß das für ein Mensch sein, dem Lotte gefällt, dem sie nicht alle Sinnen, alle Empfindungen ausfüllt!" (*Die Leiden* 52)²⁷. When it comes to his emotions, he either feels or does not, and nothing in between.

As another few days pass, Werther becomes more and more desperate for Lotte's affection, seeking hopeful signs that she might feel the same way for him, where there truly are no signs to be found:

Nein, ich betrüge mich nicht! Ich lese in ihren schwarzen Augen wahre Teilnehmung an mir und meinem Schicksal! Ja ich fühle, und darin darf ich meinem Herzen trauen, daß sie – o darf ich, kann ich den Himmel in diesen Worten aussprechen? – daß sie mich liebt! (*Die Leiden* 54)

Everything Lotte does becomes a secret message to Werther, an unspoken admission of mutual love and appreciation. Werther effectively becomes enslaved by his passion—that is, his love for Lotte—and ultimately, becomes consumed by it.

Though Werther tries to occupy his mind with work or painting, his feelings for Lotte are too much to bear. After a year passes and Lotte and Albert marry, Werther ultimately resolves to end his life; he is unable to tolerate the pain of not having her as his own. In a letter he left on his desk the night before he commits suicide, the full weight of his situation comes to light:

Alles das ist vergänglich, aber keine Ewigkeit soll das glühende Leben auslöschen, das ich gestern auf deinen Lippen genoß, das

²⁷ "What kind of person would merely 'like' Lotte, and not have his whole mind and heart filled with her?"

ich in mir fühle! Sie liebt mich! Dieser Arm hat sie umfaßt, diese Lippen haben auf ihren Lippen gezittert, dieser Mund hat an dem ihrigen gestammelt. Sie ist mein! Du bist mein! Ja, Lotte, auf ewig.

Und was ist das, daß Albert dein Mann ist? Mann! Das wäre denn für diese Welt—und für diese Welt Sünde, daß ich dich liebe, daß ich dich aus seinen Armen in die meinigen reißen möchte? Sünde? Gut, und ich strafe mich dafür; ich habe sie in ihrer ganzen Himmelswonne geschmeckt, diese Sünde, habe Lebensbalsam und Kraft in mein Herz gesaugt. Du bist von diesem Augenblicke mein! Mein, o Lotte! (*Die Leiden* 188-90)

Not only does he call into question the validity of their marriage (“Und was ist das, daß Albert dein Mann ist?”)²⁸, but Werther claims that in the afterlife, he and Lotte will be together forever, and he shall patiently wait for her on the other side (“Sie ist mein! Du bist mein! Ja, Lotte, auf ewig”)²⁹. Though he cannot be married to her in this world (and extramarital or polyamorous relationships did not coincide with the norms of 18th century European society), he is content to call her his in the next. As he finishes writing, he sends a messenger to Albert requesting his pistols: “Wollten Sie mir wohl zu einer verhabenden Reise Ihre Pistolen leihen? Leben sie recht wohl!” (*Die Leiden* 190)³⁰. Albert honors the request, ignorant to the fact that he had armed his friend with the tools to kill himself, the message containing his last farewell. Where he once held the same pistol in jest the year prior, he presses the barrel, now loaded, to his forehead, and pulls the trigger.

As Werther is no longer alive to tell the tale of his death, the curator explains what came of him after that night. The book then ends with a somber conclusion, the curator’s note syncopated and concise in comparison to the flowery words of the protagonist:

Um zwölfte mittags starb [Werther]. Die Gegenwart des Amtmannes und seine Anstalten tuschten einen Auflauf. Nachts

²⁸ “What does it mean if Albert is your husband?”

²⁹ “She is mine! You are mine! Yes, Lotte, forever”

³⁰ “Would you lend me your pistols for a trip I intend to make? Farewell and be happy!”

gegen eilfe ließ er ihn an die Stätte begraben, die er sich erwählt hatte. (*Die Leiden* 202)

Throughout his story, Werther's obsession with Lotte is the most prominent factor in his fate, proving his own argument that unbridled passion can ultimately be one's own undoing.

However, it is the curator's last words and not Werther's that exposes that he did not necessarily die of a broken heart, but from loneliness: "Der Alte folgte der Leiche und die Söhne, Albert vermochts nicht. Man fürchtete für Lottens Leben³¹. Handwerker trugen ihn. Kein Geistlicher hat ihn begleitet" (*Die Leiden* 202)³².

If one were to examine the book with a focus on the curator rather than Werther as the central character, the lesson the curator (and, by extension, Goethe armed with the hindsight of his own *Leiden*) seems most interested in is coping with loneliness, a demon one must conquer in order to truly be self-reliant. Werther, himself, exposes this intrinsic need for mutual understanding in one of his final letters to Wilhelm:

Manchmal sag ich mir: Dein Schicksal ist einzig; preise die übrigen glücklich – so ist noch keiner gequält worden. Dann lese ich einen Dichter der Vorzeit, und es ist mir, als säh ich in mein eignes Herz. Ich habe so viel auszustehen! Ach, sind den Menschen vor mir schon so elend gewesen. (*Die Leiden* 140)

This entry, combined with the book's first ("Wie froh bin ich, daß ich weg bin! Bester Freund, was ist das Herz des Menschen! Dich zu verlassen, den ich so liebe, von dem ich unzertrennlich war, und froh zu sein! Ich weiß du verzeihst mir")³³ and last few lines, revisits our initial question: what defines reality (or, the heart of man) (*Die Leiden* 2)? From Werther's perspective,

³¹ From Stanley Appelbaum's reading, "The original 1774 edition made it clear that Lotte's life wasn't in danger, and that she survived."

³² "The old man accompanied the body, as did his sons; Albert couldn't. There was fear for Lotte's life. Laborers carried the bier. No clergyman attended"

³³ "How happy I am to have come away! Best of friends, what the human heart is like! To leave you behind, you whom I love so much, from whom I was inseparable, and to be glad! I know you'll forgive me"

no one can truly experience the world in the same way as anyone else; each situation, regardless of precedent, is unique. There are no absolutes when it comes to morality, law, and order. With this in mind, Werther's reaction to Lotte referencing Klopstock when they first met makes more sense as to why he reacted as he did, regardless of what the reader feels is right or appropriate. If one feels utterly alone in their own reality, then to have a new companion who understands something one holds so dearly *must* mean that they are connected on some spiritual level.

It is not Werther, but his suicide that establishes Goethe's philosophical credibility, proving his argument through contradiction. Recall *Werther's* lesson: each situation, regardless of precedent, is unique. His suicide, though on the surface, was one caused fundamentally by unrequited love, whether it be lustful, jealous love or simply to love another human being. Much like his love for Lotte, his love for others in general was apparent in Werther's life: "He has friends and makes friends easily, even among the aristocrats. He is particularly attracted to children and common people, and easily gains their confidence and attachment" (Feuerlicht 479). From a rationalist standpoint, Werther's fate could have easily been avoided by simply moving on. He made friends easily enough and his story even begins by sharing his excitement for starting over and having done just that.

When Werther discussed suicide with Albert, it was not merely moral debate, but a "passionate defense of suicide" that shows Werther had already entertained these ideas for himself (Feuerlicht 480). In essence, regardless of what Albert said to dissuade Werther that suicide was ever a valid option, he played the role of the friend at the feverish man's bedside; Werther was already resigned to death and he could not be stopped. No amount of well-wishing or optimism could cure him of his melancholy, not to mention Albert's very pistol was the key instrument in Werther's death. Instead, Werther saw suicide as freedom, "the possibility of

leaving the prison of life and the limitations of human existence anytime he [wanted] to” (Feuerlicht 480). In the end, it was the limitations of the conventions of family and love—that if Lotte and Albert were married, there was no place for Werther—that prompted Werther to take his own life. He rejected their union and society’s framework surrounding love, life, traditional marriage, and how one ought to act among others. As Feuerlicht suggests: “to explain Werther’s suicide by his insanity is easy, but wrong. Werther has never been more disciplined and logical than on the day before his death” (477). In order for Goethe to be free, he had to set Werther, his “pathological shadow,” free. Taking into account Goethe’s own need to write the novel, using it to come to terms with his own life and its pains, Werther died so that Goethe could live.

Much like Werther, many of the bourgeoisie of the era used literature as a “means of self-presentation”:

Werther actively employs literary models [Klopstock, “Dichter der Vorzeit”] to structure his relationship to self and to the world. His imaginary activity does not “come at the expense of his reciprocal contact with the objective world,” but rather makes such contact possible from the beginning. Nevertheless, we will observe that...the patriarchal lifestyle [is] not enough for Werther, that the identity [it] provide[s] is not sufficiently substantial. (Hasty 168)

Through his book, Goethe rationalized his own need to challenge the status quo: one need not kill themselves in order to die and begin again. Effectively, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* serves as a warning to balance one’s subjective passion with objective societal demands as both can lead to one’s undoing. By giving completely into one’s heart, one becomes blind to reason and loses himself to the depths of his own mind; by neglecting the heart, one becomes a husk, a puppet who allows his actions to be dictated by the norms and laws of the place he finds himself in. Both sides of the spectrum end in either physical or spiritual death, and, as Goethe argues, the body cannot function without the mind.

Whether or not Werther was truly (objectively) mad, a moment of clarity to what truly ails him is offered in a letter he wrote one Christmas Eve:

Zwar ich merke täglich mehr, mein Lieber, wie töricht man ist, andere nach sich zu berechnen. Und weil ich so viel mit mir selbst zu tun habe und dieses Herz so stürmisch ist – ach, ich lasse gern die andern ihres Pfades gehen, wenn sie mich nur auch könnten gehen lassen. (*Die Leiden* 96)³⁴

Though easily equated with passionate or intimate love, Werther sought to find someone who appreciated him for himself. Applying his lesson to mind, perhaps Werther's failure to thrive stemmed from a fraternal loneliness, a void created after he moved away from Wilhelm; perhaps the two were truly inseparable as Werther suggested.

Werther did not necessarily seek out passionate or intimate love, but to find someone who appreciated him for himself and for his heart. Through self-reliance and self-identity, one may understand that they can be alone, but they must not always be lonely. Romanticism and the American transcendentalist movement (recalling Emerson and Thoreau) echoed the sentiments of Goethe and his fellows, and provided the basis of our own republic, free from what our founders considered the tyranny of an unjust king. Though Goethe's words were written over two centuries ago, even today do they speak not only to the idealized values of a nation, but to the hearts of every person who yearns for the freedom to pursue their lives in relative peace. Like our creator before us, whoever or whatever that may be, it falls onto us to create a better generation and to illuminate—to enlighten—our future.

³⁴ "To be sure, I notice more and more every day, dear friend, how silly it is to judge others by one's self. And because I commune so much with myself, and my heart is so impetuous—ah, I'd gladly let others go their own way if they would only let me go mine"

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APPENDIX

"Prometheus" (1772-4)

Cover your skies, Zeus,
With the mist of clouds!
And practice, boy who
beheads, like the thistles,
the oaks and mountain peaks!

Let my earth be
left alone,
and my hut,
that you did not build,
and my hearth,
whose glow
you envy.

I know no one more impoverished
under the sun and amongst the gods.
You are barely nourished
by sacrificial offerings
and whispered prayers,
your Majesty,
and you'd starve were
it not for children and beggars;
hopeful fools.

Since I was a child
who knew not where he was,
I've turned my wandering eyes
to the sun, as if up above
there was an ear to hear my plight,
a heart like mine,
who would grant mercy to the afflicted.

Who helped me
against the insolence of the Titans?
Who hath saved me from death,
from slavery?

Did you not accomplish it all yourself,
O, holy glowing heart?
And glowing, young and well,

by the deceived who give thanks for their salvation
to the sleeping one above?

And I should honor you? For what?
Have you ever eased the suffering
of the oppressed?
Have you ever tilled the tears
of the anguished?
Was it not I who forged man,
almighty time,
and the eternal Fates,
my masters and yours?

Do you somehow wrongly believe
that I should hate life
and flee into the deserts
because not all boys have
matured from their carnal, barbaric dreams?

Here I sit, forming the race of man
in my own image,
a lineage, who like me, can
suffer and cry,
enjoy and rejoice,
and they will scorn you,
just as I do!

“Ganymed” (1770-5)

How, in the brightness of the morning,
you shine all around me,
springtime beloved!
With thousandfold love-bliss,
The holy feeling
Of your eternal warmth
Imprints itself upon my heart,
Unending beauty!

Could I but embrace you
in these arms!

Ah, upon your breast
I lie, I languish,
and your blossoms, your grass
press upon my heart.
You cool the burning
thirst of my bosom,
O, lovely morning wind!

There calls the nightingale
Lovingly for me from the misty vale.
I'm coming! I'm coming!
but where? Ah, where?

Up! It surges up!
The clouds are leaning
downwards, the clouds
bow down to yearning love.
To me! To me!
In your lap, clouds,
upwards!
Embracing, embraced!
Upwards to thy bosom,
All-loving Father!