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# 'Oh, was ich ein Kind bin!': Two Perceptions of Childhood in *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*

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## 10. 'Oh, was ich ein Kind bin!': Two Perceptions of Childhood in *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*

Identification with Werther, the protagonist of *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* resulted in several suicides and an increase in sales of blue and yellow cloth, all of which in turn further scandalized enlightened contemporaries and perhaps even motivated changes in Goethe's revised edition of 1787.<sup>1</sup> These extremes of reaction which have continued into the present are occasioned by certain discourses and narrative structures of the text that invite diverse reader responses. Although recent criticism has begun to examine the family relationships from a psychoanalytical or biographical perspective,<sup>2</sup> the role and function of the extensive representations of childhood has not yet been explored with regard to the text's reception even though some commentaries and particularly illustrations have highlighted these depictions.<sup>3</sup> The text is situated at a juncture of two contemporary discourses about childhood, which, as Werther says, see the child respectively as 'Untertan' and as 'Muster':

Ja, lieber Wilhelm, meinem Herzen sind die Kinder am nächsten auf der Erde. ... immer, immer wiederhole ich dann die goldenen Worte des Lehrers der Menschen: 'Wenn ihr nicht werdet, wie eines von diesen!' Und nun, mein Bester, sie, die unseresgleichen sind, die wir als unsere Muster ansehen sollten, behandeln wir als Untertanen. (30)

In contrast to the customary understanding that children are to be educated by adults, Werther believes that children are to be the 'Muster' for adults, and he himself in fact emulates children.

These two discourses, presented by Werther, by several characters, and by the editor, allow for both the reader's empathy with Werther and the reader's discomfort with, even rejection of, his perspective. I will first discuss these concepts and their correlative values and then examine the way in which the epistolary format structures the reader's responses. Thinking about childhood means thinking about being a child from the distance of adulthood. The description of childhood necessarily involves

the perspective of a historical phase in the life of each adult; the adult subject combines present observations and memories of past moments into a unique construction which nevertheless embodies certain general 'cliches.'

Toward the middle of the eighteenth century several discourses may be differentiated. In contrast to an earlier Puritan and Pietistic understanding of the child as an evil creature ruled by desires, the Enlightenment, in the tradition of Locke, thought of childhood as a stage in development toward adulthood, and of the child as the potential ideal adult. Education was required due to the absence of appropriate physical, emotional, moral, and intellectual powers. Rousseau, who affirmed the same natural goodness of children but considered the process of education the child's corruption by civilization, thought childhood was a state of being foreign and different from adulthood, a state possessing value in and of itself. Through Herder's depiction of it as a pre-rational and archaic state, childhood became a Romantic counter-image to late eighteenth-century society.<sup>4</sup>

Werther creates his own subjective image of childhood and focuses on three main features: desire, natural innocence and imagination. In terms of a discourse which emphasizes the absence of certain ideal adult characteristics in children, those same features could be called uncontrolled passions, limited knowledge and irrational fancy. In both cases the 'real' life of children is of little concern to the adult projections. Werther's image of childhood is based on selective observation and remembrance.

As Werther observes the idylls of the little peasant boy holding his brother and of Lotte cutting bread, he ignores the responsibility delegated to these older siblings and instead focuses on the uncontrolled passions of the brother chasing geese and the visibly demonstrated desires of the small children: 'besonders ergetze ich mich an ihren Leidenschaften und simplen Ausbrüchen des Begehrens' (17). Werther endorses Lotte's behaviour in the incident with Malchen at the well and the narrative of her mother's death. To maintain their natural innocence she tells imaginative stories which evince childhood fears, rather than attempting to explain the concepts of dangerous strangers and of death.<sup>5</sup> The imagination seems to alleviate the constricting implications of limited knowledge and perspective. Werther's own memories reinforce his idealized construction of childhood. When he returns to his place of birth, he attempts to recall those happy days when he dreamt 'in glücklicher Unwissenheit' (72), allowing his imagination to be enthralled by river adventures (73) and Christmas wishes (102). Werther associates happiness with children and with the memories of his own childhood, and thus concludes that children are ideal human beings, models for

adults. People are happiest, 'wenn [Gott] uns in freundlichem Wahne so hintaumeln läßt' (36). The image combines happiness with what could be termed self-deception, ignorance and uncontrolled movement, in other words the characteristics Werther selected for childhood. But not only has he identified the use of the imagination as an important attribute of children, he also uses this heavenly gift (79) to construct his own ideal:

Unsere Einbildungskraft, durch die Natur gedrungen sich zu erheben, durch die phantastischen Bilder der Dichtkunst genährt, bildet sich eine Reihe Wesen hinauf, wo wir das unterste sind und alles außer uns herrlicher erscheint, jeder andere vollkommener ist. ... Und so ist der Glückliche vollkommen fertig, das Geschöpf unserer selbst. (60)

The imagination functions as the means to construct his image of happy children (14). He underpins this belief by interpreting literally the biblical admonition quoted earlier, that if people do not become like children, they will not be allowed into the Kingdom of Heaven (30; cf. Mat. 18).<sup>6</sup> Werther follows his own advice and emphasizes the continuity of childhood into adulthood. For him, children possess characteristics which, like seeds, will develop in harmony to their fullest potential without adult interference (30). Since he sees himself as a kindred spirit of children, he seeks their physical proximity, plays with them and tells them stories.

But he goes one step further: he also attempts to behave like a child, particularly with regard to his love for Lotte. As much as possible Werther fulfills his own desires and gives himself to his passions. But while he treats his heart like a child—'Auch halte ich mein Herzchen wie ein krankes Kind' (10)—indulging its whims, and while he admits to himself, 'Oh, was ich ein Kind bin!' (37), he is conscious that adults would disapprove (10) and that he is hurting himself (75). Social conventions at first hold him back outwardly, but they never inhibit his indulgence of his feelings. He comes to question God's providence: 'hast du das zum Schicksale der Menschen gemacht, daß sie nicht glücklich sind, als ehe sie zu ihrem Verstande kommen und wenn sie ihn wieder verlieren!' (90). And his imagination becomes the refuge from society's demands for his love. It can make him cry like a child as everything comes alive around him (105). But while he reprimands himself for it, he continues to escape into that inexpressible and overwhelming world, because the magic lantern of love provides him with moments of pleasure and happiness (39).

The culmination of Werther's idealization of childhood occurs when he bases his decision to commit suicide on the characteristics of his 'Muster.' After much deliberation, he asserts his desire in terms of 'I want to, I must' (106) and proceeds to plan his own death. Without knowledge about death, Werther imagines it like a dream (116) in which he and Lotte will be united forever. His last thoughts prior to suicide link Lotte, the children, and death. They again surround and comfort him as he kisses them (123). It is the children that are to know the story and fate of their friend, and they do empathize.

Adults, by contrast, receive Werther's attempt to become childlike less sympathetically. His suicide could be read as the regression into an imagined childhood where he can satisfy those desires denied to him in reality. After all he is an adult, not a child. One discourse linked to childhood emphasizes the demands placed on adults. In this view, childhood is a stage during which outside experiences mould the child into the 'proper' adult. Werther objects to this concept because it imposes an adult will and a specific Enlightenment image of humanity on the child, as on an 'Untertan' (30-31).<sup>7</sup> For him this unnatural procedure does not lead to happiness.

Two episodes establish the rational principles of education. The doctor, whose dress and social position distinguish him and who maintains physical distance from the children, finds Werther's playing with Lotte's siblings inappropriate because it is undignified and obliterates the borders between adults and children. According to him, a reasonable individual should deal with children only pedagogically, to develop their reason in turn. The doctor's interacts with Werther and the children through a distanced lecture rather than a fairy tale. Similarly, another professional man thinks it is a dangerous perpetuation of superstition to tell Malchen that she will grow a beard if kissed by a stranger. Lotte's siblings are called 'ungezogen,' in contrast to 'erzogen,' since Werther indulges their whims rather than motivating them for socially useful and rational action. Both pedagogues cited by Werther stress the development of children's capacities to reason, because, as Katharina Rutschky puts it, the goal of Enlightenment education is the 'Aufhebung der Kindheit' (46).

Such education results in an exemplary adult like Albert. Lotte's needs for marriage and family seem fulfilled by this good man, who is loyal, loving, and reliable (106). He is an integrated member of society as he pursues his administrative duties. In the argument with Werther on suicide and with regard to the farmhand's actions, Albert emphasizes the ultimately social implications of suicide and concludes that an individual needs to be cognizant of and responsible for his behaviour even under the influence of passions (46-50, 96-97).

By contrast Werther rejects the social conventions exemplified by either the feudal hierarchy at court or his mother's bourgeois economic-rational planning and attempts to create social relationships on the basis of his heart's desire. Werther understands the farmhand's and the fool's behaviour, because they possess characteristics that are linked to his childhood ideal. The farmhand's passions are not distorted by education and the fool lives happily in his imaginary world. Society exculpates the insane, the inebriated and those in love (44-49) just as it does children, for because of their self-centred state, they do not fulfill a useful, goal-oriented, rational role. From this point of view Lotte criticises Werther's attempt to emulate children in the second part of the text. She asks him repeatedly to contain his emotions (35) and actually admonishes him like a child who will receive his Christmas gifts within the family only if he does not visit her prior to the 24th of December (102). But she herself finds that she wants to speak to Werther as an adult, and not as a pedagogue to a childish man. When Lotte requests that he behave like a man (102), she cites qualities that assume an individual perfectible through education. Because Werther also associates 'Geist,' 'Wissenschaften,' and 'Talente' (102) with this discourse, he accuses her of speaking like a 'Hofmeister' (103) to him, her 'Untertan.' Society can create distance by means of taking on a pedagogical attitude towards children and adults who do not meet their standards of adult behaviour. This text structures similar responses for its readers.

Because the epistolary novel exhibits a unique degree of unity through first-person narration, the reader becomes enveloped by the all-consuming voice of Werther. In fact, Werther himself provides such guidelines for reading. He passionately identifies with passages of literature. Lotte similarly expects to recognize and affirm her familiar world of quiet, bourgeois family life in reading. However, just as Werther tries to become like a child and yet remains an adult, the text involves the reader in a dialectic of identification and distance.

Except for the preamble, the narrative voice of Werther remains constant until the editor interrupts and assumes the responsibility of telling parts of the last section with his voice. The elements presented, however, are mediated through other characters, like Lotte, Albert, the doctor and the professional, though still verbalized by Werther.<sup>8</sup> These switches of focalization provide the reader with opportunities to view the information in a different context. Because these characters embrace the discourse of education, the reader trying to build consistencies faces conflicts between the characters' perspectives and Werther's.<sup>9</sup> Thus Werther's idealization of childhood receives a subtle reevaluation in terms of the concept of education. The editor's interpretative function

allows the reader to gain some additional distance from Werther. His preamble suggests a reading that balances identification with distance, asking for understanding without the suspension of judgement. The ability to judge others asserts itself through the education discourse, which implies in eighteenth-century terms that to educate someone the pedagogue needs to know differently and 'better':

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 mir's danken werdet. Ihr könnt seinem Geist und seinem Charakter eure Bewunderung und Liebe, seinem Schicksale eure Tränen nicht versagen. (7)

Just as the editor seems in some sense above Werther, he also distances himself from the reader, who is asked to view the text as a friend if fate or 'guilt' should not provide another.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless the reader comes to trust the editor, who points to his own diligence and reliability (7, 94), admits the limitations of his sources, and emphasizes the difficulty of seeing clearly an individual's motivation for action. He makes the reader aware he has organized and omitted material.

The editor, however, also judges Werther's behaviour by participating in the education discourse, as evidenced by his own terminology and style. While he initially raises expectations of empathy, his judgement of Werther is also equivocal: he calls him a 'poor man' whose spirit and character should inspire love and admiration. But he accuses this 'young unsteady man' (22) of being self-centred in his love:

Er fand sich durch alles dieses wie zur Untätigkeit *berechtigt*, er fand sich abgeschnitten von aller Aussicht, unfähig, irgendeine Handhabe zu ergreifen, mit denen man die Geschäfte des gemeinen Lebens anfaßt; ... ganz seiner wunderbaren Empfindung, Denkart und einer endlosen Leidenschaft hingegeben. (98; emphasis added)

Without being unsympathetic, the editor casts doubt on the appropriateness of Werther's behaviour. This contrasts sharply with his description of Lotte as a dear sweet being (98) who speaks in the '*gefaßten* Tone des edelsten Gefühls' (115; emphasis added) though emotions ravish her heart.

The editor's style also sets him apart from Werther. He embraces a mode of writing that Werther labels that of a chronicler. This appears to be a factually organized mode of writing focused on the accurate, ostensibly 'objective' representation of sequences (103). Werther at-

tempts to write in this manner when he describes his encounter with the court, 'eine Erzählung, plan und nett, wie ein Chronikenschreiber das aufzeichnen würde' (67). This style or something similar is the norm in the administrative office where Werther works for a while (61). But he becomes frustrated by the diplomat's insistence on perfectibility, a concept inherent in the education discourse. While Wilhelm appreciates this style (13, 19), Werther feels unable to express his feelings about Lotte in words, and especially in rigid abstractions. Instead of this distanced mode of expression, which seems artificial to him, he resorts to inversions, spontaneous additions and exclamations (61) because he can identify with them. Similarly, while Werther's letters further the reader's identification with the hero, the editor creates room for an evaluation of him.

Two types of construction then inform the image of childhood in *Werther*. Through observation and memory Werther incorporates the notions of desire, natural innocence and imagination into an idealized 'Muster' of the child. In Werther's terms, the Enlightenment educators perceive a child as an 'Untertan' based on what they see as a 'good' adult. As Werther becomes childlike, by identifying with his 'Muster,' his behaviour can be judged childish in the context of the education discourse, as presented by several characters and by the editor. However, if the text has a didactic purpose, which the editor's stance seems to indicate, it is also best served by the presentation of different attitudes, because in Bruce Duncan's words the 'vibrant constellation of opposites ... produces in its reader a fruitful ambivalence, a simultaneous identification with and detachment from the hero' (48). Thus the two discourses, which emulate and subordinate the childhood mentality, and their analogous narrative techniques, which support reader identification and distance, contribute to the text's diverse reception.

The concept of childhood not only provides a powerful lens through which to view Werther as a character. From the perspective of the modern reader, the impact of Werther's statement, 'Guter Gott von deinem Himmel, alte Kinder siehst du und junge Kinder, und nichts weiter' (30), seems particularly profound because the text participated in the creation of the sentimental, Romantic ideal of childhood.

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## Notes

- 1 The 'Wertherfieber' is well documented (Flaschka 110; Ekmann 15); Blackall speculates that this initial reception motivates the changes in the second edition (51).
- 2 Fischer argues that the text focuses on childhood because Werther desires to regress into the womb, which is linked to Lotte as a mother figure, while Mayer-Kalkus shows that Werther's fate exemplifies the effect of a feminine coding of desire in a patriarchy, and Schindler elaborates this focus on the mother's and Lotte's roles. Other examinations of the family contend, as Sorensen does, that the bourgeois, patriarchal family becomes so emotionally invested that Werther idyllizes it and connects it to nature. For Hasty, aesthetic activity constructs Werther's identity and finally creates an imaginary family. Forget links the motif of childhood to the representation of consciousness, the heart and an identification of Werther with Christ, but Gessl, rejecting those idyllic undertones, stresses the socially critical role of children in view of Goethe's biography.
- 3 Wilhelm von Humboldt commented, 'Mehr als alles haben mich die Kinderszenen gerührt' (Trunz 536), which is more generally reflected in the many illustrations of *Werther* editions collected by Georg Jäger.
- 4 The two discourses titled 'Untertan' and 'Muster' in the text seem to reflect these trends, which Goethe probably read either directly or indirectly through children's literature, for example. To date, Ewers offers the most differentiated discussion of the context and content of childhood discourse in the eighteenth century (esp. 7-28).
- 5 Since Enlightenment educators thought accidents resulted from wrong behaviour, they told warning stories to encourage children to draw 'rational' conclusions (Richter 81, 101).
- 6 Kuzniar notes the contemporary currency of 'Werther's endeavours to transgress the boundaries between art and life' (18).
- 7 Mayer-Kalkus describes 'Erziehung' as a 'Dialektik der Aufklärung' in which free will is created through discipline (112).
- 8 Focalization and narration can be most simply distinguished by the questions 'Who sees?' and 'Who speaks?' Seeing and speaking may, but need not, be attributed to the same agent (Rimmon-Kenan 72).
- 9 I have adapted some ideas from Iser.
- 10 In the first edition, the editor guides the reader to identify and sympathize with Werther's letters (Muller-Salget 541); in the second, Werther's effusive language is toned down, the editor's section expanded, and the farm hand's story elaborated. These changes result in a clearer opposition between Werther and the editor.

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