The Semiotics of Young Werther

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Desiring Transcendence, but Living in a secularizing, relativizing century, Werther complains, in a key, early letter, about limits on action and knowledge: "die Einschränkung [...] in welche die tätigen und forschenden Kräfte des Menschen eingesperrt sind." He speculates that there is no reality beyond the dreams we have of the world, "daß das Leben des Menschen nur ein Traum sei," and he claims that any sense of truth arising out of our searching is "nur eine träumende Resignation [...] da man sich die Wände, zwischen denen man gefangen sitzt, mit bunten Gestalten und lichten Aussichten bemalt." As the letter of May 22 ends, Werther claims that it is possible to accept the severe restrictions of human relativity because one possesses the freedom to leave the prison of limited being: "so eingeschränkt [der Mensch] ist, hält er doch immer im Herzen das süße Gefühl von Freiheit, und daß er diesen Kerker verlassen kann, wann er will." In a subsequent letter, Werther similarly refers to the contingency of being, again using the image of a wall:
Wilhelm, was ist unserm 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 machts doch immer unser Glück. (July 18)

Werther's life is a desperate attempt to transcend this prison, a search for a fulfilling totality of unmediated meaning.² The early letters suggest two solutions: 1) transcending the system through suicide, or 2) finding limited happiness (through love, for instance) within the system. Suicide is Werther's final decision; but for most of the novel, even as he seeks to escape the restraints of language, he works and suffers within the semiotic systems he shares with the rest of society.

In terms of eighteenth-century semiotic theory, *Werther* was written at an auspicious moment, for language was increasingly understood in terms of a new paradigm. The sixteenth-century notion of resemblance was being replaced by that of representation, the supposed motivated relationship between signifier and signified was becoming conventional, the unitary linguistic sign was being seen as double:

It is the task of words to translate [...] truth if they can; but they no longer have the right to be considered a mark of it. Language has withdrawn from the midst of beings themselves and has entered a period of transparency and neutrality.⁵

Before interpreting Werther as a text in which the vigorous eighteenth-century debate on natural vs. arbitrary language is carried on, I shall recall two of the voices in the debate heard especially distinctly by Goethe, those of Herder and Lavater. These two names are (along with Merck) the most often cited in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (which concentrates most heavily on the period in which *Werther* was written).⁴ Goethe read drafts of Herder's *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* in Strasbourg as Herder was writing it. He reviewed the third volume of Lavater's *Aussichten in die Ewigkeit* for the *Frankfurter Gelehrte Anzeigen*, and he was corresponding with Lavater on questions of language while he wrote *Werther*.

**Herder and Lavater on Language**

The *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, Herder’s main contribution to the discussion of the nature and origin of language — which had included essays by Locke (1690), Condillac (1746), Maupertuis (1748), Rousseau (1754), Mendelssohn (1756), Michaelis (1760), and Süssmilch (1766) — was awarded the prize of the Berlin Academy in 1771 and published in 1772.⁵ In direct response to Süssmilch’s recent claim that language had a divine origin, Herder
argues (as had most of the other participants in the eighteenth-century debate) for human origin. Despite that choice of the human over the divine, however, Herder does not claim that language is a totally arbitrary sign system. Instead, he posits nature as a kind of divine originator.

Herder begins by suggesting that even (and especially) in an animal state humans used natural language: “alle starke Leidenschaften seiner Seele äußern sich unmittelbar in Geschrei, in Töne, in wilde, unartikulierte Laute” (697). The key word here is “unmittelbar,” for the natural language is essentially undifferentiated from what it expresses, it is characterized by an identity between signifier and signified. The unarticulated sounds are themselves, in a sense, the pain or pleasure, and not mere representations: “Es ist, als obs freier atmete, indem es dem brennenden, geängstigten Hauche Luft giebt: es ist, als obs einen Teil seines Schmerzes verseufzte” (697). There is a language of “Empfindung,” Herder summarizes, “die unmittelbares Naturgesetz ist” (698).

In contrast to this natural language, Herder describes the contemporary “künstliche Sprache” produced by “unsre bürgerliche Lebensart und gesellschaftliche Artigkeit” (698), a language that damns up the flood of emotions a natural language expresses. Such a culturally determined language, “verfeinert, zivilisiert und humanisiert, […] das Kind der Vernunft und Gesellschaft, kann wenig oder nichts mehr von der Kindheit ihrer ersten Mutter wissen; allein die alten, die wilden Sprachen, je näher zum Ursprunge, enthalten davon desto mehr” (701). But even given present conditions, Herder points out, even with reason dominating feeling and with the artificial language of society replacing the tones of nature, one can find approximations of the language of nature in the most powerful oratory, in the best poetry, and in moments of action. Hearts and souls can still be affected, Herder declares, and then asks, rhetorically, through what means:

Geistige Rede und Metaphysik? Gleichnisse und Figuren? Kunst und kalte Überzeugung? So fern der Taumel nicht blind sein soll, muß vieles durch sie geschehen, aber alles? und eben dies höchste Moment des blinden Taumels, wodurch wurde das? — durch ganz andre Kraft! — Diese Töne, diese Gebehrden, jene einfachen Gänge der Melodie, diese plötzliche Wendung, diese dammernde Stimme, — was weiß ich mehr?

(707)

Tones, gestures, simple lines of melody, and poetry approach the power Herder supposes resides naturally in the language of natives living in the remote corners of the earth, where “die ganze ungeteilte menschliche Seele am lebhaftesten würke” (781). Klopstock’s poetry qualifies in this regard insofar as it does not suffer the divisiveness of abstraction but emphasizes feeling (759); but even more so do Greek and Celtic
(Ossianic) songs serve as direct expressions of the whole, undivided human soul: “in ihren Elegien tönen, wie bei den Wilden auf ihren Gräbern, jene Heul- und Klagetöne, eine fortgehende Interjektion der Natursprache” (701). Klopstock, Homer, and Ossian, of course, figure prominently in Werther.

Given the arbitrary nature of most language, Herder wonders at one point whether there really are conditions of feeling or thought that are simply inexpressible. The answer is yes, and no: “Die Basis der Menschheit ist also, wenn wir von willkürlich der Sprache reden, unaussprechlich” (774). But, he goes on to ask, “ist denn für die ganze Figur?" If one looks at the whole, he argues, one sees that feeling (the “Basis”) does not rule, but rather Besonnenheit (“[man] empfindet mit dem Verstände”), and thus, there is “kein Zustand in der menschlichen Seene [...] der nicht wortfähig oder wirklich durch Worte der Seele bestimmt werde” (774). This question of expressivity will run through Werther, with Werther himself emphasizing the ineffable nature of “die Basis,” and the novel as a whole bearing witness to the effability of (admittedly limited) human existence.6

Investigating the question further, Herder suggests that two senses (feeling and seeing) constitute the two poles of our experience, and that a third sense (hearing — “die eigentliche Tür zur Seele” [746]) mediates between the two and makes it possible for us to think and talk about what we see and feel. Feeling is inner, seeing is outer, and hearing is both inner and outer. Feeling is characterized by instinct, narrowness, darkness, and an overwhelming, inarticulable presence. Seeing is characterized by breadth, light, coldness, indifference, and again, inarticulable presence. As the middle, unifying sense, hearing partakes of both narrowness and breadth, darkness and light. Because we hear only one tone after the other, hearing is characterized by progression rather than presence. And, as intermediary sense, hearing is not inarticulable like the other two, but is itself the “Sinn zur Sprache.”

The language hearing makes possible both enables and limits us. Because we are “ein Gewebe zur Sprache [...] darum denkt der Mensch nicht heller, nicht dunkler; darum sieht und fühlt er nicht schärfster nicht länger, nicht lebhafter” (750). But beyond those limits, the purpose of our being “zur Sprache” is harmony:


If one were to deny this “Bestimmung zum Sprachgeschöpfe,” Herder concludes, one would destroy nature, ripping to shreds all the harmonies language establishes, one would judge oneself, “statt des Meister-
stucks der Natur ein Geschöpf [...] voll Mängel und Lücken, voll Schwächen und Konvulsionen!” (750). As we will see, such denial closely characterizes Werther’s condition, for he finds the limited harmony and the narrow wholeness of a life lived in and through language totally unacceptable, and must judge himself and others as creatures “voll Mängel und Lücken, voll Schwächen und Konvulsionen.”

Herder’s essay thus touches on several points Goethe takes up in Werther: 1) the contrast between an earlier, poetic, natural language and the artificiality of contemporary language; 7) the double assertion that there are indeed feelings beyond language and that language is perfectly adequate to express feelings; and 3) the argument that we are both creators of language and creations of language, that while language limits us, it also enables us.

In 1772 (two years before writing Werther) Goethe reviewed the third volume of Lavater’s Aussichten in die Ewigkeit. The review is generally negative, criticizing Lavater for creating a future paradise to fit his own desires and for setting the actual relativities of earth aside for the supposed absolutes of a fictional eternity. But of the sixteenth letter, Goethe has something more positive to say: “Dem sechzehnten Brief von der Sprache des Himmels wollen wir sein Wohlgedachtes nicht abeugnen.”

That letter begins with an assertion that arbitrary language has no place in heaven:

Lassen Sie mich ein wenig von unserer Sprache im Himmel stammeln; stammeln, sag’ ich — denn unaussprechlich verschieden von unserer eigentümlichen Sprache muß unsere himmlische seyn.

Willkürliche Töne, die mit dem, was sie vorstellen sollen, in keiner natürlichen unmittelbaren Verbindung stehen, scheinen offenbar ein so unvollkommnes zufälliges, unbestimmtes Mittel zu seyn, unsere Gedanken und Empfindungen andern mitzuteilen, daß ich mich schlechterdings nicht vorstellen kann, daß diese in jenem Lande der Wahrheit noch sollten statt haben können.9

Herder placed natural language in the past, at the origin of language; and although Lavater works from the opposite direction, situating natural language in the eternities, he too refers to the past: “Alle willkürliche Sprachen scheinen Abarten, Verdrehungen, Verstümmelungen einer ersten Natursprache zu seyn” (57). That natural language was physiognomical, gestural; and physiognomy and gestures, Lavater claims, are direct, unmediated languages. As Christ is supposed to be the perfectly expressive image of the invisible God, so too are the face and gestures of every person (made, as they are, in the images of God and Christ) perfectly expressive: “ganz Natursprache.” Thus even after the natural beginning has been compromised and even before the perfec-
tion of heaven, direct expression and comprehension are possible through physiognomy.

There is more to Lavater's theory of language, like the requirement he imposes on heavenly language that it be both successive and momentary, painting and language at the same time (evidently under the influence of Lessing); but for my reading of Werther the salient points are that an original and future natural language is now a degenerate arbitrary language, and that Lavater, while looking forward to the reinstitution of that language, proposes physiognomy as a presently accessible natural language.

Goethe's Early Writings on Language

Despite his criticism of Lavater, but in line with his singling out the sixteenth letter for praise, Goethe published a short work in 1773 in which he, like Lavater, theorizes about a perfectly expressive language ("Was heißt mit Zungen reden?" is the second of "Zwo wichtige bisher unerörterte biblische Fragen, zum erstenmal gründlich beantwortet, von einem Landgeistlichen in Schwaben"). The essay begins by suggesting that to speak in tongues is, "vom Geist erfüllt, in der Sprache des Geists, des Geists Geheimnisse verkündigen" (440). The new language of the spirit was "jene einfache allgemeine Sprache, die aufzufinden mancher großer Kopf vergebens gerungen." It was "mehr als Pantomime, doch unartikuliert." "Nur fühlbare Seelen" were able to understand and speak this language; and even their experience was necessarily limited:

Die Fülle der heiligsten tiefsten Empfindung drängte für einen Augenblick den Menschen zum überirdischen Wesen, er redete die Sprache der Geister, und aus den Tiefen der Gottheit flammte seine Zunge Leben und Licht. Auf der Höhe der Empfindung erhält sich kein Sterblicher. (441–42)

Ephemeral at best, the ability to speak in this language between pantomime and articulated language was generally lost, dammed up, Goethe writes, by theologians who privilege reason over spirit. But if a chosen one be inspired by the spirit, the essay ends, let him come forth and babble his feelings, and we, the "Haushalter im Verborgnen," will taste the living water (443).

Lavater read Goethe's essay, and in September of 1773 wrote effusively to Goethe stating that his soul thirsted for more instruction. After several months of correspondence, however, just as he was finishing Werther, Goethe expressed a dramatically different view of language in a letter to Lavater and Pfenninger. There, Goethe refers to his own lack of religious belief, claiming that he is "resignirter im Begreifen und Beweisen" than Pfenninger. "Ich bin vielleicht ein Tohr"
he suggests, "dass ich euch nicht den Gefallen thue mich mit euern Worten auszudrücken." The disagreement as to the right words, Goethe explains, "entsteht weil ich die Sachen unter andern Combinationen sentire und drum ihre Relativität ausdrückend, sie anders benennen muss" (24). Because truth is based on individual perception and expression, "so ist das Wort der Menschen mir Wort Gottes es mögens Pfaffen oder Huren gesammelt und zum Canon gerollt oder als Fragmente hingestreut haben" (24). Finally, the letter argues, knowledge is necessarily fragmentary: "Im einzelnen sentirst du kräftig und herrlich, das Ganze ging in euern Kopf so wenig wie in meinen" (24).

Within a year, then, Goethe wrote both a fiery essay on the gift of tongues, describing the rare ability to speak the mind of God in a natural, unmediated language, and also a letter that relativizes religious experience and finds the locus of meaning not in those experiences themselves, but in the language through which they are expressed and lived. In the novel that is a product of the same time period, Werther is clearly aware of the limits language imposes, but he lives (and dies) for the gift of tongues.

Nature vs. Convention: The First Letter

In Book 16 of Dichtung und Wahrheit Goethe himself links Werther to the problem of language (a problem also at the center of Faust):

Denke man aber nicht, daß ich seine [Spinoza's] Schriften hätte unterschreiben und mich dazu buchstäblich bekennen mögen. Denn daß niemand den andern versteht; daß keiner bei denselben Worten dasselbe, was der andere, denkt; daß ein Gespräch, eine Lektüre bei verschiedenen Personen verschiedene Gedankenfolgen aufregt, hatte ich schon allzu deutlich eingesehen, und man wird dem Verfasser von "Werther" und "Faust" wohl zutrauen, daß er, von solchen Mißverständnissen tief durchdrungen, nicht selbst den Dunkel gehegt, einen Mann vollkommen zu verstellen.13

The unavoidable misunderstandings Goethe describes here and the related misapprehension and linguistic arbitrariness Werther writes about in the letters quoted at the beginning of this essay are highlighted three times in Werther’s first letter: first in statements about Leonore and her sister whom he has just left, second in claims to have overcome misunderstandings between his mother and an aunt, and third as he describes the garden he frequents.

The sisters whom he has left behind have affected him in different ways, Werther writes. The unnamed sister attracted him unthreateningly through her "eigensinnige Reize" and through the "angenehmen Unterhalt" she provides. In contrast, Leonore is described as a "Herz," as passionate and feeling. She evoked good humor, Werther writes, with
her "ganz wahren Ausdrücken der Natur." Beyond the good humor, however, Leonore’s expressions were disturbing, provoking Werther to feelings of guilt ("Und doch — bin ich ganz unschuldig?") because they, in contrast to his own expressions, were direct expressions of her feelings for him. Conditioned by social convention (according to which the other sister’s "eigensinnige Reize" could provide pleasant entertainment without commitment), Werther expressed what he had not actually felt, and must ask himself: "Hab ich nicht ihre Empfindungen genährt?" Feeling the pressure of an actual, impending commitment, Werther fled, and now writes to Wilhelm: "Wie froh bin ich, daß ich weg bin!"

As if eager to absolve himself from the misunderstandings he has occasioned and from the guilt of his subsequent flight, Werther continues the letter with a description of his skillful mediation of misunderstandings between his mother and a supposedly recalcitrant aunt. He has found, he writes, "daß Mißverständnisse und Trägheit vielleicht mehr Irrungen in der Welt machen, als List und Bosheit."

As the letter comes to a close Werther writes again of nature and convention, contrasting the unpleasant city (a place of convention) with the "unaussprechliche Schönheit der Natur." The garden he frequents was created, he writes, not by a scientific gardener (whose garden would subject nature to conventional rules), but rather by "ein fühlendes Herz" (whose garden would be natural in the same way as Leonore’s heartfelt expressions). Unlike Leonore’s true representation of her feelings, however, Werther can safely receive the gardener’s self-expression ("ein fühlendes Herz [hat] den Plan bezeichnet, das sein selbst hier genießen wollte"), for he is dead. This pattern will be repeated as Werther finds Lotte attractive because of her natural expression and because she is unavailable. Werther can, and has been seen as psychologically flawed in his need to flee the available; but if the novel is indeed about a desire for the closure of natural language and the inadequacy and impossibility of closure, then the contrast between Leonore’s availability, which Werther flees, and Lotte’s unavailability which attracts Werther, demonstrates some sort of awareness on Werther’s part that promised availability is spurious.

On this reading, then, the first letter contrasts the direct, feeling language of nature and of the heart (Leonore’s and the gardener’s) with the arbitrary, unfeeling languages of the social order (the architectural conventions of the city, scientific gardening conventions, the "angenehmen Unterhalt" with the sister, and Werther’s own conventional flirtation that Leonore interpreted as true expression). In the course of the letter Werther shows himself, when natural expression threatens to move to closure, more comfortable with convention and later, when the gardener proves to be dead, on the side of the gardener’s natural expression. The general theme introduced here, of natural vs. conventional expression,
is addressed even more directly in the next, often quoted letter of May 10.

Expressing Totality: The Letter of May 10

Describing nature as the creation of an almighty and all-loving God, Werther notes that it is made in the image of God ("nach seinem Bilde"). As such, nature is a true expression of the essence of God, and Werther can experience God’s presence there ("fühle die Gegenwart des Allmächtigen"). Filled with that presence, Werther wishes to re-express it: "ach könntest du das wieder ausdrücken, könntest du dem Papiere das einhauchen, was so voll, so warm in dir lebt, daß es würde der Spiegel deiner Seele, wie deine Seele ist der Spiegel des unendlichen Gottes!" Werther longs for a language to express his feelings as naturally as nature does God's, for then he would truly be like God, being himself now a creator of natural signs. But for the moment, at least, Werther is overcome by the "Gewalt der Herrlichkeit dieser Erscheinungen."

Let us assume for the moment that what Werther writes about the depth and profundity of his feelings is correct. He describes a correspondence between his soul and nature that makes him sink into a feeling "von ruhigem Dasein." When he longs to express this condition of unity, of oneness, of silent, unmediated being, however, he notes that his art suffers: "Ich könnte jetzo nicht zeichnen, nicht einen Strich." And yet, he asserts, he has never been a greater painter than at this moment. Despite the many interpretations that have discounted Werther’s assertion, preferring to see him as a dilettante, Herder, Lessing, and Lavater provide a context in which Werther’s stated inability can be evaluated positively.

"Schon als Thier hat der Mensch Sprache," Herder’s essay begins; but on the continuum he sets up on which the move from the uncultured to the cultured is a move away from natural expression, one could say that only "als Thier hat der Mensch Sprache." After that origin, language begins to impose limits on its creators and they become creations of increasingly conventional language. In both Herder’s and Lavater’s systems, the move from natural, unarticulated language to the arbitrary language of culture means a definite loss. Only in the wild, already elegiac poetry and songs of the past does one approach the fully expressive language of the animal origin. Perfection is approached, then, not by creating language, but by leaving it behind. Thus Werther's claim that he has never been a better painter than in this moment when he cannot draw a line makes a kind of sense. His soul corresponds perfectly to nature; and to move to any artificial language, to any culturally determined means of expression would be to sunder that unity, to introduce mediation into an unmediated wholeness.
Werther’s assertion has been often linked to the scene early in Lessing’s *Emilia Galotti* in which the painter Conti, having painted a portrait the Prince proclaims “wie aus dem Spiegel gestohlen,” argues that his painting does not do Emilia justice. Conti, in this moment of insufficiency, is surprisingly satisfied:

Wie ich sage, daß ich es weiß, was hier verloren gegangen, und wie es verloren gegangen, und warum es verloren gehen müssen: darauf bin ich ebenso stolz, und stolzer, als ich auf alles das bin, was ich nicht verloren gehen lassen. Denn aus jenem erkenne ich, mehr als aus diesem, daß ich wirklich ein großer Maler bin; daß es aber meine Hand nur nicht immer ist. (I, 4)

That Werther is not a professional painter like Conti, as many have argued, is beside the point. In both cases the artist recognizes, in Conti’s words, that “Vieles von dem Anzüglichsten der Schönheit liegt ganz außer den Gränzen” of art. Werther’s abilities may not match Conti’s, but even if they did, he would still, at some point, have to face the limitations he so abhors. And in fact, the ability to recognize the limits of art becomes, finally, the criterion for the true artist. In this context, Werther’s later report (July 24) of his failure to portray Lotte can be read more positively as proof of his growth as an artist.

In that letter, Werther relates that he has three times failed to paint Lotte’s portrait. Earlier, he claims, he could have drawn a good likeness; but now he has “prostituted” himself. Prostituted, because art necessarily falsifies nature, and Werther submitted his feelings three times to that process. Later, however, he drew Lotte’s silhouette, “und damit soll mir genügen.” The dissatisfaction with the portraits and the satisfaction with the silhouette are marks of Werther’s progress toward natural expression. Seen in a context in which culturally determined forms of expression are removes from a simpler, natural expression, and in which all forms of expression are rated according to their simplicity, Werther’s incapacity is actually indicative of his capacity. The further along the continuum toward the arbitrary an act of expression lies, the less able he is to perform it.

This reading of Werther’s attempt to portray Lotte may strike readers used to seeing Werther as a dilettante as nonsense; but eighteenth-century silhouette theory supplies support for an interpretation that sees in silhouettes a negative perfection not present in more complicated works of art. Lavater’s short essay “Über Schattenrisse,” for example, begins with a paragraph praising silhouettes as a kind of natural language:

Das Schattenbild von einem Menschen oder einem menschlichen Gesichte ist das schwächste, das lecreste, aber zugleich, wenn das Licht in gehöriger Entfernung gestanden, wenn das Gesicht auf eine reine
According to this account, the silhouette Werther has made would be "ein unmittelbarer Abdruck der Natur." But if it indeed satisfies his desire to express himself, why does it not fulfill him? Or to put it in another way, why does the movement toward more perfect expression result in ever greater alienation (which will end in suicide) rather than in the healing unity one might expect? Lavater suggests a possible answer when he points out that the perfection of the silhouette is nothing positive, only something negative. The negative perfection Werther pursues tends toward solipsism. As he moves away from the arbitrariness of the social order in his search for the true expression of natural language, he simultaneously loses contact with those with whom he would communicate. The limit toward which ever more perfect communication tends is non-communication. The only absolutely natural expression is silence.

The Relativity of Expression: The Letter of May 10

For the foregoing discussion I assumed, as Werther seems to, that he has indeed, through nature, experienced the essence of God. The question, then, was how to communicate that experience. But the May 10 letter also contains some surprising qualifications as to exactly what it is that Werther experiences. Take, for example, the climactic passage expressing mystical union with God. Lying on the grass, at one with the worms and gnats, Werther feels

die Gegenwart des Allmächtigen der uns all nach seinem Bilde schuf, das Wehen des Alliebenden, der uns in ewiger Wonne schwebend trägt und erhält. Mein Freund, wenn's denn um meine Augen dämmt, und die Welt um mich her und Himmel ganz in meiner Seele ruht, wie die Gestalt einer Geliebten, dann seh'n ich mich oft und denke: ach könntest du das wieder ausdrücken, könntest du dem Papier das einhauchen, was so voll, so warm in dir lebt, daß es würde der Spiegel deiner Seele, wie deine Seele ist der Spiegel des unendlichen Gottes.

First, the two descriptions of God are theological chestnuts. Werther admits the difficulty of expressing his feelings; but these clichés also reveal that what he knows about the God whose presence he is experiencing is determined by language. Second, Werther's description of "das Wehen des Alliebenden, der uns in ewiger Wonne schwebend
trägt und erhält,” even if believed in the moment he writes it, can only be highly ironic in the context of the rest of Werther’s life. Third, the supposed presence is further undermined by the seemingly positive statement that nature is resting in Werther’s soul “wie die Gestalt einer Geliebten” — not just “like a beloved” (already a metaphoric remove), but like the “Gestalt” of a beloved. Werther truly knows neither God nor a beloved, but only the image he forms of them. Fourth, the mirror that nature and the soul are said to be is itself an instrument of mediation and reflection. Perfect mimesis is impossible. 18 Finally, Werther’s assertion that his soul is created in the “image” of God (“nach seinem Bilde”) already posits an intermediate step, making his soul a mirror of a mirror. Thus Werther is not experiencing presence, but absence, not God, but God’s image, not the beloved, but her image. The Bild, the Gestalt, the Spiegel, the irony, and the clichés all work to deny the very presence they are meant to assert.

Werther’s letter overtly states that language is indeed inadequate to express essential experience. It also reveals that there is no experience except through language, and that, as a result, language can in fact express what is experienced. Remember here Herder’s dual assertion that “Die Basis der Menschheit is also, wenn wir von willkürlicher Sprache reden, unaussprechlich,” but that because “Basis” does not rule, but rather “Besonnenheit,” there is “kein Zustand in der menschlichen Seele [...] der nicht wortfähig oder würklich durch Worte der Seele bestimmt werde.” The tension between presence and mediation found in Herder’s essay and in the letter of May 10 informs the rest of the novel to a remarkable extent.

Expressing Totality and the Relativity of Expression: The First Evening with Lotte

The novel features dozens of contrasting scenes in which Werther vacillates between a longing for presence and its perfect expression and a realization that both are impossible. Werther’s first evening with Lotte (June 16) provides a series of striking instances. When Werther struggles to describe this evening he essays repeated descriptions of Lotte and inevitably interrupts his description with an expression of disgust: “Pfui! das sagt jeder von der seinigen! Nicht wahr?” or “Das ist alles garstiges Gewäsche, was ich da von ihr sage, leidige Abstraktionen, die nicht einen Zug ihres Selbst ausdrücken.” The language he is using is simply not adequate to his subject. After thus drawing attention to the inadequacy of his medium, Werther begins a long narrative about the evening. First there are the children around her while she cuts them their bread, each thanking her “ungekünstelt,” and with this non-artificial thanks they join Leonore as producers of natural language. Lotte speaks to Werther, but he hardly listens to what she says, for he is caught up in another, more
natural sort of language: "meine ganze Seele ruhte auf der Gestalt, dem Tone, dem Betragen." Werther is likewise impressed by the physiognomy of the youngest child, "das ein Kind von der glücklichsten Gesichtsbildung war," and, in spite of the boy's snotty nose, kisses him heartily. (Such kissing, repeated by two of the boys when Lotte leaves, will become a sign of non-mediated communication throughout the novel.)

Lotte begins a conversation about books, and Werther again pays attention not so much to what she is saying (although he does not miss this either), but rather to her physiognomy and to her speaking itself: "ich sah mit jedem Wort neue Reize, neue Strahlen des Geistes aus ihren Gesichtszügen hervorbrechen." The conversation turns to dance, and again, while dancing and conversing, Werther is most fascinated by Lotte's physiognomy:

Wie ich mich unter dem Gespräche in den schwarzen Augen weidete, wie die lebendigen Lippen und die frischen muntern Wangen meine ganze Seele anzogen, wie ich in den herrlichen Sinn ihrer Rede ganz versunken, oft gar die Worte nicht hörte, mit denen sie sich ausdruckte!

As these examples show, Werther is, on this evening, tuned in to a natural, gestural language, paying little attention to the conventional language being spoken among his companions. Following this pattern, he impatiently cuts short the attempt to name the people they meet at the dance ("wer behält all die Namen"), for the names are but arbitrary signifiers. Dancing, however, is a direct, or natural expression like the simple melody Herder and Lavater describe as natural language, and Werther watches Lotte dance with admiration: "sie ist so mit ganzem Herzen und mit ganzer Seele dabei, ihr ganzer Körper, eine Harmonie, so sorglos, so unbefangen, als wenn das eigentlich alles wäre." Werther is impressed by wholeness, by singular harmony, by a body undivided from a mind, and he shares that wholeness and harmony when Lotte Waltzes with him ("Ich war kein Mensch mehr"). Later, while ecstatically looking into Lotte's eyes, "voll vom wahrsten Ausdrucke des offensten reinsten Vergnügens," Werther is mildly disturbed by a woman who intrudes into this paradise with a name: "Albert," she says twice, "mit viel Bedeutung." Lotte explains to Werther who Albert is, and although this is not a total surprise, Werther nonetheless loses the rhythm of the dance, forced out of the blissful harmony by a word, a warning sign from a social/symbolic order in which Albert is engaged to Lotte, an order in which there is no place for unmediated, extraordinary communication.

At this moment lightning disturbs the civilized festivities, and to ease fearful minds Lotte suggests a counting game in a shuttered and curtained room. The object of the game is to count quickly around a circle, or in other words, for each participant to produce the next sign in a conventional sign system. Separated from the threat of nature by the
shutters and curtains, and further isolated from nature by the conventional order of the game, Lotte and the others forget their fear.

When Werther and Lotte leave the closed room and the game they begin to return to the natural order they enjoyed while dancing, a condition Werther relates to the weather from which the party shelters itself ("mit ihr herumzufliegen wie Wetter"). With Lotte still chattering about the game, Werther "konnte ihr nichts antworten." His silence continues through the entire scene at the window, a (practically) wordless exchange in stark contrast to the busy, empty artifice of the counting game.

Through sound, scent, touch, and sight Lotte and Werther experience the fullness of the receding storm. The only word spoken is the name "Klopstock." Where Albert's name was intrusive, this name is evocative: partly because Lotte first places her hand on Werther's, and partly because of the poem about a spring storm the name is meant to evoke. Werther, on hearing the name, sinks into a stream of sensations which he must and does express by kissing Lotte's hand "unter den wonnevollsten Tränen."

Throughout this evening Lotte’s gestures, the dancing, the memory of Klopstock's poem, and the messages of hands, tears, and lips enable Lotte and Werther to communicate through a natural language deeper and more expressive than the conventional language used by the people around them. One could argue, of course, that even this "natural" language is conventional, especially the dance and the name evoking the contemporary enthusiasm for Klopstock. But along Herder's language continuum, dance, as gesture, would be more natural than most spoken language, and in fact, the German dance Lotte and Werther do is less conventional than the minuet done by other couples. And Klopstock too rates on the natural side of Herder's continuum. As far as the reader can tell from Werther’s report, this evening with Lotte is truly an experience of deep feeling and full expression.

As usual in this novel, however, the positive experience is almost immediately relativized. In the letter of June 21 (directly following the two letters that describe the first evening with Lotte), Werther describes a broad view of nature, a system of "in einander gekettete Hügel und vertrauliche Täler" in which he would like to lose himself, but which, when seen up close, fails to fulfill its promise:

Ein großes dämmerndes Ganze ruht vor unserer Seele, unsere Empfindung verschweigt sich darin wie unser Auge, und wir sehnen uns, ach! unser ganzes Wesen hinzugeben, uns mit all der Wonne eines einzigen großen herrlichen Gefühls ausfüllen zu lassen. — Und ach, wenn wir hinzueilen, wenn das Dort nun hier wird, ist alles vor wie nach, und wir stehen in unserer Armut, in unserer Eingeschränktheit, und unsere Seele lechzt nach entschlüpfigem Labsale.
In the face of expected fullness, then, Werther redesigns the prison walls. But despite, or perhaps because of his sense of limits, Werther continues to seek wholeness, unity of feeling, unlimited correspondence between language and being, and perfect communication.

The Natural Languages of Kissing, Violence, and Insanity

Kissing is the most direct, and thus preferred form of communication for Werther. The breath from Lotte's mouth moves Werther when her words do not ("Wenn sie gar im Gespräch ihre Hand auf die meinige legt, und im Interesse der Unterredung näher zu mir rückt, daß der himmlische Atem ihres Mundes meine Lippen reichen kann," July 16). He would have liked to kiss the messenger who had just come with Lotte ("Ich hät' ihn gern bei'm Kopf genommen und geküsst," July 18). And in a scene added to the novel in 1787, when Lotte sends Werther written messages, he "reads" them with his lips ("Um eins bitte ich Sie: keinen Sand mehr auf die Zettelchen, die Sie mir schreiben. Heute führte ich es schnell nach der Lippe und die Zähne knisterten mir," July 26). These messages have less meaning for Werther as words than they do as physical pen strokes from Lotte's hand or as the physical presence of the messenger. Kissing, a direct, tactile language, bypasses the abstract mediation of words. Of course neither the messenger nor the dead letter are Lotte; but the scenes are effective in portraying both desire and the language that feeds and simultaneously frustrates that desire.¹⁹

There are times when that desire swells, when Werther has been with Lotte, for example, "und mich an der Gestalt, an dem Betragen, an dem himmlischen Ausdruck ihrer Worte geweidet habe" (August 30). When Lotte is expressing herself this way, Werther reports that he can no longer hear or see, "und mich's an die Gurgel faßt, wie ein Meuchelmörder, dann mein Herz in wilden Schlägen den bedrängten Sinnen Luft zu machen sucht." Werther's desire for Ausdruck or expression and his characterization of expression as a release of pressure parallel Herder's description of the effect of speaking a natural language ("es ist, als obs freier atmete, indem es dem brennenden, geängstigten Hauche Luft giebt: es ist, als obs einen Teil seines Schmerzes verseufzte"). Lacking other means to relieve the pressure of his feelings, to express himself after the emotional scene with Lotte, Werther climbs mountains and breaks through trackless forests, tearing his flesh on thorns to find violent succor in nature.

In the eight or nine months Werther is away from Lotte, he lives in the society of women and men whom he sees, for the most part (as he does Albert), as creatures of an empty social order. Der Gesandte, for example, is obsessed with making Werther write according to custom. Werther also complains about the people's Rangsucht, the strict difference in classes, the fixation on ceremony, and the cliched language
with which people speak about art. And Werther’s feelings about these matters tend to violence. When he is told how people are laughing at him after his social humiliation, his emotions are so strong that only the shedding of blood will ease them: “Wenn ich Blut sähe würde mir’s besser werden. Ach ich habe hundertmal ein Messer ergriffen, um diesem gedrängten Herzen Luft zu machen” (March 16). Like the storied horse that bites open a vein to relieve heat and to catch its breath, Werther wants to open a vein to relieve built-up pressure. Courting danger on mountain precipices, tearing his flesh with thorns, and (contemplating) shedding blood — these are all desperate strategies for natural expression in a world of conventional language.

As the novel approaches its end Werther senses the impossibility of communication and fantasizes a violent, and thus powerful way to make an impression: “Ich möchte mir oft die Brust zerreißen und das Gehirn einstoßen, daß man einander so wenig sein kann” (October 27). In his letter of December 8, Werther describes his condition as “ein inneres unbekanntes Toben, das meine Brust zu zerreißen droht, das mir die Gurgel zupreßt! Wohe! Wehe! Und dann schweif ich umher in den furchtbaren nächtlichen Szenen dieser menschenfeindlichen Jahrszeit.” Werther demands release from the pressures inside him, he must express himself. He will do so, not like his fellow participants in the restrictive symbolic order, but rather like the flooding waters and fierce winds he observes outside. He will destructively burst his bonds, violently escape from his prison, express himself by destroying himself.26

Despite such outbursts, Werther stubbornly believes that violence is not the only means of expressing deep feelings. He writes Wilhelm, for example, that he should not misinterpret his words, “es ist meine ganze Seele, die ich dir vorlege” (November 15). He also reads Lotte’s feelings from her forehead, a physiognomic communication of compassion that he describes as poison she is preparing for him, poison he will drink “voller Wollust” (November 21; like the kissing, another image of orality). The extraordinary letter of November 24 likewise describes a scene of deep communication without spoken language:


Werther reads Lotte’s looks and song as full expressions of her deepest feelings. The words she sings are emptied of the arbitrariness of
language, sharing the pure, expressive sound of music. Werther focuses on her lips, which seem to ingest the musical tones and then resound with the secret (essential/natural) echo of the music. He would like to respond in kind, with a gesture, with kisses, but finds himself still held back by societal rules defining that as destructive.

In spite of this hopeful portrayal of gestures, physiognomy, and other means of natural expression, the novel moves, as always, from one pole to the other. Before the editor breaks in to describe Werther's last days, Werther tells of his meeting with the man trying to find flowers in the cold of late November (November 30). Werther is impressed by the man's physiognomy ("die [...] einen graden guten Sinn ausdrückte"), and notes that "seine Kleidung einen Menschen von geringem Stande zu bezeichnen schien." Both of these readings turn out to be inaccurate, for the man, while he may have "einen guten Sinn," certainly does not have "einen graden," unable as he is even to distinguish the seasons; and far from being "von geringem Stande," he has had enough education to have been a scribe for Lotte's father. The direct language of nature (which physiognomy supposedly is) thus fails in this instance, another indication that the expressive paradise Werther has been constructing is flawed. The scribe, both enabled and limited by the language that was his tool, is now beyond (but also without) articulate language: "Jetzt ist's aus mit mir, ich bin nun — Ein nasser Blick zum Himmel drückte alles aus." The man's movement (mirroring Werther's) from limited expression within the symbolic order to full expression through a tearful gesture has been bought at the cost of sanity. When the scribe's earlier effective but existentially empty use of language became problematic through his love for Lotte, he "gained," in his subsequent insanity, a fullness that culminates in nothingness. "I am [...]" states the man, and then finishes his sentence with a gesture indicating that he is a fool.

Werther identifies with the madman, and defends his excesses against detractors safely entrenched in the world of arbitrary signs: "Und dürft ihr das Wahn nennen — Ihr Wortkrämer auf euren Polstern." But, aware that his dreams are being crushed, he also calls out to his father in heaven, "der sonst meine ganze Seele füllte und nun sein Angesicht von mir gewendet hat! [...] Schweiter nicht länger."

Insanity and violence loom large, then, as Werther's quest for the "Fülle des Unendlichen" (December 6) nears its end. This will culminate, not in his killing his rival (although he contemplates this), but in his suicide.

The Final Scenes

First, however, Werther dreams of a union with Lotte: "Diese Nacht! Ich zittere es zu sagen, hielt ich sie in meinen Armen, fest an meinen Busen gedrückt und deckte ihren lieben lispelnden Mund mit unend-
lichen Küssen” (December 17). This is the expression Werther longs for: a physical pressing, a lisping declaration of love (unconventional, moving away from the articulated toward the unarticulated), and a transcending of even that language with direct, unending kisses.

The editor describes the increasing silence between Lotte and Albert, and recounts Werther’s visit with Lotte during which she tells him that things must change, that he should not visit again until Christmas. Werther responds with murmurs (at the margin of language): “er [...] ging in der Stube auf und ab, und murmelte das: es kann nicht so bleiben! zwischen den Zähnen.” Lotte berates Werther for his unrelenting passion; and again Werther responds on a sub-linguistic level. Where he earlier murmured between his teeth, he now “knirrte mit den Zähnen, und sah sie düster an.” The next morning he begins to write the letter to Lotte found on his desk after his suicide. In this writing, in this turn to the word as he is fleeing the word, lies the beginning of a final series of events in which writing, books, speaking, words, and gestures play a major role. As Werther rushes away from the restrictions of the symbolic order he does so with pen to paper.

Although Lotte had asked him not to come again until Christmas, Werther unexpectedly arrives; and Lotte’s first response, “Sie haben nicht Wort gehalten,” reveals her sense that Werther is breaching the social order to which he had committed himself through a word or promise. Werther immediately claims that he promised nothing; and indeed, his insistence on distance from the restrictions of the symbolic/social order characterizes his very nature. While Lotte confusedly sends for companions to mediate between her and Werther (to stand in as enforcers of social convention), Werther puts down several books he has brought and asks about others.

Lotte finally consents to being alone with Werther; but in the absence of a mediating person she goes to the piano and begins to play a minuet. Earlier Werther had commented on the power (“alte Zauberkraft”) of a simple melody, a simple song Lotte played to ease all the pressures he was feeling. Now, however, the more formal (more highly cultured, more artificial, more arbitrary) minuet is meant to control such feelings. When she finds that her feelings interfere with her playing of the minuet, however, Lotte breaks it off and goes to sit with Werther.

Still, however, with passions running high, she is fearful of direct communication, and she asks Werther if he doesn’t have something they could read. The right text could uphold the social distance she both wants and doesn’t want. Werther says he has nothing to read (and thus refuses to contribute to further repression of the feelings between them). Casting about, choosing both the “right” and the “wrong” text, Lotte suggests that she has Werther’s translation of several “Gesänge Ossians.” A “song,” of course, will intensify feeling and facilitate/demand its expression rather than repress it. Songs by a (supposedly) ancient
poet, read aloud, approximate the conditions of natural language discussed by Herder — and even before Werther begins reading there are tears in his eyes.

The passages from Ossian are about poetry and poets of the past, a nostalgic/necrophilic backward look to a time when songs of anguish were sung in accord with nature: “Süß ist dein Murmeln, Strom, doch süßer die Stimme, die ich höre. Es ist Alpins Stimme, er bejammert den Toten.” Morar’s voice, Alpin sings, “glich dem Waldstrome nach dem Regen, dem Donner auf fernen Hügeln.” and thus represents the antithesis of the arbitrary language that dominates the world around Werther. The four or five narrative steps between Werther and Morar (narrator, Ullin, Alpin, Morar), augmented by the fact that Werther is not singing a new song of his own, but merely reading a translation, emphasize the distance between the ideal and Werther’s almost totally negative reality. Nonetheless, the reading at least revives the memory of Morar (“Der Gesang soll deinen Namen erhalten. Künftige Zeiten sollen von dir hören, hören sollen sie von dem gefallenen Morar”); and the retold story still has enough power to release the feelings pent up within Lotte and Werther: “Ein Strom von Tränen, der aus Lottens Augen brach und ihrem gepressten Herzen Luft machte, hemmte Werthers Gesang” (the song has become Werther’s, he the poet).

Werther throws down the paper, for although it has brought on the rush of tears, it still stands between him and Lotte. Holding Lotte’s hand, Werther covers it with his tears, and his “Lippen und Augen [...] glühten an Lottens Arme.” In this moment of unmediated union even the mediation of sight has been overcome as the eyes touch rather than see. But Lotte, sobbing, tries to return to the safety of the symbolic order. She speaks (“mit der ganzen Stimme des Himmels”— and there is some irony in this formulation), placing her words between them, and asks that Werther speak as well, that he continue reading. Werther reads again, but brokenly, partially obliterating the words he speaks, moving ever farther from the clear articulation of arbitrary language. What he reads are the last words of a poet about to die, and they so powerfully move Werther that he again puts down the text to express himself.

Once more he presses Lotte’s hands against his eyes. Lotte returns the pressure (“sie drückte seine Hände, drückte sie wider ihre Brust”) and their glowing cheeks touch. The moment of union (toward which the novel has moved from the beginning) reaches its peak as the world (the prison-house of language) disappears for the lovers and Werther “schlang seine Arme um sie her, preßte sie an seine Brust, und deckte ihre zitternde, stammelnde Lippen mit wütenden Küszen.” Just as in his earlier dream, Werther covers Lotte’s moving lips with kisses, obliterating her words. In the dream her lips were “lispelnd,” here they are “zitternd” and “stammelnd”— the lisping and stammering in both cases somewhere between the arbitrariness of fluent speech and the natural-
ness near silence. Werther’s earlier recognition of violence as a state of absolute totality finds a counterpart in the “wütenden Küssen.”

Although Lotte has followed Werther this far, she is frighten (perhaps by the violence), and again she struggles for the mediating help of language: “Werther! rief sie mit erstickter Stimme sich abwendend, Werther! und drückte mit schwacher Hand seine Brust von der ihren! Werther! rief sie mit dem gefärbten Tone des edelsten Gefühls. After the moment when her stammering lips at least partially acquiesce under Werther’s kisses, Lotte fights her way back into the symbolic order by stages: first the word “Werther,” cried with muffled voice, then the physical pressing away (the inverse of Werther’s pressing), and finally the forceful, collected, “noble” cry of “Werther!” that causes Werther to let her go. She tells him that he will never see her again, and runs from the room. Werther, a moment before caught up in the total, speechless unity that has been his deepest desire, is left to beg for a word (“Lotte! Lotte! nur noch ein Wort”) and then to enter into a solitary silence: “Du Wächter [...] ließen ihn stillschweigend hinaus [...]. Sein Diener [...] getraute sich nichts zu sagen.”

But almost immediately Werther begins to communicate again, employing the language he has fled so assiduously. He knew that Lotte loved him, he writes, “wußte es an den ersten seelenvollen Blicken, an dem ersten Händedruck.” But these signs could be displaced by other signs that made him doubt, like the sight of Albert at her side. He reminds Lotte of the flowers she sent him as a sign of her concern when she could not speak with him. They, Werther reports, “versiegelten meine Liebe.” But even after such a “sealing,” he writes, “diese Eindrücke gingen vorüber, wie das Gefühl der Gnade seines Gottes allmählich wieder aus der Seele des Gläubigen weicht, die ihm mit ganzer Himmel fülle im heiligen sichtbaren Zeichen gereicht ward.” Even a divinely full message given in “holy, visible signs” will fade! But immediately after the utter skepticism, Werther claims that no eternity


In Werther’s mind there is a distinction between “glowing life” a
limiting clarity of well articulated speech; but stammering too lacks the unlimited depth and darkness of silence. Caught then, even near his end, between discourse and imaginary totality, Werther finishes his final letter.

First he discusses how he reads a constellation as a sign of his present happiness: "habe [...] ihn zum Zeichen, zum heiligen Merksteine meiner gegenwärtigen Seligkeit gemacht." (These are approximately the same words Werther used earlier in the letter when he argued that even the "heilige sichtbare Zeichen" produced by God had temporal limitations.) These and other signs are admittedly created by Werther himself; and they are, in the absence of Lotte, the objects of Werther's desire, the source of that happiness. The silhouette, for example, has been kissed a thousand times (as was her gritty note), and the pistols, Werther's clothing, and Lotte's pale-red ribbon have been made into signs of Lotte. Werther has a sense that he has experienced Lotte's essence; but as he obliquely admits here, he is repeatedly reduced to finding meaning in signs he has himself created. And if God's signs reveal no more than a fleeting presence because they too, however divine, are arbitrary, then how poor is the essence Werther possesses, mediated as it is through these admittedly self-constructed signs.

Werther's final letter ends with affective but ultimately ineffective doublings: "Sei ruhig! ich bitte dich, sei ruhig! [...] Lotte! Lotte leb wohl! Leb wohl!" He is, however, beyond speech when he is found by his servant: "keine Antwort, er röchelt nur noch." Finally, Werther has permanently lost the ability to speak; as desired, he has left the symbolic order. Having passed from clear speech through lisping and stammering in the course of the novel, Werther can now sound a death rattle, a last sign of the silence to come.

The physician arrives and reads several medical signs (the pulse, the paralyzed limbs, the head wound) and decides Werther is beyond hope. Throughout the novel Werther has felt intense inner pressure, an inability to breathe, a constriction of the heart, and has fought to ease that pressure. Now he has shot himself over the right eye, and "das Gehirn war herausgetrieben." The brains are no longer constrained (or protected) by the skull, the blood pounding in Werther's arteries has been released, and, "zum Übersüße," the doctor opens a vein to bleed his patient. The doctor's "cure" curiously matches Werther's own action, for reasons explainable through eighteenth-century medical theory.

Discussing the eighteenth-century theory of disease that linked illness to transgression of traditional moral principles, K. Codell Carter argues that "the prevalence of bleeding [...] simply reflects the physician's judgment that most people [...] deviated from social norms by way of excess rather than by way of deficiency [...] . [T]he need for treatment [...] indicates that the patient is in disequilibrium with respect to
society." This is definitely the case with Werther, whose "disequilibrium with respect to society" becomes so extraordinary that he, repeatedly frustrated by the chasm between language and totality, finally "heals" himself of excess by shedding his own blood, simultaneously expressing himself. For the blood too is read as a sign in the final scene ("Aus dem Blut auf der Lehne des Sessels konnte man schließen [...]"), revealing that Werther must have shot himself sitting at the desk where he did much of his writing. In an odd way, then, this suicide at the "Schreibtisch" is a form of writing, parallel to Werther's written acts of self expression. As such, death too becomes created meaning - as opposed to a given, absolute totality. Werther's attempts to narratively order his "sacrificial" suicide (the parallels he creates to the last days and death of Jesus, for example) add to the sense of (merely) created meaning. But while this final act of expression, like all the others, is shown to be limited, the suicide is, paradoxically, also the ultimate natural gesture.

A similar combined expression of blood and pain is portrayed in the Inferno, where Dante describes the plight of the "violent against themselves." The souls of these suicides are imprisoned in thorny trees and can speak only when branches are torn from the tree. Then, blood and words together escape through the wound, the pain giving voice to the soul, allowing it to tell its story ("pain and pain's outlet simultaneously"). Werther, in a sense, has ripped off his own branch, and the pain issues forth as blood and words, the blood fatal, the "words" (death rattle) of the final scene at last the ultimate expression Werther has sought throughout the novel. The last paragraphs, while describing Werther's death and the ultimate power of the social order over him, also portray the plenitude (of sorts) Werther finally experiences.

Lotte’s father arrives at the death bed with his oldest sons. He kisses Werther "unter den heißesten Tränen" — the tears and kiss that have so often meant fulfillment to Werther. Even more moving than their father’s attachment to Werther is the reaction of the sons:

Sie fielen neben dem Bette nieder im Ausdruck des unbändigsten Schmerzens, küßten ihm die Hände und den Mund, und der älteste, den er immer am meisten geliebt, hing an seinen Lippen, bis er verschieden war und man den Knaben mit Gewalt wegriß.

In their obvious love for Werther, in their unqualified expression of grief, and in the kiss, these boys are little Werthers. Their necrophilic kisses and their extraordinary expression of suffering demonstrate the freedom from social/linguistic restraints Werther has long sought. In this moment the social order is overcome. In this moment natural language holds sway. But as always, the center cannot hold, and the boy is forcefully torn away. Society reasserts its power.
Werther thus escapes from the limitations of language and life to the total openness and emptiness of death under the kiss of Lotte’s oldest brother; but (or and) at the same time, his death, like his life, is highly mediated by language. Herder’s injunction (given in a different context), “Vergehe, oder schaffe dir Sprache,” might well be taken as the driving force in Werther’s life. For a time Werther continues to express himself through the partial adequacy of language. But frustration with the partiality pushes him toward the other possibility — a totality found only in silence. He creates and uses language, he pushes that language to its limits, and then, as he transgresses those limits, he passes away. Only in the negativity of Vergehen can the natural language Herder posits as originary be reached.

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NOTES

I would like to thank Tim Bagwell, with whom I co-sponsored a Mellon Regional Faculty Development Seminar on “Contemporary Critical Theory: Semiotics and Goethe’s Werther” (Summer 1987) and a similar Vanderbilt Faculty Development Seminar (Spring 1988) and participants in those seminars for their responses to these ideas. Alice Kuzniar and David Wellbery, guest speakers for the first seminar, Benjamin Bennett, guest speaker for the second, and Alan Leidner also provoked my thinking on Werther’s semiotics.

A version of this paper was presented in a session sponsored by the Goethe Society of North America at the MLA convention in 1987.

1. I quote the 1774 edition of the novel (usually by date) according to Goethe, Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens: Münchener Ausgabe, vol. 1.2 (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1987).

2. Nietzsche, echoing Werther’s metaphor of “Wände, zwischen denen man gefangen sitzt,” refers to a “prison-house of language.” Fredric Jameson draws his title The Prison-House of Language from the following lines by Nietzsche: “We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit” (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972, i).


5. Recently published in Johann Gottfried Herder, Werke (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985ff), vol. 1: Frühe Schriften 1764–1772. All page references from Herder will be to this edition. Both Aarsleff and Kieffer discuss this European debate at length.

6. This is an example of what Benjamin Bennett has called the "double perspective" at work in the novel (and in the novel's reader). "Goethe's Werther: Double Perspective and the Game of Life," The German Quarterly LIII (1980).

7. As Bennett points out, Goethe describes six ages of culture in his 1817 essay on Hermann: "the primordial, the poetic, the theological, the philosophical, the prosaic, and the utterly decadent" (Goethe's Theory of Poetry, 252). But even as early as Werther Goethe is obviously concerned with the sorts of distinctions Herder makes in his essay.

8. Münchner Ausgabe, 1.2:384. Lavater discusses language elsewhere in the Aussichten as well. In the second volume, for instance, he speculates on an olfactory factory that would translate thoughts of the godhead untranslatable by eye or ear; and in the thirteenth letter he discusses a distinction between two types of signs: the Bild, a non-arbitrary sign, and words, arbitrary tones or lines.

9. Johann Caspar Lavater, Aussichten in die Ewigkeit (Zürich: Orell, Füssli und Compagnie, 1841) 56. The stammering in the "presence" of a higher language will have its equivalent in Werther, as will the general longing for a non-arbitrary language.


11. Münchner Ausgabe, 1.2:440ff. Kieffer (n. 3) argues that in this essay Goethe "comes close to Hamann's linguistic thought" (18).


14. Lavater suggests that each person, having been created in the image of God, is, physiognomically, perfectly expressive, "ganz Natursprache."

15. Clark Munczer makes this point thus: "Werther's creative deficiency is of the secondary imagination alone. Here, in striking anticipation of Coleridge, Goethe shows him willing and able to repeat the eternal act of creation within the finite mind. Only the recreative phase eludes him. Werther fails to transform his artist's pad into a mirror of his soul, but he successfully
represents the condition of that soul as a mirror of divine splendor.” *Figures of Identity: Goethe’s Novels and the Enigmatic Self* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984). I will argue that Werther approaches a negative perfection of artistic representation; and also that for Werther (and Goethe) representation is ultimately impossible. There is, simply, no “mirror of divine splendor,” and there may be, in fact, no “divine splendor.”

16. The note on this line in the *Hamburger Ausgabe*, for instance, argues that “das Wesentliche ist der Unterschied [...] Werther [...] bleibt Dilettant.”


18. Neil Flax (n. 3) argues, for example, that in the Rembrandt etching of the *Erdgeist* appearing to Faust (the one possible moment in the play in which Faust may experience absolute being), the “referent of the revelational sign is another sign and, moreover, a sign that stresses its semiotic (that is, repeatable) status by pointing to its reflection in a mirror. With an admonishing finger, the spirit refers once again to the inexorable law of universal semiosis: Revelation is always the reproduction of a repeated representation” (197).

19. Werther’s growing obsession with touch and pressures (*Drücke*) of various sorts as forms of *Ausdruck* is further intensified in the 1787 version when Lotte teases him with a canary: “Als sie dem Tierchen den Mund hinhielt, drückte es sich so lieblich in die süßen Lippen” (12 September). Pressing and kissing are explicitly related as the bird presses its beak against Lotte’s lips. When Lotte feeds the bird with food held in her lips, Werther must turn away; but the moment when he too will find similar fulfillment is fast approaching.

In the *drücken* practiced here and elsewhere, especially as the novel comes to an end, Werther finds a direct, natural form of expression related to the word “ausdrücken,” a gesture of warmth and texture.

20. Anticipating Artaud, Werther recognizes violence as natural language.

21. It is interesting, in this regard, to compare the bloodletting at the end of *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*. There Wilhelm, after his training as *Wundarzt*, bleeds his son after an accident, and thus introduces a healing harmony.


23. I am grateful to Tim Bagwell, who suggested the parallel between the *Inferno* passage and the blood and “words” in *Werther*. 