



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI TRIESTE

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES
Foreign languages and literature

Bachelor's thesis in
German literature

**“I WILL ENJOY THE PRESENT,
AND THE PAST WILL BE PAST FOR ME”
TIME IN GOETHE'S *THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER***

Graduand
Alice Panozzo

Supervisor
Prof. Paolo Panizzo

Co-Supervisor
Prof. Maria Carolina Foi

A.Y. 2017/2018

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Introduction

In the so-called age of connectivity, “going viral” is a well-known phenomenon. Hence today more than ever it is possible to understand what happened in 1774 as *The Sorrows of Young Werther* appeared. The epistolary novel – telling the story of a young man who spins increasingly out of control for an impossible love and ends up shooting himself – not only inspired endless rewritings, parodies and sequels, but also a shocking number of suicides. The victims – for the most part young men – took care of wearing Werther's iconic blue frock before taking their lives. Attempts were made to contain the novel's impact by forbidding its distribution, but this only powered people's curiosity and had the work circulating through pirated versions. Idolised by many young admirers and demonised by many others, Goethe defended himself as best he could against allegations of condoning suicide, often choosing to remain silent. However, when writing his autobiography fifty seven years later, the author would state that the work had “produced its great effect precisely because it struck a chord everywhere, and openly and intelligibly exhibited the internal nature of a morbid youthful delusion”¹. If we give credit to this statement, to read *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in an autobiographical key is surely enticing but also limiting. Even if the work is patently informed by Goethe's own life events, the importance of this still relevant classic is to be found in its analysis of a much wider generational phenomenon, namely a specific cultural tendency of the time.

The Sorrows of Young Werther is challenging both because of Werther's complexity and the work's structure. As Goethe himself revealed, Werther's letters are the result of several conversations the author imagined to have with different people² and this explains why their contents are so diverse. While only a small part of the letters are narrative, the most part deal with topics such as art, nature, the pursuit of happiness, the hypocrisy of society or even the meaning of life. The controversial and multifaceted main character has been, and continues to be, much discussed. He was initially interpreted as the prototypical melancholic lover who chooses to take his life for a dignified, if impossible, passion. Later it was noted that even before meeting Lotte, Werther flirts with suicidal thoughts. Some critics have stated that the novel meant to criticise the passiveness and the exasperation of feeling promoted by the *Empfindsamkeit* poetic. According to others, it intended to

1 J.W. Goethe, *The autobiography of Goethe: Truth and poetry; from my own life*, translated from the German by John Oxenford, George Bell and Sons, London 1897, p. 507.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 503.

stage the collapse of the Pre-Romantic genius trope and the self-centric titanism movement. Many other interpretations of Werther were given, such as failed revolutionary against a phoney society, first modern nihilist character, dandy *ante litteram*, depressed masochist. As Mittner rightly stated, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is an extremely rich novel that reveals new details with every new read³. With this in mind, the interpretation offered by the present paper is not meant to be exhaustive or definite, on the contrary it must be considered in its partiality. Insofar as possible, the paper focuses not so much on the reasons for Werther's suicide, but rather on how his mental mechanism functions, in particular with regards to how his perception of present, past and future (first, second and third chapter respectively) intertwine and mirror his complex personality. Our analysis will start from the very first letter of the novel, where significant thoughts about time and the present can be found. Werther states that the present – intended as day-to-day life – is so unbearable that people tend to detach themselves and actively recall their past suffering in order to flee from it. In this chapter we will examine how much Werther himself is aware of this mechanism and how this awareness impacts upon his ways of relating with Lotte and her family. In the second chapter we will examine how the concepts of place of origin, patriarchal world and rurality come to form a substantial alignment in Werther's *Weltanschauung*. We will try to relate these concepts to some socio-cultural changes occurring in the eighteenth century middle-class in Germany, as well as to the poetic imaginary of the time. In the third chapter we will consider both the way in which Werther envisions his future and his unwillingness to make choices. This latter aspect in particular is considered to have a crucial role in the vicious circle that leads to his tragic death.

3 L. Mittner, *Il "Werther", romanzo antiwertheriano*, introduzione in *I dolori del giovane Werther* di J.W. Goethe, Einaudi, Torino 1962, p. XX.

I. An indifferent present

I.I. Evading the present

In the opening letter Werther writes to his best friend Wilhelm that, even if far away from him, he is indeed very glad he has left home after what has recently happened. As the reader soon finds out, Werther is referring to an unpleasant romantic triangle involving two sisters, both in love with him. While the “willful charms” of the first sister were “pleasantly diverting” to him, the second one was given false hope of being loved in return by Werther himself. After a brief endeavour to excuse himself, Werther openly admits his guilt by wondering “And yet—am I wholly innocent? Didn't I nourish her feelings?”⁴.

If we give credit to this *mea culpa*, we might be surprised by the passage that follows:

Oh, what is man, that he can grumble about himself! I will, dear friend, I promise you, change for the better, will no longer, as I have always done, chew on the cud of the little bit of unpleasantness that fate puts in our way; I will enjoy the present, and the past will be past for me.⁵

This is what Werther states right after admitting he has been dishonest with the two sisters. “[T]he little bit of unpleasantness that fate puts in our way” is surely a bizarre way to define what happened, for it suggests that Werther is the victim, not the guilty party. What is claimed here appears to be the right, if not the moral duty, to “change for the better” by forgetting one's own mischiefs, by ceasing to “chew on the cud” and enjoying the present. A peculiar way to phrase it indeed! Rather than a self-improvement, this sentence seems to indicate a refusal to take responsibility disguised as a not so convincing *carpe diem*. But maybe there is more to this statement than meets the eye.

This declaration of intent has been mostly read by modern critics as a confirmation of Werther's exalted hedonism, of his thrill-seeking inclination aimed at living for the day. However, the present is mentioned one more time in the passage that follows, this time paired with a relevant adjective: “people would have fewer pains if [...] their imaginations were not so busily engaged in

4 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book one, letter of the fourth of May.

5 *Ibid.*

recalling past trials rather than bearing an indifferent present”⁶. First of all the peculiar causal link is to be noted: people suffer because, being unable to bear an “indifferent present”, they flee from it by means of imagination, namely by recalling “past trials”. Meaning it is not the spontaneous resurfacing of painful memories that overruns the present, but, on the contrary, the present itself is intolerable because it is *indifferent*. It is indeed a very important overturning. As we will see, Werther perceives the present as indifferent when he is not able to manipulate it or to mould it into something else, in other words when it no longer provides him with thrilling emotions, provoking a feeling of void and depression. The passage claiming “ I will [...] change for the better, [...] I will enjoy the present, and the past will be past for me” offers thus two possible interpretations. On the one hand, as many critics have firmly stated, it could be read as a confirmation of the thrill-seeking approach which without any doubt typifies Werther. On the other, however, it could be read as a genuine and authentic longing for self-improvement: the wish to face and overcome the feeling of tedium provoked by daily life – namely that daily, indifferent present. This second interpretation has been endorsed by Rolf Christian Zimmermann, who further claims that Werther's first letter is a mission statement doomed to fail, as he will not prove able to change himself in the course of the novel⁷.

We will try here to find a point of intersection between these two perspectives. We will argue that Werther wants indeed to free himself from the addiction to sentimental exaltation but that this endeavour is doomed to fail, for it is based on the unstable foundations of his own fantasy, which is in turn the main tool he uses to flee from reality.

To prove this point it is necessary to stress once again that Werther is to some extent aware of his thrill-seeking attitude. Many critics have rightly assumed that Werther's suicide is only partially related to an unhappy love story – since at this point of the novel he hasn't yet met Lotte. From the very first letter the reader can indeed sense not only a problematic approach to life, but also a certain awareness and a true longing for self-improvement. In the course of the novel it is possible to identify Werther's genuine effort, albeit feeble, to participate in the present and to somehow replace a living-for-the moment approach with a living-in-the-moment attitude. It is an effort that presents itself as a fascination for role models, as we will try to illustrate. Towards the end of the novel, when the suicide is only weeks away, the fictional editor of the letters tells us that Werther has not given up ruminating after all and that this has provoked an inertness, a total inability to act in the present:

Everything unpleasant in his public life, his vexation at the embassy, whatever else had turned

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ R. C. Zimmermann, *Das Weltbild des jungen Goethe*, vol. II, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 1979, p. 171.

out badly, whatever had hurt him, surged and ebbed in his soul. With all this, he found himself justified in his inactivity, cut off from all prospects, incapable of seizing any handle to get hold of the ordinary business of life, and so he finally descended, yielding completely to his strange feeling, his way of thinking, and submitting to his endless passion, to the everlasting monotony of being sad and mournful company for the charming and beloved creature whose peace he disturbed, his energies raging, venting them without aim or prospect, ever closer to a sad end.⁸

Werther's attempt has failed. And as he finally grows aware of this failure, namely in the second half of the novel, there takes place what Giuliano Baioni has pointed to as a high-speed collapse into the awareness of the fleetingness of time⁹.

I.II. The regular recurrence of external things

To claim that Werther's main issue is not being able to participate in the present might come off as a dare. The lyrical passages describing breathtaking instances of panic rapture in nature seem to suggest that the here-and-now is of utter importance to Werther. If he is completely immersed in the vibrancy of the moment – at least in the first part of the novel – on what basis can we state that he perceives the present as unbearable?

By tracing a parallelism between young Werther and young Goethe, Giuliano Baioni argued that the counterpart of chasing unrepeatable, exhilarating instants is that of perceiving every other regular, ordinary day-to-day experience as trite and predictable¹⁰. What Werther wishes to achieve in the first letter, then, is not a hedonistic pleasure-abandon to the instant, which after all already typifies him, but rather an existential balance that should allow him to live serenely without depending on rare and isolated moments of ecstasy. Only then will he be able to enjoy what Goethe himself calls the “regular recurrence of external things”:

All comfort in life is based upon a regular recurrence of external things. The change of day and night—of the seasons, of flowers and fruits, and whatever else meets us from epoch to epoch, so that we can and should enjoy it—these are the proper springs of earthly life. The more open we are to these enjoyments, the happier do we feel ourselves; out if the changes in these phenomena roll up and down before us without our taking interest in them, if we are insensible to such beautiful offers, then comes on the greatest evil, the heaviest disease—we regard life as a disgusting burden. It is said of an Englishman, that he hanged himself that he might no longer dress and undress himself every day.¹¹

This is how Goethe describes the “heaviest disease”, the one he has sentenced Werther to. If Baioni

8 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, The Editor to the Reader.

9 G. Baioni, *Il giovane Goethe*, cit., p. 229.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

11 J.W. Goethe, *The autobiography of Goethe: Truth and poetry; from my own life*, translated from the German by John Oxenford, George Bell and Sons, London 1897, p. 503.

is right, the tedium and the perception of “life as a disgusting burden” can be linked to the addiction to the electrifying panic instant, a sort of palate numbness for simple food after eating a too salty, if savoury, dish. Let's get back to Werther and consider a paradigmatic passage in the seventeenth of May letter, referring to the people living in the village to which he recently moved:

But a quite good sort of people! When I sometimes forget myself, sometimes enjoy with them pleasures that people are still allowed, joking around a table with good company in frankness and good fellowship, taking a long walk, arranging a dance at the proper time, and such things, it has a quite favorable effect on me; but I must avoid thinking that so many other energies that I must carefully conceal still lie within me, all decaying unused.¹²

This dense and meaningful extract might help us to get at the the very core of Werther's inner conflict. Firstly, we can find again the desire to enjoy the “pleasures that people are still allowed” that have “a quite favorable effect” on him, namely the simple occasions of sociability and companionship. However, this need for ordinariness is hindered by an opposite tension, which is the craving for thrilling emotions. Werther openly admits that, in order to enjoy these simple pleasures, he has to forget himself and his many energies that “still lie within me, all decaying unused” and that he “must carefully conceal”. As the following passage reveals, the energies he refers to is the ability to experience a transcendence of the self and to reach a state of ecstasy while perceiving the divine power of nature. Later in the novel he describes them as “my life's sole bliss, the sacred, invigorating power with which I created worlds around me”¹³. What must be noted is that these energies are wholly incompatible with social life. Social occasions are available to Werther in so far as he puts aside these transcendental abilities, for they can only be implemented in utter solitude or with an equally gifted companion.

In the third chapter we will illustrate how and under which condition Werther is relatable to the *Sturm und Drang* genius figure. For now we would like to stress once again the double tension affecting Werther: on one hand he wishes he could live in the present and enjoy everyday life with the same peace of mind he admires in the humble figures he meets throughout the novel; on the other he longs for the intensity of the panic instant. This inner struggle will give way to a self-perpetuating loop. Werther tells himself he has finally found peace of mind in what he perceives as a rural idyll, thus pronouncing himself satisfied with what he has achieved. But as he finally acknowledges that his happiness is inauthentic and transient – as this naive image of the rural world is a self-deception that he himself created by means of his imaginative power – he finds himself back at the start. These lands of make-believe have allowed him to both avoid confrontation with the much feared present and to perpetrate his existential stalemate.

12 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the seventeenth of May.

13 *Ibid.*, Book Two, letter of the third of November.

I.III. Emulating and simulating: Werther's self-deception

In Werther's eyes, Lotte is a role model. She embodies precisely that fulfilling, simple and active way of life for which he longs. Before he even describes how he met her, Lotte is presented to us as follows “So much simplicity with so much understanding, so much goodness with so much firmness, and calmness of soul together with real life and activity”¹⁴.

As Werther sees her for the first time, she is famously distributing slices of bread to adoring children who surround her. As the reader later finds out, Lotte promised her dying mother to take care of her younger siblings as if they were her own children. Her engagement with Albert has been blessed by her mother and is therefore symbolically sacred and indissoluble. Despite these quite burdensome and binding premises, Lotte is content, she mourns her mother's “glorious soul”¹⁵ and willingly devotes herself to what she describes as a “domestic life, which is, of course, no paradise, but on the whole a source of unutterable blessedness”¹⁶. As Mittner pointed out, Werther finds in Lotte that pure spirit of abnegation and sacrifice for which he craves¹⁷. According to Baioni, moreover, Lotte is a point of reference for Werther due to both her firm personality and her story¹⁸. It is relevant that Lotte embodies the serenity Werther is lacking but at the same time she is untouchable (for she is engaged and symbolically mother/sister of her children/siblings). Werther's “choice” to fall in love with her mirrors his inner contradiction: the longing for ordinariness is reflected in Lotte's personality and way of life, but the fact that she is culturally and socially unapproachable – and Werther knows it before he even meets her – reveals that he resists to the idea of taking a real step towards it. In this fashion Werther remains in the condition of fantasising about his life with Lotte without actually putting himself to the test of reality and present. We will come back to the topic of choices in the third chapter.

While Lotte represents the main role model, she is surely not the only one. In the letter of the twenty-seventh of May, for instance, Werther describes his encounter with a woman of modest means, who struggles day after day with misery in order to feed her three children. This is how Werther describes the event:

I tell you, dear friend, when my senses are reeling all my tumult is allayed by the sight of such a creature calmly and happily following the narrow circle of her existence, who helps herself through from one day to the next, sees the leaves fall and has no other thought than that winter

14 *Ibid.*, Book One, letter of the sixteenth of June.

15 *Ibid.*, Book One, letter of the tenth of September.

16 *Ibid.*, Book One, letter of the sixteenth of June.

17 L. Mittner, *op. cit.*, p.XXXVIII.

18 G. Baioni, *Il giovane Goethe*, cit., p. 237.

is coming.¹⁹

Why should the sight of this humble woman calm Werther down? As Zimmermann noted, Werther relates the adverbs “calmly and happily” with “narrow circle of her existence”. To happily follow a narrow circle of existence means to be able to accept the repetitiveness of life, which Werther will not or cannot embrace. According to Zimmermann, what Werther means by stating that she “[...]sees the leaves fall and has no other thought than that winter is coming” is that the woman is able to accept joy and sorrow by sensing that both these emotions come and go, just like the seasons, over the course of a lifetime²⁰.

As just mentioned, Werther believes he will find this kind of fulfillment in the rural world. Let's see a passage from the letter of the twenty-first of June:

When I go out to my Wahlheim mornings with the sunrise and pick my own sugar peas in the garden of the inn, sit down, pull off their strings, and now and then glance into my Homer; [...] then I feel so vividly how Penelope's arrogant suitors slaughtered, carved, and roasted oxen and swine. Nothing fills me so much with a calm, genuine feeling as the traits of patriarchal life, which I, thank God, can weave into the way I live without affectation.²¹

Zimmermann argues that Goethe intended this passage as sarcastic²². If he is right, it is indeed a rather bitter irony. Shelling sugar peas is sufficient for Werther not only to feel a sense of belonging to rural life, but also to experience the echoes of a lost patriarchal world. Ruralilty and patriarchal life are in Werther's eyes equivalent because both undergo a transformation process imposed by his imagination and become fantasy worlds in which ingenuity, innocence, happiness and sense of purpose reign supreme. Hence rural life is doubly sublimated: on the one hand it is idealised and purified from any difficulty it implies, on the other it is turned into the key to access a mythologised homeric past. Werther's imaginative frenzy has played tricks on him once again. By playing peasant and reading Homer, Werther feels tranquility and genuineness. Just as with the humble woman “calmly and happily following the narrow circle of her existence”, his attempt to live in the present is reduced to a passive beholding, or rather fabrication, of a quotidian-oriented ideal of life. The analysed passage continues as follows:

How happy I am that my heart can feel the simple, harmless bliss of the person who brings to his table a cabbage he has grown himself, not just the cabbage alone but all the good days, the beautiful morning he planted it, the lovely evenings he watered it, and as he had his joy in its

19 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the twenty-seventh of May.

20 R.C.Zimmermann, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

21 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the twenty-first of June.

22 R. C. Zimmermann, *op.cit.*, p. 188.

advancing growth, he enjoys it all again in one moment.²³

Werther never grew a cabbage, ça va sans dire. To believe that Werther's heart “can feel” what it must be like to grow a cabbage from seed is to say that Werther knows what it means to be a peasant (in the eighteenth century!). The fatigue after a hard day's work, the hunger that follows a bad harvest, the concern to feed one's family: the wealthy young bourgeois that is Werther is quite alien to all this, and so are his idyllic descriptions of countryside life.

But there's more. The happiness envisioned by Werther is not related to mere livelihood. The cabbage is so tasty because it brings back to memory “all the good days”, “the beautiful morning he planted it” and above all the “joy in its advancing growth”. The pleasure coming from the cabbage is enhanced by, and cannot be divided from, the memory of the efforts invested in its growing. The “harmless bliss” that Werther hallucinates, then, derives from the feelings of continuity and cohesion he attaches to country life, which is in turn the exact opposite of his actual way of life. While rural life, as Werther imagines it, offers pleasures and purpose as results of a coherent life project, hedonism – or vitalism – is based on the fact that the fleeting moment is detached not only from the past but above all from the future, namely devoid of *context*. The moments of ecstasy perceived by Werther as extremely blissful are not the result of an activity belonging to an ongoing stream of time but rather take the form of many isolated and eruptive fragments characterised by a surrender to pleasure, therefore a non-activity. Considering this, the quest for panic rapture to which he is addicted is incompatible with what he so much longs for, namely the piece of mind deriving from a sense of purpose.

Mittner brilliantly noted that every character in the novel is extremely indulgent toward Werther, above all Werther himself²⁴. This self-indulgence is exactly what condemns him to a morbid *reverie* and hinders him from taking action. Werther convinces himself he is actually experiencing what he is still envisioning, sublimating, hallucinating. The harmless bliss his heart is feeling cannot but be of the same sublimated essence of the make-believe lands he creates. Again and again, Werther makes himself spectator of his own fantasy, of an act he was never part of, namely the “regular recurrence of external things”.

23 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the twenty-first of June.

24 L. Mittner, op. cit., p.XIX.

II. The light of the past

II.I. Origin and patriarchal world: Werther's past

Many critics have pointed out the crucial role of Werther's past. In the letter of the fifth of May he expresses the desire to visit his native village. In such an occasion we find out something notable about his past: “I will enter by the same gate through which my mother rode out with me when she left the dear place after my father's death to lock herself up in her unbearable town”²⁵. While his home village is marked by the presence of the father and is “dear”, the town to which his mother insisted to move is defined as “unbearable” - which is by now a significant adjective for our analysis. The urban centre acquires a doubly negative value for it is linked with both his father's death and the departure from his home. The place of origin on the contrary is described as a place of innocence in which Werther as a child fed on dreams, hopes and expectations: “At that time, in happy ignorance, I longed to go out into the unknown world, where I hoped for so much nourishment for my heart, so much enjoyment, to fill and satisfy my longing, striving breast”. Place of origin translates to paternal presence, patriarchal world and rurality: it is upon this equivalence that Baioni has built his interpretation. If Werther's father represents the cosy limitedness of provincial country life, his mother embodies the thrilling overabundance of stimuli and newness of the modern urban culture²⁶. Werther shares little information concerning his parents and this scarcity of detail makes the contraposition even more striking. The father is literally a ghost: his absence is marked by a roaring silence spanning the whole novel. If Baioni is right, father and mother symbolise the two ends of a polarity: while the former embodies the (lamented) stability and safety of the native place, the latter represents the newness and precariousness of mundane life. Father and mother would then not only correspond to different environments (small-town versus urban) but also to different times (past and present) as we will try to illustrate in the next chapter. In his patriarchal visions Werther sublimates an old provincial world regulated by the fatherly principle and the recurrence of tradition. But the world in which he has actually grown up, namely the town,

25 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book Two, letter of the fifth of May.

26 G. Baioni, *Il giovane Goethe*, p. 230.

is inevitably different. Fickle and fragmentary, the mundane lifestyle of the town spins at a different speed, its pivot being not tradition anymore, but rather the exciting run-up for newness, luxury and eroticism. Born in the old world and bred in the new one, Werther is a young bourgeois who is split or rather suspended between two different kinds of middle-classes, two different kinds of societies belonging to two different moments in time. From this perspective the *sorrows* affecting Werther are paradigmatic. They are not mere autobiographical projections or fictional inventiveness, but rather a metaphor of that complex socio-cultural transition affecting the eighteenth century middle-class. We will try now to illustrate the more relevant elements of this historic moment.

II.II. The society of fashion and luxury

Mobility and stillness are both keywords for the eighteenth century German middle-class. On one side the fast-paced developments in commercial and technical fields had opened up promising opportunities for enrichment and given way to a decisive economic rise; on the other this new economic power was not sufficient to translate to political power, the latter remaining in the hands of the aristocracy and leaving intact Germany's absolutistic system. In his book *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*²⁷ Wolf Lepenies argues that this political powerlessness had led to a spread frustration among German bourgeois, causing a passivity that would lead to the fatal schism between the private and public spheres. In an attempt to compensate for its lack of political power, the German middle-class would then shift its focus to a new source of gratification. In the major towns the bourgeoisie was challenging aristocracy in terms of lifestyle quality. On the heels of French rococò culture this translated to fascination with sumptuousness, luxury, hedonism and eroticism. According to Lepenies this new inclination to luxury was a coping mechanism aimed at legitimating the inability to exert political power by displaying economic prestige. This is where Goethe chooses to set Werther's adolescence. The in-between condition of a social class concurrently producing and consuming its own luxury, both economically rich and politically powerless, mirrored a rising contradiction. According to Baioni, the clash between the puritanical work ethics that distinguished the bourgeoisie and the new fascination for luxury had produced an unprecedented bewilderment²⁸. The inbreeding mechanism self-perpetuated: the more economic growth, the more luxury to be displayed. Significantly, the best-known fashion magazine at the time was entitled *The society of fashion and luxury*. Luxury itself was not a novelty, its introduction to the bourgeoisie way of life was. The hedonistic approach was shocking for the sensibility of that time because it now concerned a social class that was still rigidly regulated in terms of morality. The most conservative

27 W. Lepenies, *Melanconia e società*, trad.it. Francesco Paolo Porzio, Guida, Napoli 1985, p. 81 [original title *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1969].

28 G. Baioni, *Il giovane Goethe*, p. 8.

observers objected that the abrupt surplus of stimuli available on the market was meeting superficial and transient needs, causing not only an unforgivable surrender to pleasure, but also vanity and above all frenzy. Suddenly everything was ageing rapidly, the work of a generation soon turning obsolete and therefore wasted.

This acceleration implied a never-ending chasing after novelties, leading to feelings of precariousness and instability. In the context of this social turmoil Baioni has detected a paradigm shift in the lived time of bourgeoisie, namely the acceleration of the “time of life” pushed by an insatiable desire to desire²⁹. Such an urge to seek pleasure was of course not limited to luxury goods. As the towns buzzed with mundane life occasions, liveliness and changeableness flooded as well the field of human relationships. Goethe himself appears to label this phenomenon as a cause of melancholy: “The separation of the sensual from the moral, which, in the complicated, cultivated world sunders the feelings of love and desire, produces here also an exaggeration which can lead to no good”³⁰.

This cultural swing was bound to impact the traditional family model and the relations between generations as well. According to Franco Moretti, as economical growth opened up new opportunities in the labour market and cities thrived, continuity between generations became loose, leaving room for a new, unprecedented mobility. The duty to follow in the steps of family tradition was to be replaced by a certain freedom of action³¹.

Considering that Werther lost his father at a young age, one can understand why Baioni defines the novel “the first expression of modern youth culture”³². To be fatherless means to be no longer subject to patriarchal authority. But the sudden shift to a buoyant world takes its toll and can also result in displacement. Werther's escape to rural life might then be read as an escape from the overstimulation of urban life. In the natural world, which is perceived as a place of solitude and inner life, Werther seeks “a precious balm” that might warm his “often shivering heart”³³, but that same heart is already addicted to thrill-seeking and brought, in the absence of external inputs, to self-stimulation: “I no longer want to be led on, cheered up, spurred on,” he writes “my heart surges enough by itself; I need a lullaby, and that I have found in abundance in my Homer”³⁴. On the run from the accelerated urban rhythm, Werther attempts a homecoming: he is dreaming the mild light of the past, the reassuring fatherly presence.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

30 J.W. Goethe, *The autobiography of Goethe: Truth and poetry; from my own life*, translated from the German by John Oxenford, George Bell and Sons, London 1897, p. 503.

31 F. Moretti, *Il romanzo di formazione*, Einaudi, Torino 1999, p. 4.

32 G. Baioni, *Introduzione*, cit., p. VII.

33 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book one, letter of the fourth of May.

34 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book one, letter of the thirteenth of May.

II.III. Downfall of the bucolic-patriarchal ideal

As we have illustrated, there is a double correlation between origin-father and rurality-patriarchy. The language Werther uses to describe his native village shows that these equations assume a sort of sacred value. The “pilgrimage” undertaken with “all a pilgrim's devotion”³⁵ is nothing but a re-enactment ritual aimed at recalling a lost and mythologised world, that of the father. “I approached the town, greeted all the old, well-known garden sheds, the new ones repelled me, as did all the other changes that had been made”³⁶. Everything that differs from Werther's memories irritates him as it desecrates the sanctuary which he has carved out of an idealised past. In this respect Werther's striving for the past can once again be traced back to an escape from the present. But what kind of father is Werther seeking?

Sørensen investigated the fatherly figure in the novel by taking into account how the patriarchal family model changed in the course of the eighteenth century³⁷. According to the critic, the traditional patriarchal family had the father playing the main role not only by being the breadwinner, but also by preserving the family's respectability in society and by taking care of the moral education of the children, who were seen as little grown-ups to be introduced to life. However, his role was two-fold: if on one hand he enjoyed absolute power over wife and children, on the other a certain dose of emotional attachment was necessary to grant the unity of the household. This latter aspect resulted in the indulgent and patronising manner of paternalism. The alternation of strictness and leniency provoked in the children a polarised ambivalence of love, fear and respect towards him.

According to Sørensen, such an ambivalence is questioned in the course of the eighteenth century. The historical record of the time indicates that emotional intimacy between family members was increasing, determining a less formal relationship between father, wife and children. Moreover, thanks also to the re-evaluation of childhood perpetrated by Rousseau and other pedagogical studies, children were not seen anymore as not-yet-adults but rather as a *sui generis* category whose typical spontaneity was to be appreciated, if not admired. While childhood was becoming synonymous with a natural and authentic vision of the world, civil society was deemed to be its opposite with allegations of hypocrisy and affectation. The new attention to childhood, together with the increasing closeness between family members, provoked as well a new perception of the fatherly figure. The balance of authoritarian (normative) side and indulgent (paternalist) side was

35 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book Two, letter of the ninth of May.

36 *Ibid.*

37 B.A. Sørensen, *Über die Familie in Goethes Werther und Wilhelm Meister*, “Orbis Litterarum” 42, 1987.

rearranged in favour of the latter. Hence a deep change took place in what might be called the social imaginary: the household came to be seen as a “precious emotional unit”, in fact as a natural form of human association marked by serenity and spontaneity. At the same time, civil society was demonised and perceived as an artificial social order built upon rigorous laws and shallow human relationships. As family was now considered the older, and therefore more legitimate, social unit, it was to be associated with an equally ideal backdrop, namely rural environment. Genuineness and innocence featured the countryside family idyll while the urban environment was seat of civil society and social institution. As the contraposition between *Gefühlsgemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* grew stronger, the father image in the collective symbolism split as well. The gentle face of the family man belonged now to the bucolic family picture while the tyrannical voice of law and order came to be identified with the powerful institution.

As Sørensen points out, the same dual father figure is neatly split in Goethe's *Werther* and this provokes a strong ambivalence. The critic notes that Werther longs for integration in Lotte's family only as long as it matches the one dimensional picture of the benevolent *Gefühlsgemeinschaft*. Lotte dispenses love, nurture and care all around as she embodies the threefold role of daughter, mother and sister. The environment in which she is first presented perfectly dovetails that bucolic home-ness we saw emerging in the eighteenth century imaginary. In this idyllic version, family stirs in Werther a longing for integration or simulation. Just after meeting Lotte and her siblings, the vibrancy of the panic instant seems to lose appeal:

Dear Wilhelm, I have thought about all sorts of things, about people's desire to spread themselves out, make new discoveries, roam around; and then again about the inner drive to yield voluntarily to restrictions, to go along on the track of habit [...] Thus the most restless vagabond longs at last for his home country and finds in his hut, on his spouse's breast, in the circle of his children, in the tasks of supporting them the bliss that he sought in the wide world in vain.³⁸

Hut, spouse, children – such a flawless rural idyll picture! – represent here an authentic bliss and are opposed to the panic dispersion, whose deceiving nature promises pleasure and joy but, once it is over, can only lead to one's own limitedness. The transient, if not illusory, nature of transcendental ecstasy is corrosive in the long-run, for the hopes and expectations it excites are never fully achieved and the relief it gives is temporary and fleeting. Hence, the only antidote to the vagabond's dispersive tension is the warm circle of family, but only in its rural and idealised declination, freed from any vulgar mingling with society and above all ruled by a patriarch who does not represent law and order but rather benevolence and condescension. The authoritarian patriarch awakens outrage and rebellion in Werther, not so the forgiving and protecting father:

38 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the twenty-first of June.

[...] and could a person, a father, be angry whose son, unexpectedly returning, threw himself on his neck and cried: Father! I have come back! Don't be angry that I am breaking off the travels that you meant for me to endure longer. The world is everywhere the same, in effort and work, reward and joy, but what is that to me? I am only happy where you are, and it is before your countenance that I want to suffer and enjoy.³⁹

Lotte's family can keep up with this standard only as long as father figures remain out of the picture. As Albert and Lotte's father appear, Werther's devotion turns into coldness and contempt. However, until then, Werther can take up their vacant posts by attending Lotte's siblings. Two months after their first encounter he writes:

It is surely true that in the world nothing makes a person necessary but love. I feel it in Lotte, that she would lose me reluctantly, and the children have no other notion than that I will always come tomorrow. Today I went out to tune Lotte's clavier, but I couldn't get to it; the little ones were after me for a fairy tale, and Lotte herself said that I should do what they wanted. I sliced their evening bread for them, that they now take from me almost as gladly as from Lotte, and told them the story of the princess waited on by hands.⁴⁰

This time Werther is playing family: he has made himself indispensable by winning Lotte's siblings' affection, who now accept him as a family member. Werther won't easily give up his simulation, not even when Albert returns from his business travel:

I could lead the best, the happiest life if I wasn't a fool. It is not easy to find united such beautiful circumstances to delight a person's soul as those in which I find myself now. Alas, it is certain that our heart alone creates its happiness.— To be a member of the charming family, to be loved by the old man like a son, by the children like a father, and by Lotte!—then honorable Albert, who doesn't disturb my happiness by any bad moods, who embraces me with hearty friendship, to whom I am, after Lotte, the dearest thing in the world!⁴¹

His craving for a sense of belonging and inclusion to the warm circle of the *Gefühlsgemeinschaft* makes him self-indulgent. Werther projects all around him what he deems to be the ideal conditions of happiness: to be loved like a son, like a father and finally like a husband. But it is indeed an illusion. As a matter of fact he has no father, nor children, nor wife. He who on the contrary actually occupies this threefold position is “honorable Albert”, to whom Werther attaches the mere role of friend in the fictional family picture.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the presence of Albert – the prosaic-bourgeois element – marks over time the collapse of the idealised family imagery in Werther's eyes. The shelter symbolised by

39 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book Two, letter of the thirtieth of May.

40 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the fifteenth of May.

41 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book one, letter of the tenth of August.

the hut becomes more and more corrupted by gradually losing its purity and abstraction. Werther starts to feel not only excluded but also has to recognise that even the most ideal of families must inevitably mingle with *Gesellschaft* and submit to its rules. The family idyll can only exist if contrabanced by the much less poetic element of daily activity and participation in society. Albert embodies this necessary complement. At first Werther admires his pragmatism (“I have rarely seen his like for order and industrious-ness in business matters”⁴²), but soon he starts to feel envious (“often envy Albert, whom I see buried up to his ears in files, and imagine myself happy in his place!”⁴³) and finally bitter (“She would have been happier with me than with him. He is not the man to fulfill all the desires of her heart”⁴⁴). Albert's dedication to work is to Werther utterly incompatible with the idea of love. According to him, true love can not and must not be vulgarised by any other element in order to maintain its purity. In Werther's eyes love is always and only effusion taken to the extreme, as the letter of the twenty-sixth of May points out:

It is like love. A young heart is smitten with a girl, spends every hour of his day with her, squanders all his energies and everything he has in order to express every moment that he is totally devoted to her. And then a philistine comes along, a man in some public position, and says to him: My fine young man! To love is human, but you must love in human fashion! Divide your hours, some to work, and dedicate your hours of relaxation to your girl. [...] If the young man does this he will become a useful young person, and I myself will advise any prince to put him in an academy; but his love is over and done with, and if he is an artist, his art as well.”⁴⁵

Albert really resembles this “philistine” suggesting one should divide his hours in pleasure and duty. Meticulous and resolute, he is determined to secure his engagement by granting economic security to the household while Werther, as the fictional editor sums up at the end of the novel, “every day consumed his entire property only to suffer and have to pinch and scrape in the evening”⁴⁶. The huge gap between these incompatible approaches leads to Werther's final judgement: “that's his amicable, tender, intimate involvement in everything; that's his calm, steady faithfulness! It's complacency and indifference! Doesn't every miserable piece of business attract him more than his dear, precious wife?”⁴⁷. The idyll has fallen.

The reader can witness the same mechanism with regard to Lotte's father, the steward. Werther is in awe of him and feels beloved like a son just as long as the steward remains in the shadow.

42 *Ibid.*

43 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book one, letter of the twenty-second of August.

44 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book Two, letter of the twenty-ninth of July.

45 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book one, letter of the twenty-sixth of May.

46 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, The Editor to the Reader.

47 *Ibid.*

According to Sørensen, it is because Lotte's father is a peripheral figure that Werther can mythologise the patriarchy of Lotte's family. But the second that Werther becomes aware of his authoritarian role, the clash is inevitable and the disenchantment hits hard. We are referring to the final episode in which a love-obsessed peasant known by Werther tries to take advantage of the widow for whom he is working, gets dismissed and finally, having gone mad with jealousy, murders the widow's new manservant. This character is a sort of variation of Werther himself – a lovesick who, instead of taking his own life, pours out his frustration and kills. Werther is fascinated by this man since their very first encounter, when he states “Never in my life have I seen urgent desire and warm longing so pure, indeed I can say, never thought or dreamed it could be this pure”⁴⁸. When he finds out about the murder, Werther goes straight away to the steward in order to defend the peasant. In this scene Albert and the steward – who are, let us not forget, the “lawful” family fathers – form a united front by refusing to take into account Werther's line of argument aimed at exonerating the accused. Here's the editor's account of the episode:

[...] the steward, as one may easily imagine, was not swayed by it. On the contrary, he did not let our friend finish, energetically contradicted him, and blamed him for taking a murderer under his wing! He pointed out that in this fashion every law would be annulled, the security of the state would be destroyed, and furthermore, he added, in such a matter he could do nothing without taking the gravest responsibility upon himself. Everything would have to take its orderly, prescribed course.⁴⁹

The observance of the law, the security of the state, the responsibility of power: Werther can no longer ignore that the steward, besides being a benevolent family father, is also a patriarch securing the household in a legally regulated social context, whose laws he is forced to obey and have obeyed. The sacred image of the father becomes contaminated. The disclosure of the workaday (Albert) and authoritarian (the steward) aspects of the father image determines the downfall of Werther's imaginative system, which is built exactly on the bucolic-patriarchal ideal. Werther is left with nothing but mourning for a lost make-believe world “And the past's ray of sunlight appeared the way a prisoner dreams of meadows, herds, and high offices!”⁵⁰.

48 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book one, letter of the thirtieth of May.

49 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, The Editor to the Reader.

50 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book Two, letter of the twelfth of December.

III. The dark abyss of the future

III.I. Choice deferral

Werther projects an idealised past on the present, but how does he perceive the future? Let's read another passage in which he recalls his childhood during the peregrination to his native village:

I remember so vividly sometimes standing there and watching the water flow past [...] until I had totally lost myself in the contemplation of invisible distances.—You see, my friend, so limited and happy were the glorious fathers of old, so childlike their feeling, their poetry! When Ulysses speaks of the unmeasured sea and the infinite earth, that is so true, so human, heartfelt, limited, and mysterious. What good does it do me to be able to repeat with every schoolboy that the earth is round? A person needs only a few clumps of earth to enjoy himself on it, fewer still to rest beneath it.⁵¹

Here again we find the peculiar alignment – happiness-patriarchality-rurality-limitedness – which we have already analysed. The “glorious father of old”, as well as children, are happy because sea and earth are in their eyes unlimited, which means they can still feed on big hopes thanks to their ingenuity. Their limited knowledge allows them to envision the world and its possibilities as endless. Limited are as well the “few clumps of earth” on which they ramble. The discovery is disappointing (“What good does it do me to be able to repeat with every schoolboy that the earth is round?”), the experience of exploration is pointless with regard to achieving happiness. Werther seems to suggest that the hopes upon the future are inversely proportional to the limitedness of experiential possibilities. Happiness is possible only when it is fantasised because new experience, knowledge and discovery can only lead to disillusionment:

There I stood under the linden, which, when I was a boy, had been the goal and boundary of my walks. How different now! At that time, in happy ignorance, I longed to go out into the unknown world, where I hoped for so much nourishment for my heart, so much enjoyment, to fill and satisfy my longing, striving breast. Now I return from the wide world—O my friend, with how many shattered hopes, with how many thwarted plans!⁵²

The many possibilities that the “wide world” had seemed to offer have now turned into a smoking pile of scrapped dreams. And this disheartening scenario is even more humiliating since it can no longer be attributed to a lack of resources (as forefathers and children could do) but to a failure that

51 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book Two, letter of the ninth of May.

52 *Ibid.*

is felt as individual. Werther's resources are indeed numerous: not only his social status allows him to manage his time freely, but he is also endowed with several talents. However, as Mittner acutely pointed out, these talents are all helplessly amateurish and Werther cannot or refuses to invest in them properly by prioritising them and making them actual activities⁵³. If it is true that, in order to turn dreams into reality, one needs to choose only some of them, Werther's many expectations are doomed to perish without finding application because his fear of choosing renders the present's soil sterile, incapable of hosting the seed of future – one thinks of the cabbage we discussed in the first chapter. It follows that a world with limited possibilities is envisioned as a world of happiness: a world in which people don't get to choose, because choice is not available, but in return are free to fantasise and lose themselves in happy projections. Withdrawing into fantasy translates to time-freezing and failure to take action. Werther confines himself to the narrow space of the beautiful instant also because it is a condition where he is not required to make a choice. Here is a well-known passage from the letter of the twenty-second of May:

I'll gladly confess, for I know what you would say to me about this, that the happiest people are those who like children live for the day, drag their dolls around dressing and undressing them, and cautiously slink around the drawer where Mama has locked up the sweet cakes, and when they finally get their hands on what they want stuff their cheeks with it and shout "More!"— Those are happy creatures.⁵⁴

Critics have broadly intended this passage as a further confirmation of Werther's hedonism, where sweet cakes symbolise prohibited pleasure. However, on the basis of what we have investigated, we might believe that kids are “happy creatures” not in as much as they seek pleasure, but rather because they carelessly pursue a precise purpose (“More!”). Werther in fact continues: “Those too are happy who give showy titles to their rag-and-bone grubbing or even to their passions, and tout them to mankind as stupendous operations for its welfare and salvation”⁵⁵. Children enjoying sweet cakes and bourgeois convinced of the usefulness of their activities – what do they have in common? Just one single thing: they are completely focused on a purpose and pursue it without second-guessing it. They channel their energy into a single goal in which they believe, obtaining thereby a sense of ease in employing time. This is exactly what Werther is missing. In an attempt to compensate for his existential bewilderment, he creates parallel fantasy worlds. The price of this choice deferral, however, is waiving the possibility to devise his life.

Falling in love with Lotte is part and parcel of this dynamic. By choosing her as an object of desire – while knowing all along about her engagement to Albert – Werther opts for an unattainable target

53 L. Mittner, op.cit., p.XXIII.

54 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the twenty-second of May.

55 *Ibid.*

so that he can endlessly dilate the moment of longing and fantasy without actually being confronted with the much harder challenge of an actual love relationship. When his pen-friend Wilhelm presses him to take a decision (the well-known *aut-aut* of the eighth of August, either you take the risk of openly confessing your love or you move along), Werther breaks away in a not so convincing manner: “I don't know! —but let's not get tangled up in metaphors. Enough”⁵⁶.

In order to overcome the fear of getting trapped, Werther always blames someone else for the few choices he makes. He blames Wilhelm and his mother for forcing him to accept the job at the embassy, later he blames the embassy itself for humiliating him up to the point where he cannot bear to stay there. Finally he blames Lotte for his own love obsession (“She should not do this! Not fire up my imagination with these images of divine innocence and happiness, not wake my heart from the sleep in which it is sometimes cradled by the indifference of life!”⁵⁷) and for no less than his suicide. Upon receiving the pistols he has asked Albert, he addresses Lotte as a death-giver in his suicide note: “They have passed through your hands, you have wiped the dust from them, I kiss them a thousand times, you have touched them: and you, spirit of heaven, favor my resolve! And you, Lotte, hand me the instrument, you from whose hands I wished to receive death and now receive it”⁵⁸.

While his “invigorating” energies – the ones that had allowed him to ignore the present and the reality – inevitably run out, Werther becomes more and more paralysed, literally stuck between the drive to take action and the inability to do so. This is proven by the letter of the twenty-second of August:

It is a disaster, Wilhelm, my active powers have deteriorated to a restless indifference, I cannot be idle and yet I can't do anything, either. I have no powers of imagination, no feeling for nature, and books nauseate me. When we have lost ourselves, we have lost everything. I swear to you, sometimes I wish I were a day laborer, just to have when I wake up in the morning a prospect of the day to come, an obligation, a hope.⁵⁹

Despite this, the possibility of accepting the job at the embassy makes Werther recall the fable of a horse that, tired of his own freedom, decides to serve a man and is ridden to death. Choice deferral is caused by the fear of making the wrong choice, as well as by that of losing freedom through commitment: choosing a path would imply excluding thousands of other possibilities that might be more promising or less binding:

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- 56 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the eighth of August.
- 57 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book Two, letter of the sixth of September.
- 58 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, The Editor to the Reader.
- 59 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the twenty-second of August.

It is wonderful how everything around attracted me when I came here and looked from the hill into the lovely valley.—There the little wood!—Oh, could you mingle with its shadows!—There the mountaintop! [...] I hastened there and came back, but without finding what I had hoped for. Oh, distance is like the future! An enormous glimmering oneness lies before our soul, our feeling blurs in it along with our eyes, and we long to let go of our whole being, to let ourselves be filled with all the bliss of a single great, glorious feeling.—But alas! When we hasten there, when there becomes here, everything is as it was, and we stand in our poverty, in our finiteness, our soul thirsting for the refreshment that has slipped away.⁶⁰

Through choice, the future is no longer an enticing sea of possibilities, but rather a finite path that eliminates many other developments. The future is bright only if it is panoramic (just like the view over the valley!), only if it comprises the totality of possibilities. The little wood, the shadow of the trees, the mountaintop are objects of desire as long as they belong to an all-encompassing perspective, to an organic totality. In a way Werther seems to inhabit not a linear time but rather the pointillist time the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman accurately described. Even though Bauman's analysis strictly refers to Western contemporary society, it is possible to see an interesting compatibility with Werther's approach to time:

Pointillist time is broken up, or even pulverized, into a multitude of 'eternal instants' – events, incidents, accidents, adventures, episodes – self-enclosed monads, separate morsels, each morsel reduced to a point [...] Each time-point is now believed to be pregnant with the chance of another 'big bang', and successive points continue to be believed to be pregnant too [...] A map of pointillist life, had it been charted, would bear an uncanny similarity to a graveyard of imaginary, fantasized or grossly neglected and unfulfilled possibilities. Or, depending on the point of view, it would suggest a cemetery of wasted chances: in a pointillist universe, the rates of infant mortality, abortion and the miscarriage of hopes are very high.⁶¹

Pointillist time, whose main features are lack of cohesion and continuity, rejects the idea of direction, or development, because the endless possibilities encompassed in each of its instants promise and permit new starts over and over – provided that one is footloose and fancy-free, namely devoid of commitments that could hinder a radical change (a steady job, a family, an affective bind, a choice with no turning back). “[I]s not perhaps my longing to change my circumstances an inner, restless impatience that will pursue me wherever I go?”⁶² Werther rightly wonders. The chronic desire to start all over again is powered by the dissatisfaction with the lack of immediate results after an effort; at the same time the pressing of many other possibilities compels him to leave the work unfinished to start afresh somewhere else. Mittner pointed out that Werther is fickle not only with regard to his feelings but also to his actions⁶³. By always acting different,

60 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the twenty-first of June.

61 Bauman Z., *Consuming life*, Polity Press, Cambridge (UK) 2007, p. 32.

62 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the twenty-second of August.

63 L. Mittner, op. cit., p.XXIX.

Werther ends up not taking action at all. At this point we are reminded of the brilliant definition of melancholy proposed by the sociologist Rolland Munro:

Melancholy represents not so much a state of indecision, a wavering between the choice of going one way or another, so much as it represents a backing off from the very divisions [...] It is to sense the infinity of connection, but be hooked up to nothing. Unlike the flâneur, who goes on being caught in the spell of looking, melancholy is [...] a form without content, a refusal from knowing just this or knowing just that.⁶⁴

The enthusiasm of freedom is reversed in a stalemate: as the choice discloses its one-sidedness, the disparity between its limitedness and the infinity of possibilities makes it impossible to take steps. Here choice deferral involves hunger for totality, and this already implies the ultimate choice of suicide. Letter after letter, spasm after spasm, Werther's heart collapses and becomes numb “like a stopped-up well, like a leaky bucket”⁶⁵. This inability to feel or take action inevitably leads to the terrifying awareness of the time passing by and of the transience of life:

The full, warm feeling of my heart toward living nature, that flowed over me with such bliss, that made the world around me a paradise, has now become an unbearable torturer, a tormenting spirit, that pursues me wherever I turn. [...] Something like a curtain has drawn back from my soul, and the stage of never-ending life transforms itself before my eyes into the abyss of the eternally open grave. Can you say: It exists, since everything passes away?⁶⁶

Similarly to how the spectacle of life has reversed in a death scenario, the glorious past can now only mirror the absence of a future: “the past flashes like lightning above the dark abyss of the future”⁶⁷.

III.II. Is Werther a model of Pre-Romantic genius?

At this point it behoves us to briefly mention a much discussed question, namely how Werther is to be related to the *Sturm und Drang* genius type, since Goethe was considered the major leader of this Pre-Romantic movement. What has been so long discussed is whether Werther represents the artist-as-a-genius or rather a chronic enthusiast, one of the so called *Schwärmer*. The answer to this question is relevant in the work's interpretation: is Werther's suicide to be interpreted as a failure of this poetic or rather as a proof of the inevitable link between genius and melancholy?

64 Munro R., *Outside Paradise: Melancholy and the Follies of Modernization*, in "Culture and Organization", 2005, 11:4, p. 276.

65 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book Two, letter of the third of November.

66 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the eighteenth of August.

67 J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book Two, letter of the fifteenth of November.

On the basis of autobiographical documents, Baioni has argued that Werther's difficulty in facing ordinary, day-to-day life mirrored the same problem affecting young Goethe⁶⁸. According to the critic, this was due to the very idea of genius that marked the author's generation. In the poetics of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, the genius was the sensitive artist who could immediately feel and embrace the divine vibrations of nature, thus the one who could – and must – accumulate one after another ever new, extreme and rip-roaring emotional experiences. The trope of the genius corresponds to the poetic of vitalism, namely the search for the supreme and sublime instant. But while the genius could perceive nature's infinity and let go of himself in the ecstatic panic rapture, he also had to prove himself able to fight back against the overwhelming force of nature, return to himself and translate what he had experienced into a poetic outcome. Critics have often underlined how the two hymns by Goethe *Ganymed* and *Prometheus* mirror this polarity. Ganymed represents the erotic “feeler” surrendering to the sensuous divine call and ascending the infinity of the God-Father. On the other hand Prometheus is the titan who rises up against the Gods-Masters by breaking free of the bondage and shaping his own offspring to his own image and likeness. Baioni claims that these two figures, intended as complementary moments of the artistic production, are in Goethe's early work incompatible⁶⁹. According to this view, Werther is a Ganymed without being a Prometheus, which means he is able to perceive infinity but also doomed to get lost in it. According to Mittner, Goethe's work was supposed to stage the failure of the Pre-Romantic genius figure once it is extracted from the mythological context and lowered into historical reality – in other words to show that the genius proves to be sustainable only on an artistic level, while failing in real life⁷⁰. The vitalistic drive to seek ever new emotions and never to settle might be then seen as the counterpart of a personality that cannot cope with a limited, restrained context, such as ordinary reality. Zimmermann, like Baioni, claims that Werther is a caricature of the Ganymed figure and therefore, lacking the moment of activity, is not to be defined as a genius, but rather as its contrary, a *Schwärmer*, an enthusiast day-dreamer who loses touch with reality by means of his imaginations. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by Goethe himself in *Truth and Poetry*, where the author claims that the work had had such a dreadful impact – with regards to the stunning succession of suicides following its distribution – only because it staged the sick sensibility of a whole generation of young men⁷¹. However, Ponzi underlines how Goethe himself claimed to believe that melancholy was an inseparable part of geniality⁷². Both Schings and Lepenies point out that, since Aristotle,

68 G. Baioni, *Il giovane Goethe*, p. 197.

69 G. Baioni, *Il giovane Goethe*, cit., p. 166.

70 L. Mittner, op. cit., p. XXVII – XXVIII.

71 J.W.Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, p. 583: “Diese Gesinnung war so allgemein, daß eben 'Werther' deswegen die große Wirkung tat, weil er überall anschlag und das Innere eines kranken jugendlichen Wahns öffentlich und faßlich darstellte.”

72 M. Ponzi, *Passione e melanconia nel giovane Goethe*, Roma, Lithos Editrice, 1997, p. 77.

genius and melancholy are tied together⁷³.

Whether Werther is to be seen as a *Sturm und Drang* genius, its failure or a *Schwärmer* remains an open question. The same applies to the causal relation between melancholy and vitalism (the which-comes-first question – whether it is the thrill-seeking approach that causes melancholy or vice versa). What we tried to argue in this paper is rather that these two dynamics are interwoven and power one another, creating a vicious circle that eventually spins out of control and eliminates the possibility of future, as has been masterfully staged in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

⁷³ H.J.Schings, *Melancholie und Aufklärung*, J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Stuttgart 1977, p. 56 and W. Lepenies, *Melanconia e società*, Guida, Napoli 1985, p. 13.

Conclusion

A complex work such as Goethe's *The sorrows of Young Werther* cannot be easily probed. Keeping this in mind, we have elected a pivotal element in our interpretation: time. The concept of time is deeply interwoven in Werther's reflections and this allows the scholar to formulate some questions regarding the lived time of the main character. Although this could come off as a rather abstract topic, the work offers plenty of material to work with. In the very first lines of the novel Werther states “I will, dear friend, I promise you, change for the better, will no longer, as I have always done, chew on the cud of the little bit of unpleasantness that fate puts in our way; I will enjoy the present, and the past will be past for me”⁷⁴. We took this mission statement seriously and tried to single out Werther's effort to enjoy the present throughout the novel. Werther extols sensibility and imagination, he is proud of his ability to “feel”. But he somehow senses that this endless thrill-seeking hunt is an endeavour to flight from the boredom and the depression he otherwise experiences in an ordinary, day-to-day life.

Werther sets out to find a conjunction of ordinariness and happiness and believes to have found it in Lotte and her family, that are taken as role model. Werther sees in Lotte's serene and simple existence the secret of a happiness that is different from the enthralling spiritual enthusiasm he well knows. But this happiness cannot be but inauthentic, a shallowly projected fantasy, and therefore temporary. Werther pretends not only to be part of the family when he is in fact not, he also transforms the provincial world into a sort of idyll in which he “feels” the echoes of a lost patriarchal world. This new life aimed at enjoying the present is actually all focused on recalling a lost and idealised past.

We have briefly analysed some socio-cultural changes occurring in the eighteenth century. The well-to-do bourgeoisie undergoes some relevant socio-cultural changes in terms of a more hedonistic lifestyle, a looser relationship between generations and a new kind of mobility and freedom. Meanwhile the rural lifestyle – in particular with respect to the countryside family seen as a “precious emotional unit” – comes to be opposed to civil society, which is deemed hypocritical and artificial.

Born in the provincial countryside but having grown up in a town, Werther's inner contradiction mirrors the gap between these two worlds. If the hyperstimulating environment in which he has grown has made him addicted to the new and the sensational, the escape to the countryside is

⁷⁴ J.W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated from the German by Burton Pike, Modern Library Paperback edition, Random House, 2004, Book One, letter of the fourth of May.

believed to be a return to the ingenuity and serenity of childhood. The bucolic-patriarchal ideal is doomed to fail because it is an ideal – Werther still needs to embellish reality through the lenses of his fantasy in order to avoid boredom and listlessness. But the idyllic picture gets corrupted when Albert, Lotte's fiancé, enters the scene. As Werther realises that the workaday, prosaic bourgeois Albert is a necessary complement of the family idyll, his disillusionment is unavoidable.

The chronic need for stimuli that characterises Werther is an actual addiction to thrilling emotions. In the well-known letters describing his panic raptures in the natural world, he experiences a transcendence of the self by reaching a state of ecstasy that makes him feel divinised. This has been rightly interpreted as a tension toward infinity and boundlessness corresponding to a continuous self-stimulation of emotions and feelings. When left without stimulation, Werther falls into tedium and an inner void. While this constant need makes him chase after the stirring and the new, it creates at the same time a *Weltanschauung* in which the ability to “feel” occupies the first (and maybe only) place. The mild-mannered lifestyle of the working bourgeoisie is perceived as a negative model, implicitly pointed at as a sensorial sleep, an emotional flatness.

Werther is well aware of being affected by the restless need to continuously change his “circumstances”. This is mirrored by his tendency to avoid choices. In so far as choices represent commitments, they are perceived as dangerous and binding. Werther wants the future to be an all-encompassing panoramic that is still saturated with the totality of possibilities. By deferring choices, Werther comes to a condition of existential immobility and later full stalemate. When his power to elaborate reality runs out, Werther can no longer feel anything and time becomes an oppressive countdown. Devoid of the power to stage a past to re-live, nor able to dream of a future (by this point), Werther is forced to finally face the indifference of the present, the void of a life he never fully started to live.

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Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit handelt von Goethes Briefroman *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. Insbesondere wird die Hauptfigur aus einer Zeitperspektive untersucht: Das Thema der Zeit taucht nämlich mehrmals im Text auf. Schon im ersten Brief ist ein bezeichnender Vorsatz zu finden: Werther will die Gegenwart genießen und möchte aufhören, über die Vergangenheit zu grübeln. Davon ausgehend wurde die Forschungsfrage gestellt: wie ist diese ursprüngliche Absicht mit dem tragischen, abschließenden Selbstmord zu verknüpfen? Beziehungsweise gelingt es ihm tatsächlich, die Vergangenheit auszulassen und die Gegenwart zu genießen?

Die Forschungsarbeit ist in drei Kapitel unterteilt. Im ersten Kapitel wird untersucht, was es heißt, die 'Gegenwart zu genießen'. Hierzu werden unterschiedliche Romanauszüge analysiert und mit einer aufschlussreichen Textstelle in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* in Zusammenhang gebracht, in der Goethe Werthers existentielle Betrachtungsweise als Generationsphänomen beschreibt. Kapitel 2 geht der Frage nach, ob Werthers Verhalten gegenüber der Gegenwart und der Vergangenheit bestimmte historische und soziale Veränderungen im 18. Jahrhundert widerspiegelt, wie z.B. die Umgestaltung der großbürgerlichen Lebensweise und die Idealisierung des ländlichen Lebens. Im dritten Kapitel wird schließlich untersucht, wie Werther sich seine Zukunft vorstellt. Diesbezüglich wird analysiert, ob seine Zeitwahrnehmung eine Rolle bei seiner Entscheidung zum Selbstmord spielt.

Die Ergebnisse dieser Forschung weisen darauf hin, dass Werthers Wahrnehmung der Gegenwart seine innere Unzufriedenheit widerspiegelt. Dass die Art des Zeiterlebens eine wichtige Rolle für das Unbehagen von Werther spielt, wird von Goethe selbst in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* bestätigt. Der Autor beschreibt Werthers Unwohlsein als Ablehnung des repetitiven Charakters des Alltags: Der normale Alltag wird nicht als lebenswert betrachtet. Aus dem Vergleich zwischen diesem Textabschnitt und unterschiedlichen Romanauszügen lässt sich erklären, dass Werther schon zu Beginn des Romans ein Gefühl der Leere und der Traurigkeit empfindet. Dies führt zu einer geistigen Unruhe, die das Bedürfnis nach immer neueren und spannenderen Gefühlen bewirkt. Dabei spielt die Phantasie eine wichtige Rolle: Mithilfe seiner Einbildungskraft schafft Werther Phantasiewelten, die als beschönigende Filter wirken. Am Anfang des Romans will Werther allerdings versuchen, diese Dynamik zu überwinden: Er möchte den Alltag als lebenswert empfinden. Dazu wird die ländliche Lebensart idealisiert und als Urmodell der Gelassenheit und Sinnerfüllung menschlichen Daseins betrachtet. Ein solches Wunschbild von Frieden und Seligkeit

wird mit einer patriarchalischen Gesellschaft verknüpft und dem Leben in der Stadt entgegengesetzt. Diese Polarität von Land und Stadt findet man auch in der Auffassung der damaligen deutschen Mittelklasse, die im 18. Jahrhundert wichtige soziale und historische Veränderungen erlebt. Die Lebensweise in der Stadt gewinnt zunehmend an Luxus und wird als genussüchtig und unbeständig angesehen. Im Gegensatz dazu werden das ländliche Leben und die traditionelle patriarchalische Familie als Bild der Reinheit idealisiert. Wenn man bedenkt, dass Werther seinen Vater in jungen Jahren verloren hat, kann sein Streben nach einer patriarchalischen Zeit auf dem Land als eine Rückkehr in die Vergangenheit angesehen werden. Im Gegensatz zur Mutterfigur wird der Vater immer als wohlwollende und milde Figur idealisiert und mit der Kindheit und der ländlichen Umgebung verknüpft. Anstatt die Gegenwart zu genießen, wendet sich Werther an eine zum Mythos erhobene Vergangenheit zurück, die mithilfe der Phantasie rekonstruiert wird. Aufgrund dieser Unfähigkeit, die Gegenwart wahrzunehmen, stellt sich Werther auch kein Lebensziel und kann sich daher auch keine Zukunft vorstellen. Dies kann als Ursache für die zunehmende Hemmung der Handlungsfähigkeit betrachtet werden, die der Herausgeber am Ende des Romans als Grund für Werthers Verzweiflung angibt. Aufgrund dieser Analyse lässt sich der Schluss ziehen, dass das Zeiterleben von Werther am Anfang sowie am Ende des Romans sein existenzielles Unbehagen widerspiegelt und bei der Entscheidung zum Selbstmord dieser durchaus modernen Figur eine relevante Rolle spielt.