

The problem of body in goethe's the sorrows of young werther



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As the referent of the individual, the body functions as a site for contradiction, resistance, and reassertion. It embodies a set of rules that delineates individual space through an exclusion of that which is not self. In Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, corporeality problematizes the relations between the self and its signifiers. Whereas it has been proposed that mind lies over matter, the body generates real opposition to the expression of genius. An entity based on the premise of finitude, the body bounds aspirations towards the infinite. As the episodes of Werther's sketching, the bounded space of the individual body resists the lawless space of the sovereign genius. Werther's sketch serves as a preliminary study for the alternate reality that he envisions. The "dark eyes" (Goethe 14) that Werther attributes to the older boy are the same "dark eyes" (Goethe 25) that he endows to Charlotte¹. Eyes that can melt from one body to another presuppose a fluid nature of reality². Fluidity characterizes Werther's selection of subject matter, bridging the gap between himself and the world. "I included the nearest fence, a barn door, and a few broken cartwheels," he notes, "just as they came into view" (Goethe 14). Rather than actively selecting his subject matter, Werther sketches objects as they stream into his field of vision. He paints outdoors in order to minimize the barriers between himself and nature. The continuity that the objects experience as they flow from the outside world into Werther's sketch implies a confluence of external and personal space. At the same time, Werther perceives his body as an obstruction to the conflation of individual and exterior into a single entity. Like the sand that prevents him from drinking in Charlotte's letter (Goethe 50), Werther's body reminds him of his individuality and essential separateness from the external world.

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Decorporealization, a breaking of the damn of the body, thus proves necessary in Werther's construction of a fluid reality. In declaring that "Nature alone forms the great artist," (Goethe 14) Werther elides his body from the process of creation. Negating his own agency, he emphasizes that it is only "by accident" (Goethe 13) that he finds the two boys in the square and that it is only "without adding the slightest invention of . . . [his] own" (Goethe 14) that he completes the sketch. Reducing the artist to a conduit of nature, Werther presupposes self-destruction as a necessary counterpart to the self-creation of genius. Wishing to become dissolved in and disseminated into the world's reality, Werther's yearning is profane, because it challenges God's omnipotence. God can be everywhere at once only because He has no body that localizes His being. Corporeality makes one an individual, binding his existence to a finite locality. Perceiving the finitude imposed by his body, Werther muses, "What is man, that celebrated demigod . . . is he not . . . held back and restored to dull, cold consciousness at the very moment when he longs to lose himself in the fullness of the infinite?" (Goethe 124-125). Werther seeks to dissolve his body as a gesture towards boundlessness. So great is his narcissism that he aspires to God's omnipotence⁴; to Werther, genius is to be no less than a bodiless, boundless Creator⁵. As he states, "That the life of man is but a dream is a thought which has occurred to many people, and I myself am constantly haunted by it" (Goethe 11). Werther seeks to be the creator of his own "dream". The body's finitude poses a problem for the genius. Specifically bounded, corporeality limits genius in its essential irreproducibility. As Werther realizes, Lotte, once produced, cannot be reproduced: "Three times I have started Lotte's portrait, and three times I have bungled it . . . Finally I gave up and cut her silhouette, and with that I

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shall be satisfied" (Goethe 50). Werther can fill the evacuated silhouette with himself, but he can never fill it with the real Lotte; although he can merge with his construction of Lotte, he cannot reproduce this identification with the real girl. The body denies genius the ultimate act of creation through its reassertion of individual irreplaceability. Genius can destroy but cannot recreate that which has already been created. Only through the impossibility of decorporealization can there emerge a reality where artists can be lovers and where individuals can merge with the world.