Body & Text in the Eighteenth Century

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Morphisms of the Phantasmatic Body: Goethe's 'The Sorrows of Young Werther'

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There is nothing self-evident about the idea of approaching a literary text in terms of its fashioning of the phantasmatic body, but in the case of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*[1] much speaks for the fruitfulness of such a line of questioning. Considered generically, *Werther* marks a powerful innovation vis-à-vis its major predecessors. The epistolary novel as exemplified by Richardson's *Clarissa* or Rousseau's *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, despite occasional effusive passages, maintained a high degree of dramatic objectivity by virtue of the fact that the letters concatenated to produce the narrative are written by several correspondents and exchanged among the actors within the narrated story. This means not only that the letters themselves play a role in the unfolding of the narrative intrigue (who knows what, and when, is always important) but also that the perspective of any one character is counterbalanced by the perspectives of the other letter writers. In *Werther*, however, letter writing is the privilege solely of the eponymous protagonist, and his addressee is a figure (Wilhelm) effectively absent from the narrated story. Thus, whereas the earlier novels placed the reader in the position of an observer of the story's events, Goethe's novel affords no spectatorial vantage. *Werther*, in other words, asks the reader not to behold from the outside a drama of tangled motivations and stratagems, but, rather, to listen to (I shall justify this auditory verb subsequently) and imaginatively reenact the movements of a particular subjectivity. *Werther* is the first European novel in which subjectivity per se — the per se of subjectivity — attains aesthetic concretization. My claim is that this novelistic project involves, as one of its central components, the literary rendering of incarnate self-reference and that this occurs through the linguistic projection of the phantasmatic body.

A second reason for reading *Werther* with regard to its rendering of the phantasmatic body has to do with the fact that the experience of this imaginary corporeality reactivates aspects of the ontogenesis of bodily experience during early childhood.[2] It has become a commonplace in the historical literature to locate the emergence of childhood—conceived as a separate sphere of experience, a kind of emotional cocoon—in the latter third of the eighteenth century. The structural implosion of the family onto the nuclear triad of father-mother-child, the ascendance of the mother to the role of first educator and in general the maternal monopolization of care, the consequent emotional-erotic charging of primary socialization, and, disciplinarily speaking, the pedagogical magnification and discursivization of childhood as a domain of inquiry and manipulation from Rousseau forward: all these interlocked historical developments contribute to a reorientation of the literary imagination toward the deepest strata of personal history.[3] Thus, it is no accident that Goethe's protagonist identifies so insistently with children, borrowing from them the orientation of his desire. He reads Homer as if listening to a "cradlesong" and spoils his "heart" as if it were a "sick child" (p. 7; p. 10). Werther's subjectivity, in short, is imbued with the affective dynamics of the passage through childhood, and his particular pathology derives from the conflicts the process of becoming an adult subject has left, virulently unresolved, within him.

The phantasmatic body does not have a fixed form; on the contrary, it is caught up in a process of transformation that continuously alters its dimensions and shape, its pulsations and rhythms. Metamorphosis, then, is the medium of access to the phantasmatic body, and, more specifically: metamorphosis experienced as the movement of desire or anxiety. Description and analysis, therefore, must cleave to the changing forms through which this metamorphosis passes. I call these recurrent patterns of transformation morphisms and in what follows I shall trace out what I take to be the predominant morphism inflected in Werther's nearly monologic letters. In the second phase of the analysis I shall argue that the insistence of this morphism in the novel bears a strong internal connection to the type of reading the novel elicits.

The Morphism of the Absolute Body

Werther's eleventh letter (June 16, 1771), that letter which installs his 'love' for Charlotte within the narrative structure, recounts a ball in the countryside. The ball begins with a minuet, a dance characterized by strict

tration of movement and ritualized exchange, but then passes over altz, a differently structured dance which only two of the couples o have fully mastered. Among those fluent in the new language of are Werther and Charlotte: "Never had I danced more lightly. I felt more than human, holding this loveliest of creatures in my arms, with her like the wind, till I lost sight of everything else; and— m, I vowed at that moment that a girl whom I loved, or for whom I slightest attachment, should never waltz with another, even if it be my end! You understand what I mean" (p. 17; p. 25). Historians ed in the cultural shaping of corporeal expression and behavior und evidence in the cited passage of a historical transition. The ball ce in *Werther* registers a large-scale shift in the social organization ily movement that affected the entire cultural semiotics of cor-ty.[4] The waltz (or German dance, as it was sometimes called) was ovation of the late eighteenth century. In contradistinction to the atic minuet, a group dance of pose, constellation, rank ordering, ped movements, and theatrical display, the waltz accorded inde-ce to the dancing dyad, involved whirling, improvised movement, ghlighted the self-enclosure of the couple's intimacy. Within the ae bourgeois values of individual autonomy and expressivity and of ilial privatization of the couple, it is claimed, found an appropriate al expression. The emergence of this new corporeal code, it should d, did not occur without inciting moral outrage. As late as 1771, nacy and turbulence of the dance could still be perceived as scan-[5] No doubt this pronounced sexual connotation of the waltz (as to and simulation of intercourse) prompts the jealous vow that ots Werther's memory of the scene.[6]

eature of this historical mutation that interests me here is that the s it enters the fiction, becomes the site and occasion of a specific sm of the phantasmatic body. Waltzing with Charlotte, Werther nces a transformation of his own corporeality: the heaviness of the lls away ("light"); the dancing couple attains equivalence to a ological or cosmic movement, flying "like the wind" ("wie Wet-inally, the surrounding field of objects that would relativize the the field, let us say, of corporeal alterity—disappears.[8] The trans-ve aspect of this complex is indicated by the fact that Werther o become, within the waltz, "more than human" ("kein Mensch literally: "no longer a human being"). The significance of this nt only becomes clear when one recalls that the concept of human Menschheit" or "Menschsein") in the novel is inextricably tied to

the concept of limit ("Grenze") and therewith to the concepts of finitude, relativity, determination through difference. Waltzing with Charlotte, then, Werther senses something like a transcendence of human corporeal limitation, a possibility of corporeal movement that would be centered within itself and would course, without resistance, through a boundless space. The dancing couple becomes a transfinite body, isolated because unrelated to any alterity, and yet within this isolation total unto itself. I call this transformational type the morphism of the absolute body.

The reading I have adumbrated deviates from the sociohistorical account. According to the latter, the transition involved in the passage from minuet to waltz is to be interpreted in terms of abstract values inhering in large-scale social structures: hierarchical stratification and its attendant forms of ritualized greeting and exchange are replaced by individual autonomy; public and ostensive definition of identity passes over into a privatized, familial definition. Thus, both dances are viewed as *ways of representing* categories that ultimately derive from a theoretical discourse of macro-structural sociological description. To be sure, this representational model has a certain validity as regards the minuet and its placement within aristocratic society, the hierarchical order of which constituted a highly articulated code that could be (and was) mapped onto a variety of visibly accessible practices.[9] But the waltz is not a mechanism of representation in this sense. Rather, it is a socially circumscribed occasion for the production of the morphism of the absolute body, a social space within which the self-referential experience of an asociality becomes possible. Thus, the historical shift I register in the quoted passage from *Werther* does not substitute one represented content for another; it abandons this mode of semiosis altogether. Instead of organizing bodies within a dual system of signifying elements and their correlated signifieds, the waltz, or at least its fictional version, generates a phantasmatic corporeality that extinguishes representation.

I alluded above to the fact that the waltz, especially at the time of its historical emergence, bears sexual connotations that elicited moral censorship. The specific deployment of these connotations in *Werther* allows us to begin to measure the novel's historical innovation as regards the organization of sexuality. In Sophie La Roche's *Miss Sternheim* (see note 5), what the enraged Seymour perceives in the waltz is something like the prince's actual sexual possession of the heroine. This act (which, of course, is not accomplished in La Roche's novel) would be a symbolic 'triumph' inscribed on Miss Sternheim's corporeality and fulfilling thereby the agenda of a 'rake' and 'voluptuary'. Opposed to this code of 'rakish seduction'

centered on a scenario of 'violation,' the novel also operates with a code of 'sentimental love' in which sexuality is subordinated to friendship and shared norms of virtue. In *Werther*, however, neither of these opposed codifications of sexuality remains in force. The 'rakish' variant completely disappears and the 'sentimental' variant is decisively transformed insofar as it is no longer grounded in an intersubjectively available criterion of the good. To be sure, the figure of Charlotte embodies, for Werther as well as the reader, certain socially defined standards of virtuous behavior, but this is not the motivation of his desire. As the waltz scene reveals, Werther 'falls in love' with Charlotte because, dancing with her, he experiences the particular morphism he does. This morphism is the scenario that organizes his libidinal investment, a scenario different in every respect from the 'violation' dreamt of by La Roche's prince. Werther's desire is quite simply to become what the waltz holds out for him as an imaginary possibility: the absolute body.

One way of formulating the historical innovation sketched out in the previous paragraph is to say that the sexual component in *Werther* undergoes a process of universalization. Sexuality here is not limited to the coital act, but, rather, suffuses a range of experiences which, at least on the surface, have nothing to do with the relations between the sexes. Thus, a sort of pansexualism[10] makes itself felt in the novel, perhaps nowhere more forcefully than in Werther's famous letter of May 10, 1771:

> When the lovely valley teems with mist around me, and the high sun strikes the impenetrable foliage of the trees, and but a few rays steal into the inner sanctuary, I lie in the tall grass by the trickling stream and notice a thousand manifold things; when I hear the humming of the little world among the stalks, and am near the countless indescribable forms of the worms and insects, then I feel the presence of the Almighty Who created us in His own image, and the breath of that universal love which sustains us as we float in an eternity of bliss [das Wehen des Alliebenden, der uns in ewiger Wonne schwebend trägt und erhält]; and then, my friend, when the world grows dim before my eyes and earth and sky seem to repose in my soul like the form of a beloved—then I often think with longing, Oh, if only I could express it, could breathe onto paper all that lives so full and warm within me, that it might become the mirror of my soul, as my soul is the mirror of the infinite God! (p. 6, slightly modified; p. 9)

Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus has discussed this passage as an exemplification of the Lacanian mirror stage, arguing that it displays Werther's capture by his own specular image and consequent alienation within the imaginary.[11] Although this reading has the distinct merit of replacing the vague evocation of Werther's feeling for nature typical of much commentary on the

passage with a clearly stated, and powerful, structural hypothesis, it seems to me to go wrong in significant respects. The mirror stage, according to Lacan, inaugurates a structure in which the infant, not yet in command of the internal diversity and turbulence of its body, relates to an image (the specular image offered by the mirror) with which it identifies. The jubilatory response of the infant derives from the anticipation of a corporeal integrity that it does not possess. Within the medium of vision, the circumscribed and unitary corporeal image, to which Lacan attributes a formative capacity, fixates the ego, a process that introduces, at the very root of this subjective structure, alienation and misrecognition. Of course, the cited passage from *Werther* does employ at one point the word "Gestalt" (rendered as 'form' in the translation), with which Lacan designates the formative image, and it likewise calls on the figure of the mirror. The drift of the text, however, moves in a very different direction than that prescribed in Lacan's account, and we can mark this difference, I think, by saying that whereas Lacan describes the fixation and stabilization of the ego within the domain of representation, Goethe's text is oriented toward a corporeal morphism — the absolute body — that comes into being as the dissolution of this domain.

I note, first of all, that the scene is bathed in mist and that the sun, a precondition of clear vision, is carefully held outside the enclosing sanctuary (a 'valley' and, within this earthly fold, a tree-shaded hollow). Indeed, the function of the sun here is not to illuminate but, rather, to 'penetrate'; that is, to pierce, with its warmth, Werther's supine body. Nor is it a singular figure, a formed and formative image, that catches his attention, but a proliferation of a 'thousand manifold' things. The semantics of the text, then, multiplies forms to the point of indiscernibility (the auditory 'humming' of the English version translates a visual "Wimmeln", or 'blurring', in the original). Quite in contrast to the Lacanian description of the mirror stage, the passage moves toward a 'dimming' ("dämmern") of perception, toward a blending of distinct contours, and toward a mode of reception ('feeling', "fühlen") that does not externalize itself as a visible, free-standing shape. To state the matter as simply as possible, Werther does not see himself as an object, as Lacan claims the ego does. And for this reason he cannot, as the conclusion of the passage states, objectify his phantasmatic corporeality in a visual representation.

What is the morphism of the absolute body if not a visible, contoured form? In the variant under discussion it appears as a structure I should like to call infinite crossing. Two worlds intersect at the point marked by Werther's subjective position: that of the infinitely small and manifold and

that of the infinitely large. Werther's body, then, is felt as being without limitation, as a point of passage where one infinity crosses over into and becomes another. The absolute body is not an object defined by other definite objects; rather, it relates only to the infinitudes whose crossing and equivalence it is. Parallel to this, the passage also deploys a structure I want to call the total embrace: the world 'reposes' within Werther 'like the form of a beloved' while at the same time the 'universal love' ("der Alliebende") permeating everything holds ("trägt und erhält") him in a state of 'floating' ("schweben"). The absolute body is an embrace in which container and contained are identical.[12] These two structures—infinite crossing and total embrace—demonstrate that the mirror functions here not as an operator of visual objectification (as in Lacan's theory) but as a figure of paradoxicalization installing within the text a scenario that can never be seen.[13]

To delineate the function of this paradoxicalization, I want to press the reading of the passage under discussion a bit further. I suggested earlier that it exemplifies a characteristic expansion within the novel of the scope of sexuality, a tendency of the text toward a certain pansexualism. This term takes on special pertinence when one notes that it translates the name Werther accords his *pantheistic* deity ("der Alliebende," literally: 'the all-loving one') and that pantheism, in its Spinozist formulation, provides the paradigm of an absolute amorous relation. In particular, the Spinozist notion of *amor dei intellectualis*, in which the mind participates in divinity by loving God as God loves himself, seems to anticipate the structure of the infinite embrace adumbrated above. The love Spinoza attempts to think shares with Werther's the predicates of joy, eternity, and repose. In addition, the connection to the *Ethics* lends Werther's experience a heretical connotation that fits well with his views, expressed elsewhere in the novel, on religious orthodoxy. But in the context of the present argument the comparison is urgently relevant insofar as Spinoza's *amor dei intellectualis* names a type of love that transcends corporeal limitation. In *Werther*, this amorous transcendence assumes fictional salience as the morphism of the absolute body.[14]

My argument is not that the Spinozist conception of an intellectual love of God is the meaning the letter of May 10 transmits, merely that that conception resonates within the text, that it provides the text with a schema of non-objectival love. The figuration of the absolute body, however, sets other semantic resources into play that deviate from the philosophical-religious register and introduce within the text a decidedly non-Spinozist inflection. I mentioned earlier the double enclosure that situates the sce-

nario: the valley and, within this, the shady pocket formed by the trees. A reading of this enfolding figure as 'feminine' seems beyond dispute, and this all the more so when we consider the verbs employed to designate Werther's "floating" through eternal bliss. "Tragen" — 'to carry' — is the verb of pregnancy (a mother-to-be 'carries' her unborn child), and "erhalten" can designate the act of giving vital sustenance. The absolute body — unhindered by alterity, floating in a quasi-liquid medium that bears and nourishes it — is the autoerotic unity of mother and child.

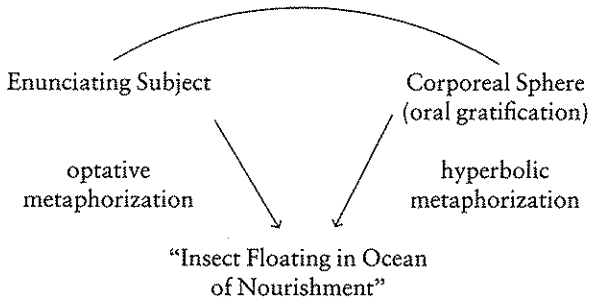
Thus far my reading has been moving backward, from the dance scene to the letter of May 10. Continuing in this direction, I want to call attention to a passage of considerable compositional prominence. After dealing in its opening two paragraphs with matters left over from the past, Werther's first letter of the novel (May 4) turns to his new circumstances. The world in which the novelistic plot will unfold, the very scene of Werther's unhappy destiny, is introduced with this remark:

> For the rest, I am very well off here. Solitude in this terrestrial paradise is a wonderful balm to my emotions, and the early spring warms with all its fullness my often-shivering heart. Every tree, every bush is a bouquet of flowers; and one might wish himself transformed into a cockchafer, to float about [herumzuschweben] in this ocean of fragrance, and find in it all the food [Nahrung] one needs. (p. 6; p. 8)

This is Werther's first enunciation of desire, and it is a kind of program for what is to follow. The hovering movement of the insect anticipates both the freedom of the dance ("herumzufliegen") and the sense of floating ("schweben") in the medium of universal love. From "balm" to "ocean," the scene is bathed in liquidity, dissolving the alterity of contoured objects into a flow that bears, soothes, even feeds (as in the maternal variant) the transformed subject. Thus, at the point where the morphism of the absolute body is first installed within the text, it appears as an exquisite oral gratification: a suffusion and nourishment that sustain the entire body in an autoerotic lubrification. All the subsequent scenes of transformation — the expansion to cosmic freedom within the dance, the pantheistic embrace — adhere to the structure of this wish.

The cited passage allows me to develop more explicitly than has thus far been the case what I mean by the morphism of the absolute body. The 'transformation' (explicitly named as such in the English translations, verbally enacted — "man möchte . . . werden" — in the German original) of the body into its phantasmatic counterpart is in fact a double operation. On the one hand, a domain of corporeal experience that I shall designate with the term "oral gratification" (liquid intake, satiation, quiescence) is

hyperbolically metaphorized in the figure of the 'floating insect.' On the other hand, the enunciating subject projects itself into the position of the insect, a projection that could be called optative self-metaphorization. The morphism of the absolute body, then, is the fusion, the cooperation, of these two metaphorical processes:



I want to stress that metaphorization, as employed here, does not imply substitution. In other words, I am not arguing that the figure of the 'floating insect' is merely a stand-in for what the text really means (for example, the infantile experience of liquid intake), or that that same figure simply externalizes an emotion that exists, apart from its optative projection, within the subject. On the contrary, the sheer organic facts that inhere within the field I have designated as oral gratification undergo a process of infinitization and totalization (for example, liquidity becomes an 'ocean') that decisively alters their relativized character and engenders a substantially new (psychic) reality in which the organic sphere persists *as trace*. Likewise, what might be thought of as the emotional tenor of the passage comes into being only through the optative projection that casts Werther's body into the 'ocean of fragrance.' The wish does not seek to recapitulate a previously experienced fulfillment; rather, it brings forth the scenario of that fulfillment, which, therefore, has a (psychic) reality only as a functional component of the wish itself. In both of its operations, then, metaphorization is *originary*, irreducible to a literal meaning that would be its organic-corporeal or subjective truth. Indeed, a kind of zero point, at which my subjectivity or my body would appear to me without such metaphorization, without such ec-static displacement beyond itself, is unthinkable. There is no *incarnate subjectivity* (the loop of the diagram is meant to indicate this unity of the two poles) without such epiphoric transference.

I have repeatedly urged that the morphism of the absolute body is

sexual in character, a scenario of desire, and that this sexuality is essentially autoerotic. The process delineated in the previous paragraph enables me to specify this claim. Sexuality, I want to say, is the domain of experience that opens up through the metaphorization of the organic functions (in this case, oral gratification), through the displacement of the corporeal onto a metaphorical plane. Sexuality, as this novel conceives it, is the *originary becoming-metaphor of incarnate subjectivity*.[15] The autoerotic character of the morphism can be explicated in two ways. First, it too results from metaphorization: that is to say, through metaphorization the corporeal functions are turned toward the subject, become something that exists for-the-subject, a scenario into which the subject—again originarily—projects itself. (In this sense, sexuality *tout court* is autoerotic.) Second, Werther's self-displacement into the morphism of the absolute body is autoerotic in the (restricted) sense that that particular scenario involves no other subjects, no other bodies, indeed, as I have often pointed out, no alterity in general. One of the truly remarkable features of Goethe's novel is that, rather than restrict sexuality to the genital farce, it discloses a sexuality that inheres in the very process of self-metaphorization. For this reason, to speak of the novel's pansexualism seems to me even technically correct.

The scenario organizing Werther's desire is the morphism of the absolute body, and one of the variants of this dream of nourishing lubrification is the unity of mother and unborn child. Hence Werther's passionate attachment to Charlotte, who lives according to the promise to raise her siblings as if they were her own:

> "Be a mother to them," she [Charlotte's dying mother] said to me [Charlotte]. I gave her my hand. "You are promising much, my child," she said—"a mother's love and a mother's eye! I have often felt, by your tears of gratitude, that you know what that means; show it to your brothers and sisters. And be as obedient and faithful to your father as a wife; you will be his comfort." (p. 41; p. 59)

Tears, which flow so often in this novel, are grateful testimony to the Mother's infinite gift, and this because they correspond, in their liquidity, to that gift (of life, of love, of nourishment).[16] Before she presents herself as image, as contoured figure, the Mother is this liquid donation. Werther's first vision of Charlotte confirms this: she stands surrounded by the children, who, with the outstretched arms of their demand, reach for the bread—the nourishment, the bread of life—she distributes to them. Viewing this "scene" ("Schauspiel"), Werther finds his attention drawn to the "pink ribbons" affixed to her dress "at the arms and breast" (p. 15; p. 21).

ribbons, which are so proximate to the source of the Mother's gift of nourishment (and in the first sketch of the novel, which calls "flesh-colored," even mimic the color of that source), become a for Werther, the single token of his love he takes to his grave.[17] And ter (June 16) that begins with this scenario of the gift of nourishment hich Werther projects himself, installing his 'love' for Charlotte 'at ght', ends by metaphorically fulfilling the promise of the liquid- nal donation that the metonymic ribbons seemed to offer him: "I bered at once that magnificent ode which was in her thoughts, and *down into* the flood of feelings that she poured over me with this word. It was more than I could bear, I bent over her hand and kissed stream of the most blissful tears" (p. 19, substantially altered; p. 27). his baptism, Werther is as if born anew in the sign of the Mother's gift, and he repays this gift, as Charlotte had already repaid it, with uid testimony of his gratitude.[18]

erify this thesis regarding the essentially oral character of Werther's or Charlotte, I introduce one further piece of evidence. Late in the as Werther's agony approaches its apex, Charlotte acquires a ca- s a gift for the children, who, of course, have been the mediators ther's desire from the first scene of nourishment. Moreover, she re- this canary as "a new friend," endowing it thereby with the title er himself enjoys within the family. Thus, the canary is introduced e text in such a way that a double path of identification—via the n and via the term "friend"—is opened up for Werther. The bird, a re of the 'air', of 'flight' and therefore of 'unhindered movement', es a figure for Werther's desire:

y flew from the mirror and settled on her shoulder. "Here's a new friend," l and coaxed him to perch on her hand; "he's a present for the children. dear he is! Look at him! When I feed him, he flutters with his wings and o nicely. He can kiss me too—look!"

eld the bird to her mouth and he pressed lovingly [lieblich] into her sweet f he could feel the bliss he enjoyed.

shall kiss you too," she added, and held the bird toward me. His little beak from her mouth to mine, and the touch of his peck was like a breath, a e of love-filled pleasure.

kiss," I said, "is not without desire [Begierde]; he wants food [Nahrung], ns away unsatisfied [unbefriedigt] from this empty caress [leeren Lieb-]."

eats out of my mouth too," she continued. She reached him a few morsels r lips, from which the joys of innocent sympathetic love smiled in delight]. (p. 56, slightly altered; p. 80)

What is most instructive about this passage in the context of my argument is the way in which Werther at once elicits and suppresses a phallic interpretation of the bird. He sees the 'loving' ("lieblich") penetration of the lips, he reduces the bird synecdochically to the phallic 'little beak', but disqualifies the kiss ("Liebkosung") as "empty." He refuses, then, a genital-coital interpretation of the figure and insists on another, for him more powerful 'desire' ("Begierde"): the desire for the oral intake of 'food' ("Nahrung"). For him, the 'kiss' is not acceptable as a prelude to the genital act, but is, in its orality, itself the scenario he longs for. What Werther desires, in short, is a kind of oral-oral linkage with the Mother that would suffuse his body-become-bird (much as it had become floating insect in the first letter) with satiation. The metaphorization that has fixed Werther's sexuality is incompatible with the parcellation of the body in intercourse. He does not want to possess Charlotte in the focused functionalization of genital sex; he wants to drink her.

To drink her as she, the liquid Mother, drinks herself:

> She turned to her piano for relief and in a sweet, soft voice breathed sounds in harmonious accompaniment of her playing. Never have I seen her lips more attractive [reizender]; it was as if they thirstingly [lechzend] opened that they might drink into themselves [in sich schlürfen] those sweet tones that quelled up [hervorquollen] from the instrument, the secret echo of which returned out of her pure mouth. (p. 62, substantially altered; p. 87)

Music is a liquidity flowing from the instrument that itself vibrates with the emotional undulations of Charlotte's—of the Mother's—interior body.[19] The introduction of voice, and, more specifically, of voice in its presemantic form as 'sound', into the oral complex I am tracing out here will prove important in a subsequent phase of my argument. At this point, I merely want to accentuate the structure of a *closed circulation of liquidity* the passage instantiates, as well as the fact that the corporeal site through which this circulation passes, becoming thereby a kind of 'eager drinking' ("schlürfen"), is the oral orifice. Thus, it is no accident—rather, a systematic consequence of Werther's incarnate metaphorization—that Charlotte's singing lips become, as the letter closes, "lips on which the spirits of heaven *float*" ("Lippen, auf denen die Geister des Himmels *schweben*") (p. 62, substantially altered; p. 87, my emphasis). That is to say, the lips, as the point of insertion into the maternal economy of pure liquid circulation and nourishment, become the site where the morphism of the absolute body is realized.[20]

The same verb of eager drinking ("schlürfen") characterizing oral in-

take within the economy of maternal-liquid circulation is employed in a letter that precedes the just-cited passage by three days: "She does not see, she does not feel that she is preparing a poison that will destroy us both; and with full voluptuousness [Wollust] I drink deeply of the draught [schlürfe den Becher aus] that she gives me to my ruin" (p. 61, slightly altered; p. 87). I mentioned earlier in connection with the ribbon at Charlotte's breast (see note 17) that Werther takes in his destiny orally, consuming not merely his love but also his death through the mouth. The morphism of the absolute body which determines Werther's desire seems to be inherently *ambivalent*, and the passage just quoted illustrates this ambivalence as a reversal of valence from the 'nourishing' aspect of 'drinking' to a 'poisonous' variant.[21] Werther's self-metaphorization as absolute body suspended within the liquidity of life and love becomes a self-metaphorization as absolute body suffused with poison, a projection which, however negatively charged, is nevertheless sexually invested (see "Wollust").

Documenting this reversal of valence is, as I shall soon show, easy enough. More difficult is the task of theoretically accounting for it. My effort in this direction takes its departure from a passage in Lacan's early text *Les Complexes familiaux*, a rather surprising reference, perhaps, in view of what I said earlier about the inadequacy of the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage as a model for reading *Werther*. But this inadequacy is precisely the point here, since, in the passage in question, Lacan attends to a level of psychic organization that, as I argued above with regard to the letter of May 10, is inaccessible to representation. "Thus, this stage being anterior to the advent of the form of the object, it does not seem that its contents could represent themselves in consciousness." The organizing figure of this stage (a figure which does not, and cannot, appear as a visible form) is the "maternal imago," or the "imago of the nourishing relation." Before the play of mirrors, before the constitution of a representational world, there is the Mother, and this imago, so named because it organizes a psychic complex and not because it appears as an object, is characterized by what Lacan calls a *primordial ambivalence*. The "basis of this ambivalence," Lacan speculates, is the "sensations of sucking and prehension." The being that absorbs is itself absorbed; the being that is suspended in the comfort of an embrace is likewise strangulated by that embrace. Focusing especially on the aspect of feeding, Lacan goes so far as to name this ambivalence a "cannibalisme fusionnel": the eater eaten, the eager drinker gulped.[22] My claim is that this same ambivalence is expressed within the novel in the reversal we are following from a "schlürfen" ('eager

drinking') of the life that emerges as liquid from the maternal body to a "schlürfen" of 'poison' likewise 'given' to Werther by the Mother. The morphism of the absolute body—the self-metaphorization that organizes Werther's sexuality—is intrinsically unstable, oscillating between the embrace of life and the violent annihilation of corporeal limitation in the embrace of death.

This oscillation is thematized in Werther's letter of August 18, which begins with the question: "Must it always be so—that the source of our happiness becomes the fountain of our misery?" (p. 36; p. 51). An interesting question, bearing, as it does, on the source of liquidity. And to illustrate how extreme this reversal from happiness to misery can be, Werther recalls the pantheistic experiences described in the letter of May 10 and analyzed above as a variant of the absolute body that evokes the nurturing unity of pregnant woman and her unborn child. The linguistic rendering of this memory draws on figures of 'infinite flight,' 'liquidity,' and 'drinking' that are utterly familiar to us: "Ah, how often then did the flight of a crane, soaring above my head, inspire me with the desire to be transported to the shores of the immeasurable ocean, there to drink the pleasures of life from the foaming goblet of the Infinite, and to realize, if but for a moment within the confined powers of my soul, the bliss of that Creator Who accomplishes all things in Himself, and through Himself!" (p. 36; p. 51). Now, however, such bliss is inaccessible to Werther and nature presents itself in a scenario of monstrosity:

> It is as if a curtain had been drawn from before my eyes, and, instead of prospects of eternal life, the abyss of an ever-open grave yawned before me. Can we say of anything that it is when all passes away—when time, with the speed of a storm, carries all things onward—and our transitory existence, hurried along by the torrent, is swallowed up by the waves or dashed against the rocks? There is not a moment that doesn't consume [verzehrte] you and yours—not a moment in which you don't yourself destroy something. . . . My heart is wasted by the thought of that destructive power [verzehrende Kraft] which lies latent in every part of universal Nature. Nature has formed nothing that does not destroy itself, and everything near it. And so, surrounded by earth and air and all the active forces, I stagger on in sheer anxiety. I see nothing but an all-consuming, all-devouring monster [ein ewig verschlingendes, ewig wiederkäuendes Ungeheuer]. (p. 37; pp. 52–53)

The earlier dream of "drinking the pleasures of life" (in German: "jene schwellende Lebenswonne zu trinken," a formulation that suggests the 'swelling' breast as the source of 'vital bliss') persists within the second, horrific vision insofar as both phantasms occupy the semantic register of 'infinite oral intake.' The valence of this hyperbolic orality, however, has

undergone an exact reversal. Now the liquidity itself (the torrent), as the translation felicitously puts it, "swallows" everything. The oral cavity becomes a "yawning," bottomless grave: an "abyss" or "Abgrund." Second by second the world is eaten up ("verzehrt"), so that all that Werther can see is the infinitely consuming, infinitely chewing monstrosity of the omnivorous world-mouth. "Ewig verschlingend": the same verb of oral consumption that marks Werther's ingestion of his love through the metonymy of the ribbon, the verb that ties him to the maternal breast (see note 17), here names the other pole of the primordial ambivalence—a universal cannibalism.

Some two weeks prior to his suicide, Werther's vision of the all-consuming "Abgrund" of nature becomes a reality: a flood, induced by unseasonable thawing, has engulfed the "beloved valley" ("liebes Tal," p. 69; p. 98) that was the privileged site of his experience of the absolute body. The nourishing maternal hollow fed, as the letter of May 10 had specified, by a "trickling stream" (p. 6; p. 9) has become "a single storming sea" (p. 69; p. 99). Despite this reversal, however, Werther still longs to be absorbed by the infinite embrace of liquidity: "Oh, with open arms I stood at the edge of the abyss [Abgrund] and breathed: down! down! and lost myself in the bliss [verlor mich in der Wonne] of storming down my agony and suffering, of surging them away like the waves!" (p. 70, substantially altered; p. 99). But one last step remains to be taken, one last oral ecstasy must be achieved: Werther must kiss Charlotte, must touch the lips of the Mother with his own. This occurs during his last visit to Charlotte on the eve of his suicide. The kiss is nothing other than the enactment of the scenario that from the beginning had organized his desire, the drinking-in of the maternal liquidity: "The sacred fire that flowed [strömte] from your lips still burns on mine and new, warm bliss [Wonne] is in my heart" (p. 82, substantially altered; p. 117). And a few lines later: "I tasted [geschmeckt] it in all its heavenly bliss, this sin, and sucked [gesaugt] force and the balm of life [Lebensbalsam] into my heart." By the law of ambivalence that governs Werther's oral desire, this infantile 'sucking' consumption of 'life's balm'—the same balm in which the insect of the novel's first letter floats and finds nourishment—becomes the imbibing of his death. The pistols Werther borrows for his suicide come to him from Charlotte's hands: "They passed through your hands—you wiped the dust from them. I kiss them a thousand times" (p. 84; p. 121). And thus the instrument of his death becomes the chalice from which the maternal donation flows: "You see, Charlotte, I do not shudder to take the cold and fatal cup from which I shall drink the frenzy of death. Your hand gave it to

me, and I do not tremble" (p. 86; p. 123). It only remains for Werther to tie together the destiny of his desire by taking the pink ribbon with him to his grave: "Wie ich das alles verschlang!" According to the editor's report, "The bullet had entered the forehead over the right eye; his brains were protruding" (p. 87; p. 124). But that description applies only to the real. By the logic of his own self-metaphorization, Werther took the pistol in his mouth.

The Interior Body of Reading

In his discussion of *Werther* in *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1795), Schiller astutely depicts the novel's hero as "a dangerous extreme of the sentimental character" ("dieses gefährliche Extrem des sentimentalischen Charakters"). This extremity derives from an irreconcilable polarization: on the one hand, Werther "strives for a substanceless infinite" ("nach einem wesenlosen Unendlichen zu ringen"); on the other hand, he comes to experience even "his own existence as a confining limit" ("in seinem eigenen Dasein nur eine Schranke sieht"). Such extreme polarization, Schiller implies, quite naturally leads to Werther's suicide as an effort to "tear down" this limit and thereby to reach what he holds to be "true reality" ("zur wahren Realität durchzudringen").[23] This observation, I believe, can be translated into the terms of the argument developed across the foregoing pages. What Schiller calls a "substanceless infinite"—for Werther the sole and true "reality"—corresponds to what I have designated (less moralistically than Schiller) as the morphism of the absolute body; what Schiller refers to as Werther's "striving" is the movement of his hyperbolic metaphorical self-projection, enacted, finally, in his suicide. Schiller's observation, however, calls attention to a feature of the novel that I have ignored up to this point: that the morphism of the absolute body does not, as it were, saturate the novel, that it stands in opposition to a contrary phantasm of the body, to a morphism that, rather than freeing up corporeality to the experience of an unhindered movement, collapses the body onto itself in a sensation of constriction and constraint. Schiller writes that Werther "sees in his own existence . . . a confining limit," that his being-there ("Da-sein") itself is a kind of wall or enclosure that separates him from the infinite, with which he seeks to merge. Again translating the terminology of Schiller's gloss, we can say that Werther phantasmatically projects his experience of corporeal particularity—his experience of his body as separate, defined by its alterity to other bodies—as a kind of imprisonment. The counterexperience to the morphism of

the absolute body is a phantasm of entrapment and enclosure in which the very 'thereness' of existence becomes an immobilizing prison wall, the skin of corporeal particularity a straitjacket. I call this the *morphism of the incarcerated body*.

It would be possible to trace the ramifications of this morphism throughout the novel, starting, for example, from Werther's reflections on human existence in the letter of May 22, which culminate in the sentence: "And then, however confined [eingeschränkt] he [man, der Mensch] may be, he still preserves in his heart the sweet feeling of liberty, and knows that he can quit this prison [Kerker] whenever he likes" (p. 10; p. 14). The metaphor of the prison along with related projections of confinement recurs often, reaching its apex perhaps in the vision of the torrent that has swept over Wallheim and into which Werther would like to plunge: "Won't this imprisoned soul [dem Eingekerkerten] someday be released for such bliss?" (p. 70; p. 99). By a peculiar reversal of values that inheres in the logic of his self-projections, Werther conceives of the very positivity of his existence as a deprivation and a captivity, as a negative condition that isolates him from absorption into the fluid and unconstrained unity of the absolute body. The body as thrown into the here and now of its being-there, the body as this particular body, limited and material, is the source of a kind of claustrophobic torment, and the fundamental impulse governing Werther's every action is the impulse to get out. Hence the darkly suggestive first sentence of the novel: "How glad I am to have got away!" (p. 5; p. 7).

For reasons of space, I must leave to others the investigation of the morphism of the incarcerated body in order to take up here a different line of questioning.[24] My query still bears on the pole of Werther's characterological "extremity" explored in the previous section, the morphism of the absolute body, but approaches this aspect of the novel from a different perspective. The question I want to raise is this: if the morphism of the absolute body is the *predominant* (which is also to say, not the only) imaginative projection of corporeality in the novel, then what consequences does this have for the process of reading? How does the reader find access to this morphism? This question touches on what might be termed the immanent aesthetics of the novel. I claimed above—for example, in the discussion of the standard sociohistorical interpretation of the dance and of the inadequacy of the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage as applied to Werther's absorption into the encompassing maternal oneness of nature—that the morphism of the absolute body comes into being as the dissolution of representation, that the absolute body is precisely the body with-

out contours or limits, that it has its source in the pre-representational experience of oral satiation. If this is the case, however, then it is clear that readerly access to this morphism cannot be achieved on the level of figuration, be it the local figuration of specific images or the overriding figuration of narrative construction. Stated more radically, if the morphism of the absolute body indeed determines what the Russian formalists called the *dominant* of the text, then its effects must be sought out on a level that is pre- or at least asemantic, and the process of reading this text must be conceived in such a way as to include, along with the various dimensions of the novelistic figuration, an asemantic level of apprehension. But what might this level be? How does such apprehension work?

We can begin to answer this question by returning to the letter of June 16. As the group of young people is on the way to the dance, a conversation unfolds in which Charlotte expresses her views first on novels and then on dancing. Werther describes his attentive listening to her speech as follows:

> How I gazed into her rich dark eyes as she spoke; how my own eyes hung on her warm lips and fresh, glowing cheeks, how I *sank down into* the wonderful sense of what she said—so much so, that I often did not hear her actual words! In short, when we arrived at the dance, I alighted from the carriage as if in a dream and was so lost in the dimming world around me that I scarcely heard the music which came from the brightly lit ballroom. (p. 16, slightly altered; pp. 23–24)

The same letter culminates, of course, in the scene at the window where Charlotte utters the name of "Klopstock," linking their joint act of witnessing the receding storm to the reading experience each has had, separately, of that poet's "magnificent ode": "I remembered at once that magnificent ode which was in her thoughts, and *sank down into* the flood of feelings that she poured over me with this watchword. It was more than I could bear. I bent over her hand and kissed it in a stream of the most blissful tears" (p. 19, substantially altered; p. 27). The juxtaposition of these passages tells us something about Werther's mode of reading: in both, the same verb of 'sinking' (versinken), of liquid absorption, defines his apprehension of language. Exactly that experience to which Werther found access in his reading of Klopstock's ode, in other words, is opened up for him as he listens to Charlotte's speech. And this listening, although it submerges the protagonist into what is called the "wonderful sense" of what she says, could hardly be thought of as semantically oriented. Werther does not even distinguish the words pronounced. His audition receives a sense (Sinn) that is not carried by the additive sequence of

individually partitioned words, but rather flows beneath it, an asemantic sense that unleashes and sustains the liquid flow of emotion evoked in him. Werther, as reader or listener, does not interpret or conceptualize. Rather, he experiences a kind of inner dissolution of the lexical-semantic code that becomes for him a point of access to the morphism of the absolute body.

The claim I want to make here is that the account of reading as an asemantic listening these passages sketch out applies to the kind of reading the novel itself elicits; that the novel takes effect when the intellectual labor of constructing semantic relations withdraws from the foreground of the reader's attention, yielding to an *apprehension of the interior body as suffused with a flowing, liquid emotionality*. And I want to claim further that the semiotic mechanism through which this apprehension is conveyed is *the voice*. But this voice is not an oral utterance sent out into the real world of spatial distances; it is not oratorical. Rather, it is an interior and remembered voice, a kind of vocal phantasm experienced within the reader's body as a soothing liquefaction. If Werther, riding in the carriage, does not distinguish Charlotte's words but nevertheless "sinks down into the . . . sense" of what she says, it is because this "sense," far from being a semantic structure, is *her voice itself* as the oral-aural conduit to the interior body.

To bring this set of claims into sharper focus, I find it useful to consider a passage I alluded to at the outset, Werther's first reference to Homer in his letter of May 13:

> You ask if you should send me books. My dear friend, for the love of God, keep them away from me! I no longer want to be guided, animated. My feelings are so stormy by themselves! I need a cradlesong to lull me and this I find abundantly in my Homer. How often must I still the burning fever of my blood, for you have never seen anything so unsteady, so restless, as my heart. But need I confess this to you, my dear friend, who have so often witnessed my sudden transitions from sorrow to joy, and from sweet melancholy to violent passion? I treat my heart like a sick child, and gratify its every fancy. Do not repeat this; there are people who would misunderstand it. (p. 7; p. 10)

Note here that Homer's epics do not fall within the class of what Werther calls "books," that they do not belong to a literary culture. Such books take their effect in what might be termed a traditional rhetorical dimension, either "guiding" (that is, instructing) or "animating" (that is, promoting pathos). Werther rejects both dimensions of rhetorical efficacy, much as throughout the novel he repudiates accumulated bookishness. But Homer, although Werther unquestionably reads his works, elicits

from him another sort of response, lulling him into an emotional quiescence, and the reason the Homeric text does this is that it works like a "cradlesong." Homer affords access, in other words, to an experience of language that precedes reading, precedes even the ability to construct semantic relations; to an experience of language as the voice of the Mother, as a tonal flow that soothes the "sick child" Werther's heart is. There is a line that runs from this passage to those on Charlotte's singing at the piano, in which, as I remarked above, her voice and mouth (note that in the carriage Werther focuses on her "warm lips") become the point of insertion into the maternal economy of the absolute body. The Homeric epics are not, for Werther, heroic narratives; they are the Mother's lulling lullaby.

Werther's localization of Homer in the sphere of what I want to call primordial orality is not an isolated or idiosyncratic gesture, but rather is continuous with literary currents in the 1770s. To make this point, I call attention to a passage on Homer from Herder's introduction to his edition of *Volkslieder* (1778–79):

> He did not sit down on velvet in order to write a heroic poem in twice twenty-four songs according to Aristotle's rule or, if the muse so wished, outside the rule, but rather sang what he had heard, represented what he had seen and vitally seized hold of: his rhapsodies did not remain in bookshops and on our rags of paper, but rather in the ear and in the heart of living singers and hearers, out of which they were much later collected and finally, buried beneath glosses and prejudices, came to us. Homer's verse, as encompassing as the blue heaven and communicating itself in such myriad ways to everything that dwells beneath it, is not the hexameter of schools and art, but rather the meter of the Greeks that lay ready in their pure and subtle ear, in their resounding language, and waited, as it were, like a formable clay for the figures of gods and heroes. Infinite and untiring it flows in gentle cascades, in repeating epithets and cadences, such as the ear of the people loved. These features, the agony of all translators and epic poets, are the soul of its harmony, the soft cushion of rest, that at every line's end closes our eye and puts our head to sleep so that it might awaken to new vision with every new line and not tire of the long way.[25]

Herder is a great, that is, historically decisive, critic not because of the accuracy of his observations and judgments but because he formulated a new imaginary of language and literature. Thus, to read this (utterly typical) passage in a strictly referential way ("Here Herder contrasts the oral culture of Homer with the modern culture of writing"), even if such a reading bears an ideology-critical accent ("Here Herder compensates for the alienation of the emergent literary market by valorizing the oral culture of Homer"), is to fall short. The task, rather, is to reconstruct the

imaginary constellation, the mythical horizon, within which the values of orality and writing (for they are, like all mythic elements, not facts, but mutually defining signs) receive their respective definitions.

I start, then, with the observation that Homeric song, as Herder here construes its existence, has nothing at all to do with oral culture in the technical sense of the term. There is no mention, no perception, of the noisy give and take of preliterate cultural production, of its ritualistic features, of its problems of memory and storage, the necessary redundancies and the laborious construction of tradition. The voice of Homer is no real voice burdened by limitations of volume and projection, and his listeners are no real bodily assembly galvanized by corporeal proximity. Finally, there is no mention of the rigorous discipline (the mnemotechnics, the schooling of the voice, the training in set forms) characteristic of oral cultures; it is as if everything ushered forth from spontaneity. In short, orality here does not occupy a place in the world, is not a technology of the word. Quite the contrary, Homer's voice and song go directly to the heart and ear of his auditors without ever passing through an exteriority, and these auditors themselves are the sheer internality of their attentive listening. To put the matter another way, Herder imagines the collectivity of oral culture as a collective individual that, in the inwardness of its audition, hears the originary song of its language.

Two operations, then, produce the value of primordial orality that Herder's text endows with such mythic dignity: a singularization of collectivity and an internalization of sound. The group becomes an individual subject attentive to the movements of its own inwardness. Both of these operations come together in the phrase "such as the ear of the people loved": the people as a single ear affectively bound to the gentle cascades of voice that resound within it. At this point, the imaginary character of Herder's concept of orality—the phantasmatic scene it evokes—profiles itself most clearly. We are dealing here with an intimate emotional tie, with the 'love' of an individual subject for the voice that vibrates within it, and in particular (as the cited passage goes on to say) for the 'soul' whose audibility, whose existence, that voice is. Any remaining doubts as to the private, individual, and inward nature of this primordial orality, this circuit of voice and ear, are dispelled by the transformation of the "soul of its harmony" into a "soft cushion" that soothes us (suddenly Herder is back in the contemporary world) into sleep. The rhapsode's performance before his assembled listeners has become, exactly as in *Werther*, a lullaby sung to a child. The "gentle" ("sanft"; one might also translate "tender") cadences the ear so 'loves' emanate from a maternal instance.

To substantiate this reading, I call attention to a further passage from Herder, this time from his *Treatise on the Origin of Language*:

> The nursing infant that stammers its first words repeats with this stammering the feelings of its parents and swears with each early stammering through which tongue and soul form themselves to render these feelings eternal, as truly as it calls them his father- or mother-language. Throughout its life these first impressions of its childhood, these images from the soul and heart of its parents, will live and act within him: together with the word the entire feeling that early overflowed his soul will return: with the idea signified by the word all of the associated ideas that then lay before him in his morning-view into the realm of creation—they will return and act more powerfully than the pure and clear central idea itself.[26]

I select for emphasis three intertwined ideas of this passage. First, Herder clearly conceives of orality as the medium not merely of the tongue's training but of the formation of the soul. Subjectivity emerges within the audibility of the voice. This implies (second idea) that the voice is the carrier of what might be termed an ontogenetic semantics: into adulthood it maintains a link to the experience of language acquisition and to the familial network of feelings, symbolic positions, and perceptual colorings that characterized that experience. We might say that language for Herder takes on a personal-historical density, that it bears the sedimentations of childhood experience even into the phase in which such experience is forgotten; in short, that my language is so intimately connected with my childhood that it remembers more than I do. These two linked notions are important in understanding the "sense" that Werther, in the passage cited earlier, "sinks into" without differentiating Charlotte's words, and they are likewise a key to his reading of Homer as "cradlesong." The sort of reading alluded to in these passages actualizes the anamnestic potential of language as voice, recapitulates, as a resonance within the interior body, the formation of the soul in the movements of the voice, and allows the resonant traces of childhood impressions shaped within the familial network of affectively invested symbolic positions to become audible once again. These vocalic traces and not the "pure and clear central idea" of the words (that is, their lexical-semantic nucleus, their conceptuality) are what reverberate within the reader's interior body.

The third idea of the passage I want to emphasize does not receive explicit mention. It has to do with the overall point of Herder's remarks, their function within a larger context of argument. Herder wants to claim that the transition from nature to culture the nursing infant negotiates is itself a natural event, or, more precisely, that it obeys a natural economy. The economy in question (the economy that structures the entirety of

Herder's argument in the *Treatise*) is that of lack and supplement. As a sheerly natural being, the human infant is poorer and weaker than any of the animals. But this weakness is itself the condition of strength, for nature supplements the instinctual poverty of the human creature with the richness of education, development, culture, and community. And the instrument through which this process of natural supplementation occurs, of course, is language, the orality through which the child internalizes the "feelings of its parents" and therewith shapes its "tongue and soul."

I stress this point because it is crucial to understanding how the concept of primordial orality functions in Herder's theory and who the agency of this orality actually is. The transition from nature to culture is smooth and continuous, it is accomplished not by the violent imposition of an arbitrary law as in Rousseau but by what Herder calls the "economy of the nature of human kind." Here is another "look," as Herder says, at this economy:

> The woman, in nature so much the weaker part, must she not accept the law from the experienced, providing, language-forming man? Yes, if it be called law what is merely the mild beneficence of instruction? The weak child, so literally called immature, must it not accept language, since it enjoys with it the milk of its mother, the spirit of its father? And must not this language be rendered eternal if anything is to be rendered eternal? Oh, the laws of nature are more powerful than all the conventions which cunning politics concocts and the wise philosopher claims to enumerate! The words of childhood—these our early playmates in the dawn of life! with which our entire soul formed itself—, when will we fail to recognize them, when will we forget them? Our mother language was simultaneously the first world we saw, the first sensations we felt, the first activity and happiness we enjoyed.[27]

The deficiencies of the natural creature do not run up against a heterogeneous law of culture which would press the infant into conformity; rather, they are compensated by a gentle benevolence, by a sort of loving care that the economy of nature guarantees. The man, as the stronger, language-shaping agency, conveys his 'law' (if 'law' be called this protective charity) to the woman, who in turn transmits it to the child. The child, then, is twice removed from the violence of the law, first by the father's love of the mother, and then by the mother's love for the child. And especially this latter love—the maternal donation through which the child receives its first language—can be stylized as 'natural.' The infant passing into culture drinks in the mother's voice like milk from her breast. The maternal voice nurses the child and provides therewith the natural supplement that transforms our creaturely poverty into cultural abundance. Pri-

mordial orality is the voice of the Mother, the medium of a natural culturation. And the meaning carried in what I referred to above as the ontogenetic semantics of language is the affective tonality of the vocal cocoon that unites mother and child. This is why the poetry of Homer is a lullaby whose tender cadences, according to Herder, we "love"; and this is why Charlotte's singing at the piano is Werther's point of insertion into the liquid-maternal economy.

This brief excursus through Herder's theory of language allows me to formulate more explicitly the claims made above regarding the kind of reading *Werther* elicits. Beneath the lexical-semantic differentiation of the text there flows—much as for Herder the "gentle cascades" of Homer's song flow within the loving ear of his listeners—a *melos* that is the very medium, the existence, of the "soul." This is what I meant when I said at the outset that *Werther* is the first European novel in which subjectivity per se becomes audible. The voice (conceived, to be sure, not as oratorical, not as emitted into the world, but as primordial orality) is the existence of subjectivity: "This subjectivity for itself is, wholly abstractly, the pure process of time which, in the concrete body, is as time realizing itself, as vibration and tone."[28] The category of empathy has often been employed to characterize the pragmatics of the novel, but this vague notion of emotional identification misses entirely the psychological, medial, and corporeal dynamics of reading that the text sets into motion. The reader of the novel, I want to say, is drawn into a fantasy scene that is not a scene, not a visual or representational objectification, and not an empathetic actualization of the feelings of a fictional individual; this scene is, rather, the hallucination of the oral-aural circulation of voice within the interior body, the experience of the interior body as dissolved in primordial orality.

This voice, however, only becomes audible intermittently; it is interrupted, checked, fragmented, and suppressed by everything in the novel's language that is not voice, by everything that derives from its *written* character. This point emerges in an especially revealing fashion in Werther's first note addressed to Charlotte herself: "Yes, dear Charlotte! I will take care of everything as you wish. Do make me more requests, the more the better. I only ask one favor; use no more writing sand with the little notes you send me. Today I quickly raised your letter to my lips, and it set my teeth on edge" (p. 29; p. 41). Just as the granular residue of the writing process blocks Werther's fantasy of orally consuming (kissing, drinking) Charlotte's language, just as the sand desiccates the liquidity of ink, so too in the novel generally do the mechanisms of writing block access to the domain of primordial orality.

The interference of orality and writing produces an alternation of flow and disruption that lends the novel its characteristic rhythm. Surges of language emerge only to be halted and are halted only to be repeated again. This rhythmic pattern profiles itself globally in the novel's overriding material-semiotic structure as a concatenation of letters, fragments of letters, and self-addressed notes, with the force of interruption and fragmentation becoming ever more insistent as the novel bends toward its sorrowful end. But the same pattern emerges in local passages as well. A telling example occurs with the first mention of Charlotte's piano playing:

> Sometimes when we are talking she lays her hand on mine and in the eagerness of conversation comes closer to me, and her divine breath touches my lips—I feel myself sinking away [versinken] as if struck by lightning. And yet, Wilhelm, with all this heavenly intimacy—if I should ever dare—you understand. No! my heart is not so depraved; it is weak, weak enough—but isn't that a kind of depravity?
>
> She is sacred to me. All desire is silenced in her presence; I don't know what I feel when I'm near her. There is a melody which she plays on the piano with the touch of an angel—so simple is it, and yet so full of spirit! It's her favorite song, and when she strikes the first note all my worry and sorrow disappear in a moment. (p. 27, slightly altered; p. 39)

Both in terms of the events described and in terms of the internal rhythm of the description, the passage moves from the simulation of orality to a phase of staccato interruptions in order to return to an oral glide. And the trace left by these interruptions of the oral stream is a purely graphic marker of division, — the dash, a punctuation that Werther at one point claims not to like at all.[29] This emergence of the dash precisely at that moment when the oral phantasm edges toward fulfillment is by no means unique. The two other piano scenes in the novel (pp. 62/87; pp. 64/91) exhibit the identical rhythmic alternation, the identical fracture of orality by the severance of writing.[30]

The rhythm of oral flow and scriptural interruption that constitutes the phenomenology of reading in *Werther* corresponds, on the level of narrative, to the conflict of love and law. This is why the dash, in the piano passages just referred to and throughout the novel, takes effect as a force of censorship, impeding explicit acknowledgment of Werther's desire. Thus, it is no accident that Albert is a successful secretary at court, a profession one could characterize as writing in the name of the law, exactly that profession at which Werther—in part due to his supervisor's insistence on proper punctuation—did not succeed. This interweaving of the issues of orality and writing, love and law, takes on a special salience at that moment when Charlotte, acting in anticipation of her husband's proscrip-

tion, tells Werther he must not visit her again before Christmas Eve, imposing thereby a rhythm of regulated intervals between their meetings: "'We can't go on like this any longer!' He turned away from her, walking hastily up and down the room, muttering between his teeth, 'We can't go on like this any longer!'" (p. 72, slightly altered; p. 102). And when Charlotte, in the same scene, goes on to speak of his attachment to her in words Werther recognizes as Albert's, the text again notes: "He gritted his teeth and looked at her gloomily" (p. 72; p. 102). Just as the dental consonant interrupts and articulates the vocalic flow—introducing thereby phonemic articulation, the very possibility of language as a diacritical structure—Albert's word, the word of prohibition, sets Werther's teeth on edge, forces his mouth into a kind of dental rigidity. The passage, recalling Werther's earlier remark on Charlotte's use of "writing sand," illustrates the internal severance of orality by the law and by writing that constitutes the fundamental structural principle of the novel and its reading. Hence the peculiar quality of Werther's anxious fantasy of retribution for the transgression he dares not admit to: basking in the "heavenly expression" of Charlotte's "words," giving himself over to his dream of oral-aural union, he suddenly feels something "grab me like an assassin around the throat" (p. 38, slightly altered; p. 55).[31] The law is to love as writing is to voice: a regulated strangulation.

In the passages on Klopstock and Homer and in the carriage scene cited above, the novel installs the scenario of its own reading. The voice becomes audible beneath the level of lexical-semantic articulation. A similar paradigmatic status can be attributed to the following excerpt: "Yesterday, as I was leaving, she took my hand and said, 'Adieu, dear Werther.' Dear Werther! It was the first time she called me 'dear'; it penetrated my whole being. I have repeated it a hundred times since and last night, as I was going to bed and talked to myself about nothing in particular, I suddenly said, 'Good night, dear Werther!' and I could not help laughing at myself" (p. 61; p. 87). To love, as this passage defines it, is to love the voice that says "love" and in doing so suffuses even the body's skeletal rigidity ("ging mir durch Mark und Bein"). To love is so thoroughly to identify with the voice intoning the predicate of love ("dear"; "lieber") that that voice is held within the body, awaiting the inattentiveness of freely associating speech to return and, in my voice, address me once again. Werther's voice becomes the echo of Charlotte's and Charlotte's, in turn, the echo of a more primordial orality. For it is not a quotidian "adieu" that the returning voice addresses to Werther, but a "good night," as if whispered to a child going to sleep. The Homeric "cradlesong" in its

most reduced and purest form: the voice of the Mother, the voice *as* Mother.

The chain of concepts I have developed here to characterize the relation between semiosis and corporeality specific to the novel—the morphism of the absolute body, the liquid maternal economy, primordial orality, the intermittent rhythm of voice and writing—requires one further notional link. As the natural supplement, the articulation of nature and culture, the voice occupies an ambiguous position. In the sentence I cited from Hegel, it is said that the voice is the existence of subjectivity as time. The time that characterizes the voice is at once the sheer presence of its audibility and its audible disappearance. The voice dies with every instant of its life; it is the pure expression of organic-corporeal vitality and at the same time of death. Thus Herder notes in his *Treatise* that suffering animals give expression to their death as voice: "the sound of death resounds [der Todeston tönet]."[32] And Hegel develops much the same idea: "In violent death every animal has a voice, expresses itself as negated self."[33] This has important consequences for the aesthetic structure of the novel. If, as I have argued, Goethe's novelistic project is to bring primordial orality to aesthetic concretization, to make that voice—intermittently—audible in its writing, then that novelistic project must also include the experience of voice as pure negativity, as the death of the body. And the reader's listening to that voice must be a kind of labor of mourning.

The ambiguity of the voice corresponds to that of the oral fantasy of the absolute body: simultaneously nourishment and poison, enclosure within the maternal-liquid economy and drowning, drinking, and being swallowed. Interestingly enough, the passage in which Werther imagines the world as an omnivorous monster, a kind of all- and self-consuming mouth, also includes the novel's most explicit thematization of time: "Can we say of anything that it is when all passes away—when time, with the speed of a storm, carries all things onward—and our transitory existence, hurried along by the torrent, is swallowed up by the waves or dashed against the rocks?" (p. 37; p. 52). Moreover, the ambiguous position of the voice as life/death determines the narrative structure of the novel's love story. If to love, as Werther loves Charlotte, is to identify with the voice, to wish to coincide with and dissolve in that voice, then it is likewise to identify with one's death. To love the voice is to love death as pure negativity. The eroticization of death so often noted by critics of the novel is a function of its set (Einstellung) toward language.

And what of the reader's work of mourning? Where does this listening to voice as death find its correlate in the novel? The answer, of course, is in

the infinite lament of Ossian's songs. "Ossian has superseded Homer in my heart," Werther writes, about two-thirds through the novel (p. 58; p. 82), announcing the displacement of his identification with the epic "cradlesong" onto the dolorous litany of the bard. And at the close of the novel, when he reads from his translations of Ossian at Charlotte's request, the voice that rises from within him is that of death and absence. The insertion of these translations into the novel is often regarded as an aesthetic failing, an awkward halting of narrative pace, and when they are accorded a function, the passages are usually viewed merely as an index of Werther's unhappy state of mind. If my argument up to this point is correct, however, then the Ossian translations, in all their monotony, must be viewed as that moment when the novel achieves its most radical authenticity. The songs that Werther reads are nothing but an enclosure of voices within voices, each voice recalling and rehearsing the death of voice. Here the equivalence of voice and soul posited in Herder's language theory finds perfect expression; but the souls are not forms of vital animation, they are shades, audible traces of the dead. Goethe's translation of Macpherson's forgery thus opens up a kind of ghostly echo-chamber within the novel in which death, without locus or body, reverberates. And this echoic effect vibrates in the reader, disclosing the hetero-affection of one's own voice, its invasion by another. Listening to the *evocation* of the dead that echoes through Werther's translations, to this voice without origin that is voice in its purest form as negativity, Charlotte and Werther experience once again the flow of the liquid-maternal donation and the possibility of an erotic union that, as bodies, they will never know: "They felt their own misery [Elend] in the fate of the noble ones [Edlen]—felt it together, and their tears united [vereinigten sich]" (p. 80, substantially altered; p. 114). The "Edlen"—the dead—echo in the "Elend" that is the poverty, the abandonment, the disappropriation of vocalic time.

Werther, I have argued, identifies with the voice, both in his love and in his suicide, an identification that corresponds to his self-metaphorization as absolute body. But this correlation also applies to Goethe's singular aesthetic achievement in the novel. At the most fundamental level of the text, prior to its play of narrative and scenic representations, prior, I am tempted to say, to its fictionality, this text is a single—if interrupted—evocation. Voice (not fiction) is the movement of transport that dissolves the reader's organic body in the audition of subjectivity per se. Voice is the originary metaphor of the novel itself, the semiotic-corporeal *atopia* of the novelistic event.