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Romantic Subjectivity in Goethe and Wittgenstein

Abstract: From roughly 1600 to 1800, a new form of subjectivity developed in Europe. As a result of developments in science, technology and political economy, subjects — first a small minority and then an increasingly large sector of the bourgeoisie — began to sense new possibilities of leading independent lives, with shapes determined from their own inner resources. As subjects began to accord greater and greater importance to their individual thoughts, feelings, and sensibilities, courses of life came to be seen as properly determined less and less by heredity and class membership and more and more by free personality. At the same time, however, the experience of the possibility and value of a life of free personality was freighted with anxieties and uncertainties about how really to get on with life and about what one's social reception and place might be.

Goethe's *The Sufferings Of Young Werther* models the shape of life of such a new subject. Werther demonstrates a peculiarly intense sensory receptivity, a mobility of thought, and thoroughgoing uncertainty about his social and personal identity. These features of his character are evident in the short observations on and summaries of his daily life that he sends to his friend Wilhelm — a kind of absent second self and in the peculiarly intense language that Goethe puts in Werther's pen and consciousness. In the end, a less subjectively intense common social life goes on without Werther, who proves unable to find a place within it.

The protagonist in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* demonstrates a similarly strong and unsettled subjectivity in his conversations with himself about philosophical problems. His thoughts too are labile: he doesn't 'know his way about', and he does not know either how to bring his reflections to a constructive end or how to integrate himself into any community. In contrast, however, to the end of *Werther*, the protagonist finds in the inexhaustibility of his reflections a kind of home in writerly activity, albeit without social peace.

By developing the comparison between subjectivities of the protagonist of *Werther* and *Philosophical Investigations*, I argue that modern, romantic subjectivity, which is nearly inescapable for us, involves having a sense of the continuing task or burden of integrating intense subjectivity with stable social life. In this we live between the two forms of escapism into death-withdrawal or into isolated, modernist, artistic activity that characterize the ends of Werther and of the

protagonist of *Philosophical Investigations*. Writing is one central way to carry on this life, literally and metaphorically.

As a result of the fine work of Mark Rowe, Joachim Schulte, Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker,¹ it has now been evident for some time that there are deep affinities — affinities in style and textual organization, in conceptions of elucidatory explanation via comparisons, and in a sense of subjectivity housed within nature — between the Goethe of the *Farbenlehre* and the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*. Among the very deepest of these affinities is their shared sense of the limits of metaphysical explanation. The identification of simple elements is always relative to purposes and circumstances, never ultimate. Hence there is no single kind of ultimate explanation running from the nature and behavior of ultimate simples to the nature and behavior of complexes composed out of them. There are often useful explanations to be found of how the behaviors of complexes are determined by the behaviors of their parts, but this kind of explanation is one among many. Comparative descriptions of complexes — whether of organisms, human practices, works of art, or chemical and physical structures — are not to be supplanted in favor of ultimate metaphysical explanation.

Valuable and sound though these ideas are, they are, however, not my theme in this essay. Instead, I am concerned with a different form of affinity between Goethe and Wittgenstein, an affinity in their senses of what it is to be a human subject. To be sure, I will practice some comparative description of their respective senses of subjectivity in the hope that some illumination may result, but I will dwell more on the substance of the comparisons than on the logic or methodology of the illumination pursued.

Thomas Mann's remarks on *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* provide a useful starting point. "It would", Mann observes,

not be a simple task to analyze the psychic state that determined the underpinning of European civilization at that time [1774, the date of publication of *Werther*]. [...] A discontent with civilization, an emancipation of emotions, a gnawing yearning for a return to the natural and elemental, a shaking at the shackles of ossified culture, a revolt against convention and bourgeois confinement: everything converged to create a spirit that came up against the limitations of individuation

¹ See M. W. Rowe, "Goethe and Wittgenstein", in: *Philosophy* 66 (1991); J. Schulte, "Chor und Gesetz: Zur 'Morphologischen Methode' bei Goethe und Wittgenstein", in: *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 21 (1984); G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, 537-540. I summarize and comment on this work in my "Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein", *Intentionality and Romanticism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 177-181.

itself, that allowed an effusive, boundless affirmation of life to take on the form of a death wish. Melancholy and discontent with the rhythmical monotony of life was the norm.²

It is likewise not a simple task to say what may have made such melancholy and discontent the norm, at least in certain circles. Secularization, bringing with it a sense of lost meaningfulness as religious ritual became a smaller part of daily life, and modernization, bringing with it a market economy and new but very uncertain life chances, are surely part of the story. But secularization and modernization are themselves interwoven with deep, largely tacit selfunderstandings about what is worth doing, in ways that are difficult to disentangle. Charles Taylor, in his monumental survey of the making of the modern identity, describes what he calls

three major facets of this identity: first, modern inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths; second, the affirmation of ordinary life which develops from the early modern period; third, the expressivist notion of nature as an inner moral source.³

These facets of identity that come to the fore in modernity are as much a part of a generally possible human repertoire of identity as they are byproducts of something else. They are, according to Taylor, an inescapable part of our moral framework, a set of commitments that we cannot help but have.

One important result of these commitments, is an undecomposable intermingling of moral discovery with moral invention. We no longer think of ourselves as simply living out in one way or another basic human tendencies that are simply given. Rather, drawing on our inwardness, on ordinary life, and on nature, we partly make ourselves what we are. As Taylor puts it,

We find the sense of life through articulating it. And moderns have become acutely aware of how much sense being there for us depends on our own powers of expression. Discovering here depends on, is interwoven with, inventing.⁴

Finding is inseparable from founding.

But why should this occasion what Mann noted: discontent, yearning, shaking, revolt, melancholy, and a death wish? It is easy enough to see why a certain improvisatoriness and independence of mind might be valued. But how and why did our moral improvisations come to be freighted with all that? — Here the

² Th. Mann, "On Goethe's *Werther*", in: V. Lange, ed., tr. E. Corra, *The Sufferings of Young Werther and Elective Affinities*, New York: Continuum, 1990, 2.

³ Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

answer has to do, I think, with a certain lack of both ground and closure to our moral efforts. Without fixed tendencies and *tele* as starting points and endpoints, it becomes uncertain what moral progress and human achievement might look like, even uncertain whether they are possible at all. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy note the uncertainties that attach to our moral efforts in the wake of the felt absence of any fixed presentation of the self and its powers, as they describe the conception of the subject in Kant's moral theory.

Without oversimplifying or hardening the contours of a question that merits extended analysis, we cannot fail to note that this 'subject' of morality can be defined only negatively, as a subject that is not the subject of knowledge (this knowledge suppressed 'to make room for belief'), as a subject without *mathesis*, even of itself. It is indeed posited as freedom, and freedom is the locus of 'self-consciousness'. But this does not imply that there is any cognition — or even consciousness — of freedom. [...] (T)he question of [the moral subject's] unity, and thus of its very "being subject", is brought to a pitch of high tension.⁵

Lacking a fixed ground and definite *telos*, efforts at articulating and enacting 'a sense of life' come to be marked by a desperate intensity. Different subjects become variously lost within different ongoing projects of articulation, each maintaining its sense of its place and progress not through ratification by an audience, which is all too caught up in its own projects, but rather through an hysterical lingering in process. Articulation

sets out to penetrate the essence of poiesy [— poetic making —], in which the [articulation] produces the truth of production itself, [...] the truth of production *of itself*, of autopoiesy.⁶

The manifold modern *Bildungsromane* and personal epics of coming to selfconsciousness and assured social vocation, but *Bildungsromane* and epics that have difficulty in reaching their own conclusions (other, perhaps, than by taking the artistic making of the very work in hand as the achieved *telos*), are evidence of the dominance of the project of autopoiesis in the modern moral imagination. Human moral selfimagination and achievement become a "question of *the becoming* present of the highest"⁷, not of its *being* present.

⁵ Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe and J.-L. Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, tr. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, 31.

⁶ Ibid., 12. The subject term of Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's clauses is "literary production", not "articulation", but with the migration of human self-production toward the literary, in a mix of discovery and invention, the latter, more general term makes their characterizations appropriate to human moral efforts in general.

⁷ R. Gasché, "Foreword" to Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, tr. P. Firchow, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, Xix.

The three inescapable parts of our moral framework that Taylor identifies — inwardness, ordinary life, and nature as an expressive resource — conspire in our experience with and against one another to inhibit the achievement of a stable sense of life. Either nature in the aspect of the sublime conspires with inwardness to resist the sways of ordinary life and conventionality, thus setting up the image of the chthonic genius as the exemplar of moral achievement, as in Nietzsche, or nature in the aspect of the beautiful conspires with ordinary life and conventionality, thus setting up an image of pastoralized domesticity as the exemplar of moral achievement, as in certain moments in Rousseau. Each image then stands in immediate criticism of the other, and no stable image of moral achievement persists.

Under such uncertainties and instabilities, it is all too plausible that one might not only become melancholic, but come to wish for nothing more than surcease, even to regard the taking of one's own life as the only possible creative act with a fixed endpoint, as the only meaningful act. Or of course, more modestly, one might forego efforts to live according to a sense of life or to what is highest and assume instead an instrumentalist stance toward the things of life, seeking only modest satisfactions. This strategy is common in modernity, and it is surely honorable. But does it quite escape the silent melancholies, quiet desperations, and covert nihilisms about which Emerson and Thoreau and Nietzsche variously warned us?

To come now specifically to *Werther*: Werther's own character is torn between the idealized images of chthonic originality, represented for him by the wild excesses of his own inner emotional life, and pastoralized domesticity, represented for him by the figure of Lotte, maternally feeding bread to her younger brothers and sisters. There are interesting historical specificities that surround the split in Werther's character — and in Goethe's between these two ideals. In his monumental study of Goethe's development, Nicholas Boyle suggests that these ideals are posed, and posed as irresolvable, for Werther and for Goethe, by certain strains in 18th century German culture. "Werther's innermost life", he writes,

is determined by a public mood; he lives out to the last, and inflicts on those around him, the loyalties which — because they are literary, in-tellectual, in a sense imaginary loyalties, generated within the current media of communication — most of his contemporaries take only halfseriously. His obsessions are not gratuitously idiosyncratic — they belong to his real and socially determined character, not just to a pathologically selfabsorbed consciousness.⁸

⁸ N. Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age — Volume 1: The Poetry of Desire*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, 176.

Specifically, Boyle suggests that Leibnizianism, Pietism, and Sentimentalism offered images to Goethe of "the self thirsting for its perfectly adequate object."⁹ This thirsting of the self for a confirming object took an especially inwardized turn in Germany, since it could not plausibly be welded to a project of political nation building. Autonomy or achieved selfhood had to be found within, and its principal marks were inner intensities of imagination, feeling, and devotion. Goethe's subjectivity, like Werther's, is dominated by "his belief in binding moments of insight"¹⁰ to be achieved fitfully against the sway of official and conventional culture. At the same time, however, Goethe also absorbed a certain political realism and social consciousness from the Storm-and-Stress movement. He had an awareness of individual character types, including his own, as specific social roles — a novelist's sense (unlike anything in Werther himself) of social reality as narratable from multiple points of view. In *Werther*, as Boyle characterizes it,

the Sentimentalist content of the novel is in perfect but momentary balance with a Storm and Stress aesthetic which determines the manner of its presentation.¹¹

Like Werther, Goethe in writing *Werther*

endeavored to find roles for himself to act out which both had some general moral or historical significance and could be filled by him with a sense of selfhood: roles which fused both a [social] character and [an intensely individual] consciousness.¹²

Inwardness and the pursuit of chthonic originality alone lead to empty solipsism; acceptance of oneself as a social type and conformity to convention alone lead to derivativeness and imaginative death. The task is to combine the pursuit of originality with acceptance of oneself as a social type. Unlike Werther, Goethe himself carried out this task through the act of writing about his innermost emotions and selfimagination in a social setting. This act of writing gave him the opportunity both to cultivate his inner life and to achieve a certain realistic distance from it. For Werther himself, faced with the same task and torn between his hyperbolic idealizations of originality on the one hand and domesticity on the other, things do not go so well. The "very impetus to selfdestruction is being imposed on him by the German public mind" — itself faced with the problem of cultivating both autonomous selfhood and continuing sociality — "commerce with which he cannot avoid, or wish to avoid, if he is to express himself at all."¹³ The task of blending selfhood with social identity is neither unique to Werther,

⁹ Ibid., 124.

¹⁰ Ibid., 110.

¹¹ Ibid., 177.

¹² Ibid., 162.

¹³ Ibid., 176.

nor to Goethe, nor to the German public mind of the late eighteenth century. It is the fate of modern subjectivity as such either to face or to evade it.

Like Boyle, Mann too characterizes Werther as "the overrefined final product of the Christian Pietist cult of the soul and of the emotions."¹⁴ What this means, above all, is a desire for singularity, specifically a desire to desire, intensely and infinitely. As Mann puts it,

the desire to exchange that which is confining and conditional for that which is infinite and limitless is the fundamental character of Werther's nature, as it is of Faust's. [...] He is in love even before his love has an object.¹⁵

Even Lotte asks Werther,

Why must you love me, me only, who belongs to another? I fear, I fear, that it is only the impossibility of possessing me that makes your desire for me so strong.¹⁶

Only a desire for the impossible can certify itself as genuinely singular and original, capable of confirming selfhood against the grain of conventionality.

In the grip of such a desire, impossibly seeking original selfhood both against the grain of all conventionality and yet blended with social identity, no one knows what to do. Our desires are original if and only if impossible, unrecognizable; and they are recognizable and satisfiable if and only if they are mimes of the conventionalized desires of others. No wonder that Werther observes that

All learned teachers and tutors agree that children do not understand the cause of their desires; but no one likes to think that adults too wander about this earth like children, not knowing where they come from or where they are going, not acting in accord with genuine motives, but ruled like children by biscuits, sugarplums, and the rod — and yet it seems to me so obvious. (9)

Werther cannot anywhere recognize, act on, and satisfy his own desire as his own.

As he then himself wanders the earth, impossibly seeking fully original selfhood blended with social identity, Werther alternates in his moments of attachment and identification between surrender to beautiful scenes of sociality, composure, convention, and pastoralized domesticity, on the one hand, and ecstatic

¹⁴ Th. Mann, op. cit., 9.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁶ J. W. v. Goethe, "The Sorrows of Young Werther", in: D. E. Wellbery, ed., tr. V. Lang, *Goethe: The Collected Works*, vol. 11, , Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, 72. Subsequent references to *Werther* will all be to this edition and will be indicated in the text by page number.

abandonment to sublime scenes of wild creative energy, on the other. In neither moment is the attachment or abandonment either ordinary or in fact achieved; in both cases it is hyperbolized in Werther's imagination into something exceptional, and his hyperbolizing imagination blocks his actually doing anything.

The emblem in nature of the beautiful, of pastoralized domesticity, and attachment, in Werther's imaginative perception, is the cozy valley of Wahlheim — home's choice.

'It is', Werther writes early on, interestingly situated on a hill, and by following one of the footpaths out of the village, you can have a view of the whole valley below you. A kindly woman keeps a small inn there, selling wine, beer, and coffee; and she is extremely cheerful and pleasant in spite of her age. The chief charm of this spot consists in two linden trees, spreading their enormous branches over the little green before the church, which is entirely surrounded by peasants' cottages, barns, and homesteads. Seldom have I seen a place so intimate and comfortable [...] (10)

The force and direction of Werther's idealization is evident in his litany of adjectives: "kindly", "small", "cheerful", "pleasant", "little", "intimate", and "comfortable". Here he would — originally and creatively — surrender himself to a domesticated, given, human life in nature. But to desire to do this originally and creatively is to make one unable to do it, and Werther simply gazes on the scene, until, as he thinks of himself, he reverts in thought to the idea of nature as also a source of iconoclastic creative energy.

The counterpart scene in which Werther imagines ecstatically abandoning himself to the sublime comes late in his correspondence, as things are not going well. On December 12th, he writes,

Sometimes I am oppressed, not by apprehension or fear, but by an inexpressible inner fury which seems to tear up my heart and choke me. It's awful, awful. And then I wander about amid the horrors of the night, at this dreadful time of the year.

Yesterday evening it drove me outside. A rapid thaw had suddenly set in: I had been told that the river had risen, that the brooks had all overflowed their banks, and that the whole valley of Wahlheim was under water! I rushed out after eleven o'clock. A terrible sight. The furious torrents rolled from the mountains in the moonlight — fields, trees, and hedges torn up, and the entire valley one deep lake agitated by the roaring wind! And when the moon shone forth, and tinged the black clouds, and the wild torrent at my feet foamed and resounded in this grand and frightening light, I was overcome by feelings of terror, and at the same time yearning. With arms extended, I looked down into the yawning abyss, and cried, "Down! Down!" For a moment I was lost in the intense delight of ending my sorrows and my sufferings by a plunge into that gulf! But then I felt rooted to the earth and incapable of ending my woes! (69-70)

If only he could give himself over to this energy in sublime nature, to this wild torrent, the problem of the satisfaction of impossible desire would at least be ended, if not solved. Werther's itinerary lets itself be read as a move from sometime attachment to the beautiful to complete domination by the sublime, ending in the realization that only this end is possible. In some earlier scenes of the perception of nature, Werther's awareness shifts abruptly and jarringly back and forth between a sense of the "overflowing fullness" of nature, before which he feels "as if a god myself" and a sense of nature as "an allconsuming, devouring monster." (36-37). At this late moment in December, he remains in the condition that he had earlier ascribed to humanity in general: "we are as poor and limited as ever, and our soul still languishes for unattainable happiness". (20) His death looms, but he does yet quite grasp it: "My hour is not yet come: I feel it". (70)

Werther's relations to Lotte directly mirror his relations to nature. Both are dominated by his hyperbolizing imagination, as he sees her now as beautiful, now as sublime. When he first sees her, he finds

Six children, from eleven to two years old [...] running about the room, surrounding a lovely girl of medium height, dressed in a simple white frock with pink ribbons. She was holding a loaf of dark bread in her hands, and was cutting slices for the little ones all round, in proportion to their age and appetite. She performed her task with such affection, and each child awaited his turn with outstretched hands and artlessly shouted his thanks. (15)

Everything here is simple, cozy, natural, and artless, in forming a scene of mildness with which Werther would like to identify. But then he also dreams that

I pressed her to me and covered with countless kisses those dear lips of hers which murmured words of love in response. Our eyes were one in the bliss of ecstasy. (70)

In each case, Lotte is more a posited object of Werther's fevered imagination of himself in relation to her than she is a being seen by him in her own right. She is an occasion for him to fantasize himself complete, both original and at home. Lotte here plays the same role as was played by the earlier object of his affections, whom Werther describes wholly in terms of her effect on him:

I have felt that heart, that noble soul, in whose presence I seemed to be more than I really was, because I was all that I could be. God! Was there a single power in my soul that remained unused? And in her presence could I not develop fully that intense feeling with which my heart embraces Nature? (8)

Here, as ever, the real object of Werther's consciousness is *my soul, my heart, my seeming to be more than I really was*. No wonder, then, that when he imagines that she loves him, Werther rhapsodizes in the same egocentric terms: "That

she loves me! How the idea exalts me in my own eyes! And [...] how I worship myself since she loves me!" (27)

Werther's selfclaimed exceptionalism, his sense that unlike ordinary people "there lie dormant within me so many other qualities which wither unused, and which I must carefully conceal" (8), leads him consistently to scorn ordinary life and the achievements of reciprocity, decency, and human relationship that are possible in it. In particular, he scorns, while also envying, Albert's staid conventionalism and decency. But he here finds Albert only to be typical of what most people are like.

Most people", he writes, "work the greater part of their time just for a living; and the little freedom which remains to them frightens them, so that they use every means of getting rid of it. Such is man's high calling!(8)

In contrast, Werther seeks for himself a genuine high calling and exemplary, commanding achievement, outside the framework of the ordinary. Not for him "the gilded wretchedness, the boredom among the silly people who parade about in society here" (44) at court, a world in which he stands "before a puppet show and see[s] the little puppets move" (45), as they are "occupied with etiquette and ceremony" (45). Unable to mix with them, he argues that real love, constancy, and passion "exists in its greatest purity among that class of people whom we call rude, uneducated" (55), as he again hyperbolically idealizes a pastoralized ordinary life. Yet he is unable, with his dormant qualities which he must carefully conceal, to mix with ordinary people either.

Work, too, is treated by Werther as something either stalely conventional and meaningless or idealized as salvific. On the one hand,

the man who, purely for the sake of others, and without any passion or inner compulsion of his own, toils after wealth or dignity, or any other phantom, is simply a fool. (28)

On the other hand,

Many a time I wish I were a common laborer, so that when I awake in the morning I might at least have one clear prospect, one pursuit, one hope, for the day which has dawned. (37)

In both cases, his attention is on the work as the vehicle of the exalted expression of his personality, not on the work itself and those who do it. Even when he imagines doing a small bit of work in first arriving at the court of Count C., his thoughts remain on himself and his superiority to others.

But when, in spite of weakness and disappointments, we do our daily work in earnest, we shall find that with all false starts and compromises we make better headway than others who have wind and tide with them; and it gives one a real feeling of self to keep pace with others or outstrip them in the race. (42)

Werther's God is similarly exceptional — a being whom he assumes either specifically listens to his pleas or specifically avoids them, without any mediating institutions or any involvements in the lives of others. On November 30th, as he approaches his end, he addresses God directly and intimately, presuming to be his particular and special son.

Father, Whom I know not — Who were once wont to fill my soul, but Who now hidest Thy face from me — call me back to Thee; be silent no longer! Thy silence cannot sustain a soul which thirsts after Thee. What man, what father, could be angry with a son for returning to him unexpectedly, for embracing him and exclaiming,

Here I am again, my father! Forgive me if I have shortened my journey to return before the appointed time. The world is everywhere the same — for labor and pain, pleasure and reward, but what does it all avail? I am happy only where thou art, and in thy presence I am content to suffer or enjoy. And Thou, Heavenly Father, wouldst Thou turn such a child from Thee? (64)

His address here is strikingly reminiscent of his earlier thoughts about Lotte, whom he similarly regards as his unique savior.

I cannot pray except to her. My imagination sees nothing but her; nothing matters except what has to do with her. (38)

What does it all avail? Seeking absolute and perfect ratification of his exceptional personality and talents, and perfect, autonomous selfhood joined to continuing sociality in a life of daily selfaffirming divinity, but finding only ordinary people and his own tortured thoughts and fantasies, Werther can in the end hit only on the strategy of giving it all up. The only freedom from continuing failure is death. "We desire to surrender our whole being" (20), and if partial, egocentric surrender to Lotte, to art, to nature, or to work is received and ratified by no one, ordinary as they all are, then genuine surrender must be complete, an escape from life itself.

I have heard of a noble race of horses that instinctively bite open a vein when they are hot and exhausted by a long run, in order to breathe more freely. I am often tempted to open a vein, to gain everlasting liberty for myself. (50)

As he recalls almost kissing Lotte,

And yet I want — but it stands like a barrier before my soul — this bliss — and then die to expiate the sin! Is it sin?" (62) In the end: "The body was carried by workmen. No clergymen attended. (87)

Goethe himself, of course, did not commit suicide, despite the autobiographical character of the novel. Mann suggests that Goethe's willingness to go living had to do with his sense of his identity as a writer.

Goethe did not kill himself", Mann writes, "because he had *Werther* — and quite a few other things — to write. *Werther* has no other calling on this earth except his existential suffering, the tragic perspicacity for his imperfections, the Hamletlike loathing of knowledge that suffocates him: thus he must perish.¹⁷

How did Goethe himself then come to have and to be aware of having another calling, one that made life for him worth living? As Mann suggests, the answer has to do, I think, with the very act of writing *Werther*, as well as with the ongoing activity of writing for a public already begun with *Goetz von Berlichingen*. For Goethe, the act of writing in general, and of writing *Werther* in particular, combined a kind of catharsis — both a clarification and an unburdening — of his emotional life with the achievement of a kind of distance or perspective on himself. He came through writing to achieve a sense of himself as having a social identity as a writer, so that the problem of wedding autonomous selfhood to continuing sociality did not for him go fully unsolved. It would be addressed again and again in the act of writing, from *Faust* to the lyric poetry to *Elective Affinities*, though with more maturity and never quite perhaps with the immediate cathartic intensity of address of *Werther*. Yet even in his maturity Goethe retained an intense subjectivity, capable of responding to others as though they were vehicles of salvation for him. Mann notes that at the age of 72 he fell in love with the 17 year old Ulrike Sophie von Levetzow. Though address and partial solution to the problem of subjectivity are possible, perhaps full solution is not.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's character strongly resembles those of Goethe and *Werther*. Both his personal and philosophical writings combine an intense wish for attachment to others or to activities as vehicles for the expression of the higher self he felt himself to have with an equally intense critical scrutiny of that wish. The subtitle of Ray Monk's biography, *The Duty of Genius*, captures this feature of his character well. For the young Wittgenstein in particular, the realization and confirmation of genius was, in Monk's words, "a Categorical Imperative", and the only alternative to failing to follow it was death: genius or suicide.

¹⁷ Th. Mann, op. cit., 8.

Wittgenstein's recurring thoughts of suicide between 1903 and 1912, and the fact that these thoughts abated only after Russell's recognition of his genius, suggest that he accepted this imperative in all its terrifying severity.¹⁸

Monk traces Wittgenstein's submission to this imperative to his reading of Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character*, published in 1903, the year of Weininger's own suicide. Brian McGuinness accepts this connection but goes further to read this imperative into the composition of the *Tractatus* and to situate it in the context of Wittgenstein's family life and surrounding culture. McGuinness characterizes what he calls "the final message of the *Tractatus*" as

Perhaps a clearer, a more concentrated view [...] would enable him to see the world aright. At any rate, if there was no real prospect of this: if he could not reach this insight, and if he could not get rid of his troubles by reconciling himself to the world, then his life was pointless.¹⁹

What made this question — genius or suicide — arise with special force in Wittgenstein's case, McGuinness argues, was not only the example and influence of Weininger or the general sickness of prewar Austrian culture, but also and more deeply the influence on him of his father. The Wittgenstein family

formed a sort of enclave, fortified against the corruption and inadequacy that surrounded it by severe and private moral standards, which, it seemed, some of them had not the temperament to match or meet. Ludwig's case ...seems to have that of a phenomenally strong assent and attachment to these standards, often at war not only with the normal human failings that became glaring in their light, but also with a particularly soft and affectionate nature.²⁰

Yet McGuinness immediately goes on to add that Wittgenstein himself

was not one to see his problem as that of being unable to do what his father required,²¹ and he further comments that "what we describing here is no disease. As Tolstoy says: 'These questions are the simplest in the world. From the stupid child to the wisest old man, they are in the soul of every human being.'²²

With the example of *Werther* before us, we can see the problem of genius or suicide as forming a strong theme in German culture in its response to the yet more general problem of wedding autonomous selfhood to continuing sociality.

¹⁸ R. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, New York: The Free Press, 1990, 25.

¹⁹ B. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein, A Life: Young Ludwig 1889-1921*, Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988, 156.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 156, citing Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*.

Wittgenstein's preoccupation with autonomy and with the realization and confirmation of genius against the grain of culture is pronounced in the remarks in his own voice published as *Vermischte Bemerkungen, Culture and Value*. "It's a good thing", he writes, "I don't allow myself to be influenced."²³ As is typical in the postKantian, postGoethean German tradition, the realization of genius is conceived of as a matter of letting something natural and divine come to the fore in one's thought and life, often under the prompting of nature itself. "Just let nature speak and acknowledge only *one* thing as higher than nature, but not what others may think." (1e) "Don't take the example of others as your guide, but nature!" (41e)

When one is thus guided, one's thinking and acting happen with significance, in and through one, rather than under one's personal control. "One might say: art *shows* us the miracles of nature. It is based on the *concept of the miracles of nature*. (The blossom, just opening out. What is *marvellous* about it?) We say: "Just look at it opening out!" (56e). It is just this kind of natural yet significant opening out of his own features of character that Wittgenstein anxiously hoped might inform his own thinking and writing.

Schiller writes of a 'poetic mood'. I think I know what he means, I believe I am familiar with it myself. It is a mood of receptivity to nature in which one's thought seem as vivid as nature itself. [...] I am not entirely convinced that what I produce in such a mood is really worth anything. It may be that what gives my thoughts their lustre on these occasions is a light shining on them from behind. That they do not *themselves* glow. (65e-66e)

Something hidden, powerful, and natural within oneself is to come to the fore, in a way that is not under one's egocentric control. One is to be swept along by one's genius into a natural-supernatural movement of thinking.

Yet talent can also be betrayed or misused, and so fail to confirm itself in its products. "Talent is a spring from which fresh water is constantly flowing. But this spring loses its value if it is not used in the right way." (10e) As a result, the most important thing is to come to think and write naturally, in faithfulness to one's talent and against the grain of culture. But effort to do so takes space within the conventionalized space of personally controlled and discursive reflection, so that it is crossed by an anxious selfscrutiny. "Am I thinking and writing as it were beyond myself, out of the depths of the natural?", one egocentrically and discursively wonders, or Wittgenstein wonders, in just the sort of tragic perspicacity about his own imperfections that Mann saw in Werther.

²³ L. Wittgenstein, CV, 1e. Subsequent references to this work will be given by page numbers in parentheses.

Working in philosophy [...] is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.) (16e)

No one *can* speak the truth; if he has still not mastered himself. He *cannot* speak it; — but not because he is not clever enough yet.

The truth can be spoken only by someone who is already *at home* in it; not by someone who still lives in falsehood and reaches out from falsehood towards truth on just one occasion. (35e)

All or nothing; naturalsupernatural, nonconventionalized, poetic truth and expressiveness or imitative, derivative, nonexistence; genius or suicide.

Domination by this imperative produces the same complex of attitudes toward work and toward religion that we find in Werther. On the one hand, Wittgenstein idealizes ordinary manual work as something beautiful and honest, more honest than intellectual chatter: "what is ordinary is here filled with significance" (52e),²⁴ if the manual work is done with respect and integrity. It is no accident, but rather deeply part of his anxious selfscrutiny and his attitudes toward culture and value, that Wittgenstein so often urged others to take up this kind of work. On the other hand, "Genius is what makes us forget skill" (43e). It is beyond the ordinary. So how can one express genius within the framework of the ordinary? How can one write poetically — originally and yet in a way that draws on the common and is accessible to others? How can one wed autonomous selfhood to continuing sociality?

I think I summed up my attitude toward philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*. [...] I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do. (24e)

Religious faithfulness offers a paradigm of significant expressiveness, but a paradigm that in its traditional, institutionalized form is dead for us, shot through with the conventionality that expressiveness is to overcome. "What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural." (3e) What is needed is "a light from above" that comes to the individual soul, not religious institutions and ordinary religious training.

Is what I am doing really worth the effort? Yes, but only if a light shines on it from above. [...] And if the light from above is lacking, I can't in any case be more than clever. (57e-58e)

²⁴ This remark is about "an ordinary conventional figure" at the end of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*, but it captures well Wittgenstein's attitude toward the manual work he repeatedly urged on others.

Religious belief cannot be something that is simply given and shared. It must rather be achieved through the dormant qualities of one's soul coming actively to take religious life as the vehicle of their expression, as the terms of deep significance.

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's a *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation. (64e)

Above all, what Wittgenstein wants from religion, from work, from the guidance of nature, from his genius, but can never quite find, is full loaded and continuing significance in the face of mere conventionality and cleverness: a new life. "A confession has to be part of your new life." (183) And if not a new life, then death: genius or suicide, or suicide as the creative act of voluntarily removing oneself from a cycle of unending selfdefeat. In 1946, in the middle of remarks about music, thought, Shakespeare, God, heroism, and the difficulty of philosophy, there occurs in *Culture and Value*, in quotation marks, the very last words of Werther to his correspondent Wilhelm: "Lebt wohl!"²⁵

The intensities of Wittgenstein's character have been well documented in the biographical literature. Yet one might argue that these intensities have little to do with his actual philosophical thinking and writing, or at least with what he chose to have published. After all, he also wrote in *Culture and Value*: "My ideal is a certain coolness. A temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them." (2e) Yet it would be striking were his official philosophical writing to be wholly uninformed by the otherwise deepest preoccupations of his character. Even in this remark, he presents *a certain coolness* as an ideal, not as something that he has actually achieved, and he did note that he was "someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do." (24e) Is *Philosophical Investigations* in any sense *about* the problem of the realization of talent against the grain of but always in relation to the affordances of culture and the ordinary, *about* the problem of wedding autonomous selfhood to continuing sociality? That *Philosophical Investigations* is about this, in detail, line by line, as well as being about the nature of meaning, understanding, the will, and so on, and about this *by* being about these latter topics, is a main line of argument of my *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism*. I

²⁵ J. W. v. Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1948, 147. Werther actually adds one more line to Wilhelm: "wir sehen uns wieder und freudiger", *ibid.*, 147. But "Lebt wohl!" alone is what lives in the memory of his readers as his valedictory to life, particularly since his last diary entry, addressed to Lotte, concludes "Es schlägt zwölf. So sei es denn! —Lotte! Lotte, lebe wohl! lebe wohl!", *ibid.*, 150.

cannot recapitulate the whole of that argument here. But I will offer a few brief pointers to it.

In Section 125 of *Philosophical Investigations*, we find that “das philosophische Problem [...] ist [...] die bürgerliche Stellung des Widerspruchs, oder seine Stellung in der bürgerlichen Welt”; in English, and appropriately, that “the philosophical problem [...] is [...] the civil status of a contradiction, or its status in civil life.”²⁶ “Our entanglement in our rules is what we want to understand” (§125). This entanglement “throws light on our concept of *meaning* something” (§125). — What is it to be entangled in rules in civil life, in ordinary life, in the ordinary, civil “bürgerlichen” world? Not to “know one’s way about” (§123) is not to know how to engage with this world, how to bring one’s talents and selfhood to authentic, nonderivative, and yet ratifiable expression within it. To ask “what does this knowledge [of how to go on in applying a rule] consist in?” (§148) is to ask what there is in me — what talent, what locus of understanding, what source of mastery — that enables me to go on and *how* to bring this talent, locus, or source to apt expression. Something must be there in me. I can do something, and we are not in using language aptly either machines or other animals. But what is it? And do I bring whatever it is to expression aptly? How? I seem caught between an anxiety that the only routes of expression are those already laid down in surrounding practice, that I contribute nothing, that I am ordinary, and hence nonexistent: call this the anxiety of expressibility; and an anxiety that I cannot express that whatever it is in the ordinary, that I am alone, and mad: call this the anxiety of inexpressibility. To be able to mean something, to understand something: these are the results of the mysterious engagement of spontaneity in me, the source of originality, with the routes of expression that are given in practice, as though a seed in me — but one I can never identify or cultivate deliberately — grew in relation to its environment.

Each morning you have to break through the dead rubble afresh so as to reach the living warm seed. A new word is like a fresh seed sown on the ground of the discussion. (2e)

It may well be that there is for the language user “a special experience” of understanding, but this special experience cannot be grasped and deliberately deployed independently of engagement with the affordances of culture. “For us it is the *circumstances* under which he had such an experience that justify him in saying in such a case that he understands, that he knows how to go on.” (§ 155) The always mysterious interaction of circumstances, that is, of the affordances of culture in providing routes of expression, with the powers of selfhood is some-

²⁶ L. Wittgenstein, PI §§ 125, 50, 50e. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the text by section number.

thing to be accepted, not explained in either a scientific or intellectualistic theory.

Wittgenstein too, like Goethe but unlike Werther, did not commit suicide. His last words, famously, were "Tell them I've had a wonderful life".²⁷ Like Goethe, he achieved through the act of writing, repeatedly and day to day, a kind of catharsis, *some* distance or perspective on his anxieties as a subject, and a sense of himself as having a social identity as a writer. Hence there is some point to thinking that the second voice of the *Investigations* (if there are only two) — the voice that rebukes the tendency to seek scientific or intellectualist explanations of our cognitive abilities and that recalls us instead to the ways of the ordinary — *is* Wittgenstein's more mature voice. At the same time, however, the first voice — the voice of temptation and of intensities of perfect explanation and attunement — is his too, a voice he cannot quite give up, much as Goethe in his maturity would not give up intensities of infatuation and would still also identify himself with such intensities in Edward in *Elective Affinities*. The mature voice of the ordinary, the voice of survival, comes to the fore and is allowed the last word within a section, but always in continuing critical engagement with the voice of perfectly grounded and explained attunement, the voice of temptation.

Wittgenstein knew all this about himself. In 1931, in one of the remarks of *Culture and Value*, he wrote: "The delight I take in my thoughts is delight in my own strange life. Is this joy of living?" (22e) It is perhaps the kind of joy in living, arising out of the acknowledgement of the weddedness of one's selfhood to others and to the given and out of gratitude for that weddedness and the always partial expressiveness it enables, that is open to us as subjects who seek to achieve both autonomous selfhood and continuing sociality.

²⁷ L. Wittgenstein, cited in N. Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958, 100.