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Goethe's *Werther* and the First American Novel, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*

It is obvious that William Hill Brown (1765-93) knew Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774) when he wrote what is considered to be the first American novel, *The Power of Sympathy or, The Triumph of Nature* (1789). In a description of the room in which Harrington, the protagonist, had committed suicide, Worthy, Harrington's friend, sees a "table, and *The Sorrows of Werter* was found lying by its side" (LXIII).[1] In addition, an Ossian quotation that critics have also related to Goethe's novel rather than to the original, comes up in one of Harrington's letters. The quotation is from *Songs of Selma*, the final passage from the Ossian of James Macpherson (1736-96) that Werther read to Charlotte:[2]

> The time of my fading is near, and the blast that shall scatter my leaves. Tomorrow shall the traveller come, he that saw me in my beauty shall come; his eyes will search the field, but they will not find me. (LXII, 65)[3]

These sentiments caused Werther and Charlotte to be overcome by emotion, which led to the fateful kiss. In *The Power of Sympathy* these words mirror Harrington's resolution to commit suicide.

It has, then, been generally acknowledged by critics that Brown knew the English version of *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, but that acknowledgment has not gone beyond the two aspects mentioned, except for an occasional assertion to which I will refer below.[4] My contention is that additional echoes of *Werther* in *The Power of Sympathy* are rather striking. These echoes pertain to those sections of Brown's novel that are most successful, i.e., to the ill-fated love between Harrington and Harriot that leads to her death and his suicide.

Brown was born in Boston to a prosperous clockmaker and developed early on an interest in literary affairs. *The Power of Sympathy*, his most significant work, gives evidence of his wide reading in a great number of European, mostly English, authors. In 1792 at age twenty-seven he moved to Murfreesborough, North Carolina, to join his younger sister and her husband. He died there the next year, probably of malaria.

By the time Brown wrote his novel in 1789 a good number of editions of the first English translation of *Werther* (London, 1779) had appeared. They were published in

London, Dublin, and Philadelphia. The Philadelphia edition came out in 1784, that is five years before *The Power of Sympathy*, and is the only one whose title is not *The Sorrows of Werter* but *The Sorrows and Sympathetic Attachments of Werter*. It is reasonable to think that Brown took the idea of "Sympathy" in his title from the Philadelphia edition.

The stated purpose of the author of *The Power of Sympathy* is to warn against seduction, a warning that is first given in the dedication and the preface, repeated by various letter writers, and is finally mentioned in the "Monumental Inscription," a poem that concludes the novel. And as if that were not enough, there are several interspersed stories that deal with the disastrous consequences of women being seduced and then abandoned. The frontispiece, too, refers to this theme as it depicts the suicide of Ophelia, the victim of seduction and abandonment. Seduction and abandonment is also the background of Harriot, Harrington's beloved. Harrington senior had seduced his sister-in-law who then was abandoned by him and ultimately died, leaving behind their daughter Harriot. She is thus the young Harrington's half sister, a fact they are unaware of when they first meet.[5] At the very beginning of the novel, when Harrington falls in love with Harriot, he tells his friend Worthy that he plans to seduce her and set her up as his mistress in an apartment. After all, she did not have known parents and made a living as a lady's companion and was therefore beneath his station. But soon love triumphs and his attitude toward Harriot changes to adoration and the intention of marriage. Their love remains as pure as the love between Werther and Charlotte: seduction is no longer an issue in what happens to Harrington and Harriot. It seems that Brown wanted the reader to understand that the seduction of Harrington's aunt by his father and the subsequent birth of Harriot is to be seen as the sin of the father that would have fatal consequences in the next generation. Also, he might have considered the love between closely related people as one showing special "Power of Sympathy," a love in which "The Triumph of Nature," the second part of the title of the novel, prevails over reason. Still, for the reader, the issue of seduction does not play a role in the development of the relationship between Harrington and Harriot. Thus, the many warnings against seduction found in the novel, are not relevant to its main story, the ill-fated love of the protagonists. This structural dichotomy might at least in part be explained by the impact Brown's reading of *Werther* had on his writing *The Power of Sympathy*.[6]

I will first discuss Harrington and in so doing foreground those aspects of his story that show parallels in *Werther*. As both Harrington and Werther are men in whom feeling predominates, it comes as no surprise that joy, enthusiasm, and rapture are among the emotions they experience when they first fall in love. As Werther assures himself again and again of Charlotte's love, so does Harrington when he writes to Worthy:

> AM I to believe my eyes—my ears—my heart!—and yet I cannot be deceived . . . She loves!—I say to myself, *Harriot* loves me, and I reverence myself. (XV)

Such a boost in one's own worth is also felt by Werther who tells his friend Wilhelm in a similar staccato style:

> NO, I am not mistaken—I read in her eyes that she is interested for me; I feel it. And I may believe my own heart, which tells me that she—dare I say it?—Can I pronounce the divine words?—she loves me.
> That she loves me! Oh! how the idea exalts me in my own eyes! —. . .
> How I honour myself since I have been beloved by her? (21)[7]

Both Harrington and Werther have to convince themselves first that, indeed, their Harriot and Charlotte love them and then feel the effect of that certainty on their self-esteem.

In the next letter Harrington tells Worthy that Harriot has reprimanded him for his quick passion and at times obstinate prejudices.

> This gentle reprimand is so tempered with love that I think she commends me. I however promise a reform, and am much pleased with my improvement. *Harriot* moulds my heart into what form she chooses. (XVI)

In the same vein Werther writes to Wilhelm that

> CHARLOTTE has reproved me for my excesses, with so much tenderness and goodness! . . . My dear friend, I am no longer any thing, She makes me just what she pleases. (53-54)

At the beginning of Harrington's courtship of Harriot he is not enough of a "republican" to consider her a person he could marry, but then, under the influence of love, he disregards differences of class and is annoyed when, at a social gathering, people object to the presence of a "mechanick's daughter . . . and the amusement was put an end to for the evening" (XVII). Werther, too, criticizes the "paltry distinctions between the inhabitants of the same town" (37) and relates an incident during a social gathering when a dispute over precedence caused the party to break up, calling the people involved "idiots" (38). Harrington even expresses himself against slavery, but neither he nor Werther can in any way be considered social reformers. They both put their own interests, their hearts, in the first place and make life dependent on their emotional welfare.

When they feel that there is no future for them,—in Harrington's case when he finds out that he cannot marry Harriot, in Werther's case when he knows there is no future for him in the triangle made up of Charlotte, her husband Albert, and himself,—they decide to commit suicide. During the time Harrington is struggling with the idea of ending his life, "society is distateful" to him (XLVII) and every day he is becoming "more of a misanthrope" (LIII). The Editor, who reports on Werther's last days, says that "in society he appeared joyless and flat" (59). Both Harrington and Werther are prone to pace back and forth when agitated. (LXIII, 25 and 62)[8] While Werther

repeats his need to depart, i.e., to commit suicide, three times in his letters to Wilhelm, Harrington uses phrases like "I must go" and "I must depart" seven times in his letters to Worthy. As Harrington tries to assure himself that "there [i.e., in heaven] shall I meet her" (LII) and that "I will fly to the place where she is gone" (LVI), so does Werther when he tells Charlotte "We shall again see one another here and hereafter" (33) and "I will fly to meet you" (67). Both hope that God somehow will forgive them in spite of their terrible deed. (LIV, 67) And while neither Harrington nor Werther had always been happy with what Worthy and Wilhelm told them, at the end they both thank their friends "for all your good advice" (LXIV), "for the good advice you give" (54).

Another striking similarity between the two novels is the way in which Harrington and Werther plan their suicide. Harrington tells Worthy that "The step [i.e., suicide] must not be taken with rashness. I must be steady—calm—collected" (LVI). Werther, according to the Editor, "would not commit such an action with precipitation and rashness; he was determined to take this step like a man who knows what he is doing, and is resolved and firm, but calm and tranquil" (60). But in spite of such preparation neither one dies instantly when he shoots himself in the head. Each one is found "weltering in his blood" (LXIII, 71) and in neither case can the surgeon save the victim. Harrington's wish to be buried next to Harriot—she had died soon after learning that they could not marry—is fulfilled since "The rigour of the law was not executed—the body was privately taken away" (LXV). In Werther's case the intervention of Charlotte's father makes it possible that he is buried at the place he had selected. I had already mentioned that in *The Power of Sympathy* Worthy reports that *The Sorrows of Werter* was lying on a table next to the dead Harrington. Also on it was a letter by Harrington to Worthy that had "been written at intervals" (LXIII). Its contents form part of the novel. Goethe has Werther read *Emilia Galotti*, Lessing's famous tragedy, before committing suicide. The book was lying on a bureau in his room. Also, similar to Brown's novel, letters by Werther were found in the room, letters that he had written at intervals and that the Editor uses for his report on the protagonist's last days.

I believe that Brown's reading of Goethe's *Werther* impressed him to such a degree that his initial plan to write a novel in which seduction played a central role was thwarted and the tragedy of unfulfillable love became the focus of the story. But rather than discarding the many and often tedious passages in which the author through several of his characters inveighs against the disastrous consequences of seduction, he kept them as well as discussions of various educational and behavorial issues. It could be, as I mentioned above, that he wants the reader to realize that seduction is punished in the next generation. But we are not mindful of that connection when we follow with empathy the doomed love of the protagonists, a love that clearly has Brown's sympathy. He is much more distant when it comes to the didactic passages of Worthy, Mrs. Holmes, and her father-in-law. A few of these passages, as Cathy N. Davidson has pointed out, show that Brown treated those persons with irony.[9] Thus, when Mr. Holmes is holding forth for a long time and finally turns to "proving the eligibility of reading satire," two in his small audience decide to pursue matters of more interest to

them (XII). There is more irony and also criticism in the case of Worthy as I will show below.

There are three more aspects of *The Power of Sympathy* that have parallels in *Werther*. When Werther takes a walk in the woods one winter's day, he sees a man trying to find flowers. He answers Werther's query about what he is doing with "I have promised my mistress a nosegay" (65). It turns out that the man is a former admirer of Charlotte who, having been rejected by her, went insane and, after a period of violent behavior in a madhouse, is now harmless. In one of the interspersed stories of *The Power of Sympathy*, Fidelia, the girl who just before marriage was abducted and whose fiancé had drowned himself, is found in the woods picking wild flowers. "These," she cried, "are to make a nosegay for my love." Werther, while on a walk with Albert who keeps praising Charlotte, picks up flowers and then throws them into a brook. (25) Fidelia throws her flowers "into the river, and they will swim to him" (XXVII). Like the young man rejected by Charlotte in *Werther*, Fidelia raved for a while but now "the poor maniack strays about the fields harmless and inoffensive" (XXVIII).

Another parallel between *The Power of Sympathy* and *Werther* is the relationship between Harrington and his best, and apparently only, friend Worthy and that between Werther and his best and only friend Wilhelm. Worthy and Wilhelm are the recipients of most of the letters Harrington and Werther write. While Worthy's replies are also given, we have to infer from Werther's letters and the last part of the novel, which is no longer in letter form, what Wilhelm wrote and what he was like. In the very first letter in *The Power of Sympathy*, Worthy's character is brought out. According to Harrington, Worthy would have been thoughtful and circumspect and "would have considered the consequences" before falling madly in love with Harriot. And in his next letter to his friend he "CANNOT but laugh at your [Worthy's] dull sermons" and refers to his letters as "monitorial correspondence" (III). Worthy boasts to Harrington "I have seen many juvenile heroes, during my pilgrimage of two and twenty years" (II) and reveals himself throughout the novel as a moralist for whom reason is the highest virtue. Worthy, the "sententious friend" according to Harrington (III), gives the latter constant advice that is rarely appropriate, often besides the point, and frequently completely out of place. One can understand that he would tell Harrington, who had just written that life is intolerable "Let your mind be employed" (LVIII). One is less impressed by his telling Harrington in the same letter "YOU argue as if your reason were perverted" and "*the love of life increases with age*" (as a rejoinder to Harrington's "we increase in misery as we increase in age" [XLVI]). But for Worthy, still in the same letter, to state that "Our prison grows familiar—we contemplate its horrours . . . how few are they who are hardy enough to break their prison? LET us watch over all we do with an eye of scrutiny" is suggesting to his friend exactly what he should not do. To tell Harrington, who had just written his friend that "I AM determined to quit this life" (LVI) that only "few are . . . hardy enough to break their prison" shows insensitivity to someone else's state of mind. Werther had early on in the story, before meeting Charlotte, remarked, "that he has it in his power to quit his prison" (8), a sentiment both Harrington and Werther turn into reality by committing suicide.

Soon after the beginning of the novel Worthy goes to stay at Belleview, the country home of Mrs. Holmes who is a friend of his and who is just as sanctimonious as he is. Worthy is to marry Myra, Harrington's sister, in a few months. At Belleview he admires a piece of embroidery but has forgotten that it was made by Myra. There is complete absence of passion between the two, in contrast to the Harrington/Harriot relationship, and somewhat comparable to that between Albert and Charlotte in *Werther*. When Myra is in obvious distress because of her brother's suicidal state of mind and their half sister Harriot's death, Worthy does not rush to help her but waits at Belleview until the last minute to see his fiancée. His behavior toward Harrington is equally remiss. Harrington had early on expressed his "great desire to see you," i.e., Worthy (XLVIII), and had indicated again and again that he was about to end his life. Worthy, though, waits and waits before going to see his friend, and when he finally gets there, is asked by the family to wait until the next day since Harrington was asleep. During the night Harrington kills himself. Of course, Harrington knew that his own impulsiveness needed to be balanced by someone who was sober and who could give him advice. However, Worthy's various pieces of advice and his much delayed efforts to talk to his friend in a period of crisis make him less than an ideal friend, not a person to be admired. Davidson presents a careful assessment of Worthy's character and actions, including his insensitivity to the plight both Myra and Harrington are facing. She also compares Worthy's attempts to dissuade Harrington from committing suicide to those by Albert when he and Werther discuss that issue.[10] Werther's friend Wilhelm, like Worthy, seems to be the older of the two. Also, Wilhelm is clearly the sober and steady one in contrast to Werther's emotionally unstable personality. While we do not hear of any woman in Wilhelm's life—and that in itself is an indication of his personality—we know through Werther's reaction to his friend's letters that Wilhelm is a well-meaning person who advises Werther, among other things, to be factual in his reports, not to neglect his sketching, and to either seriously pursue Charlotte's love or give her up, the well-known either/or advice. Wilhelm's suggestions must be considered superior to those of Worthy but Wilhelm, too, delays talking to Werther far too long. When he finally gets to the place where Werther is staying, it is too late.[11]

There is a final aspect of the two novels where I detect a parallel. It has often been pointed out how in *Werther* nature shows a benign face in the beginning only to turn into a violent, destructive force toward the end. Places where Werther and Charlotte loved to walk in the beauty of spring are devastated by the winter storms. In *The Power of Sympathy* there is Belleview, the country place of Mrs. Holmes where she and other rational people spend their time away from the city in harmony with nature. For Leslie A. Fiedler, Belleview is the center of the novel. He concludes that "the utopian dream of 'rational love' proves to be an illusion."[12] Nature triumphs, be that in the form of seduction or of adultery or would-be incest as in the case of Harrington and Harriot. In both novels, then, nature has two faces, one benign and one uncontrollable and destructive. Nature also manifests itself in the power of human attractions. As Harriot tells Harrington, "when Nature pleads, how feeble is the voice of Reason? Yet, when Reason is heard in her turn, how criminal appears every wish of my heart?" (L) No amount of reason and good advice can keep Harrington and Harriot and also

Werther from their paths toward death. All three remain true to their love and to themselves and thus both novels leave the reader with an unsettled view of the world since the authors do not provide easy answers to the enigma of existence.

This is not the place to evaluate *The Power of Sympathy* as a work of art. But it should be mentioned that the novel shows serious flaws that have been pointed out by a number of critics. When compared to Goethe's *Werther* it becomes evident how superior this novel is to the American one. As Fiedler has observed, there is little or no indication in *The Power of Sympathy* as to where the Harrington/Harriot story takes place.[13] In *Werther*, on the other hand, there is scene after scene where the reader visualizes the interaction of the protagonist with others and his environment in a great variety of locations. Also, to mention one more contrast, in *Werther* the protagonist's voice is heard exclusively during the greatest part of the novel. As a consequence we are in complete empathy with his feelings and his view of the world. Many readers never realize that Werther's assessments are often less than accurate and his actions, especially toward the end of his life, less than exemplary. In *The Power of Sympathy* Harrington's letters are interspersed not only with those of Worthy but also with the letters of several other people who write about many issues not related to the Harrington/Harriot story. The result is confusion in the reader's mind as to the direction of the story. No wonder then, that Brown's novel was limited to one edition until it was printed again in 1894, while *Werther* was an instant international best seller.

Actually, the Harrington/Harriot story forms only a part of *The Power of Sympathy*, but, as I stated before, it is the part that surpasses the rest of the text since it deals with love, despair, and death rather than superficial moralizing. My conclusion is that Brown was so taken by his reading of *Werther* that he was inspired to write a novel in which the intensity of Werther's and Charlotte's love and agony would be duplicated in the love and agony of Harrington and Harriot. In so doing he added the most impressive part to his original idea of writing a story about the disastrous consequences of seduction. One must admire the way Brown absorbed essential aspects of Goethe's novel to create his own love story *The Power of Sympathy*.

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Notes

[1] All references to *The Power of Sympathy* are to the Roman number of the letter in the edition by William S. Kable (n. p., Ohio State UP, 1969).

[2] I refer to Werther's beloved as Charlotte in accordance with the English translation available to Brown.

[3] The page number refers to the English translation of Goethe's *Werther*, entitled *The Sorrows and Sympathetic Attachments of Werter* (Philadelphia: R. Bell, 1784). The text is number 18501 in Charles Evans' *American Bibliography* (Chicago: Privately Printed, 1903-55). This item is available in the Readex Microprint edition of Early American Imprints published by the American Antiquarian Society. The only difference between the 1784 Philadelphia edition and the Ossian passage in *The Power of Sympathy* reproduced here is that the Philadelphia text has "To-morrow."

[4] The two major interpretations of *The Power of Sympathy* are by Leslie A. Fiedler and Cathy N. Davidson. I use the revised, second edition of Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (first edition New York, NY: Criterion Books, 1960; second edition New York, NY: Stein and Day, 1966). Davidson's pioneering article "*The Power of Sympathy* Reconsidered: William Hill Brown as Literary Craftsman" (*Early American Literature* 10 [1965]: 14-29) and the fifth chapter, which is devoted to Brown's novel, of her *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1986) helped me greatly in my approach to *The Power of Sympathy*. I will refer to the two critics at the appropriate places. They point out only a couple of parallels of minor significance between the two novels.

[5] The similarity of the two names brings out the consanguinity of the lovers, just as Ekbert shares part of his name with his half sister and wife Berta in Ludwig Tieck's novella *Der blonde Ekbert* (1797). Other persons in Brown's novel are named so as to recall actual people as Mr. Martin who is modelled on a Mr. Morton. Some names have literary and religious associations. A girl who was seduced and then committed suicide is named Ophelia, her caring father Shepherd, and another woman is named Maria who is as innocent as "a lily of the valley" and says before dying "Heaven opens on my soul" (XXXIX). With obvious irony, an unfaithful lover is called Fidelio, and Worthy, as I will try to show, following Davidson, is not a friend worth having.

[6] One of the sections of chapter 5 in Davidson's *Revolution and the Word* has as its heading "A Novel Divided Against Itself" (98).

[7] The advice "Reverence Thyself" is quoted by Mrs. Holmes as coming from a "celebrated *European* wit" (XXX). Carla Mulford in her edition of *The Power of Sympathy* (New York, etc.: Penguin Books, 1996, 251-52) suggests several English authors as the source of the quotation. However none of them juxtaposes self-reverence with being loved as Harrington and Werther do.

[8] Henri Petter points out this similarity in *The Early American Novel* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 1971), 246.

[9] Davidson, 1965, 14-19; 1986, 103-6.

[10] Davidson, 1965, 18.

[11] Christian Friedrich Blanckenburg was the first to observe in his 1775 review of *Werther* the extreme tardiness of Wilhelm's going to help his friend. Blanckenburg finds that tardiness an improbability in an otherwise perfectly constructed novel. His essay is available in Karl Robert Mandelkow, ed., *Goethe im Urteil seiner Kritiker*, volume 1 (München: Beck. 1975), 65-86, here 85.

[12] Fiedler, when pointing out the ambiguity of nature in Brown's novel, refers to Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809) which, like *The Power of Sympathy*, "studies the strange, sometimes fatal attractions which move us beyond the power of will to resist or reason to control" (*Love and Death*, 123).

[13] Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 124.