

Werther's Rules for Art

The Sorrows of Young Werther is a book about love and suffering, but is also about an artist and his opinions on art. Werther holds many binaries about what he finds to be the method to create greater art. The primary binary explored here will be how art should be created: nature versus the constructed rules. With this binary, more binaries describing and defining them are established, such as pure versus contaminated, free versus constrained, and non-economic versus economic. These binaries dissolve as Werther seeks to get closer and closer to the origin of nature, and his ability to create art crumbles.

The binary of nature versus the rigid rules created and enforced by men is exemplified in Werther's proclamation that:

Only Nature creates a great artist. A good deal can be said of the advantages of rules, *much as* can be said in praise of bourgeois society. A man shaped by the rules will *never* produce anything *tasteless* or bad, *just as* a citizen who observes laws and decorum will never be an unbearable neighbor or an out-and-out villain. (32)

Werther emphasizes that "*only* nature creates a great artist." There is no freedom in where the source of the rules for art can come from. Nature is the only source of great art. There is no room in between nature and man's rules or no third party that can create great art. If great art and great artists are the result of nature, then he defines for us the product of societal rules through what they are not. They are not "tasteless or bad." He gives an analogy where the art is compared to a citizen in society who will never create an "unbearable neighbor" or an "out-and-out" villain. The rules produce conformity, and as a result, nothing new or remarkable, only things that aren't offensive. They are neutral. His metaphor about neighborly conventions clarifies who is offended by rules following art. It is everyone within the societal structure who is given the same rules for how to be a good neighbor who expects the same from his

neighbor who is provided with the same rules. Werther rejects this source of rules in favor of genius. If the loss of great art is the cost of following the constructed rules, then we get an idea of what is lost when Werther continues in the same letter, “and yet *on the other hand*, the rules will destroy the *true* feeling of nature and its *true* expression!”(31). This leads us to question what he means by true here. What is the difference between true feelings of nature and false feelings of nature, and how are they properly expressed?

We get some idea of Werther’s definition of the True feelings of Nature when he describes the deep feelings he used to have for nature before the introduction of Lotte into his life: “Nature – at such times, how my heart embraced it: I felt as if I had been made a God in that overwhelming abundance, and the glorious forms of infinite creation moves in my soul, giving it life.” He continues, “and then mankind comes building its nests, crowding together safely in little houses, and supposes its rules over the whole wide world!”(65). Nature that has not been affected by humans, seems to be the true nature. There is also a sense of Divinity involved in true nature. It is what God created, and for it to be true and untainted, it must be what the rules of man attempt to constrict. Any nature that is successfully constricted by man seems to be a false nature or tainted. To Werther, genius is the vessel through which nature transcribes itself to art. However, genius is an empty vessel. It carries the “infinite creation” but does not attempt to understand it because that would be an attempt to fit the creation of God into the understanding and rules of man, and in doing that, it taints nature in the process of turning it into art or poetry. We get a sense of this after he is drawing two brothers sitting together in a natural setting unposed and finds that: “I had completed a well composed, quite interesting sketch without adding anything of my own. This strengthened my purpose in the future to rely on nature alone.” His adding nothing of his own implies a purity to the sketch because it recreates the

God-created nature untouched by humanity and constraints. This aligns with how Derrida characterizes Kant's view of artistic genius in *Economimesis*:

Genius transcribes the prescription and its *Vorschreiben* is written under the dictation of nature, whose secretary it freely agrees to be. At the moment, it writes, it allows itself literally to be inspired by nature which dictates to it, which tells it in the form of poetic commands what it must write and in turn prescribe; and without genius really understanding what it writes. It does not understand the prescriptions that it transmits; in any case it has neither concept nor knowledge of them. (13)

Derrida uses writing here to demonstrate Genius as almost doing the job of transcribing the word of God into writing. The role of Genius is not entirely different from that of the courtroom stenographer in that it is hurting the product to try to help or augment a lawyer's speech when typed out or to change God's creation of nature by adding or subtracting something when what is best is to copy exactly. Changing a composition to follow the rule of thirds might not be tasteless, but it takes away from the originality of nature. This creates another binary between pure art and art contaminated by man. The true expression of nature is an exact replica without anything tainted.

Both Werther and Kant also relate the artist to God. When Werther writes, "Nature – at such times, how my heart embraced it: I felt as if I had been made a God in that overwhelming abundance,"(65) he is putting himself in relation to God. In doing this, he extends mimesis to the creator, not just the product. This relation and its importance are explained well by Derrida:

But since an analogy has already made *natura naturans* the art of an author-subject, and, one could even say, of an artist-God, mimesis displays the identification of human action with divine action-of one freedom with another. (9)

The artist must do their best to imitate God. Imitation of the creating is the more important aspect of mimesis than the imitation of the product. Within this exchange between either side of the mimesis the attributes of the Divine must be maintained in the artist. This means that the artist must maintain the absolute freedom of Divinity. Werther, as an artist, must carry overwhelming abundance and “infinite creation” and ultimately a complete freedom. God and its product of nature precedes the artist and their product of art, and the mimesis must imitate the process. Referring to Werther’s praise of nature again, it is significant that he reveres the “infinite creation” of nature. It is not just the product that has been created but the act of creation or production itself that gives nature its significance as the sole origin of great art. These feelings of infinite creation are the “true feelings of nature” Werther talks about. mimesis of the creator and the creation process would represent its “true expression.” We see Werther clearly align himself with God as well as place himself in a secretary-like role when he is thinking to himself early on: “If only you could express this, if only you could breathe onto the paper in all its fullness and warmth what is so alive in you, so that it mirror your soul as your soul is the mirror of God and His infinity!” God’s “infinity” is free, and this freedom is also the job of the artist to imitate as he is analogous to the divine creator who enacts this infinite creation. Through his soul mirroring God’s and the ideal art mirroring his soul, we find genius as a secretary, as Derrida describes it. In this system, the producer's soul is mirrored in the product, and the artist producer's soul is to mirror God, the original producer. There are then two ways to attempt mimesis: the first is an imitation of the product (a more shallow version further from the origin of a divine creator), and the second is an imitation of the producer and act of production (the one closer to the origin of a divine creator and the “better” mimesis).

Mapping on to the binary of nature and constructed rules is the resulting descriptive binary of freedom versus constrictions. To Werther and Kant, nature possesses a certain divine freedom, whereas the rules of man serve the purpose of

restricting freedom and confining it. Derrida says: "Kant specifies that the only thing one ought to call "art" is the production of freedom by means of freedom." Werther writes: "Only Nature has inexhaustible riches, and nature creates a great artist." What makes nature the ultimate origin for great art is its freedom. There is no end or no rules, and it is not constrained. This might be why Werther believes the rules of men are the opposition or antithesis to nature. Werther further demonstrates this opposition and its relation to freedom here:

Oh my friends! You ask why the torrent of genius so rarely pours forth. So rarely floods and thunders and overwhelms your astonished soul? Because, dear friends, on either bank dwell the cool, respectable gentlemen, whose summerhouses, tulip beds and cabbage patches would all be washed away, and who are therefore highly skilled in averting future dangers in good time, by damming and digging channels. (32)

Genius here is clearly identified with nature or God's creation, and it destroys the rules and ruins the channels when it is successful. It is inherently violent against the constructed rules. Floods are natural but the canals are not. Here his metaphor serves to cement genius as something natural by aligning it with floods. The man built canals attempt to constrict the freedom of the floods by making them follow specific routes and prevent the otherwise free flow of floods. Werther writes, "the rules merely *contain*, they cut back the ranker growth"(32). However, Divinity or the Genius that aligns itself with Divinity is, by its nature, boundless and infinite. Once it is constrained, it is not divine creation or its analogous representative of a poet, artist, or writer. The Artist must be completely free.

For the artists to imitate the divine producer, he must imitate his freedom, but as Derrida writes: "How can man's freedom (in a liberal economy) resemble God's freedom which resembles itself and reassembles itself in it. It resembles it precisely by not imitating it, the only way one freedom can resemble another"(10). If the artist is to

place himself in the analogous position of God, he must perform mimesis by creating his own freedom and being separate from God's. Freedom can not be constrained or else it is not free and as a result cannot be defined. If Werther imitates God's freedom, the shape of the freedom imitated creates bounds for the freedom imitating it making it not infinitely free. So by attempting to imitate God's freedom Werther fails in imitating the principle of freedom.

Werther believes in order to maintain freedom, the artist must be non-economic. Derrida writes that according to this structure, "The poet, when he is neither writing nor singing, is just a man among men, must also eat. He must sustain the (mechanical) labor force which poetry, Kant shows, cannot forego"(12). The effort of being non-economic is both an effort to maintain freedom and purity. The belief in the exclusion of economy from the production of art holds these descriptions of nature together when they might otherwise oppose each other. The constraining economics of humans caused by their need to eat and sustain life are not applicable to a divine creator and, therefore, have no place in the production of art. This is why excluding a constraining economy maintains purity. It excludes freedom because the second the boundlessness of God is interfered with by tangible restrictions, and those are inherently economic restrictions, the poet is reduced to a mere man not analogous to God. There is a fear that the economy will constrict the freedom of art: "Art, strictly speaking, is liberal or free [freie], its production must not enter into the economic circle of commerce, of offer and demand"(5). Werther furthers this point when he imagines the advice of a man constructed by rules and then refutes it:

My dear young sir! To love is only natural, but you must be true to human nature when you love! Divide up your hours, some of your work and some for recreation with your girl. Calculate your income and, once your necessities are seen to, I shall be the last to urge you against giving her a present with what remains, though not too often: on her birthday say, or her saint's day" and so forth. - If the

man obeys, he will turn out a respectable young chap, and I should personally advise any prince to appoint him to his council; but his love will be done for, and so, if he is an artist will his art. (33)

Here, Werther sets up a binary between the non-economic and the economic, correlating to the binaries of the free and the constrained as well as nature and the rules of society. We find an economy of time and of how it is divided and spent and invested just as money is. Some time may be divided to your girl or your art, but only what is left over. Werther claims that if one participates in this economy of time, then their art will suffer. This forces another binary upon us, that of the bounded economy and free economy. For example, art that serves the interpersonal economy of man, commissioned art or craftsmanship, would not have the freedom of non-economic art and of nature, and therefore the artist would fail in the pursuit of great art through genius. The analogy of love here can be used for art, and how resources are devoted to art. Giving what's left is not enough to create great art. Instead, all time and all of the artist must be given up or sacrificed because if their product has anything of the artist left in it, then it is not perfect mimesis. There is a separate economic relationship which is completely free between the artist and the divine creator. Derrida describes this relationship:

The communicability of pure judgments of taste, the (universal, infinite, limitless) exchange between subjects who have free hands in the exercise or the appreciation of fine art, all that presupposes a commerce between the divine artist and the human one. And indeed this commerce is a mimesis, in the strict sense, a play, a mask, an identification with the other on stage, and not the imitation of an object by its copy. "True" mimesis is between two producing subjects and not between two produced things. (9)

Genius is only genius if it is the secretary of nature, not if it is also partly one for economic demands. This mimesis between the artist and God is an economy. It is an

economy that requires that bounded human economies are completely out of the picture. The separate economy consists of an exchange of opinions about what makes good art. The artist as genius does not understand this infinite creation but simply transcribes it exactly. This belief that the greatest artist puts nothing of himself and makes every effort to escape man and its constructive economy to instead join a free economy with a divine creator in order to imitate the freedom of the process by which God produces nature is a fetishization of the origin. Derrida writes:

At the moment it freely gives orders to man through the voice of genius, nature is already, itself, a product, the production of the divine genius. At the moment it dictates, it is already in a situation analogous to that of human genius which, furthermore, itself produces a second nature. Productive imagination has the power to create "as it were" [gleichsam] "another nature" [Schaffung einer andern Natur] [49]. There is an analogy therefore between genius which creates a second nature (for example by prescribing rules to other artists), the first nature which dictates its precepts to genius, and God who creates the first nature and produces the archetype which will serve as example and rule. Such hierarchical analogy forms a society of the logos, a sociology of genius, a logoarchy. (13)

We can look at these various natures as almost xeroxes of each other, each distancing itself further from the original of God. The best within the structure of "hierarchical analogy" is seen as the original creation of God (nature). It is only through God's creation that we get access to God. That is why it is through nature that this infinite divine creation can be detected. From there, the artist (analogous to God) based on the previous nature produces something new, and through that creates the new analogous equivalent to nature. Through this hierarchical template, Derrida claims a society of logos is created. However, it is this exact society of logos and set of rules and rationality that come with it that Werther disdains in favor of the inexplicable passions and boundlessness of nature. It has the same origins as the art he wants to create. This

means that the society of logos, which originates from the freedom of divine creation, has turned against it. It is violent against freedom and it constrains, according to Werther's flood and channel analogy. It is through genius that divine creation can be expressed and it is the society of logos that attempts to constrain it. It has not just strayed from the origin or let the word of God fade but instead has turned against it, according to Werther. After describing the beautiful immensity of nature Werther writes: "...and then mankind comes building its nests, crowding together safely in little houses, and supposes its rules over the whole wide world!" The act of "supposing its rule" is certainly aggressive against nature and its creator. If this repetition of the structure of analogy between producer and the thing produced would create the society of logos making it a copy of the first nature created by the original divine creator then they are not in a directly oppositional binary but rather they are siblings or distant cousins or something who hate each other.

According to Werther it is by the system of mimesis of imitating the initial production of nature by God that great and free art is made, but it follows is also that process that creates its opposition. The society of logos is confined by the economy but Werther rejects this so it is then his goal to perform mimesis based on the original nature and its divine producer. It is his goal to be as non-economic as possible. Werther's rejection of the economy builds throughout as almost all of his time is spent on his obsession with Lotte. He sinks deeper and deeper into this supposedly getting closer and closer to the origin as he continues to delve further away from the outside world of economies. We see his obsession with returning to the original both in his taste in literature and his behavior. He writes about his journey to visit the town where he grew up or his origin: "I made my pilgrimage to my home parts with all the reverence of a true pilgrim" he continues "No pilgrim in the holy land encounters as many places of sacred memory, nor can his soul very well be as devoted as mine." He gives the return to his origins a sense of Divinity by mentioning reverence and

comparing his visit to home to a visit to the holy land. His reverence for Homer and specifically references to the odyssey also reflect this obsession with the original or the origin point. He writes to Wilhelm: "You ask if you should send me my books?-My dear fellow, I implore you, for God's sake keep the things from me!" He continues later "what I need is soothing lullabies, and I have found them in abundance in my Homer"(28). He can only hold one author in such high consideration and it is the works of Homer. He can only regard Homer (the perceived father of the Western canon) as worth reading and providing what he wants. It is the original. However as he distances himself from society and the economy throughout the book his taste in literature changes. He writes: "Ossian has ousted Homer from my heart. What a world that exalted soul leads me into"(95). This switch implies that something has gone wrong in Werther's search for the origin because Ossian is a false origin. The writings of Ossian are fraudulent and impure; they pretend to be an origin but they are not; written by James Macpherson and not original. As Werther distances himself from the real world and rationality he is supposed to get closer to an origin but he finds himself idolizing a false origin.

As he sinks further into this love and into himself and supposedly towards the origin his art begins to fail. He writes to Wilhelm: "Since you are so concerned that I should not neglect my drawing, I would prefer to say nothing at all about the question than to admit how little I have done of late." He continues to say that "My feelings for nature, down to tiny pebbles and blades of grass, have never been so full and acute, and yet I do not know how to express myself"(55). This freedom from economy should allow him to create art by allowing him the freedom necessary to imitate the freedom of a divine creator. Instead he is left unable to draw but with all the feelings for Nature. He has accomplished all the steps he is supposed to take by detaching himself from the economy and filling himself with feelings of nature but he is not able to create art. This lack of an ability to create is extended to Lotte and the portrait he attempts of her:

“I have started a portrait of Lotte three times, and three times I have failed disgracefully; which depresses me all the more since I could take a very good likeness not so long ago. So then I cut a silhouette profile of her, and that will have to do”(55). This directly contradicts his prediction that if one is economic “their art will suffer” so it is necessary to not be economic for great art. The silhouette is also an abandonment of the mimesis he endorses earlier in the novel where he paints exactly what he sees without adding “anything of my own.” What then is the cause for Werther’s inability to complete the act of creating great art?

Werther successfully fills himself with the feelings of “infinite creation” but struggles in the step of transcribing these tastes or judgments dictated by God through nature to paper. He claims that economy and its constrictions are the issue preventing freedom from art but it is only once it is attempted to be stripped away and Werther is seemingly fully isolated from the world outside when he fails to make art completely and we can see the flaw in this structure of binaries. The refusal of the economy buffers the clashing of purity and freedom and attempts to stabilize the binaries. Werther with his prioritization of freedom and antagonization of structure still does not find himself without structure. By prioritizing an origin point he traps himself. First he has a belief in this idea of Genius. Which transcribes the word of God through nature exactly onto paper without adding anything of the artist's self. Any of the artist's own input would ruin the purity of nature and the divine creator's judgments. This transcription is done through mimesis. This is the transactional system between the divine artist and the human one. However in order to achieve this mimesis we have to acknowledge the binary Werther draws of the infinite freedom of the divine creator opposing the constraints of man and the society of logos. This means that the artist must resemble God’s freedom. He can only do this by “not imitating it.” This creates a dissonance between the goal of transcribing God’s preferences exactly and not imitating it. If the artist transcribes exactly he maintains the purity of the Divine creator but loses it in

some sense by giving up the freedom of the production of nature. If the artist chooses to embrace freedom by not imitating the divine creator's freedom then they certainly lose the purity. This leaves Werther stuck; full of the feelings of infinite creation but unable to transcribe them in a way that maintains the purity of the origin while upholding the freedom he ascribes to it. The rigid structure of mimesis that Werther creates does not leave room for him to shoot for the two absolutes of freedom and purity and achieve both leaving him stunned and unable to create art the further he goes away from the constructed rules of man and toward what he finds to be the origin.