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RICHARD BELL *University of Maryland, College Park*

In Werther's Thrall

Suicide and the Power of Sentimental Reading in Early National America

Setting down the novel for the final time, he raised the horse pistol to his temple and fired. Beachcombers found his young, "genteely dressed" body early the next morning; the book and the gun lying together on the ground by its side. Three years earlier, in 1804, Alexander Hamilton's blood had pooled among the dirt and rocks on this same stretch of the New Jersey shore. Like Hamilton this man was an immigrant and like Hamilton he had been behaving strangely in the weeks before his death, telling friends that he was tired of life and ready to die. But this man had his own story, as the two letters tucked in his pocket and the novel found at his feet soon made clear. His name was Bertell, he was just twenty years old, and the first letter was his suicide note, addressed to whoever might find his body. It described how he had been cast aside by the young lady he loved, how the rejection had been too much for his heart to take, and how he had made up his mind that he could only find peace in death. In the second letter he had scribbled a hasty will, leaving two-thirds of his paltry estate to the girl who had broken his heart. The third text on the scene was the book that Bertell had been reading over and over for weeks now. To readers of all the news stories that spread word of his suicide, this well-thumbed and heavily underlined little volume was the most important clue as to why this young romantic had taken his own life. Bertell's copy of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the most popular and yet most vilified sentimental novel in America, lay open at the page where Werther, pistols prepared, writes to the woman who has promised herself to another and takes his final leave: "They are loaded—the clock strikes twelve—I go. Charlotte! Farewell! Farewell!" (70).[1]

Fiction, it seemed, could be fatal. Reading Goethe's inflammatory tale of how one adoring young man ended his anguish by pistol had led an-

other to do the same. At least that was the conclusion many newspaper readers reached when printers from Vermont to Virginia splashed this young German immigrant's story across their pages in the summer of 1807. In fact, Bertell's suicide came as the inevitable proof of what protective parents and anxious ministers had been warning would happen ever since Goethe's overwrought romance first reached American shores in the 1780s, the latest in a post-Revolutionary deluge of sentimental new fiction aimed squarely at the rising generation.

This essay examines why so many adults found it useful to claim that stories like Werther's could steer suggestible young readers toward copycat suicide. It recovers how and why so many parents and preachers—men and women who had embraced the possibilities of sentimental reading in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution—later came to cultivate such a bitter suspicion of the sentimental novels and short stories popular among early national teenage readers. As more and more mothers, fathers, and ministers concluded that sentimental literature was a potent but entirely unreliable partner in the cause of adolescent moral education, many began to denounce such fiction as morally corrosive, dangerous nonsense that could do far more harm than good. Here I endeavor to explain the reasons why this onslaught of criticism came to center upon the Werther effect—the term contemporary sociologists still use when debating the enduring claim that reading about suicide can influence the decision to commit it. Seizing on the fact that *Werther* and a swath of early American novels that followed in its wake each put the suicides of tremulous and tearful young characters front and center, critics of sentimental fiction pointed to suggestive (yet ultimately circumstantial) evidence that young readers like Bertell were being manipulated by the power of sympathy to follow in the fatal footsteps of those about whom they read. Their motivation, I argue, was to try to undermine the genre's soaring popularity and to vent their frustrations and anxieties about secular reading, the proper role of literature in adolescent education, and the plasticity of individual morality.

Based loosely upon Rousseau's *Nouvelle Heloise*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Lieden des Jungen Werthers*) takes the form of a series of letters from a twenty-three-year-old artist to a distant friend. Chronicling his emotional ups and downs over a year and a half, the letters speak directly to the reader and narrate the passionate

Werther's story of love and loss during a sojourn in a bucolic Rhineland village. There he meets and falls in love with Charlotte, the fiancée and subsequent wife of Albert, a man several years her senior. Having promised her dying mother that she would marry Albert to provide security for her eight brothers and sisters, Charlotte is flirtatious but ultimately does not return Werther's insistent affections. Werther refuses to move on and his growing obsession with Charlotte quickly starts to paralyze his mind and ravage his heart. Dressed in a blue frock coat, yellow waistcoat, and breeches, Werther pens a suicide note—"Charlotte! Farewell!"—borrows two pistols from Albert, and shoots himself (70).

In Europe, the novel was phenomenally popular, a genuine literary sensation. First published in the German states in 1774, it was translated into French (1775), English (1779), Italian (1781), and Russian (1788) and reprinted again and again to satisfy swelling demand across the continent. Its effect on readers was palpable. A generation of young romantics took the character of Werther to their hearts. As historian Georges Minois writes, "the youth of Europe learned his speeches as they learned Hamlet's" (267). The novel's popularity spawned countless imitations and motivated the production of all manner of Werther collectibles, from gloves embroidered with the story's most dramatic tableaus to a perfume known as eau de Werther.[2]

Werther enjoyed equal success in America, and was one of the best-selling novels printed there before the War of 1812. Each of the nineteen British editions issued before 1800 circulated in American port cities, and local booksellers like Robert Bell in Philadelphia produced eight editions of their own, in three different translations, between 1784 and 1809. Only Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791) was reprinted more often. During the height of the novel's popularity booksellers placed more than five hundred notices in American newspapers to announce fresh supplies. Its readers were disproportionately adolescent. Many of them were boys on the cusp of manhood, like the sensitive young soul one British traveler came across in Georgetown in 1798 who "delighted in the perusal of the Sorrows of Werter [and] perfumed his handkerchief with lavender" (Davis, *Travels* 137). Yet though the story was told from the point of view of a delicate young man of feeling, booksellers made particular efforts to target young women as readers. *Werther* topped a widely circulated list of "novels for winter evenings" recommended "to the ladies" (*Literary Maga-*

zine), while other promotional pieces touted the book as perfectly suited to "the Entertainment of the Ladies" ("Classified Adv."). In her diary for Good Friday 1784, twenty-one-year-old Anne Livingston of Philadelphia recorded her first encounter with the book: "After Tea Miss Cox & myself playd. by turns on the harpsichord while Emelia work'd. Then Emelia read to us the Sorrows of Werther while we work'd. It is a very affecting little history, & made Grace & myself sob & cry like Children, but there is certainly a luxury in some kind of sorrows, as well as bitterness in others" ("Diary of Anne Hume Shippen Livingston" 312) (see fig. 1).[3]

The luxurious sentimentalism of Goethe's novel left young readers gasping for more. Its unprecedented popularity led to a flood of imitative works on a scale otherwise unseen on the American literary landscape until the arrival of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. In addition to reading extracts of *Werther* published in American magazines, consumers could digest plays, poems, and even other novels that followed the famous story or featured its tragic hero. Among prose imitations, the most notable and opportunistic was English author William James's *The Letters of Charlotte*, a watered-down reimagining of Werther's story told from the female perspective. Tremendously popular in its day, it was first published in America as a companion to the 1789 Boston edition of *Werther*, and subsequently enjoyed five solo printings. Poets too found Werther to be a compelling and profitable subject. Editors printed dozens of Werther poems in American newspapers throughout the 1780s and 1790s, and dozens more appeared in literary magazines. Some poets active in the early national period even chose "Werter" as their pseudonym, no doubts in hopes of associating their own quickly forgotten stanzas with this literary juggernaut. Playwrights too got in on the act: in 1797 audiences in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were treated to the first American performances of a dramatic interpretation of the story. The play, originally published and performed in Dublin, was produced again in Charleston in 1803 and 1804—where the cast featured Edgar Allan Poe's father—and returned once more to Boston in 1809.[4]

Such retellings not only testified to the American appetite for all things *Werther* but also crystallized concern that the reading revolution famously described by Cathy Davidson (113–16), a revolution so many parents and preachers had cheered as it had taken hold in the 1770s and early 1780s, was producing some dangerous and unanticipated consequences. Initially

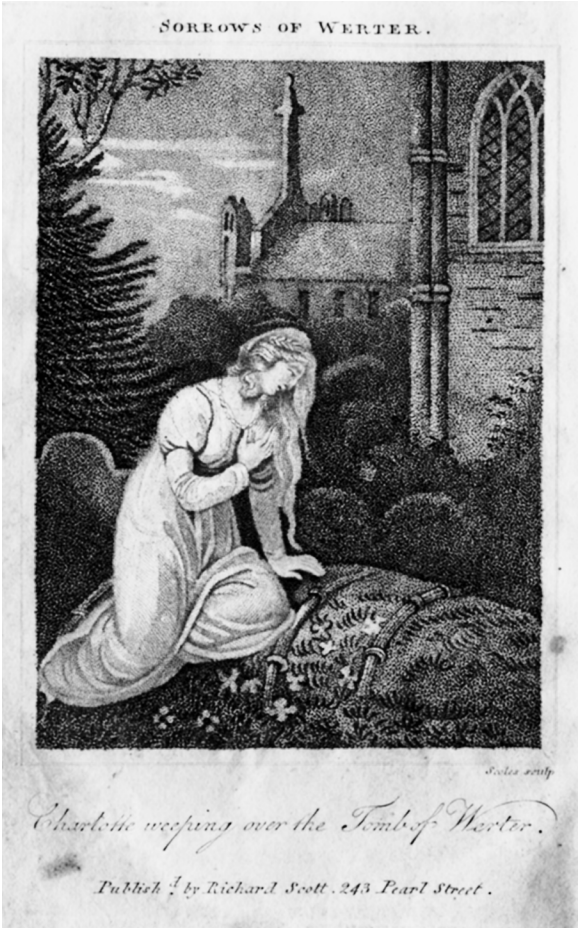

FIGURE 1. *In this illustration, taken from an 1807 New York edition, Charlotte weeps over the tomb of Werther. By such means young readers in particular were encouraged to identify with Charlotte's grief following Werther's suicide. Detail from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,* The Sorrows of Werther, *tr. Dr. Pratt (New York: 1807). Used by permission of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Libraries, Dr. Kenneth J. LaBudde Department of Special Collections.*

at least, proud patriots and anxious patriarchs like Thomas Jefferson and Dr. Benjamin Rush had championed the fashion for sentimental fiction that gripped Revolutionary America, convinced that the culture of sensibility promoted in works by Richardson, Sterne, and Rousseau might be replicated in work by American authors and used to engineer moral reform among young readers. With rates of premarital pregnancy at record levels, these early supporters of the rise of the novel had once voiced hopes that fiction might smuggle lessons about female chastity and male self-discipline into the hearts and minds of adolescent readers by illustrating with riveting power the consequences of seduction. At the same time, advocates had anticipated that the appetite for fiction among young people could be exploited to temper the selfishness that many associated with the rise of consumer society, by reminding middling readers of their obligations to the growing army of beggars crowding city streets in the postwar years. For example, in a very well publicized lecture at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia in 1786, Rush had hoped aloud that "a familiarity with scenes of distress from poverty and diseases" might heighten young people's regard for one another, and singled out the literary arts as particularly potent tools if "properly directed" (33, 26).[5]

Spurred on by boosters like Rush, many American authors and editors working in the 1780s and early 1790s had gamely set about transforming sensibility into a national project. Between 1789 and 1796 the *Massachusetts Magazine* published more than one hundred stories, letters, and poems on the theme of seduction (Tennenhouse 46) while other home-grown literary periodicals like the *Columbian Magazine* and the *American Museum* stuffed their pages with examples of young people performing charitable acts to aid virtuous people in distress. Likewise, in the first American novel, William Hill Brown's aptly titled *Power of Sympathy* (1789), the protagonist, Harrington, trumpets the practical rewards of investing feeling with moral value: "Hail sensibility! Sweetener of the joys of life! Heaven has implanted thee in the breasts of his children—to soothe the sorrows of the afflicted—to mitigate the wounds of the stranger who falleth in our way" (Penguin ed. 62). Many of Brown's rivals went further, dramatizing the consoling, neighborly impulse engendered by true sensibility. For instance, in Susanna Rowson's *The Inquisitor; or, Invisible Rambler* (1788), the titular man of feeling is brought to tears by the deprivations suffered by the downtrodden men and women he meets on his travels. More important,

his sympathy leads him to action: he shells out eighteen pounds to free a stranger from a crippling debt; he risks his reputation to save a virtuous young girl from a house of ill repute; he talks another young woman out of her plans to elope with a cad; and he leads a prodigal daughter back to her parents to be reunited and redeemed. To fund all this good work, the rambler puts his own comfort on the line, dismissing his servants, parting with one of his carriages, and selling two of his horses.

So far so good. In a letter to his young cousin Robert Skipwith, Thomas Jefferson counseled him that "[t]he entertainments of fiction are useful as well as pleasant" (74). "Everything is useful," the Virginian continued, "which contributes to fix in us the principles or practice of virtue. When an original act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also" (75). By the mid-1780s, this view of the positive social utility of fiction, and of novels in particular, had become a commonplace, and evidence abounded that juvenile readers like Philadelphia's tearful Anne Livingston were responding. In fact, as cultural historian Sarah Knott has recently demonstrated, many young post-Revolutionary readers went so far as borrow the names, personas, and third-person narration commonly found in novels purporting to model sensibility when writing in their own diaries or in private correspondence (109–51). Identifying with the plight of literary characters to the point of renaming themselves "Leander" or "Amanda," plenty of young readers, with hearts apparently as malleable as wax, began to see the world through fiction's lens (Blauvelt 32).[6]

Yet before the moral and social effects of reading so many didactic plots could be measured, *Werther* burst on the scene. While the novel's popularity with adolescent readers was unprecedented, the anxieties it provoked among their parents and self-appointed moral guardians reflected a broad and growing disenchantment with sentimental fiction. As the number of foreign and domestic novels on sale in America proliferated throughout the 1780s and 1790s, it was becoming clear to them that some authors had not signed on to their campaign to harness literature for the purposes of moral education. Plots and characters had begun to appear that seemed to complicate or even undermine the messages about living virtuously and acting charitably embedded in works like *Clarissa* or *The Inquisitor*.

The popularity of *Werther* and its unashamedly self-absorbed and self-destructive central character now propelled parents like Rush and preachers like Rev. Samuel Miller of New York further toward the reluctant conclusion that undisciplined and excessively sentimental narratives might actually skew young readers' delicate sensibilities to the point of perversion, encouraging them to wallow in exquisite fictional tragedies while ignoring those around them truly in need of their sympathy. Addressing the Young Ladies Academy in Philadelphia in 1787 at the height of *Werther* fever in the city, Rush voiced his distrust of a novel so sensational and stylized that it seemed to have replaced moral instruction with sentiments so cloyingly romantic as to be downright damaging:

> The abortive sympathy which is excited by the recital of imaginary distress, blunts the heart to that which is real and, hence, we sometimes see instances of young ladies, who weep away a whole forenoon over the criminal sorrows of a fictitious Charlotte or Werther, turning with disdain at three o'clock from the sight of a beggar, who sollicits (sic) its feeble accents or signs, a small portion only of the crumbs which fall from their fathers' tables. (*Essays* 82)

Rush's disgust was palpable. Goethe, he believed, had broken the cherished link between sensibility and charity, and betrayed the sacred covenant between author and reader by misusing the much-trumpeted power of sympathetic identification to stir up affection for wholly undeserving characters.

As copies continued to fly from the shelves of bookshops and libraries in the 1790s and 1800s, more and more public figures climbed aboard Rush's anti-*Werther* bandwagon. To drive home their case against the book's unchecked sentimentality, most took to arguing that the novel's tear-soaked pages encouraged young readers to follow in its idol's bloody footsteps. In a frequently reprinted opinion piece published in American newspapers in 1806 one female commentator charged that Goethe and his ilk could never compensate "for the injury that vague minds receive from those publications where SUICIDE is represented as heroism; nor can the writer of the Sorrows of Werther ever make atonement for the injury he has done to society" ("Sentimental Gleaner"). Goethe's offense, a growing gaggle of pundits agreed, was to tame the terrors of self-destruction, and thereby tempt "vague minds" to follow young Werther's example if ever their own romantic entanglements became too much to bear.[7]

Looking around, they found plenty of suggestive evidence that Goethe's sentimental rendering of romantic suicide might have already encouraged imitative acts. In the two decades before news of Bertell's 1807 death reached them, Americans who subscribed to European magazines or London newspapers were learning of other suicides around the Atlantic world that were plausibly the deadly consequence of reading *Werther*. In 1777 a young Swede shot himself, leaving a copy of *Werther* open by his side (Minois 267). A year later, when another Scandinavian drowned herself having been abandoned by her lover, a copy of *Werther* was found in her pocket (268). In 1784, London's *Gentleman's Magazine*, a favorite read of city elites in the United States, reported the suicide of a Miss Glover. "The Sorrows of Werther were found under her pillow," the magazine noted. For fear the book would catalyze copycat killings, councils in cities like Leipzig and Copenhagen banned its sale and the bishop of Milan bought up every copy he could find (Atkins 40).

As early as 1785—a matter of months before Rush attacked the novel at a female academy in Philadelphia—agitated critics of *Werther* saw disturbing signs that the book's deadly influence now extended to American shores. A report in a Boston newspaper in March 1785 described the death of a gentleman-soldier whose hopeless passion for a woman who did not return his affections had driven him to search for "a passage from misfortune." His suicide note, as transcribed in the paper, bore marked similarities to that of Werther's. "The pistols are loaded," he wrote. "ADIEU, for the last time!—Love me after I am dead, as I did you while I was alive" ("From the New Hampshire Mercury"). Over the next few years, columnists up and down the east coast of America regularly invoked reports like this as evidence of an escalating *Werther* epidemic. Writing in Philadelphia's *Weekly Magazine* in 1798 one essayist tried to persuade booksellers like Robert Bell to remove the book from their shelves, by alleging that it had already proved "the bane of more than one family" in the state. By way of proof she offered the "short history" of Eleanor, a young woman wallowing in depression brought on by an unhappy marriage and an abortive affair. "In this unhappy state of her existence the novel of Werter was never absent from her bosom; her tears moistened its leaves daily and hourly; and she dwelt, with fond and sorrowful sympathy, over these passages between which and her situation she fancied a resemblance." When her husband wounded her erstwhile lover in a duel, Eleanor collapsed by his side and "resolved not to survive him" ("The Ubiquitarian").[8]

News of the 1807 suicide of a twenty-year-old German immigrant named Bertell thus came as no surprise. Over the previous two decades, belief that reading the novel could lead to copycat deaths had slowly become gospel in certain circles. In an anti-*Werther* diatribe that circulated in several newspapers in 1810, one Salem essayist claimed that its mortal effects had been felt in "hundreds of families" over the past few years. "Within the narrow circle of my own acquaintance," she confided, "I have known two young men who rushed unbidden into eternity, deluded by the sophistical arguments of Werther in favor or in vindication of suicide" ("The Monitress"). Each was a textbook case of Wertherism:

> The bodies of each were found with the book carefully confined next the heart; as if the self deceived victims imagined it would serve as their excuse at the awful bar of eternal justice. These young men both killed themselves for love, as it is called. Like Werther, each had seen a pretty girl, and decorated his goddess with a thousand imaginary charms, vowing, perhaps, from the first captivating glance, to be hers, or die. Difficulties arise, their hopes were defeated; so, taking a draught of Lethe from the sentimental stream of nonsense we have been viewing, they believed it no hazard to rush into the presence of the Judge of quick and dead. How could they answer to a probable question, 'Why hast thou quitted life unbidden, thy duties unperformed, thy sins unrepented of;' The idea is shocking! we turn from it with horror!

In fact, there was no turning away. *Werther*'s poison seemed to be infecting much of the fiction popular with young readers. To many parents' utter horror, two of the very first American novels not only featured the suicides of their own avowedly sentimental characters but depicted these tragic climaxes as the fatal consequences of reading *Werther*.

Its ventriloquized encomiums to sensibility notwithstanding, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) placed the demonstration of the Werther effect at the heart of its convoluted plot. In a series of letters eerily similar to Werther's, Harrington informs his priggish friend Worthy of his blossoming romance with Harriot. Yet when the two lovers learn that they are actually brother and sister, Harriot quickly succumbs to a spiral of despair and illness that claims her life. Harrington too revolts at the news that their relationship was incestuous. Trembling with grief and disgust, he resolves to suicide, a decision he defends in a series of Goethian arguments

laid out in his last letters. Before Worthy can respond, he gets word that it is too late; Harrington has shot himself in his apartment. Arriving on the scene, Worthy sees the body for himself and reports that "A LETTER that he had written for me, laid unsealed upon the table, and *The Sorrows of Werter* was found lying by its side" (Mulford 100).

No reader of *The Power of Sympathy* needed any explanation to understand the significance of the presence of Goethe's novel at the scene. Reading *Werther*, William Hill Brown strongly implied, had validated and perhaps strengthened Harrington's resolution to die; it had influenced his choice to use a pistol and may even have put the idea of suicide in his head in the first place. Certainly, one can see Goethe's influence in the style and substance of the justifications that Harrington offers to Worthy for the rash act he intends to commit. Indeed, literary critic Julia A. Stern has argued that for Harrington, intent on enacting sentimental suicide, "*Werther* functions as a virtual 'how-to' manual" (13).

Brown's dramatization of the feared connection between reading *Werther* and copycat suicide was hardly unique. In fact by fictionalizing the Werther effect, Brown demonstrated that such fears were pervasive as early as 1789. Just four years later, the anonymous female author of *The Hapless Orphan* (1793) offered further testimony. Like *The Power of Sympathy*, *The Hapless Orphan* is an epistolary novel of desire, disappointment, and multiple suicides. At its denouement, Fanny is shot and killed by Ashley, a young man whose affections she—like Werther's Charlotte—has persistently refused. Ashley had been reading *Werther* in the days before this murder and had taken to quoting passages to Fanny in which Werther "argues in favor of suicide" (194) to show her the measure of his love and sorrow. After shooting Fanny, Ashley dispatches himself, leaving a suicide note confirming the novel's influence: "The Sorrows of Werther is now open upon my table: It animates my heart; it cheers my soul; it will sustain me through the scene which I am about to act" (213). Several English novels circulating in America at the same time offered similar tableau; *Werther*, it seems, was more than a manual, it had become the ultimate literary accessory.[9]

As rattled observers like Rush were acutely aware, suicide was spreading through the pages of young Americans' favorite fiction like yellow fever. In fact, texts featuring suicidal characters reading *Werther* represent only a

fraction of the narratives in which an act of self-destruction plays a central role. Indeed, as one might expect at a time when themes of seduction, ruin, and comeuppance dominated literary output, no less than one-third of the first forty-five novels written by Americans, all of them published between 1789 and 1810, depict a character dying by his or her own hand. These fifteen novels together portray the suicides of ten women and fourteen men and there are dozens more attempts at, thoughts of, and discussions about suicide in these and other early American novels.

This crude body count takes no heed of differences in print runs, marketing, and sales; nor does it differentiate between those works that appear to valorize suicide as an extreme romantic gesture akin to Werther's and those that portray acts of self-destruction with studied ambivalence or ambiguity, or even, at other end of the spectrum, as the just desserts of vice and villainy. But neither did many knee-jerk critics of sentimental fiction. To observers like Benjamin Rush all fiction had been poisoned by the fashion among some writers for excessive sentimentality. As a result, any literary portrayal of suicide was automatically assumed to be dangerously romantic.

There were, to be sure, quite a lot of novels and short stories that fit the emerging stereotype. In 1791 the author of a short piece in the *New York Magazine* referred to a lady's decision to shoot herself after her reputation was ruined by scandal as an "Instance of Female Heroism." "If [a] suicide can meet compassion from an insulted God," proclaimed another approving author in the same magazine a few years later, "surely it must be the seduced female" ("The Seduced Female" 14). Plenty of writers of long-form fiction seemed to have assumed as much. In a subplot of *The Power of Sympathy*, the hapless Ophelia poisons herself after being duped and then dumped by her sister's husband. As the drugs took their effect, William Hill Brown told readers, "her sensibility became more exquisite" (Penguin ed. 40). Likewise, in Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792) readers were encouraged to share Captain Farrago's uncharacteristically emotional reaction to news of a similar suicide. The blustering hero of this subtle parody "could not but shed tears" when he learned that a young woman disappointed in love had "suspended herself from the bed post with her garter" (127). Presented as the tragic consequence of a lapse of virtue, the suicides of these fictional girls were depicted as entirely deserving of young readers' sympathies (see fig. 2).

FIGURE 2. *American literary magazines published numerous short stories between 1789 and 1810 that culminated in the suicide of young women undone by seducers. Details from (left to right):* Massachusetts Magazine *6 (1794),* New York Magazine *5 (1794),* New York Magazine *2 (1791). Courtesy (left to right), American Antiquarian Society, The Library Company of Philadelphia, and American Antiquarian Society.*

Cognizant that a healthy proportion of their readers were adolescent boys on the verge of maturity, several turn-of-the-century authors depicted young men in similarly sentimental throes. In addition to Harrington and Ophelia, the third suicide in *The Power of Sympathy* is of Henry, a principled romantic who plunges "into the river—to close his sorrows with his life" after discovering that his beloved Fidelia has yielded to his rival (Mulford 51). Similarly, the eponymous young hero of John Davis's *Ferdinand and Elizabeth* (1798) joins his lover in a suicide pact when the obstacles to their earthly union become insurmountable (135), while in *The Gamesters* (1805) the guilt-stricken Leander Anderson throws himself into a stream after failing to act to stop a girl from being seduced by another man (296—97).

These novels and the many (sometimes illustrated) short stories that told similar tales together suggest that suicide had become a defining element of the sentimental form, if not its apotheosis. "Death by suicide," literary critic Herbert Ross Brown concluded in the early twentieth century, "was the supreme luxury of the sentimentalist" (58). As the literary language calculated to cultivate sensibility, sentimental writing was de-

signed to stir powerful reactions among readers to scenes of acute suffering. Depicting acts of suicide thus offered the ultimate trial of a writer's skill, and the superlative opportunity for readers to test their developing powers of sympathy. Confronted by characters driven to commit heinous sins for romantic reasons, readers faced an exquisite dilemma. Was condemnation or pity the proper response? As a writer for the *Massachusetts Magazine* who signed himself "Werther" explained in 1790: "The heart of tenderness, while it abhors the crime, cannot but feel the most real sorrow for that distress which urged him on to the fatal deed" ("The Felo de Se"). In essence, then, sentimentalized suicides provided the perfect stimuli for young readers to display their finer shades of feeling; the ubiquity of such scenes was thus essentially demand-driven.

By the turn of the century, the presence of so many seemingly sympathetic depictions of suicide in early national literature had, in the minds of many wary critics, transformed all fiction into a blight on public health. Elaborating the scourges of modern living in 1803, New York Presbyterian Samuel Miller wailed that self-destruction now appeared so commonly in novels that the entire genre amounted to little more than "an apology for suicide" (2: 175). Likewise, a piece in New York's *People's Friend* that appeared just weeks before news of Bertell's death reached that city's readers bemoaned "the many instances of Suicide which have lately occurred" before blaming "those hot-beds of vice, the NOVEL SHOPS" ("Suicide"). It should not be surprising that such remarks usually lacked anything stronger than circumstantial evidence to prove the existence of a widespread copycat effect. Decrying portrayals of fictional suicide was merely a means to an end, a convenient and compelling opportunity to express deep disappointment that the reading revolution had run amok. The once promising cult of sensibility that Rush, Rowson, and others had sponsored during the 1780s now seemed to them to have been hijacked by writers apparently unwilling to use their talents to give the nation's youth a timely moral education. Instead of instilling fellow feeling in the rising generation, literature in America seemed to many commentators in the 1790s and 1800s to be going in a different, darker, and more dangerous direction.

As most critics had only belatedly come to realize, sympathy was a force unto itself; once elicited and unleashed it was too potent to be harnessed or co-opted. While early champions of the novel had presumed that readers

would be able to distinguish between characters whose positive example they were expected to emulate and those they were supposed to pity or condemn, the power of sympathy made the task next to impossible. For instance, the fondness among American authors for tales that centered upon young women ruined by rakes required the genre to rely on the power of negative example to preserve its didactic credentials. But in practice, delivering what literary scholar Elizabeth Barnes has described as "sentimental pedagogy" through negative example proved easier said than done, not least because readers had to put themselves completely in the fallen woman's position in order to experience her anguish (87). Furthermore, novels that followed *Werther* in their use of epistolary devices only magnified the strength of fellow feeling between readers and the correspondent(s) whose choices they were supposed to denounce and reject.[10]

Novels or short stories that garbed acts of suicide in the language of sentiment only served to draw attention to this fundamental flaw in the campaign to use popular fiction to prod people toward acting right, and exposed the lack of control that ministers and parents had over how young people interpreted these new secular forms. *The Power of Sympathy* was a case in point. As Barnes has argued, the responses of the characters that discover Harrington's body at the climax of the novel perfectly illustrate the fears of those who had come to realize that sympathy was an ungovernable force: "Although the spectators acknowledge the young man's error, they attribute Harrington's intemperate action to his 'genius,' which inflamed his 'violent passions' and 'too nice sensibility'" (31). Drawing the parallel between these assembled observers and the young readers of the novel, Barnes sums up their reaction to Harrington's suicide: "In the end, they cannot condemn him, for, knowing his history, they know that he was the 'dupe of nature, and the sacrifice of seduction'" (40–41). Thus even while authors like Brown used paratext to insist that their work was intended to warn young readers of the "dangerous Consequences of SEDUCTION" (Mulford 7), critics of sentimental fiction increasingly concluded that the opposite was true.[11]

On these grounds cynicism about the power of reading quickly became fashionable. In 1787, the wealthy lawyer John Mifflin had kept his concerns private, confiding to his diary his fear that reading sentimental novels was having a pernicious effect on sensibility, "that it incapacitates us to feel for anything but romantic distress—plain unadorned misery which is to

be seen every day, passes unfelt and unheeded" (Mifflin 18 January 1787). Over the next seven or eight years, this once-hushed skepticism spilled into the open as *Werther* achieved cult status, gaining even greater volume and visibility after 1794 as word of atrocities following the French Revolution convinced American newspaper readers of the dangers of unchecked emotionalism. Once hailed as the answer to the most acute problems facing the young republic, by the turn of the century, the form's respectability had evaporated; the novel had become, in the words of a column in the *Lady's Magazine* "a species of writing which can scarcely be spoken of without being condemned" (Robinson).[12]

This blitz of criticism about the way writers of popular fiction handled suicide is best understood as a signal expression of the crisis in moral authority first examined by Cathy Davidson. Yet studies of responses to the rise of the novel in America have so far failed to emphasize the degree of paternalistic condescension to both authors and readers manifest in contemporary complaints about the wild and destructive powers of sympathy. To be sure, the sentimental language that framed several literary suicides confused the demarcation between positive and negative example. Likewise, several authors were no doubt guilty of romanticizing suicide to appeal to young readers craving scenes of Goethian tenderness. Yet a great many other American (and European) writers presented self-murder in a very different light. More often than not, suicide appears in novels and short stories published in America between 1780 and 1810 either as self-inflicted retribution for villainy or as something to be prevented or unambiguously censured. For instance, a short story by Thomas Bellamy that appeared in one of Boston's literary magazines in 1789 took pains to warn readers that conscience usually catches up with callous young men. When the virtuous young lady he has ruined dies of shame, the once rakish Charles is suddenly struck down with guilt and seizes a small dagger, plunging it into his chest. "May this unhappy man, with whom we have murdered many a guilty hour, prove an awful lesson!" the narrator concludes.[13]

Most other fiction writers avoided such direct addresses to readers, preferring to let their plots speak for themselves. In *Edgar Huntley* (1799), Charles Brockden Brown punishes Clithero, a homicidal sleepwalker, by forcing him to drown himself in the Delaware River to avoid being incar-

cerated. Similarly, in Sally Wood's *Dorval* (1801) the eponymous speculator and murderer shoots himself in prison, while in George Watterston's *Glencarn; or, The Disappointments of Youth* (1810), Mrs. Richardson poisons herself after attempting to ruin the life of her husband's adoptive son. While each character thus escapes further punishment in the here and now by fleeing toward the hereafter, these authors each clearly frame the villain's suicide as a prelude to divine judgment and retribution.

Perhaps in response to the chorus of criticism that sentimental fiction romanticized teenage self-destruction or perhaps in testimony to the fact that such blanket criticism was sometimes wide of the mark, American authors contrived to dramatize suicide prevention as often as possible. No fewer than three of the characters in the *History of Constantius and Pulchera* (1795) are saved from suicide by one timely intervention or other (15, 21, 60), while in Susanna Rowson's *Trials of the Human Heart* (1795) the villainous Clara Moreton "conceive[s] the impious idea" to take her own life but is distracted from doing so when she hears "a rustling on the other side of the hedge" (99). Similarly, in *The Gamesters* (1805) one of Leander Anderson's first attempts to drown himself stalls when "fancy gave him the resemblance of his father" (280), while in *Kelroy* (1812), a novel written by Benjamin Rush's niece, Rebecca, the suicide of the Wertherian protagonist is preempted by a fatal illness (191).[14]

Refusing to resort to such contrived plot devices to abort a suicide, one or two writers instead dramatized the power of rational discussion to deter characters from destroying themselves. The highwayman in James Butler's *Fortune's Foot-ball* (1797), for example, listens while Charles and the appropriately named Mercutio "endeavoured both by moral and philosophical arguments to dissuade him from his desperate purpose—in which they happily succeeded" (1: 28). More conservative writers were not so coy, and let characters articulate explicit anti-suicide messages directly to the reader. In *The Coquette* (1794), Hannah Webster Foster's alter ego Julia Granby comforts foolish Eliza Wharton after her suitor forsakes her, telling her to resist any fatalistic daydreams. "I hope, said I, that you have formed no resolution against your own life. God forbid, rejoined she. My breath is in his hands, let him do what seemeth good in his sight" (Mulford 223). A few pages further on, when Major Sanford's wife leaves him after discovering his own affair with young Eliza, he briefly flirts with suicide before

wrestling with his demons and resolving to live. "I would fly to death, and seek a refuge in the grave," the rake tells a correspondent, "but the forebodings of a retribution to come, I cannot away with!" (238).

A few authors went further still, offering up their works as custom-designed antidotes to the perceived toxicity of the Werther effect. The second American novel, Rev. Enos Hitchcock's *Memoirs of the Bloomsgrove Family* (1790), admiringly quotes Benjamin's Rush's much-reprinted indictment of Goethe's self-absorbed characters, and describes young Rozella Bloomsgrove as the antithesis of those "young ladies, who weep away a whole forenoon, over the criminal sorrows of a fictitious Charlotte or Werther, turning with disdain, at two o'clock, from the sight of a beggar" (296). Hitchcock, a preacher with Federalist views, surely approved of a novel that appeared in the American market a decade later. Reprinted in Philadelphia in 1802 from a British original, *The Slave of Passion; or, the Fruits of Werther* attempted a thorough reworking of Goethe's story, an exercise the anonymous author hoped would "counteract the poison in Werther's Letters" (4).[15]

The Slave of Passion loosely follows the outline of Goethe's narrative: a young man learns of the marriage of his intended and despairs, resolving to suicide. In fact, the protagonist, Charles, has been reading *Werther* and repeats the German's arguments to justify suicide almost verbatim in a letter to his friend, Henry. Unlike Goethe's Wilhelm (whose replies are assumed but unseen), or Worthy in *The Power of Sympathy* (whose long-winded and intermittent replies lack focus or force), Henry writes back immediately, obliterating each and every argument that Charles, channeling Werther, has marshaled. After a moment of suspense, the plot veers drastically from the Goethian model when Charles writes back grateful and exultant to have been dragged from the metaphorical precipice by the arrival of Henry's last letter. With tragedy averted, a happy ending quickly follows as Charles learns that he has been misinformed of his beloved's marriage. The novel closes as Charles prepares for his wedding, his brush with *Werther* a distant memory.

The works of Charles Brockden Brown—as packed with scenes of self-destruction as any of this generation—demonstrate the often-confounding variety of portrayals of young men and women killing themselves to be found in early American fiction. Among the many suicides in Brown's multifaceted works, a handful seem straightforwardly sentimental. In

Arthur Mervyn (1799), the sister of the title character is seduced by her schoolmaster, the "arch-villain" Colvill. "Young, artless, and beautiful" (1: 187), she takes her life to escape from "the upbraidings of her parents, from the contumelies of the world, from the goadings of remorse, and the anguish flowing from the perfidy and desertion of Colvill" (88). Likewise, the eponymous *Jane Talbot* (1801) confesses to her readers that "Often have I wished to slide obscurely and quietly into the grave. . . . Never felt I so enamored of that which seems to be the cure-all" (288).

Yet such sympathetic renderings of characters bent on destroying themselves were by no means typical of Brown's broad oeuvre. In the "Man at Home" sketches, first published in 1798, Brown's narrator recalls a young man forced to live with the consequences of an impulsive suicide attempt. For eighteen-year-old Henry Fairfax, the cause was the wretched smallpox that claimed the life of his new bride. The distraught young man "sought out her grave, and shot himself at the foot of it." But his aim was not as true as his heart. Henry survived, though his head wound left him incapacitated and he lived out his remaining years occupying "a cell in an hospital. Squalid, naked, and emaciated—what a monument of ruin and of rashness dost thou exhibit!" (90). Later the same year, copies of *Wieland* began to appear in Philadelphia bookshops. Theodore ends that bloody and ambiguous story by murdering his family and then himself, fanatically convinced that God has ordered him to do so. Sometimes understood as a lampoon of high-strung sentimental fiction, this grisly tale presents Wieland's suicide as the product of his intoxicating delusion. Brown was undoubtedly fired by opposition to the enthusiasm consuming France during the Reign of Terror and used the book's bloody denouement to warn, in literary critic William Manly's words, of "the consequences of a morbidly hypersensitive sensibility when it is cut loose from any balancing skepticism" (320).[16]

While Charles Brockden Brown's accumulated output reveals his virtuoso ability to continually alternate between positive and negative examples of self-destructive conduct, a few individual works by other authors embodied the same tensions within single narratives. In the *Hapless Orphan* (1793) young Ashley first enacts the Werther effect in textbook style, before the narrator, Caroline Francis, denounces the book as a "plausible sanction for suicide" (205–06). Apparently a small minority of American authors believed they could have their cake and eat it; decrying *Werther* on one

page, while offering their own renderings of romantic suicide on the next. John Davis's *Ferdinand and Elizabeth* (1798) provides another case in point. Thirty pages before the eponymous lovers agree to a suicide pact, Ferdinand comes across a servant girl and asks her if she is a fan of "these love-inflicting volumes." "She replied with a coquettish air that she slept every night with the Sorrows of Werter under her pillow! I could hardly restrain my laughter, but discharging the bill, bade my novel-reading nymph farewell, whose susceptibility amused me" (62–63).[17]

As events in France in the mid-1790s consumed the American imagination, it became ever more politically difficult for public figures to acknowledge that some authors were enacting scenes of suicide in order to dramatize intervention or censure. In fact, it was all that struggling authors could do to defend themselves against charges that their sensational designs smacked of Jacobinism. Charles Brockden Brown was one among several authors who tried to blunt some of the attacks on American fiction as uniformly indulgent and corrosive. In a column he published in his *Literary Magazine* in 1805, Brown responded directly to Rev. Samuel Miller's recent claim that novel reading was a leading cause of suicide. "Suicide in truth, is very rarely to be found," Brown gamely protested. "Wherever it occurs, so far as we remember, it is placed in such a light as to discourage rather than provoke imitation" ("Criticism" 315). Choosing Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise* as an example of a well-known novel in which a suicide was averted, Brown asserted that not all prose fiction was guilty as charged:

> The faults of Rousseau's famous novel are not few, but it really does not appear to us chargeable with promoting suicide. Some readers may suppose the preponderance of argument in the epistolary controversy contained in the work to be in favour of suicide, but readers of good sense can hardly fail, we think, of forming a different conclusion; and as to the intention of the author, something may surely be inferred from his having represented his hero as influenced by his friend's reasonings to lay aside his murderous purposes. (315–16)

Although he might have made similar claims about *Werther*, Brown avoided any mention of it. He did not want to push his luck.

As the *Literary Magazine* found its feet, its editor slowly grew bolder. In a column for an 1806 issue, Brown charged parents and preachers with a patronizing disregard for their offspring's ability to discern the difference

between positive and negative example. Most adolescent readers, Brown scolded, could readily distinguish virtue from vice and deserved more credit. For his part, the editor continued, he could not "refuse to teach a child to read, because he may possibly light upon something in the form of books trifling or pernicious. It would be just as wise to sew up his mouth, because he may possibly swallow a poisoned berry, or a brass pin" (404). By 1810, such bursts of pique had become a regular refrain in this and other literary magazines as a growing number of writers tried to protect their literary reputations by disassociating themselves from the excesses of Goethian sentimentalism.[18]

The turn-of-the-century struggle over the prominence of suicide and sentimentality in early national literature reflected a much broader reconsideration of the role of sensibility in the forging of American democracy. In its heyday during the early 1780s, "the aesthetics of sentiment" (Samuels 6) had penetrated not just novelistic fiction but also advice books, sculpture, painting, poetry, and fashion. Yet by the 1810s, the republic's problems seemed to have expanded beyond those that a keenness of perception, delicacy of feeling, capacity for sympathetic identification, and ability to be stirred to profound responses by beauty and suffering might plausibly address. The expansion of the white male franchise, the growth of factory production and out-of-home labor, rising in-migration and immigration to the nation's largest cities, ethnic fragmentation, and the insistent and insidious spread of an overtly masculine doctrine of competition and profit seeking convinced early nineteenth-century Americans of the naivété of a middle-class culture that touted affectionate ties as tools of successful nation building (Burstein 8–18). As they groped for ways to understand and accommodate the increasingly capitalistic and individualistic culture ushered in after the War of 1812, "Americans did not become unfeeling," Andrew Burstein notes, "but they turned away from the risks of extreme sensibility" (323).

Literary tastes and trends were inextricably linked to these broad transformations. Between 1805 and 1825, young people's interest in novels filled with tears, sighs, and suicide noticeably slackened. For the first time in thirty years, *Werther* struggled to find new readers. While booksellers had paid for more than five hundred advertisements for the book before 1809, over the next sixteen years less than 5 percent of that number turned up

in newspapers, suggesting that the next generation of young readers had already moved on. Literary magazines stopped excerpting sensational moments in the now familiar story, and the cottage industry in *Werther* paraphernalia sputtered and stalled. Soon enough, it became the subject of satires and parodies like L. A. Wilmer's "The Sorrows of Skwerter" (1838). Summing up the novel's dramatic reversal of fortune, one Jacksonian minister remarked that even the most feebleminded of readers "would now regard it as a book too silly to cry over" (Norton 250). And it wasn't just *Werther*. Library and bookstore records show that after 1815 both supply of and demand for the most overtly sentimental fiction was spiraling. Fickle young readers seemed to have grown bored with it. Increasingly formulaic and predictable, plots no longer seemed fresh, fun, or deliciously dangerous. Whether declining reader interest also testifies to the effects of three decades of warnings from parents and ministers that extremely sentimental fiction was ruinous and opposed to reason is more difficult to determine.[19]

Eager to turn the page on young Werther, writers coming into their own after the War of 1812 seemed willing to do whatever was necessary to distance themselves from suspect sentimentality. Thus in John Neal's ruggedly masculine and fervently nationalistic *Keep Cool* (1817), Earnest pours scorn on the tropes of Neal's Eurocentric literary predecessors, telling his partner: "'I may be romantick; but I would blow my brains out this very moment if I thought this was the sickening, sniveling romance of novels.' His eyes flashed as he added in a lofty, affected tone, 'mine, Percy, mine is a high souled romance—the poetry of extravaganze. I would spill my heart's blood, to be serious'" (73). For similar reasons, female novelists writing in the Jacksonian and antebellum eras worked equally hard to keep Werther at a safe distance, preferring instead to use the redeeming influence of evangelical heart religion to direct the sympathy of their heroines (and by extension their readers) toward worthy targets. Put another way, this new breed of sentimental writers avoided the pitfalls of trying to teach by negative example, and confined themselves to modeling the transforming power of sympathy through positive example.

By the 1850s, sentimental fiction had become a means to confront middle-class readers, particularly women, with the plights of people fundamentally different from themselves, most notably lower-class women, Indians, and slaves. As a result, by the middle of the nineteenth century it

was rare indeed to find characters from the same backgrounds as middle-class readers committing suicide. Authors had no desire to be accused of inciting another epidemic of copycat deaths. Instead, writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe seized on the suicides of black slaves, noble savages, and desperate factory girls, in hopes of turning their sentimentalized deaths into fodder for the cause of social and political reforms vastly more wide-ranging than anything imagined after the American Revolution.[20]

NOTES

I am indebted to Monica Lewis, Sandra Gustafson, the journal's anonymous readers, and audiences at University College, London, and the Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture for their constructive comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. I take details of the suicide from "New-York, July 31, 1807." The Readex database of *America's Historic Newspapers* (AHN) includes eighteen printings of the story of Bertell's death.
2. On the sale of Werther collectibles, see Gutbrodt and Schiffman 208–09.
3. For more on the American reception, see Long, "Werther in America" 88. On the appeal of Werter to female readers, and the character's "feminization" see Schiffman 212. Sarah Knott has recently challenged the enduring belief that sentimental literature was gendered feminine and consumed almost exclusively by young women (46). See also Davidson 77, 95–98, 112–13.
4. On this history, see Long, "Werther in America" 106–07; Long, "English and American Imitations"; and Atkins 251. Examples of excerpts from *Werther* printed in American newspapers include "Miscellanies" and "Miscellany." I have identified thirty-four Werther poems published in newspapers from New Hampshire to South Carolina before 1825, including several unknown to Long. Others were published as stand-alone pieces such as Taylor. It was also common for poets to versify individual letters from Goethe's epistolary novel. See, for instance, "Charlotte's Sohlequy"; "Death of Werter"; "Werter: Letter 5th"; "Letter Lxi"; and "Werter's Farewell." For poetry using the Werther pseudonym, see Werter, "Brumalode" and "Long-Island"; "A Sonnet"; and "To Miss S." On Werther plays in America see [Advertisement].
5. For more on the hopes for this literature, see Barker-Benfield 1–36, 104–53, 248, 76; Burstein xi–xviii, 14; Knott, *Sensibility* 17–18; Weyler 3, 24, 105; Barnes x–xi; and Fichtelberg. On the complex relationship between British and American fiction in this period see Tennenhouse and Gillian Brown 10–11.
6. See also "On the Means."
7. See also "The Speculator"; "The Ubiquitarian"; and "The Monitress."
8. On Werther, reading, and contagion see Schiffman 214–19.
9. See also Croft and Waltraud Proescholdt-Obermann 86.

10. See also Barnes 8–9, 14, 20, 35–36. On the degree to which English authors hewed to positive examples see Barker-Benfield 264, 343.
11. See also Davidson 44, 99.
12. See Knott, *Sensibility* 145 and Cleves 1–103. For scholarship that ties the critical backlash against sentimental literature solely to anti-Jacobin reactions to the French Terror, see Barker-Benfield 359–68.
13. See Davidson 42–43.
14. Notably, Clara Moreton, a slanderer and adulteress, survives her brush with suicide to commit a series of additional outrages.
15. See Davidson 127–29.
16. See also Christophersen 120–21. In addition, in *Jane Talbot*, Henry Colden is deemed unacceptable as a son-in-law because he is a proponent of rational suicide (99).
17. The passage in which Caroline Francis indicts the novel later appeared as a stand-alone essay in several American newspapers, sometimes without proper attribution to its fictional source. For instance, see "Sentimental Gleaner."
18. See also "Phebe Smith"; Beltenebros; and C. B. Brown, "On the Cause."
19. I drew advertisement data from the Readex AHN database.
20. See Tompkins 124–25, 59, 76; Barnes 94–95; and Sanchez-Eppler.

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