

# The History of Reading, Volume 1

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### 3

## Weeping for Werther: Suicide, Sympathy and the Reading Revolution in Early America

*Richard Bell*

Setting down the novel for the final time, he raised the horse pistol to his temple and fired. Beachcombers found his young, well-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 he 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, addressed to a friend in Brooklyn, 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 intensively for weeks now. To readers of the dozens of 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 vilified sentimental novel in America, lay open at the page where Werther, pistols prepared, takes his final leave by writing to the woman who has promised herself to another: "They are loaded – the clock strikes twelve – I go. Charlotte! Farewell! Farewell!"<sup>1</sup>

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

led another to do the same. At least that was the conclusion many newspaper readers reached when printers from Vermont to Virginia splashed Bertell'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 the first English translation of Goethe's over-wrought romance first reached American shores in the early 1780s, the latest in a post-revolutionary deluge of new fiction aimed squarely at the rising generation. Because *Werther* and a swathe of American novels that followed in its wake each put the suicides of tremulous and tearful young characters centre stage, a generation of serious-minded adults had convinced themselves that the nation's susceptible youth would be manipulated to follow in the fatal footsteps of their fictional heroes. The discovery of Bertell's body on the Jersey shore in 1807 convinced them they had been right all along.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* takes the form of a long series of letters from a twenty-three-year-old artist to a distant friend. The letters speak directly to the reader and narrate the passionate Werther's story of love and loss during a sojourn in the fictional village of Wahlheim (based on the town of Garbenheim, in Hesse state). 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 siblings, Charlotte flirts with Werther, but ultimately does not return his insistent affections; his growing obsession with Charlotte quickly starts to paralyse 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.<sup>2</sup>

In Europe the novel was phenomenally popular. First published in Leipzig in 1774, it was translated into French (1775), English (1779), Italian (1781) and Russian (1788) and repeatedly reprinted to satisfy swelling demand across the continent. Its effect on readers was palpable. A generation of young romantics took Werther to their hearts. As historian Georges Minois writes, 'the youth of Europe learned his speeches as they learned Hamlet's'.<sup>3</sup>

*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 traveller came across in Georgetown in 1798 who 'delighted in the perusal of the Sorrows of Werter [and] perfumed his handkerchief with lavender'.<sup>4</sup> Although the story was told from the point of view of a delicate young man of feeling, booksellers also made special efforts to target young women readers. *Werther* topped a widely-circulated list of 'novels for winter evenings' recommended 'to the ladies'.<sup>5</sup> 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.'<sup>6</sup>

The unprecedented popularity of *Werther* led to a flood of imitative works. In addition to extracts of *Werther* published in American magazines, consumers could digest plays, poems, and even other novels that followed the story or featured its tragic hero. Editors printed dozens of Werther poems in American newspapers and literary magazines throughout the 1780s and 1790s; some poets active in this period even chose 'Werter' as their pseudonym, explicitly 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. Originally performed in Dublin, the play 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.<sup>7</sup>

Such retellings testified to the American appetite for all things *Werther*, but also crystallized concern that the reading revolution famously described by Cathy Davidson – a dramatic surge in the supply of and demand for fiction that so many parents and preachers had cheered as it had taken hold in the 1770s and 1780s – was producing some dangerous and unanticipated consequences.<sup>8</sup> Proud patriots and anxious patriarchs like Dr Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia and the Reverend Samuel Miller in New York 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 local authors and used to

engineer moral reform among self-regarding young readers.<sup>9</sup> Between 1789 and 1796 the *Massachusetts Magazine* published more than one hundred stories, letters and poems on the theme of seduction 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. 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. His sympathy leads him to action: he gives 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.<sup>10</sup>

Before the moral and social effects of reading so many didactic plots could be measured, novels like *Werther* burst on the scene. As the number of foreign and domestic novels on sale in America proliferated throughout the 1780s and 1790s, 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 started to propel parents like Rush and preachers like Samuel Miller to the conclusion that excessively sentimental narratives might actually pervert young readers' delicate sensibilities, encouraging them to wallow in fictional tragedies while ignoring those around them in need of their sympathy. Addressing the Young Ladies Academy in Philadelphia in 1787 at the height of *Werther*-fever in the city, Rush attacked the novel for perverting sensibility:

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 solicits its feeble accents or signs, a small portion only of the crumbs which fall from their fathers' tables.<sup>11</sup>

Goethe, Rush 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, 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 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 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'. Goethe's offence, pundits agreed, was to tame the terrors of self-destruction, and tempt 'vague minds' to follow young Werther's example if ever their own romantic entanglements became too much to bear.<sup>12</sup>

Alarming, there was growing evidence that Goethe's sentimental rendering of romantic suicide might have already encouraged imitative acts among American readers. 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.'<sup>13</sup> American columnists began to seize on reports like this as evidence of an escalating *Werther* epidemic. Writing in Philadelphia's *Weekly Magazine* in 1798 one essayist tried to persuade booksellers 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 Werther 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 wounds her erstwhile lover in a duel, Eleanor collapses by his side and 'resolved not to survive him'.<sup>14</sup>

News of the 1807 suicide of a twenty-year-old German immigrant on the Weehawken shore thus came as no surprise. Belief that reading the novel could lead to copycat deaths had 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.'<sup>15</sup>

In fact, *Werther's* poison seemed to be infecting much of the fiction popular with young readers. To many parents' 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*. 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. When the two lovers learn that they are actually brother and sister, Harriot succumbs to a spiral of despair and illness that kills her. Harrington 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 his moralizing friend 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.'<sup>16</sup>

Brown's dramatization of the connection between reading *Werther* and copycat suicide was hardly unique. 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), an epistolary novel of desire, broken hearts and multiple suicides, offered further testimony. At its climax, 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' 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.' Several English novels circulating in America at the same time offered similar tableau; *Werther*, it seems, had become the ultimate literary accessory.<sup>17</sup>

As rattled observers like Rush were acutely aware, suicide was spreading through the pages of young Americans' favourite fiction like yellow fever. 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 fifteen of the first forty-five novels written by Americans depict a character dying by his or her own hand. These fifteen early American novels portray the suicides of ten women and fourteen men, and there are dozens more attempts at, thoughts of and discussions about suicide in their pages.

This 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, and those which portray acts of self-destruction with studied ambivalence or as the just desserts of vice. But neither did many critics of sentimental fiction. To critics like Rush all fiction had been poisoned by the fashion among some writers for excessive sentimentality: any literary portrayal of suicide was assumed to be dangerously romantic.

There were many novels and short stories that fit Rush's 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'.<sup>18</sup> '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'.<sup>19</sup> Many writers of long fiction seemed to have assumed as much. In a subplot of *The Power of Sympathy*, the hapless Ophelia poisons herself after being duped and dumped by her sister's husband. As the drugs took their effect, William Hill Brown told readers, 'her sensibility became more exquisite'.<sup>20</sup> 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'. 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, 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, while in *The Gamesters* (1805) the guilt-stricken Leander Anderson throws himself into a stream after failing to act to stop a girl being seduced by another man.<sup>23</sup>

These novels and the many similar (sometimes illustrated) short stories 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'.<sup>24</sup> As the literary language calculated to cultivate sensibility, sentimental writing was designed to stir powerful reactions among readers to scenes of acute suffering. Depicting suicide offered the supreme trial of a writer's skill, and the 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.'<sup>25</sup> Sentimentalized suicides provided the perfect stimuli for young readers to display their finer shades of feeling; the ubiquity of such scenes was essentially market-driven.

By the turn of the century, the presence of so many seemingly sympathetic depictions of suicide had, in the minds of many critics, transformed fiction into a blight on public health. Writing in 1803, New York Presbyterian Samuel Miller complained that self-destruction now appeared so commonly in novels that the genre amounted to 'an apology for suicide'.<sup>26</sup> 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'.<sup>27</sup>

Such remarks usually lacked any conclusively causal evidence to prove the existence of a copycat effect. Decrying portrayals of fictional suicide was a convenient and compelling opportunity to express deep disappointment that the reading revolution had run amok. The promising cult of sensibility that Rush, Miller and others had once sponsored now seemed 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, American literature seemed, to many commentators in the 1790s and 1800s to be going in a different, darker, and more dangerous direction.

As most critics had belatedly come to realize, sympathy was a force unto itself; once elicited and unleashed it was too potent to be harnessed. 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 pervasive power of sympathy made the task next to impossible. 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 correctly, and exposed the lack of control that ministers and parents had over how young people interpreted fiction. *The Power of Sympathy* was a case in point. As Elizabeth 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".' 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".'<sup>28</sup> While authors like Brown used paratext to insist that their work was intended to warn young readers of the 'dangerous consequences of seduction', critics of sentimental fiction concluded that the opposite was true. Once hailed as the answer to the 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'.<sup>29</sup>

This onslaught of criticism about how popular fiction handled suicide is best understood as an expression of the crisis in moral authority brought about by the reading revolution; such criticism was neither fair nor balanced. Several authors were no doubt guilty of romanticizing suicide to appeal to young readers craving scenes of Goethian tenderness. However, many other American (and European) writers presented self-murder in a 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 unambiguously censured. No fewer than three of the characters in the *History of Constantius and Pulchra* (1794) are saved from suicide by timely interventions, while in Susanna Rowson's *Trials of the Human*

*Heart* (1795) Clara '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'.<sup>30</sup> 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', while in *Kelroy* (1812), a novel written by Benjamin Rush's niece, Rebecca, the suicide of the Wertherian protagonist is pre-empted by a fatal illness.<sup>31</sup>

Refusing to resort to such fantastical 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 Mercutio 'endeavoured both by moral and philosophical arguments to dissuade him from his desperate purpose – in which they happily succeeded'.<sup>32</sup> More conservative writers were less coy, and let characters articulate explicit anti-suicide messages. 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.' 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!'<sup>33</sup>

A few authors went further, offering their works as antidotes to the perceived power of the Werther effect. The Reverend Enos Hitchcock's *Memoirs of the Blooms Grove Family* (1790) admiringly quotes Benjamin Rush's much-reprinted indictment of Goethe's self-absorbed characters, and describes young Rozella Blooms Grove 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'.<sup>34</sup> Hitchcock, a Federalist preacher, 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'.<sup>35</sup>

*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. 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, Henry writes back immediately, obliterating each and every argument that Charles has marshalled. 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.

A few skilled writers even displayed the virtuoso ability to alternate between positive and negative portrayals of literary suicide. For instance, 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'.<sup>36</sup> A small minority of American authors believed they could have their cake and eat it; decrying *Werther* on one page, while offering their own 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.'<sup>37</sup>

In the face of rising criticism, Charles Brockden Brown began to speak up to defend novelists against accusations that their work was indulgent and corrosive. In a column in his *Literary Magazine* (1805), Brown responded to Samuel Miller's well-publicized 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.' Choosing Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* 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.<sup>38</sup>

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, Brown slowly grew bolder. In a column for an 1807 issue, Brown charged parents and preachers with a patronizing disregard for their children's ability to discern the difference positive and negative example. Most adolescent readers, Brown argued, could readily distinguish virtue from vice and deserved more credit. For his part, 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.'<sup>39</sup> By 1810, such bursts of pique had become a regular refrain in literary magazines as a growing number of writers tried to protect their reputations by disassociating themselves from the excesses of literary sentimentalism.

The turn-of-the-century struggle over suicide and sentimentality 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' had penetrated not just fiction, but also advice books, sculpture, painting, poetry and fashion.<sup>40</sup> 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 labour, 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 naivety of a middle-class culture that touted affectionate ties as tools of successful nation-building. 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'.<sup>41</sup>

Literary tastes and trends were inextricably linked to these broad transformations. Between 1805 and 1825, young people's interest in sentimental novels noticeably slackened. For the first time in thirty years, *Werther* struggled to find new readers. While book-sellers had paid for more than five hundred advertisements for the book before 1809, over the next sixteen years less than 5 per cent of that number turned up in newspapers, suggesting that readers had moved on.<sup>42</sup> Literary magazines stopped excerpting sensational moments in the now familiar

story; instead it became the subject of parody, like L. A. Wilmer's 'The Sorrows of Skwerter'.<sup>43</sup> Summing up the novel's dramatic reversal of fortune, one Jacksonian minister remarked that even the most feeble-minded of readers 'would now regard it as a book too silly to cry over'.<sup>44</sup> And it wasn't just *Werther*. Library and bookstore records show that after 1815 demand for the most overtly sentimental fiction was spiralling downwards. Fickle young readers seemed to have grown bored of 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.

As the Goethian sentimentalism lost its literary currency, portrayals of suicide in American fiction became harder to find and condemn. In a sample of forty-five novels published between 1810 and 1824, only four feature characters destroying themselves. By the middle of the nineteenth century it was rare to find middle-class characters 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, turning their sentimentalized deaths to the cause of social and political reforms vastly more wide-ranging than anything imagined after the American Revolution.

## Notes and references

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