

‘The grave’s a fine and private place’: Mourning and love in late eighteenth-century Europe

Lene Østermark-Johansen

A couple of weeks ago I was alone in this room, the only tourist that afternoon who had pressed the doorbell and gone in search of whatever might remain of a more than 250-year-old unhappy love affair. I had arrived in the small German town by train late the evening previously and been taken by Google maps on a spooky tour in the dark across cemeteries and narrow lanes to my hotel, so my mind was already in its Gothic mode. And yet nothing had prepared me for my thoughts that sunny afternoon, as I visited the two rooms in Wetzlar in which the young lawyer Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem shot himself on 30 October 1772, depressed and miserable with unfulfilled love for Elisabeth Herd, already betrothed to a suitor closer to her in rank than Jerusalem. The simple set-up in the room—a desk with an open book, a chair, an open drawer with a gun, and a dummy wearing the yellow waistcoat and trousers, together with the blue jacket, reputedly worn by Jerusalem—are intended to bring the tragic events of the autumn of 1772 to life. Marketing material on the internet had sold the experience of visiting the twee timber-framed house as a happy, joyous event, whether for the middle-aged pair or for the young couple contemplating the literary afterlife of Jerusalem’s suicide: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in part based on Jerusalem’s sad ending, can celebrate its 250th anniversary next year, and there will undoubtedly be all sorts of Werther events both in Germany and elsewhere the entire year. Back in the room we can take up the copy of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s tragedy *Emilia Galotti*, which was reputedly the last thing Jerusalem read, a text about a man’s obsessive love for a woman he cannot have, and a text which also makes it into Goethe’s book; the gun is behind glass, as a relic (even though it is not the original gun used by Jerusalem to kill himself)? or to prevent theft or a succession of suicides? Be that as it may, I suddenly questioned my own literary tourism. The Jerusalem House was the last stop on a trip in the footsteps of Goethe which had included all the sights in Weimar, in Wetzlar the Lottehaus where Goethe’s beloved Charlotte Buff had lived before marriage and been visited by a young love-sick Goethe. I had walked the Wetzlar Goethe Weg with a view of the river all the way to Gabenheim, renamed Wahlheim in the novel, where the young Goethe and his Werther used to hang out with the locals, and I had gazed at the commemorative stones erected to Jerusalem and Charlotte Buff in the cemetery, knowing full well that the body of

Goethe's Lotte was in Hannover, and that somewhere under the grass in the cemetery were the earthly remains of Jerusalem, concealed as his grave became what was considered an unhealthy site of pilgrimage in the 1770s.

But what, in fact, is the joy of visiting the room in which a young man has shot himself, has even spent the entire night in agony, hovering between life and death because his shots were not precise enough to kill him at once, or because he regretted his act? A large poster in the entrance hall, illustrating Werther's death, reminds us of the discrepancy between the lover's solitary act and the many professionals who rushed in to try to keep him alive, with the distant beloved gazing safely from her silhouette at the havoc caused by her sheer being. Is this where love happens? Is this where our love of reading about unhappy love makes us voyeurs of the physical framework of other people's misery and destruction? A site which we visit in the hope of distilling from the silent walls some memories of the last moments, where the sweet shiver of horror at imagining the moments before pulling the trigger, the hours of physical and mental pain and the eventual release from the agonies of being alive and being in love set in, as we smugly turn to our significant other and say, 'Was it not terrible! What a waste of a young life! If only he had spoken with someone!' The dark tourism which even on sunny days draws us to cemeteries, church vaults, sites of self-mutilation, sites of last meetings, may serve to enhance our own melancholy at not being in a romantic relationship or our joy at being in one, of not being Jerusalem or Werther, not being Juliet, not being Héloïse or Abelard, but we are also living out our darkest fears when we go to gaze at the tombs of lovers, united in death after decades of separation, in the case of Héloïse and Abelard.

The double tomb in the Père Lachaise in Paris became in the nineteenth century a site for lovers; just look at all the many depictions of it, at Jean François Gigoux's 1839 illustration to the correspondence between the two twelfth-century lovers which invites a young bourgeois nineteenth-century couple inside the architectural structure of the tomb. The dead and the living are on curiously intimate terms, a memento mori: 'Like us, so you shall be one day', they seem to say; the parallel between the marriage hearse and the marriage bed is further spelled out by our young lady's wreath: a giant wedding ring and a piece of commemoration and adoration all at once. By 1869, in his *Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain would speak of the site as

a grave which had been more revered, more widely known, more written and sung about and wept over, for seven hundred years, than any other in Christendom save only that of the Saviour. All visitors linger pensively about it; all young people

capture and carry away keepsakes and mementoes of it; all Parisian youths and maidens who are disappointed in love come here to bail out when they are full of tears; yea many stricken lovers make pilgrimages to this shrine from distant provinces to weep and wail and “grit” their teeth over their heavy sorrows, and to purchase their sympathies of the chastened spirits of that tomb with offerings of immortelles and budding flowers.

Most of the great love stories of western literature revolve around unfulfilled, unreciprocated love, love cut short, love made impossible by circumstances, by rivals, by blood, by war, by money (or lack of it), by geographical distance, by messages gone wrong or misunderstood—the list is long, seemingly endless. When we visit a site like the Jerusalem Haus, we may have a feeling of going beyond Goethe’s novel, of getting to the real source of eighteenth-century *Weltschmerz*, of getting access to Goethe’s compositional process as he was interweaving his own unhappy love affair with that of Jerusalem into a novel which has for centuries become the epitome of unhappy romantic love in European fiction. Given that no such thing as ‘Jerusalem’s grave’ any longer exists, the Jerusalem Haus is the closest we come to a monument, to an embodied spatial framework carrying some sort of imprint of the unhappy lover. It adds to the power of Goethe’s novel that his Werther conflates the lives and feelings of no fewer than two real men. The teasing grey-zone areas between fact and fiction hover tantalizingly behind our enjoyment of the novel, and ever since 1774 the tourist industry has been exploiting this schism.

I am going to conclude by drawing your attention to a series of objects which have long fascinated me, partly because they deal with a ‘non place’, partly because they form a significant part of the English reception of Werther, partly because they go beyond the narrative of Goethe’s novel, and partly because they link world literature with the domestic sphere, with the world of petticoats and turns attention away from Goethe’s unhappy male protagonist to the woman left behind. As you may remember, we hear little of Charlotte’s reaction to Werther’s sudden death, apart from her fainting in her betrothed Albert’s arms and there being fears for her life. Albert lent Werther the pistols with which he killed himself in a moment full of dark forebodings but given the male-centered focus of the entire novel, the grief of Lottchen is never discussed. The novel concludes with Werther’s burial at the place he had himself singled out and with the remark that ‘No priest attended.’

In the years following the publication of Goethe’s novel, various fictitious letters were produced by both French and English writers, constructing Lotte’s letters to Werther. A major

part of the visual material relating to Werther in England focuses very single-handedly on the scene of Charlotte mourning at Werther's grave. This is a kind of fan fiction, a sequel to Goethe, refusing to abide by the very definitive ending of his novel. The so-called 'Graveyard School' of English poetry, represented by Thomas Gray, Robert Blair and Edward Young, had popularized the elegy as a genre and long meditative poems set in cemeteries, and there is no doubt that the cult of Charlotte at Werther's grave inscribes itself in that tradition. Looking at the amount of objects, trinkets, merchandise of English origin which were produced in the last decades of the eighteenth century I think it is fair to speak of a veritable cult of Charlotte at Werther's grave. The poet Charlotte Smith, who of course had the privilege of sharing the name of Goethe's female protagonist, produced several sonnets relating to Goethe's novel, the most powerful being the one spoken in Werther's voice, giving instructions about his last resting place and how he wished to be mourned:

MAKE there my tomb beneath the lime trees' shade,
Where grass and flow'rs, in wild luxuriance wave;
Let no memorial mark where I am laid,
Or point to common eyes the lover's grave!
But oft at twilight morn, or closing day,
The faithful friend, with fault'ring step shall glide,
Tributes of fond regret by stealth to pay,
And sigh o'er the unhappy suicide!
And sometimes, when the Sun with parting rays
Gilds the long grass that hides my silent bed,
The tear shall tremble in my CHARLOTTE's eyes;
Dear, precious drops! they shall embalm the dead;
Yes! CHARLOTTE o'er the mournful spot shall weep,
Where her poor WERTER, and his sorrows — sleep.

The deictic 'there' makes us imagine Werther carried out of his rooms, giving his last orders outdoors, on the one hand toying with anonymity, on the other acutely aware of naming both himself and his chief mourner. The poem becomes, of course, itself commemorative of his last moments and last wishes in a carefully orchestrated ritual, where tears are a token of love, preserving both lover and beloved, together with the memory of unhappy love. Werther has lost the 'h' in his name and become anglicized to ensure correct pronunciation. This

feature recurs in all the depictions of his urn on a plinth, under a weeping willow rather than the original lime trees, with the weeping Charlotte next to it. The visual representation of mourning requires an object; it cannot deal with a non-place, with an absence of a monument. Mourning requires materiality, an object. It is a transitive verb after all. Following the pattern of the conventional mourning sampler, of a type which engaged thousands of young girls in the Anglophone world, John Raphael Smith's engraving undoubtedly made it to many an English wall, either in its own form or as the pattern for embroidered tondi in mixed media: wool and paper on felt, patiently stitched and framed, bringing Goethe's novel into the female boudoir or, in the case of this trinket, even close to a young woman's heart. I am intrigued to ponder the messages given by someone with the grieving Charlotte on their wall or at their breast. 'I too have read the book'? 'I too have loved and lost'? 'I too would mourn my lover were he to predecease me'? Or is the message even more subversive? After all, this is not the widow mourning her late husband, but rather Albert's betrothed mourning her admirer who killed himself because she could never be his. The speaker of Andrew Marvell's seventeenth-century poem 'To his Coy Mistress' had sensibly concluded that 'The grave's a fine and private place/ But none, I think, do there embrace'. One of the sad messages of Charlotte at Werther's tomb would seem to be that only when the chaotic body and mind of Werther have been turned to dust and confined within a classical urn can love take place. With Goethe's book in her hand, our felted Lotte can safely gaze at Werther's remains and, perhaps over a cup of tea, wonder at what might have been, one of the many roads not taken in life.