

# THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

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*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749–1832*



DIE LEIDEN DES JUNGEN WERTHERS



## ROMANTIC?

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- Austen's books are arguably romances (more correctly, they create the basic DNA of the modern romance), but I argued that they are not actually very *romantic* — they are in fact precise and calculating. Moreover, they are not *Romantic*, but really belong to the Age of Enlightenment
- *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, by contrast, is a clear early example of Romanticism (we'll talk in a moment about what that is). But is it romantic? Would you give it to someone for Valentine's Day?

Harriet Smithson, inspiration for Berlioz



## ROMANTIC... MUSIC

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- What we're listening to on our Romantic Era Spotify:
  - Liszt, "Hungarian Rhapsody"
  - Dvořák, *Slavonic Dances*
  - Chopin, "Polonaise"
  - Tchaikovsky, *1812 Overture*
  - Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique*
- In common?
  - National/ethnic identity
  - Epic, vast, grandiose
  - Artist as titanic individual, but also doomed, suffering, on drugs, suicidal



# ENLIGHTENMENT VS. ROMANTICISM

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*Stereotypes*

# Enlightenment

the beautiful

rational, comprehensible

society

science

cosmopolitan, elite

satirical

the intellectual

classical (Roman) literature

experience

architecture

# Romanticism

the sublime

irrational, overwhelming

the individual

nature

“just folk”

serious

the artist

Homer, Dante, Shakespeare

innocence

ruins



## MOZART: ENLIGHTENMENT

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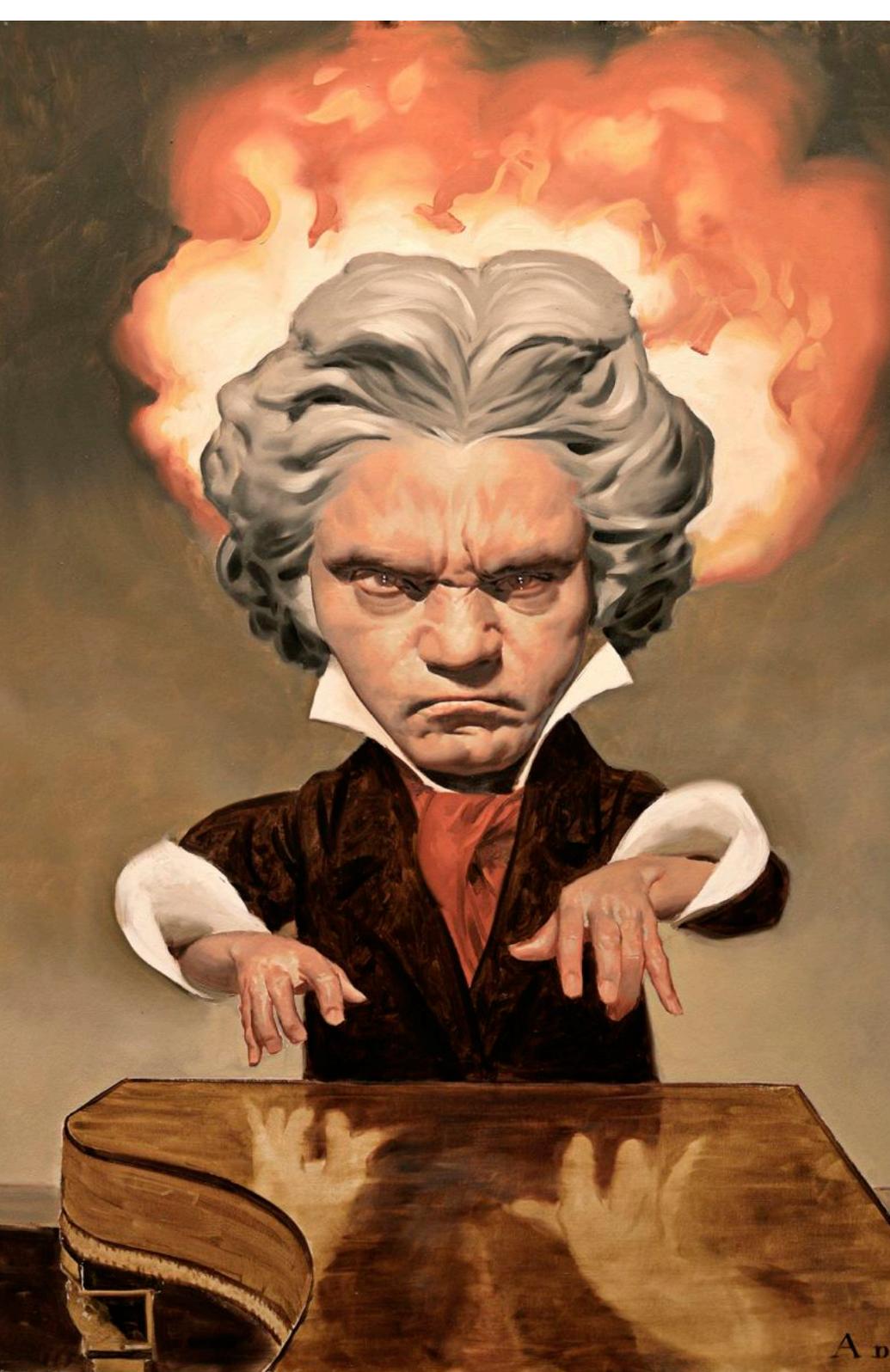
- Qualities:
  - Comprehensible
  - Orderly
  - Beautiful
  - Rational
  - Architectural
- *Mozart for Babies*, musical equivalent of Einstein — musical intelligence

CLASSIC *fm*

MOZART FOR BABIES



Relaxing music for playtime and bedtime



## BEETHOVEN: ROMANTICISM

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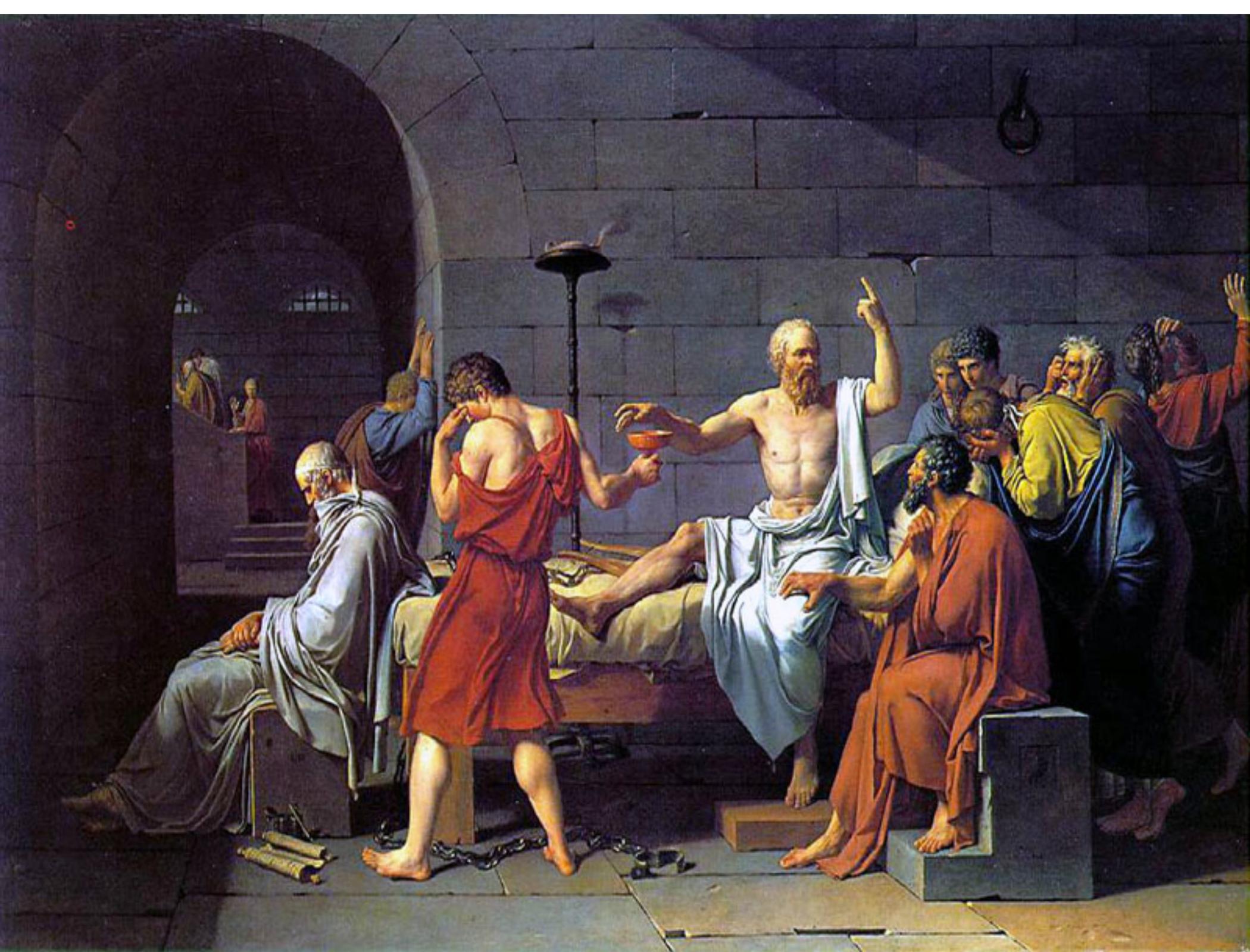
- Qualities:
  - Sublime
  - Confused
  - Overwhelming
  - Ruins
  - Emotional
- Not for kids: musical experience of intensity, feeling

BEETHOVEN

FOR  
BABIES



Intense music for crying and baby rage!





# CLASSICAL GOETHE

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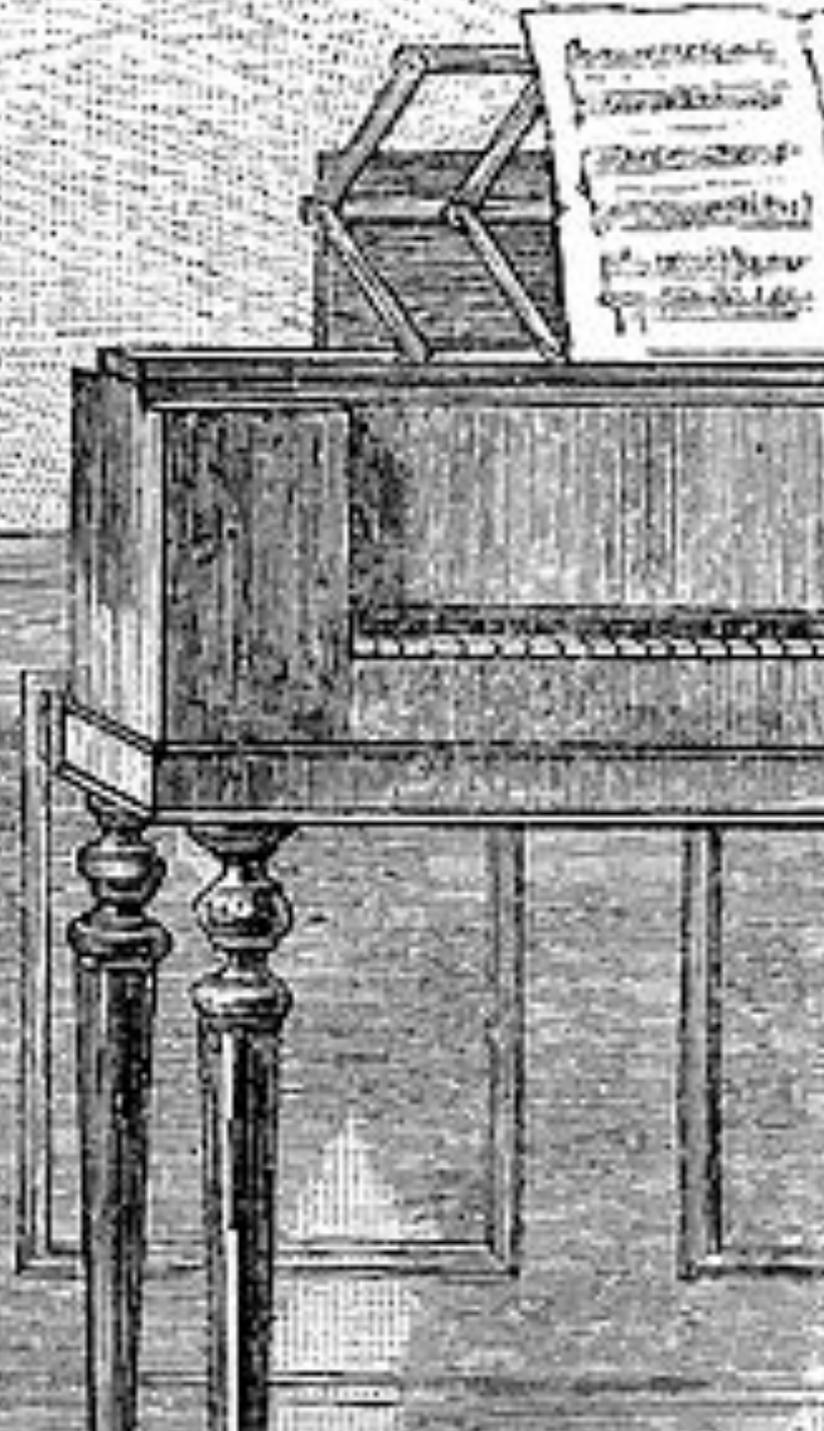


- Comes from a wealthy, prominent family, and is “ennobled” after the enormous success of his first novel
- friends and colleagues with Schiller, Fichte, Humboldt, Schlegel — a constellation known as “Weimar classicism”
- 1774, *Werther*; 1808-1832, *Faust*
- Quite like Voltaire: 10,000 letters, enormous literary output, more than amateur scientist (optics, geology, plant geology, and discovered the human “intermaxillary bone” (aka, Goethe’s bone)
- Enlightenment gentleman scientist and *philosophe*, and yet...

# MANSPLAINING, CIRCA 1774



Where is spontaneous  
human combustion  
when you need it?

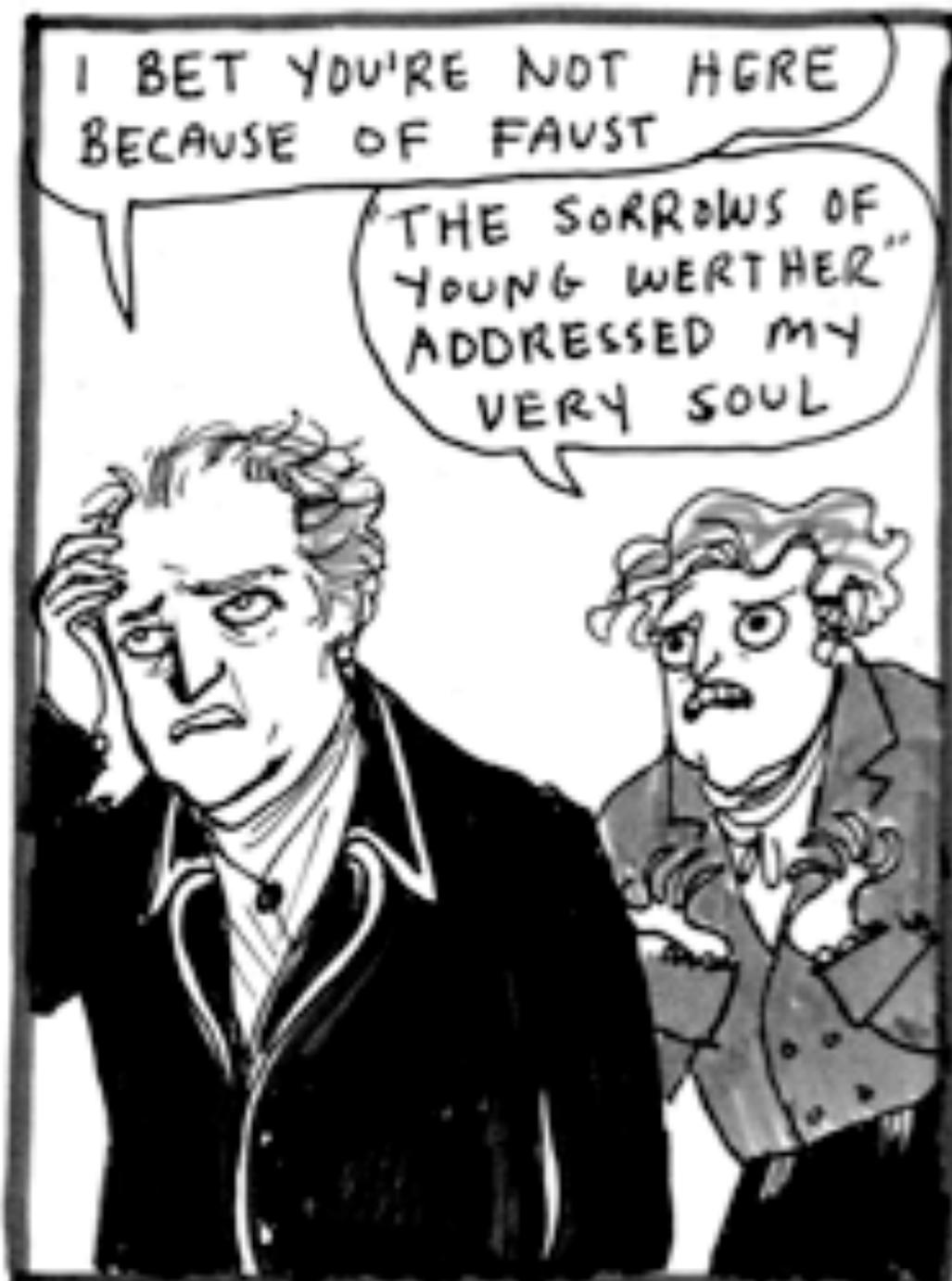




# ROMANTIC GOETHE

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- *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) movement
- *Werther* published anonymously, but widely known by Goethe
- Goethe always insisted that writing the book took a terrible toll on him and made him suffer
- Inspired Werther-themed merchandise across Europe, including a perfume, and young men tried to dress as Werther does in the novel
- There were also numerous copycat suicides, often with the book in the hand of the victim





# THE EPISTOLARY NOVEL

- ▶ Two positive qualities:
  - ▶ intimate
  - ▶ interior
- ▶ Two negative qualities:
  - ▶ potentially “unreliable”
  - ▶ predicated on absence...
    - ▶ ...and hence has a fundamental narrative problem: cannot narrate own death, marriage, or any other scene of “togetherness”





## THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

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- Romantic interiority (epistolary form; 4, 5-6)
- The *sublime* (2, 30-31, 34)
- Homer (3, 5, 7, 17, 35, 47) & Ossian (76-80)
- The *Volk* (common people) (3-4, 9, 17, 35)
- Nature (2, German 2, 7, 9)
- Pathos & the “pathetic fallacy” (15, 16, 81)
- The ever-popular “tortured artist” effect (7, 30)
- A question of *tone*

# ROMANTIC INTERIORITY

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“

When I consider all this, Wilhelm, I am silent. I examine my own being, and find there a world, but a world rather of imagination and dim desires, than of distinctness and living power. Then everything swims before my senses, and I smile and dream while pursuing my way through the world (5-6).

# THE SUBLIME

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I throw myself down among the tall grass by the trickling stream; and, as I lie close to the earth, a thousand unknown plants are noticed by me: when I hear the buzz of the little world among the stalks, and grow familiar with the countless indescribable forms of the insects and flies, then I feel the presence of the Almighty, who formed us in his own image, and the breath of that universal love which bears and sustains us, as it floats around us in an eternity of bliss; and then, my friend, when darkness overspreads my eyes, and heaven and earth seem to dwell in my soul and absorb its power, like the form of a beloved mistress, then I often think with longing, Oh, would I could describe these conceptions, could impress upon paper all that is living so full and warm within me, that it might be the mirror of my soul, as my soul is the mirror of the infinite God! O my friend — but it is too much for my strength — I sink under the weight of the splendour of these visions! (2)

# THE SUBLIME

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All this displayed to me the inner warmth which animates all nature, and filled and glowed within my heart. I felt myself exalted by this overflowing fulness to the perception of the Godhead, and the glorious forms of an infinite universe became visible to my soul! Stupendous mountains encompassed me, abysses yawned at my feet, and cataracts fell headlong down before me; impetuous rivers rolled through the plain, and rocks and mountains resounded from afar. In the depths of the earth I saw innumerable powers in motion, and multiplying to infinity; whilst upon its surface, and beneath the heavens, there teemed ten thousand varieties of living creatures. Everything around is alive with an infinite number of forms (30-31).

## THE FOLK (DER VOLK)

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A peasant came from an adjoining house, and set to work arranging some part of the same plough which I had lately sketched. His appearance pleased me; and I spoke to him, inquired about his circumstances, made his acquaintance, and, as is my wont with persons of that class, was soon admitted into his confidence.... It would, in fact, require the gifts of a great poet to convey the expression of his features, the harmony of his voice, and the heavenly fire of his eye. No words can portray the tenderness of his every movement and of every feature: no effort of mine could do justice to the scene (9).

# THE 'PATHETIC FALLACY'

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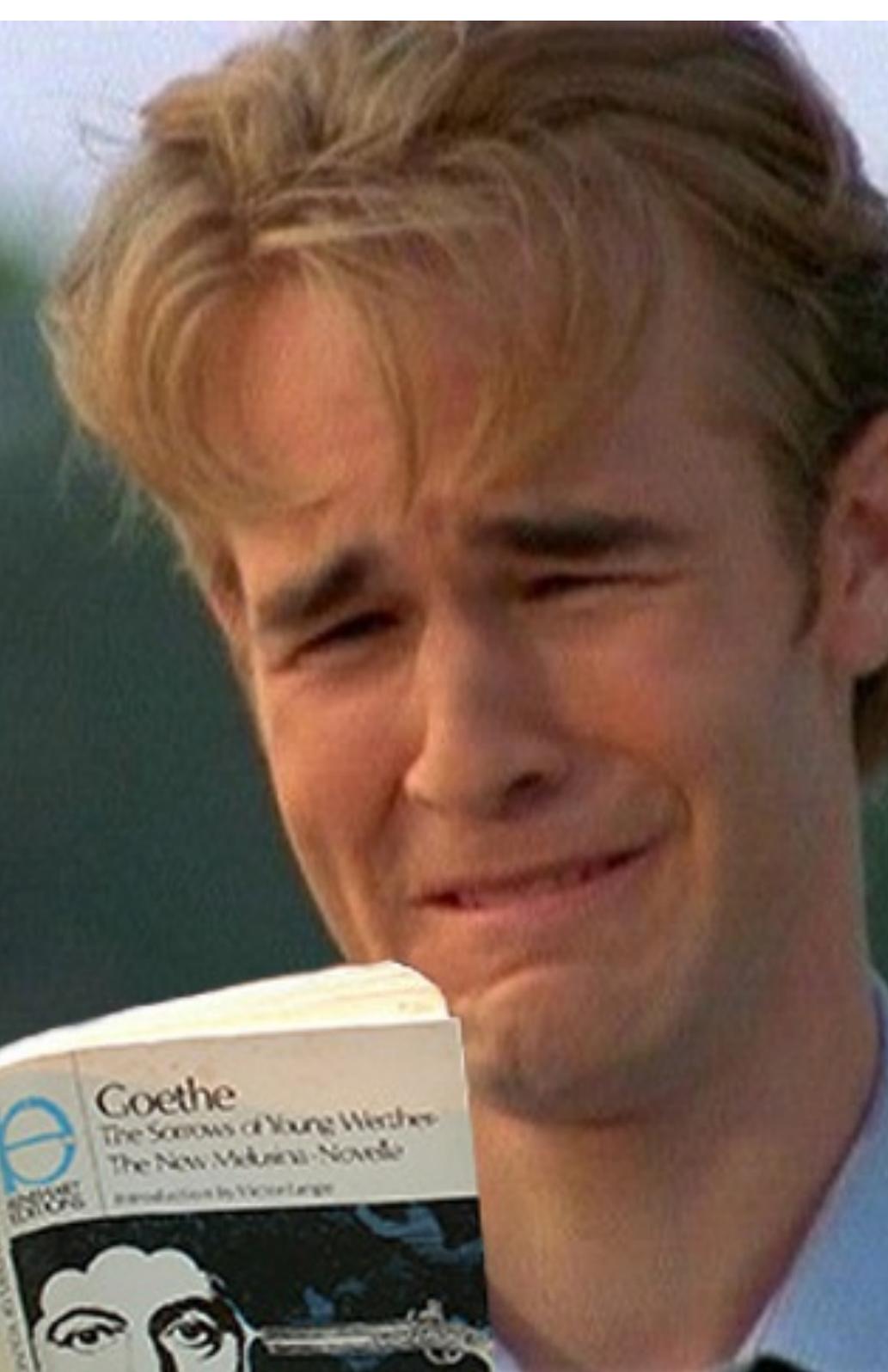
The dance was not yet finished when the lightning which had for some time been seen in the horizon, and which I had asserted to proceed entirely from heat, grew more violent; and the thunder was heard above the music (15).

Werther ran to the gate of the town. The guards, who knew him, let him pass in silence. The night was dark and stormy (81).



## THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

- Narcissistic masculinity (aggrieved, resentful: 52-53, 55, 74, 85-86; “Merry Christmas!”)
- Romantic Nationalism
- state is reflection of organic unity of “the people”
- language, race, culture, religion, customs are all one
- Leads to self-determination (yay!), but also ethnic cleansing (boo!)
- national character, but also national stereotypes (an Irishman, a Pole, and a Frenchman walk into a bar...)
- The multiethnic, multi-linguistic state becomes a “problem”



## THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

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- The gothic as one side of Romanticism
- death
- horror
- supernatural and irrational
- morose and narcissistic
- *Werther* is not a gothic novel, but certainly the idea of an innate impulse toward obsession, compulsion and self-destructive behaviors, not to mention a self-serious, morose and narcissistic tone



PENGUIN  CLASSICS

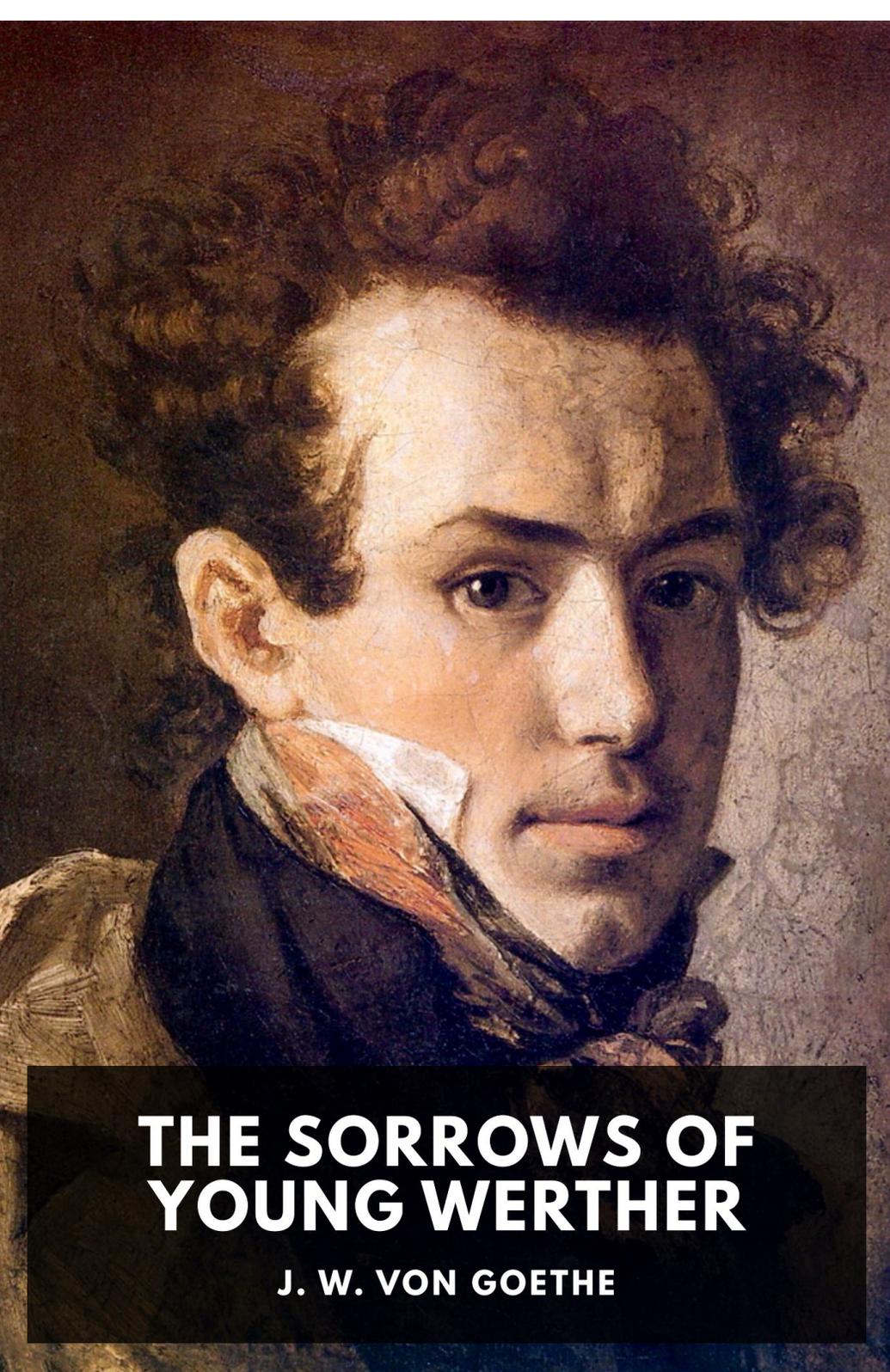
JOHANN WOLFGANG  
VON GOETHE

*The Sorrows of Young Werther*

## WERTHER OR GOETHE?

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Is this Romantic style (emphasizing realism), or is it classical? Werther—or Goethe—is young, slight, caught off-guard.



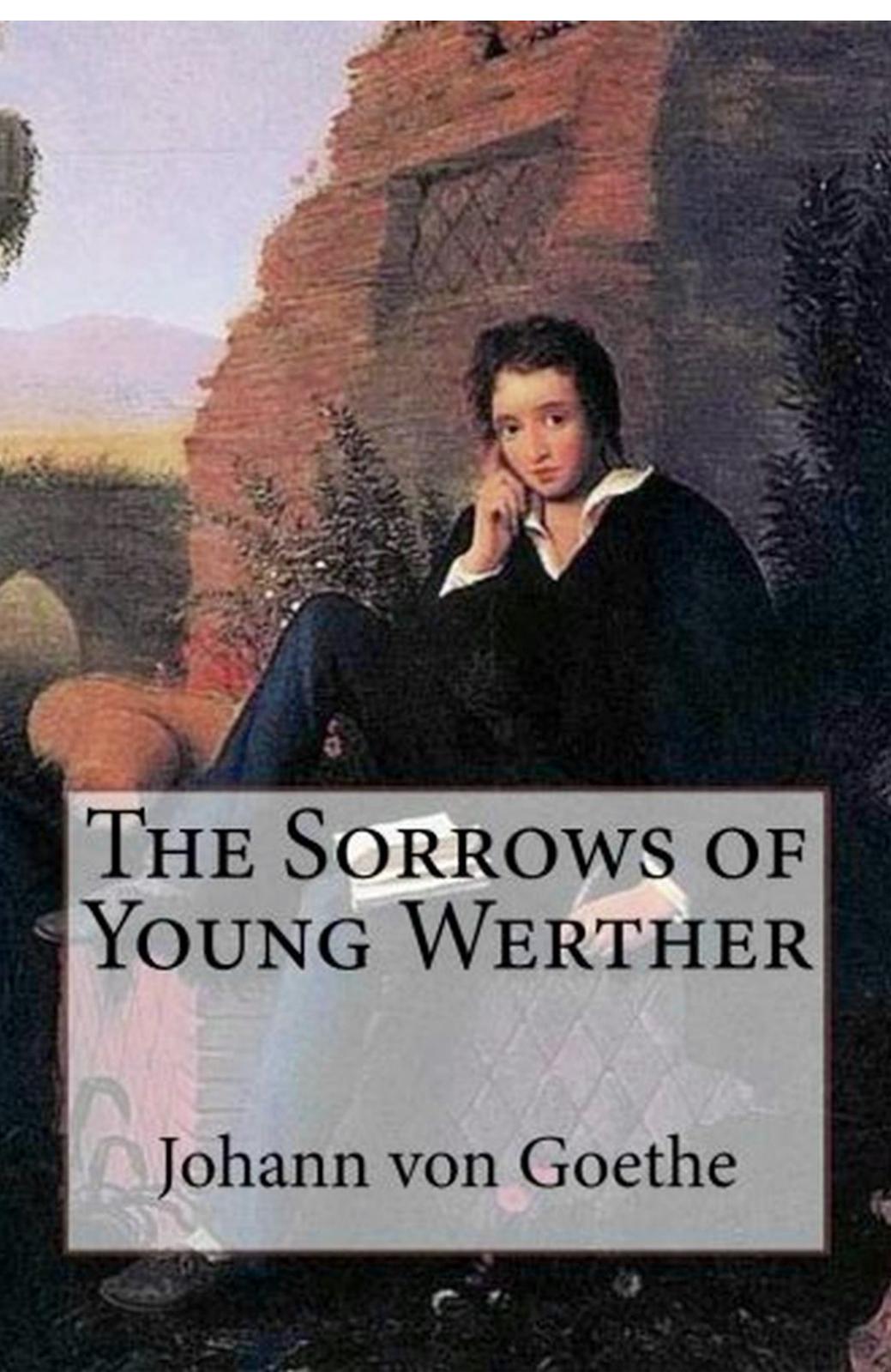
# THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

J. W. VON GOETHE

## WERTHER AS ROMANTIC

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Intense, wild hair, furrowed brow, the artist once again takes after Beethoven (tragic, doomed, haunted, passionate)



# THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

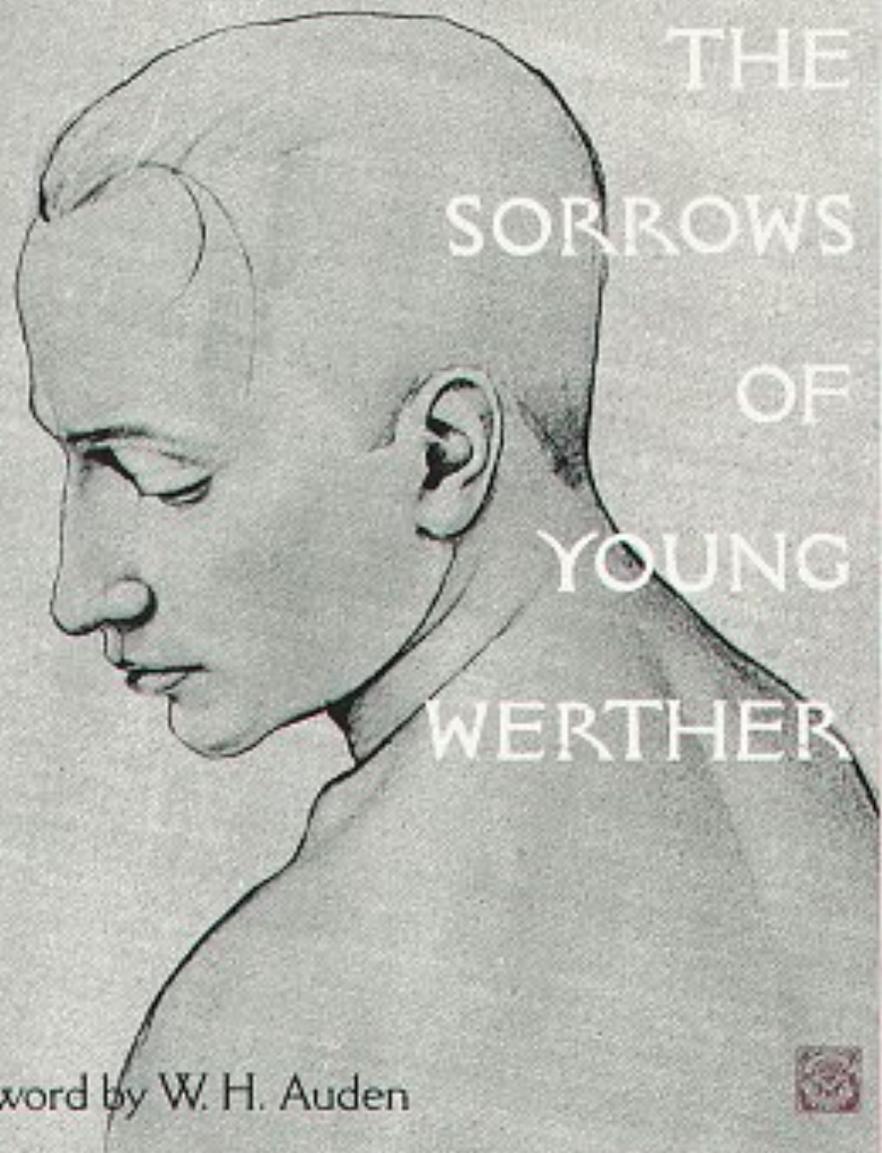
Johann von Goethe

## WERTHER AS ROMANTIC

.....

Romantic were obsessed with ruins, especially Roman ruins, as places where one could come and contemplate what was lost, what was no more — Werther himself, for example.

 **GOETHE**



THE  
SORROWS  
OF  
YOUNG  
WERTHER

Foreword by W. H. Auden



# NEOCLASSICAL SORROW

.....  
Economy of line, harmony of form;  
like a classical figure, a male nude,  
but a nakedness that perhaps  
suggests vulnerability.



THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER  
JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE  
TRANSLATED BY BAYARD QUINCY MORGAN

ONEMORLD CLASSICS

## GOETHE AS GOTHIC

.....

Neoclassical, but in an emotional access, and turned away from the viewer — suggests both death and an unknowable, unimaginable grief — also a suggestion of angelic loss.

*Signet Classic*

Goethe

THE **SORROWS** OF  
**YOUNG WERTHER**  
AND SELECTED WRITINGS



## GOETHE AS GOTHIC

.....

No human figure: Werther represents a ruin—or is himself a human ruin? Masculinity cut off in its prime, a stunted tree? Goethe as gothic, suggests horror, a graveyard...



# MASCULINE NARCISSISM

.....

No one can imagine how much I suffer inside! No one!

**J. W. Goethe**

**Alianza** editorial

Penas del joven Werther

Prólogo de  
Rosa Sala Rose

# THE SUFFERINGS OF YOUNG WERTHER

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE



TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY  
STANLEY CORNGOLD

## FUNEREA

.....  
Old sepia photograph suggests long gone, pose once again suggests classical beauty and perfection. The face defiantly turned aside, turned away from the world, since death was chosen deliberately. Werther as something beautiful.

"A cult classic . . . You can see how a new translation is [necessary] to welcome the young to the precipice."

—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

THE SORROWS OF  
YOUNG WERTHER

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Johann Wolfgang von  
GOETHE

A new translation, with an Introduction, by  
BURTON PIKE

The  
Modern  
Library

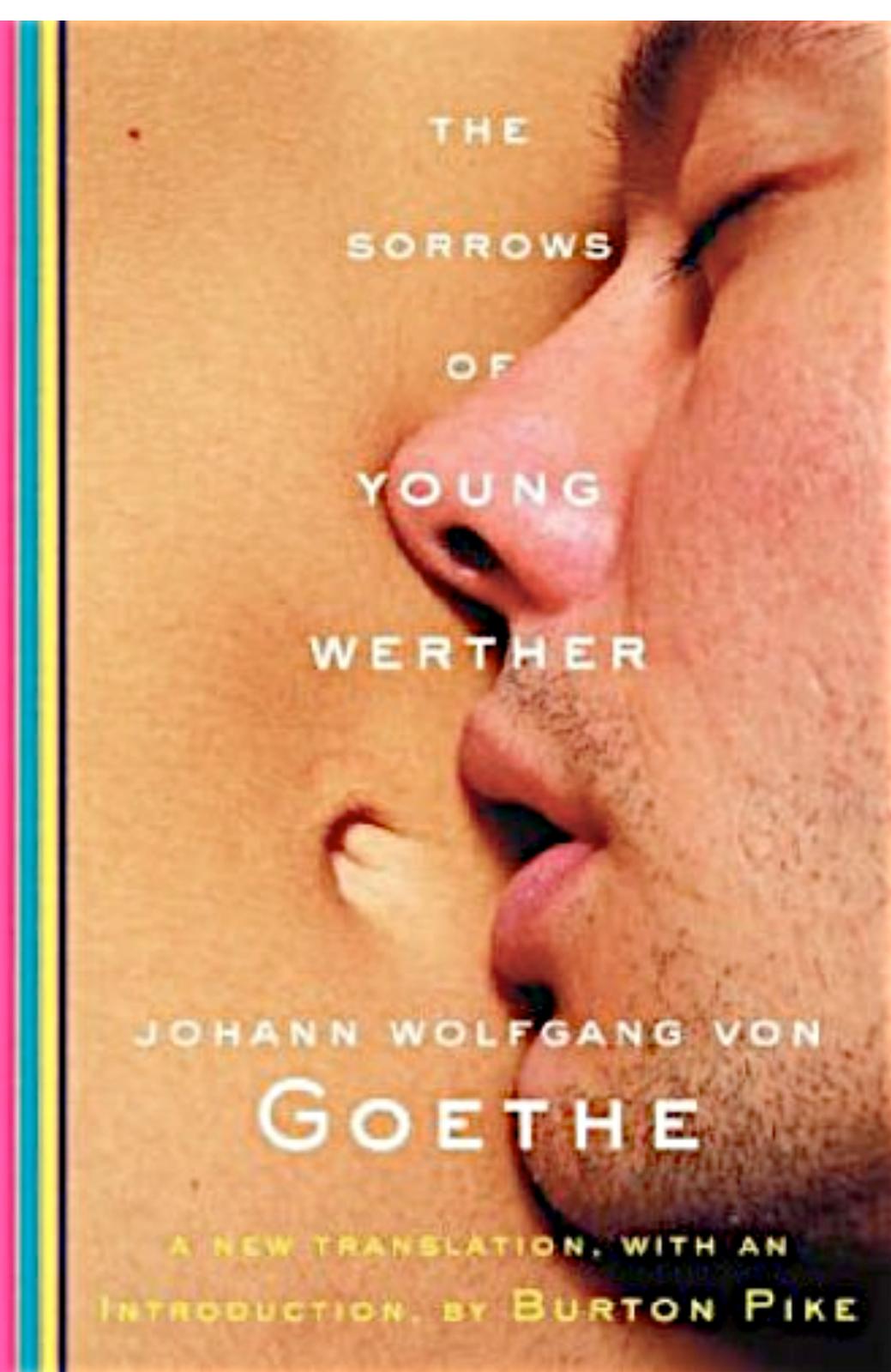


Classics

# MASCULINE MELODRAMA

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Vertical repetition and framing suggests film stock (hence, modern); dark eyes and hair, hirsute—very much not neoclassical. Masculinity at the margins.



THE  
SORROWS  
OF  
YOUNG  
WERTHER

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON

GOETHE

A NEW TRANSLATION, WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION, BY BURTON PIKE

## LOVE AT THE MARGINS

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What message does this cover send? Why? What's the rainbow edging doing? Does Werther actually suffer from a different impossible love, a love that dare not speak its name?