

Editorial Foreword

The Evolution of Narratives of Suffering Through the Ages

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No matter how deeply philosophers may reflect on the matter, what is commonly referred to as suffering has never been merely an expression of human “passivity,” nor simply an expression of a passive condition shared universally by humanity. No matter how strongly suffering itself is emphasized, narratives of suffering cannot fail to interrogate its source. The story of Job (Hiob), as a paradigmatic narrative of suffering, is precisely such a case.

Job is innocent. His tragic ordeal is merely the consequence of a wager in the “supernatural” realm that is played out within the “natural” world. God chose to expose him to Satan’s power in order to test his loyalty—not because Job had sinned, nor because he had already proven disloyal. Regrettably, the conceptual mechanism linking sin and punishment nevertheless followed soon after. Bildad the Shuhite reproached Job, saying, “if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you” (Job 8:6). This rebuke implies that Job was regarded outright as a sinner at fault. From this perspective, Job’s suffering constituted a just punishment. Fortunately, Job persisted in the belief he had done no wrong. Confronting Bildad’s accusation, he insisted, “I am blameless” (Job 9:21).

To maintain such conviction is truly remarkable. How Job could sustain it constitutes perhaps the most profound mystery in the entire narrative of his suffering. Even today, readers, placed in a position of dramatic irony where they know more than the characters, may still find this difficult to comprehend. In fact, this mystery itself represents an inquiry into the source of suffering, conducted in a profoundly enigmatic manner. What Job yearned for in the midst of his suffering

was not sympathy or consolation, but an understanding of the true origin of his affliction. The words spoken from the whirlwind—a series of questions centered on the challenge, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (Job 38:4)—provide the answer. In other words, the light of “theodicy” within the narrative of Job’s suffering—as Paul Tillich observed in his discussion of the dialectical relationship between “ground” and “abyss” (Grund und Ungrund)—is disclosed in Job’s very creation, in the mysterious power of God as Creator, who is simultaneously Job’s ground and his abyss.

Turning to the story of Jesus Christ’s passion, the Synoptic Gospels offer a vivid portrayal of suffering itself. Jesus Christ prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “remove this cup from me” (Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42; Matthew 26:39), and on the cross he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46). Jesus Christ, who endured this suffering, was, of course, innocent. Moreover, he knew full well that he himself was without fault. Even if his followers—represented by Peter—very likely, as the French scholar René Girard has argued, tacitly acquiesced in the mechanism that violently designated Jesus Christ as a scapegoat, Jesus Christ nevertheless remained firmly convinced of his own innocence. In Girard’s view, it is precisely by virtue of this conviction that Jesus Christ in his suffering and Job in his suffering stand in sharp contrast to Oedipus in his.

The Passion of Jesus Christ likewise foregrounds the question of the origin of suffering, with the responses emerging in this new era taking on new dimensions. The light of “theodicy” is revealed throughout the course of Jesus Christ’s life—as the Son of God—from his passion to his resurrection, as he distributes bread and wine to his disciples, and as he serves as mediator for the salvation of all humanity. It is revealed in the mysterious power of Jesus Christ, who is both the foundation and the critique of humanity. As Jürgen Moltmann has stated, Christian theology must be a theology of the cross, and the core of this theology is that “the crucified Christ became the brother of the despised, abandoned and oppressed”.^①

Narratives of suffering have undergone significant transformation in the modern era. Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werther*), published in 1774—translated by Wei Maoping as *The Sorrows of Werther*

^① Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 24.

the Young Man, The Suffering of Werther the Young Man, or, in a more radical rendering, The Passion of Werther the Young Man—may be regarded as a seminal novel. The work offers a meticulous portrayal of the suffering of the young Werther; yet within this narrative, the sharp gleam of “theodicy” is nowhere to be found.

Some scholars have observed that Werther exhibits a powerful instinctual drive toward “death.”^① Werther’s diary entry from August 12, 1771, seems to provide compelling evidence of this. The diary describes how Werther entered Albert’s room and saw his pistol. While discussing the gun with Albert, Werther narrates how “I had worked his text very thoroughly; I stopped listening, I began to fool around, and in a sudden movement pressed the pistol against my forehead, above the right eye.”^② This episode appears to constitute an inadvertent manifestation of Werther’s death instinct. This manifestation, moreover, gives rise to a heated debate between Werther and Albert on the question of suicide. Werther’s impassioned defense of the meaning and value of suicide is itself nothing less than yet another expression of this death instinct.

However, identifying Werther’s instinct for “death” does not fully resolve the problem. How this instinct manifest itself, and how it ultimately leads to its realization—that is, how Werther finally takes his own life—are questions that require further examination. In other words, the specific circumstances under which, and the concrete events through which, Werther’s death instinct is released still demand explanation. Furthermore, if Werther did indeed possess a strong death instinct, it remains possible that this instinct underwent a certain transformation, and that it was this transformed form that eventually propelled him toward death. This would suggest that, in addition to instinct itself, other factors—particularly certain ideas or psychological processes—also contributed to driving Werther toward death. Indeed, it is quite possible that it was precisely these ideas and factors that activated the death drive, assuming that such a drive was in fact operative within Werther.

What is certain is that it was in the midst of his agonizing love for Lotte that Werther resolved to take his own life. His visit to Lotte’s home on the evening of December 20, 1772, was decisive. Under pressure from her husband Albert, Lotte resolved to end the ambiguous relationship with Werther and reduce their feelings

^① Ignace Feuerlicht, “Werther’s Suicide: Instinct, Reasons, and Defense,” *The German Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1978): 476–492.

^② Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. David Constantine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40.

to a genuine friendship. She explicitly demanded that Werther not visit again until Christmas Day. The result was the “suicide note” Werther wrote the following morning (December 21)—whose opening line read: “It is decided, Lotte, I shall die and I write this to you not in romantic fervour but calmly, on the morning of the day on which I shall see you for the last time.”^①

It is equally certain that Werther’s love was so agonizing because he could not shake off this obsessive thought: love must be possessed; to love Lotte is to possess Lotte; to love Lotte is to be with her, forever. To be able only to love and not to possess, and yet not able to cease loving either—this is the very reason for Werther’s anguish in love. On October 30, 1772, he wrote, “God only knows what it does to a man to watch such loveliness passing before him and not be allowed to reach out for it. Is not reaching out the most natural of human impulses? Don’t children reach out for everything they notice?—Why shouldn’t I?”^② On November 22, 1772, he wrote, “I cannot pray: ‘Let me have her.’ Yet often she seems to be mine. I cannot pray: ‘Give her to me.’ For she is someone else’s. I explicate my pain this way and that—if I let myself go, there’d be a whole litany of theses and antitheses.”^③

In this situation, Werther links his suffering to the Passion of Christ, imagining his own pain as a form of suffering analogous to that of Jesus Christ. In his diary entry of November 15, 1772, he wrote, “What else is it but the fate attendant on being human—to suffer one’s measure, to drain the cup?—And if the chalice was too bitter for the human lips of the God of heaven why should I play a bragging part and pretend I find it sweet? And why should I be ashamed in the frightful moment when my whole existence trembles between to be and not to be, when the past flashes like lightning over the black abyss of the future and everything around me founders and the world goes down with me—Is it not the voice of a creature driven wholly into itself, losing itself, toppling unstopably down, in the inner depths of its energies vainly labouring to rise—the voice that asks through grating teeth, ‘My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?’ And am I to be ashamed of that moment, am I to be afraid of it, when He could not escape it Who rolls up the heavens like a cloth?”^④

Thus, it may be said that, in the midst of his agonizing love for Lotte, Werther

^① Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 93.

^② *Ibid.*, 75.

^③ *Ibid.*, 78.

^④ *Ibid.*, 77.

had long since prepared himself for death, and that in making such preparations he regarded himself as a companion to the suffering Christ. He understood—or imagined—himself as an imitator of Jesus Christ; he sought to imitate and reenact the Passion of Christ. Yet he does not bear witness to the truth of Jesus Christ through the imitation of Christ's passion. Instead, he “absurdly” imitates and reenacts the Passion by being tormented to death in a desperate love, thereby placing himself on a path of suffering as lonely and despairing as he understands Jesus Christ to have undertaken. The decisive driving force at work here is imitation: once the object of imitation is established, it reinforces Werther's resolve and courage to face death. This suggests that if the tormented Werther did indeed possess a strong instinct for “death” throughout his agonizing love affair, then this instinct had already been sublimated through his self-understanding and self-awareness as one who imitates the Passion of Jesus Christ.

The German scholar Herbert Schöffler keenly discerned the dimming of the light of “theodicy” in Werther's imitation of the Passion of Jesus Christ. He pointed out that Werther's suffering was undertaken solely for the sake of “this-worldly values” (diesseitige Werte), for the sake of “love” (Liebe) or romantic affection, and bore no relation to “otherworldly values” (jenseitige Werte).^① Schöffler's argument is, of course, a valid one. However, “this-worldly values” and “otherworldly values” may not be so sharply differentiated. As a “this-worldly value,” love may nonetheless contain a faint glimmer of “otherworldly value.” If this is indeed the case, then Werther's imitation—and, by extension, the similar endeavors of many other modern writers, particularly their tendency to seek inspiration and consolation in classical narratives of suffering, whether to dispel fear and anxiety or to endure suffering and seek revenge—surely calls for reevaluation.

^① Herbert Schöffler, *Deutscher Geist im 18. Jahrhundert. Essays zur Geistes- und Religionsgeschichte*, hrsg. von Götz von Selle, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956, 176.

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