Our current project seeks to develop new ways of understanding the relationship between the novel and late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writing by focusing on one of the most popular novels of the period, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (The Sorrows of Young Werther; 1774/1787). With the steep rise of printed writing in the eighteenth century, epistolary novels like Goethe’s *Werther*, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, or Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie* became landmarks of the new vibrancy of the publishing industry. They were some of the most persuasive signs of an emerging commercial literary modernity. As a fictional network of texts, the epistolary novel came to stand for a new culture of literary connectivity.

There has been a good deal of bibliographic research on the nature of such publishing events—enumerative accounts of the host of adaptations that arose from these singularly productive works. At the same time, there are a number of studies that engage at a more intimate interpretive level with particular adaptations or particular categories of adaptations (although in the case of *Werther* such studies are fewer than one might think). These studies have much to tell us about some of the aspects of *Werther* that were of interest to some late eighteenth-century readers and writers. But if *Werther* was indeed a “syndrome,” in Klaus Scherpe’s words, of an emerging bourgeois society, we want to know more about the reach of the text’s pathos. How far did a work like *Werther* penetrate into the published writing of the period? How much of an “effect” did it have beyond the works that were nominally indebted to it? Where did *Werther* go and what did it do?
To that end, we have over the past year begun creating topological models for visualizing the lexical relationality among literary works. While the term topology covers a variety of fields that extend from graph theory to the mathematics of continuous spaces to thinking about “topos” or space more generally, we are using it as a means of modeling linguistic patterns to understand the spatial relationality of literature. We are interested in the extent to which the language of a particular work or concept—in our case the novel *Werther*—circulates within a given environment and structures a given literary field. Rather than look at only those works that claim to be Wertherian, we are interested in mapping *Werther*’s discursive presence in a more diffuse, less explicit sense. If *Werther* is, as Robyn Schiffman has recently provocatively claimed, a broken epistolary novel, we are interested in how it motivates an alternative understanding of circulation beyond the more linear epistolary model of sender and receiver. The value of topology, we want to argue, is the way it allows us to rethink our inherited critical models of literary circulation, from the bibliographically inflected notion of the “social text” of D. F. McKenzie or Jerome McGann to the poststructurally inspired idea of intertextuality from Gérard Genette, Julia Kristeva, or even Harold Bloom. Instead of understanding literary relationality according to such bibliographic categories as titles or adaptations or such lexical categories as keywords, motifs, or even citations, topology attempts to conceptualize—and visualize—relationality as a function of a more diffuse lexical coordination. Topology helps us see how groups of words recur over time according to complex patterns—the way they form, in Michel Foucault’s words, “fields of regularity.”

Instead of the binary on/off of the keyword, title, or citation that something either is or is not Wertherian (or, in Harold Bloom’s case, Wertherian by negation), topologies create ways of visualizing a more latent sense of one text’s presence in another, not just as more or less present (a question of succession), but also present in this or that way (a question of differentiation). Topology allows us to track the different ways in which a particular lexical category, in this case *Werther*, circulates through the writing of a particular period. According to topological thinking, there is not a singularity out there called *Werther* but rather different kinds of Wertherisms that allow different kinds of new literary arguments to take shape. Indeed, this is how we want to understand the “Werther Effect”—as the transformation of literary discourse into multiple, heterogeneous and yet mutually constitutive entities. *Werther* instantiates, we would like to argue, a new kind of circulation, one that diverges from the two reigning models of the period—either the horizontal linearity of a newly available epistolary culture or the vertical linearity of a genealogically inflected theory of textual inheritance. Instead, the Werther Effect corresponds to a newfound sense of spatial dispersion and literary dimensionality.
If we are on the one hand looking for a more latent sense of textual presence during this period, then we are also, on the other, attempting to understand the meaning of such presence as presence. As with all hermeneutic practices, topology is deeply attentive to the language of texts, to the words themselves. But unlike more traditional hermeneutic work, whose success lies in a kind of divinatory act of identifying a meaning that is not immediately there—beyond language—topology attends to the recurrence of words, the way language repeats itself at a distance (a different kind of thinking about the beyond). Instead of understanding language in significatory terms (what it says), topology allows us to think more about language in agential terms (what it does). It shows us how the patterns of lexical repetition within texts produce meanings that are not localized in or inherent to those patterns. Meaning is not a function of signification in a topology but organization. In so doing, topology brings to light what we might call the latency of the lexically manifest, the meaning of the distributed recurrences of language that otherwise escapes our critical consciousness. Topology enables a deep engagement with the redundancy of reading.

This chapter is the first in a series that will explore the Werther Effect in the long nineteenth century—where it comes from, where it goes, and what it does. We will focus on Werther’s diffusion within Goethe’s own corpus as the most local level for accounting for the Werther Effect. Goethe famously said he only ever read Werther once more in his life after writing it (see the epigraph). We are interested in testing this claim—in taking literally Goethe’s understanding of the Unheimlichkeit of Werther within his corpus. In what ways is Goethe’s body of writing uncannily Wertherian? And how might Wertherness come to stand for a new theory of the uncanniness of discourse itself?

**Werther, Artist**

We want to begin by explaining how we generate our network maps before moving into the specific knowledge that they render visible. Figure 6.1 presents a Voronoi diagram of Goethe’s corpus, color-coded by genre. Each tile represents one of three things: an individual work, a section of a longer work, or a group of poems or essays (organized by period and genre). The texts are based on the digitized Weimarer Ausgabe, to which we made certain emendations. The smaller a tile is, the more lexically similar it is to those works around it (just as the larger it is, the more lexically anomalous it is). The farther apart any two tiles are, the less alike they are to each other. The topology thus allows us to read relationality in both local and global terms.

The works are arranged algorithmically according to their “Wertherness”—that is, according to the relative presence or absence of a
set of words within them drawn from *Werther*. In order to create this set, which we might call a lexical chromosome of *Werther* (a finite web of language unique to it that functions like a hereditary vector), we generated a list of the ninety-one most frequent significant words drawn from the novel.\(^{13}\) We used ninety-one because it roughly maintains a three-to-one ratio between words and works, which allows us to search for similarities between works without overfitting for their differences.\(^ {14}\) We used “significant” words—that is, we removed a set of 269 stop words (such as *der, die, das, und*, etc.)—because stop words are usually semantically poor and yet stylistically rich. (They are the best means so far for determining authorship attribution and classifying texts as categorically different,
as opposed to our aim of identifying lexical relationality. Finally, we did not lemmatize our corpus because we chose to retain some of the grammatical information encoded in single words (such as tense, mood, case, and number). We are not looking at purely lexical phenomena but at words that are embedded within specific syntactical functions.

From this list, we then created a scaled document term matrix that lists the frequencies of our Werther words as a percentage of the overall number of words in each of the works in our corpus. This matrix gives us an idea of the relative presence of our ninety-one variables for every work. We then created a distance table that calculates the distances between every work in the corpus by considering each of the word frequencies as a single coordinate in Euclidean space. A work’s location is the aggregate of all these coordinates (i.e., word frequencies) so that it assumes a location—in our case, in a ninety-one dimensional space. The distance between each work’s location is then calculated using straightforward Euclidean geometry. “Distance” is thus a measure of the similarity of the lexical presence of Wertherian words between any two works. The more two works share similar levels of presence of a greater or lesser number of words from our set, the closer they will be drawn to one another. Reading topologically, as we will see, moves us from a syntactically driven model where we read words within sentences to a dimensionally driven model where we read words in space.

From the distance table, we then created a force-directed graph using Frick’s GEM algorithm to locate the works in relation to each other in two-dimensional space. This graph was then translated into the Voronoi diagram, as shown in figure 6.1. The Voronoi diagram, which translates the points in the network graph into tiles and sizes them according to their location within the graph, is useful for two reasons: First, it makes the connections between works far more legible than a network graph (which can be very hard to read once one gets above a certain number of nodes and edges). Second, it transforms the representation of the work as a discrete “point” into that of “place.” It relativizes the identity and location of the work, which is in keeping with our overall exploratory aim—not to make definitive pronouncements about absolute affinities or positions but to identify relative connections that could be otherwise.

Turning now to the map in figure 6.1, we see that the first edition of Werther (tile no. 32) is located in the upper-left corner in the prose section of Goethe’s works (red). It is relatively large and occupies a boundary with other genres—most notably drama (green). The other tile to which it corresponds most strongly is the second edition of Werther (no. 33). So far, this arrangement returns familiar information—an important point that gives us confidence both in the overall reliability of the model and in the significance of any subsequent anomalies it may deliver. Werther appears as relatively lexically anomalous within Goethe’s corpus; it correlates most strongly with its second edition. Moreover, the second edition,
which was published around the time of Goethe’s first collected works edition, correlates more strongly with its immediate environment (i.e., it looks more like Goethe’s other novels than the first edition does) but less strongly with the overall corpus (i.e., it is further from the drama and poetry than the first edition is). Finally, the first edition occupies a slightly liminal generic space on the boundary with the theatrical—in particular the plays *Die Aufgeregten* (The Outraged; no. 213) and *Die Wette* (The Wager; no. 113).

The presence of the latter two plays, and in particular their composition dates of 1793/1817 and 1812 respectively, should give us some indication that something out of the ordinary is also going on here. The topology brings to light an aspect of *Werther* that does not fit our received narratives about its “place” within Goethe’s corpus. If we follow the standard periodization of Goethe’s work into three categories (early, middle, and late), we can see that *Werther* belongs to a rather heterogeneous temporal arrangement (fig. 6.2). Far from correlating strongly with Goethe’s early period, *Werther* is, quite to the contrary, intermixed with both the middle and late periods. According to the recurrence of words that most

![Figure 6.2. This is the same topology as in figure 6.1, colored according to period: green = early (1749–88), blue = classical (1789–1805), red = late (1806–32)](image)
strongly identify with Werther, Werther lives on in Goethe’s writing. The authorial disavowal of the youthful work made in Goethe’s old age is belied by the continued presence of the language of Werther in the later writings. It is indeed temporally uncanny.

If we return to the genre map with which we began (fig. 6.1), we can see an even more significant constellation taking shape. There is much that could be said (or asked) about the linkages on display here. For example, one could explore the intimate connection between Werther and the concluding two books of Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship; no. 254) and the first half of Wilhelm Meister’s Wanderjahre (Wilhelm Meister’s Journeymen Years; no. 179) or the way in which arranging for Werther words pushes many of the autobiographical works further away from Werther (tiles no. 101, 128–30, 155), suggesting an antipathy between Werther and Goethe’s later self-representation. What interests us for now are those works surrounding Werther to the left: the biography of the neoclassical painter, Philipp Hackert (no. 150), the translation of Diderot’s Rameau’s Nephew (no. 237), and one tile further left, the translation of the Renaissance sculptor Benvenuto Cellini’s autobiography (nos. 204, 205). There is a strong correlation, in other words, between Werther and artists. (The Winckelmann biography [no. 255] occupies a different cluster to which we will return shortly).

This is an obvious point—Werther is after all an artist, albeit a struggling one—but also one that also seems to have been entirely overlooked in the scholarship. Of the 653 articles on Werther in Seifert’s Goethe-Bibliographie from 1950 to 1990, the 545 articles on Werther from the online Bibliographie der deutschen Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft from 1985 to present, and the 1,383 articles on Werther on JSTOR from 1841 to present, not one has identified a linkage between Werther and the circle of artists whose work was most extensively memorialized in Goethe’s corpus.18 But according to our topology, the works that are most Wertherian—the works that correspond most strongly to the language of Werther—are precisely those works in Goethe’s corpus whose subject is the life of an artist. Indeed, according to our topology, it turns out that the artist biographies have an even higher incidence of Wertherian words than Werther itself. It seems we have taken Werther’s status as an artist less seriously than we should have.

The Place of the Hand

Identifying the unrecognized correlation between artist biographies and Werther is one indication of the extent to which topological reading has the potential to introduce new knowledge into our scholarly understanding of the literary past. The question that follows from this more global insight is what about artistiness has such a strong effect on arranging
Goethe’s corpus from a lexical standpoint? What kind of structuring effect does the Wertherian language have on the overall corpus? To find an answer to these questions, we chose to iterate the process by isolating two separate clusters within the larger map (highlighted in fig. 6.1) and rerunning the model on these more limited corpora. The first cluster consists of the works most immediately surrounding Werther, chosen for the obvious reason that it contains those works that correlate most strongly with Werther. The second cluster, which is located farther afield, was chosen as one of a couple possible other concentrations within the map not located near Werther. (A second one seems to exist in the lower portion among the dramatic and poetic texts, but we chose to focus on the first because of the heterogeneous array of texts that belonged to it—what about Werther would draw such disparate works together?). Our assumption is that a concentration of texts represents a meaningful constellation of concerns and that a distant concentration will tell us something different about the Wertherness that lies within and that is in part responsible for that arrangement.

Once we identified the works that belonged to each cluster (usually around nine to ten), we then divided the works into individual “pages” consisting of two hundred-word units or the average length of a page in the first edition of Werther. The pages were then colored according to the works to which they corresponded. The resulting topologies are akin to throwing the pages of ten different works up in the air and watching them fall onto a floor that has been magnetized to pull those pages closest to each other depending on the correlation within them of Wertherian words. The paginal topology performs, we might say, a radical act of interleaving.

As one can see from our first map (fig. 6.3), there is a great deal of heterogeneity in the correlation between the arrangement of individual pages and the works from which they are taken. (To see whether this heterogeneity had something to do with the small number of the words on a “page,” we tried the same process using five hundred- and thousand-word units and found no significantly higher level of organization or correlation). In order to facilitate the identification of clusters within this map, we created an algorithm that identified the most tightly packed clusters of pages according to fifty-page units (fig. 6.4). The next step for us, and this cannot be emphasized enough, was then to go in and read the clusters of pages as we would any text. Topology is, for us, not a replacement of hermeneutic reading but its facilitator—part of the long history of technologically informed reading practices. The changing materiality of texts simply structures our reading in new ways. It is not a substitute for it.

We want to begin by focusing on the purple cluster from figure 6.4, in which we find a predominant figural concern with the notion of the
hand—one of the words from our initial set and one of the more charged symbolic and anatomical sites having to do with the arts in the eighteenth century (and of course beyond). To take a few examples that occur in these pages, in *Wanderjahre* 227 (WA I.24:232), we see the children in the pedagogical province undertaking their gestural learning, which consists of raising and lowering their hands. *Wanderjahre* 328 (WA I.24:331) details the ice-skating scene where Hersilie and Flavio are grasping and letting go of one another. In *Wanderjahre* 368 (WA I.24:373), we see the infamous scene in which the painter recites Mignon’s song and the members of the group fall into each other’s arms before being forced to disband (the ungraspability of song as the condition of their dispersion). *Die Aufgeregten* 9 (WA I.18:11) concerns the status of the surgeon or *Chirurgus* (from the Greek for hand). In *Lehrjahre* 316 (WA I.23:278–79), we see a skeleton being pieced back together. *Unterhaltungen* 152 (WA I.18:222)
concerns the tale of the split desk, that quintessential place of handwriting but also an ontology of sound (similar to the crisis of recitation in the *Wanderjahre* passage mentioned previously). Finally, in *Wanderjahre* 72 (WA I.24:71–72), Felix cuts his hand upon being handed an apple by Hersilie, the ultimate and heavily laden topos that conjoins hand, wound, and desire all within the adolescent passage into adulthood—a passage that is incidentally followed by a scene of translation, where Hersilie hands Wilhelm her translation of “Die pilgernde Törin” (The deranged pilgrimess). That is to say, the cut hand is followed by a writerly/readerly scene not of possession but of striation and escape—of über-setzen.

If we take a more prolonged look at two pages from this cluster—the only pages that belong to the first edition of *Werther* included in this cluster—we can see how the topos of the hand drives much of the figural work of these passages. What we see happening in particular is the staging of a tension between the categories of the *Handwerk* and the *Kunstwerk*,

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Figure 6.4. The same topology as in figure 6.3, with the ten most concentrated fifty-page clusters identified algorithmically. The colors are arranged hierarchically, with pink being the most concentrated group of pages and brown being the tenth most concentrated.
the handicraft and the work of art, and their associated material and the spiritual properties, a tension, as we shall see, that turns around the central category of “graspability.” Thus in Werther 16 (WA I.19:19), we read the opening of the letter from May 27:

Ich bin, wie ich sehe, in Verzückung, Gleichnisse und Deklamation verfallen, und habe drüber vergessen, dir auszuerzählen, was mit den Kindern weiter worden ist. Ich saß ganz in mahlerische Empfindungen vertieft, die dir mein gestriges Blatt sehr zerstükt darlegt, auf meinem Pfluge wohl zwey Stunden. Da kommt gegen Abend eine junge Frau auf die Kinder los, die sich die Zeit nicht gerührt hatten, mit einem Körbchen am Arme, und ruft von weitem: Philips, du bist recht brav. Sie grüßte mich, ich dankte ihr, stand auf, trat näher hin, und fragte sie: ob sie Mutter zu den Kindern wäre?

Here we have all the major terms of Wertherism: the prioritization of aesthetic feeling (“mahlerische Empfindungen”), the crisis of narrative (“in Verzückung, Gleichnisse und Deklamation verfallen”), and the presence of maternity (the underlined words correlate to our Werther set and show how motherhood is doing much of the clustering work of this page). We want to focus on one of the material objects that appear in this scene and around which the scene largely turns—not the Blatt or sheet that was sent off in disorganized fashion the day before (though its presence as the other object seems important here) but the small Körbchen or basket that, along with the speech act of declaring the male child’s virtue, comes to stand metonymically for the woman’s motherhood, for the observer’s ability to intuit her maternity. In particular, we are interested in what it means to be “am Arme,” the way the basket as handicraft assumes the place of the hand, rather than functioning as an extension of it (like the Blatt). The technological object, the Handwerk here, is not figured as an extension of the human (pace McLuhan) but as an integral part of the human body—one that encloses the figure within a closed and thus entirely and unproblematically graspable circuit of meaning, much like the shape of the basket itself. The metonymical standing-for that the basket performs (basket/motherhood) is itself premised on a metaphorical substitution (basket/hand) that is enacted through the notion of being “am Arme.” The rhetorical trajectory that this passage marks out—from substitution to attachment, from artifice to nature, from metaphor to metonym—is premised on an understanding or interpretation on the part of the viewer of the meaning of the handcrafted material object as quite literally vorhanden, as being before the hand.
on her head by the spring (Werther 7, WA I.19:11), an example of that primordial Heideggerian “thing” in the form of the jug or Krug.\(^{25}\) The second, far more famously, comes in the form of the “Schleife” (bow) affixed to Lotte’s breast and arm, which will later be sent to Werther as a birthday gift (along with a volume of Homer), a scene that is crucially the only other one from the first edition of Werther included in this particular cluster (Werther 78; WA I.19:78). In other words, the basket, which is enclosed within its own material/spiritual circuit—a marker of the very possibility of the continuity between the material and the spiritual as circuit—is then itself enclosed within a circuit that moves from the highly eroticized opening (and open) container (the spring, the source of the jug, is a space of both cleansing and prostitution) to the deeply spiritualized (and möbial) container of the bow, one that is both open and closed, “an Arm und Brust.”

What these two pages mark out then is not just the trajectory but the reticulation of two opposing significations of material containers—the tension, we might say, to return to Heidegger, between the vorhanden (the “before-the-hand”) and the zuhanden (the “to-the-hand”) of the material object or Werk.\(^{26}\) From the fluid-containing Krug that stands for a dangerous eroticism to the fruit-bearing Korb that stands for an unproblematic maternity and nutritive nature, we move to the bifurcated Schleife that is at once erotic index and maternal marker (“an Arm und Brust”), at once metaphorical substitute and natural metonym, liquid, and fructal.\(^{27}\) This tension, or perhaps this oscillation, will then be performed in dazzling fashion in the passage from Werther 78 (WA I.19:78) in which Werther receives the Schleife as a gift:

Ich küsse diese Schleife tausendmal, und mit jedem Athemzuge schlürfe ich die Erinnerung jener Seligkeiten ein, mit denen mich jene wenige, glückliche unwiederbringliche Tage überfüllten. Wilhelm es ist so, und ich murre nicht, die Blüthen des Lebens sind nur Erscheinungen! wie viele gehn vorüber, ohne eine Spur hinter sich zu lassen, wie wenige sezzen Frucht an, und wie wenige dieser Früchte werden reif. Und doch sind deren noch genug da, und doch—O mein Bruder! können wir gereifte Früchte vernachlässigen, verachten, ungenossen verwelken und verfaulen lassen? Lebe wohl! Es ist ein herrlicher Sommer, ich sizze oft auf den Obstbäumen in Lottens Baumstük mit dem Obstbrecher der langen Stange, und hole die Birn aus dem Gipfel. Sie steht unten und nimmt sie ab, wenn ich sie ihr hinunter lasse.\(^{28}\)

The point here is not to dwell on the particular, and particularly obvious, allegorical reading that such a passage makes possible—in this case the overly determined oedipal arrangement in the form of the young man’s
slurping attachment to a fetishized proxy for the maternal breast. Rather, we would argue that an understanding of the text’s true pathos depends on an attention to the way the scene oscillates rhetorically between the spiritual and material status of objects themselves to the problem, we might say, of allegorization itself. With every “breath,” Werther then “drinks in” the memories of a religiously infused bliss (“die Erinnerung jener Seligkeiten,” the latter a word that is itself a container of phonetic, though not etymological, echoes of the spiritual Seele). Such acts of imaginative transport conclude in the knowledge that real experiences are nothing more than mere “appearances”—a conclusion that is itself already syntactically determined by the metaphorization of experience that precedes it as “life’s blossoms.” That is to say, the mixed metaphor or catachresis with which the reverie begins (from breathing memories to drinking them) is followed by another metaphor (the botanical blossom) that is used to think through the physical absence of memory—one that does so by echoing a very different bond of liquidity in the form of Blut/Blüthe (blood, blossom). The self-indulgent reverie contains a phonetic unconscious, we might say, of its capacity to suck the life out of life.

The passage will continue its reflection on the apparitional nature of life no longer through a series of mixed metaphors but instead through the naturalization of metaphor—the fleetingness of time is now compared to a fruit tree and the sparsity of ripeness for which it comes to stand. Instead of a monstrous self-understanding of language, catachrestic and vampiric, the passage has given itself wholly to the dominance of language over itself—metaphor gives birth to metaphor here in the way that blossoms produce fruit. Such metaphorization of experience will eventually lead to the memory of an actual experience that corresponds to the metaphor—one in which Werther is sitting in a fruit tree using the long staff of the fruit plucker (literally a fruit breaker, Obstbrecher) to hand down the organic bounty to a receptive Lotte. Again, the point is not to indulge in the sexual innuendo of phallic tweezers, broken fruit, and receptive women, but to record the way this passage moves rhetorically between objects that give birth to imaginative transports that themselves give birth to the recounting of real experiences. From the material object of the Schleife, we move to the mixed metaphor of incorporation to the spiritual metaphor of the fruit back to its real material proxy (as memory) that is almost comically overladen (overripe) with erotic meaning, much in the same way in which the passage is overripe with metaphor itself. What we have here is a passage that in some sense warns against and worries over the overproliferation or overpowering of experience by metaphor, as it consistently moves toward the metaphorical/spiritual only to fall back, or in this case climb upward, into the real tree that seems to produce too much metaphorical fruit. The rhetorical circuit is transformed into a loop, or rather a bow, that crosses over itself every time it tries to progress.
The movement from the *Korb* to the *Schleife* can thus be read as a larger reflection on an eighteenth-century shift from the idea of the *Handwerk* to that of the *Kunstwerk*, from an understanding of the arts as technical trades to engines of imaginative labor (from “the arts” to the singular “Art”). This is far from demarcating a simple progression, however—one that is most often used to understand the literary historical value of *Werther* itself as a *Kunstwerk* and its author as an “Artist” (i.e., as setting in motion precisely this shifting cultural valuation of creativity). What this passage and the looped object at its center draw attention to is the reticulated nature of the problem. We do not move linearly from one model to another, from the material to the spiritual, but quite to the contrary, fall upward back into the real in a never-ending circuit. We must remember that the contents of that maternal container of the *Korb*, what it disseminates or sets in motion, was likely the very fruit that is now inextricably bound up in this circulatory process of material and spiritual intercalation. In understanding the *Kunstwerk* as *Handwerk*, in placing the basket within the bow, or in more general terms, in placing the hand and its agency at the heart of the novel, *Werther* allows for an intertwining of the material and the spiritual, for the dizzying rhetorical coagulation that we witness here—one that is, not coincidentally, communicated on the day commemorating the hero’s birthday (i.e., during the spiritual-ized reenactment of the material entry of Wertherness into the world).

What we are arguing for then is the way reading topologically brings into view a tension within Goethe’s aesthetic theory—one that is not abandoned after *Werther* and thus written off as an ontogenetic mistake but instead remains as a problem throughout his life and writing. This Wertherian problem drives Goethe’s continued thinking about the tactility and materiality, the thingness and instrumentality, of the work of art as the very conditions of its spiritual force. Understanding the relationship between the *Handwerk* and *Kunstwerk* not as a trajectory but as a problem of reincorporation is what circulating, uncannily we might say, through Goethe’s later writings, in particular in the biographical works on artists and then ultimately most pronouncedly in his final novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, a tour de force on the objectivity of aesthetic experience. Far from setting in motion an aesthetic ideology (always dangerous or transgressive in its overtones) that is premised on the imaginative force of the artwork, on the phantasmatic body (Lotte the unpossessable ideal, Werther always already away), aesthetic experience is framed in *Werther* as the question of the possibility of the recuperation of the materiality of the artwork as handwork, as *Gegenstand*, within such imaginative transport. This tension, this desire for irresolution if you will, is most compactly articulated in another page from this cluster, *Wanderjahre* 55 (WA I.24:55), in which the *Korb* reappears: here, the protogeologist Montan describes himself as a *Kohlenkorb*, the coal basket or container of combustibility,
and decides that Wilhelm is best described as a *Wanderstab* or wandering stick—as that object of the hand that enables an understanding of corporeal movement as a form of errancy or irresolution.

### From Hand to Handlung

One could continue reading this particular topology in similar terms, moving across clusters to find different nuances of the central problematic of the graspability of the work of art. Topology is, as we have suggested, a kind of variation engine, an identification of the differences that reside within resemblance, a mapping of nuance. In this section, we would like to move instead to the secondary cluster that we identified in figure 6.1 within the initial topology of Goethe’s corpus. As we mentioned at the outset, topological reading aims to not only theorize textual meaning as a function of environment but also identify the heterogeneity of concentration, the way different fields of regularity are brought to light through lexical repetition. By attending to a cluster not attached to *Werther*, we are looking for how texts bear similarities to one another even as they bear a greater dissimilarity to *Werther*, a means of understanding what Deleuze called (in reference to topological thought) the “relation of the non-relation.” The topology allows us to identify a second-order Wertherness within the textual field of Goethe’s writings, to see the way a becoming, an emergence, is the function of the difference of repetition.

If we turn to this second page map (fig. 6.5), the most marked feature that we find is the correlation between aesthetic and natural scientific work, bridged by the descriptive work of the travelogue. Goethe’s writings on theater, art, and Winckelmann are mixed here with his writings on morphology, meteorology, and natural philosophy, and these are then interspersed with the unfinished autobiographical project, *Die Reise in die Schweiz* (The Swiss Journey, 1797). Where the initial cluster of our figure 6.3 marked a concerted attempt to understand the singular category of art across different kinds of genres (the novel, the novella collection, the artist biography) and different kinds of periods (early, middle, and late), in this cluster we see a concern with understanding the larger category of nature through two different domains of observation (art and science) that exhibits a strong correlation among works from the mid-1790s: *Der Sammler und die Sei- nigen* (The Collector and His Kind, 1798), “Der Versuch as Vermittler von Subjekt und Objekt” (The Experiment as Mediator Between Subject and Object, 1792), *Die Reise in die Schweiz* (The Swiss Journey), and the introduction to the *Propyläen* (Propylaea, 1798).

What we would like to suggest is happening in this second cluster—and in particular its two most concentrated fields (fig. 6.6)—is the way a Wertherian vocabulary, when configured differently from the initial cluster of texts, becomes generative of Goethe’s subsequent attempts to
think through the congruence of aesthetic and scientific knowledge.\textsuperscript{31} Such concerns reach a particular level of intensity in the mid-1790s and are ultimately synthesized in their most extended form in the manuscript notations for \textit{Die Reise in die Schweiz}.\textsuperscript{32} The debate about the phantasmatic versus material presence of the work of art (the question of its \textit{Vorhandenheit} in \textit{Werther}) turns by the 1790s into a debate about the relationship between experience and idea, between act and error, as the basis of the knowledge of the world—one that arguably owes much of its origins to Goethe’s post-Italian engagement with Kant.\textsuperscript{33} The centrality of the hand in \textit{Werther}, one could say, turns to a question of the meaning of \textit{Handlung} as a source of knowledge. Movement, time, and the reliability of insight become the driving concerns that emerge from the tensions surrounding the object and its appeal to both the imagination and the senses, so that the travel \textit{narrative}, the story of observation, becomes its most charged form.\textsuperscript{34}

Figure 6.5. A topology of the pages of the secondary cluster of works highlighted in figure 6.1: orange = \textit{The Swiss Journey}; pink = \textit{General Natural Philosophy}; purple = \textit{Writings on Art} (1788–1800); light pink = \textit{Winckelmann’s Century}; green = \textit{Writings on the Theater}; gold = \textit{Meteorologie}; blue = contributions to the \textit{Morning Paper (Morgenblatt)}; red = \textit{Maxims and Reflections on Literature and Ethics}; light blue = poems addressed to persons (late); bright green = \textit{From Goethe’s Letter Case}
The question about the complementarity of art and science that belongs to this cluster and would emerge as one of the central features of Goethe’s later corpus is given voice in the introduction to the Propyläen, Goethe and Schiller’s attempt to revive the arts in a postrevolutionary world and a journal that can be read as a decisive turning point in Goethe’s life and work. The terms of the problem are rendered with particular clarity on a page included in our second (pink) cluster:

Der Mensch ist der höchste, ja der eigentliche Gegenstand bildender Kunst! Um ihn zu verstehen, um sich aus dem Labyrinth seines Baues herauszuvickeln, ist eine allgemeine Kenntnis der organischen Natur unerläßlich. Auch von den unorganischen Körpern, so wie von allgemeinen Naturwirkungen, besonders wenn sie, wie z.B. Ton und Farbe, zum Kunstgebrauch anwendbar sind, sollte der Künstler sich theoretisch belehren; allein welchen weiten Umweg müßte er machen, wenn er sich aus der Schule des Zergliederers, des

Figure 6.6. The same topology as in figure 6.5, with the ten most concentrated fifty-page clusters identified algorithmically. We discuss the two most highly concentrated clusters in pink and green.
Naturbeschreibers, des Naturlehrers dasjenige mühsam aussuchen sollte, was zu seinem Zwecke dient; ja es ist die Frage, ob er dort gerade das, was ihm das Wichtigste sein muß, finden würde? (Schriften zur Kunst 13; WA I.47:12)\textsuperscript{35}

The question that Goethe is asking is whether scientific modes of observation have anything to offer the artist.\textsuperscript{36} The answer that he wants emphatically to give is \textit{yes}, but the obviousness of this conclusion is so foreign to his audience—and of course to ours today as well—that he approaches it with great circumspection. The primary thrust of the argument is that only when an artist penetrates the surface of nature, only in understanding the “Fundament der Erscheinung” (basis of appearance), defined as the “Wirkung und Gegenwirkung” (action and reaction) of organic processes, can he or she compete with nature. This interiority, that which makes knowledge of the world possible, is of course not static inside but the all-important theory of a developmental formation, or \textit{Bildung}. Only when we have understood the processual nature of nature are we in a position to represent nature as nature.

In its attempt to understand the symbolic possibilities of capturing nature, the passage relies on a noticeable proliferation of architectural metaphors (the \textit{Fundament}, the \textit{Umweg}, the \textit{Labyrinth})—a move that clearly takes its cues from the new journal’s title, which refers to the entryway or antechamber of a building but is also likely in conversation with Kant’s assertion about the basic architectonics of reason.\textsuperscript{37} Unlike Goethe’s youthful musings on the gothic cathedral (or the fruit tree), the point of the classically informed (and post-Kantian) perspective is not an exterior wonderment or something that one stands before. Instead, observation is an experience that must be passed through. The journal is not simply understood as an initiatory project for the still nascent (non-art-) appreciating public; it also marks a rethinking of the kind of knowledge that underpinned aesthetic experience as experience.

Such experientiality (and the essential seriality at its core) has clear linkages to Goethe’s burgeoning scientific work from the period—a point that has been frequently noted in the scholarship that is nicely reflected in our topology in the way portions of Goethe’s seminal essay on experimentation, “Der Versuch als Vermittler zwischen Subjekt und Objekt,” written five years earlier, appear in close proximity to these passages from the \textit{Propyläen} on the passages of aesthetic experience.\textsuperscript{38} At the heart of Goethe’s theoretical treatise on scientific experimentation (a \textit{Versuch} about the \textit{Versuch}) is an argument concerning the necessary multiplication of perspective. In words that clearly foreshadow the introduction to the \textit{Propyläen}, Goethe writes:

\begin{quote}
Da alles in der Natur, besonders aber die allgemeinen Kräfte und Elemente in einer ewigen Wirkung und Gegenwirkung sind, so kann
\end{quote}
man von einem jeden Phänomene sagen, daß es mit unzähligen anderen in Verbindung stehe, wie wir von einem freischwebenden leuchtenden Puncte sagen, daß er seine Strahlen nach allen Seiten aussende. Haben wir also einen solchen Versuch gefaßt, eine solche Erfahrung gemacht, so können wir nicht sorgfältig genug untersuchen, was unmittelbar an ihn gränzt? was zunächst auf ihn folgt? Dieses ist’s, worauf wir mehr zu sehen haben, als auf das was sich auf ihn bezieht? Die Vermannichfältigung eines jeden einzelnen Versuches ist also die eigentliche Pflicht eines Naturforschers. (Allgemeine Naturlehre 30, WA II.11:32, my emphasis) 39

Given the fundamental structure of nature that consists of an eternal action and reaction—of a basic contingency we might say—the aim of the natural scientist is to proliferate the experiences that underlie the initial experiment and, in particular, the seriality of those experiences (as opposed to the infinite possibility of a spatial bordering upon). Much has been written on the emerging polyperspectival nature of both art and science that would follow from the 1790s and assumed larger cultural dimensions in both a German and European context—what Gerhard Neumann has defined as a post-Cartesian modernity. 40 What interests us and what we see in particular being drawn into view through our topology is the way the insertion of the category of experience into both aesthetic and empirical knowledge marks a simultaneous insertion of the problem of error as a condition of insight. As Goethe remarks, one can “never carefully enough” investigate or get to the bottom of (untern-buchen) that which borders or follows on a single experience. Given nature’s essence as a “free-floating luminescent point that sends its rays in all directions,” not only movement but a particular kind of movement—errancy—becomes the basic condition of modern knowledge.

Over and over again, we find in these two central clusters a vocabulary that turns around the relationship of action to truth. 41 There is a kind of epistemic reckoning with the place of error in relationship to human experience. The problem of how reason and action are to combine to produce true knowledge will find one of its most distilled expressions in an excerpt included in this cluster from Goethe’s treatment (Behandlung) of Schiller’s Wallenstein trilogy Die Piccolomini, a play, and a passage, that would emerge as one of the period’s most intense reflections on the relationship between act and judgment. “Auf den Verdacht hin willst du rasch gleich handeln?” (You wish to act rashly upon suspicion?) Max asks his father Octavio (Theater 40, WA I.40:50–51). Octavio’s reply is in the negative; only when he sees “der erste offenbare Schritt” (the first public step) will he then act. Max then asks, “Und wer soll Richter drüber sein?” (And who shall be the judge of that?), to which his father replies, “Du selbst” (You yourself).
Once again we can see Goethe worrying over this connection between action and judgment, experience and insight, and once again it will be material foreign to Goethe’s corpus where the legacy of Wertherness in his writing achieves some of its most intense tones (Hackert, Rameau, Cellini, and now Schiller). The post-Kantian problem of the internalization of judgment—the poignancy of the “you yourself” here—emerges as an extended reflection on the problematic relationship between experience and reflection. Far from trying to banish error as a condition of truth, Goethe—and Goethe’s reading of Schiller—argues for the internalization of this exteriority. In the same way that art was to incorporate scientific modes of observation (and vice versa), truth too must incorporate its own exteriority of error. As Goethe writes in an aphorism included in this cluster from Über Kunst und Alterthum (On Art and Antiquity), “Manchmal jedoch kommen wir zum völligen Bewußtsein und begreifen, daß ein Irrthum so gut als ein Wahres zur Thätigkeit bewegen und antrieben kann. Weil nun die That überall entscheidend ist, so kann aus einem thätigen Irrthum etwas Treffliches entstehen, weil die Wirkung jedes Gethanen in’s Unendliche reicht” (Maximen 1, WA I.42.2:113). Error is as good a generator of truth as truth, because both bring us into the experience of knowledge as infinitely and serially perspectival.

While we don’t have the space to enter into it here, one could read this cluster’s central prose text, Die Reise in die Schweiz (The Swiss Journey), as an exploration of this possibility of the incorporation of exteriority—not interiorization per se but a heterotopic model of allowing for, of learning to dwell with (to use an architectural metaphor), that which is outside ourselves. From the paraphrastic speech of “Euphrosyne” to the metaphors of entwinement in “Amyntas” to the elegy of the stream caught in the miller’s wheel (“Der Junggesell und der Mühlbach” [The Bachelor and the Miller’s Stream]) to the circularity of the famed pastoral/urban falls of Schaffhausen later used as a model in Faust II, Goethe’s journey to the pastoral heart of Europe that passes through a series of urban centers is an extended exploration of this conjunction of narrative and error, of narration as errancy, of how to imagine these exteriors within and interiors without. It is, we would argue, a crucial archive of topological thought.

Conclusion

We have over the course of this chapter tried to move from the most general understanding of Werther’s place within Goethe’s corpus into successively more specific relational readings of Werther’s dispersion—its continued and uncanny presence within the Goethean literary body. Our theory is that a basic tension, or investment in irresolution itself, between the status of the material object as handicraft or artwork in
Werther serves as the basis of a new concern in Goethe for the relationship between experience and error, for the possibility of the aesthetic basis of empirical knowledge. As Goethe will write in an aphorism included in our cluster from the Wanderjahre on the distinction between what he calls “gewöhnliches Anschauen” (regular observation) and “reines Anschauen” (pure observation), “Es äußert sich jenes [d.h. gewöhnliches Anschauen] im praktischen Sinn, im unmittelbaren Handeln; dieses [d.h. reines Anschauen] symbolisch, vorzüglich durch Mathematik, in Zahlen und Formeln, durch Rede, uranfänglich, tropisch, als Poesie des Genies, als Sprichwörtlichkeit des Menschenverstandes” (Maximen 59; WA I.42.2:181). Regular observation is based on immediate experience. Pure observation is symbolic, numerological, tropological, and proverbial. It is always already aesthetic, but perhaps even more significant, it is singularly lexical, sprichwörtlich.

To argue for Werther as a key source of this turn in the 1790s is to make a very large counterclaim within Goethe scholarship. The empirical concerns that emerge after Italy have historically been understood as a repudiation of earlier sentimental investments in a subjectively laden emotionality—an emotionality that was of course extravagantly on display in Werther. Indeed, the publication in 1796 of the Briefe aus der Schweiz (Letters from Switzerland) in Schiller’s periodical, Die Horen (The Horae), which consisted of a revised version of the collection of letters compiled during Goethe’s first Swiss journey that followed the publication of Werther, has been understood as a kind of counterpoint to the more objective travelogue of the third Swiss journey that Goethe began one year later and that came to be known as Die Reise in die Schweiz. According to this theory, the earlier letters were published to illustrate precisely an epochal break between a sentimental epistolary style à la Werther and a post-Italian tender empiricism. The conjunction of Die Reise in die Schweiz, the Propyläen introduction, Der Sammler und die Seinigen, and the many maxims on natural science (a conjunction that we should remember is expressly the product of a Wertherian vocabulary) shows us that the work of Werther, a post-Wertherism we might say, brings together these otherwise post-Kantian attempts at thinking through the relationship between experience, imagination, narration, and knowledge.

The larger point to be made here, beyond the field of Goethe scholarship, is the way reading topologically brings into view (quite literally through the form of the diagram) an intertextual presence that is not otherwise legible to the naked eye—a presence that is based on decidedly different modes of reading from those that have historically been operative within the discipline of literary studies. Reading topologically does not just mean reading topologies; it implies a new kind of Lese-technik, a reading technique in the double sense of the term, in which
lexical recurrence (a highly insignificant way of thinking about how words mean) and dimensionality (a highly spatial way that words relate to each other, almost suprasyntactically we might say) are the two primary means through which new semantic configurations and new textual concentrations are brought to light within a given textual field. In rethinking our engagement with literary history in topological terms, we aim to reframe our understanding of literary works not as static, discrete, and highly singular objects but as socially embedded, circulatory processes—as linguistic events that can be mapped. In so doing, topologies place us in a critical relationship to the network as one of the dominant figures of contemporary thought.

To conclude, we wish only to underscore the fundamental contingency of topological reading. Not only are the readings presented here contingent on the particular spaces to which we have chosen to pay attention within our various topologies; they are also contingent on the way we have chosen to model our theoretical category of “Werther” or “Wertherness.” The point is not that a stable category can be used to interpret an unstable environment or that a stable environment can be used to interpret an unstable textual category—the twin bedrocks of contextualization or intertextualization studies. Rather, reading topologically illustrates the way a contingent object brings into view a contingent environment, which is then used recursively to interpret that initial object. Not only are there other Wertherisms lurking in our topology waiting to be uncovered; there are other Wertherisms waiting to be brought to light when we model Werther differently. To this end, we offer one final topology of Goethe’s corpus, structured according to an alternative model of Werther—in this case the most common significant words from Werther minus words that are also common to the corpus as a whole, a more distilled version of Wertherian language (fig. 6.7). What we find is Werther’s relocation within the drama and poetry section (i.e., its denovelization) as well as an affinity with translation: Goethe’s early translation of the “Song of Solomon” is the closest single work, but also close by is his late collection of poems, “Aus fremder Sprachen” (From Foreign Languages). Werther as “Artist,” it would appear, is also the basis of Goethe’s lifelong interest in translation and the aesthetics of translation.

Notes

Epigraph: “Incidentally, as I’ve repeatedly said, I have only ever reread that book once since its initial appearance and have protected myself from ever doing so again. Those are some serious fireworks! I feel uncanny around it and am afraid of reexperiencing the pathological state from which it emerged.” Woldemar Freiherr von Biedermann, ed., Anhang an Goethes Werke: Abtheilung für Gespräche, vol. 5
Figure 6.7. This topology of Goethe’s works is arranged according to a different set of Wertherian words. Instead of the most frequent significant words from Werther, we used the most significant frequent words from Werther minus those words that were also the most common for the overall corpus, giving us in essence a more distilled version of Wertherian language. Where figure 6.1, we could say, is based on what is common in Werther, this map shows the results of searching for the commonly uncommon in Werther. The result is that Werther is jettisoned from the novels section into the drama and poetry—the first edition of Werther is one of the two small red tiles in the center of the map. The other red tile is Goethe’s translation of the “Song of Solomon.” How one models the theoretical category one is investigating determines the structure of the literary field under review.

(Leipzig: Biedermann, 1890), 5. All translations in this chapter are my own unless otherwise noted.


4 We feel it is important to address at the outset the collaborative nature of this project, as it bears on questions of credit and the division of labor in the digital humanities. While the invention, design, and creation of the topological models used for this chapter belong to Mark Algee-Hewitt, and while the readings and interpretations generated by the maps belong to Andrew Piper, given the many, many hours of discussion between us that has gone into the creation, refinement, and interpretation of the model (by no means complete), it is impossible to separate intellectual ownership in such straightforward terms. Each of us is deeply indebted to the other for inspiration. This project is not strictly divided between a technical and a humanistic operator; rather, the two ways of thinking are deeply interwoven here.

5 For a detailed history of the meaning of topology, see I. M. James, ed., History of Topology (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1999).


9 An important aspect of the “Werther Effect” is the way Werther is himself already an “effect”—an outcome of a new kind of reading culture. The question for our larger project is how we might measure the Werther Effect in these terms—how the novel is both generative of new literary forms and generated by prior ones. Is the Werther Effect a measure of something deeply novel called Werther, or is it more of a reverberation of a prior set of literary and linguistic effects? For a discussion of the changing nature of literary reception during this period, see Hans Vaget’s emphasis on “Werther als Leser,” in Goethes Erzählwerk: Interpretationen, ed. Paul Michael Lützeler und James E. McLeod (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), 37–72, and more recently, Katja Mellmann, “Das Buch als Freund—Der Freund als Zeugnis: Zur Entstehung eines neuen Paradigmas für Literaturrezeption und persönliche Beziehungen, mit einer Hypothese zur Erstrezepetion von Goethes ‘Werther,’” in Bürgerlichkeit im 18. Jahrhundert, ed. Hans Erwin Friedrich, Fotis Jannidis, and Marianne Willems (Tübingen: Max Niemyer, 2006), 201–40.

10 The connection to thinking about language genetically here, as a form of code or instructions, should be explicit. One of the crucial sources for topological thinking derives from the related field of bioinformatics where a four-letter code is understood in instructional terms. Repetition in an organic setting is the condition of producing enormous degrees of variation. As the idea of life is increasingly understood in textual terms, it warrants thinking about how knowledge of organic textual processes can be brought to bear on the understanding of the history of cultural textuality and in addition how models of cultural textuality might generate insights into organic processes.

11 For a lengthier discussion of the theoretical implications of topological reading, see Andrew Piper, “Reading’s Refrain: From Bibliography to Topology,” in Reading: Selected Essays from the English Institute, ed. Joseph Slaughter (Cambridge, MA: English Institute in Collaboration with the American Council of Learned Societies, forthcoming).

12 The most notable change was our inclusion of the first edition of Werther, which is not included in the Weimar Edition. The grouping of smaller works into categories involved a number of interpretive decisions. For longer literary works, we tried as much as possible to mirror bibliographic volumes. For aesthetic and scientific writings, we tended to group shorter works together unless there was a high historical value surrounding them (such essays as “Von deutscher Baukunst”). For poetry, we grouped genres together by period. We did not include letters or conversations. These choices produce a total of 255 unique works within Goethe’s corpus and 5 distinct genres (drama, poetry, prose [consisting of novels and autobiography], aesthetic writing [critical essays], and scientific writing).

13 There are obviously numerous different ways to model our theoretical category. For the purposes of this chapter, we have chosen the most common significant words in Werther, but the future value of such work will depend in part on our ability to construct creative theoretical models—the numerous different ways that we can model “Wertherness.”

14 Our use of this subset of words allows us to balance our understanding of each text as a unique lexical object with our interest in seeing the relationships between them: using all the words in each text would allow the minute
differences between texts to overwhelm their similarities, while using only common words would negate these important differences altogether.


17 So that our argument for the meaning of the arrangement of the topologies presented here does not merely hinge on the expected correlation of like texts (such as the two editions of *Werther*), we also performed a series of statistical tests to ensure that our set of Werther words was significantly affecting the layout of the topology rather than other, possibly random, factors. For a randomly selected sample of tiles at fixed distances away from *Werther* on the topology, we charted the average density of Werther words and performed a *t*-test to compare these results to the average density of a randomly selected, equally numerous list of words. If the map was based primarily on the distribution of Werther words, then we should find a decreasing mean density and variation of distribution of the Werther words in works farther from the “center” of the topology, while our random sample should not show the same pattern. This discrepancy in mean and variation is precisely what the *t*-test demonstrated, thus indicating that our Werther word set was the primary metric determining the layout of the Voronoi diagram.


19 The disorganization of the pages of the works chosen suggests that the “work” as a category appears to be a far less lexically homogenous category than either “genre” or “period,” both of which exhibit much stronger correlations with themselves, though this would be an interesting claim to test further.

20 In order to test the usefulness of this algorithm, we first identified clusters by hand, making choices based on three criteria: density, location, and correlation to different works. Our aim was to look for clusters from different areas of the map that consisted of different works but still had an overall sense of concentration. Our manual identifications of clusters corresponded surprisingly closely with the algorithmic identification of clusters. Our manual clusters were not at the very top in order of concentration.
All citations will consist of their topological number (the tile number within the topology) and their appropriate reference in the Weimar edition, according to section, volume, and page number, cited as WA in the text. Our references to this initial cluster correspond to the manually identified cluster that overlapped with the purple cluster in figure 6.4.

For a discussion of the significance of embodiment for a new, “modern” notion of individualism that is a product of Werther, see Gerhard Neumann, “Goethes Werther. Die Geburt des modernen europäischen Romans,” in Spuren, Signaturen, Spiegelungen. Zur Goethe-Rezeption in Europa, ed. Bernhard Beutler und Anke Bosse (Cologne: Böhlau, 2000), 515–37. For us, embodied consciousness is not the outcome of Werther but its central problem as the individual learns to relate to a world of techne or crafted objects beyond himself, best captured in the liminal space of the hand.

“I have, as I now see, fallen into ecstasy, similes, and declamation, and thus forgotten to finish telling you what happened to the children. I sat on my plow deep in painterly sensations, which my sheet from yesterday showed in a very fragmented fashion, for what must have been two hours. Around evening a young woman with a small basket on her arm approached where the children were playing—time had not touched them—and called out from a distance: Philips, you are very well behaved. She greeted me, I thanked her, stood up, stepped closer, and asked her: was she the mother of the children?” (WA I.19:19).

The extent to which this passage mimics Paul de Man’s reading of Proust in his Allegories of Reading—the way “reading” in Proust is staged as the persistent substitution of metonymy for metaphor—will likely be familiar to many readers of this volume. Our point is not that Proust is nothing more than a restaging of an original Goethean scene of reading but rather that this trajectory is itself subject to a reconfiguration within Goethe, where it is no longer figured as a trajectory but as a circularity—a circularity that is tied to the irresolvable tension between the spiritual and material status of the material object, its movement between Handwerk and Kunstwerk. See Paul De Man, “Reading (Proust),” in Allegories of Reading (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 57–78.


Our distinction between the vorhanden and zuhanden goes slightly against the grain of Heidegger, who lists them as synonymous. For Heidegger, the zuhanden is an act of Verweisung, of pointing, a question not of what for (wozu) but whereto (wohin). We would simply argue that Heidegger’s understanding of this ideational tension in the material object—between its thereness and its pointingness (or not-thereness)—is fundamentally Wertherian in structure. See Martin Heidegger, Sein und Zeit (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 78–84.

Our reading is thus a modulation of David Wellbery’s emphasis on the phantasmatic and singularly liquid understanding of corporeality in Werther. As we think the following passage makes clear, there is less a movement than a circularity to how materiality is metaphorized in the novel. David Wellbery, “Morphisms of the Phantasmatic Body: Goethe’s The Sorrows of Young Werther,” in Body and Text in

28 “I kiss this bow a thousand times, and with every breath I swallow/slurp the memory of those blissful moments through which those few, happy, irretrievable days overwhelmed me. Wilhelm, so it is, and I am not grumbling, the blossoms of life are only appearances! how many pass by without leaving a trace, how few produce fruit, and how few of these fruit will ever be ripe. And yet there are plenty enough, and yet—O my brother! is it possible to neglect ripened fruit, to disdain them, to allow them to wither and rot unsavored? Good-bye! It is a beautiful summer, I often sit in the fruit trees of Lotte’s garden with the fruit-plucker attached to a long staff and retrieve the pears from the top. She stands below and receives them as I lower them down to her” (WA I.19:78).

29 If we turned to our third manually identified cluster, which corresponds to the orange cluster on our algorithm map, we would find a set of concerns that translates this question of the graspability of the artwork into questions about departure, circularity, and return.


31 It is important to emphasize the extent to which this secondary concentration is not to be understood in opposition to Werther (as non-Wertherian) but, as we mentioned previously, as a second-order Wertherness—a configuration of texts that is still dependent on a particular density of Werther words, a density that is both differently configured from the primary cluster and also of a lower order of density. If one looks at a topology of Goethe’s corpus structured according to the most common words in the corpus overall, these works belong to a similar region of the map but are only brought next to each other when we use the Werther set of words. Their general loose affinity, in other words, becomes manifest when arranged according to Wertherness.

32 While much of Goethe scholarship has focused on the Italian Journey as the central autobiographical travel narrative of Goethe’s life, Switzerland, as Peter Brenner has pointed out, occupies far more of Goethe’s corpus than Italy. See Peter J. Brenner, “Von der Bewegung zur Beharrung: Goethes Reisen in Deutschland, Frankreich und der Schweiz,” Goethe-Jahrbuch 120 (2004): 167–81.

33 As Wolf von Engelhardt has pointed out, “Erfahrung” or “experience” is the central term of the opening sentence of Kant’s introduction to the first critique and it is only after reading Kant that Goethe begins speaking of “experience” as a central scientific and aesthetic category—indeed as one that unites these two fields. See Wolf von Engelhardt, “Der Versuch als Vermittler zwischen Subjekt und Objekt: Goethes Aufsatz im Licht von Kants Vernunftkritik,” Athenäum 10 (2000): 9–28.

34 See Joseph Vogl’s emphasis on the “Weg der Farbe” (path of color) in Goethe, the centrality of processual thought to empirical knowledge—one that is crucially tied to the Farbenlehre as well as narrativity in general. Where Vogl emphasizes the developmental “path” of knowledge as a path backward to a primordial Nicht-Wahrnehmbare (nonobservable), we are interested in the path as a site of errancy, as opposed to development, as the persistent incorporation of error within insight. Joseph Vogl, “Der Weg der Farbe,” in Räume der Romantik, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach and Gerhard Neumann (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2007), 157–68.
35 “Man is the highest, indeed the only proper object of the visual arts! To understand him, to unwind him from the labyrinth of his construction, a general understanding of organic nature is indispensable. So too should the artist inform himself theoretically about inorganic bodies, in addition to general natural forces, especially when, as in the case of sound and color, they are applicable to the practice of art. And yet what a long detour must he make when he must arduously locate from within the school of the dissector, the describer of nature, and the teacher of nature that which will serve his purposes. Yes, it is a question whether he can find there that which will be the most important to him?” (WA I.47:12).

36 In a passage also included in this cluster, we see Goethe asking the opposite question of what the arts have to offer the scientist or, perhaps more concretely, that there is a scienticity to aesthetic experience, not understood as “objectivity” and “truth” in the more traditional sense but as one that can be systematized in its experiential rigor. See “Ernst Stiedenroth Psychologie,” Allgemeine Naturlehre 68 (WA II.11:75).


39 “Since everything in nature, especially the general forces and elements, are in perpetual action and reaction, one can thus say that every single phenomenon stands in relationship to countless others, just as we would say of a freely floating luminescent point that it sends its rays in every direction. When we have undertaken such an experiment, made such an experience, we can never carefully enough investigate what immediately borders it? What follows from it? The latter is what we need to observe more of versus that which relates to it? The multiplication of a single experiment is the fundamental duty of the natural scientist” (WA II.11:32; my emphasis).


41 In addition to the opening section of the Versuch essay, where Goethe discusses the questionable value of experience, see also the language from the natural scientific aphorisms that are included in Allgemeine Naturlehre 129 (WA II.11:140).

42 “Sometimes we achieve full consciousness and grasp that an error as well as a truth can impel and move us to action. Because the act is everywhere decisive, it is possible that something accurate can emerge from an active error because the effect of the action reaches into infinity” (WA I.42.2:113).

43 “The former (i.e., regular observation) expresses itself in a practical sense, in immediate experience; the latter (i.e., pure observation) symbolically, principally
through mathematics, in numbers and formulas, through speech, primordially, tropologically, as poetry of the genius, as the proverbiality of human reason” (WA I.42.2:181).


46 For a critique of these one-way models, see Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).