

ON RE-READING THREE THWARTED ROMANCES

La Nouvelle Héloïse, Die Leiden des jungen Werthers,

Jacopo Ortis

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IN the last half of the eighteenth century, three works appeared written along curiously similar lines: the first by a Frenchman, the second by a German, the third by an Italian. All three described, with a minimum of concrete incident and with a maximum of passionate description and sentimentally speculative digression, philosophical and social, a supersensitive young man's enamourment with an exquisitely virtuous young woman, and the effect wrought upon his battered soul by her marriage to another.

All three are cast in a mould made famous and popular earlier in the century by the Englishman Richardson: all three, that is to say, take the form of the Epistolary Romance.

The first (and longest) is, of course, Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*. A somewhat disjointed work, divided into six parts, and covering a period of several years, it describes the origin and progress of the love of Julie for the high-minded and noble-souled Saint-Preux, whom her father refuses to consider as a suitor for her hand on account of his insufficiently aristocratic origin. A sympathetic Englishman, Milord Edouard, intervenes on behalf of Saint-Preux, but unhappily his tactless sarcasms in the face of Julie's father's opposition only serve to crystallize that opposition to unshakeable determination: the father will never consent. The kindly Milord offers to help the lovers to a home and independence of their own, but Julie opposes a virtuous though not quite adequately motivated refusal.

For a while the lovers continue to correspond, but before long Julie is forced by her father to marry one M. de Wolmar. Saint-Preux meditates suicide, but is dissuaded by the sound arguments of the worthy Milord.

Six years after, Julie is peaceful, and in general happy, with a considerate husband and two beautiful children. But she can never forget Saint-Preux, and one day learns that he is to be in the neighborhood on his way to Italy. He wants to see Julie once more. The husband urges him to visit them: Julie has told all. (Since

the lovers, in the early stage of their affair, had known no reason for restraint, her tale was not a light one). Saint-Preux visits them, is charmed with the simple life they lead, and duly impressed by M. de Wolmar's noble confidence in him. The former lovers go through one critical experience—out in a boat together while the husband is away—but they rise superior to temptation. . . .

The last two parts consist mainly of digressions, in the midst of which Saint-Preux is suddenly informed, by a long letter from M. de Wolmar, that Julie is dead. She had dashed into the lake to save one of her children from drowning, only to succumb shortly afterwards to the results of chill and exposure.

Such is the story, which occupies, however, only a fraction of the pages in the volume. The bulk of them are filled with Rousseau's digressions, some of them closely connected with the plot, some of them only remotely: digressions on Travel, on the Simple Life of Mountaineers, on Italian Music, on Modesty, on Duelling, on Paris, on Religion, on Adultery, on Suicide, on Philosophy, on Domestic Economy, on Education (a lengthy digression this, and—as we expect of Rousseau on the subject—singularly feeble-minded, singularly akin to the noisiest "educationalist" theories of our own day), and on a number of other matters.

Rousseau, we must remember, was about forty-five when he wrote his *Julie*. He began it, apparently, at a period when he felt a burning desire to write love letters, but had no one whom he could regard as a suitable recipient for these ardent outpourings. He continued it, however, under the very different stimulus of his rejected passion for Mme. de Houdetot—a lady who nobly checked his advances, strong in her devotion to that Gallic form of the Seventh Commandment: Thou shalt not commit adultery with more than one person at a time. But however much the ideas Rousseau sets forth in his *Julie* may have been influenced by his conversations with Mme. de Houdetot and her influence upon him for restraint, the plot of his tale is not even remotely suggestive of any actual external events in his life.

While Rousseau's *Julie* was a work of maturity, written when the author was past middle life, Goethe's *Werther* was a work of youth, composed when he was less than twenty-five years old. The situation which it sets forth is, as we all know, very similar to that of *Julie*. Thackeray's famous summary is not quite accurate, though its first stanza does well enough:



WERTHER'S LOTTE
By Kaulbach

Werther had a love for Charlotte
 Such as words could never utter;
 Would you know how first he met her?
 She was cutting bread and butter.

Charlotte, having seen his body
 Borne before her on a shutter,
 Like a well-conducted person,
 Went on cutting bread and butter.

In *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, the hero did see Lotte for the first time when, if she was not cutting Butterbrot, at least "Sie hielt ein schwarzes Brot, und schnitt. . . jedem sein Stück. . ." He soon fell deeply in love with her; but their idyll was shadowed by the fact that the lady was betrothed to another, one Albert.

After a few months, Werther's passion for her became so evident, and her interest in him had grown so strong that the twentieth-century reader cannot quite see why it would not have been the part of wisdom to reconsider her betrothal to the other man; or a least to put off for a year or two—until all were quite sure of themselves—all thought of marriage. But in that case *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* would have lost all that appealed to the exquisitely sensitive souls of the period; and besides, in the eighteenth century (at least for purposes of sentimental fiction) a betrothal—even a marriage—might be taken very seriously. Lotte and her Albert were therefore in due course made man and wife; and Werther, after a vain attempt to reconcile himself, blew out his brains. It was a rather untidy suicide. "Über dem rechtem Auge hatte er sich durch den Kopf geschossen, das Gehirn war herausgetrieben. . ." Yet it was hours before he died, and in the interval "er. . . hat sich konvulsivisch um den Stuhl herumgewälzt. . ." Charlotte, by the way, did not go on cutting bread and butter: on the contrary, the editor tells us specifically: "von Lottens Jammer laszt mich nichts sagen"; and later: "Man fürchtete für Lottens Leben."

The similarities of Werther's history to that of Saint-Preux are obvious enough. The lady each adores becomes the wife of another, and the lover a restless witness of her domestic activities. He is sorely tried—especially in a moment when she shows some weakness for him—but makes a gallant effort to resign himself. Saint-Preux, having contemplated suicide and been dissuaded, suc-

ceeds in accepting the facts; the story in his case ends with the lady's accidental death. Werther, on the other hand, fails, and shoots himself with pistols borrowed (in rather dubious taste, one must admit) from his lady's husband.

One might think that in writing *Werther* Goethe had taken Rousseau's rambling romance, cut out all that was extraneous and purely digressive, changed the conclusion into something more logical and inevitable, adapted the whole to a German background, and so, keeping the same form of the epistolary novel, made of it a brief, unified, effective, and moving little tragedy. The work aroused an immediate sensation: it was universally read and wildly applauded; but, although Rousseau's *Julie* had likewise been enormously successful, and had appeared only a dozen or so years earlier, hardly anyone thought of suggesting that *Werther* was a re-working of Rousseau's tale.

Why not? Simply because everyone knew that *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* contained only a minimum of fiction. Lotte was Lotte Buff, whom Goethe had known at Wetzlar as the fiancée of one Kestner. There was no attempt to conceal her identity; not only her Christian name, but a number of details were kept, such as the many brothers and sisters for whom, in her widowed father's house, she had to act as housekeeper and mother. Goethe had tried to win her, but she had preferred—and shortly married—Kestner. The poet fled the scene, and presently forgot Lotte, more or less, in his attachment for another married lady, Maximiliane Brentano, whose husband before long very wisely forbade Goethe to visit his house. It was this last jolt which turned Goethe's mind once more to Lotte and her husband, and reminded him at the same time of the suicide, some months earlier, of a Wetzlar acquaintance named Jerusalem, known also to have had a love affair with a friend's wife. So Goethe sat down forthwith and wrote off *Werthers Leiden* in a bare month, telling all the story of his passion for his Lotte and of his despair over her marriage to her betrothed; changing only the ending, to attribute to himself, instead of his actual resignation, the suicide of the unfortunate Jerusalem.

Naturally enough, when the book was published, the good Kestner was at first decidedly annoyed; for Werther is not quite as considerate of Albert as he might be. But ere long he too was reconciled, and Goethe-Werther continued his friendly relations with Lotte and her husband "ever after." In this the poet showed himself

a far more sensible person than his hero; but the truth, of course, makes an infinitely less throbbing story.

The third of these tales of a thwarted passion is Ugo Foscolo's *Ultime Lettere di Jacopo Ortis*. The hero, overwhelmed at the betrayal of his native Venice by Napoleon to the Austrians (*Treaty of Campoformio*: October, 1797), and proscribed by the new government as one dangerous to the state, withdraws for safety—and for such peace as he may find—to a little villa in the Euganean Hills. Here he meets the charming Teresa, whom he frequently sees with her little sister, Isabellina; he learns that she is unhappy, and speedily falls in love with her. But alas! She can never be his. She is betrothed to a certain Odoardo, wealthy and influential: a worthy enough man, though lacking in those more delicate sensibilities for which Teresa—being a lady of the Eighteenth Century—so ineffably yearned. Her father has insisted on the match with Odoardo, though her mother opposed it (on Teresa's behalf) even to the extent of leaving her husband and withdrawing to a little house of her own, in protest.

This father, however, is neither brutal nor callous. He is, indeed, from some points of view, the most interesting character in any of the three stories. Lotte's father had been scarcely mentioned by the young Werther; Julie's had been so obstinate and arrogant that her refusal to run away with her lover when every opportunity was offered seemed a foolish weakness. But Teresa's father is in reality thoughtful and sympathetic. He has a full grasp of the whole situation, and feels only admiration and affection for Jacopo. Under different circumstances, there is no man he would more happily accept as son-in-law; but unfortunately he is himself, like Jacopo, suspected by the government: he, too, has desired his country's freedom from the foreign yoke. When a favorable opportunity occurs, he talks the whole matter over with Jacopo. Edoardo, to whom Teresa is engaged, is not only rich and influential; he is definitely *persona grata* to the government. By marrying him, Teresa will secure both herself and her family from the persecutions of their enemies, personal and political alike; whereas her marriage to Jacopo could bring only speedy ruin upon them all.

Jacopo admits the truth of all this; and when Teresa's father urges his departure as the one course which may save her from continued hopeless suffering, he accepts his fate, and departs. For

some months he wanders about his unhappy country; but the political and social sufferings of his Italy only serve to make his own despair the keener. He goes back to take a last farewell of Teresa, now safely married, and of her father; then stabs himself to the heart with a dagger.

This suicide, like Werther's, is described with a wealth of ghastly detail: 'S'era piantato un pugnale sotto la mammella sinistra: ma se l'era cavato dalla ferita, e gli era caduto a terra.' . . . "La ferita era assai larga, e profonda, e sebbene non avesse colpito il cuore, egli si affrettò la morte lasciando perdere il sangue che andava a rivi per la stanza. . . ." And the final tragic touch: "Gli pendevo dal collo il ritratto di Teresa tutto nero di sangue, se non che era alquanto polito nel mezzo; e le labbra insanguinate di Jacopo fanno congetturare ch' ei nell' agonia baciasse l' immagine della sua amica."

All things considered, however, Foscolo's story is, in this twentieth century, perhaps the most readable of the three, though it certainly lacks the swift unity, and much of the art, of *Werthers Leiden*. The little things that tend to annoy us today in Werther—his oft-reiterated devotion to his Homer (through the first half of the story) though he shows no signs of knowing anything about what Homer wrote; his subsequent turn from Homer to that masterly and gifted faker Macpherson (whom he accepts as Ossian and quotes at agonizing length); his failure to meet the situation boldly, and to ask Lotte to consider and to wait—these are avoided by Foscolo. Jacopo's devotion to Plutarch, Dante, and Petrarch are obviously genuine; and occasional lines from the Italian poets annoy us far less than whole pages rendered from the "Ossian" by Werther. Again, such incidents in *Ortis* as the picture of the famous satirist Parini, an old man in Florence, have a very real interest today; while in the main story itself, Foscolo is the only one who really gives an adequate motive for the lovers' separation and the lady's marriage to another. And Foscolo shrewdly adds verisimilitude to his tale by a number of minor touches: "Such and such a letter which Ortis must have written cannot now be found. . . ." "The other pages of this letter have been somehow lost. . . ." and the like.

Jacopo Ortis, however, is lacking indeed—we must repeat—in the unity of *Werther*. And this lack of unity is at bottom the result of an attempt to graft one hero upon another. For the *Ultime Let-*

tere di Jacopo Ortis was not conceived and composed as a single work; it represents a triple working over of material which presented itself to the author successively in quite different forms.

In one of the earlier versions Teresa was a widow with a little daughter, happily betrothed to a noble and affectionate Odoardo. And the hero of the earliest version had been a far more sentimental and far less violent individual, a man whose political activities and convictions seem to have been a very minor matter. One of the chief weaknesses in *Jacopo Ortis* lies in the fact that Foscolo did not always succeed in eliminating this earlier, more sentimental aspect of his hero; so that occasionally the character appears inconsistent. The fact that in its final version Foscolo's story shows the political element so strongly emphasized, pictures its hero as less sentimental and more forceful, and describes the heroine not as a widow with a little daughter but as a maiden, forced by circumstances and a father's will to marry one she did not love (in this last aspect marking a return to Foscolo's earliest version, abandoned, in the second, in favor of the widow)—these changes are all caused by parallel changes in the author's circumstances. Between the first and last versions, the Italian political situation had entirely changed, reaching a crisis, and Foscolo himself had passed from comparative indifference to an active interest, actually enrolling, in 1799 as a volunteer in the National Guard. The lessening sentimentality and increasing force of *Jacopo Ortis* in the later version marks a corresponding change in the character of the author. And the difference in the heroine's position was the definite result of Foscolo's devotion to a new lady, Isabella Roncioni, whose circumstances were similar to those of Teresa in her final form. It is only recently, we must note, that it has been possible to trace, roughly, the development of Foscolo's story in its successive versions, since only fragments of the earlier versions have survived. But there can now be no doubt that *Jacopo Ortis* went through three quite different forms, its author modifying and altering the story in accordance with his own changed outlook.

Foscolo himself declared that his chief debt to Goethe was a study he made of *Werthers Leiden* at the time that he was working on the last revision of his *Ortis*; adding that *Werther* was especially valuable to him in assisting him to work out his story along lines of greater unity. That the original conception owed anything

to *Werther* he indignantly denied; and, indeed, became so furious when it was suggested that his work was simply an imitation of Goethe's that he involved himself in a series of contradictory denials which made it only too evident that, on several points at least, he was not telling the truth. Demonstrably false, for example, was his angry declaration that he had never seen *Werther* prior to that period of the final re-working of his *Ortis*.

Foscolo's attitude in the matter has never been quite explained; but it is, I think, not hard to understand. Uppermost in his mind, unquestionably, was the series of events in his own life which had formed the background and the mainspring of the several versions of his work, especially his passionate attachment first for the wife of Vincenzo Monti, and then for the unhappy Isabella Roncioni. Unlike Goethe, he had carefully concealed the close connection between his story and his life, though everyone felt that Jacopo was Ugo Foscolo, and several of the editions carried Foscolo's portrait labelled "Jacopo Ortis." He was himself profoundly convinced that his novel was a true if idealized picture of his own experiences, and that its debt to *Werther* was confined to a few last-minute touches in the interest of unity. But it was utterly impossible for him to declare this fact without admitting publicly his relationship to certain ladies whom he had always taken every precaution to protect. Hence his blind rage: the accusation that he had from the first imitated *Werther* was false; but the evidence he might have adduced in this connection was forbidden him by a sense of honor. No wonder he was furious; and no wonder that he took refuge in a series of heated denials which—only too inevitably—were soon, without great difficulty, proved in large part false.

So there abide these three works on a single theme: Rousseau's *Julie*, Goethe's *Werther*, and Foscolo's *Ortis*; three works so similar in general handling that the theme would seem inevitably to have been copied by Goethe from Rousseau and by Foscolo from Goethe. And yet in point of fact the first of the three seems to have been the only one that was not in its essence profoundly autobiographical; and thus all were in large degree essentially original.

What, in conclusion, of these three tales from the point of view of the twentieth-century reader? That the lady should, in all three, have given up an attractive, interesting, and romantic lover in fa-

vor of a somewhat dull and commonplace husband, doubtless calls for explanation if not for apology in this our day and generation. To readers of such products as *Westward Passage*, these heroines must seem strangely simple-minded; it would have been so easy and so obviously satisfactory to oscillate between the two men, sating oneself in comfort first with husband, then with lover—indefinitely. But in the eighteenth century men or women—or perhaps both—seem to have been differently constituted; at all events, romantic love in those days must have been less . . . naked, shall we say?—less unrestrained. Werther and Ortis—both are out of fashion now in the excessive power upon them of their passion. And Charlotte and Teresa alike are quite demoded in the nineteen thirties in that they seem to have practised something in the nature of restraint or—even worse—of decency. But we make no apology for them: only a little whimsically we note the fact.

And having re-read these tales, we do not feel that our time has been entirely misspent. They have in part amused us and in part have made us, almost philosophically, reflective: what more could we ask? As we lay them aside again, we are not sorry, after all, that the Goethe Centennial should have given us reason or excuse for turning back a moment to three thwarted romances of a century and a half ago.



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