

Literature as Documentation: Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*

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Literary allusions are the substance of Ulrich Plenzdorf's 1972 novel *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* (*The New Sorrows of Young W.*)¹ As the title unabashedly declares, the book is a modern version of Goethe's epistolary portrait of a gifted young man (Goethe himself), alienated from eighteenth-century society and hopelessly in love with a charming young woman who is soon to marry someone else. Both the disaffection with a regimented way of life and an unhappy love affair, heightening the protagonist's sense of rejection, are the themes in Plenzdorf's story about the present situation in the German Democratic Republic; his use of the title and quotations from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* has the effect, aside from producing humor by the quaintness of the diction, of reinforcing the accuracy of the author's point of view.² Further documentation is afforded by Plenzdorf by way of references to other, equally viable models for his contemporary novel: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and J.P. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.³ The format of the novel itself, the record of a series of interviews on the subject of the precipitously departed W. and his commentary on them, made necessarily from the beyond ("Über den Jordan") and therefore requiring a great deal of substantiation, functions like the similar interrogatory and stream-of-consciousness sections in Uwe Johnson's *Speculations about Jakob* (1959). There, too, these devices provide the fiction with an aura of veracity. Additional allusions are garnered from such diverse sources as Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena*, another Uwe Johnson story, and the name of a magazine dedicated to the preservation of bourgeois values—"Die Gartenlaube"; all address the problem of W.'s estrangement from society and the search for a private identity.

The quotations from Goethe's 1774 letter-novel, interspersed throughout *The New Sorrows of Young W.*, after having been introduced at the beginning of the book in a lengthy passage which both foreshadows and summarizes events to come, underscore the protagonist's growing awareness of his need to defy society's demand that he play a prescribed role and the concurrent need to find himself. Plenzdorf interjects the material from Goethe's text initially in his story about Edgar Wibeau's accidental death in today's East Berlin by having the quotations appear to be recorded messages sent by the youthful victim to his best friend and fellow-apprentice

¹ The original version was a screenplay, the text of which is given in *Plenzdorfs Neue Leiden des jungen W.*, ed. Peter J. Brenner (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982).

² See Heinz Piontek, "Werthers Leiden in der Republik," in *Plenzdorfs Neue Leiden des jungen W.*, p. 294: "Goethe wird von Plenzdorf keineswegs parodiert, vielmehr—wenn auch mit ironischer Distanz—als Muster herangezogen."

³ According to some critics Werther's Homer and Ossian have been replaced, respectively, by W.'s *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Catcher in the Rye*; see Gertrud Bauer Pickar, "Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*: The Interaction of Portrayal and Social Criticism," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 24, No. 4 (Winter 1978-79), p. 547.

awaiting news from a companion who has fled their hometown and sequestered himself in an abandoned summerhouse ("Gartenlaube") or rudimentary living quarters on the edge of a garden plot; in another patent analogy to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the recipient of the missives is named Willi (for Wilhelm.) To a lesser degree, the name Edgar Wibeau also has associations with the book he has chanced upon in the toilet of his hideout and has chosen as a means of communication and self-expression, although, in tearing away the paper covers and the title page, he has deprived himself of the ability to identify who has created his alter ego Werther; "Edgar" suggests the fondness for English names, language, and literature prevalent at the time of the birth of the Sturm und Drang movement. By a stretch of the imagination "Wibeau"—Edgar's Huguenot ancestry is an important component of his sense of outsidership—can signify, as a combination of the German *wie* (how) and the french *beau*, the rallying cry of the age of *Empfindsamkeit*: sensitivity, "O wie schön!" (O, how beautiful).⁴

The picture Edgar Wibeau draws of himself by way of the pointedly selected quotations from Goethe's *Werther* recited on tape is that of a young man in the throes of infatuation—"She is sacred to me"⁵—and frustration—"I shall not see her again." The two concluding passages depict not so much the rejected lover as the nonconformist—"I retreat within and find a world"—whose individualism a narrow-minded society has tried to destroy—"this is the fault of all of you." Neither Willi nor Edgar's father, into whose hands he gives the tapes, are capable of understanding the situation Edgar describes or even of identifying the source of the peculiar kind of German he uses. Ironically enough, when the young woman with whom Edgar has fallen in love, his Charlotte, identified by Plenzdorf only by the name Edgar has chosen for her—Charlie, describes the cul-de-sac into which he has fled, she uses a variation of the summing up of the hopelessness of Werther's situation which Edgar has repeated in evaluating Werther himself: "He couldn't be helped" (p. 27). Charlie, not without exhibiting the depth of her lack of understanding, contends: "He simply couldn't be helped" and "But Edgar simply couldn't be helped" (p. 53).

In regard to the *Werther*-quotations interspersed throughout the story, Edgar alternates passages related to his ill-fated infatuation with Charlie (pp. 37, 42, 56f., 61, 90) with those concerning Werther's abhorrence for the restrictions of bourgeois life in the eighteenth century and thus his abhorrence for similar restrictions imposed by a socialist state in its ascendancy and his enthusiasm for the independent life (pp. 51, 55, 73, 74, 93f.). In an isolated instance, he quotes Werther in order to indicate his approval of his worker friend Zaremba (p. 71). The most poignant of the passages taken from Goethe's *Werther* testifies to Edgar's realization of a moment of utter despair—"not one blissful hour, nothing! nothing!" (p. 84.) This suicidal despondency results from rejection by both women to whom he is attached, Charlie and his mother (who forgives him for his waywardness but expects him to be his model self once more), and rejection by society, in particular the workers, the group which can usually absorb any kind of eccentric; Plenzdorf, having the East-German literary and political (in amalgamation) authorities to contend with, cannot, however, allow his protagonist to duplicate the last phase of Werther's life,

⁴ D.G. John has proposed a different reading of the name Edgar Wibeau: in French *vie beau* suggest the good (beautiful) life that the individual, free of the constraints imposed upon him by society, might be expected to lead. In German, *wie bau* (en)—to Edgar's chagrin his contemporaries insist upon calling him "Wibau"—might be part of a DDR slogan: *Wie bauen wir einen sozialistischen Staat?* See D.G. John, "Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*: The Death of a Fool," *Modern Drama*, 23, No. 1 (March 1980), p. 38.

⁵ All references are to the German text, Ulrich Plenzdorf, *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* (Rostock: Hinstorff, 1973), p. 13; all translations are mine.

culminating in his suicide. Edgar's death is accidental and occurs when he is on the point of realizing that there is a place for the individual in a closed society; in the article "Werther's Children: The Experience of the Second Generation in Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* and Volker Braun's 'Unvollendete Geschichte,'" the authors propose that the invention, the electric paint sprayer, the malfunctioning of which causes an explosion and his death, was to be the key to the door opening upon his reentry into a socialist society: ". . . he would be able to reenter society as an innovator and intellectual aristocrat."⁶

Edgar's descent into despair and his misfortunate demise (which does not occur in the original, screenplay version, where there is a kind of reconciliation between Edgar and society) seem to be less related in tone to *The Sorrows of Young Werther* than to another of Plenzdorf's models, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. On occasion, critics have even held this 1945/1951 novel about an American adolescent, who runs away from the prep school he is attending and its suffocating atmosphere of conformity and through a subsequent series of debilitating and depressing adventures in New York becomes almost fatally ill, to be Plenzdorf's primary source.⁷ There are several obvious similarities between Salinger's protagonist and Edgar Wibeau: both rebel against the tenets of a mechanistic and materialistic society (Werther's age, on the other hand, is not an urban and technological one); both are delighted with women and claim to have rapport with them, one feature of which is a love for dancing. Both are "Kindernarren," that is, adults who are utterly enchanted with children. However, it is basically the manner in which Salinger's Holden Caulfield expresses himself which Plenzdorf has duplicated in order to give authenticity to his portrait of a young man growing up (reluctantly) in the latter half of the twentieth century. Passages chosen at random from both books bring their compatibility in this regard into sharp focus.

Catcher in the Rye: There were never many girls at all at the football games. Only seniors were allowed to bring girls to them. It was a terrible school, no matter how you looked at it. I like to be somewhere at least where you can see a few girls around once in a while, even if they're only scratching their arms or blowing their noses or even just giggling or something. Old Selma Thurmer—she was the headmaster's daughter—showed up at the games quite often, but she wasn't exactly the type that drove you mad with desire. She was a pretty nice girl, though . . . She had a big nose and her nails were all bitten down and bleedly-looking and she had on those damn falsies that point all over the place, but you felt sort of sorry for her. What I liked about her, she didn't give you a lot of horse manure about what a great guy her father was. She probably knew what a phony slob he was.⁸

The New Sorrows of Young W: Actually, I only felt sorry for the wife. There she sat now with her husband, that wimp. Werther should've at least given some thought to that. And anyway: let's suppose that he couldn't've gotten anywhere with the wife: no reason at all to put a bullet through his brain. Because he

⁶ Ute Brandes, Ann Clark Fehn, "Werther's Children: The Experience of the Second Generation in Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* and Volker Braun's 'Unvollendete Geschichte,'" *The German Quarterly*, 56, No. 4 (Nov. 1983), p. 616. See also J.D. John, "Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*: The Death of a Fool," p. 36; John finds a symbolic value in the doorbell button which Edgar deliberately incorporates in his invention and which causes the malfunction: "In pushing this button Edgar is requesting reentry into society and at the same time acceptance of his life style and contribution."

⁷ See Marcel Reich-Ranicki, "Der Fänger im DDR-Roggen" in *Plenzdorfs Neue Leiden des jungen W.* (Suhrkamp), p. 265, where reference is made to "Edgars Lieblingslektüre und Plenzdorfs wichtigstes Vorbild." In the same book the article by Heinz Piontek, entitled "Werthers Leiden in der Republik," states (p. 293): "Ohne Holden Caulfield . . . ist Plenzdorfs Hauptfigur nicht denkbar."

⁸ J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1951), p. 3.

had a horse, didn't he! In his place I would've headed for the woods in a flash . . . There he would've found thousands of fellows like him, guys like Thomas Müntzer or whatchamacallem. Nothing real to that [part of the story]. Just garbage. (P. 27; my translation).

In both instances the language is not a literal transcription of the way juveniles talk, either in the United States or in the German Democratic Republic;⁹ rather, its keynote is incongruity: the rowdiness of the diction conceals the emotionality of the young frightened by the callousness at the core of the maturity to which they aspire. Edgar lets Werther, in the language of the faded *Empfindsamkeit* movement, give voice to what cannot be said in a world in which the individual is a nonentity. Holden does not have this resource, but he testifies to the same disenchantment of the nonconformist confronted with an age in which masses and machines predominate. Thus it is in the area of social comment that the documentation provided by *The Catcher in the Rye*¹⁰ makes a greater contribution to *The New Sorrows of Young W.*; Edgar's infatuation with Charlie has no direct parallel in Salinger's story.

The bitterness of Holden Caulfield's dissatisfaction with both his elders and his peers in their insistence on conformity adds substance to the cleverness of the book, and in *The New Sorrows of Young W.* the issue raised of the place of the individual with his or her private concerns in a regimented society made and makes this pungently updated version of a literary classic significant and controversial. Plenzdorf has identified the conflict between the outsider and the social stratum on whose periphery he exists as the source of the literary efforts which produced the Edgar Wibeau story: "*The New Sorrows of Young W.* were written in a situation regarding which the text was very important to me in that it allowed me to find my identity again, which, as I believed, I was on the point of losing."¹¹ Like J.D. Salinger, Plenzdorf depicts in his novel an identity crisis which comes about because the unique personality is frustrated in its development by the restrictions placed on it through society's espousal of conformity. Edgar's attempt to confine himself as a spontaneously creative individual within the bounds of a limited social structure by inventing a workable paint sprayer for the group of house painters to which he belongs is, however, doomed to failure by Plenzdorf. Although, in pursuing a path of parallelism with Goethe's *Werther*, he has eliminated the possibility of Edgar's reproducing Werther's suicide (Edgar frivolously plays with her husband's rifle, even aiming it at Charlie),¹² Plenzdorf provides Edgar's accidental death with a negative aspect. Edgar's final (as always retrospective) comment on the manner of his demise is that, despite his intent to prove his adaptability by turning his paint sprayer over to his coworkers in Berlin and by returning home to complete his apprenticeship, "I would never have *really* gone back to Mittenberg" (p. 107; italics in the text). Thus, as Robert Weimann, an East German literary critic, has pointed out, the proposed solution to the problem, a reconciliation between the individual and society, has been nullified,¹³ and the element of chance which seems to play

⁹ See Samuel Moser, "Es ist nicht ihr Fall . . . Plenzdorf: Die alten Leiden," in *Plenzdorfs Neue Leiden des jungen W.*, p. 309: "Edgar Wibeau schlägt mit einem Vokabular herum, das scheinbar der Umgangssprache abgehört ist, in Wirklichkeit aber nichts anderes ist als ein konstruierter Jargon, eine Geheimsprache."

¹⁰ Although Holden Caulfield has his own explanation of the title in that he pictures himself catching children playing in a field of rye before they run and fall over a cliff (p. 173), the term applies in actuality to someone who follows after the harvesters and gathers up the missed stalks; in both instances the image of a lone individual existing on the fringes of society but contributing to it nonetheless prevails.

¹¹ Quoted in Peter Zeindler, "Glück des einzelnen vor dem Plansoll. Eine Begegnung mit dem DDR-Dramatiker Ulrich Plenzdorf" in *Plenzdorfs Neue Leiden des jungen W.*, p. 314. My translation.

¹² See also p. 107: "Ich meine, ich hätte nie im Leben freiwillig den Löffel abgegeben."

¹³ See Robert Weimann, "Plenzdorfs 'Werther'—eine produktive Auseinandersetzung mit dem literarischen Erbe" in *Materialien: Ulrich Plenzdorf, 'Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.'*, ed. Jürgen Wolff (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1980), p. 20.

an ironic or at least humorous part in bringing the events in the novel to a conclusion has been emphasized. In this respect the end of *The New Sorrows of Young W.* resembles both the tone and the denouement (such as it is) in *The Catcher in the Rye*: Holden's physical and to some extent mental breakdown has resulted neither in a fatality nor a reconciliation with society; the outsider remains an outsider—the end of the book returns to the beginning.

Equally as obvious as Salinger's novel in its relationship to *The New Sorrows of Young W.*, Uwe Johnson's stylistically innovative work *Speculations about Jakob* (published in 1959) has received only scant attention as a model for Plenzdorf.¹⁴ Both in form and in content Johnson's story about a young worker in the German Democratic Republic, a train dispatcher, who becomes disillusioned with the political ethic which prevails there, anticipates *The New Sorrows of Young W.* The unusual format of Plenzdorf's work, consisting of a series of interviews between unnamed participants on the subject of the (apparently) accidental death of the book's protagonist, together with stream-of-consciousness sections providing deeper insights, is unmistakably a duplication of Johnson's *modus operandi*: in *Speculations about Jakob*, the protagonist, too, is dead when the novel begins; inquiry into his death proceeds by way of a number of conversations between people whose identity remains obscure, especially through the first reading. The same characters, whose outlines are dimly seen, enlarge upon the information given in the dialogues through monologues in which they reveal their hidden thoughts and attitudes. Johnson has maintained that in telling his story in this indirect, documentary fashion he is attempting to establish more securely the veracity of his fiction, to give it the aspect of truth.¹⁵ Since the introspective parts of Plenzdorf's novel are restricted to the comments made by the protagonist from the grave, it is apparent that Plenzdorf has not been as radical as his predecessor in his approach to achieving reality in fiction; in large part he has maintained the stance of the omniscient story-teller with the result that, by allowing Edgar to speak from the beyond, he has heightened the novel's humor and created an unambiguous character. (As a consequence, however, the other persons exist only in their relationship to Edgar.)

Beyond the obvious parallels between Johnson's and Plenzdorf's novels in matters of style, the two books share a sociopolitical point of view. Johnson's Jakob is, at the outset of the course of events leading to his demise, a model worker, a shining example of the German Democratic Republic citizen who is convinced of the rightness of the socialist cause. Political circumstances, at first factors which cause his mother to flee the country and, eventually, the Communist suppression of the Hungarian revolution, cause him to waver in his dedication to the state. Jakob has in this way come to realize that he is an individual, personally involved in political confrontations, and that the state cannot and does not always speak or work for him. The conclusion Jakob reaches has, of course, much in common with Johnson's own viewpoint. Discussing the situation of those who are moved to take flight from the German Democratic Republic, he has explained the reasons for their defection. "Many an individual who wanted to respond to the new society precisely as an individual now was forced to make the discovery that he was not being looked upon as an individual at all but as a member of a group. This group, however, consisted

¹⁴ There is a passing reference to Johnson's novel in Marcel Reich-Ranicki's "Der Fänger im DDR-Roggen," p. 295.

¹⁵ See, for example, the analysis of his purpose Johnson makes in an essay in *Berliner Sachen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 20: "Der Verfasser führt die schwierige Suche nach der Wahrheit vor, indem er seine Auffassung des Geschehens mit der seiner Personen vergleicht und relativiert, indem er ausläßt, was er nicht für reine Kunst ausgibt, was noch eine Art der Wahrheitsfindung ist."

of his or her parent's generation, people of a bygone, over-with age."¹⁶ This critique of citizenship in the German Democratic Republic is in précis form the stance taken by Plenzdorf in viewing Edgar Wibeau's adventures and demise in the German Democratic Republic. Edgar rebels as an individual and as a member of a new generation (cf. *The New Sorrows of Young W.*) who is expected to conform to the requirements established by a previous generation, the members of which had different needs. Edgar, as Plenzdorf establishes in a clever and entertaining way, can more readily identify with a character in an almost notorious eighteenth-century novel than he can with his contemporaries.

Werther is, however, not the only personage with whom Edgar has an affinity. Having been driven out of his Robinson Crusoe-like island of isolation because he is no longer able to be self-reliant and needs money, he has gone to work in the building trades, where at most times there is a place for someone who can perform menial tasks. In his ineptitude Edgar is the despair of the boss of a group of house painters who find themselves equally frustrated by the young outsider's eccentric ways. Only one of the membership of this well-disciplined clan keeps a sympathetic eye on Edgar. Zaremba is an older, but still vigorous man, a proto-Communist in that he has always championed the cause of the common people rather than a political system. Because of this kind of loyalty, which nevertheless included membership in the Communist Party, Zaremba was appointed judge by the occupying powers in East Germany in the tumultuous closing days of the second World War. Edgar proposes that he must have been a judge with the wisdom of Solomon: "Somebody or other had told me that Zaremba is supposed to have been Chief Justice or some such thing of Berlin for three weeks right after '45. He is supposed to have handed out some really stiff and mindblowing sentences" (p. 68). In this regard Zaremba becomes a duplicate of one of Brecht's best characters—Azdak in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, a village scribe who is elevated to the rank of judge during an insurrection. Azdak carries his innate honesty and kindness on to the point of a fault and is therefore considered to be a bungler: "The judge always was a shyster, so now let's have a shyster for a judge."¹⁷ Azdak's sort of justice becomes the agency through which the play's denouement is achieved; folk wisdom ("now and then Azdak believes in miracles," p. 828) proves to be more just than legalism. Like Azdak, Zaremba believes in common sense, the goodness of people, and in song as a vehicle for creating harmony. By adhering to these principles he almost achieves his purpose of curbing Edgar's radically individualistic bent, so that the young rebel may apply his creative talents to solving common problems. But in *The New Sorrows of Young W.* Zaremba's plans for Edgar are shortcircuited. Ultimately neither Zaremba nor Azdak is allowed to prevail because their unorganized way of functioning must give way to the orderliness and legalism on which a political system alone can be based.

In using literary references to attest to the accuracy of his story and the viability of his characters and to underscore his point of view, Plenzdorf has chosen mostly models which are immediately apparent. There is even a reference to the hunchback of Notre Dame, whom Zaremba imitates to amuse his coworkers. The hunchback almost blatantly symbolizes the outsider. Two allusions in *The New Sorrows of Young W.* are introduced in a more subtle fashion. Stressing the fact that with Willi, Edgar's closest friend, whose rebellion only seems to duplicate Edgar's, there is destined to be a parting of the ways, Plenzdorf has Edgar describe Willi's tendency to conform in the long run with the phrase: "He didn't understand the world any more" (p.

¹⁶ Uwe Johnson, *Berliner Sachen*, p. 54. My translation.

¹⁷ Bertold Brecht, *Die Stücke von Bertold Brecht in einem Band* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), p. 286. My translation.

48). The reference to Hebbel's inveterate bourgeois Meister Anton in the play *Maria Magdalena* and his outcry against the coming of a new age, "I don't understand the world any more," is unmistakable. Finally, the title of an Uwe Johnson short story "Jonas For Example" occurs incidentally in a conversation between Addi, the boss of the painters, and Edgar's father; in Johnson's story Jonas is the biblical Jonah and a symbol for the individual who is crushed when he becomes a tool of the powerful.

The use of literature as documentation in fiction derives in all probability from the trend in post-World-War-II literature to establish itself as a creditable source of the truth by allowing the author of a drama or work of fiction to limit his creative activity to the collection and rearrangement of documentary material. Thus the camera eye and the motion picture camera lens replaced the artist, and court records the playwright. In the field of fiction a good number of the authors associated with the literarily prominent Gruppe 47, including Heinrich Böll, who as the translator of *The Catcher in the Rye* influenced Plenzdorf particularly in the writing of *The New Sorrows of Young W.*, turned journalism into art and kept their prose accurate, terse, and free of qualifying adjectives. In the German Democratic Republic, the pronouncement that all forms of artistic activity, not excluding the production of literature, must promulgate a sociopolitical message had the result that the novel itself became a kind of document, as a rule a case study of a worker, delinquent in his appreciation of the socialist experiment in government, who finds a Zaremba-like guide to lead him down the path to his reformation. Plenzdorf has suggested that the concept of the book—the Werther metaphor—came to him as a means to provoke reaction to this official version of what fiction should purport to be: "The text was deliberately written so as to be open to interpretation . . . Otherwise I can comment on the history of my story only to the extent that . . . external pressures played the principal part, that is, there were several years in which I could never completely do exactly what I wanted . . ."¹⁸ In my estimation, it was the turning of a screenplay into a novel which produced, from a primary use of literature as documentation (*Werther*), a proliferation of the device. To heap irony upon irony, Plenzdorf's successful creation of a novel documented by literary allusions has itself been acclaimed as an impressive record of its time, a *Zeitdokument*.¹⁹ Being held in the same esteem as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) and Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (1963), is in the long run not the worst fate to befall a work of fiction.

¹⁸ Ulrich Plenzdorf, *Materialien: Ulrich Plenzdorf, Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* (Klett), p. 33. My translation.

¹⁹ See the introduction to *Materialien: Ulrich Plenzdorf, Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* by Jürgen Wolff, p. 5: "Demnach wäre dieses Werk vor allem als ein Zeitdokument zu würdigen."