

2011

Nature in a Box: Ecocriticism, Goethe's Ironic Werther, and Unbalanced Nature

Heather I. Sullivan

Trinity University, hsulliva@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/mll_faculty



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Sullivan, H.I. (2011). Nature in a Box: Ecocriticism, Goethe's Ironic Werther, and Unbalanced Nature. *Ecozon@*, 2 (2), 228-239.

This Post-Print is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

“Nature in a Box: Ecocriticism, Goethe’s Ironic *Werther*, and Unbalanced Nature”

Heather I. Sullivan, Trinity University

Ecocriticism emphasizes how our bodily and ecological boundaries are just as porous, inter-penetrable, and open as are our cultural and linguistic realms. As individual bodies and communities, we are fully immersed in our material environment and participating in constant exchanges of matter and energy. Highlighting open boundaries and the material flows in which we participate contests the subject-based assertions that we are primarily self-enclosed, self-determining individuals whose external surroundings are relatively insignificant compared to our deep, inner worlds. The notion of a closed subject assumes that bodily boundaries are only intentionally penetrable, thereby overlooking the many substances such as air, water, food, but also toxic materials that regularly, if not continuously, enter and exit our bodies. In this essay, I nevertheless advocate for a cautious approach to the ecocritical question of boundaries. This approach acknowledges the ongoing transformations and exchanges of matter and energy through all bodies, environments, and ecosystems, yet it also attests to the obvious fact that boundaries, in some form, are requisite for organic life as we know it.¹ In conjunction with Stacy Alaimo’s notion of “transcorporeality” such that bodies, matter, and cultures are all part of the material entanglements that co-emerge, and, in Karen Barad’s phrase, that “intra-act” as relations preceding *relata*, I therefore propose another approach when viewing the question of material bodies, minds, and their environments. That is, we individuals are neither fully bounded, self-determining subjects, nor are we fully open, “vibrant bodies pulsing in harmony with their environments,” as Louise Westling claims (36). Instead, bodies, like our subjectivities, are necessarily in *disharmony* with their environments, existing as complex nexuses of shifting, intra-acting membranes that

¹ Additionally, the quest for the eradicating boundaries echoes aspects of the political and economic call for “the free and open markets” associated with capitalistic globalization. Indeed, Vandana Shiva and other international scholars have made that claim regarding the “opening” of new markets worldwide as well as the genetic engineering across species. Shiva writes in *Stolen Harvest*: “Do the boundaries between species have integrity? Or are these boundaries mere constructs that should be broken for human convenience? The call to ‘transgress boundaries’ advocated by both patriarchal capitalists and postmodern feminists cannot be so simple. It needs to be based on a sophisticated and complex discrimination between different kinds of boundaries, an understanding of whom is protected by what boundaries and whose freedom is achieved by what transgressions” (Shiva, 57). See also Patrick Murphy’s discussion of international and ecological “borders” in *Ecocritical Explorations*.

maintain temperature and chemical differences as well as some kind of bodily form requisite for individual living beings. Yet, at the same time, bodies and minds exist only in relation to their species and co-species, other life forms, and their materiality. Furthermore, boundaries are not always where one expects them, and our subjective, cultural, and political assumptions regarding the limits of our physical and mental selves are highly contested. An ecologically-informed perspective for ecocriticism hence should strive to maintain simultaneously a sense of open and closed boundaries and re-conceptualize them as part of dynamic, evolving, and very “unbalanced nature.” This essay applies such a perspective to Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s “ironic Werther,” who emerges from the juxtaposition of Goethe’s boundary-busting nature novel *Werther* with his satirical comedy thereof, *The Triumph of Sentimentality*. The protagonist in *Triumph* seeks containment of nature in a box, whereas Werther longs to erase all bounds and be immersed in nature, even to “be nature” as a bug. I then relate the ironic *Werther* to Timothy Morton’s celebration of “radical openness” in *The Ecological Thought* in order to assess the advantages of maintaining some boundaries in our ecocritical wanderings.

Rethinking boundaries brings an awareness that nature’s borders are in flux, even though specific life forms do exist in specific ecological niches. A long-term and broad view of the biosphere through eons of time demonstrates that nature is not a static place in contrast to the radical changes and “progress” of human culture. Rather, balance is an issue of scale. In fact, there is an increased ecological emphasis on “unbalanced nature” that replaces outdated notions of nature’s holistic stability, as John Kricher describes in *The Balance of Nature: Ecology’s Enduring Myth*. Kricher debunks the long-held values of balanced nature, stasis, and climax states: “The balance of nature paradigm is of little value within evolution and ecology. It has never been clearly defined and is basically misleading. But the balance of nature is esthetically pleasing, a fact that is largely responsible for its continued vigor through the ages” (Kricher 23). Furthermore, Kricher notes that the balance of nature is a teleological belief system wherein all parts fit neatly together in their place as if by design. This belief system is not scientific, though it has long been included in ecological theories and its siren call still reverberates in many environmental discussions. It is a challenge not to see the tremendous beauty and seeming longevity of natural landscapes as sites of harmony and stability in contrast to radical and rapid human changes.

Yet even though the anthropogenic devastation of so many ecosystems is taking place at an unprecedented pace, that does not mean that nature has only recently, and only because of us, become unbalanced. The particular form of these changes is different, but not the imbalance.

The necessity of rejecting the reigning notion of balanced nature has been noted in ecocriticism, particularly by the ecocritics Ursula Heise in *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet*, Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism*, and Dana Phillips in *The Truth of Ecology*. All three cite the ecologist Daniel Botkin's 1990 *Discordant Harmonies*, which, like Kricher's more recent work, describes the prevalent yet fallacious belief in balanced nature as a utopian continuity. Heise quickly dispatches with the notion of "global ecology as harmonious, balanced, and self-regenerating," notes Botkin's rejection of orderly, steady-state ecological systems, and declares that this has "momentous consequences for environmental literature and ecocriticism" (Heise 64, 65). Garrard discusses the image of stable, enduring nature as a fall-back to pastoral visions that resonate in the outmoded ideas of succession and climax states. Phillips writes that:

ecology has come to be identified in the popular mind with such values as balance, harmony, unity, purity, health, and economy. It's fair to say that many people regard these values, however utopian they may be, as all but indisputable and as all but synonymous with the very word 'ecology.' Few laypersons dare to question these values publicly, and imagery expressing our collective devotion to them, and indeed to everything green, pervades our daily lives. (Phillips 42)

Yet if we reject the tidy contrast between the pastoral images of harmoniously stable nature existing in opposition to frenetically "developing/progressing" humanity, if we begin, in other words, with nature that has been unbalanced all along, then we face a considerable challenge: how do we address our radical alterations to environments without longing for a stability to which we might "return"? How do we also counter the claims that our disruptions are therefore irrelevant or merely part of larger patterns of change? Formulating ecological strategies based on unbalanced nature alters our fundamental understanding of environmental questions; it shifts the ground, and destabilizes our green agendas for balance with nature. It is nevertheless necessary to avoid erroneous solutions. Unbalanced nature means long-term fluxes, ongoing formation and destruction, and, as Kricher says, evolution and geological processes. He stresses that

nature is dynamic, not static, and boundaries are short-term: “If a habitat, any habitat, is left alone, protected, with nothing done to it, it will nonetheless eventually exhibit change. Change is inevitable because eventually some form of natural disturbance will occur, climate may alter, new species will invade, extant species will drop out” (Kricher 91). Nature’s dynamic forms still have, according to Kricher, species and habitats, hence some boundaries, however temporary.

Negotiating amongst the cultural delineations and the ecological, or biological boundaries of our material bodies as part of unbalanced nature is a tricky business, but one literary model for envisioning this process is provided by the juxtaposition of Goethe’s famously sentimental *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) with his less well-known play that satirizes Werther, *Triumph of Sentimentality* (1777). Indeed, I claim that one cannot derive an accurate sense of how Goethe views “nature” without reading both texts together. If Werther sings sentimental praises of nature much like a prototypical ecocritic desiring to see nature, be nature, and to erase all boundaries, including those between bodies, nature’s teeming life forms (especially insects), as well of as those dividing classes, lovers, and bodies, then Prince Oronaro in *Triumph* seeks quite the opposite, which is to say he hopes to keep nature under control and in a box. Oronaro loves nature, but finds it much too fluctuating, unbalanced, and bug-ridden, so he refuses to go outside and revels instead in a nature room safe within his castle. For travel, he has boxes to carry “nature” with him everywhere. He also safely concentrates his love on a puppet girl whose body is literally stuffed with sentimental literature thereby avoiding the greater bodily challenges of actual intra-actions with natural and feminine bodies. Werther, on the other hand, constantly wanders outdoors through the elements, and pines for a real girl, Lotte. Overcome with Storm and Stress sentimentality, he desires the opening of bodies and minds to each other, until he finally chooses the radical solution of a suicidal shot to the head in a gesture that unfortunately opens his mind once and for all to the world, and presumably, to nature. His quest for boundless connection leads to fatal ruptures. His fellow nature worshipper, Oronaro, chooses the opposite path and seeks instead containment strategies. Every evening when travelling, he unpacks his beloved puppet along with his “nature in a box,” creating a nature grotto in a designated room. Goethe’s *Triumph* derives its energy from this problem of containment. This scene of boxes is paralleled by another enactment of

intense containment: the stand-alone monodrama in Act IV that mournfully stages the sufferings of Prosperina trapped in the barren landscapes of hell, longing for escape and some decent greenery and gardens. This is performed by the queen who has fallen for Oronaro's effusive sentimentality, much to her husband's dismay. *Triumph's* containment of nature's landscapes also contain and imprison the figures; this is in stark contrast to the wild storms and flooding rivers that destroy landscape forms and embody openness in *Werther*. Together the two Goethean texts provide us with ironic sentimentality about our very real material entanglements in the world, and suggest that, if nothing else, there is confusion with regard to "nature" about boundaries, where they are, who or what determines them, and what happens when one believes whole-heartedly in one's own ability to create them or destroy them at whim.

It is obvious to point out that Goethe's *Werther* is about nature, but it is only part of the story. For one thing, reading *Werther's* nature revelry ironically helps expose his longing to be an insect, an overlooked yet significant issue. Additionally, the novel's effusive nature-fever is most often read alone, without reference to *The Triumph of Sentimentality*, despite the fact that it is Goethe's direct reflection on his world-famous best-seller.² For our question of boundaries, the juxtaposition of *Werther* and *Triumph* is the most productive means for gaining understanding of Goethe's views on nature, and his "ironic aesthetics," as Astrida Tantillo notes. She reads *Werther* alongside *Triumph*, and analyzes both of them as a critique of Rousseauian nature worship. Tantillo's description of the "ironic aesthetic" who "refuses to allow a simple or unified interpretation of a work of art" is paradigmatic for Goethe generally, and it is also relevant for ironic ecocritical readings of boundaries (Tantillo, 2001, 453).³ She compares the ironic aesthetic (as one must be when reading the

² Much of the scholarship on Goethe's *Werther* overlooks the lesser-known satire, and thus reads the novel alone as a monolithic assertion of modernity, sentimentality, the middle-class, or the relationship of nature to art. Most readings also neglect the other texts Goethe wrote relating to *Werther* such as the "prequel" to the novel, *Werther's Travels* (mostly known as "Letters from Switzerland"), written later. Hans Rudolf Vaget discusses the many *Werther* texts together, reading *Werther* as the "undead" that haunts Goethe throughout his life as a reflection of his own uncontained creativity

³ Tantillo's ironic approach to Goethe's texts stands in contrast to more traditional readings that tend to interpret *Werther* as an autobiographical extension of Goethe. Other authors who similarly emphasize the novel's irony include Duncan, Grathoff, Kuzniar, Lange, Leidner, Prier, and Sullivan; however these authors concentrate on the novel's internal irony rather than how it relates to Goethe's satire of his own sentimentality. Tantillo's 2001 essay stresses the insights of this cross-fertilization, and her recent *Goethe's Modernisms* demonstrates again the benefits of multiple perspectives for reading Goethe.

satire, *Triumph*) with the “sentimental aesthetic” like Werther and some ecocritics, who demand a harmonious interpretation. In this essay, I use the ironic aesthetic’s insistence on multiple views in order to uphold a perspective of open and closed boundaries in ecocriticism. This view puts the two texts on a spectrum, so that we can see on the one end the intense rhapsody and free-flowing immersion into the “all,” and on the other end, the parody as a quest for containment and control with boxes.

Similarly, neither the issue of Goethe as Germany’s “nature poet” nor the issue of our contested bodily, environmental, and subject boundaries can be limited to one end of the spectrum or to a singular, static position.⁴ Goethe specifically stresses irony as inherently necessary when seriously approaching nature. In his self-proclaimed scientific masterpiece, *Towards a Theory of Color*, he declares that some irony is imperative to avoid abstraction and uncontained theorizing that can blind us to our own assumptions.⁵ Goethe’s “irony” is hence a form of self-awareness and an attempt to see beyond our own ideological, aesthetic, and subjective frameworks; it is an openness to various viewpoints. For ecocriticism, such irony with regard to boundaries is crucial in that we must simultaneously negotiate with serious ecological limits (that are denied by current economic practices) and yet also our own porosity and transcorporeality as bodies existing in open flows with our surroundings. The challenges of calling for limits to our environmental impact while also asserting limitless connections and inter- and intra-penetration requires careful consideration. At the very least, ecocriticism would benefit from the recognition that boundaries, whether contested, constructed, or life-containing, are, indeed, a vital issue.

For Werther, boundaries are the problem. He loves nature completely and without irony; he savors it, sees it as a vast interconnected weave, and as an all-encompassing flow in which he longs to dissolve. Despite the many readings of “nature” in *Werther* as an

⁴ As Goodbody notes, Goethe’s significance with regard to nature for German culture is equivalent to Thoreau’s in American studies. Goodbody’s book on ecocriticism discusses 20th-century German literature, but includes a chapter on Goethe as “ecophilosophical inspiration.”

⁵ Goethe strongly advocates against observations of nature that begin with a theory instead of with the observed phenomenon; he suggests irony to avoid abstract theorizing. “Jedes Ansehen geht über in ein Betrachten, jedes Betrachten in ein Sinnen, jedes Sinnen in ein Verknüpfen, und so kann man sagen, daß wir schon bei jedem aufmerksamen Blick in die Welt theoretisieren. Dieses aber mit Bewußtsein, mit Selbstkenntnis, mit Freiheit, und um uns eines gewagten Wortes zu bedienen, mit Ironie zu tun und vorzunehmen” provides the best possible results. (Goethe, *Theory of Color*, 14).

internal mirroring of the sentimental self,⁶ I suggest following Goethe's lifelong scientific studies that attribute an intense "agency" and resonance to nature as something materially present beyond the self. Nature is the active world of physical materiality in which Werther exists, one in which the elements drive the flux and flow of weather and energy exchanges, and one which forms him as much as he shapes it. Early on in the novel, this means an inspired revelry: "This confirmed me in my resolution of adhering in the future entirely to Nature. Nature alone is inexhaustible and can form the great artist" (Goethe, *Werther* 11). Later, once he feels oppressed by cultural norms and Lotte's marriage to Albert, Werther again speaks of an overwhelmingly active nature, though now as a fearsome, destructive force: "My heart is wasted by the thought of that destructive power which lies latent in every part of universal Nature. Nature has formed nothing that does not destroy itself, and everything near it. And so, surrounded by earth and air and all the active forces, I stagger on in sheer anxiety" (Goethe, *Werther*, 37). Nature here is a power driving Werther onwards and "forming" him. His final turn to suicide occurs in part because he cannot close himself to outside influences, whether natural or cultural. He is wildly open to the world, with disastrous results.

Werther's openness is offset by the novel's epistolary form, which is uncharacteristically "closed": it famously presents only Werther's writings and thus stands primarily as an extended monologue with only brief comments from the editor at the beginning and a few notes and thoughts from others at the very end, after Werther has decided for death. Yet his monomaniacal writing only serves to reveal even more his absorption of energy and ideas that are all around him. The more singular his voice appears, the more open he is to external influences, both physical and cultural. Indeed, what appears to be his voice is often direct citation.⁷ His emotional connections to nature, children, and farmers are well-documented examples of how prone he is to the impulses of others; I highlight here instead his sympathy for, and desire to become, a bug. In his very first letter, for example, he describes retreating from a certain "Leonore's" affections, and proclaims a desire to become a beetle (cockchafer), and then, as a bug, to "float about in this ocean of

⁶ Readings of Werther's self tend to see nature in the novel primarily as a reflection of his internal events and feelings, such that human subjectivity overwrites the outer world. Analyses concentrating on Werther's self include Furst, Muenzer, and Swales.

⁷ See Sullivan's discussion.

fragrance, and find in it all the food one needs" (Goethe, *Werther* 6). The vision of retreat from social relationships into an insect world predates Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, but one can still see a similarity in terms of loss of personal agency and escape from social responsibility. That Werther, as the middle-class man at the entrance to modernity, rejects cultural restraints, economic divisions, and all other boundaries, yet derives his greatest satisfaction from a bug-eye's view is telling. Werther fails socially, and in his quest to find harmony with nature, precisely because he expects in both cases to discover a deep, harmonic convergence despite class differences, social conventions, or species delineations. Seeking immersion into the minutiae of the insect world, Werther assumes that balanced nature pulses in harmony with his thoughts and desires. Becoming a bug means, apparently, achieving a cosmically creative unity, "Oh Wilhelm," he cries, "how willingly would I have given up my human existence to merge with the wind, or to embrace the torrent! Won't this imprisoned soul some day be released for such bliss?" (Goethe, *Werther*, 70).

Merging with the wind and insects is indeed the prototypical Wertherian quest. He begins with the wish to immerse himself in nature as he lies next to the lovely stream, seeking the insect's view. "[W]hen I hear the humming of the little world among the stalks, and am near the countless indescribable forms of the worms and insects, then I feel the presence of the Almighty" (Goethe, *Werther* 6). His approach to nature is prescient for much of early ecocriticism, which tends to follow in the romantics' footsteps.⁸ Werther thus not surprisingly rages when trees are indiscriminately chopped down, and he spends a great deal of time hiking through the hills and dales thinking poetically. But it is not just nature that moves him, it is also Love. Indeed, the novel follows a tragic love tale that unfolds within various discussions of nature: Werther meets Lotte and loves her, and she loves him; they share a love for sentimental nature poetry as well ("Klopstock!"), yet she is engaged to the hard-working and thoroughly bourgeois Albert. She marries Albert whereas Werther seeks solace in work and the aristocracy. In dismay at the restrictive class prejudices, he quickly turns back to his imagined harmony with nature. At this point, though, nature becomes a horror of regurgitating self-destruction, since insect-nature has a dark side: "The universe to me is an all-consuming, devouring monster" (Goethe, *Werther*

⁸ *Werther's* participation in Germany's Storm and Stress era is more broadly considered to be part of European Romanticism.

37). Even here, Werther maintains his preference for the insect-perspective by worrying about how every step of a stroll through the woods kills hundreds of tiny bugs. “The most innocent walk costs thousands of poor insects their lives; one step destroys the delicate structures of the ant and turns a little world into chaos” (Goethe, *Werther* 37). Overcome by the rather incompatible mix of the insect’s perspective, Messianic delusions, and a burning passion for Lotte, Werther finally kills himself with a pistol shot to the head, thereby attaining real openness to “nature.” He quite literally opens his mind and body to the world. “When the surgeon arrived, Werther was lying on the floor; his pulse beat, but his limbs were paralyzed. The bullet had entered the forehead over the right eye; his brains were protruding. He was bled in the arm; the blood came, he was still breathing” (Goethe, *Werther* 87). His death lasts twelve hours as he bleeds out, open to the world. This final scene suggests that some boundaries can, in fact, be beneficial in the short term.

Much like Werther, Morton’s *The Ecological Thought* rejects all boundaries. Both Werther and Morton celebrate openness, exploded bounds, and, finally, Love. Although Morton’s book successfully shakes up many core ideas in environmental thinking by questioning, for example, how “nature” is in many ways a capitalistic concept derived from exploitation of resources and then imagining an idyllic realm of the past, he still sounds much like Werther with his revolutionary cry to transgress all boundaries, calling for and locating us in “radical openness.” Morton asks:

Is there such a thing as *the environment*? Is it everything ‘around’ us? At what point do we stop, if at all, drawing the line between *environment* and *non-environment*: The atmosphere? Earth’s gravitational field? Earth’s magnetic field, without which everything would be scorched by solar winds? The sun, without which we wouldn’t be alive at all? The Galaxy? Does the environment include or exclude us? Is it natural or artificial, or both? (Morton 10)

His point is well taken, in the sense that he clearly reveals the complexity of environmental delineations. We are open systems, interacting with environments, all of which flow into each other on a microscopic and cosmic scale. Furthermore, Morton shifts from the so-called “web” of ecology to the “mesh” of the universe, which “consists of infinite connections and infinitesimal differences” (Morton, 30), and thereby brings ecology into postmodernism. In enmeshing us, Morton demonstrates the significance of the question of boundaries: “Although there is not absolute, definite ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of beings, we

cannot get along without these concepts either. The mesh is highly paradoxical. Endosymbiosis abolishes inside-outside distinctions. A life form must have a boundary for filtering nutrients and poisons. Yet these boundaries are not perfectly defined” (Morton 39). He thus mentions that we need bodily bounds, at least to “filter nutrients and poisons,” unlike Werther who finally attempts full immersion. But are bodies merely a filter? They are also themselves ecosystems. After all, the E. coli in our intestines require the solidity of the intestinal lining to maintain their preferred environment even as intestines must be porous in order to allow nutrient absorption. Intestinal openings to the world for input and output are quite specific, and all complex life depends on intestines remaining otherwise resiliently resistant to too much openness. Morton notes the issue of filtering, but seems to overlook the profound significance of the actual boundary. Ripping open intestines, for example, opening them to the rest of the body, and especially the world, would have disastrous effects on a body, and, at the very least, disconcerting effects on the E. coli. While Morton thinks concretely about what we do with “shit” culturally, he rather unfortunately neglects the advantages of relatively stable intestinal walls, thanks to which, in fact, we are able to produce the shit that he so adamantly explores.⁹ Intestines are a fine example of specific porosity, by which I mean a partial and temporary yet distinct boundary whose openness and steadfast integrity together maintain our existence—however briefly.

Morton indicates his general rejection of boundaries with his derogatory use of the term “boxes,” a fact with particular relevance for this discussion of “nature in a box.” Achieving “the ecological thought” requires, he claims, that we think openness and thus cease to put things in boxes such as the “anything but human” box or the “Gaia box,” the “web of life” box, or the “more than human” box (Morton 76). While throwing out all the boxes and boundaries, even for bodies, he nevertheless maintains the apparently singular “mind” that can be “closed.” Our bodies are “radically open,” but apparently we can still have closed minds. Ecological thinking, he writes, “serves as an operating system for politics: it doesn’t tell you what to do, exactly, but it *opens your mind* so that you can think clearly about what to do” (Morton 125, emphasis mine). Human beings have *closed* minds

⁹ Morton repeatedly addresses the need to know where our shit goes, in response to Lacan. He makes a good point, but the thing about excrement is that it is just part of a larger system of food (agriculture, transportation, markets, cooking) and our bodies that consume, digest, and slowly move it through the intestine. See 32.

that can be *opened* with or to “the ecological thought.” Morton’s ecological thought, in fact, explodes bodily, environmental bounds and yet “reserves a special place for the ‘subject’—the mind, the person, even the soul” (Morton 113). I note here in contrast the well-known fact that our minds are already radically open to other minds and cultural practices via language and ideas, whether we like it or not, as postmodernism has so definitely indicated and recent studies in brain science demonstrate.¹⁰ Alaimo also documents in *Bodily Natures* how our minds are materially open in their physical and cognitive responses to caffeine, drugs, medicines, and various chemicals, or pollutants, as well. Minds are not so much open in the seemingly rational manner that Morton implies as something that we can intentionally direct; they are instead emergences from open processes of exchange with linguistic, cultural, *and*, equally significant, physical environments. While our bodies and intestines are, in some ways, more closed than Morton asserts with his call for “radical openness,” our minds might well be even more open as fluid subjectivities.

Goethe certainly outdoes Morton in regard to exploded subjectivities. Whereas Morton just speaks of “opening one’s mind,” Goethe takes that notion all the way to its endpoint. Not only does Werther shoot open his skull so that his brain emerges, freely, into the world, but his Werther’s subjectivity is precariously open to influences from others, nature, and texts. Additionally, his manner of thinking in turn, also flows into those around him. He enacts, I would say, Morton’s “radical openness.” Yet that is not all—his subjectivity flows even “beyond the text” in that large numbers of young men and some women copied Werther around Europe, adopting his clothing style, his manner of speaking and thinking, and some even his choice of suicide, so much so that Goethe spent the rest of his life trying to say, as he does in the preface to the second edition of *Werther* to “be a man and do not follow me.” Werther lives an activist’s dangerous dream: subjectivities are contagious and can unexpectedly cross texts and bodies, but often not as one hopes.

Morton claims that the ecological thought “forces us to invent ways of being together that don’t depend on self-interest” (Morton 135). This inspiring assertion deserves additional thought. Self-interest can also simultaneously be interest-for-others and environments at the same time, since one really cannot think one human being without

¹⁰ See especially Damasio regarding the brain.

a physical connections and entanglements with others, the environments, and the cultural frameworks in which the “self” is enmeshed. In this way, we might rethink not “self-interest,” but rather what exactly we mean by “self.” Perhaps “self-interest,” as it might be ecologically defined, is a good thing, at least if we understand the self as a nexus of mesh. Morton concludes the book with the statement that “In the future, we will all be thinking the ecological thought. It’s irresistible, like true love” (Morton 135). Perhaps the fact that this sounds more like boundless enthusiasm for a Borg-like unity of all thinking one thought—resistance is futile—did not occur to Morton. Ecologically speaking, diversity has advantages, and one might also advocate for diverse “thought.” Also, while ideas are definitely contagious, we cannot easily predict what “all” will be thinking, nor if it will be particularly ecological. It may not be, since ecological thinking requires a multi-pronged perspective, one able, for example, to think open and closed boundaries together, able to think the large and small scales of global and local together, and to think about today as part of much longer spans of time as well.

Grappling with the issue of the boundaries and boxes which Morton and Werther reject with such animosity may be better formulated in terms of varying scales of time and space, and the general concept of unbalanced nature. In the long-term, geological timescale, all boundaries are, indeed, erased. Life forms and species exist as bounded, short-term delineations perpetuating themselves. For human communities, the local is no longer so local, as Heise demonstrates, rather it, too, is imbricated in much larger international weather, economic, and agricultural systems so that ecological thinking must also be a global view today. However, our environmental foundation also needs to relate to the smaller, humanly-conceivable scope of regional ecosystems in order to inspire action and to avoid being overwhelmed by the vast interconnectivity of everything, as Patrick Murphy contends. Kate Rigby’s discussions of boundaries in terms of regional and national addresses such a spatial issue. She describes the changing boundaries in England and other areas in Europe in the 19th century when countryside commons and meandering paths were eradicated and replaced by larger, modern agricultural divisions and road. This both closed the local walkways between villages, isolating them from each other, and yet opened

the small villages to the national capital at the same time.¹¹ Rigby thus highlights the complexity of boundaries, opening and closing them both. Morton, in contrast, takes a more unitary approach, stressing the benefits of erasing all boundaries, like a good postmodernist (and, like a good capitalist seeking the “open markets” of globalization, though he strongly advocates against many other aspects of capitalism), but he neglects the possibility that one might need some bounds on occasion. Morton and Werther provide the first step into an appreciation of nature, a savoring of the radical idea of our immersion in the endless flows and exchanges; but Goethe also takes the next step by providing his readers with Oronaro who enacts this dream even as his actions clearly reveal the problematic one-sidedness of a vision dominated either by boxes or intensified ruptures. Reading *Werther* and *Triumph* together keeps us appropriately off-balance and aware of our boundaries. Indeed, this is just what we need in ecocritical discussions of boundaries: the tension merging from the juxtaposition of radical openness, boxes, and unbalanced nature.

Juxtaposing Goethe’s seriously sentimental *Werther* with his satirical *Triumph of Sentimentality* maintains both a requisite lack of balance and the ironic aesthetics’ multi-pronged perspective. It also offers insights into the messiness of subjectivities that are less directional than Morton’s *The Ecological Thought*. In 1777, just three years after the first publication of *Werther*, Goethe satirized his own international best-seller. *Triumph* is known as a play delineating art and artifice from nature,¹² but like *Werther* it is also about the individual’s fate and possibility of self-determination in the face of restrictive cultural and natural forces. Both texts also present an unstable character dealing with unbalanced nature and the terrible unbalancing of love. In this case, it is a marital crisis. King Andrason is displeased that his wife is smitten with Prince Oronaro whose sentimental revelry and melodramas are infectious. The king asks his sister’s maids to seduce Oronaro so that he can have his wife back. This effort fails since the Prince actually loves not the queen but rather a life-size doll resembling her, a doll stuffed full of sentimental literature, including *Werther* and some Rousseau. Additionally, Oronaro loves nature, like Werther, but finds it too hot or cold, too damp or too dry, filled with bugs and rain and dirt, and even air, and so

¹¹ See Rigby, especially 66-70.

¹² See especially John P. Heins for a discussion of the aesthetic delineations.

he has nature constructed in his castle where he can revel in its aesthetic beauties without placing himself at risk. As his servant, Merkulo, describes it, Oronaro loves nothing more than nature, yet his very sensitivity makes him too sensitive:

My prince has such delicate, extremely sensitive nerves, that he must really protect himself from the air and the rapid changes during the day. Clearly, one cannot always have things under the open sky quite so temperate as one wishes. The dampness of the morning and evening dew is considered to be extremely damaging by the doctors, and the scent of moss underneath springs on warm summer days is thought to be no less dangerous!¹³

Of course, unlike Werther, Oronaro loathes the insects, ants, and spiders. Furthermore, not to be without his “nature” when travelling, the prince has had the greatest masters build boxes to contain bubbling springs, bird song, and moonlight that can be assembled on site. These are unpacked to create an indoor grotto with all the amenities of nature, except for the cool breezes which they have not yet been boxed, though the French scientists are working on it.¹⁴ Goethe thus unbalances our expectations: “nature” becomes interior decoration, and the cultural artifice of sentimentality becomes a “force of nature.” Furthermore, the crux of the play relates to the efforts to decipher the two oracular messages, the one to the King and the other to the prince regarding their loves; both messages are oddly precise and concrete even though they seem utterly mysterious at first. In other words, the “spiritual” wisdom becomes mundane and material, and the mundane material, or even mechanical, becomes aesthetically spiritual.

All seems well in the sixth and final act of Goethe’s play, (five acts were not enough for resolution): the king and queen are reunited, as is the prince with his doll. Oronaro maintains his love for artificial, interior nature and the artificial girl; the queen sees the folly of sentimentality; and nature remains safely boxable. This suggests a reversal of Werther’s reality; for Werther, nature explodes all bounds and he seeks to join it. Yet even as both texts play with our misconceptions of nature, they share one view on the problem

¹³ “Mein Prinz ist von so zärtlichen, äußerst empfindsamen Nerven, daß er sich gar sehr vor der Luft, und vor schnellen Abwechslungen der Tagezeiten hüten muß. Freilich unter freiem Himmel kann man’s nicht immer so temperiert haben, wie man wünscht. Die Feuchtigkeit des Morgen- und Abendtaues halten die Leibärzte für höchst schädlich, den Duft des Moores unter den Quellen bei heißen Sommertagen für nicht minder gefährlich!” (82, translation mine).

¹⁴ The Prince travels with many “Kasten,” containing “nature.” “Merkulo: ‘Hier führen wir die vorzüglichsten Glückseligkeiten empfindsamer Seelen bei uns. In diesem Kasten sind sprudelnde Quellen.’ Mana: ‘Oh!’ Merkulo: ‘Hier in diesem ist der Gesang, der lieblichste Gesang der Vögel verborgen.’ Mana: ‘Warum nicht gar?’ Merkulo: ‘Und hier in diesem größern ist Mondschein eingepackt’” (Goethe, *Triumph* 84).

of agency and contagious subjectivities. In the *Triumph*, the king warns the girls who pull the sentimental books out of the doll not to take even a single glance lest their allure overcome them. Indeed, the danger of sentimentality still lurks even at the seemingly happy end: both the queen and Oronaro repeat their final lines twice, as if they had not recovered from sentimentality but rather have themselves become puppets of love. The danger in Goethe's *Triumph of Sentimentality*, in other words, is that sentimentality will indeed triumph, particularly when we think we have overcome it. Putting nature in a box, as the prince does, fails since nature tends to escape containment eventually. Yet the metaphor of boxes is quite relevant. While Morton sees us successfully opening our minds and thinking our way out of these messes by eliminating boxes, Goethe sees subjectivity and nature's flows as being directed by many forces including gravity and currents, but also cultural trends and fashions utterly out of the control of even their authors. That is, readers and interpretations of *Werther* became a force that Goethe could not deter for the rest of his life despite all of his best efforts. Subjectivity's contagion can blaze unexpected and uncontrollable paths. Efforts to resist it or direct its course, are often, to cite the Borg yet again, futile. Both *Werther* and *Triumph* deploy human agency and natural flux as related, unruly flows. We human beings have enormous influence on these flows, but rarely with the outcomes we intend and imagine. By juxtaposing the exploding boundaries of *Werther* with the closed boxes of *Triumph*, Goethe shifts the flows of agency. The traditionally assumed course moving from human subject to the world becomes instead multi-directional flows amongst nature, culture, individuals. Goethe describes an entanglement of minds, bodies, texts, and world not so unlike Barad's entanglement of "matter and meaning."

I conclude with three core ideas for ecocriticism in terms of boundaries and boxes. First, by juxtaposing Goethe's *Werther* with his *Triumph of Sentimentality*, we better understand Goethe as being more than a sentimental nature poet. He was the author of complex polarities such as both the sentimental and the "ironic Werther." When armed with this irony, one can see Werther's inclination to become an insect and have a bug-eye's view as emblematic for modern entanglements with nature that cannot be expressed as a singular perspective. Goethe's two texts contest in differing ways our boundaries, so that an active polarity emerges which we most productively read with the multi-pronged perspective of ironic aesthetics. Second, it is highly relevant for ecocriticism to assess the

material boundaries of bodies in terms of local and global ecosystems, the political and ideological contestation of all such borders, and also their contagious subjectivities. We follow Morton's plea to acknowledge how bodies, ecologies, and subjects are radically open, but we should also embrace and maintain the health and stability of our porous yet enclosed intestines, upon which we depend during our lifetime. Third, understanding unbalanced nature means seeing how all boundaries fade in the long-term, cosmic view; yet short-term boundaries allow a steady-state existence far from equilibrium, in other words, they allow, with some significance, biological life to exist. Straddling these two sides of porous boundaries and stable boundaries allows another polarity to emerge, this one also embracing the human body as part of unbalanced nature broadly (rather than in opposition to it). To think the juxtaposition is to contend meaningfully with the manifold arguments regarding our bodily, environmental, and subjective bounds.

While Goethe doesn't provide us with simple solutions to our current ecological crises, he at least saw clearly the challenges of delineating and re-thinking boundaries. And he was not so hasty to throw away the boxes. The ironic image of boxes reminds us of the impermanence of our precariously flimsy and yet necessary boundaries that contain our internal organs and allow stable maintenance of temperature, pH, etc. Erasing these limits can be dangerous, as Werther reveals, but believing in them whole-heartedly as fully enclosed boxes is also limiting, if not ludicrous, as Oronaro demonstrates. On a broader international scope, the elimination of boundaries overlooks the obligation to maintain some cultural, physical, and economic limits in the face of "opening" global markets as if that were entirely about freedom instead of imposing specific cultural paradigms. I thus propose boxes as a metaphor for the maintenance of material bodies and their habitats, or "nature": porous boxes, open boxes, but boxes nevertheless, boxes that suggest the necessity of bounds to humanity's hubris of believing that we construct at whim the very material and cultural bodies, subjectivities, and spaces we inhabit.

WORKS CITED:

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. Print.

- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. Print.
- Blackall, Eric A. "Goethe's *Proserpina* in Context: The Two Faces of *Empfindsamkeit*." *Patterns of Change: German Drama and the European Tradition*. Eds. Dorothy James and Silvia Ranawake. New York: Lang, 1990. 45-58. Print.
- Botkin, Daniel. *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. Print.
- Damasio, Antonio. *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2003. Print.
- Duncan, Bruce. "Werther's Reflections on the Tenth of May." *Exile and Enlightenment: Studies in German and Comparative Literature*. Eds. Uwe Faulhaber, Jerry Glenn, Edward P. Harris, and Hans-Georg Richert. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987. 1-9. Print.
- Furst, Lilian R. "The 'Imprisoning Self': Goethe's Werther and Rousseau's Solitary Walker." *European Romanticism: Literary Cross-Currents, Modes, and Models*. Ed. Gerhart Hoffmeister. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990. 145-161. Print.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. "Der Triumph der Empfindsamkeit." *Dramen 1776-1790*. Vol. 5. Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker Verlag, 1988. Print.
- . *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Trans. Victor Lange and Judith Ryan. New York: Suhrkamp, 1988. Print.
- . *Zur Farbenlehre (Theory of Color)*. Vol. 23.1. Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker Verlag, 1991. Print.
- Goodbody, Axel. *Nature, Technology and Cultural Change in Twentieth-Century German Literature: The Challenge of Ecocriticism*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.
- Grathoff, Dirk. "Der Pflug, die Nußbäume und der Bauernbursche: Natur im thematische Gefüge des *Werther*-Romans." *Goethes Werther: Kritik und Forschung*. Ed. Hans Peter Herrmann. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994. 382-402. Print.
- Heins, John P. "Sentimental Confusion: Art, Nature, and Aesthetic Autonomy in Goethe's *Der Triumph der Empfindsamkeit*." *Goethe Yearbook XIV*. (2007): 83-101. Print.
- Heise, Ursula. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.
- Hinchliffe, Steve. *Geographies of Nature: societies, environments, ecologies*. Los Angeles, Sage, 2007. Print.
- Kricher, John. *The Balance of Nature: Ecology's Enduring Myth*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009. Print.
- Kuzniar, Alice. "The Misrepresentation of Self: Werther versus Goethe." *Mosaic* 22: 2. (1989): 15-28. Print.

- Lange, Victor. "Die Sprache als Erzählform in Goethes Werther." *Formenwandel: Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Paul Böckmann*. Hamburg: Hoffmann and Campe Verlag, 1964. Eds. Walter Müller-Seidel and Wolfgang Preisedanz. 261-272. Print.
- Leidner, Alan C. *The Impatient Muse: Germany and the Sturm und Drang*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994. Print.
- Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Print.
- Muenzer, Clark. *Figures of Identity: Goethe's Novels and the Enigmatic Self*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984. Print.
- Murphy, Patrick. *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000. Print.
- Phillips, Dana. *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Print.
- Plumpe, Gerhard. "Kein Mitleid mit Werther." *Systemtheorie und Hermeneutik*. Eds. Henk de Berg and Matthias Prangel. Tübingen and Basel: Francke Verlag, 1997. 215-231. Print.
- Prier, Raymond A. "Charlotte's Vicar and Goethe's Eighteenth-Century Tale about Werther." *Narrative Ironies*. Eds. Raymond A. Prier and Gerald Gillespie. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997. 283-297. Print.
- Rigby, Kate. *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004. Print.
- Schneider, Eric and Dorion Sagan. *Into the Cool: Energy Flow, Thermodynamics, and Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Print.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000. Print.
- Sullivan, Heather I. "The Dangerous Quest for Nature Narratives in Goethe's *Werther*: A Reading of the Ruptured Monologue and the Ruptured Body." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 14:2 (2007): 1-23. Print.
- Swales, Martin. *Goethe: The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Print.
- Tantillo, Astrida. "A New Reading of *Werther* as Goethe's Critique of Rousseau." *Orbis Litterarum* 56 (2001): 443-456. Print.
- . *Goethe's Modernisms*. New York: Continuum, 2010. Print.
- Vaget, Hans Rudolf. "Werther, the Undead." *Goethe Yearbook* XII (2004): 17-29. Print.
- Westling, Louise. "Literature, the environment, and the question of the posthuman." *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*. Eds. Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006: 25-47. Print.