



THE MIRROR OF NARRATIVE:
ON THE TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION OF
GOETHE'S *DIE WAHLVERWANDTSCHAFTEN*

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*Alles gaben Götter, die unendlichen,
Ihren Lieblingen ganz,
Alle Freuden, die unendlichen,
Alle Schmerzen, die unendlichen, ganz.*

(Aus einem Brief an Gräfin Auguste zu Stolberg)

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ABSTRACT

This analysis of Goethe's novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809) examines the way in which the construction of order in the text may be read as a critique of certain aspects of Enlightenment thought. A major section of this study focuses on a discussion of the nature of >real< and >fictional< order and the way in which these forms of order interact both on a thematic level within the text and in the implicit dialogue of the narrator with the reader. Central to this analysis is a detailed discussion of the myth of Narcissus. The variations on this myth, which are apparent not only in this novel, but also in many of Goethe's other works, provide the reader with an insight into the way in which individuals devise a means by which to impose order on their experience. A consideration of the permutations of this myth and their rôle in the characters' construction of order highlights a major schism in world-models prevalent at the end of the 18th century, namely the conflict between consensual and individual visions of utopia.

I have illustrated the method used by the characters to construct an image of >reality< by examining the theme of time in the novel. This indicates the way in which the characters attempt to construct and manipulate a particular form of order according to their own desires. In accordance with the Narcissus-myth, the characters mirror their own images in preferred models of the Real. Central to this process is the attempt of certain characters to manipulate language and the unwillingness of others to transform emotions into a linguistic object.

From this it becomes clear that the novel reflects the basic disillusionment with the potential of language to communicate complete and unambiguous meaning that was prevalent in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Goethe's novel indicates a loss of faith in the rhetorical tradition and represents language as being in a transitional phase. I have related this idea to the writings of other major thinkers of the Enlightenment.

The final two sections of this study focus on the effects that these various thematic developments have on the narrative structure itself. The contrasting rôles of the narrator and author have been closely examined, so as to analyse the principles underlying the act of reading a fictional text. An analysis of the complex structure of the work also reveals the impossibility of classifying it according to any single literary form. In order to illustrate this, various other approaches to the novel have been considered in the course of this study. It becomes evident that the attempt to impose a single structural model on the narrative from outside the text itself results in a fundamental distortion of various thematic complexes. In a similar sense, models created within the narrative display certain limitations when used as the basis for a single interpretation. Emphasis is placed on the various conflicting narrative techniques in the work, including elements of the >realist< tradition in fiction and an important consideration of the >self-reflective< aspects of the novel. It becomes evident that much of the novel's greatness lies in its resistance to classification according to any single category within European literary history.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University. To the best of my knowledge and belief this study contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text. I consent to the thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if accepted for the award of the degree.

Kathryn Brown

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