

Metonymy

The Tatjana Gürbaca production of *Werther*
Zürich, 2017

Massenet's *Werther* and Gounod's *Faust* both derive from Goethe originals. Can it be a coincidence that, when the title character arrives at the heroine's house in the country, he sings a paean to Nature for having created anything so lovely, treating the house and setting as the poetic equivalent to the young woman within it? Metonymy, to give it its literary term, and *Werther* at least is a poet. But the house designed by Klaus Grünberg for Tatjana Gürbaca's production in Zürich is not any rustic cottage, but an intricate construction in pale wood (marvelous acoustically) that might have come from IKEA, so intricately do the doors, closets, and drawers open and close, with one thing—an ironing board, for instance—sliding out of another. The inhabitants of the house, the widowed Bailli and his eight children, also emerge from the woodwork, from cupboards and trap-doors. This too is metonymy, but with a completely different meaning: no work of nature, but a well-ordered household running like an oiled machine.



There is a case to be made here. The life that Charlotte chooses instead of the poetic disorder offered by *Werther* is indeed a domestic one of duty and routine, and it is this aspect of life in conservative Wetzlar that Goethe emphasizes in his novel. It is also understandable that *Werther* should envy such built-in social comfort, as a stranger from another region and a spiritual outsider, without friends or family. It even fits some of his lyrics—those imagining Charlotte as life-partner rather than muse—but not all of them. And the metonymy of the set becomes less functional as the opera proceeds, adding little to the second act, and nothing to the third. Only towards the end of the fourth does the set do something symbolically different, when the walls open up to reveal a starry sky and immense planet Earth. In the long interlude between Acts III and IV, Charlotte steps outside the house for the first time, putting on a pair of boots and walking (not running) in place in front of a closed curtain. She goes into the limbo from which *Werther* first appeared, which may have some significance, but the action is too little and the interlude too long.

In reviewing Christof Loy's somewhat later production of the opera, I mentioned that I did not understand the character arc of the two main characters, but at least they had one. I have to say that I had very little

sense of either growth or decline from either the Charlotte or the Werther here; in fact, I found myself losing interest in them. Anna Stéphanie as Charlotte was suitably situated between youth and middle age, but she lacked physical or vocal charisma. Perhaps I am too used to Juan Diego Flórez in lighter roles, but he just seemed to be working too hard here, although his soft singing was exquisite. The other characters were fine, but not special.

The DVD is well made, though, and the production runs like clockwork. I enjoyed many of Gürbaca's ideas, too, such as her use of freezes, her evocation of the Act I ball by figures that suggested a modern version of a Venetian Carnival, or the fact that, at the climax of his Act III aria "Pourquoi me réveiller," Werther sets fire to his manuscript and apparently many of his letters too.



But the director teetered uneasily between the symbolic and the real. The DVD booklet has two illustrations. On the cover, the end of Act II, when Werther pulls up the floorboards to symbolize the grave that soon must claim him. And on the inside, the climax of the Act III duet, with Charlotte in her underwear, trying to get away from Werther, who is kneeling before her trying to lift the hem of her slip. Both are striking theatrical images, but do they belong in the same production? Do they belong, period? The first is too heavy-handed in its symbolism; the second is too physical, turning a spiritual assault into a sexual one.

Yet Tatjana Gürbaca could occasionally go for stimulating enigma. It was wonderful how she opened the 50th anniversary celebration that is the occasion for Act Two with five eighty-something old women sitting in chairs placed across the middle of the stage. And at the climax of Act IV, another very old couple tottered on, in pajamas, but with the same props (a tinsel crown and Red Indian headdress) as Charlotte and Werther had at the start of their Act I duet, and dancing a slow-motion version of the same waltz. I cannot explain either of these touches logically, but they did work.