

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Odyssey of Reading Novels

She speaks of complexities of translation,
its postcolonial and diasporic nature,
how translated text
is torn from original
as if it were unwillingly
sundered from its parent.

As she triumphantly
concludes her perfectly
paced performance,
she crosses her arms,
returning to herself
as if to say
her ideas have been
translated into words
as best she could.

("Brett de Bary," Daniel R. Schwarz)

Beginnings

This book, the first of a two-volume study, includes major novels published before 1900 that are frequently taught in European novel courses. The high tide of the European novel was the nineteenth century but no discussion of the European novel can ignore *Don Quixote*. Thus there is well over a two hundred-year

Reading the European Novel to 1900: A Critical Study of Major Fiction from Cervantes' Don Quixote to Zola's Germinal, First Edition. Daniel R. Schwarz.

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jump from Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1615) to Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830) and *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839) and Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot* (1835). Much of this study deals with works by the great Russians: Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877).¹ Among the French nineteenth-century novelists, in addition to the aforementioned, I include Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) and *Sentimental Education* (1869) and Emile Zola's *Germinal* (1885).

I have been rereading most of these books for a lifetime, although important new translations of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Cervantes have been published in recent decades. But do we really reread or is every reading a fresh reading? As Verlyn Klinkenborg rightly observes, "The real secret of re-reading is simply this: It is impossible. The characters remain the same, and the words never change, but the reader always does."² We are different readers each time we pick up a text, maybe a different reader each day, changed ever so slightly depending on our life experience, our psyche that day, and the texts we are reading. For reading is a transaction in which the text changes us even as we change the text. While Klinkenborg has written that, "Part of the fun of re-reading is that you are no longer bothered by the business of finding out what happens" (*ibid.*), I find that rereading makes me aware of nuances I missed, even while making me aware that my memory of what happens is not accurate. What we recall is not a novel but a selection and arrangement of the novel, and as time passes what we retain is a memory of a memory rather than the full text in all its plenitude.

I am addressing the novels under discussion not only diachronically but also synchronically. That is, I am aware of the evolution of the novel and how major novels strongly influence their successors. For example, we will see in *Don Quixote* how the first person narrator's familiarity with his readers, his combining realism with fantasy and tall tale, his efforts to distinguish story from history, provide a model for subsequent novels, including *The Brothers Karamazov*. As Harold Bloom would argue, each major novelist is a strong misreader of his predecessors and thus each is also an original. We read major texts, as T. S. Eliot rightly contended in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," not only in the context of their predecessors and the possible influence of those predecessors, but also in the context of their successors. Thus each major work changes our view of its predecessors.

I also want to think of the novels on which I focus as being in conversation with one another, as if they were all present simultaneously at the same discussion or colloquium and were making claims for how and why they exist. Put another way, if we substitute "words" for "object," our novelists are all following Jasper Johns's oft-repeated axiom for art: "Take an object. Do something

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to it. Do something else to it.”³ I want to think about what is unique to what the novelist in each *doing* has created, and how these *doings* are similar and different.

I have not written completely symmetrical chapters. But each of my chapters will: (1) first and foremost provide a close reading of the novel or novels under discussion; (2) speak to what defines the essence of the author’s oeuvre; (3) place the focal novel or novels within the context of the author’s canon and culture; and (4) define the author’s aesthetic, cultural, political, and historical significance. On occasion, I may focus on two works within a chapter when one adumbrates or complements the other.

We read in part to learn the wisdom of experience that the novelist fused in his vision of life and his historical scope. Those who provide notable wisdom include Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Stendhal, and Balzac. These writers at times show what Thomas Mann – who might have been writing about himself – called in an essay on Theodor Fontaine, “classic old men, ordained to show humanity the ideal qualities of that last stage of life: benignity, kindness, justice, humor, and shrewd wisdom – in short a recrudescence on a higher plane of childhood’s ancient unrestraint.”⁴ Of course there is no particular age when one achieves such a temperament. As we shall see in my Volume 2, Mann, writing *Death in Venice* in his thirties, as well as Albert Camus, had this temperament at quite an early age, and it pervades every page of Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*.

Why are there no women novelists in my study of the European novel to 1900? While Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot played a pivotal role in defining the nineteenth-century English novel, women played a much less important role in the European novel. Few would argue that George Sand (the pseudonym of Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, 1804–1876) was the equal of the aforementioned French novelists.

We do have fully realized and psychologically complex women characters in the person of the title characters of *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* as well as the Marchesa in *The Charterhouse of Parma* and Natasha in *War and Peace*. But in too many of the included novels, the women are depicted as objects of desire and relatively passive figures, as Madonnas or Mary Magdalenes, innocents or whores. Some of the more passive figures, like Grushenka in *The Brothers Karamazov*, do have some aspects of complexity.

Usually in the European novel before 1900, women – even fully realized ones – are not as intellectually gifted or ambitious in terms of achievement as men, and seem to be the creations of men who do not think of women as equals. How these male writers think of women is culturally determined, but it is hard not to wish for something more. It is the English novel where female writers – Austen, Brontës, Woolf – and their characters make their mark.

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Indeed, even the male writers such as Dickens and Thackeray create more vibrant, rounded women characters than we usually find in the European novel.

Since I am writing in English, I occasionally make comparisons to the English and American literary traditions. It is by similarities and differences – the entire context of major novel texts – that we best understand how novels work formally and thematically.

The Function of Literature: What Literature Is and Does

According to Lionel Trilling, “[L]iterature has a unique relevance ... because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.”⁵

Literature is a report on human experience, but, we need to ask, does its aesthetic form make it a privileged report and, if so, privileged in what way? Is literature part of the history of ideas, or only in a special sense where the aesthetic inflects the ideas? As a cause, literature, I argue, affects its historical context – its *Zeitgeist* – but literature is also a result of its historical context. Imaginative literature and, in particular, novels are indexes of a culture as well as critiques, but they do not – nor do other arts – exist in some separate higher universe. As Michael Chabon asserts, “[T]he idea for a book, the beckoning fair prospect of it, is the dream; the writing of it is breakfast-table recitation, groping, approximation, and ultimately, always, a failure. *It was not like that at all.* ... The limits of language are not the stopping points, says [James Joyce’s] the *Wake*; they are the point at which we must begin to tell the tale.”⁶

In this study, I try to balance the *how* with the *what*, and to balance the way that novels give us insight into human experience at a particular time and place and have significance for contemporary readers with how that is accomplished in terms of aesthetic choices and strategies. What a story means is why most readers read, and it is naïve and iconoclastic to think otherwise. How and what – form and content – are inextricably related.

What we read becomes part of our lives and how we experience both our culture and prior cultures. As David Foster Wallace observed, “Human beings are narrative animals: every culture countenances itself as culture via story, whether mythopoeic or politico-economic; every whole person understands his lifetime as an organized, recountable series of events and changes with at least a beginning and a middle. We need narrative like we need space-time.”⁷

Traditional novels present the illusion of a comprehensible and at least partially rational world, with recognizable cause and effect shaping character and – beginning with the High Modern period (1890–1950) – the psyche. But we need

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to remind ourselves that there are other strands of novel history that eschew realism and rely more on romance, folklore, fantasy, myth, play, magic – including linguistic pyrotechnics – and deliberate send-ups of realism. In this study, *Don Quixote* may be the purest example, but Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* and especially *The Charterhouse of Parma* partake of this alternate tradition, one in which the very idea that books represent life is called into question. In English we think of Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, *Gentleman* and Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, as well as, more recently, the work of Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie; in Spanish, we have the magic realism tradition of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez, among many others. As we shall see in my second volume, such Kafka texts as *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* take the reader into a surrealist world where normative cause and effect are suspended.

In general, especially in longer novels in the realistic tradition, characters need to typify a way of living a particular time and place and be shown to respond to social issues and political questions. Are the constructed imagined worlds of longer novels in which we live as readers for days, perhaps even weeks, different from the imagined worlds of short novels? What does it mean to say a novel has amplitude? For longer novels to qualify as masterworks, usually they need to raise major philosophical questions about what gives human life meaning and purpose and/or major political questions about how a country should be organized legally and morally.

By contrast, the very pace of shorter novels can be an asset. Their focus is usually on the dilemmas facing one man or woman, as in such short novels as *Heart of Darkness*, *The Secret Sharer*, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, *Daisy Miller*, or *The Dead*. Great short novels have the taut unity of poetry and short stories, with every word relating to major themes, and an experienced reader observes that unity – indeed, teleology – at first reading.

Longer novels often take a rereading to see how the discrete parts relate and may contain digressive material – such as Tolstoy's iterative commentaries on history and warfare that at times seem tangential even to a rereader – or characters that stray far from the center of the reader's consciousness and drift on the edges of our memory of the novel. In shorter novels, every character – indeed, every sentence – matters, in part because in one reading or even two within a day or so, we retain whatever the book presents.

In our age of shortened attention spans defined by smart phones, Twitter, social media, and Google searches, some of the masterworks I am discussing seem endless, especially to younger readers. Now when I assign a middle-length novel of four or five hundred pages, students respond the way earlier generations of students responded to 1,000 pages.

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Recurring Themes

For most of the novel's history, notwithstanding the exceptions to realism I mentioned above, novels depended on relevance to historical contexts and contemporary social issues. As Georg Lukács observes, "Realists such as Balzac or Tolstoy in their final posing of questions always take the most important, burning problems of their community for their starting-point; their pathos as writers is always stimulated by those sufferings of the people which are the most acute at the time."⁸

Of course, the realistic tradition is still important today, as Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, Philipp Meyer's *American Rust*, and the novels of Saul Bellow and Ian McEwan make clear. As we shall see, major novels often had something of a pedagogical function even if they were not outright polemical and didactic – and they could be that too. Novels were expected to be readable and tell a story, but also expected to make you think. Although there were many exceptions, major novelists were less likely than today's novelists to write an account of the author's personal feelings – often in the voice of the narrator – and more likely to speak of social and political contexts. This was even truer of the European novel in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century than it was of the British and American novel of the same period.

European novels tend to balance the study of individuals' idiosyncrasies and families with a panoramic view of how political, cultural, and economic factors shape the ways that an individual thinks and behaves. Social hierarchies in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe were different from our purported democratic and egalitarian twenty-first-century values, although we are still very much a stratified society with racial, ethnic, class, and gender inequities. In Russia especially, hierarchy was inherent in the social system; the aristocracy didn't court social inferiors but were expected to protect them and further their interests. Of course, there were abuses not only in Russia but also in most countries. In France, the French Revolution tried to redress some of those social incongruities and abuses, but with the Restoration and subsequent regimes, these abuses and inequalities continued in some form.

Recurring themes in our novels are the transformation of agrarian life due to machinery and the concomitant effect on traditional rural communities, the rise of capitalism, the evolution of the modern city, the attraction and disappointment of urban life, and the creation of a class of underemployed workers. Often reflected within our novels is class division, sometimes perceived more acutely by us twenty-first-century readers than by the authors.

In writing of the cultural and socio-economic significance of railroads Tony Judt observes, "[After 1830] trains – or, rather, the tracks on which they ran – represented the conquest of space."⁹ Railroads transformed the landscape of

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much of the world. They made movement possible that was once unthinkable. Invented in the 1760s, the steam engine was the quintessence of the Industrial Revolution but didn't motor trains until 1825. The steam engine depended on coal, the subject of Zola's *Germinal*, to make it run. We see trains playing an important role in *Anna Karenina* and in *Sentimental Education*. As Judt puts it, "[M]ost of the technical challenges of industrial modernity – long distance telegraphic communication, the harnessing of water, gas, and electricity for domestic and industrial use, urban and rural drainage, the construction of very large buildings, the gathering and moving of human beings in large numbers – were first met and overcome by railway companies."¹⁰

Napoleon Bonaparte is also a thread that runs through the European novel from Tolstoy and even Dostoevsky (in *The Brothers Karamazov* his words are invoked by the precocious Kolya, who refers to him as "that pseudo great man" [IV.x.6.555]) to Stendhal and Balzac. In a sense he plays the role as fantasy superhero – even if viewed with some irony as an arrogant over-reacher – that chivalric heroes played for Don Quixote. As a man who rose from minor Corsican nobility to become not only a military hero but also the most dominant figure in Europe, Napoleon had more to do with nineteenth-century political and social history than any other figure. He is naïvely and obsessively idealized by Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black*. His gigantic presence bestrides European history like a colossus. His civil reforms affecting laws and education, instituting government appointments based on merit, and building roads and sewers had a lasting effect on France and were a model for much of Europe. By allowing freedom of religion, the Napoleonic Code shaped Jewish history in Europe and led the way in emancipating the Jews, making the Jews equal citizens with equal civil rights and abolishing ghettos in countries Napoleon conquered.

As we shall see, many of our novels examine the conflict between individualism and community standards, whether they be religious, political, or class strictures. Thus our novels often explore the value of subjectivity, self-awareness, and individual feelings, including sex and love. I am thinking not only of *The Red and the Black*, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, and *Madame Bovary*, but also of Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's novels, despite the somewhat reductive religious solutions of authors. In many of our novels, personal sincerity and integrity become important values; how one behaves depends on individual choice rather than on rigid stipulations imposed by political and religious authority. Many of the novels I discuss dramatize the disruptive effects on individual characters of cosmopolitanism (*Père Goriot*, *Sentimental Education*, *The Red and the Black*), industrialism, and the movement from rural to urban culture and, in the case of *War and Peace*, Tolstoy's resistance to these developments.

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As a genre the novel itself is often an expression of pluralism, secularism, and/or indifference to religion. The novels I discuss demonstrate diversity in religious, social, and political cultures (*The Brothers Karamazov*, *War and Peace*). These novels also address capital formation and ensuing class struggle (*Père Goriot*, *Germinal*) as well as freedom of thought and intellectual inquiry struggling with a sometimes monolithic and a decadent Catholic Church and autocracy (*The Red and the Black* and *The Charterhouse of Parma*). Indeed, some of the novelists in my second volume, such as Giorgio Bassani and Giuseppe di Lampedusa, suggest that traditional religion may close the door to subjective self-examination and self-knowledge, while responding to the needs of the individual psyche may free mankind from archaic and rigid morality and hierarchies. But are not these later novelists taking their cue from Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal, and Zola?

The European novel rarely fell prey to what Ralph Rader – whose focus was the English novel – called “Victorian Rule,” which requires “the subordination of the individual to the social” and defines “the highest good as the sacrifice of one’s self for the common good.”¹¹ It is this Rule that validates the behavior of such characters as William Dobbin, Esther Summerson, and Dorothea Brooke.

Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal, and Dostoevsky are more cynical about the need to attend to the common good than Zola and Tolstoy. Even before the twentieth century, European novelists tend to be more concerned about how the individual in all his idiosyncrasies can remain human and how he or she can be happy both in the moment and looking forward without regard to the community good. In *The Charterhouse of Parma*, it never occurs to Fabrizio or the Duchess to think about the common good; without any compunction, including the effect on res publica, the Duchess will poison the Prince.

The Reader’s Odyssey

Memory

Memory shapes our perceptions and identities, even in this age of Google where we may not have to remember as much. Our reading – particularly of masterworks that we read and reread – informs our memory and influences how our memory responds to experience. Our memories make us who we are and are a major basis for our values and character. Joyce Wadler reminds us: “What we consider a memory is actually a memory of a memory, which we refine every time we replay it in our mind.”¹² Yet, as unreliable and fragmentary as memory is, it is how we make sense of our national, cultural, familial, and personal past and form our narratives, including stories about ourselves and our plans for our own future.

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As the poet-critic Charles Simic put it, memory can be at once a “gold mine,” a “garbage dump,” and an “archive.”¹³ It is our own written and spoken words which give our memories shape, but for serious readers our memories are also shaped by the texts we read, and that is especially true when we enter into the sustained imagined worlds of novels. We make sense of our own lives by ferreting out significant details and facts and integrating significant pieces of the present with memories of past experience, including memories of our reading experience.

Turning our experience into stories, we can bring them to life for others and ourselves. For some, those stories are oral; for others they are written. Just as for the novelists we are discussing, imagination plays a role in filling our gaps and transforming our memories into the shape of meaning. We read to share the experience of others, and those of us who write do so to share their experience with others.

Sense-Making

Always skeptical of neat interpretations, Jacques Derrida reminds us: “A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer.”¹⁴ But is this so different from Plutarch’s claim that “The speech of man is like embroidered tapestries, since like them this too has to be extended in order to display its patterns, but when it is rolled up it conceals and distorts them”?¹⁵

Reading novels is an odyssey that takes us through adventures in sense-making as we journey through complex texts. As Jeanette Winterson observes, “What we write about fiction is never an objective response to a text; it is always part of a bigger mythmaking – the story we are telling ourselves about ourselves.”¹⁶

We may meet resistance to our understanding, be held in the bondage of temporary puzzlement – even confusion about why characters behave and speak as they do – but eventually we emerge with some awareness of what the novel has enacted and how it has been accomplished.

Reading literature – especially of diverse cultures – broadens our sense of what it means to be human. Imaginative literature provides for the reader a detailed representation of the inner experience of being alive in a given time and place. Imaginative literature deepens our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

According to the Irish novelist John Banville, “[W]e go to fiction for many reasons – to be entertained, instructed, diverted, enlightened, entranced – but what we are really in search of is not fiction, but life itself. Like the figures in our dreams, the characters we encounter in fiction are really us, and the story we are told is the story of ourselves. And therein rests the delightful paradox that the novelist’s transcendent lies are eminently more truthful than all the facts in

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the world, that they are, in [James] Wood's formulation, 'true lies.'¹⁷ Wood not only argues that "fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude," but also that "[E]ven when one is believing fiction, one is 'not quite' believing, one is believing 'as if.'"¹⁸

Authors work alone, but as they approach final drafts and publication, they often do not think of themselves as soloists. They are aware that they are in a duet with their audience whose full – albeit silent – communication is necessary to complete the hermeneutical circle. In formal terms, within their texts authors create a narrator who speaks to an imagined audience; sometimes authors expect the reader to cast a skeptical eye on unreliable and imperceptive narrators.

Formal criticism rightly demands that readers respond to themes and values enacted within the text as opposed to what the author says beforehand; the latter is called the intentional or biographical fallacy. Yet what an author says about his text or his personal, social, and political values – even if we consign those writings to the pre-critical or post-critical task of reading carefully – is another often relevant and corroborative piece of data.

Interpretive History

Readers change as history and culture evolve. What is the role of interpretive history in understanding a literary work? Do readers judge behavior differently in the complex world of novels than they would judge similar events in their own life? Do twenty-first-century readers respond much differently than the original readers of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century texts?

The reading and reception of novels and authors change as times change; different cultures view texts and their authors differently. Such relativism of course is a dynamic process, and the meaning and value of literary texts will continue to evolve as historical circumstances and ideologies of reading – New and traditional historicist, deconstruction, feminist, Marxist, Aristotelian, etc. – evolve. As a pluralist, I resist one-dimensional readings that see every text in the context of "progressive" history and label texts as colonialist or fascist because they do not adhere to current political values. Yet I do not ignore the need for resistant readings that point out the oppression of women or the poor or minorities when texts (and authors) are oblivious to them.

Interpretive history is the various responses to texts over time. Because of transformations in cultural values, we need different readings than the original author intended. Historical contexts help us understand a text differently than the original audience was expected to perceive. For example, Chinua Achebe changed the discussion of *Heart of Darkness* in his 1977 essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" and so did Adam Hochschild's

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revelations in his 1998 *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* about how the exploitive imperialism and lawlessness of Belgium's King Leopold II in the Congo were even worse than that of most other colonial powers. Another example of interpretive history: no one (except someone writing in a very thinly distributed gay journal before gay studies had a foothold) had ever mentioned in print the male homosocial relationship in *The Secret Sharer*. But when I edited a volume on *The Secret Sharer*, accompanied by five critical essays, all five contributions (including my own) mentioned it independently and without any prompting from me.

But, we need to ask: Do literary texts enable us to think like people of another time even if they show us how those people lived? In part, "yes"; we often become readers without much resistance to an author's perspective. But as contemporary readers we also have our own optics and our way of thinking. This is another way of saying that novels enter a dialogue with both the audience for whom the author wrote and those reading the novels today. Of course, we should not think that our thinking is always completely different from earlier members of a similar culture. Yet, the more different the culture we are reading about is from our own – for example, village life in Nigeria in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) – the harder it is to think like the author and his or her characters and the more our own thinking deviates from author, narrator, and characters.

Is form only intellectually perceived or can we readers feel it as we develop a relationship with the narrator, experience iteration, and enjoy linguistic play? We might think of what I call *felt form*. Form is not merely perceived but felt in our literary experience and how we feel it can be communicated. Criticism that speaks of affects need not and should not be restricted to resistant readers but rather can be very much a part of authorial readings. In our criticism and in the classroom, we can describe how we experience an evolving text aesthetically as we understand its patterns and how it continually modifies, undermines, and reconfigures themes and characterizations. We might say that stories have "pleasurable intelligibility" derived from our understanding their meaning within a formal arrangement.¹⁹

Cognitive Poetics

Let us turn to the burgeoning field of cognitive poetics. Literary studies are now relying on cognitive psychology to explain why and how we read, and in some cases to relate our desire for complex plots to our evolutionary development. Blakey Vermeule observes, "Cognitive poetics is deeply humanistic. Its goal seems to be to understand what makes the experience of art so rich and powerful – not to explain the experience away or somehow nail it to the wall, as some of its critics fear."²⁰

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According to Patricia Cohen, literary studies has begun to look to the technology of brain imaging and the principles of evolution to provide scientific evidence for how and why we read:

.....
This layered process of figuring out what someone else is thinking – of mind reading – is both a common literary device and an essential survival skill. Why human beings are equipped with this capacity and what particular brain functions enable them to do it are questions that have occupied primarily cognitive psychologists.

Now English professors and graduate students are asking them too. They say they're convinced science not only offers unexpected insights into individual texts, but that it may help to answer fundamental questions about literature's very existence: Why do we read fiction? Why do we care so passionately about nonexistent characters? What underlying mental processes are activated when we read?²¹
.....

The Function of Criticism and My Critical Approach

What is the function of literary interpretation and comparison? Criticism begins as an act of self-understanding and continues in the act of sharing – in writing or speech – that understanding with readers.

These activities keep literary works alive in our minds, particularly if we propose our understanding in the spirit of “This is true, isn't it?” What we critics need to do is emphasize matters that may not be obvious, shine the light on meanings that are latent but represent, and in some cases stress what seems obvious but may have been neglected or misconstrued. We may seek to show that what seems a systematic, continuous, coherent, and unified text may be more complicated and/or ambiguous than we thought.

Novels are by humans, about humans, and for humans, and we forget this at our peril. Their subject is inevitably the human experience, notably the psyche and values by which humankind lives in a specific historically defined culture. As Tom Stoppard observed, “The reason we love the books we love – it's the people. It's the human mud, the glue between us and them, the universal periodic table of the human condition. It transcends.”²²

As readers of my literary criticism know, I try to balance “Always the text” with “Always historicize.” This is another way I strive to be, as Henry James wrote in “The Art of Fiction,” one those readers on whom nothing – or as little as possible – is lost. I rely on using close scrutiny of evolving texts to make my arguments about what values a text enacts and how texts shape the reader's response so as to understand these values. I focus on such formal issues as structure, narrative technique, and choice of language and argue for the inextricable relationship between form and content, between aesthetics and

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themes. Thus I stress that literature represents imagined “as if” worlds rather than real ones.

Significant form controls content. Necessary and sufficient ingredients for great fiction include how parts relate to the whole, rich dialogue that is lively and reveals speakers’ psyches and values, dramatic scenes that are purposeful in terms of larger plot intentions and thematic patterns, and a compelling narrative voice to which we cannot help but listen.

I shall be arguing that the narrative voice has a human face, and that is a large reason why we read novels, namely that humans are talking to humans about human experience. When writing is great, contemporary novelist David Mitchell observes, “[Y]our mind is nowhere else but in this world that started off in the mind of another human being. There are two miracles at work here. One that someone thought of that world and people in the first place. And the second, that there’s this means of transmitting it. Just *little* ink marks on squashed wood fiber. Bloody amazing.”²³

One aspect of my approach is what might be called pattern recognition – including recurrences, modulations, deviations, and transformations of plot, characterization, and language, and this means full attention to the words on the page rather than reference to an external theory. Attending to what Stephen Dedalus in the “Proteus” episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses* calls “ineluctable modality of the visible” and later defines in “Scylla and Charybdis” as “What you damn well have to see,” I am more an Aristotelian than a Platonist who focuses on a priori forms. Thus I seek to know what is the world represented by an author and what personal and historical factors caused an author to give that world shape. I believe in reason, but understand the need for intuition in reading texts imaginatively. Thus my discussions combine a mosaic of quotations and insights in the context of a reading that addresses major issues in the texts.

I try to define what is special and unique about each author by asking, “What kind of fiction did each of these authors write?” The novel is a flexible form without absolute rules, although it has multiple conventions of narration and dialogue. As 2010 Booker Prize winner Howard Jacobson puts it, “Here’s the wonder of the novel. The novel is the great fluid form in which all those possibilities flow in and flow out. Nothing is definite, nothing is finished, nothing is determined.”²⁴ Indeed, the novel form is so flexible that novels propose, even as they attend to their subjects, new modes of telling and viewing characterization, often in response to new ways of understanding how the human psyche works. Thus one of the narratives implicit in the pages that follow is a history of experiments with the novel form. While this history is an essential part of this volume with its strong component the realistic novel, the history of experiments in form is even truer of the twentieth-century authors on whom I will focus in Volume 2.

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Aesthetic features always signify. The amplitude and conventions of novels often allow for different perspectives on events and characters; most novels eschew dogma, preferring to test different perspectives. Novels can propose, test, dispose of, reconfigure, and reformulate ideas.

While not inattentive to historical contexts following my mantra, “Always the text; Always historicize,” my book’s focus is on the formal and aesthetic dimensions of literature. For too long, historicism – in the name of cultural studies – has deflected us from attention to the text by claiming that a positivistic cause and effect between literary texts and one or another historical phenomenon is the fundamental reason for reading. Thus in some classes and scholarly essays, Leopold Bloom’s carrying a potato in his pocket has been contextualized by long discussions of the Irish potato famine, while the novel *Ulysses* awaits impatiently for the teacher and the critic to return to the text. Another example would be scholarly essays that discuss the history of Parma without attending to Stendhal’s form.

I do not treat aesthetic matters in isolation from social, political, and historical issues. Rather I show how the aesthetic choices artists make shape the presentation of these issues, even while their understanding of these issues shapes their aesthetic choices. A novelist’s awareness is historically determined, although certainly individual personality enters into the choice of how events and characters as well as form are presented. Often novels – and especially the European novels under consideration – are in a dialogue with history, or should we say interpretations of history? Thus Russian and French novels reflect the glory and torment – the triumphs and vulgarity – of Russian and French (or, in Stendhal’s case, Italian) history.

I also am cognizant of the difference between what is sometimes called authorial reading, which responds to the author’s intended structure of effects, and various resistant (often contemporary) readings, which might notice sexism, racism, class snobbery, and homophobia, of which the author was unaware or chose to ignore or minimize.

In showing how authors build a structure of effects with their readers in mind, I write for both readers and rereaders. I stress the respect authors have for readers and their desire to shape their readers’ responses. In the discussions that follow, I will be attentive to the narrator – who is speaking about character and history, albeit always in written form – and his relationship to the reader. Novels are not written in a vacuum and we sometimes forget how important a figure the reader is to authors when writing. Our authors are much aware of the reader when creating their narrators, knowing that who narrates and how is crucial to communication. Usually the narratee – the audience addressed by the narrator within the text – is a surrogate for an imagined reader at the time the text was

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written, whereas a reader of a later generation may more likely be resistant to a kinship with the imagined narratee. But in each case the reader plays an active role in constructing the text.

I consider myself a pluralist, making use of diverse approaches, depending on the novel. At times, I take as my inspiration a line from Wallace Stevens: “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never” (“The Well Dressed Man with a Beard”).

I have tried to avoid the shortcoming of my approach – which I have elsewhere called “humanistic formalism” – namely, that it oversimplifies aesthetic structure and significant form in its quest for unity and coherence. I have learned from deconstruction, but try to eschew its tendencies both to stress every possible nuance of thematic confusion or formal dissonance and to enter into abstract discussion that takes us away from the experience of reading about lived life.

An Aspect of Realism: The Author in the Text

According to Zadie Smith, “Realism is built [upon three credos]: the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, [and] the essential fullness and continuity of the self.”²⁵

Thinking of traditional realism, Smith asks some compelling questions: “Do selves always seek their good, in the end? Are they never perverse? Do they always want meaning? Do they sometimes want its opposite? And is this how memory works? ... Is this how time feels? Do the things of the world really come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? ... Is this really Realism?”²⁶ Some of the novelists I discuss in this volume challenge these ideas of realism and are aware of these paradoxes. Dostoevsky, Flaubert, and Stendhal know that characters act contrary to their own interest and eschew the most obvious lessons that experience teaches. In my second volume, we shall see how Kafka, Camus, and Saramago stress illogical behavior. Smith reminds us that “most avant-garde challenges to realism concentrate on voice, one where this ‘I’ is coming from, this mysterious third person.”²⁷

A convincing and plausible voice is the essence of realism and such a voice is often rooted in personal experience. Writing about Colm Tóibín but also thinking of other writers Tim Parks observed, “We may even ask if the satisfaction of achieving an aestheticized expression of personal suffering does not preserve the pain by making it functional to the life of the sufferer turned artist.”²⁸ Does not the narrative voice in Dostoevsky, Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert often describe the behavior of despised characters as if the author were denying and

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disguising aspects of himself that he does not wish to reveal or may not even be fully aware of?

The author's presence in the text takes many forms. This is what Ralph Rader called "the fiction of the actual" or – a term I like less – the "similar" novel.²⁹ As James Phelan and David Richter put it, the form of some novels "moves away from the 'as if' quality of the novel to represent in fictional form real people and events."³⁰ Such novels are, they argue, radical versions of "the way authors make room for representations of themselves and their own personal conflicts within otherwise fictional literary creations."³¹ We need to be aware of the oscillating distance between author and characters even in so-called novelists of the actual like Tolstoy, Flaubert, and Zola – and, in the twentieth century, Mann, di Lampedusa, Bassani, Proust as well as Woolf and Joyce – all of whom use their novels to define their aesthetic, personal, and social values. We need to be aware, too, that authors pretending to take a cosmological perspective – whether Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, or Kafka (or, in the Anglo-American tradition, Hardy, Conrad, Hawthorne, and Melville) – often reveal a great deal about themselves.

In such novels as *Don Quixote* and *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Cervantes and Stendhal propose a parodic form of the fiction of the actual – what we might call "the fiction of the actual manqué" – where the narrator calls attention to himself as if he were a surrogate for the author, but in fact he or she is not a surrogate.

Reading Translations

Translation is necessarily the recontextualization of cultural artifacts because translation is a kind of plagiarism, an appropriation of one book to make another, or a kind of, to use a current term, remixing.

Translation has been called "creative betrayal" because the original can never be fully rendered.³² Translating a text means transforming it, but how does a translated text get closest to the original? Is it by seeking equivalence or is something more subtle and nuanced required? The best translators are artists in their own right. To an extent a translation always implies the culture of its new language. Should we translate into another language "He hit a home run," if it were used by a contemporary American author, to mean: "He has done very well"?

Let us think about the issues raised by working with translations. Octavio Paz has wisely noted: "No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation – first from the nonverbal world and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase."³³

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Commenting on Stanley Corngold's translation of Goethe's *The Sufferings of Young Werther* (1774), J. M. Coetzee has remarked:

.....
[Corngold] follows Goethe's German closely, even at the risk of sometimes sounding foreign. He takes pains not to use words that were not part of the English language by 1787.

The reason for the 1787 cutoff date is obvious: to avoid anachronism. But anachronism is not only a matter of word choice [but of prose style].... With works from the past, how should the language of the translation relate to the language of the original? Should a twenty-first-century translation into English of a novel from the 1770s read like a twenty-first-century English novel or like an English novel from the era of the original?³⁴
.....

These are essential questions and the tendency recently is towards the latter position but, more importantly, towards keeping the spirit of the original prose to the extent it is possible.

To retain, say, Tolstoy's nuanced and playful use of repetition of a word becomes a challenge to a translator. Does he simply repeat or does he try to find equivalents to the subtle nuances? As Caryl Emerson asserts, "The Pevear and Volokhonsky translations [of Tolstoy] don't paraphrase, respecting the Tolstoyan period as one would a poem. They observe Tolstoy's repetitions (same word in Russian = same word in English, because Tolstoy is incantational). [They d]on't soften his dogmatic nonsense, and in [*War and Peace*, leaving in the French]; in [*Anna Karenina*] the LONG sentences, like waves in the sea. Mostly sustaining the sense that the fellow never gave up."³⁵

The obvious problem in discussing novels in translation is that we are not dealing with the original primary texts. In terms of close verbal analyses, I shall be using well-known translations. While translations can't replicate the original and always produce different texts, they can give the original text new life, not only with different words but sometimes also with different nuances. For some expressions there is no translation because the original belongs to the culture. Sandra Bermann observes, "Translations are texts in which other languages can be heard – whether as distant echoes or as distinct dialogues.... [L]inguistic translation means cultural translation. Yet no matter how well-prepared and carefully wrought, no matter how deep the linguistic and cultural knowledge of the translator, translation does not and cannot reproduce its already complex source.... Translation allows a text to live on in another culture and time.... But translation also questions and disrupts a text from a new cultural standpoint, raising unanticipated questions in the cultures that now read it."³⁶

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Translating is a hermeneutic activity. As Lawrence Venuti puts it:

.....
 [A] hermeneutic model treats translation as an interpretation of the source text whose form, meaning, and effect are seen as variable, subject to inevitable transformation during the translating process.... Translating never gives back the source text unaltered. It can only inscribe an interpretation, one among many possibilities, through lexical and syntactic choices that can alter source-textual features like meter and tone, point of view and characterization, narrative and genre, terminology and argument.

The translator inscribes an interpretation [that] ... mediates between the source language and culture, on the one hand, and the receiving language and culture, on the other.³⁷

As James Campbell observes, “The question of translators’ fidelity to the works they are charged with smuggling across the border has been much debated. Every thoughtful practitioner is aware that he is creating something new.”³⁸ But, as Campbell also notes, “Translators take fewer liberties nowadays,” with the result of what has been called “‘internationalist’ translatoresque” that is responsible for the “standardization and flattening of foreign texts.”³⁹ Thus, while I am writing about that “something new,” I am also in some cases dealing with the aforementioned problem of standardizing and flattening of a foreign text.

Good translations can be close to replications or iterations. But because the original language is culturally determined, sometimes, to create a parallel reading experience, it is necessary to find *different* language rather than replication of the translated language. In a sense a good translation has two different goals. A good translation needs to be torn free from its original cultural context and given a fresh one in the new language even while paradoxically doing its best to retain as much of the cultural original as possible. In her introduction to *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, Sandra Bermann observes:

.....
 [E]ach language bears its own vast and endlessly transforming intertext of socially and historically grafted meanings, along with their graphic and acoustic imagery.... Yet even in its imperfect, or simply creative negotiations of difference, translation provides a necessary linguistic supplement that bridges cultural chasms and allows for intellectual passage and exchange.... If we must translate in order to emancipate and preserve cultural pasts and to build linguistic bridges for present understandings and future thought, we must do so while attempting to respond ethically to each language’s contexts, intertexts, and intrinsic alterity.⁴⁰

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In a sense a translation is an Afterword, a commentary in another language coming as it does after the original writing is finished. Languages have a cultural and national history and the best translations respect idioms and silences and speech patterns, but also know that some things – especially word play – resist translation. With his puns, neologisms, portmanteau words, and stream of consciousness that jumps from one thought and sensation to another, Joyce's writing is most difficult to translate, especially *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. But the authors I discuss here also require deft and subtle translation. In recent years, Edith Grossman's wonderful translation of *Don Quixote* and Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky's translations of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy have taught us that a great translation, reflecting the translators' understanding of the words and the context in which they were written, can bring us a richer and more authentic reading experience than prior translations. Grossman observes: "For me this is the essential challenge in translation: hearing, in the most profound way I can, the text in Spanish, and discovering the voice to say (I mean, to write) the text again in English. Compared to that, lexical difficulties shrink and wither away. I believe that my primary obligation as a literary translator is to recreate for the reader in English the experience of the reader in Spanish."⁴¹

What happens when translation goes off track is that the translation has strong resonances of the culture in which the translation takes place. Thus Constance Garnett's translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* has lower-class characters speak in Cockney English, which doesn't work for American readers, and more importantly does not address the history of serfs and servants in Russia.

Yet translation at its best is also collaboration between the original artist and the translator, a creative act in which a new voice is achieved. We are hesitant to call a translator an artist because we like to think of the artist as someone who wrenches art out of his soul, possibly out of a process of lonely suffering, perhaps combined with the difficulty of coming to terms with the major examples of his or her art while creating. But we might remember that in the latter case appropriation often takes place. Is not, for example, *Ulysses* an appropriation of Homer?

Translations are intellectual travels from one country to another, perhaps something like border crossings, but the borders are not always clear. Major texts that are translated into many languages are cosmopolitan and diasporic, but our focus in my book will be on these major texts immigrating into the English-speaking world. Yet the very act of translation is cosmopolitan by situating a text in two worlds. Although postcolonial theorists regard translation as an act of colonialism, I regard translation as a political, intellectual, and social act of globalization because it erases borders and creates cultural dialogue. In that sense it has a progressive social function because it gives us access to other worlds in other places.

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Edith Grossman, who has produced the renowned translation of *Don Quixote* that I am using in this book, has remarked:

.....
 Translation not only plays its important traditional role as the means that allows us access to literature originally written in one of the countless languages we cannot read, but it also represents a concrete literary presence with the crucial capacity to ease and make more meaningful our relationships to those with whom we may not have had a connection before. Translation always helps us to know, to see from a different angle, to attribute new value to what once may have been unfamiliar. As nations and as individuals, we have a critical need for that kind of understanding and insight. The alternative is unthinkable.⁴²

Familiarity not only with the original language but also with the culture and history of the nation and the particular region or city where the events described take place is essential to a good translator. Not all translators subscribe to the same assumptions of what constitutes a good translation. One approach is to stay close to the original, following every sentence, and retaining the order of ideas and metaphors, even reproducing inconsistencies in tense or punctuation. That is, the translator is meticulous about staying close to the original and does not try to improve on a masterful artist. Yet translations that hew too close to the original can create misunderstandings, in which case some imaginative recreation might be preferable.

Grossman observes, “Where literature exists, translation exists. Joined at the hip, they are absolutely inseparable, and, in the long run, what happens to one happens to the other. Despite all the difficulties the two have faced, sometimes separately, usually together, they need and nurture each other, and their long-term relationship, often problematic but always illuminating, will surely continue for as long as they both shall live.”⁴³

Richard Howard concludes his discussion of Grossman’s *Why Translation Matters*: “In the end, Grossman warmly (after all) and gratefully rehearses the twofold answer to the question of her title: translation matters because it is an expression and an extension of our humanity, the secret metaphor of all literary communication; and because the creation of any literary translation is (or at least must be) an original writing, not a pathetic shadow or tracing of the inaccessible ‘original’ but the creation, indeed, of a second – and as we have seen, a third and a ninth – but always a new work, in another language.”⁴⁴

We might close this section with a cautionary note about our reading translations from a discussion within the text of *Don Quixote*. When presiding over which books to burn and choosing one because the author has been a

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translator, the priest remarks to his friend, the barber: “[H]e took away a good deal of its original value, which is what all who attempt to translate books of poetry into another language will do as well: no matter the care they use and the skill they show, they will never achieve the quality the verses had in their first birth” (1.VI.48; trans. Grossman). I take this as an admonition that I am writing on European novels in translation, even though I, consulting a wide range of colleagues, have tried to find the best translations.

Conclusion

In the following pages I shall discuss major European novels in translation. I shall bring to this project my lifetime of reading and writing about literature, including some expertise about the form of the novel and the unfolding experience presented by the words on the page. While I acknowledge previous scholarship on each writer, I do not claim to be a world-class authority on either the individual novels or novelists that I discuss.

With each chapter I have included study questions to guide teachers and readers towards what I feel are the most salient issues. I invite you to join me as I celebrate the experience of reading some of the masterworks of Western literature.

Notes

1. I considered for inclusion Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (1862) but ultimately did not consider Turgenev to be at the same level as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.
2. Verlyn Klinkenborg, “Some Thoughts on the Pleasures of Being a Re-Reader,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2009.
3. Quoted in Roberta Smith, “Sculpture in High Relief,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2011.
4. Quoted in Philip Lopate, “The Best German Novelist of His Time,” *NYR* 58:3 (Feb. 14, 2011), 35–38; see p. 35.
5. Quoted from *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), in Louis Menand, “Regrets Only,” *New Yorker*, Sept. 29, 2008, 80–90.
6. Michael Chabon, “What to Make of *Finnegans Wake*?” *NYR* 59:12 (July 12, 2012), 45–48; see p. 48.
7. Quoted in Wyatt Mason, “Smarter than You Think,” *NYR* 57:12 (July 15, 2010), 12.
8. Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (London: Hillway, 1950), 12.
9. Tony Judt, “The Glory of the Rails,” *NYR* 57:20 (Dec. 23, 2010), 60–61; see p. 60.

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10. Judt, "The Glory of the Rails," 60.
11. Quoted in James Phelan and David Richter, "The Literary Theoretical Contribution of Ralph Rader," *Narrative* 18:1 (Jan. 2010), 73–90; see p. 82.
12. Joyce Wadler, "Though Memory May Fail Us, What I Recall Was Truly Love," *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 2013.
13. Charles Simic, "Grass: The Gold and the Garbage," *NYR* 57:5 (March 24, 2011), 23–24; see p. 23.
14. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 69.
15. Plutarch's "Life of Themistocles," quoted in Roderick Conway Morris, "Weaving a More Modern Narrative," *IHT* (June 14, 2011), 11.
16. Jeanette Winterson, "A Classic Passes 50," *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2012.
17. John Banville, "The Prime of James Wood," *NYR* 55:18 (Nov. 20, 2008), 85–88; see p. 88.
18. Quoted in Banville, "The Prime of James Wood," *ibid.*
19. Quotation from Ralph Rader, "Fact, Theory, and Literary Explanation," in Frances Ferguson, "Ralph Rader on the Literary History of the Novel," *Narrative* 18:1 (Jan. 2010), 91–103; see p. 100.
20. Blakey Vermeule, "Room for Debate: Can 'Neuro Lit-Crit' Save the Humanities?" *New York Times*, April 5, 2010.
21. Patricia Cohen, "Next Big Thing in English: Knowing They Know That You Know," *New York Times*, March 31, 2010; <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/01/books/01lit.html?src=me&ref=arts> (accessed February 14, 2014).
22. Tom Stoppard, quoted in Wyatt Mason, "David Mitchell, the Experimentalist," *New York Times Magazine*, June 27, 2010; <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/27/magazine/27mitchell-t.html?pagewanted=1&8dpc> (accessed February 14, 2014).
23. Quoted in Mason, "David Mitchell, the Experimentalist," *ibid.*
24. Howard Jacobson, quoted in Sarah Lyall, "Booker Prize Winner's Jewish Question," *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2010.
25. Zadie Smith, "Two Paths for the Novel," *NYR* 55:18 (Nov. 20, 2008), 89–94; see p. 89.
26. Smith, "Two Paths for the Novel," 91.
27. Smith, "Two Paths for the Novel," 92.
28. Tim Parks, "Life at the Core," *NYR* 58:6 (April 7, 2011), 58–59; see p. 58.
29. Ralph Rader, "Exodus and Return: Joyce's *Ulysses* and the Fiction of the Actual," *UTQ* 48 (Winter 1978/9), 149–171.
30. Phelan and Richter, "The Literary Theoretical Contribution of Ralph Rader," 82.
31. Phelan and Richter, "The Literary Theoretical Contribution of Ralph Rader," 84.
32. Verena Conley, "Living in Translation," *Profession* 2010, 18–24; see p. 18.

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33. Octavio Paz, "Translation: Literature and Letters," in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 152–162; see p. 154.
34. J. M. Coetzee, "Storm Over Young Goethe," *NYR* 59:7 (April 26, 2012), 17–22; see p. 21.
35. Professor Caryl Emerson, Princeton University, March 31, 2008, email to Daniel R. Schwarz.
36. Sandra Bermann, "Teaching in – and about – Translation," *Profession* 2010, 82–90; see pp. 84–85.
37. Lawrence Venuti, "Translation, Empiricism, Ethics," *Profession* 2010, 72–81; see p. 74.
38. James Campbell, "Creative Misreading," *New York Times Book Review*, June 12, 2011, 35.
39. Campbell, "Creative Misreading," 35.
40. Sandra Bermann, "Introduction," in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5–7.
41. Edith Grossman, "Translator's Note to the Reader," in Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), xix.
42. Edith Grossman, "Prologue," in *Why Translation Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), x–xi.
43. Quoted in Richard Howard, "Duet for Two Pens," *New York Times*, April 8, 2010; <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/11/books/review/Howard-t.html> (accessed February 14, 2014).
44. Howard, "Duet for Two Pens."

