Confronting / Defining the Self:

Formation and Dissolution of the ‘I’ from Montaigne to Grass

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# I. Proglomena

## 1. The Changing of the Guard?

Reading and writing is to humanists what nature is to physicists.

(Holquist, ‘Radical Challenges—Radical Questions’)[[1]](#footnote-1)

### Preamble

Simply stated, this book is about canonical literary works in the European tradition that span the period from the Renaissance to the mid-twentieth century. It is the result of many years of teaching German and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania and Vanderbilt University. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my students over the years who engaged with me in Socratic dialogue on the meaning, value, and pleasures of literature. They pushed, questioned, prompted, deepened, and made me think more clearly about the right questions to ask. I divide the book into two main parts: (1) a prolegomenon that considers the questions to be asked and (2) interpretations that show how asking the right questions leads to fruitful outcomes. A brief epilogue that points forward as well as backward rounds out the analysis. The project is ambitious.

It becomes even more ambitious with my desire to frame important questions of literary value—and perhaps to justify my selection of and focus on older works of literature. I deemed it necessary to consider three major issues that impact discussions of literature and cultural value. First is the fate of the book and the role of the reader in our own times. Second is a reconsideration of the nature of the canon, aesthetic wisdom, and the study of books. Third are conceptions of the art of reading and writing since Montaigne. All three foci revolve around the assertion of selfhood in one way or another and are gathered into clusters within part ‘I. Prolegomenon’.

Part ‘II. Exempla’ contains close readings and comparisons of works organized into separate chapters according to specific themes and time periods. The first two chapters in this section, ‘Determining the Self’ and ‘Broadening the Self’, focus on Madame de La Fayette’s *The Princess de Clèves* (1678) and Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). In a two-step honing process of considering first the construction of a restrictive sense of Self then of a broader concept, the two novels establish the patterns for assessing an exciting new self-awareness in European literature. The third and fourth chapter, ‘Losing the Self’, examine works from the second half of the nineteenth century that showcase what happens when *ennui* and marginalization impact the notion of Self in altering ways. Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1864) illustrate major aspects of this dynamic. Side lights on Heinrich von Kleist’s *The Marquise of O* (1808), Nikolas Gogol’s *The Overcoat* (1842), and Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879) serve to sharpen their emotive affects.

Chapters 5 and 6, ‘The Fragmented Self’ and ‘The Fractured Self’, pick up on the philosophical questioning of the value of a unified sense of Self that was already announced in *Notes from Underground*. Here, two works drawn from the early twentieth century on fragmentation are explored: Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and Hermann Hesse’s *Der Steppenwolf* (1927). A reading of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85) provides a prelude to reflections on the central issue. The final chapters 8 and 9, ‘The Self and the Absurd’ and ‘Defining the Self Anew’, consider what happened in the context of World War II that radically altered traditional assumptions of normalcy. One work penned during the war, the other a retrospective coming to terms with it. Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* (1942) is here paired with Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* (1959). Both novels focus on outsiders and exemplify the new kind of experimental writing promoted by such New Novelists of the 1950s as Alain Robbe-Grillet that generally rejected traditional use of narrative, plot, and character in favor of an original version and vision of things.

While no monograph is capable of including all the texts necessary to trace the complex (and by no means linear) developments addressed in these pages, my purpose is to examine seminal writings from the European tradition that affected others.[[2]](#footnote-2) The unifying thread in each is how to define the Self within the tension between having too much and too little freedom. This amounts to defining the *modes of being* human across a scale of possibilities.

### Asking the Right Questions

In an era when the pace of change seems hectically overwhelming, when pressed hard by our modern consumerist economy that constantly clamors for new products and fads, we lose an awareness of what really matters. We tend to skim the surface. To complicate matters further, the world grows ever smaller, geographic distances between cultures dwindle, hegemonic clashes arise, misleading culture wars lure us into camps. We are left with an impression of general turbulence. A genuine sense of Self becomes unmoored. We begin to wonder: Who am I?

In light of such hyperactivity, the place of literature and of the humanities within society tends to get sidelined. Their value even called into question. What good are they? ‘If the field of literary studies is imperiled’, Jacob Brogan commented in 2022 on the state of the Modern Language Association of America, perhaps ‘it’s partly because to those outside [academe], all of its trappings — the theoretical debates, the articles about poems no one understands, even the conference-going — can seem pretty useless’.[[3]](#footnote-3) While not entirely fair to the tenor of internal debates, Brogan’s statement does capture the broader public’s outsider-perception. The predominant question for many producers and distributors of literature and literary studies is now often enough: Will the book sell? Can we make a profit? Should editors not consider whether even a scholarly book should be made more attractive for the consumer. Literary studies, we are told, ‘often speaks in a remote, cryptic register to an ambiguous collectivity;’ maximally, it can count on an estimated 50,000 people interested in serious literature?[[4]](#footnote-4) Might the Harry-Potter-model prove to be a source of emulation even if it threatens to devalue the act of serious reading to a mere killing of time? Would it amount, however, to a watering down of solid scholarship in favor of broader appeal?[[5]](#footnote-5) Are these even the right questions to ask?

With her timely and forceful reminder, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), American philosopher Martha Nussbaum seeks to right the ship of fools that is the current state of affairs regarding the place of the humanities within a for-profit society. Nussbaum admonishes us anew to take literature and the humanities seriously because they have the power to shape full-functioning individuals, to teach critical thinking, to cultivate sensitivity. *Not for Profit* is hardly the only appeal or all that original.[[6]](#footnote-6) The ‘full-functioning’ model is traceable to Socrates and his dialogic method teaching/inquiring in shaping the individual. At its core is the notion that a fertile imagination, an awareness of one’s interdependency with others, and compassion for others are essential to human agency. Indeed, as philosopher and literary scholar Mark Roche rightly emphasizes in his own plea, a liberal arts education has a unique potential to impart a sense of personal direction for life because the liberal arts exert a formative influence on character. They can help us gain new perspectives on life and Self through the engagement of mind and soul.[[7]](#footnote-7) The advanced critical skills the humanities impart are central to a well-functioning polis. In this model of the full-functioning individual, vocation replaces the profit-making paradigm as the chief objective of writing and reading. With the increasing neglect of the humanities at all levels of education and within the public sphere, a largely unrecognized fomenting crisis threatens even the foundations of civil stability. Few seem aware of the growing danger of intellectual sloth for our collective existence. My hope is to help combat that intellectual laziness by arguing again for the importance of good literature and serious reading.

### The Role of Comparative Literature

Comparative literature, which is at the core of my investigation, has been involved in repeated efforts to rejuvenate and defend the humanities more generally against incessant demands to advance mainly short-sighted gains. It has done so through outreach. Most recently, world literature has come to challenge both the previously dominant positions of national literatures and to prompt renewed reflection on what constitutes Comparative Literature. But the questions posed by globalization are not new to the discipline. Comparative Literature has always seen action at the margins; it has always sought to educate the whole person. Much ink has been applied more recently to examining these issues.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Alas, the study of literature itself often seems to be in disarray, marked by few unifying absolutes, but displaying multiple locales and perspectives. At least, judging by the vast array of esoteric offerings at the annual meetings of the Comparative Literature Association and the Modern Language Association of America together with its affiliates, literary studies appear to be a largely decentered discipline. That is the perception that Brogan had in mind in his review of the 2022 annual MLA convention and the ills of the profession.[[9]](#footnote-9) In 2017 Deidre Shauna Lynch and Evelyne Ender issued a call for submissions to the *Publications of the Modern Language Association* (*PMLA*) on ‘Reading Cultures’. The project proved to be eye-opening. The responses to the call proved so strong that the *PMLA* had to devote an unprecedented two volumes to the topic. The editors conceived of their project as an extenuation of an earlier MLA undertaking by Leah Price and Seth Lerer that spotlighted *The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature* (2006). Nonetheless, it quickly became clear that many of the contributors to *Reading Cultures* were more interested in the immateriality of reading practices than in the material culture of books.[[10]](#footnote-10) As a consequence, we need to take a closer look at fundamental issues of the immateriality of reading practices that apparently deviate from a consumerist approach to everything. Easier said than done. Considered in the proper light, the immateriality of literature consists of ideas, plots, characterizations, images, metaphors, and words rather than graphs, tables, and formulae.

Comparatist Michael Holquist aptly characterized the function of language as an investigative tool: ‘We do literature, and at the heart of our endeavors is language as it has been shaped—and shapes—literacy. Reading and writing is to humanists what nature is to physicists.’[[11]](#footnote-11) Just as natural scientists seek to understand the inner workings of natural phenomena, humanists delve deeply to fathom the essence of being human. With their metaphors, similes, analogies, tropes, and other rhetorical strategies, humanists use a kind of ‘messy mathematics’ to get to the bottom of things. This messy mathematics gives rise to an ‘aesthetic wisdom’, as Daiyun Yue remarks in ‘Comparative Literature in the 21st Century’, in which ‘scientific thinking, rational thinking, emotional thinking, religious thinking, artistic thinking can complement each other and enrich each other’.[[12]](#footnote-12) It behooves us to return to literariness as a core concern of narrative fiction with its valuation of crafted style, choice diction, irony, allegory, and most kinds of figuration. Because these traits especially mark canonical works of literature, I focus on them. It is why I wish for us to rethink the original impetus inherent in a canonical work. And because the potency of the classic has to be accessed, I wish to pay close attention to the role of the reader in the question of literariness.[[13]](#footnote-13) Of course, even when a narrative distorts and simplifies life experiences, its structure and diction nonetheless function as a prism. That focusing mechanism is capable of evoking an array of agonistic emotions which prove engaging.[[14]](#footnote-14) My critical tools in the following are the old-fashioned ones: a broad range of reading, close reading of individual texts, empathy with the fictional characters, and attention to renderings of selfhood and its attainment. But why focus on the Self?

### The Self

In reflecting upon the ‘Self’ (capitalized) I wish to consider how it differs from the ‘self’ (lower case) and from the ‘I’. The first suggests a substratum and requires conscious reflection and affirmation, whereas the lower case ‘self’ is more generally a matter of identity, subject to interactions with the world and others, and is malleable. The ‘I’ is the psychological variant of the Self that includes corporal and mental self-awareness with the ability to be self-determining. A recent, fruitful contribution to the much-discussed poetics of Self/self/’I’ in narrative writing is Horst S. Daemmrich’s *Self-Realization* (2021).[[15]](#footnote-15) It is a thematic study of a broad range of literary works from antiquity to the present central to my undertaking. But it goes far beyond what I have in mind here with my preference for a philosophical approach and a delimited number of works subject to a close reading.

A key concept for Daemmrich’s discussion of self-realizations is that of the spiral that circles inward around a core while simultaneously spiraling outward to include ever more layers of personal, socio-economic, cultural, political, physical, historical, and intellectual encounters. He aptly asserts that the ‘theme of self-realization encompasses all distinct behavioral patterns that preserve the integrity of the individual personality in social interrelations’.[[16]](#footnote-16) He suggests imagining the Self as the axis of a wheel with spokes jutting out in all directions. An alternation between the body’s interaction with the physical world (a variation of *vita activa*) and the realms of thought and reflection (*vita contemplative*) is an absolute necessity in realizing the Self.[[17]](#footnote-17) The latter opens the way for intellectual and spiritual growth that also conveys to readers ‘a vision of human potential’ beyond the lived experience and can ‘raise serious questions about the apparent predetermination of existence’.[[18]](#footnote-18) My focus is on how the ‘I’—what Daemmrich calls individual personality—is rooted in a concept of Self as seen within an ontological context. To this end, I distinguish more clearly between Self and self/selves, taking my cue from Johann Gottlieb Fichte. The ‘self’ can essentially be a matter of social, religious, or political identity rather than of genuine Self-expression. To be sure, the act of I-You-Self transformation is a mark of many protagonists. For me, nonetheless, is the belief that the Self is foundational to both the ‘I’ and the ‘You’. Moreover, I am interested in how the reading act, properly executed, animates, and actualizes the textual message. I also wish to shed light on how intimate reading contributes to the making of a literary canon. Daemmrich does not address these issues.

Another study relevant to my own is one that foregrounds the role of popular music.[[19]](#footnote-19) The focus on music might be surprising, yet, unlike the written word, music is quite evidently performance art. It requires participatory movement and change. Motion figures centrally in my deliberations. Historically, music has been used to express and construct a sense of well-being, to soothe the nerves, or to inspire. In particular, we frequently associate listening to and producing music with a coming-of-age experience; that is, the time when one is in search of establishing a sense of individual uniqueness or of bonding with a community spirit to compensate for a sense of one’s own self-absence. After the so-called ‘death of the subject’ and the emergence of the fragmented self, the quest for a ‘real’ Self through music devolved into a questionable endeavor. Many of the articles in *Popular Music and the Poetics of Self in Fiction* speak to these issues.[[20]](#footnote-20) Fiction plays a role here too. And it has long been involved in constructions of the Self in coming-of-age novels such as Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), Hermann Hesse’s *Peter Camenzind* (1904), Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945), J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) or Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* (1999). Useful for my own inquiry is the way Bachleitner and Werner understand ‘self’. It equates to ‘the totality of an individual’s (or group’s) distinctive features, character traits (feelings, acts, aims), and self-concept’. These characteristics are constituted by an alternation, they opine, between an ‘I’ and a ‘me’ perspective, that is, between the subject and the object of one’s actions. Interactionality is the key concept here. It points to a further differentiation between self and identity which are, in turn, social categories. Far from connoting sameness, identity (by implication self) is in reality the result of ongoing negotiations. Identity and self are changeful. Not permanent.[[21]](#footnote-21)

For the time being, let it suffice to say that individual (or collective) identity ‘does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change’.[[22]](#footnote-22) I will have more to say about my understanding of the difference between Self and identity as a balancing act, on the one hand, of fitting in and, on the other, of maintaining uniqueness in the next chapter. In doing so, I will capitalize Self to indicate a core element that is not simply changing all the time as Simon Frith proposes when he asserts that the self is ‘a process not a thing, a becoming, not a being [...] *a self-in-process*’.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Last, but not least, in thinking about the self/Self is the awareness that we all have an inherent inclination to view the past through the lens of the present. On the one hand, viewing the past involves a blindness caused by a preoccupation with current concerns. On the other, it can lead to a revealing discovery about how blind we are to current events resultant of untested assumptions.[[24]](#footnote-24) If we focus more on the psychological evolution of the Self via confrontations with an Other past and present, the past offers a counterweight to etymologically unanchored group think. The Self, I submit, is more deeply rooted than any temporary cultural-polemical tempest can completely overpower.[[25]](#footnote-25) Literature provides models of enduring intellectual and emotional integrity in the face of disconcerting opposition. Literature of the Self, as Daemmrich’s study reveals, serves to underscore how misguided the endeavor is to reduce the complex human being to a single, homogenizing group identity. The latter lacks, moreover, the power to shape full functioning individuals. Confrontations/definitions of the Self aim at developing a full-functioning person.

### Book Presence in a Digital World

Marshall McLuhan seemed farsighted when, in his *Gutenberg’s Galaxy* of 1962, he discerned the inchoate unraveling of the nexus of public and author that had long defined ‘good’ literature. The metamorphosis resulted from the invention of movable type under the pressures of new a ‘electric-circuitry’ technology. Today it is known as digital. The undoing of the ‘Gutenberg mind’, McLuhan argued, has occasioned the passing of accepted literary forms,[[26]](#footnote-26) in particular the (long) literary novel that has long been declared on its death bed by such authors as Philip Roth and Jonathan Franzen. It has even been declared transformed into a ‘skeuomorph’, largely by the haptic dissonance of on-screen reading. Such critics suggest that a once purposeful medium has morphed into a purely decorative form as a result of technological advancements and their collective impact on potential readers.

Naturally, then, we should ask how these developments impact the reading of serious books? I mean printed books with a somewhat challenging literary quality that might even qualify as ‘canonical’? I do not mean books rapidly produced by hacks on Grub Street and shamelessly hawked in excessively gushing terms even in venerable venues such as the *New York Times Book Review* (to be sure, a practice traceable to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). The number of copies sold—a qualification for the NYT best-seller list—is not a sure sign of literary quality, although some of the ‘faddish’ ones are nonetheless genuinely good. Here I think, for example, of Lucinda Riley’s historical novel series, *The Seven Sisters*. Riley manages to negotiate the divide between popular fiction and probing inquiry.[[27]](#footnote-27) Yet, the kind of work I have in mind, is of different metal. No doubt that a consumerist mode of engagement with the arts has a long history. Laying the blame for his part on university creative writing programs, novelist, essayist and journalist Will Self reasserted the claim in ‘The Printed Word in Peril’ (2018) ‘that the literary novel had quit center stage of our culture and was in the process [...] of becoming a conservatory form, like the easel painting or the symphony’.[[28]](#footnote-28) On the other hand, Will Self’s assertion has not remained uncontested. Even digitalization does not necessarily translate into the slow, inevitable death of the novel. In fact, literature has re-invented itself in different modes.[[29]](#footnote-29) The digital age, so Charles Finch tells us, has witnessed ‘a veritable surge of creative re-imaginings of books as bearers of the literary’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Even longer works of fiction seem to be thriving. Precisely because of their length, multi-volume narratives such as Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan quartet[[31]](#footnote-31) and Karl Ove Knausgård’s autobiographical *My Struggle, Books 1–6* (*Min kamp*, 2009–11) proved to be so successful with readers. Even though the novel thrives on social conditions and their repercussions—here we might think of Turgenev’s *Fathers and Children* (Отцы и дети; Otcy i deti, 1862) or Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le Noir*—that is not the point of these new novels. They seem aimed at creating a sense of immediate trust and identification with the narrator/author. In doing so, they provide the same kind of self-forgetting engagement that classic narratives have always achieved (and fragmented tweets and statements cannot offer).[[32]](#footnote-32)

Finch concludes startlingly yet reassuringly that a persistent, core yearning resides deep inside each of us that has survived the glittering attractiveness of digital devices, at least for the time being. And what is it that we yearn for, he asks? The foundation of a Self.[[33]](#footnote-33) That need entails an element of aesthetic wisdom related to the texture of a printed text and the tactile feel of the book. There is, lest we forget, ‘an epistemological and ethical imperative associated with the reading act’.[[34]](#footnote-34) It behooves us, therefore, to consider the reading public and the expectations it brings to the task.

### Readers and the Future of Reading

How do attentive readers approach the text? I mean *really* read: intently, consciously, slowly, imaginatively, reflectively? I do not mean skimming for information to answer specific questions or perusing just the introduction and conclusion to acquire a general sense of what the argument is about.[[35]](#footnote-35) I do not mean reading breathlessly in pursuit of an amorous union or criminal resolution. I mean reading for detail and nuance that take you beneath the surface phenomena and invite you to tarry. Long ago English critic Percy Lubbuck insightfully commented on the ‘right’ way to engage a novel, noting that the method is not always successful but must nonetheless be pursued: ‘The beginning of criticism is to read aright, in other words to get into touch with the book as nearly as may be. It is a forlorn enterprise—that is admitted; but there are degrees of unsuccess.’[[36]](#footnote-36) While he was referring nineteenth-century works such as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, something like Fredrik Backman’s novel, *Folk med Angest* (2019; *Anxious People* 2020) with its allure of deep reading comes to mind today. Reading deeply has the power to make you a better-adjusted, better human being and not just a more knowledgeable or momentarily entertained one. I pursue these issues further later in this prolegomenon and in the later individual text analyses.

The Gutenberg galaxy initiated in the early modern era also involved readers who approached the printed word in different ways. Despite the rise and expansion of the *res publica litteraria*, a constant nonetheless prevailed in the encounter with the printed word. In her account of the Gutenberg revolution, for instance, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein emphasized that she is more interested in the transition from one form of literary culture to another. The shift from oral to print culture was of less importance to her. In contrast to McLuhan who accords the Gutenberg galaxy dominant importance, she argues that the printing press was just one among many agents of change in Western Europe, not the sole factor. Moreover, she is mainly concerned with the minority part of the new reading public that was already highly literate and capable of reading different kinds of printed material in different ways.[[37]](#footnote-37)

However, not until the mid-eighteenth century did a more discrete reader typology begin to emerge occasioned by the increasingly rapid expansion of print culture and a transitioning from the accustomed, intensive rereading of the same (mostly religious or morally edifying) texts in quarto format to extensive reading of multiple texts in duodecimo just once. Although growing in numbers, these literate readers still remained a small fraction of potential consumers more generally, constituting but one percent of the population.[[38]](#footnote-38) In reader response theory, this class was called ‘fit’. Other designations for it are ‘frequent’ readers and ‘the reading class’. In the American sphere, the designation ‘avid reader’ was restricted to the top four percent of all estimated readers.[[39]](#footnote-39) Fit readers are capable of sensing the resonance between the act of writing and the act of reading. They learned to care about the value of the creation of one-to-one epiphanies offered by intense narrative acts. Contemporary neurological studies are now able to visualize their psychological animations as embodied experience.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Is the situation any different today? Surely, some readers still value the intimacy of reading. But why would young readers who are not products of the Gutenberg mind but rather of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and numerous other digital media sites necessarily be expected to read like their parents and grandparents? Why should they consider that reading a long text slowly and reflectively with attention to method offers a better way to connect to the core need for a sense of Self and of belonging?

The ‘Stavanger Declaration Concerning the Future of Reading’ (2019) points out the dangers of digital reading habits. The main problem is that digital programming pays too little attention to training young readers how to read a digital text. A clear need exists for carefully designed texts, constructed in cooperation with humanities educators and reading-education experts. Sari Altschuler and David Weimer outline such initiatives in their manifesto for ‘Texturing the Digital Humanities’. They recognize the need ‘to move beyond the visual when thinking about how we might digitally recover and reproduce the three-dimensional elements and tactile epistemologies of texts’.[[41]](#footnote-41) What they have in mind are the benefits of 3-D facsimiles of inkless embossed pages as an extension of raised Boston line type and braille that benefitted the visually impaired. They envision a future that involves sight, touch, and hearing (eventually, also smell and taste) on the basis of a range of technological advances: headset/gloves, a finger-mimicking hand-held scanner, facsimiles created by alpha-numeric codes to capture the texture of pages and bindings.[[42]](#footnote-42)

We already know that readers tend to be overconfident about their ability to comprehend digital texts in contrast to their engagement of printed texts. That approach leads ‘to more skimming and less concentration’ on the reading matter itself, especially when done under duress. This proves to be especially true for children and young adults— but also, I would add, for the less discriminating adult, ‘moderate’ reader.[[43]](#footnote-43) Moreover, a review of 54 studies involving more than 170.000 participants confirmed that comprehension of either long informational or narrative texts is more pronounced when reading on paper than on screens. This happens best with longer texts as the ‘Stavanger Declaration on the Future of Reading’ concluded.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Regarding the impact of digitalization on reading practices, a four-year study by a group of some 200 European scholars and historians of reading, publishing, and literacy determined that paper remains the preferred reading medium for longer single texts, especially when reading for deeper comprehension and retention, and that paper best supports long-form reading of informational texts. Reading long-form texts is invaluable for a number of cognitive achievements, such as concentration, vocabulary building and memory. Thus, it is important that we preserve and foster long-form reading as one of a number of reading modes.[[45]](#footnote-45) Their findings hold true for literary texts as well. Reading more leisurely in Montaigne’s preferred mode is thus critical to preserving long-form reading, that is, anything beyond a tweet or Instagram. In any event, until the texturing revolution in the digital humanities occurs, longer texts in print still offer clear advantages for deep comprehension and literary appreciation. (Poetry and essays were not part of the study in any essential way.)

In light of all these more recent developments, I seek to showcase in a renewed look at classical works of European literature what the ultimate benefit of genuinely engaged reading practices is. I am aware that the discriminating individual who engages a challenging text in print in a manner envisioned by the author constitutes but a small fraction of potential readers.[[46]](#footnote-46) And they (we) might be dismissed as elitist members of ‘the reading class’. But proportionally it has been that way since the late eighteenth century, the ‘democratization of reading’ in the nineteenth century notwithstanding. Apparently for most readers, the required exertion is not worth the extra effort. Yet, we all need encouragement. General progress of the collective is dependent on multipliers of reasoned, imaginative discourse. Then president of the MLA Roland Greene saliently remarked that the 27,000 members of the MLA act as agents and multipliers of culture. While their work is not easily quantifiable, they can reach a million recipients in their classrooms over a week’s time. They can ‘enact the office of reading observantly and closely, [can] make a public for our field’.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Surely, I can reach some of those multipliers who make up but a small minority within the overall reader typologies. Perhaps they can distill what they deem important in my argument about literature and the humanities and disseminate it effectively to others. In adopting this approach, I fully embrace Immanuel Kant’s optimistic view that we can achieve an ever-widening circle of individuals devoted to nurturing character and intellectual maturity to the benefit of the commonweal through education. Even an only partially ‘enlightened’ teacher might succeed in a proactive intervention. The caveat, as always, is that one is never totally enlightened, but is, always only on a journey.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The ensuing explorations are, therefore, about who we are and where we fit into the world as much as they are about how we read. They lead us to insights into our very nature and environment. Comparatist Laurent Dubreuil draws precisely this conclusion in his survey of student-critiques of canonical and modern literature when he remarks:

Freeing oneself from the given is an unending process that lies at the core of higher education. This task concerns students and professors alike, who should constantly allow themselves to be altered by different concepts, poems, people, and events. In contrast, today’s identity politics is a false promise that is imposed on us, often in spaces of relative intellectual freedom. No university worthy of that name, and indeed no democracy worthy of that name, should urge people to retreat within the brackets of their identities. Living, thinking, dreaming, and creating are not about who we are, but who we might become.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Storytelling is especially adept at achieving such goals. Earlier forms of narrative fiction cultivated such techniques with much success.

## Forever Voyaging

Wir gehen nun an unsre Aufgabe, eine gute kleine Weltbücherei aufzubauen, und das stoßen wir gleich auf einen Grundsatz aller Geistesgeschichte: daß nämlich die ältesten Werke am wenigstens veralten. Was heute Mode ist und Aufsehen erregt, kann morgen wieder verworfen werden; was heute neu und interessant ist, ist es übermorgen nicht mehr.

(Hesse, ‘Eine Bibliothek der Weltliteratur’ (1911))[[50]](#footnote-50)

I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors. (Elena Ferrante)[[51]](#footnote-51)

### 2.1 Canon and Renewal

The choice of title for this chapter, ‘Forever Voyaging’, plays upon the decisive role of the imagination in achieving loftier goals of *Bildung* (individual development). It is related to the premise that story telling can alert us to emergent issues not yet identified in specific conceptual or disciplinary terms. Intertextuality will emerge as a particular characteristic in the play of the imagination.

The next step in examining the definition of the Self involves a brief consideration of what constitutes a canonical work of literature. Why, you might ask, is it necessary to talk about the canon at all? It has to do with what makes a work canonical beyond the act of mere repetition. And what does the canon have to do with renewal? First of all, canonical literature is distinguishable from works primarily designed for commercial success, that is, broad consumption. In this regard, we should bear in mind that literature can do intellectual work like that of philosophy or psychology. Without the skills of interpretation and imagination, for example, of the ability to place oneself in the experience of another, to transport oneself to another space, society cannot progress. That is a big claim. It figures centrally in the following.

Notions of what counts as a canonical literary work were scrutinized in the course of the past fifty years or so. The canon—commonly understood as a set of texts universally known and valued—was deemed too narrow, comprised of only dead white males, unreflective of the newest work being done, and blind to writers who did not fit the accepted classical mode. The canon as ‘cultural capital’, a notion launched by Pierre Bourdieu, had to be expanded beyond its understanding as embodied and objectified high cultural knowledge (habitus) that redounds to the owner’s financial and social advantage. It is analogous to a dress code and expected professional comportment.[[52]](#footnote-52) What seemed to be a certain rigidity in the core curricula of humanities programs at American and European educational institutions became a point of contention.

Traditionally, the teaching of the canon was about inculcating ideas, about accruing capital, not about transformative thinking. Resistance increased to the well-established core courses dominated by male writers of the Greco-Roman and European traditions. New discoveries were to be made and acknowledged. Furthermore, various forms of writing were thought to reveal specific types of content beyond the literary. This tendency became so dominant that the literary text often proved to be of secondary or even tertiary importance. That, in any event, is how one might read Ali Behdad’s ‘comparative frame of mind’; it seemingly prefers content read in an interdisciplinary fashion to the aesthetic consideration of a particular author’s manner of writing.[[53]](#footnote-53) In my approach, however, linguistic and aesthetic considerations are just as important as the content portrayed. They are (or at least should be), I argue, part and parcel of the ‘cultures of reading’ manifest since the beginning of print history. Some critics are inclined to emphasize the social role of literature in promoting universal human values. For my part, I adopt a middle way between the extremes in current approaches to defining literature and comparative in discussions of the canonical. Refining an individual’s judgment in the emergence of ‘aesthetic wisdom’ functions centrally in my view of the canon.

Long ago Virginia Woolf captured the essence of this move when she explained that, to her mind, forerunners were crucial to constituting a masterpiece: ‘For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.’[[54]](#footnote-54) Moreover, we cannot learn to read in a higher sense by perusing newspapers and occasional ephemeral literature (*Tagesliteratur*), but only by turning to masterpieces.[[55]](#footnote-55) Hence, I think of the canon— whether old or new—as the result of many years of thinking in common and not simply as the result of mandatory reading lists. In that sense, the canon is not marked by a logic of closure, of being fixed like the scriptural canon.

Much ink has been expended in an attempt to define the essence of a classic. Judah Goldin proposes an apt explanation in his introduction to S. Y. Agnon’s *Days of Awe* (1948). His remarks are intense, authentic, and straightforward. As such his long definition deserves quotation in full:

What is a classic? The question is probably as old as the first student of literature, but every student must ask it on his own over and over again, for in the answer he reveals not only something of the character of the specific literary work, but of the relation between his presence and a very large world, a treasury of experience and vocabulary, that he has appropriated. And so, to ask what is a classic, is to engage in literary criticism and self-criticism, self-examination and understanding, at the same time. A work becomes a classic the minute I discover that my many moods, my perceptions, my spontaneous terms of reference, my recurring images are startingly anticipated and given precise formulation by (and in) that work. It sharpens my eyesight, it cleans my mind of the fuzziness produced by my own lack of talent and laziness, it teaches me the words that I need for soliloquy and conversation.It is of course not strange nor solely a polite convention that so often when we speak of classics, we refer to early, old compositions. For the masters of ancient pieces too saw clearly and spoke distinctly and with precision. The first to see and the first to record accurately continue to affect us ever after—this is the immortality of truth. And since no one exhausts reality, the classic is not only the ancient. Whoever correctly discovers and uses the right words reveals the world and my life to me, and ever after governs me. He teaches me also to recognize and speak the truth.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Saliently enough, Goldin labels a classic ‘a treasury of experience and vocabulary’ that uses the ‘right words’ to reveal the world and the significance of human existence in authentic terms. Because no one writer ‘exhausts reality’, he acknowledges that a classic can be both ancient and modern. The key is not how long the work has been around. The key considerations are whether the author records accurately, affectively, and precisely and whether s/he opens my eyes, ears, and senses to what is, not what was. In sum, s/he reveals the relation between me and the larger world and offers me the distinctive language and imagery to express it.

This understanding of the openness of a classical work is marked by affective action revealed in the choice of words such as ‘clean’, ‘discover’, ‘sharpen’, ‘affect’, ‘recognize’, ‘exhaust’. These actions could (and perhaps should) result in a ‘sociology of judgment’ quite different from John Guillory’s meaning. In *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Guillory uses the notion of cultural capital to offer ‘a new historical account of both the process of canon formation and the immediate social conditions giving rise to the debate about the canon’. To him the debate about the canon represents a crisis of the value of literature. Because to ask what a classic is, is simultaneously ‘to engage in literary criticism and self-criticism, self-examination and understanding’.[[57]](#footnote-57) This latter aspect is central to my deliberations. While Goldin does not speak of specific social constituencies, he clearly considers thinking-in-common to be the opposite of a rigid conforming to a pre-ordained, unchanging mode of reading. The new constituencies do not lack an underlying, fundamental, and ultimately unifying objective analogous to older classics.[[58]](#footnote-58) While the context of inevitable reinterpretations might change, the human import does not. To be sure, Guillory is right to claim that ‘the emergence of a professional-managerial class has enormously altered the constitution and distribution of cultural capital in the school system’.[[59]](#footnote-59) One reason is the repetition of a text.[[60]](#footnote-60) Matters became even more complicated since 2009 with the American push for Common Core Standards which was supposed to improve outcomes. Yet, like many critics, Guillory considers the Common Core to be essentially misguided. Its nigh exclusive focus on the quantitative measurement of reading achievements places too much emphasis on measurable testing. It is tantamount to the mere accumulation of lifeless cultural artifacts. The upshot is to radically undervalue the qualitative complexity of both the literary text and the reflexive nature of the reading act itself. Goldin would have been appalled.

It has been widely noted, for example, that reading skills of American students begin to fall off in the upper grades of high school. This is due, he argues to ‘the increasing dominance of prose narrative over other forms *and of contemporary works* over older ones’.[[61]](#footnote-61) These tendencies suggest to him the ‘evasion’ of the curriculum; that is, ‘the avoidance of text complexity, whether quantitative or qualitative’.[[62]](#footnote-62) The growing popularity of young adult fiction in the publishing industry is for him another sign of the evasion of an increasingly complex method of reading by which he means ‘one that is increasingly self-critical and self-revising in response to rereading’ in Goldin’s sense.[[63]](#footnote-63) The diminished role of poetry in the curriculum (and in publishing itself) tracks this downward pressure on curricular complexity. Goldin’s view of the transhistorical and transcultural appeal of a classic is thus, so it seems to me, on the mark. She anticipates the contemporary notion of a classic work as ‘omniuniversal’.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Italian writer Elena Ferrante remarked to her publisher in 1991 shortly before the publication of *Troubling Love* that books, once written, have no need of their authors because books (good books at least) can speak for themselves (see quotation at the masthead of this chapter). Well, perhaps books cannot always speak for themselves, although something else is implied as the caption in the masthead by Hermann Hesse indicates. Comparatist Arnold Weinstein speaks to this implied meaning with his own apodictic comment at the end of his long career as a literature professor: ‘Books cannot speak: reading brings them to life.’[[65]](#footnote-65) Books ‘speak’ only in colloquy with a reader attuned to their complex layering of signification. In that sense reading is anticipatory (‘prospective’) rather than a mere recounting of events (‘retrospective’). Of course, a teacher adept at showing the way is useful.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Noteworthy in this regard is also Anne Ruggles Gere’s 2019 MLA presidential address. Even as Guillory promoted greater curricular coordination in levels K-16 in teaching reading for literariness (what I am calling ‘aesthetic wisdom’), she argued against the persistent divide in language and literature departments, that is, between those who teach language and writing skills and those who teach literature and theory as if they had nothing in common with language and writing skills.[[67]](#footnote-67) To bridge the gap she suggests a theoretical frame that highlights ‘the society-serving function of language’ on the one hand and the transactional dynamic of reading and writing on the other. In this regard, Ruggles Gere draws attention to the triadic model advocated by Louise Rosenblatt especially in her ‘Transactional Theory: Against Dualisms’ (1993) and ‘The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing’ (1994). Drawing on Charles Sanders Pierce and John Dewey, Rosenblatt highlighted the intertwinement of text, person, and context. Both reading and writing are about making meaning. This is not a new insight, yet one worth repeating because it disrupts the division between literature and composition courses by focusing on the dynamic process of how people relate to texts. The writer’s and reader’s stances, she avers, are ‘always moving on a continuum between more aesthetic and more efferent positions’.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Ruggles Gere’s re-visioning highlights the affective use of language evident in Goldin’s definition of a classic text, manifest in Guillory’s idea of complex reading, and apparent in Franke’s notion of a classic as ‘always only *in the making*’.[[69]](#footnote-69) Thus, Ruggles Gere also proves seminal to my re-visioning of the value of the canon as it relates to the literary works I examine. Of course, I faced a hard choice in deciding which works to include in my examination. On the one end of the spectrum of the canon is the seemingly immutable status of works such as Homer’s *Odyssey* (800 BCE), Virgil’s *Aeneid* (29–19 BCE), Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8 CE), Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (1308–20), Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606), Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605), Goethe’s *Faust* (1791, 1832), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1852), Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856), Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861), Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862), George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–72), Leo Tolstoy’s, *Anna Karenina* (1878), Oscar Wilde’s, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Frank Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung* (1916) or John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The list could, of course, go on.

Hopefully, such texts will never completely disappear from required-reading lists at institutions of higher education. Why? Because they genuinely inspire. Because they lend the world a more intense vitality. Because they address central enduring moral concerns of human existence of whatever era or ilk. Because they clearly contribute to Self-forming. Critics include them in the literary canon for reasons unrelated to Guillory’s claim that the emergence of a professional-managerial class in the twentieth century had an enormous impact on canon formation via required readings in school curricula and that ‘a historic-critical inquiry into the category of literature’ was lacking in the process.[[70]](#footnote-70) The tendency was obvious much earlier, becoming a core component of educational institutions by the mid-nineteenth century with the rise of the *Bildungsbürgertum* and its variants in Europe.[[71]](#footnote-71)

I intend to highlight the moral component in a work of canonical literature. Literary protagonists are often thrust from the heights of success and public approbation into the valley of aloneness, struggle, and despair. The fall, however, offers them an opportunity to discover what they are really made of. The meaning of life is essentially defined by how one makes sense of her/his moment of greatest adversity. Such works ask: How does moral renewal happen? How does one move from a life based on one set of seemingly valid social and ethical principles to another set of values for a more productive life? How does one recover from devastating loss? And what does ‘more productive’ actually suggest? Frequently, if not always, it connotes a period of self-reflection in the solitude of the ‘wilderness’ as a precondition for the successful recovery from adversity, from an exclusionary focus on the Self to an inclusionary one on meaningful relations.

On the other end of the spectrum is the more recent surge of new entrants into the literary canon drawn from previously neglected groups and cultures such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), the Moroccan Tahar ben Jelloun’s *La Nuit Sacrée* (1987), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988), Turkish-German Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s *Mutterzunge* (*Mothertongue*, 1990), the Lebanese Elias Khoury’s *Gate of the Sun* (2000) or Japanese-German Yoko Tawada’s *Kentoshi* (2014; *The Emissary*, 2018). They are, in part, examples of translation as a ‘border discipline’ which is both a practice and an interpretative tool or mode of reading. As such they are a commentary on the crucial role played by global humanities.[[72]](#footnote-72) What they share with older classics is the power of storytelling that illuminates the recesses of the human condition. The experience of being human across the multiple contexts and scales of existence is revealed. The cultural inclusiveness of this end of the spectrum tends to emphasize the value of difference; it has found enthusiastic supporters in academia and the book industry. We find these tendencies etched in the pages of *The Atlantic*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and the *New York Review of Books*. And, yes, they too expose the Other—the Not-I—as a reflection of the gazing I.

In this regard, we do well to recall the core argument of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, in particular, his notion of the I as formed by a continual interaction between an ‘I’ and a ‘Not-I’. It is an idea that resonates in contemporary theories of intersubjectivity, Self, and identity formation in a lineage of such thinkers as Eduard Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jürgen Habermas, Emmanuel Levinas, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Fichte sought to elucidate the necessary conditions under which the subject is able to achieve self-consciousness.[[73]](#footnote-73) He reconstructed the principal constitutive features of consciousness according to Kantian transcendental philosophy (apperception, space, time, categorical imperatives, the role of the imagination, and functions of reason) as a ‘history of consciousness’. It ranges from incipient self-awareness discernible ‘in undifferentiated feeling through the workings of the imagination in theoretical understanding to the practical self-consciousness of striving reason’.[[74]](#footnote-74) In the process, intersubjectivity emerges for Fichte as foundational in the constitution of the Self that is marked by an essentially moral core.[[75]](#footnote-75) That insight is central to my approach to understanding self-realization. Fichte begins the first principles of the first publication of his *Wissenschaftslehre* with the proposition: ‘the I posits itself as an I’. ‘Posits’ is meant to be understood as ‘reflect upon’, not to claim the ‘I’ as a distinct ‘thing’ or ‘substance’. In his revised *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (1796/99), Fichte corrected the inaccuracy by substituting the directive: ‘think the I, and observe what is involved in doing this’. Dan Breazeale explains why this substitution is important:

[...] we must, due to the discursive character of reflection itself, distinguish each of these acts from the others that it is conditioned by and that are, in turn, conditioned by it, none of these individual acts actually occurs in isolation from all of the others. Transcendental philosophy is thus an effort to *analyze* what is in fact the single, *synthetic* act through which the I posits for itself both itself and its world, thereby becoming aware in a single moment of both its freedom and its limitations, its infinity and its finitude. The result of such an analysis is the recognition that, although ‘the I simply posits itself’, its freedom is never ‘absolute’ or ‘unlimited’; instead, freedom proves to be conceivable—and hence the I itself proves to be possible—only as limited and finite. Despite widespread misunderstanding of this point, the *Wissenschaftslehre* is not a theory of the absolute I. Instead, the conclusion of both the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* and of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* is that the ‘absolute I’ is a mere abstraction and that the only sort of I that can actually exist or act is a *finite, empirical, embodied, individual self*.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Breazeale offers here a succinct clarification of the I as continuously evolving, chameleon-like; that is, changing without loss of an underlying uniqueness as a positing agent. It posits both itself and its world, thereby revealing the tension between its internally constituted freedom and its externally conditioned limitations.[[77]](#footnote-77)

### Individual Agency

Since the Renaissance, writers and thinkers emphatically refocused attention on the place of the individual in the world and his/her potential as the maker of her/his own fate. That shift away from the demands of Church and state marked the beginning of modernity. The emphasis on the individual occasioned a shift in value formation, which proved exhilarating in its opportunity for emancipatory experiences but also frightening in its potential for failure. Ultimately, it led to the hyper-individualism of today. A core concept of Western thought is thus the value of the individual and the importance of meritocracy. Both are intimately bound up with the notion of Self, although not solely constitutive of it.[[78]](#footnote-78) Of course, notions of the value of the individual and the importance of meritocracy had roots in Greco-Roman antiquity and were often challenged by opposing views. Yet, the resilience of the belief in the value of a unique Self as the core of agency remains manifest in such notions as the individual Self being a mirror of the Godhead, the ultimate agent, an idea that found its way into G. W. Leibniz’s seventeenth-century concept of the sentient monad. The challenges to the supposedly settled (or just emergent) Self—what I call Confronting the Self—are multiple and should be considered as continuous. Why that? Because anything that is fully formed runs the dire risk of ossification, of stasis. Life, however, is marked by movement. Constant movement. And change. And the I *is* alive. It is pure agency. It is the actual manifestation of life, life being the medium of realization. This idea is at the heart of Toni Morrison’s *The Source of Self Regard* (2019), a collection of essays and lectures drawn from four decades of her meditations on society and culture, on imaginings of Self and Other.

In the Fichtean universe morality functions as the lode star in the endless strivings of the I for self-determination and perfection. For this reason, the fundamental Fichtean intellectual and spiritual concept of the I and its encounters with the world and the Not-I figure prominently in the following.[[79]](#footnote-79) These issues remain broadly relevant today. David Brooks’ confessional *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (2019) speaks, for instance, of human experience in terms of a two-mountain metaphor. However, he does so without reference to the similar message and impact of canonical literature. Nor is he aware of the mountain motif in the allegorical *tabula cebetis* (Πίναξ Κέβητος), the Table of Cebes, popular from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries. The allegory renders the increasing degrees of moral purification humans experience during life’s journey.[[80]](#footnote-80)



[Insert Tabula Cebetis Image here]

In Brooks’ recasting of the theme, ascending the first mountain represents the promotion of self in the quest for money, power, fame, recognition (i.e., cultural capital). It is about molding the individual, about self-expressing in exclusionary fashion. Yet this self-fashioning is far from being self-directed; it is actually *fremdgesteuert* in the sense that others determine what values one should hold. Not everyone reaches the summit, and those who do, he opines, wonder whether the narcissistic focus was really worth the effort. Many questers are bumped off the ascending path by some encounter or catastrophe and land fractured and desolate in the valley below. Not all those whose hopes and aspirations have been dashed are able to recover, to pull themselves up again, to locate the ‘real’ Self among the fragments. Emptiness engulfs them. But some find renewal. They gradually realize that interdependence—not dependence—is what life is about. Ultimately, it dawns on them that an individual life is actually part of a larger ecology (even as living organisms on earth exist via interconnectedness). Then they begin to ascend a second mountain, which represents a diffusion of the solipsistic focus. The building of character begins, and a general movement toward joy and not mere happiness is launched. Joy is rooted in a moral code, whereas happiness is object-oriented. Brooks asserts, for instance: ‘If the first mountain is about building up the ego and defining the self, the second is about shedding the ego and dissolving the self. If the first mountain is about acquisition, the second mountain is about contribution.’[[81]](#footnote-81)

To be sure, he is also seeking to explain a cultural renewal that he sees as (or hopes to be) emergent, a movement away from capitalist consumption toward altruistic giving back. It should not be construed, however, as a movement away from so-called ‘unitary subjectivity’ to ‘nomadic identity’, as Frith puts it.[[82]](#footnote-82) ‘When a whole society is built around self-preoccupation, its members become separated from one another, divided, alienated. And that is what has happened to us’.[[83]](#footnote-83) The way out is to reach out. It involves a negotiation of Self and Other along the lines of shared spaces, collective memories, and tastes. Brooks identifies specific commitments that impart more substantial meaning and real joy to life beyond the hyper-individualism that defines so much of contemporary ethics. First is a commitment to a spouse and family; second, to a vocation or calling to do some good. Third is allegiance to a deep-seated belief (whether religious or philosophical); and, fourth, dedication to the well-being of a community. Each draws us out of ourselves; each requires us to balance various commitments to others. Success in this phase leads to a greater sense of personal fulfillment than does the simple pleasure of satisfying personal wants.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Not everyone has to fall off the mountain in order to gain a new insight (as Brooks himself did). Nonetheless, his model demonstrates just how persistent allegories of moral purification are. Individuals who have survived catastrophe are better equipped emotionally to deal with the pain of adversity, are better able to get up and move forward. Indeed, how is one to know one’s metal if not tested? The stresses and strains are constant and recurrent. Or at least they should be. If one settles into dogmatic adherence to a religious belief, one misses the mark again. How is such an obsession different from a sole focus on power, money, or fame? Blind allegiance to an exclusionary cause lacks the crucial element of compassion. Commitment without empathy and compassion thus lacks added value. The Other matters, especially when failure, lapse, and suffering are involved. Brooks’ assessment of the importance of failure for reconfiguring one’s defining values should not blind us, however, to the fact that he is essentially promoting insights gained long ago under different guises, ranging from the Tabula Cebetis to Fichtean intersubjectivity to modern theories of emotional intelligence. In essence, Brooks recasts the debate on the old and new (or first and Second) Enlightenment. If the first Enlightenment was about the individual and self-liberation, the Second Enlightenment emphasizes respect for the Other, acknowledging that the Self is part of an ecological system.[[85]](#footnote-85) Both can degenerate into something unintended such as solipsism or authoritarianism in the first instance, and the loss of Self in deadening uniformity in the second. In any event, Brook addresses a recurring transformative process inherent in the dynamic interaction of internal and external forces that has global significance.[[86]](#footnote-86)

### Lost

My intention is to trace seminal stages in defining the Self (an ‘I’) through various confrontations with an Other (a ‘Not-I’). There has been no lack of attention to the issue throughout history as Jerrold Seigel, Paul Ricœur, Alasdaire MacIntyre, Arnold Weinstein, and many others make clear. The key ingredients for me are the ‘confrontations’, the challenges, the opposition to the Self.[[87]](#footnote-87) My time frame ranges from seventeenth-century early Modernism to twentieth-century existentialism in literary, philosophical, and psychological writing. A comprehensive accounting of that metamorphosis (those metamorphoses?) would necessitate a genuinely interdisciplinary approach with an endless array of documentation. While such thoroughness would appeal to the dedicated scholar-researcher, it is likely to be of less interest to the average reader. Nonetheless, some scholarly documentation is unavoidable.

Literary masterpieces in the European tradition that formed the canon throughout the twentieth century had to make room on college syllabi for long-overlooked writers. Yet, the occasional removal from required reading lists of classics such as *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, or *The Magic Mountain* with their carefully crafted prose, exquisite characterizations, period authenticity, philosophical musings, and revealing social mores—their *method* of approach—is not intended to denigrate their literary value nor their ability to spark contemporary interest despite the passage of time. Newer entrants also deserve consideration, as noted above. So, why do I not include some of them, one might legitimately ask? Space is limited. Space is always limited. And I am interested in arguing for the continued importance of the classical canon, keeping it present in the contemporary mind. Then, too, even the dedicated reader’s attention span is not limitless. Hence, selection is a sine qua non for any investigation that aspires to reach a wider audience. And what theme could be more inspiring than that of self-knowledge, of self-awareness, of gaining a sense of personal value, of learning how to deal with adversity, and understanding of how to become what one is? The texts analyzed in the ensuing pages are excellently suited to this purpose.

We do not know who we are, Dostoevsky’s nameless Underground Man insists at the end of *Notes from Underground* (1864) long before the existential crisis of the mid-twentieth century we know so well from Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger* (1942). And he goes on to say that the tension between the complete freedom to act and restraint through discipline constantly impact upon who we are:

We would be the ones to suffer if our whimsical wishes were granted. Well, try it yourselves—ask for more independence. Take anyone and untie his hands, open up his field of activity, relax discipline, and ... well, believe me, he’d immediately want that discipline clamped down on him again. I know that what I’m saying is liable to make you angry; that it may make you stamp your feet and scream: ‘Talk about yourself and about your own miseries in your stinking hole, but don’t you say all of us.’[[88]](#footnote-88)

Whether the Underground Man’s assertion is universally applicable to the human condition will figure prominently in the following analyses of literature as the crucible in which the individual’s selfhood and sense of value are forged. Later, Friedrich Nietzsche, who admittedly learned much from Dostoevsky, chimed in with his own take on how to assess the Self. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–91) he contends: ‘Human existence is uncanny and still without meaning: a jester can become man’s fatality. I will teach men the meaning of their existence—the overman, the lightening out of the dark cloud of man.’[[89]](#footnote-89) The meaning of this famous assertion concerning the *Übermensch* and the dark shroud that is humankind will also be explored in Part II of my investigation.

In historical perspective, a worldview marked by an encompassing intelligent design offered comfort to the suffering, to be sure. Yet, such a view was anchored in a transcendent and ordered reality far distant from the lived reality of the many. The downside was that it offered little opportunity for personal development, for an individualistic notion of Self. With the spread of Renaissance thought, the solace provided by the prospect of future salvation became increasingly diminished. The transcendental safety net was withdrawn for those who dared to question things as they are. A new consciousness of one’s own agency emerged: one must make one’s *own* way through life without help from a transcendent being. Consequently, the theme of growing self-consciousness, of humankind being forced to think about what it actually means to be human without any of the transcendental overlays, runs like a red thread in the following pages.

Although I also acknowledge that the idea of the Self has roots in its corporeality (the biological), the social (family, community, nation), and transcendental (the thing in itself, Truth, objective reason, religious faith), I nevertheless approach the idea of the Self from an angle different from the one Jerrold Seigel adopts in his monumental account or Arnold Weinstein in his inquiry of self-affirmation in fiction. Seigel readily grants that he approaches his topic as an historian whose purpose is to chronicle definitions of selfhood by select thinkers since the seventeenth century.[[90]](#footnote-90) However, only late in his deliberations does he suggest that narrative itself might be a determining factor in describing how the corporeal, the relational, and reflexivity interact to form the personal being, even if he briefly suggests as much in his Introduction.[[91]](#footnote-91) Yet, unlike Weinstein for whom fiction stands front and center, Seigel is worried that the idea of narrativity might lead us astray, when he cautions:

if I aspire to having it [narrative] be more truth than fiction, then I need to care about how reliable my understanding of each of these things [the three dimensions] actually is. In other words, saying that selfhood is narrative does not release us from the need to give the best answers we can to the questions about which we may reasonably look to the sciences for enlightenment. Humanists construct programs that cover up this obligation at their peril.[[92]](#footnote-92)

He rightly notes, I think, that the truth of narrative is dependent upon the reliability of the narrator’s understanding of the three dimensions and their interaction. The ‘best answers’ for reliable understanding, moreover, are rooted in the sciences. He concludes that humanists ignore this connection at their own peril. I wonder whether we can be so confident that the sciences provide better enlightenment. Seigel seems to have made less clear how he sees the Self as actually being recognized or constituted.

To say that the Self *results* from narrative accounts of personal being is not the same as equating the Self entirely to the narrative. That makes sense, even if the ‘I’ engages in interpretive acts about itself and its relationship to the world. Furthermore, even personal observations can be distorted and prove unreliable. Elsewhere Seigel states that he was ‘lost’ most of the time in examining individual thinkers because he had no overarching theory in play to connect them. He later added his long introductory essay in an effort to provide a useful orientation, finding a solution with the notion of ‘intelligent agency’. In sum, he devises a narrative red thread—the agency of intelligence—to tell a story of how the idea of the Self became manifest over four centuries. Secondly, while Seigel recognizes Nietzsche’s rejection of ‘Truth’ as being a construct, he does not seem to acknowledge that Nietzsche’s iconoclastic approach extended to the ‘truths’ of natural science which are themselves mere interpretations (or, as Nietzsche says, ‘lies’). As a consequence, life in all its manifestations is essentially literature.[[93]](#footnote-93) As we shall see, Dostoevsky foreshadowed this broader point in *Notes from Underground*.

On the other hand, Seigel duly notes that the concept of the Self is a manifestation of the will to power, whereby the will to power basically designates the flow of energy that is filtered through the individual medium whether animal, plant, or inanimate matter. The insight that life is literature—and thus also an expression of the will to power—lends greater weight to the role that narrative plays in constituting the elusive *moi pure* (Paul Valéry), ‘authentic self’ (Heidegger), or ‘deep self’ (Henri Bergson) that Seigel is getting at.[[94]](#footnote-94) ‘Multi-dimensionality’, Seigel suggests, is ‘the only genuine mode of selfhood’.[[95]](#footnote-95) This assertion seems to resonate with William Franke ‘omniversality’, yet it does not jibe with the notion of a core Self. A plethora of *perspectives* presumes that something is being manifest. How is recourse to the sciences for more reliable insight of benefit, when science also interprets phenomena?

Nietzschean terminology advances Seigel’s argument. Yet, he leaves unclear whether he means that the self (small cap) results from multiple narrative layerings of selfhood much like the integuments of an onion that has no solid core or whether the Self (large cap) is like a seed imbedded in external layers that together make up the whole? Is the Self perhaps just an overriding idea? A center, to adopt Nietzschean terminology, that is found everywhere? Relevant to this ambiguity is all that which happened *after* Narcissus first saw his image in the stillness of the pond and at first not realizing that he was gazing upon his own countenance. Confronting himself as an Other rather than as his own felt Self, he initially struggled to explain the apparition that, until then, he had experienced only internally.[[96]](#footnote-96) The experience of the Self as being seen from without lies at the core of literature. Confessional literature adds an additional internal perspective of a Self being exposed to others. The latter entails a meeting of the ‘I’ and the Other. The gaze of the I/eye returns in the text as the gazed upon I/eye; mirroring occurs. The reflection reveals the individual’s own powers and limitations. It discloses the relativity of human values, enhances the human being’s sense of individuation, prompts her or him to define humanness in a changing world. Ultimately, it leads to a sense of loss of a defining ‘Self’. A personal crisis results.

‘Once again man has lost himself’, Ortega y Gasset writes in *Man and People* (1957), but immediately adds that this is nothing new, for ‘man has been lost many times throughout the course of history. Indeed, it is of the essence of man, in contradistinction to all other beings, that he can lose himself, lose himself in the jungle of his existence, within himself, and thanks to this sensation of being lost can react by setting energetically to work to find himself again.[[97]](#footnote-97) For that reason, the literary texts examined in Part II offer us the possibility of opening ourselves up to the worlds depicted. They invite us to lose ourselves in them.

History—culture in general—documents these struggles of losing, finding, and defining the Self. It has consequences for both the individual and for society as a whole. Why? Because deep meaning is not possible without community, without context (as David Brook argued in the public sphere). It is relational. Individual readers largely belong to interpretive communities that direct their attention to particular details and incline us to read in certain ways, as Stanley Fish and others have argued in academic circles.[[98]](#footnote-98) Hence, when a writer writes against the grain of expectation, s/he implicitly adopts an authorial stance. S/he takes a stand by challenging communal assumptions and notions of Self, however subtle that questioning might be.

Authorial attitude expressed as a skeptical questioning of fixed notions is of particular interest in the following analyses, for it challenges readers to think outside the proverbial box. Some of the writing is direct and unmistakable, some texts are quite muted in their questioning of accepted norms, muted because they employ metaphorical language in a strategically memetic manner. The gazing eye of the reader is directed at something outside the Self which reflects textual meaning back to the contemplating I. Done effectively, it incites rumination.

Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) is relevant in this regard, for it adds a new dimension to Seigel’s intelligent agency. Freud concluded that the evolution of culture and civilization was not as enigmatic as thought. He decided that culture/civilization was the working out of a struggle within the human species between *Eros*, the life instinct, and *Thanatos*, the death instinct. ‘This struggle’, Freud notes, ‘is what all life essentially consists of and so the evolution of civilization may be simply described as the struggle of the human species for existence’.[[99]](#footnote-99) One can (for Seigel it is an afterthought) relate this struggle to Seigel’s argument about the self/Self.[[100]](#footnote-100) More apt, perhaps, is to see the life instinct as the growth or bonding process, whereas the death instinct is dissolution and decay. Human existence depends on bonding forces be they biological, physiological, mental, or memetic. These forces of attraction and repulsion act between neighboring particles in physics, between biological cells, between contending ideas in the humanities. Bonding forces act as the center that holds everything together in a unit and accords it singularity.

Humans are after all hybrid creatures who have the ability to form mental representations of mental representations that are partially the result of gene–culture coevolution with biological development. And, as natural scientist Dan Sperber propounds, their mental products are cultural phenomena of cognitive proficiency resultant of ‘interactions between ecological and psychological factors of attraction’; together they constitute an ‘epidemiology of representations’.[[101]](#footnote-101) An epidemiological approach is preferred to analyzing the evolution of cultural memes into dominant forces that have an afterlife perhaps more resilient than their material artifacts. The dueling instincts of attraction and repulsion form a major anchor point in the following. Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* again presents us with an excellent example of these interactive forces in constituting a Self.

### Changing Constellations: Process

A variety of philosophical and literary texts help trace the shifting modes of being human from the age of optimism (Renaissance-Enlightenment) to the age of subjectivity (18th-century sensibility, Romanticism) to the positivistic determinism of the 19th century (Realism, Nihilism, Naturalism), the spiritual dislocation and disillusionment following WWI, and finally to the existentialistic plight resultant of WWII, the Holocaust, and of modern science. In other words, the selected texts will be read against the ‘galaxy’ of Einstein’s general theory of relativity (1905), Virginia Woolf’s plaidoyer for a room of one’s own (1929), and Freud’s theory of civilization and its discontents (1930). Each was based on the notion of process; each was a major disruptor of accepted ideas.

Einstein’s general theory of relativity ascribes to gravity the warping of space and time by matter and energy. As a consequence, the contents of the universe follow nonlinear trajectories. Thus, the theory of general relativity introduced a transformative conception of cosmic dynamics, in which space-time could quiver, bend, rip, expand, swirl like a mix-master and even disappear forever into the maw of a black hole. This undoing of the classical view of a linear universe affected our attitudes far beyond their scientific innovation. We no longer inhabited a fixed, predictable system. The exchange of energy and matter, the predominance of dark energy, and the tenuousness of stability changed our world view and sense of security if not our daily routine.

Woolf’s long essay, *A Room of One’s Own,* had a more direct impact on our daily routines with her similarly disrupted assumptions of an established order. Celebrated as a landmark of feminist thought with its indictment of female exclusion from independence, income, and education, *A Room of One’s Own* proved to be transformative. With its focus on building up the female Self, it caused quite a stir, ultimately transforming the literary landscape well beyond England itself. Its envisioning of female agency was instrumental to be sure, but it offered more than ‘just’ an ostensible argument for female self-sufficiency. On closer reading, as we shall see, it proved to be more than a feminist manifesto. The book has never been out of print, an attestation to its revolutionary thrust. An examination of its significance for reading and writing as sites for realizing self-affirmation more generally is undertaken in detail in the ensuing chapter.

Freud’s analysis of Western civilization, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, one of his most important and widely received works, was likewise transformative as was his theory of the psychic system comprised of the id, the ego, and the superego and their interactions. As ‘father of psychoanalysis’, he ascribed to the id (*Triebe*) instinctual drives that arise from the body. The ego (*Umwelt*, *Selbststeuerung*) designates the environmental domain that affects perception, thinking, and self-directed motor control. On the other hand, the superego (*Mitwelt*, *Fremdsteuerung*) is situated in the human realm; it exerts control of the ego according to internalized social and moral norms. Influenced by the devastation of WW I, Freud applies in *Civilization and Its Discontents* the notion of contending forces to civilization itself. He offers a kind of mapping for a better life.

The cultural study recast our understanding of civilization, the purpose of which is now to promote individual happiness through the ‘art of living’ in a community. The fulcrum point is between the individual quest for freedom and society's need for conformity. He grounded his central observation concerning the tension between the individual and civilization in the destructive and violent human energies he had witnessed. He poses ‘loving and being loved’ as the center and source of all satisfaction and a way to counter the destructive tendencies.[[102]](#footnote-102) This requires ‘the transformation and rearrangement of [one’s] libidinal components’ that is essentially an ‘economics of the individual’s libido’.[[103]](#footnote-103) Purely erotic love morphs into more generalized forms of attachment, that prove to be the bonding elements civilization. They even contain ‘an aesthetic attitude’, which is a form of compensation for and protection against the injuries inflicted by reality and the loss of love.[[104]](#footnote-104) Available only to the few, this aesthetic attitude is not related to the shallow, toxic entertainment offered by modern media that wastes much too much energy in escaping reality, an energy that could have been devoted to the ‘improvement of the human lot’.[[105]](#footnote-105)

In short, the rise of civilization with its discontents amounts to an unending dialectical dynamic of growth and restriction, of a clash between individual freedom and external necessity (Thanatos), of the tendency to inhibit and sublimate the individual’s sexual life and the tendency to expand the cultural unit from the family to ever widening communities with the goal of universal brotherhood.[[106]](#footnote-106) Freud’s interpretation of making the ‘subject independent of Fate’ via ‘internal mental processes’ allows us to comprehend more fully and accurately the process of defining the Self as the art of living that entails various *modes* of being human.[[107]](#footnote-107) The Self in search of itself is tantamount to the act of ‘forever voyaging’, to adapt Virginia Woolf’s notion about acquiring selfhood.[[108]](#footnote-108) Ortega y Gasset was to aver thirty years later: ‘Our destiny is not only what we have been and now are; it is not only the past, but, coming from the past, it projects itself, in openness, toward the future. [...] Our future being emerges from our freedom, a continuous spring forever flowing out of itself.’[[109]](#footnote-109)

Against this backdrop of a newly reconstituted constellation of ideas each literary work is plumbed for the pleasure that it extends to the attentive reader. By focusing on the work’s literary qualities, I am particularly interested in ‘*materializing* the pleasure of the text’, to employ Roland Barthes’ terminology.[[110]](#footnote-110) The pleasure of reading extends beyond mere ephemeral delight; it includes a deeper dimension. The notion of reading involved in the following analyses is tantamount to what writer Harold Brodkey labels a ‘dangerous game’.[[111]](#footnote-111) The reading act, he contends, should challenge us, should put us at risk of becoming unsettled, even changed as a result.

Hence, the dominant concept of reading applied here is one ‘in which reading and the risks of real life are subject to the same anamnesis’ rather than focusing on an aesthetic of ‘the *pleasure of the consumer*’.[[112]](#footnote-112) Barthes uses anamnesis in its twofold meaning: (1) as a function of memory, of recollecting the past; but also (2) of documenting pathological histories, of describing the evolution of an illness. In this vein, I will consider literature as ‘confession and self-analysis’.[[113]](#footnote-113) Indeed, much of what the reader will encounter in this study from *La Princesse de Clèves* to *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* to *Zapíski iz podpólʹya* (Записки из подполья, *Notes from Underground*) and *L’Étranger* contains a confessional dimension. It should be remembered that the ‘pleasure of the consumer’ is not identical to the pleasure of the text in Barthes’ meaning.[[114]](#footnote-114) It is a question of aesthetic wisdom.

The confession (or self-analysis) is not necessarily the author’s as in Augustine of Hippo’s classic *Confessions* (397–400 CE) or Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* (1712–78). A narrated character prompts the reader to turn the gaze inward in an empathetic process of identification. It can lead to a vicarious admission of what one is not, of where one is not, but to which one is now transported. Seen in this light, the art of confessional writing appears as a something other than a matter of ‘power relations’ between the roles of speaker and listener or writer and reader (modeled on Michel Foucault), which is at the heart of the wide-ranging collection, *Stories and Portraits of the Self* (2007), edited by Helena Carvalhão Buescu and João Ferreira Durate.

### Excursus: Gaps

I have noted gaps before. But an explanation for them bears repeating. Some readers might be puzzled by obvious omissions in my selected sampling. Why have I not included more women? Writers of color? More contemporary texts?

Surely, Richard Wright’s classic *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945), written in a confessional mode deserves a spot, especially when he recounts how he ‘hungered for books, *new ways of looking and seeing* [...] of *feeling something new*, of *being affected* by something that made the look of the world different’.[[115]](#footnote-115) And of course the discovering of a new look, of a new perspective, of being deeply affected, of feeling empowered, figures centrally in my overall argument. Books were a kind of drug for Wright (as for so many of the writers mentioned only in passing) and radically altered his life’s path. He devoured literature not to reinforce a set pattern or to form a habit, but rather to dislocate himself from his original situs. Reading, he grants, created a great distance between his sense of Self and the world he inhabited.[[116]](#footnote-116) Reading had induced a crisis situation. Literary renditions of life beyond his own personal experience—and perhaps his reach—have so affected his thinking, his looking, that he feels compelled to alter his external situation to align it with the modes of being human encountered through getting ‘lost’ in a literary narrative. Those textual immersions countered what David Brooks would later label ‘mental flabbiness’.[[117]](#footnote-117) They empowered him to use his own voice.[[118]](#footnote-118)

And what of Toni Morrison? Like Richard Wright, James Baldwin, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and Doris Lessing she helped others to break out of the bubble of self-hood. Barack Obama, who conveyed the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Toni Morrison in 2012 for her many contributions to American culture, acknowledged his personal indebtedness. Books do indeed continue each other, even if we tend to consider each individually, as Woolf says.[[119]](#footnote-119) The writer Wesley Morris picks up on that legacy of raising awareness of the universal value of African-American writing in his tribute to Toni Morrison upon her death on 5 August 2019 by acknowledging that she did not make him a writer but, more importantly, she did make him a thinker. She taught him to read, that is, really to *read*: ‘Hers is the kind of writing that makes you rewind and slow down and ruminate. It’s the kind of writing that makes you rewind because, god, what you just read was that titanic, that perception-altering, that true, a spice on the tongue. These spasms of disbelief are so ecstatic that immediate rereading is the only cure.’[[120]](#footnote-120) That is the impact good writers have had over the ages.

So why not include such writers? Well, they are within the more modern American literary canon and not representative of the older classical European one I have in mind. Nor do I include modern and contemporary European examples of the kind of traditional canonical works I wish to highlight as not being passé. In addition to writers already named, others also come to mind, for instance, Austrian Thomas Bernhard (e.g., *Verstörung* 1967; *Gargoyles*, 1970), East-German Christa Wolf (e.g., *Kassandra* 1983; *Cassandra*, 1984), German Bernhard Schlink (*Der Vorleser* 1995; *The Reader*, 1997), Afghan-American Khaled Hosseini (e.g., *The Kite Runner* 2003), and Romanian-German Herta Müller (*Atemschaukel* 2009; *The Hunger Angel*, 2012). They represent, in part, not only internationally bestselling authors but also writers who cross linguistic and cultural borders as both practice and interpretative modes of reading.

The theory employed here, then, is implicit in the literary work itself, in its aesthetic and narrative structure (e.g. Saussurian structuralism) that exposes ‘reading as a co-operative, interpretive experience’ (e.g., Iserian hermeneutics).[[121]](#footnote-121) This kind of ‘collaborative imagination’ between a single solitary reader and a text is different from the notion promoted by Michael Bérubé and his colleagues in their detailing of ‘collective interpretation’ in a supportive community setting.[[122]](#footnote-122) Why? Because the class of readers required to engage texts that ‘have no need of their authors’ (Elena Ferrante), is unlikely to consist of novices. Rather, they would likely be ‘avid’ or even include some ‘frequent’ readers. However, I do not wish to suggest that groups of readers exchanging ideas about textual meaning in the imaginative unlocking of aesthetic-ethical semaphores is without merit. These collective efforts—when guided by more experienced readers—can easily lead to the skills and nuanced sensitivities that we associate with the upper classes of readers.[[123]](#footnote-123) My approach is simply focused elsewhere. Ultimately, readers should be or become ‘fit’ enough to stand on their own. In short, this book is kind of a vade mecum to guide the willing toward a greater appreciation of independent, refined literary sensitivity.

My methodology in defining the Self, as should now be clear, is grounded in the art of narrative engagement. Through it we experience ‘transportation’; that is, we get ‘lost’ in a piece of writing. Through it we become more capable of experiencing empathy. The process activates sensibilities but also incites critical thinking. We are able to become more self-directive, more self-reflexive, more self-questioning, more attuned to authenticity. Such accretion of authority to oneself (and the independence gained thereby) allows the ‘freedom to think of things in themselves’.[[124]](#footnote-124) Not surprisingly, narrative accounts of self-reflexivity represent with their narcissistic dimension a metafictional paradox, as Linda Hutcheon has pointed out.[[125]](#footnote-125) Narcissism understood as being free of any negative connotation. The freedom to think critically must be learned. It starts early on. And even if critical thinking has a moral component that requires proportionality,[[126]](#footnote-126) it does not necessarily lead to enduring happiness and contentment.

To sum up: my seemingly eclectic choice of works is predicated on the belief that books continue each other. They have a way of influencing subsequent writers as moments of inheritance and of origination in a process of forever voyaging. Mimesis, ultimately, involves a dialectic and can end up being memetic. The repeated search is part and parcel of the circular power with neither a beginning nor an end that is insistently returning into itself, as R. W. Emerson noted.[[127]](#footnote-127) And we know of course that no genuine work of art is static. Even if, in the end, the following interpretations do not achieve stasis, they do have a distinct beginning and share a distinct methodology.

# II. Exempla

## Determining the Self: Madame de Lafayette, *The Princess de Clèves* (1678)

It is universally admitted that when we want to get a true picture of human life: behaviour, manners, customs, aspirations, indulgences, vices, virtues, it is to the novelist and historian that we turn, not to the psychologist or the physiologist.

(Joseph Collins, *The Doctor Looks at Literature*)[[128]](#footnote-128)



### Past and Present

Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne (1634–93) was born into a Parisian family of minor nobility, the eldest daughter of Marc Pioche (+1656), Esquire to the King, Sieur de La Vergne and tutor to Cardinal Richelieu’s nephew. At age sixteen, due to the family’s wealth and connections, she became maid of honor to Queen Anne of Austria. She was tutored by the scholar, Gilles Ménage, in Italian and Latin, who also helped her acquire a literary education and introduced her to the salons of Madame de Rambouillet and Madeleine de Scudéry. At age twenty-one in 1655, de la Vergne married the widowed army officer, François Motier, comte de La Fayette, ultimately bearing him two sons. Her first published work was *La Princesse de Montpensier* (1662). Beginning in 1665 she enjoyed a close relationship with the celebrated writer, François de La Rochefoucauld, until his death in 1680. Today, she is considered a landmark in the history of women writers, based on her first novel and a collaborative effort with Pierre-Daniel Huet and Jean Regnault de Segrais, *Zayde, histoire espgnole* (1670–71), to whom she sent her manuscript ‘pièce à pièce’ for comment. Segrais was, nonetheless, listed as the author. Her authorship was not discovered until much later. The novel was a great success.

However, *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), which was published anonymously proved to be an even greater sensation that led to a public debate. Although anonymous, many at court suspected Mme de Lafayette to be the author or her close friend, François Duc de La Rochefoucauld (1613–80). Both denied any involvement. Although scholars now conclude that La Rochefoucauld was not a collaborator in the writing, he might very well have served as an advisor as Mme de Lafayette researched the history of the final phase of Henri II’s reign (1558–59), the historical setting for the novel. She weaves historical events of the preceding era into her narrative of life at court in the later seventeenth century in a new style that offered shorter paragraphing and alternating sentence length.[[129]](#footnote-129) That style conveyed a sense of the characters and their story as being real and timeless so that the book’s anonymous publication allowed readers to focus on content and character rather than on trying to determine authorship.[[130]](#footnote-130)

Because of its precise rendition of events, persons, and interactions, *La Princesse de Clèves* has been recognized as an early example of historical fiction (*roman historique*) marked by *vraisemblance* and, more recently, of what has been described as ‘tender geographies’.[[131]](#footnote-131) Stendhal pronounced it divine as much for its intrinsic worth as for its early date of publication.[[132]](#footnote-132) Mme de Lafayette herself wrote à propos the novel that ‘it is a perfect representation of the world of the court and of the way one lives there. The book does not seem like a romance, and there is nothing overdone in it’.[[133]](#footnote-133) Situated ‘at the intersection of gender and genre that produced the modern French novel’, it represents ‘a meditation on the making of history in 17th-century France’.[[134]](#footnote-134) Indeed, *La Princesse de Clèves* is an example of what Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburg aptly observed in his celebrated *Versuch über den Roman* (Essay on the Novel, 1774): ‘Novels were not created by the genius of their authors alone: the social values of their period of origin also gave birth to them.’[[135]](#footnote-135) To that assessment we can add telling modifiers to be even more apt to the consideration of how the Self is defined through confrontation: ‘the *changing* social and *moral* values of their period of origin’. Therein lies the genuinely innovative aspect of the novel. *La Princesse de Clèves* represents a new set of emergent values that will eventually replace the traditional mores of the high aristocracy. Those emergent values figure centrally in this chapter.

The reason for the setting of this historical novel is explained early on by the narrator. The opening sentence, for instance, sets the tone for what is to follow: ‘There never was in France so brilliant a display of magnificence and gallantry as during the last years of the reign of Henri II. This monarch was gallant, handsome, and amorous.’[[136]](#footnote-136) The opulence, the gallantry, the charm, and womanizing qualities portend a raucous novel which knows no restraint. And then there is the political aspect which is clearly expressed in the passage:

Ambition and gallantry were the sole occupation of the court, busying men and women alike. There were so many interests [factions] and so many different intrigues in which women took part that love was always mingled with politics and politics with love. No one was calm or indifferent: everyone sought to rise, to please, to serve or to injure; no one was weary or idle [boredom and idleness were unknown], everyone was taken up [engaged] with pleasure or intrigue.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Despite the (for contemporary readers) tedious enumeration of historical figures, customs, and events evident in the opening pages of the novel, we quickly discern that the narrator is actually interested in a single moment of adventure within an arranged, mostly contented marriage. The historical framework proves to be a foil to better showcase the innovative exploration of the inner lives of three central figures. In particular, they are: Madame de Clèves, Monsieur de Clèves, and the Monsieur de Nemours. This work of historical fiction is therefore also rightly celebrated as the first psychological novel (*roman d’analyse*) in French literary history. And in going beyond the parameters of the traditional *roman précieux*, it foreshadows the sentimental novel of the eighteenth century, e.g., Abbé Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut* (1731), Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1763), and Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774). (The French variant tended to stress intrigue, whereas the English employed bucolic settings and the German proved more philosophical.)

As such *La Princesse de Clèves* functioned as a kind of archetype for explorations of matters of the heart that deviate from the accustomed gallantry, intrigue, and perpetual decoding of behavior typical of the epoch of origination. A new affective vocabulary emerges to describe these matters of the heart. A conflict arises between customary expectations and rational reflection, shading over into questions of reasonableness and the exploration of emotions that are often explored in monologues, innovative at the time. Despite the novel’s introspective bent, it retains some elements characteristics of historical accounts, political intrigues, and *préciosité*. It is a very early example of how sensibility comes together in the novel: ‘Sentimentalism discovers its power in the novel’s freedom to mix genres and discourses freely.’[[138]](#footnote-138) Because of its innovativeness, however, a ‘tipping point’ is reached. A shift from the traditional voluminous *roman* to the compact *nouvelle* occurs. Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves* proved to be a ‘cross-media success’.[[139]](#footnote-139)



### The Novel as Tragedy

Of paramount importance in structuring both the novel’s trajectory and the emotions expressed is the role women played and its proximity to classical tragedy. We know that Mme de Lafayette saw Racine create all his profane plays up to the last of them, *Phèdre* (1677), that appeared one year before the novel. Contemporaries themselves were reminded of Racine and tragedy in this regard: a simple action is sustained by the violence of the passions, the tenderness of the sentiments, and eloquence of affective language. As in a Racine tragedy the mainspring of the dramatic unity is the tragic passion analyzed in its various stages: birth, ‘fulfillment’, retarding moments of setbacks and misunderstandings, battles and frenzies (rendered mostly as inner struggles), and the fatal effects. And what of the princess’s tragic flaw? A positive virtue: uncompromising honesty and uprightness, which are cogently captured in the term, *aveu* (as will become clear). The novel is further marked by the majestic sadness which Racine regarded as constituting the pleasure of tragedy (preface to *Bérénice*). The use of the techniques of tragedy also point to a moral and psychological as well as an aesthetic significance.[[140]](#footnote-140)

Seen as an armchair tragedy, the novel consists of four parts (rather than the five acts of a classical tragedy). Nonetheless, the four parts correspond to (1) exposition, (2) development, (3) climax, and (4) dénouement/catastrophe. The catalyst for the ensuing action is encapsulated in distinctive scenes: the initial meeting between the princess and Nemours at the ball where they are induced to dance, the joust when Nemours is injured and the princess rushes anxiously to his side, the purloined love letter mistakenly attributed to Nemours, the ‘confession’ scene involving husband and wife in the pavilion, Nemours theft of her portrait, the pantomime scene with the princess alone in the pavilion, the chance encounter of her and Nemours in the park, and their final ‘chance’ meeting at the Vidame des Chartres’s residence, her uncle. Even the interpolated historical subplots (a traditional ploy) contribute to what amounts to a dramaturgy of the novel. And they are many: (1) Diane de Poitiers’ dominance over King Henry II who is ultimately ruined by her and his own jealousy, (2) the tale of M. de Sancerre who learns that his mistress Mme. de Toumon has long been deceiving him, (3) the episode of Anne Bolyne and Henry VIII’s cruel rejection of her despite his initial passion, and (4) the Vidame de Chartres being caught between the queen and his two mistresses that leads to his downfall.

### Exposition and Development

Book I (exposition) depicts the general contours of life at court, explicates the principles according to which Mme de Chartres educates her daughter, the later Princess de Clèves, tells of the open rivalry between the Prince de Clèves and the Chevalier de Guise for Mlle. de Chartres’ hand in marriage, and renders the first meeting of Duc de Nemours (‘a masterpiece of nature’) and Mme. de Clèves (‘a beauty to whom all eyes were turned’).[[141]](#footnote-141) Fully in line with the politics of marriage at the time, Mme. de Chartres was determined ‘to marry her daughter to someone who could raise her above those who fancied themselves superior to her’.[[142]](#footnote-142) However, court intrigues prevented a match she thought suitable. When the Prince de Clèves declared his undying love for her daughter, Mme. de Chartres agreed to the match, thinking that her daughter might feel some affection for him. However, her feelings did not go beyond respect and gratitude and betrayed none of the impatient, anxious turmoil of emotion that the prince felt for her. (His expression of passion represented a clear break with tradition and underscores Lafayette’s revisioning of the marriage bond.)

After the marriage is concluded, her feelings remained unchanged. The narrator explains that the prince now as a husband had ‘greater privileges but no different place in [his wife’s] heart. Though he had married her, he did not cease to be in love with her because there was always left something for him to desire’.[[143]](#footnote-143) With just tender courtesy in marriage, he found no satisfaction. The contrast between a husband and a lover could not be more pronounced. This situation lays the groundwork for the conflict that arises shortly thereafter when Mme. de Clèves meets the Duke de Nemours at a ball, where none other than the King himself instructs her to dance with him. Forced by court expectations into close proximity, each develops passionate feelings for the other, indeed, a fatal attraction. (Their love would have formed the perfect bond in a new concept of marriage.) On her deathbed Mme. de Chartres admonishes her daughter to love only her husband and to beware the temptations of Court. The admonition foreshadows the future struggle.[[144]](#footnote-144)

Book II (development) begins with the highly charged, sentimental story of the Comte de Sancerre and Mme de Toumon, who took two lovers as a young widow, de Sancerre and his friend Estouteville. Thus, it too serves as a warning as to what might happen to the Princess after the death of her husband. The love between de Nemours and the Princess de Clèves moves ever more front and center. Jealousy begins to raise its ugly head. First in the rivalry between M. de Nemours and the Chevalier de Guise for the Princess’ affections, second by means of the love letter directed to another woman which the Princess assumes has been lost by Nemours. Like the ball of their first meeting, the purloined letter plays an outsized role in directing the action. Her jealousy leads to her recognition that she, indeed, does love the duke. This recognition brings about a moment of retardation is the developing love story. A tale of Henry VIII’s amorous affairs further contextualizes the dangers of passionate love transformed by court infidelities, and the relationship between the Vidame de Chartres and the Queen is yet another foil for the entwinement of love, trust, and unfaithfulness.

Following interpolated narrative of Anne Boleyn and Henry III, yet another turning point is reached when Nemours visits the Princess in her chambers upon her return to Court after a long absence prompted by her mother’s death and during which the Princess had sought to drive Nemours from her thoughts. Alone with the Princess, Nemours speaks of the change that she has wrought in him, that he does not recognize himself any longer. ‘He sat down opposite her’, we are told, ‘with the timidity and shyness that real passion gives’.[[145]](#footnote-145) He speaks tenderly and without direct reference to his deep feeling for the Princess, but she nonetheless knows that he means her when he reflects: ‘and the most distinctive mark of a true attachment is to become entirely different from what one was, to be indifferent to ambition or pleasure after having devoted one’s whole life to one or the other’.[[146]](#footnote-146) Although he speaks so gallantly and respectfully of his transformation, she cannot help but feel he is being too forward. Yet she does not stop him. The conversation proves critical in her recognizing that her own feelings for him have not changed in the least despite her best efforts to devote herself solely to her husband. She is no longer able to delude herself into believing she does not really love Nemours.

When her husband falls ill, she stays long hours in his room. But as he recovers and begins anew to receive visitors, among them Nemours who spends long hours with the prince, she avoids her husband’s chambers in order not to be near Nemours. M. de Clèves, who is naturally inclined to kindness and indulgence when it comes to his wife, feels offended, for he mistakenly believes she is avoiding him. When pressed on the matter, she cannot bring herself to tell the truth; namely, that the court suspects Nemours is in love with her and that she is eager to avoid him lest the court see in their meeting a sign that she returns his love.[[147]](#footnote-147) Her main concern now is to keep her own love for Nemours secret. The difficulty for her is illustrated by the episode of the miniature portrait of the Princess that she sees Nemours purloin. She cannot ask him publicly to return it, because his having purloined it would be revealed as an act of affection. Nor can she ask him privately to return the portrait, for that would run the risk of his declaring his passion openly to her.[[148]](#footnote-148)

How right she was is further illustrated by her husband’s reaction to discovering that the portrait has gone missing. It troubles him greatly, for it is a sign to him that his wife has a lover. While she knows this to be true, she cannot admit to it. She recalls her mother’s dying words and agonizes over her predicament. It is then that she first considers telling her husband that Nemours is in love with her, but that she has not expressed her own feelings. Yet, she dismisses the idea of confessing as madness and slips back into the stress of indecision.[[149]](#footnote-149) This psychological quandary lays the groundwork for the next dramatic turn of events.

That turn comes when Nemours is injured during a joust, and she hurries spontaneously to his side with a clear expression of deep concern. Both Nemours and the M. de Guise recognized the unintended, open expression of love. Having been publicly displayed, her passion is now known to the attentive observer/reader.[[150]](#footnote-150) She becomes an ‘inexhaustible semaphore of signals’, as Ortega y Gasset would later describe body language. Repeatedly, the narrator refers to the principals’ gaze and body language as a field of semaphores that reveal the inner workings of the soul that requires no explicit verbalization. ‘Looks’, as José Ortega y Gasset claims, ‘constitute a vocabulary’. While in isolation looks might prove to be ambiguous, in the context of a composition or conversation their meaning is perfectly clear.[[151]](#footnote-151) Those engaging in the vocabulary of looks are normally the ones in power; for instance, Nemours who is constantly gazing at the princess, often seeing without being seen. Of course, she also looks with him, although she mostly seeks to avert his eyes, except in effigy. Indeed, the eyes of the world are on them.[[152]](#footnote-152) In this context we are of course reminded of Ortega’s theory of *les yeux en coulisse*, that is, ‘the look of the painter when he steps back from the canvas to judge the effect of the brushstroke he has just made’, a look that ‘shoots out like a well-aimed arrow’.[[153]](#footnote-153)

Almost immediately the next dramatic turn takes place when Mme de Clèves is handed a letter presumably fallen from Nemours’s pocket and supposedly an expression of his love for another woman.[[154]](#footnote-154) In reality, Mme de Thémines wrote the letter to the Vidame de Chartres, Mme de Clèves’ uncle, to express her jealous distress at having learned of the Vidame’s alliance with another woman. The tale of his deep and respectful intimacy with the Queen together with his betrayals of both Thémines and the Queen’s trust function as an intermezzo full of foreshadowings of the fate that awaits Mme de Clèves. Except for the Princess, everyone is using everyone else to gain personal advantage. While the incident of the mislaid letter involves different actors on different levels—the Vidame, the Queen, the Princess, Nemours, the Dauphine, Mme de Thémines, Duchesse de Valentinois—its real significance is to enhance Mme de Clèves’ self-awareness via the various confrontations to which she is compelled. Her involvement amounts to her being boxed in, Virginia Woolf would say, on all sides. We might even see her situation as somewhat analogous to the double consciousness associated with Du Bois as explicated in the previous chapter.

### Climax and Catastrophe

Book III (‘climax’) is full of significant turning points. Each one ultimately references a delimitation of the princess’s options. For instance, the incident of the letter reveals to both Nemours and Mme de Clèves that their fatal attraction is mutual. The next decisive incident is the princess’s *aveu* made to her husband in the pavilion at their country estate, Coulommiers. Usually translated as ‘confession’, *aveu* also connotes ‘admission’, ‘acknowledgment’, ‘avowal’, and ‘declaration’. Joan DeJean points out that *aveu* was used in the sense of a legal confession only in the mid-seventeenth century. Its older, legal usage connoted a loyalty oath to one’s lord. In acknowledging her feelings, the princess therefore offers the prince a mark of her current and future loyalty, a sign of homage.[[155]](#footnote-155)

Not surprisingly, she prefers the empowering seclusion of the country (to avoid temptation). ‘Using the proper legal code’, DeJean observes, ‘she asks for a male prerogative: to rule as lord over an estate’, a prerogative that Mme. de La Fayette actually enjoyed.[[156]](#footnote-156) Despite his earnest wish not to be separated from his wife, the prince must remain at court because of his obligations. When pressed by him, she admits that she feels ‘insecure’ in courtly society, especially since the death of her mother, remarking: ‘Only remember that prudence does not require that a woman of my age, who is mistress of her actions, should remain exposed to the temptations of the court.’[[157]](#footnote-157) Her husband guesses that she is in love with another and is desirous to know his identity without appearing too forward in asking. She assures him that she has done nothing to reveal her feelings for the other, nor has the other been untoward in his behavior.

Seeking to reassure the prince, she declares: I am going to make you a confession such as no woman has ever made to her husband’ (‘je vais vous faire un aveu que l’on n’a jamais fait à son mari’).[[158]](#footnote-158) And having taken that unprecedented step, prompted by her clear conscience (‘mais l’innocence de ma conduite et de mes intentions m’en donne la force’),[[159]](#footnote-159) she ends with a plea: ‘Remember that to do what I am now doing, requires more friendship and esteem for a husband than any one has ever had. Guide me, take pity on me, love me, if you can’ (‘Songez que, pour faire ce que je fais, il faut avoir plus d’amitié et plus d’estime pour un mari que l’on n’en a jamais eu; conduisez-moi, ayez pitié de moi, et aimez-moi encore si vous pouvez’).[[160]](#footnote-160)

To be sure, the significance of this *aveu* caused quite a stir. However, to more accurately reflect the innovativeness of how I read what the princess is actually saying, I am tempted to substitute ‘more affection’ for ‘more friendship, ‘wife’ for ‘one’, and to add ‘still’ after ‘love me’. When she asks her husband to ‘love’ her still if he can, she surely understood the depth of his passion for her, that he loved her as no husband has loved a wife in an arranged marriage before. And when she asserts that her *aveu* represents a higher level of *amitié* and of *estime* for her husband, she puts him in an awkward position, for both represent a strong affection. But does she really expect him to reduce his raging passion to a lesser form of affection? From her own experience, she surely knows that consuming passion is hardly reduceable to mere friendship.[[161]](#footnote-161) The crux of the tragedy lies in this declaration, which is something other than a confession of an actual infidelity. The terms ‘friendship and esteem’ M. de Clèves indeed finds irritating, for he has long explained that he is not content with mere friendship and respect from his wife. His need is for the passion of lovers. His jealousy is aroused; he cannot rest until he determines (by a later rouse) that Nemours is the object of his wife’s passion:

The peculiarity of her avowal made to her husband of her love for another derives not only from it being without precedent; it is also peculiar because it actually was the catalyst for the ‘confession’ being, as she admits to herself, quite perilous, for ‘she had wholly alienated her husband’s love and esteem.[[162]](#footnote-162) Not only that but also because Nemours accidentally overheard the intimate conversation between husband and wife. For him it was a clear confirmation that the Princess truly loves him (even if he remained unnamed in the conversation). Thus, he sees it as a confession (as in the phrase, *faire l’aveu de son amour*).

Moreover, he knows that M. de Clèves is fully aware that his wife is ‘unfaithful’ (at least in emotion). Nemours makes a fatal mistake that seals the princess’s fate even further when he cannot resist sharing his insight with the Vidame. Although veiled and speaking of anonymous persons, he tells the story (*aventure*) of a wife confessing her love for another to her husband. The Vidame easily guesses that Nemours is speaking about himself and the Princess. He, in turn, tells his friend, M. de Clèves, who suspects the woman is his wife and Nemour the lover. He confronts her with the suspicion in a rouse to get her to confess: ‘What, Monsieur de Nemours knows that you love him and that I know it?’.[[163]](#footnote-163) She can only reply that she is unaware of her part in the story that the Vidame has told nor whether Nemours is the man involved. In a brilliant move, she turns the argument around by pointing out that the Vidame has the story from a friend of Nemours and that this friend must move in the prince’s circle at court. Thus, the prince himself might be the source of the story and that he has thereby betrayed *her* confidence. For the princess, the confession was intended to free her from the dangers of having to attend court and maintain self-control. Paradoxically, it actually led to her being boxed in even further when others usurp her narrative. Book III concludes with the King’s mortal injury in a tournament when a splinter from a broken lance pierced his eye and remains lodged there. The folly of jousting against the advice of his advisors leads to his death shortly thereafter. The metaphor of blindness caused by courtly escapades sums up the string of unintended consequences.

Book IV (dénouement and catastrophe) recounts the intrigues pursuant to the King’s death. Factions are formed to prevent the King’s favorites, the Guise brothers, from rising too high. The younger Guise brother’s jealousy of Nemours is a mirror of M. de Clèves’ growing jealousy that culminates in death by broken heart. There are two high points in this section of the narrative. The first is the scene in the pavilion at Coulommiers which is charged with sexual imagery and exquisite sensibility.[[164]](#footnote-164) It is a metaphorical admission by the Princess of her passionate love for Nemours. The second high point is reached in her open admission of love to him in the Vidame’s chambers where, by a ruse of her uncle, she unexpectedly encounters Nemours. For the first time they find themselves alone and free to talk openly.[[165]](#footnote-165)

The relationship between the Princess de Clèves and the Duc de Nemours is a far cry from that of blatant sexual innuendo of the court. Rather, it seems to exemplify the agonistic forces of binding and dissolution. Two hundred years later Freud will speak of the struggle between eros and thanatos as the driving force within civilization itself. As *une âme sensible*, the young Princess de Clèves announces that struggle in telling fashion. The twenty-year passion King Henry II had for the Duchess de Valentinois is a more striking barometer of what is to come, since jealousy unravels their mutual trust. The Queen’s behavior (Catherine de Médicis) underscores another major theme in the novel: adeptness at pretense and conniving to gain advantage. The narrator tells us: ‘She was fond of splendor, magnificence and pleasure’ and that her ‘ambition made her like to reign’.[[166]](#footnote-166) She gave no outward sign of disapproval or jealousy of the king’s attachment to the Duchess of Valentinois. To be sure, one could never know what she actually felt and thought because ‘she was so skilled a dissembler’.[[167]](#footnote-167) To continue in her own favored role at court, she had to tolerate the duchess and act with politesse toward the duchess’s special position.

In contrast to the pleasure seeking and artifice of life at court, Mme de Clèves represents a new set of values that appears on the horizon and will eventually replace the traditional mores of the high aristocracy. She is a woman so different from the rest of her sex that she can inspire uncontrollable passion in both M. de Clèves and the Duc de Nemours. Nemours learns to love her both passionately and tenderly. The narrator informs us, for instance: : ‘Never was there a tenderer or intenser love than that which animated this prince [...] He gave himself up to the transports of love, and his heart was so full that he could not keep from shedding a few tears [...] tempered with all the sweetness that only love can give’.[[168]](#footnote-168) The flip side of the coin is the extreme degree of jealousy that can follow, exhibited most acutely by her husband who is caught in excruciating tension between unbounded love and unbridled jealousy. The one we might align with eros, the other with thanatos. Despite her repeated attempts to reassure her husband that no declaration of love has been made by her or by Nemours, M. de Clèves remains skeptical, unable to control is extreme jealousy. Given the way the narrator explains the inner workings of their psyche, the practiced reader has no difficulty recognizing how the husband deceives himself by allowing jealousy to guide his feelings and actions toward his spouse rather than heeding her words. She has, in fact, done and said nothing that makes her unfaithful to him. Nonetheless, he scolds her for not loving him the way he adores her: ‘You are my wife, I love you devotedly [like a mistress], and I see you love another man [...] and he knows that you love him’.[[169]](#footnote-169) And he reiterates his view that her acknowledgment of love for another was wrong, for it brought him no peace. Instead, it wounded him cruelly and mortally because he does not understand why she would confide to him her ‘love for Monsieur de Nemours, if [her] virtue was not strong enough to resist it’.[[170]](#footnote-170) He is of course blinded by his jealously.

### Signature Moments

Precisely in this jumble of conflicting emotions lies the crux of the tragic turn of events: marriage at the time was a political move, not an act of the heart. As for Nemours the lover, he does not fit neatly the traditional mode of a paramour, for he is seemingly not interested only in a passing sexual escapade. His passion continues even though it is unrequited. M. de Clèves seems incapable of grasping the essentially unrequited nature of this new kind of passion. Even on his death bed he equates her ‘idea’ of Nemours to an actual sinful deed. Only after the husband’s death, mid-way through Book IV, do Mme de Clèves and the Duc de Nemours fully and directly express their love for one another. They are now free to consummate their love, to marry and experience blissful happiness. But that does not happen. Why? Essentially, because the princess has been forced by events to become ever more introspective in seeking self-determination. The room of the pavilion at Coulommoires as a shrine of sexual expression makes way for a space of intimate seclusion devoted to loftier aspirations. Each moment is a variation on the meaning of *aveu*. ‘The princess’ *aveu*’, we can conclude with DeJean, ‘is the text of her self-definition, the mark of her self-constitution, her signature’.[[171]](#footnote-171)

Her decision to withdraw from society is inescapably determined by external factors. For instance, M. de Clèves lays a guilt trip on her when he states that she has made death welcome to him. This is a clear example of delimiting her actions. Even when he does relent and accepts her avid reassurances that she has done nothing to warrant such a horrid claim, he makes sure to box her in further by earnestly requesting that she cherish his memory ‘and that, if it had depended on you, you would have for me the feeling you have had for another’.[[172]](#footnote-172)

Given the fateful nature of her attraction to Nemours—solely a matter of the heart, not of the head—his demand for ‘additional consolation’ is unrealizable.[[173]](#footnote-173) He pressures her to define herself according to his expectations, to act against her natural inclination. The tone for the dual inhibition is set early on by her mother when she admonishes her daughter to love only her husband and to beware the dangers of the court. Apparently, she is to love even if the heart has its own reasons unaligned with rational reflection. Neither mother nor husband grasp that the ‘thought’ of Nemours simply proves overpowering.[[174]](#footnote-174) Mme. de Clèves is caught in a tragic net of external expectations and internal impulses. Explication of two select passages will serve to illustrate the point of her predicament.

The physical, passionate side of that tension is adeptly rendered in the pavilion at Coulommiers via metaphors of deep psychological meaning long before the advent of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis. To preclude intruders into this private retreat—Mme. de Clèves’ ‘room of her own’—two fences have been erected in the garden, one very high. Driven by his passion, Nemours succeeds in entering the garden and scaling the barriers. Once inside he quickly locates the princess in her retreat. Hiding behind one of the French doors (that allow him to penetrate her inner sanctum), he observes what Mme. de Clèves’ is doing. I cite the passage in full because of its rich metaphorical fabric:

He saw many lights in the room. All the windows were open; and creeping along beside the palings, he approached it with an emotion that can easily be imagined. He saw that she was alone; she was so beautiful that he could scarcely control his rapture at the spectacle. It was warm, and her head or across her head and shoulders had no other coving than her loosely fastened [unarranged and loosely tied] hair. She was on a couch behind a table, on which were many baskets of ribbons; she was picking some out, and Monsieur de Nemours observed that they were of the same colors that he had worn in the tournament. He saw that she was fastening bows on an Indian [most unusual Malacca] cane that he had carried for some time and had given to his sister, from whom Madame de Clèves’ had taken it, without seeming to recognize it as belonging to Monsieur de Nemours. When she had finished her work with the charm and a grace and gentleness that reflected on her face the feelings that filled her heart, she took a light and drew near to a large table opposite the picture of the Siege of Metz, in which was the portrait of Monsieur de Nemours; then she sat down and gazed at this portrait with a rapt attention such as love alone could give.[[175]](#footnote-175)

The sexuality of the imagery in this scene of unwitting acknowledgment is palpable. The princess is the object of a voyeur who has penetrated external defenses to draw up close to enter one of the two chambers in the pavilion. Watching her through a window/door that invites him to the more intimate, softly lit room where the princess is. The scene in the private space or cubiculum signifies ‘the mystery of the contemplative vision’ and is tantamount to a window onto the soul.[[176]](#footnote-176)

Alone, a married woman can let her hair cascade loosely around shoulders and bosom. It signals alluring sensuality normally reserved for a husband. Lightly dressed because of the warm evening, she sits in the midst of burning candles, an allusion to phallic arousal. Lying on a divan, she busies herself with fashioning colorful ribbons around Nemours’s staff. The latter two items are similarly sexually charged, as is her repose on the divan. Court custom assigns special significance to colored ribbons as a designate a noblewoman’s or nobleman’s identity and preference. The Princess adorns the Malacca cane, a phallic symbol, with her ‘lover’s’ colors, making them and it her own. The playful adornment causes her countenance to flush with charm and sweetness. Next, she takes a lighted torch—yet another phallic symbol—to view the large painting hanging on the wall that renders the successful siege of Metz. Her attention is aimed, however, solely at the portrait of Nemours contained therein. Sitting in contemplation before it, her meditation takes on the air of passionate devotion. This scene conveys to the voyeur Nemours the extent of her love for him beyond all doubt.

Astonishing is the series of sexual images which seem almost dreamlike, until Nemours makes a noise that causes her to think that someone might be observing her. Perhaps with some embarrassment, she quickly gathers her things, leaves the room, and seeks out her attendants. Nemours is ecstatic. Consummation for both was not far off. At least in thought. Yet, those open windows/doors into the Princess’s soul are quickly closed. He returns the next evening in hopes of again gaining access to her inner feelings, but finds the room closed and deserted. The princess does not wish to run the risk of potentially being observed engaged in such intimacy. What one does in private is not what one wants to be public. The lovers remain closed off from one another. The closure becomes more fixed with Nemours’s subsequent betrayal of his ‘intimacy’ when he tells the Vidame of his insufficiently veiled escapade.

A second representative passage worthy of close reading is the protracted scene of Mme de Clèves’s and Nemours’s long, private conversation at the Vidame’s residence.[[177]](#footnote-177) It plays a crucial role in our understanding of her concept of duty and how it defines her in new and unexpected ways. Her argument essentially sums up the reasons for her actions throughout the novel and lead to her conscious act of renunciation, ‘une extrême défiance de soi-même’,[[178]](#footnote-178) which is nonetheless an act of self-assertion. The pessimistic outcome is pessimistic only if one ignores the affinity of the narrative structure to the form of the classical tragedy such as Racine’s *Phèdre* (1677) which highlights how a simple action is sustained by the violence of the passions, the beauty of the sentiments, and eloquence of language. They produce a sweet sublimity of tragic tension marked by strength of will.

Then, too, one should recall the mystical thrust in reconciling the conflict between inclination and duty that has a long tradition (and which was to become a hallmark of German idealism with Kant and Schiller). External forces, here emphatically aligned with the body that was front and center in the earlier scene of the Princess’s ‘shrine’ in the pleasant pavilion at Coulommiers, tug at and ultimately define her inner Self. The Princess chooses a secluded existence over court life and marriage to the man she ardently loves. M. de Nemours calls her notion a ‘phantom of duty’, and Mme. de Clèves herself readily grants that it is an idea of duty that exists only in her mind.[[179]](#footnote-179) She engages in such extreme self-denial in order to retain control over her image and peace of mind (*repos*).[[180]](#footnote-180) Two main reasons prompt her self-denial: the first has to do with the past, the second with future expectations.

Of the past: unrequited love appears to be the key understanding her tragic situation. Of course, her unrequited love for Nemours. More importantly is the unrequited love in her marriage, as she reflects: ‘M. de Clèves was perhaps the only man in the world capable of keeping his love after marriage. My fate forbade my enjoying this blessing. Perhaps, too, his love only survived because he found none in me’.[[181]](#footnote-181) Even though she is free to marry Nemours, doing so would have undesired consequences. First, the world’s view of her as having been his mistress all along would be validated. Better to allow the body to be subject to its inner spirit. Secondly, Mme. de Clèves accepts her husband’s claim that she is responsible for his death. She makes matters even worse when she adds another second layer to the guilt complex: Nemours is equally guilty in causing M. de Clèves’s death. How? Via Nemours’s own discretions in arousing suspicions of a liaison between him and Mme. de Clèves. Known to all at court is Nemours’s reputation as an irresistible ladies’ man. Drawing a connection between the past and the future in laying out her reasons for renouncing what everyone would call a chance at happiness, the princess explains:

Vanity or taste makes all women try to secure you; there are few women whom you do not please, — my own experience teaches me that there are few whom you might not please. I should always imagine you were loved and in love, and I should not be often wrong. Yet, in this condition, I could only suffer, — I should not dare to complain. One may make reproaches to a lover; but can a woman reproach her husband for ceasing to love her? If I could become hardened to that misfortune, could I become hardened to imagining that I saw Monsieur de Clèves charging you with his death, reproaching me [for having loved you and married you, and making me feel the difference between his love and yours]? It is impossible to resist such arguments. I must remain in my present condition and in my immovable determination never to leave it.[[182]](#footnote-182)

She has ironically internalized her husband’s own situation of being a husband who loves his wife with the passion of a lover but of not returning the passion. While his distress was real, hers is projected into the future as she can readily imagine that Nemours could easily love her less once the initial passion has been satisfied. She torments herself with visions of engaging in affairs, as is surely to be expected from one so alluring as he. Consequently, her sense of obligation to honor the memory of her husband by remaining faithful to him even in death is augmented by an even deeper sense of duty to herself in achieving and maintaining her ‘own peace of mind’.[[183]](#footnote-183) She is caught in a web of scruples and guilt: (1) scruples about Nemours’ ability to remain faithful, (2) her desire to preserve her passion for him, and (3) being doubly aware of the excruciating difference between what she feels for Nemours and what she felt for her husband despite being ardently loved by both. All that would make her feel miserable.

Noteworthy is her open admission that she is grateful to him for having taught her what real passion feels like. And she does not wish to lose that exquisite sensation. Hence, her resolve not to see him again, regardless of the pain resultant of non-fulfillment. Indeed, she subjects herself to a law independent of both morality and reason, yet in doing so achieves a greater personal gain self-determination than a loss of (likely fleeting) happiness. In speaking so frankly, Mme. de Clèves is amazed at her actions and no longer recognizes her former Self. Sure, she appears as the epitome of *une honnête femme* in following through on her decision and to protect herself from succumbing to her inclination by retiring for part of the year to a convent and the other part to her country estate which she has earned via her avowal. Without declaring a fixed resolve to abandon court life, she devotes herself to occupations as holy as those of the strictest religious order. In acting thusly, she transforms her *aveu* from an admission of guilt into an expression of self-possession beyond the possession of Coulommiers. How? By rejecting the male expectation of a free woman in favor of a new insistence on female autonomy for which the world is not yet quite ready.[[184]](#footnote-184) Her health begins to decline. With death drawing ever nearer, she begins to see things in a much different light from the way she viewed them in health. Slowly, she detaches herself from worldly affairs until it becomes a habit of indifference. Nemours struggles until he is able to quietly accept his own situation of unrequited love as well with tragic resolve.

### Free Creation of Future Being

Because of their physical charm, graciousness, sensitivity, and intelligence, the Princess de Clèves and the Duke de Nemours represent for some *l'idéal précieux*.[[185]](#footnote-185) They embody ideal love, moreover, *l'amour pur*, which cannot survive in the real world they inhabit. Mme. de Clèves realizes this fact, whereas Nemours struggles to understand her resignation not to live out her love for him. For her it is also an enactment of self-possession. Unlike her, he has not been ‘boxed in’ by male coding of behavior. Strikingly, though, he does come around to accepting her position. Consequently, when Richard Moye contends that the conclusion represents both a ‘victory’ as well as a ‘defeat’ from the perspective of the convent and thus ‘presents the far more complex, and far blacker, irony of an insoluble paradox’, I think he misses the deeper point of her achieving self-direction.[[186]](#footnote-186) Simultaneously, she achieves a resolution to the dynamic of the waxing and waning of passion by opting for a higher level of tranquil existence, one marked by indifference to the call of the body. To speak in alternatives of ‘victory’ or ‘defeat’ is, to my mind, to pose the wrong question. It is to miss the ellipsis as a signifier of simultaneous presence and absence.

To the epithets to describe Mme. de Clèves, *une honnête femme* and *une âme sensible*, we can ultimately add *une femme mystico-philosophique*. In this regard Bethany Wiggin saliently points out that ‘Gallantry as charted by the *précieuses* sought to alter existing sexual relations, pushing them in a direction reminiscent of the medieval reign of the unattainable Dame. Like *hôhe Minne*, the impossibly ethereal but only possible form for a knight to serve his lady, ‘high’ gallantry pledged to transcend the sexual, to purge male-female interactions of any corporeality.’[[187]](#footnote-187) In her reading of *La Princesse de Clèves*, DeJean teases out the plausibility of the heroine’s ‘withdrawal’. By considering the use of the term, *indifférence*, contemporaneous with the composition of the novel and synonymous with *repos*, she too speaks of the princess’s ‘triumph’, although not in Moye’s sense. The desirability of a life of tranquil seclusion far from the intrigues of *galanterie* was the topic, for example, of the seventeenth-century dialogue, *Le Triomphe de l’indifférence* and of the correspondence between Mlle de Monpensier and Mme de Motteville in the 1660s. Both envisioned a rejection of marriage and the creation of a space of their own for women.[[188]](#footnote-188) Katharine Ann Jensen comes to a similar conclusion in her essay, ‘Making Sense of the Ending: Passion, Virtue, and Female Subjectivity’.[[189]](#footnote-189)

The writing style (even in translation) exposed in the passages explicated reveal the intimacy of the affective reading act that Harold Brodkey praised so highly: ‘the level of mind at which feelings and hopes are dealt in by consciousness and words’.[[190]](#footnote-190) *La Princesse de Clèves* invites us to read in this intimate manner. In recreating the intensity of feeling we read ‘creatively’, as encouraged by R. W. Emerson. All this opens the gateway to an entirely new manner of narration that focuses on the inner life and relegates external events to a secondary, albeit continuing role. Writing that has the weight of logic and truth about it always tends toward a kind of moral stance. Joan DeJean remarks: ‘As the novel’s heroine teaches her audience how to read it, the map is revealed to be a course in gallantry, giving men the woman’s perspective’.[[191]](#footnote-191) Elsewhere DeJean elaborates further on this idea, extending it to explain the cultural and linguistic changes occurring in late seventeenth-century France:

Scudéry’s decision to map the emotions, or at least the emotions related to love [especially in the scene from *Clélie* titled *Carte de Tendre*], can be seen as the most decisive moment in the French reinvention of the human heart. With this gesture, the century’s best-selling novelist made all those who held sway over the evolution of French taste and sensibility aware of the semantic revolution then taking shape.[[192]](#footnote-192) The insight into the importance of affective vocabulary such as *émotion*, *sentiment*, *sensibilité*, and *tendresse* derived from Mme. de Scudéry’s ten-volume novels, *Artamène, ou Le grand Cyrus* (1649–53) and *Clélie* (1654–60), is no less applicable to *La Princesse de Clèves.* Clearly benefitting from the tight structure of a classical tragedy, the latter novel (*nouvelle*) proved genuinely trailblazing as the progenitor of the psychological novel of confession where deep sentiment and virtue rule.

Was Mme. de Lafayette being self-deprecating when she insisted that the novel is neither remote nor pompous? The evidence suggests the contrary. The work is romantic and aspirational. Not the traditional damsel in distress in need of rescue by husband or potential lover, the Princess de Clèves goes it alone in keeping a hold on her own emotions in the pursuit of *Gelassenheit* (equanimity, self-possession). The emphasis on maintaining a sense of Self is not, however, conceived of as a ‘voyaging forever’ in Woolf’s or Ortega y Gasset’s meaning of advancement when, for instance, Ortega concludes that ‘Our future being emerges from our freedom, a continuous spring forever flowing out of itself. [...] The past [...] launches us upon free creation of our future being.’[[193]](#footnote-193) Even without the anticipation of creating versions of future being, *La Princesse de Clèves* proves to be part of a truly constructive cultural revolution that took place in France in the second half of the seventeenth century. That revolution was tightly interwoven with the discovery of the personal Self as a value in its own right.

That this seventeenth-century novel does not belong in the dustbins of history is equally obvious from its modern reception and reconceptualization. In the twentieth century it became the basis of Jean Delannoy’s film, *La Princesse de Clèves* (1961), and of Manoel de Oliveira’s *The Letter* (1999). Cinematic remakes followed in the twenty-first century with Andrzej Żuławski's *Fidelity* (2000), Christophe Honoré’s *La Belle Personne* (2008), and Regis Sauder’s *Nous, princesse de Clèves* (2011). While Honoré changes the setting from aristocratic society of the sixteenth century to that of a contemporary lycée, Sauder chooses an inner-city school with teenagers studying the novel for their Baccalaureate exam. Some of this interest can be explained by the stir Nicolas Sarkozy caused when in 2006, shortly before being elected French President, he began to belittle the novel’s inclusion on the Agrégation exam that is necessary to obtain a teaching position in the French educational system . Not surprisingly, the resultant heated controversy around his remarks also caused the sales of the novel to increase sharply.

In 2019, even a graphic-novel version appeared that retains the original historical ambience. In her blog post, ‘*The Princess of Clèves*: A Lively Retelling of a Classic Tale’, Louis Skye emphatically remarks: ‘What is truly startling for readers of this book is knowing that the original was written sometime in the 17th century. Madame de Clèves does not come across as a character who was written so long ago. She is outspoken, knows her mind, and gets her way. One can clearly understand why the book has stood the test of time.’[[194]](#footnote-194) Clearly, the novel’s plot and sentiment continue to appeal to a modern audience even as its early reception demonstrated an ability to initiate contentious public debates on authorship, content, and mores. On the other hand, it is not entirely clear that seventeenth-century readers who participated in the debates surrounding the novel actually read it.[[195]](#footnote-195) Almost immediately the novel was translated into English, an anonymous edition in 1679. Several other English translations followed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries whereas Sophie Mereau’s loosely adapted German version did not appear until 1799. The first translations into Catalan and Spanish occurred even later, in 1923 and 1924 respectively.[[196]](#footnote-196)

## Broadening the Self: *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774)

One does not look into a mirror to think, but to feel and accept. So it is with those moral facsimiles of ourselves, in whom, as in a silhouette, we recognize our manners and inclinations, our habits and peculiarities; and we strive with fraternal affection to grasp and embrace them.[[197]](#footnote-197)

When we lack a sense of Self, we lack everything! (Goethe, *Werther*, letter of August 22, 1771)[[198]](#footnote-198)

### A Breath of Fresh Air

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) is one of Germany’s most famous poet-scholars, celebrated for his prolific lyric output, his several novels and plays as well as innovative scientific studies. His first novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, written feverishly in just four weeks in early 1774 established his reputation and transformed him into an international celebrity. It was a sensation. It drew praise. It was soundly denounced. It was censored. It was reprinted again and again and remains popular today. It experienced several reprintings in twelve months, two reprints of the original and a pirate edition that also experienced two reprintings. Translations into French (1775), English (1779), and Italian (1781) soon followed; Dutch, Russian, and Japanese translations were among other later translations. In the fifteen years following the first German publication, the novel experienced a heyday in England and found numerous imitations in France.[[199]](#footnote-199) The Leipzig publishing house, Weygand, where the original version of the novel appeared, published a special 50th anniversary edition in 1824 that Goethe used as gifts.[[200]](#footnote-200)

Goethe was long valued as the author of the all-consuming *Werther*, even though other works of even greater stature followed, such as the novels *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795) and *Elective Affinities* (1809), the plays *Iphigenia at Tauris* (1787) and *Faust* (1831). Its immediacy and authentic style, naturalness, and expression of intense emotion affected readers in a previously unknown and personal manner. It was a mirror of the times that prompted the viewer not ‘to think, but to feel and accept’ pictured habits and peculiarities with empathy (see chapter caption). It caused a tremendous explosion within the reading republic, as Goethe noted in his autobiography.[[201]](#footnote-201) The novel’s success was due to the timeliness of the topic and the authenticity of its protagonist and supporting characters.[[202]](#footnote-202) Goethe had poured his own deepest feelings into the narrative, referring to it as a general confession (‘Generalbeichte’).[[203]](#footnote-203)

If *The Princess des Clèves* pried open the door to the inner life of genuine emotion, thereby astonishing her reading public, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* threw the doors wide open and led the reader even deeper into the psychic interior an actual rather than merely fictional love relationship of the author. Interiority is on full display. It proved eye-opening. By delving even more deeply into the (his own) human psyche Goethe revealed that the *intus*, the compresence so prized by Ortega y Gasset, could be something other than a positive drive of the spirit for a more intense emotional and spiritual life. Long before the agonistic contest between Eros and Thanatos posed by Sigmund Freud to describe the dynamic of cohesion and dissolution, Goethe’s *Werther* plays out that dynamic in striking fashion as he seeks to ground a sense of Self and determine its direction.

In his memoirs, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Poetry and Truth, Books XII and XIII), Goethe reflected on his resolve to explore the ‘inner and outer manifestations of nature and mood in the summer of 1772 that led him to pen *Werther*. The key elements, as he recalls, were his introspectiveness, his desire to open up every nervous fiber of his body to the myriad nuances of sensations, and his resolve to let creation hold sway ‘in loving emulation’. Torn between two ‘gigantic conceptions’, one a historical figure (Götz von Berlichingen), the other a contemporary one (Werther), he explains what is so special about *Werther*:

All my reflections and endeavors left my old resolve unchanged: to explore the inner and outer manifestations of nature and, in loving emulation, let them hold sway over me. As part of this reaction—which would not let me rest by day or night—I was confronted by two grand, indeed, I should say, gigantic conceptions [Götz and Werther] […]. The decision to let my inner self rule me at will and permit all outside events to penetrate in a way characteristic of them drove me into the wonderful element in which *Werther* was conceived and written. I tried to release myself from all alien emotions, to look kindly upon what was going on around me and let all living things, beginning with man himself, affect me as deeply as possible, each in its own way. The result was a marvelous affinity with nature and a warm and heartfelt response—a harmony with all things—that made me capable of being deeply touched by every change, whether of place or region, of day or season, or by anything else. The eye of the painter was added to that of the poet.[[204]](#footnote-204)

Goethe recognized here essential issues pertaining to our intimate ecological entwinement. What he describes amounts to an ‘ecological aesthetics’ that has an ethical dimension. In the following, I wish to emphasize a reading of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* as just such an incidence of this new ecological aesthetics that is wrapped around and absorbs the Self.[[205]](#footnote-205) This perspective proves central to a deep understanding of the novel and goes beyond Goethe’s deep infatuation with Charlotte Buff (1753–1828), an engaged woman he met during his time at the Imperial Court in Wetzlar.

My reading adds a scientific dimension to a modernist argument derived from the sociopolitical aspects of the text which views *Werther* as a prelude to contemporary extreme solipsism that is at odds with community-based values.[[206]](#footnote-206) Similarly, my reading offers an additional, decisive perspective on *Werther* as ‘the originary text of German depth-psychological narrative’ within the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis.[[207]](#footnote-207) But first, a framing comment about the novel’s plot and structure.

### Plot and Structure

The most prominent formal feature of the novel is its epistolary form. It differs from other epistolary novels of the era such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740). Rousseau’s *La nouvelle Héloise* (1762), or Sophie La Roche’s *Die Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* (1772) in two ways. First is the fact that all the letters come from just one correspondent: Werther himself. No second perspective is offered. Secondly, *Werther* is much more emotionally charged than its sentimental predecessors, even Abbé Prévost’s *Manon Lescault* (1731). A young, talented, well-read, and highly sensitive lawyer recounts in this first-person narrative his final year-and-half. The timeline of the narrated events runs from early May 1771 to December 1772 and is largely derived from then recent historical events in Goethe’s life and times that date from his sojourn in Straßburg and Frankfurt (1768–1771) but mainly from when he served as a referendary at the Imperial Court in Wetzlar in 1772.

Goethe divides the action into two books. Book One covers the period from his arrival in the idyllic village of Wahlheim in early May 1771 to his departure from it on 10 September 1771. (Wahlheim is based on Garbenheim near Wetzlar.) From the outset, the locus exerted an extraordinary draw on him (‘some secret sympathy’) even before he meets the fabled Lotte. Later he learns that she too is partial to the setting.[[208]](#footnote-208) Book Two traces Werther’s downward spiral from 20 October 1771 to 6 December when he attempts to regain balance and control of himself by taking service at court. An epilogue by the editor, ‘The Editor to the Reader’, rounds out Book Two by picking up the narrative on 12 December 1772. It hues closely to the tone of the first-person narrative by including additional letters and diary entries by Werther himself as the third-person narrator informs the reader of Werther’s final ‘remarkable days’.[[209]](#footnote-209) It begins with a description of the transformation of Wahlheim from an idyllic space punctuated by love and constancy to a site characterized by murderous rage. The novel concludes with Werther’s suicide on Christmas eve/day, so that his death coincides with the birth of Christ and the promise of new life.

Book One shows that the protagonist is more at home communing with nature in the countryside, painting idyllic scenes, admiring the stately linden trees in front of the parish rectory, enjoying the company of plain folk, playing with children, and reading stirring works of literature. Specifically noted are Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Friedrich Klopstock’s rhapsodic odes to nature (e.g., *Frühlingsfeier*), and Homer heroic epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. What Goethe states so positively in the passage from *Poetry and Truth* cited above is most apt to this first part of the novel. The readings characterize Werther’s appreciation of the simple life, enthusiasm for nature, and comforting positivism of a god-inspired adventure. The wanderer motif dominates (e.g. letters of May 9 and June 16, 1772).[[210]](#footnote-210) Only Goldsmith projects a model of temperate bourgeois values and contented domestic life with its particular notion of virtue based on merit. Goldsmith like Homer exerts a soothing influence on Werther.

Book Two is darker in tone. It is often viewed as the main venue for rendering the pathology of Werther’s passion and unravelling. James Macpherson’s *Ossian* and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s bourgeois tragedy, *Emilia Galotti* (1772) replace the earlier readings. Ossian’s doleful elegies *Colma*, *Ryno*, *Alpin* from the *Songs of Selma* (in Goethe’s own translations) with their deep-felt longing of lovers separated by elemental forces mirror Werther’s worsening mood. His final reading was of Lessing’s *Emilia Galotti*. It lay open on his desk when he was found dying. The tragedy is about passion, virtue, sacrifice, suicide, and higher purpose. Boyle opines that Werther’s identity is ‘swallowed up by his reading matter’ and determined by a ‘ghastly delusion’.[[211]](#footnote-211)

But I think not. All the readings mirror in one way or another the ultimate origin of his feelings for Charlotte (or Lotte), a winsome lass engaged to be married. Their acquaintance changes his life by transferring the main source of his elation from nature to her. What she embodies, however, is evident before he meets her and remains dominant after he has gone into decline. The capacity for great feeling is Werther’s particular strength. His guiding principle, frequently referenced throughout, is the heart with its capacity for strong feelings. This is made clear in one of the first letters (May 13, 1771) where he informs the reader that his friend and recipient of his letters, Wilhelm, knows full well from past experience that he, Werther, has an ingrained tendency to alternate between sorrow and excessive joy, between ‘sweet melancholy and destructive passion’.[[212]](#footnote-212) That is, long before novel begins. He is well aware that his manner is ill-suited to life in the social world as constituted. Pursuing an administrative career at an embassy holds little attraction for him. His one attempt at the beginning of Book Two fails. In the stilted atmosphere of high society and fossilized conventions, he feels like a fish out of water and is drawn back to Wahlheim and Lotte (now married to Albert). There he finds everything changed.

Essentially, he is incurably sick. This he affirms in several letters early in the novel: May 13, 1771; July 1, 1771, August 28, 1771.[[213]](#footnote-213) Seven months later, Lotte also remarks upon his frail state: ‘Ill, [...] very ill’ (letter of December 1771). Finally, the translator/narrator confirms: ‘Discontent and sorrow had struck ever deeper roots in Werther’s soul, had taken a tighter hold, and had gradually affected his entire being’.[[214]](#footnote-214) He becomes lost, one might conclude, seeing how the ambling leisure of Book One steadily morphs into a restless pushing and striving that knows no bounds (‘rastlose[s] Treiben und Streben’).[[215]](#footnote-215) It is analogous to the earlier restless ecstasy prompted by nature and love. In any event, his mood is an early instance of *Weltschmerz* and *Lebensmüdigkeit*.[[216]](#footnote-216) That feeling resonates with the impact his death has on those around him. Lotte’s entire family is distraught; she is so grievously stricken, that one fears for her life. His suicide prevents a proper Christian burial.[[217]](#footnote-217)

### The Dark Side

Critics have long noted that the novel was not quite a straightforward love story and is open to multiple interpretations. It is remarkable not just as a profound portrayal of authentic human sentiment; it is also a salient example of a modern, creative genius. Viewing the novel through the lens of Goethe’s revolutionary poem, ‘Prometheus’ (1773), Nicholas Boyle for instance hails *Werther* as a representation of modern creativity’.[[218]](#footnote-218) He also labels it a culturally disruptive ‘bomb’, situating it within the search for what it meant to be a German at the time.[[219]](#footnote-219) The work also contains often sharp critiques of social conventions that remain relevant today. Here we might think of issues such as the legality of suicide, social and economic inequity, litigiousness, the penal code, extenuating circumstances, causes of insanity, poverty. To accentuate the polyperspectivity of his social and political views Tantillo speaks of his ‘modernisms’. Drawing out both the liberal and conservative tendencies inherent in the agonistic contest in the tale, she suggests that we read the work against the notion of compensation that Goethe derived from his natural science studies, using it as her guiding principle. Of particular importance are the fissures in society where tensions arise.[[220]](#footnote-220) As a consequence, one is prompted to ask whether the rules and regulations that are so necessary for the functioning of civil society might entail a dark side. She asks: can a too strong a focus on the individual lead to a dismantling of the Self altogether when conflict with social expectations ensue? Werther is, then, at once a character and a consciousness.[[221]](#footnote-221)

While I do not ignore the social dimension in the following, my interest lies elsewhere. It is in the physico-theological, a perspective advanced in the early eighteenth-century by such writers as Hinrich Barthold von Brockes.[[222]](#footnote-222) I view it, however, through a new, perhaps even postmodern lens that also values *Werther* as a literary bomb, albeit not in Boyle’s meaning that applies to the radicalism of the entire, albeit short-lived Storm and Stress period 1768–82. That lens is constituted etymologically by the term ‘religion’. The word derives from the Latin *re + legere* (again + to read), hence to go through again, to read again (e.g., Cicero’s understanding). On the other hand, later thinkers connect it with *re + ligare* (again + to bind) or to rebind in the sense of recreating a bond (e.g., Augustine). In the following, I make use of both meanings: to read again and to reconnect. References to religion do not imply, I hasten to add, a state of life bound by monastic vows (which is, however, apt to Princess des Clèves). My intent is to read familiar icons and texts anew against a different backdrop, one that accords natural processes a much larger role than has previously been the case. The transcendence involved in a revised notion of the connection between the physical and spiritual does not lead to ‘salvation’ in an ethereal sphere outside the physical universe. Goethe’s concept of *Gott-Natur* expresses a sensation of transcendent wholeness that is confined to the sphere of nature itself. *Gott-Natur* is a nature-based religiosity filled with motion and transformation. It suggests a going beyond manifest fragmented, empirical individuation in an embracing of the whole. As a consequence, the background to Goethe’s novel—and the lens through which it is viewed—differs radically from the circumstances that led up to de La Fayette’s novel and how it could render self-affirmation. That difference opens up a potentially dark side. Perhaps pathological.

Werther’s deep affinity with Lotte as a sentimental soul mate is first reflected in their common enthusiastic response to Goldsmith (16 June 1771) and Klopstock (16 June 1771),[[223]](#footnote-223) their similar appreciation of nature scenes, and their preference for country dance (i.e., waltz). Noteworthy is the way Lotte sums up the significance of the domestic, sentimental novel while traveling with Werther in his carriage to attend a country ball (modeled on an actual event in a hunting lodge in Volpertshausen near Wetzlar). She confesses:

God knows how good it felt to be able to sit in some corner on a Sunday and share with my whole heart in Miss Jenny’s happiness and sorrows. Nor do I deny that that kind of writing still has its charms for me. But since I so rarely come by a book, it has to be one that is quite to my taste. And I like that author best who shows me my own world, conditions such as I live in myself, and a story that can engage my interest and heart as much as my own domestic life does, which is certainly no paradise but is still on the whole a source of inexpressible happiness.[[224]](#footnote-224)

Werther is immediately drawn in so strongly by her innocent air that he loses awareness of the others in the carriage.[[225]](#footnote-225) It is not so much a matter of Werther reacting in a similar manner. It is more a function of setting up an eventual contrast with Werther’s own preference for stronger fare. A much later famous scene brings out this contrast as it reveals the depth of passion that he and (now also) Lotte are capable of. It demonstrates how they can completely lose themselves in a text, becoming forgetful of everything else. Following their joint reading of Ossian’s elegies, each is overcome by extreme emotion: copious tears, rapid heartbeat, and ultimately hot, passionate kisses in a tight embrace.[[226]](#footnote-226) No wonder that a reductionist interpretation of the tale is common which goes like this: Werther falls hopelessly in love with an unattainable woman and ends up committing suicide! Sentimental illustrations of central scenes proved immensely popular.[[227]](#footnote-227) Upon closer inspection, the situation proves to be much more complex.

### ‘Myself not Myself’

The reader learns already in early May 1771 that Werther is not longer destined for this world. Sixteen months before his demise, in an allusion to John 11:4, he speaks of his ‘Krankheit zum Tode’ (Letter of 12 August 1771).[[228]](#footnote-228) This particular quasi-religious aspect of the narrative suggests an unexpected danger inherent in self-realization. While *Werther* is often considered a tragedy (Nicholas Boyle calls it a monodrama),[[229]](#footnote-229) I will argue that it is no more a tragedy than *The Princess des Clèves* is even if tragic motifs are invoked.[[230]](#footnote-230) Of course, I am not the first to be drawn to the pathology of the subject. I do seek, however, to shed new light on the motif in terms of self-realization.

How applicable to the second half of the work, I ask, is the identification of pathology with the cycles of nature that Goethe cited? How can one reconcile Werther’s descent ever further into his inner Self and growing awareness of what appears to be a disjuncture between it and external reality? Are decline and death also a matter of nature’s manifestations at ‘regular intervals’? Is there, as Herbert Schöffler concluded long ago, one single driving force that structures the novel but appears in different forms?[[231]](#footnote-231) Is Werther’s individual instance of pathological decline symptomatic, in other words, of a universal principle that calibrates one’s inner Self to the changing seasons of nature?

By emphasizing that Werther’s ‘illness’ is a natural, organic process I depart from previous research that considers Werther simply to be solipsistic and frail, ill-equipped for life, incapable of adapting to ‘the newer ways’ of society.[[232]](#footnote-232) Furthermore, I posit that his experiences have broader psychological and quasi physico-theological ramifications that signify more than the psyche impacting the body. This approach, nevertheless, resonates with the notion of compresence (Ortega y Gasset), Fichte’s characterization of the I / Not I, and Boyles’s proposal regarding ‘myself not myself’. In this approach several factors come together: (1) Goethe’s idea of an incessantly productive nature (‘Gestalten, Umgestalten’ / forming, re-forming); (2) Spinoza’s conviction that man is called to a life of heightened consciousness; (3) his view that progressively clearer insights link the human with the Divine; and (4) the Dutch philosopher’s belief that man and God are both thoroughly imbedded in the operations of nature.[[233]](#footnote-233) As it turns out, Werther represents an unravelling of the tightly wrought definition of self-affirmation that Mme des Clèves achieves in an extreme act of self-preservation. The second caption at the head of this chapter—’When we lack a sense of Self, we lack everything’—draws attention to this paradox.[[234]](#footnote-234) She is most intent upon not losing herself, whereas Werther seemingly desires to lose himself. The original German, which occurs in the letter of 22 Aug. 1771, reads: ‘Wenn wir uns selbst fehlen, fehlt uns doch alles’.[[235]](#footnote-235) The run-up to it is significant, for Werther bemoans the terrible destruction that even an innocent walk through a meadow inflicts upon the world of tiny living creatures (worms, ants) which he deems analogous to the more seldom devastating floods and earthquakes that humans fear (letter of 18 Aug. 1771). This perception causes him to feel a ‘restless listlessness’ (‘unruhige Lässigkeit’) and robs him of his creative imagination, his positive feeling for nature’s manifestations, and delight in reading (‘My imagination has deserted me, my feeling for Nature is gone, and books nauseate me’).[[236]](#footnote-236) None of his projections provide anchoring points for his restless soul. He is like a rudderless ship being tossed to and froe by natural forces. Being ‘lost’ is a motif that appears several times in Goethe’s works, as Erich Trunz points out. For Trunz, it insinuates a dialectic of love when the ‘I’ merges totally with the loved Other and vice-versa.[[237]](#footnote-237)

While exalting in his extraordinary talent to feel everything intensely, Werther repeatedly laments his inability to moderate his feelings. These strong emotions keep pressing the limits of his bounded being. This, too, is an instance of lacking something: the self-restraint accorded others.[[238]](#footnote-238) The guard rails necessary for social interaction—protocol, ceremony, convention—do not work for him. Because they hamper the free expression of naturalness, he considers them to be fatal bourgeois conditions (‘die fatalen bürgerlichen Verhältnisse’; ‘our fateful bourgeois distinctions of rank’).[[239]](#footnote-239) In a striking metaphor early in the narrative Werther likens himself to a fast-flowing river that is contained by shores of established, regulated activity.[[240]](#footnote-240) In Book Two the metaphor returns as a violent storm-driven torrent that thrashes its shores, wreaking havoc along its way, as it bears Werther violently along (August 18, 1771; and December 11–12, 1772).[[241]](#footnote-241) The contrast between Werther and the Princess de Clèves could not be more pronounced. While continuing the psychological turn in the history of the European novel, *Werther* thus discloses a hitherto unrecognized dimension of what it means to confront/define oneself.

The Princess des Clèves erects defenses around herself to prevent the shattering of her resolve to resist her passion, even when she is free to express it. Lotte rather Werther is similar to her in this regard, although she does not entirely succeed in controlling that passion. The emotionally charged reading of the rapturous tales of loss and abandonment expressed in Ossian’s *Colmar* and *Alpin* opens up a crack in her and Werther’s mechanisms of self-restraint.[[242]](#footnote-242) The editor informs us that they ‘could sense their own wretchedness in the fates of the noble heroes. They sense it together, and shed tears in harmony’.[[243]](#footnote-243) Unlike the princess, however, Lotte ardently embraces her lover and accepts his fervent kisses, before forcing herself to back off. As a married woman, her regaining of control is understandable. Yet, the intimacy prompts Werther’s more rapid unravelling. Having achieved physical intimacy with Lotte, whatever feeble guard rails remained are now shattered. How admirable a protagonist can he be? In an explanatory note preceding the narrative Goethe informed the reader that they were about to encounter a historical chronicle about an admirable, if lamentable, individual:

I have diligently collected everything I have been able to discover concerning the story of poor Werther, and here present it to you in the knowledge that you will be grateful for it. You cannot deny your admiration and love for his spirit and character, nor your tears at his fate.

And you, good soul, who feels a compulsive longing such as his, draw consolation from his sorrows, and let this little book be your friend whenever through fate or through your own fault you can find no closer companion.[[244]](#footnote-244)

The claim of historical authenticity proved to be alluring, although for Goethe’s purpose misleading. The assurance that all necessary documents for the story had been consulted, for which the reader should be grateful is accompanied by a plea to identify closely with the protagonist, to feel his spirit and character, to shed tears at his fate, and to find a consoling companion in the narrative itself. Even the ‘good souls’ who are inclined to read the book as the author wished seem to have missed the warning inherent in the concluding comment: ‘let this little book be your friend whenever through fate or through your own fault you can find no closer companion’.

In other words: *caveat lector*! Reader beware! Goethe’s prelude seeks to determine one level of reading, the one most commonly acknowledged. The book is to be used as friend and companion only if one lacks a true friend and companion through one’s own failure or through the lack of opportunity to establish beneficial interpersonal connections. Many readers did not understand this level of reading. Instead, countless contemporaries set out in search of the actual actors behind this domestic tragic tale (not unlike those who read *La Princesse des Clèves* as a *roman à clef*), while others ignored the warning and decided wrongly to imitate Werther’s suicide. Those encounters by readers over the ages amount to so many acts of confronting and seeking to define oneself through encounters with life-like characters on the page independent of the author’s intent. The suicide imitations represent an aspect of the dark side of this narrative about self-affirmation. But they were the result of a shallow rather than a deep reading of the text.

Because so many readers misconstrued his intent in writing the novel, Goethe felt compelled to set things straight in a second, pointedly revised edition issued in 1787. The revisions impacted both style and content. The most rhapsodic passages were toned down, new episodes and characters were added to highlight how fragile the ‘historical’ character, Werther, in fact was.[[245]](#footnote-245) Yet the ultimate message of the narrative—and this is an alternate version of the religious reading made possible by the text—remains unchanged: it traces a natural progression that points to a reality beyond the individual fate rendered. (Herein Werther also differs from the Princess de Clèves.) Goethe sought to ensure that this ultimate message of the novel was properly understood. Nevertheless, he did not entirely succeed in his efforts to discourage readers from identifying with Werther. They did not view him as an expression of the rhythms of life itself. With this shift of perspective, I depart from Boyle’s otherwise fascinating interpretation of the novel as a ‘monodrama’, as a working out of the Promethean dialectic of ‘myself not myself’. Instead, I follow Schöffler who concluded that the only guilty one in this drama that is formed out of a single drive remains this blindly operative force which causes man to incur guilt via his best actions and then abandons him to his anguish.[[246]](#footnote-246)

### Werther’s Fatal Attraction

The often-cited letters of 10, 17, and 22 May 1771 already express the entire essence of Werther’s ‘fatal attraction’ and foreshadow his ‘demise’.[[247]](#footnote-247) For that reason, they are explored in greater detail in the following. The letter of 10 May 1771 depicts Werther’s harmonious immersion in Nature and best reflects Goethe’s intent formulated in his autobiography:

When the [mist] rise[s] about me in this lovely valley, and the sun shines high on the surface of the impenetrable darkness of my forest and only single rays steal into the inner sanctum, and I lie in the long grass by the tumbling brook, and lower down, close to the earth, I am alerted to the thousand various little grasses; when I sense the teeming of the little world among the stalks, the countless indescribable forms of the grubs and flies, closer to my heart, and feel the presence of the Almighty who created us in His image, the breath of the All-loving who bears us aloft in perpetual joy and holds us there; my friend! [When][[248]](#footnote-248) it grows dusky then before my eyes, and the world about me and the heavens [exist] in my soul like a lover—then I am often filled with a longing, and think: ah, if only you could express this, if only you could breathe onto the paper in all its fullness and warmth what is so alive in you, so that it would mirror your soul as your soul is the mirror of God in His infinity!—My friend—But it will be the end of me. The glory of these visions, their power and magnificence, will be my undoing.[[249]](#footnote-249)

Written on a glorious spring day, the enthusiastic response to nature is quite understandable. Werther sees himself as occupying a middle distance between the tree canopy of the impenetrable darkness of the forest above which he claims as ‘his’ through such intimate communion and the teeming of the little world on the ground below. While only single rays of the sun penetrate his ‘inner sanctum’, Werther’s heightened senses enhance his ability to discern what is not fully illuminated. Man is destined to occupy this middle realm between the very large and the very small.[[250]](#footnote-250) He is, after all, created in the image of God and shares in the Almighty’s creative and binding power of love (‘the breath of the All-loving’; ‘das Wehen der Alliebenden’).[[251]](#footnote-251) When it is too dark to see anything so deep in the dark forest, his interiority reproduces the images discernible by day.

Yet Werther is a mirror of nature, not an active agent choosing to re-present only positive manifestations. So acutely aware of his infusion with nature, he cannot write or paint, only ‘read’ what Nature presents. The external stimuli have become his own, have suffused his *intus*. His body responds to those changing rhythms. This mirroring function is his fatal flaw. His keen awareness of Nature’s manifestations will prove to be his undoing. The final sentence in the original underscores this point more explicitly than Hulse’s translation: ‘Aber ich gehe darüber zugrunde, ich erliege unter der Gewalt der Herrlichkeit dieser Erscheinungen’ (But it will be the end of me. The glory of these visions, their power and magnificence, will be my undoing.).[[252]](#footnote-252) While Hulse’s translation of *erliegen* as ‘undoing’ is well chosen, he comes up short in capturing the deep meaning of *ich gehe zugrunde* which he renders as ‘it will be the end of me’. *Zugrunde gehen* literally means to ‘disintegrate’, ‘fall to pieces’, or ‘break up’. That is much closer to what happens to Werther, even if it is the end of him as a separate entity.

His unraveling is due to the overwhelming grandeur of the phenomena of which he is a part. Overcome by nature, he is unable to draw and sketch; that is, to bring nature to a standstill. He feels too awe-struck by nature’s manifestations to intervene as an active agent. It is not a matter of his *intus* lacking content before the influx of nature. No. The narrator avows his oneness with nature in all its processes. Goethe frequently spoke of becoming to describe nature’s dynamism by which he meant what today is known as emergence. A living-nature model replaces Newtonian mechanical physics in this scheme of things. Leibniz and Spinoza pointed the way. The fatal attraction, then, is both a cohesion and an unraveling, a rising and a falling.

My reading showcases the novel as process art. Process art emphasizes the essential movement of natural processes themselves. In a famous poem about the nexus of soul and matter, ‘Gesang der Geister über den Wassern’ (Song of the Spirits Above the Waters, 1779), Goethe mused metaphorically:

Des Menschen Seele Gleicht dem Wasser: Vom Himmel kommt es, Zum Himmel steigt es, Und wieder nieder Zur Erde muß es, Ewig wechselnd.

[The soul of man resembles water: it falls from the sky and rises to the sky to fall yet again back to earth as it must, alternating eternally.][[253]](#footnote-253)

This is the first of six stanzas inspired by a visit to the impressive Staubbach Falls in Lauterbrunnental, Switzerland, Goethe imagined the spirits hovering above the surface of the water to be both the longing of the human soul and the foundational movement of nature itself in dialogue with one another. The dialectic of upward stiving and downward boundedness captures a major motif in Goethe’s thinking.

Hence, not the representation of any deliverable, fixed-end product is its goal, but rather the inchoate moments of transformative energy in transient flux. It thematizes the impossibility of holding fast to the fleeting moments of existence while nevertheless affirming a desire to do so.[[254]](#footnote-254) Caught up in the process, Werther is thus incapable of committing his impressions to paper (as Goethe the objective observer is able to do in ‘Gesang der Geister’). Thinking in terms of process art allows me to get beyond the impasse of traditional scholarship that characterizes Werther’s inability to write or draw as a failure.

Shortly after his avowal of nature’s all-encompassing influence on his being, Werther reveals another side of his personality that stands in direct opposition to the openness of the former. On 17 May 1771 he writes that he has been well received in Wahlheim with people reacting most favorably to him. They like him and seek his closer acquaintance. Their reaction suggests, of course, that there is something quite worthy about Werther. It might in fact be his extraordinary sensitivity to Nature and to his fellow man that inspires admiration. Nonetheless, he is struck by the monotonous quality of the lives most people live, working all the time and fearful of what to do with the little freedom they do have. By contrast, the country folk he encounters with their simple pleasures and open-hearted warmth he finds to be most kind and that exerts a soothing influence on him. All this, nevertheless, cannot mask the feeling that he is repressing something destructive that resides deep inside him: ‘but then I must be certain not to think of those many other powers lying dormant in me, mouldering in disuse, which I must needs keep carefully concealed. Ah, it trammels the whole heart so’.[[255]](#footnote-255) The comment is directed at the memory of his recently departed soul mate. What he experienced with the older woman was the exquisite sentiment of a Platonic relationship which points to something more, if actually unattainable in this bounded world.[[256]](#footnote-256)

Then the letter of May 22, 1771 addresses Werther’s creative powers and offers an unmistakable portending of his fate. It is summed up in the following famous passage:

[When I consider the restrictions that are placed on the active, inquiring energies of Man, when I see that all our efforts have no other result than to satisfy needs which in turn serve no purpose but to prolong our wretched existence, and then see that all our reassurance concerning the particular questions we probe is no more than a dreamy resignation, since all we are doing is to paint our prison walls with colourful figures and bright views—all of this, Wilhelm, leaves me silent. I withdraw into myself and discover a world, albeit a notional world of dark desire rather than one of actuality and vital strength. And everything swims before my senses, and I go my way in the world wearing a smile on my face.[[257]](#footnote-257)

No wonder that he feels that no one really understands him and that is his fate to be misunderstood.[[258]](#footnote-258) Only the hypersensitive among us would react so negatively to the routine of daily life, seeing no purpose other than survival, other than the prolonging of a miserable existence. Noteworthy is his sense of being imprisoned. The only escape at this point is through the imagination, by resigning himself to the inalterability of the essential tediousness of existence. He can project luminescent figures and scenes on his prison walls to compensate. Yet, he is darkly aware that something about his inward turn is amiss: it lacks actual depiction and vitality (‘Darstellung und lebendiger Kraft’). That is why he further explains that human beings are happiest before they gain full self-awareness like children or after they lose self-awareness like the insane.[[259]](#footnote-259) Then, too, ‘confined as he may be, he none the less still preserves in his heart the sweet sensation of freedom, and the knowledge that he can quit this prison whenever he wishes’.[[260]](#footnote-260) This, I suggest, is also a form of compensation highlighted by Tantillo.

These are of course dark thoughts for the vast majority of human beings. Most of us do not think things through to their logical end. People live according to a diurnal rhythm: from sunrise to sunset to sunrise. Because the cycle is apparently eternal, one does not consider that the setting sun might not rise again. With heavy burden the unfortunate goes his weary way (‘der Unglückliche unter der Bürde seinen Weg fortkeucht’). Under the circumstances, Werther is aware that it suffices simply to be a human being (‘Mensch’) who also has the ability to imagine a better world (‘und bildet seine Welt aus sich selbst’), to paint the walls of his prison in bright colors and uplifting perspectives.[[261]](#footnote-261) No need to say anything further. Others would not understand him anyway.

In this manner, the novel makes explicit from the outset that Werther is not like anyone else. He goes confidently his own way. He knows who he is. His sense of Self is firm. Sure, he is charming, sensitive, gracious, generous, and universally well liked. But he simultaneously contemplates being crushed and dissolved by everything around him. His extraordinary reaction to Wahlheim and its surroundings proves similarly overwhelming as he surveys the terrain from the top of a hill. He is overcome by the beauty of the charming valleys, the gentle chain of hills, the charming woods dotting the landscape, the mountain rising in the distance. He longs to lose himself among them. He rushes toward them in hopes of fulfillment but returns with longing unabated. He sums up his experience, stating: ‘Oh the distance is like the future: before our souls lies an entire and dusky vastness which overwhelms our feelings as it overwhelms our eyes, and ah! We long to surrender the whole of our being, and be filled with all the joy of one single, immense, magnificent emotion’.[[262]](#footnote-262) Such is the fate of man.

A profound human impulse, he conjectures, compels us to compare ourselves and environment constantly with others and their circumstances. In fact, our mood depends upon such interactions. He realizes that solitary freedom, release from social routine, is dangerous. It allows unrestricted reign to the imagination, nurtured by poetry. It is compensation for everything that he lacks. He can conceive of beings far superior to ourselves. We humans can, he observes, project greater perfections on everyone and everything else. We create perfect beings and settings. ‘All of this is quite natural’, he concludes, ‘[...] And so the happy mortal is a model of complete perfection’.[[263]](#footnote-263) Later as a result of his scientific studies, Goethe reiterated the insight into the inexhaustibility of Nature and of the human being’s entwinement with natural forces. He also concluded that nature was more interesting when it broke with set patterns and veered in new directions, even when it seemed self-contradictory.[[264]](#footnote-264)

### Compensation

In discussing the centrality of the principle of compensation in Goethe’s philosophy of nature, Astrida Tantillo remarks that we can begin to unravel the complexity of Goethe’s literary works by using compensation as our guiding principle.[[265]](#footnote-265) Elsewhere she concludes that Goethe ‘warns against regarding the abnormal [in nature] as diseased or pathological and against using such terms as misdevelopment, malformation, crippling, and stunting’.[[266]](#footnote-266) None of these descriptors are actually apt in characterizing Werther when we view his development through the lens of natural evolution. He is, I aver, an example of the enhancement of beauty and aesthetic pleasure that result from unexpected developments in nature. In this regard, I part ways with Tantillo, for I apply the principle of compensation to the protagonist himself, not to Goethe who uses the novel to compensate for his own failing as well as a confession to free himself from the guilt of having abruptly ‘abandoned’ Friederike Brion in Sessenheim at the end of his Strasbourg years as well as for his actions vis-à-vis Charlotte Buff and Johann Christian Kestner in Wetzlar. The ethical-aesthetic pleasure of viewing the ‘dark’ side of human experience, ‘angenehmes Grauen’, as Carsten Zelle formulated the phenomenon in his ground-breaking study,[[267]](#footnote-267) is related on a certain level to the tragic pleasure associated with *La Princesse de Clèves*.

A famous debate between Werther and Albert regarding the legitimacy of suicide showcases the ‘abnormal’ side of Werther’s enhanced sensibility. The suicide motif is, in fact, the other essential motivation for Goethe to pen the novel. It was prompted by the actual suicide of the Wetzlar lawyer Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem (1747–1772). He became the model for Werther in Book Two. Jerusalem fell hopelessly in love with a married woman (Elisabeth Herd, 1741–1813), became so disconsolate that he could not continue, borrowed the pistols from Kestner, and committed suicide as described in the novel.[[268]](#footnote-268)

In this debate, Werther defends suicide, whereas Albert totally rejects it on rational and moral grounds. Werther argues that the taking of one’s own life is both logical and natural, for it is actually a symptom of ‘sickness unto death’ with parallels in nature. The individual’s fever, her/his despair, rises to such intensity that s/he no longer has the energy or will to persist. ‘Nature’, Werther argues, ‘cannot find a way out of the labyrinth, where all a soul’s powers are confused and at odds, and the poor mortal must die’.[[269]](#footnote-269) He had already confessed that his own ‘heart is undermined by the consuming power that lies hidden in the Allness of Nature’ (18 Aug.71).[[270]](#footnote-270) If one is already ‘subsumed’ by his ecosystem with its diurnal cycles and constant rising and falling, it would be ridiculous to criticize a person who succumbs to a mortal fever: ‘The fool, to die of a fever! If only he had waited till he recovered his strength’ (12 Aug. 1771).[[271]](#footnote-271) Werther had used the same argument previously to explain how a ‘deranged’ a passionate lover could become, for ‘the rules will destroy the true feeling of Nature and its true expression’ [...] rules do not ‘merely contain, they cut back the ranker growth’.[[272]](#footnote-272)

The lovelorn cannot control their passions any more than the mortally ill can willfully end their deadly fever.[[273]](#footnote-273) For Werther himself love/sentiment has become an absolute value, independent of a given object or person. He is in love with the idea of total love, of ultimate perfection. Everything in tune with him becomes ‘his’ (e.g., ‘she is mine!’). His obsession devolves into an ‘incurable illness’, as already noted (Aug. 22, ’71). Hence, Lotte is more a lightning rod than a fatal attraction. He transposes his sentiments from the divinity of nature evident in the letter of 10 May 1771 to the ‘divinity’ of Lotte that is already expressed in the ecstatic language of the letter of 16 June 1771). Tantillo argues that she becomes ‘an intermediary for Werther to form a spirituality outside himself’.[[274]](#footnote-274) This is true to a certain extent. But we should bear in mind that Werther had already experienced a spirituality outside himself. First, in his enthralled reaction to nature (letter of 10 May 1771) and, second, in his pietistic friendship to his older confidant.[[275]](#footnote-275) If not Lotte, someone (or something) else would have garnered his undivided attention. Due to his intense awareness of being driven to overcome his bounded Self, he was always looking elsewhere for completion. That yearning also proved to be a ‘fatal attraction’, just the opposite of his simultaneously being drawn to an ordered and contented bourgeois life. The latter, however, was incapable of genuinely granting him rest. Self-realization in the All of Nature is the ultimate end of the agonistic struggle between the bounded and unbounded.

Concerning Werther’s turn to the negative, Goethe noted the connection between body and soul that was later to prove critical to Ortega y Gasset’s view of the human being:

[...] repugnance toward life has its physical and moral origins. We shall leave the explanation of the former to the doctor, of the latter to the moralist, and, in material that has been worked over again and again, let us pay attention to the salient point where this phenomenon reveals itself most clearly. All one’s gratifications in life are based on the regular reappearance of external things. The change from day to night, of the seasons, of flower and fruit, and all the other things that confront us at regular intervals, so that we may and should enjoy them—these are the actual well-springs of our daily life. The more openly we avow these pleasures, the happier we are.[[276]](#footnote-276)

Interesting is the connection Goethe draws between nature and the aversion to life that one might experience. Goethe posits two sources for that ‘repugnance’, one physical and one moral. Yet, he does not venture to make explicit here why and how the two sources make themselves felt in the body and the psyche of the individual involved. The clarification he leaves to the doctor and the moral philosopher.

Just how accurate Goethe’s judgment is becomes transparent when we look to studies of the mind/body dualism debate that dominated medical discourse at the time. Werther’s body acts as an organon by means of which the ‘I’ experiences the world. Today we speak of the embodiment of the soul, a mode of inquiry traceable to Goethe’s era and not first emergent in Ortega’s view of the interconnections between soul and body.[[277]](#footnote-277) Goethe does imply in the cited passage nonetheless what those connections might be in terms of understanding Werther’s state of mind. Accordingly, the physical source of the repugnance toward life is inherent in the very regularity of change in nature that impact our lives: sunrise-sunset, the seasons, flowering and decline, ripening and decaying of fruit. Goethe chooses to focus on the pleasures of renewal of inherent in natural rhythms. Unstated although implied when read against the clear assertions in *Werther* is that the comfort and joy of the regularity of renewal has a counterpoint: regularity can also prove monotonous. Worse, the renewal of nature also entails its opposite: decline and decay. A focus on the latter causes Werther to experience a repugnance toward life. In the cold and bareness of winter it is difficult to imagine the quickening impulses of spring. Nothing in nature is permanent beyond its diurnal rhythms. Thus, the moral source of repugnance derives, on the one hand, from this natural regularity of change, as well as from the inevitable decline, decay, and dead of winter.

I read *Werther* in quite a different light than does Jane Brown who, like so many others, considers the novel a landmark in portraying the modern psychological subject. For starters, the protagonist’s very name is the comparative form of ‘wert’. It should, therefore, be understood as connoting the ‘more valuable one’ rather than simply a noble person. His very name suggests that the compresence of binding and disassociate forces (concentration vs expansion) outlined above make the protagonist worthier than anyone else.[[278]](#footnote-278) Moreover, Goethe does not call him *brav*, which can also mean ‘worthy’ or ‘noble’ but in the sense of abiding by the accepted rules and social conventions. Goethe applies the modifier *brav* (translated as ‘worthy’) to describe Charlotte’s father and her betrothed Albert. The one a bailiff, the other a court administrator. Both are diligent and respected (*brav*).[[279]](#footnote-279) That pathway is not open to Werther. ‘Rules’, he writes to his friend, Wilhelm, in the next letter dated 26 May 1771, ‘will destroy the true feeling of Nature and its true expression!’.[[280]](#footnote-280) His initial experiences in the idyllic village of Wahlheim confirms his (even earlier) resolve ‘to keep to Nature alone in the future. Only Nature has inexhaustible riches, and only Nature creates a great artist’.[[281]](#footnote-281) On 19 June 1771 he writes again to Wilhelm of the contrast between his unbridled enthusiasm for nature and the deep-seated impulse to set himself bounds:

Dear Wilhelm, I have thought a great deal about Man’s desire to go out into the world, make new discoveries and go a-wandering; and, on the other hand, about the deep-seated impulse to be contented with limits that are imposed, and gladly to proceed as custom dictates, with no interest in what goes on beyond the daily round.[[282]](#footnote-282)

But Werther is no ordinary ‘braver Mensch’ (worthy fellow). His own divinely bestowed powers and gifts do not permit contented self-restraint, as he explicitly admits several months later at the very beginning of Book Two, where he laments to God: ‘why didst Thou not keep half back, and in their place grant me confidence and contentment?’ (letter of 10 October 1771).[[283]](#footnote-283)

Secondly, Werther’s view of Charlotte, while perhaps tending toward idealization, remains rooted in reality. Hence, I cannot agree with Brown’s conclusion that Werther’s ‘selfhood has become so interiorized, so out of touch with the realities around him, [...] it has become inaccessible, and the world has become inaccessible to it. He is unable to act or even to live in the world’.[[284]](#footnote-284) To be sure, Werther does descend into a form of psychological ‘derangement’ and seemingly loses touch with Charlotte’s and Albert’s reality. Yet there are numerous indicators in the novel for us to conclude just the opposite: Werther acts totally in accord with the world around him. A longer note to Charlotte penned on the morning of his suicide draws specific attention to this underlying nexus:

[For the last time, then, for the last time I open these eyes. Ah, never more will they behold the sun; [a cloudy day obscures it].[[285]](#footnote-285) Then mourn, Nature! For your son and friend and lover is nearing his end. Lotte it is an incomparable feeling and yet it is like a half-waking dream to say to oneself: this is my last morning. The last! Lotte, I have no sense of what the words means: the last! Am I not here now with all my powers, and tomorrow I shall be sprawled on the ground bereft of the energies of life. To die!—what does it mean? When we speak of death we are only dreaming. I have seen people die; but there are such constraints on human nature that we have no feeling for the beginning and ending of our existence. Now I am still my own—yours! Yours, oh my beloved! One single moment—of severance, of parting—perhaps for ever!—no, Lotte, no—how can I be annihilated? How can you be annihilated? We *exist*!—Annihilation! What does it mean? It is merely another word, an empty sound, and cannot touch my heart.—Dead, Lotte! And interred in the cold earth, in the dark and narrow grave![[286]](#footnote-286)

Salient is Werther’s invocation of Nature rather than of the Christian God at the outset. He is Nature’s son, friend and lover. The levels of identification are multiple, encompassing a full range of attachments. This is a clear distancing from the allusions to Christ that had become a frequent motif in his final months, seemingly intensifying Werther’s ‘religiosity’.[[287]](#footnote-287) In a first step, Werther’s self-identifications progress from oneness with nature to absorption with Lotte who represents for him the ideal person, perhaps precisely because she is out of reach.[[288]](#footnote-288) In any event, she acts as an intermediary, a kind of priestess who confirms that something even more exalted exists. This she does via enactments of the sacraments of communion (*Brotschneiden*) and confession (when she expresses her love for Werther). For Werther love/sentiment has actually become an absolute value, independent of a given object or person. He is in love with the idea of total love, of ultimate perfection. Everything is in tune with him becomes ‘his’ (e.g., ‘she is mine!’). It is an expression of his ‘incurable illness’ (Aug. 22, ’71).

The next step in the progression returns the seeker to Nature. To be sure, the return was announced in a cogent metaphor of falling leaves in a letter of 4 September 1772 when Werther wrote: ‘Yes, that is how it is. As Nature’s year declines into autumn, it is becoming autumn within me, and all about me. My leaves are yellowing, and already the leaves of the nearby trees have fallen.’[[289]](#footnote-289) Soon they will be strewn throughout nature as mirrored metaphorically in Ossian’s *Alpin*.[[290]](#footnote-290) And even more specifically he remarked in mid-December on his desire for total immersion even in the violent forces of nature: ‘Oh, Wilhelm! How gladly I should have surrendered my human existence in order to be that stormy wind, scattering the clouds, snatching at the floods!—May that rapture not still be ahead for this imprisoned soul?’[[291]](#footnote-291) Clearly, Werther and nature are inextricably linked.

Yet the passage from 24 December cited above deepens the perspective beyond the metaphorical and wishful to include the physico-philosophical. It is expressed via his inability to understand the common meaning of death, grave, and non-existence. He simply cannot grasp what they are actually supposed to mean. Werther’s argument about being eternally existent (‘wir *sind* ja!’) makes logical his rejection of death and the grave as marking an end to things. It enables him to commit suicide with an inner assurance that death does not mean non-existence.

To normal ears, the claim might indeed seem extreme, even crazy. He must be deranged, one would conclude, if he cannot understand the denotations (*Worte*) and connotations (*Sinn*) of such key terms. We know from the Old Testament that we come from dust and return to dust (*Genesis* 2:7 and 3:19; see also *Ecclesiastes* 3:20). Although the Old Testament citations speak only to humankind’s material origin and decay, its humble origin and feeble composition, the New Testament adds the idea of a continued existence after the decomposition of the body, for just as Christ was raised from the dead, so shall the baptized live in the newness of life (*Romans* 6:3–9). The message and command of the NT is to love. Dust is nothing. But the spirit is something. Love is definitely something. This idea is a traditional part of the Catholic funeral mass and Lutheran funeral service. While neither Goethe nor Werther were devout Christians, they did believe in the supreme power of love.

Modern science confirms the compresence of life (presence) and death (non-presence) by viewing them as two sides of the same coin. Modern science informs us, namely, that we are made of star dust and that we will one day return to the elements that produced us. Stardust to stardust combines the Old-Testament dust-to-dust with the New Testament life-to-life. Werther (and after him Faust) would be quite pleased with what we now know about stardust, the energy of the infinite universe, matter and energy being one. And the human being is wholly embedded in the exchange.[[292]](#footnote-292) The knowledge would have made Werther even more content with his decision to ‘end’ it all.

The difference in interpretation lies in the difference between how one understands ‘the world’. For Werther it is the world of natural processes. This is evident in the sentence ‘but there are such constraints on human nature that we have no feeling for the beginning and ending of our existence’. Notable is the emphasis on ‘human nature’ (‘die Menschheit’) and on ‘[this] our [material] existence’. I add modifiers in square brackets that are inherent in the German term, ‘dieses Daseins’. ‘Our existence’ connotes the world of superimposed social conventions for Charlotte and Albert and all the other ‘normal’ people who populate the narrative. Does the novel have to end in Werther’s suicide? Yes, it does. Why? Because the alternative for Werther is to dwindle away into a mere shell of a human being—mere dust—without any of the inner vigor loudly proclaimed in these pages.

Then, too, we should not lightly dismiss his characterization of his suffering as being analogous to the passion of Christ. Christ too had to suffer and die. The comparison drawn underscores how Werther’s suffering is similar to Christ’s passion in that it opens the way to new life. In fact, the German title, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* could—and perhaps, should—have been translated as *The Passion and Death of Young Werther*. Christians do not believe that Christ was deluded by a phantom to endure his passion and death for the good of all humankind. They do not doubt that his freely chosen sacrifice opened a pathway to renewed life. In like manner, Werther’s passion and suicide can be seen on the one hand as the conscious reinforcement of the conventional values for which Charlotte and Albert stand. He clearly states that he must sacrifice himself because if he does not, his continued physical presence will undo their ‘tidy’ lives of regulated activity. On the other hand, Werther is also entirely aware from the outset that his biological being is regulated by the rhythms of nature with its change of seasons from spring to summer to fall to winter and back again repeatedly through the cycle of birth-death-renewal.

So, what are the signs imbedded in the text that prompt us to view Werther not only as one worthy of our admiration, but as being more worthy than any other character who inhabits this confessional narrative that we encountered in *The Princess des Clèves*? It is a question, I think, of his representing a deeper understanding and reconciliation of the tension between the world of social convention and the natural world. The tension is resolved in a series of steps that ultimately remove the dualism of self/nature, passive/active.[[293]](#footnote-293)

### Verselbsten / Entselbsten

In explaining his early concept of cosmology in *Poetry and Truth* (1811–33) Goethe coined the terms *verselbsten* and *entselbstigen* to designate how the individual and nature are connected.[[294]](#footnote-294) The individual exists as a human being after having emanated from nature. In *Faust* Goethe would speak analogously of the hum of nature (i.e., the *Erdgeist* / earth spirit), and later of the world spirit (*Weltseele*). Friedrich Schelling’s *Von der Weltseele* (1798) confirmed his earlier intuitive insights into the workings of nature that he found reinforced in his reading of Spinoza. The emanation from organic nature Goethe called *verselbsten*, literally the making of Self. *Entselbstigen* designated the dissolution of the individual form back into the realm of infinitely creative natural forms.[[295]](#footnote-295) Nicholas Boyle muses that ‘even creativity must have a source’. Like Goethe, he identifies Fate as ‘the unknown dispenser of all creativity’.[[296]](#footnote-296) Fate, as it would now appear is a mythological designation for the creative universe itself which is continually producing new worlds while others consume themselves like a regurgitating monster. ‘Monster’ only if the process is feared and not accepted as a given. A tension exists between the two manifestations of *verselbsten* and *entselbstigen* because they are related, yet one is individuated while the other is not. Ultimately, the individuated form disappears. As is evident in Werther’s own yearning, the individuated human being longs for continuity. This longing is also a form of the binding force of love that Minerva (the Roman goddess of poetry, the arts and handicrafts who burst from the head of Jupiter) represents. She guides the Prometheus of Goethe’s poem, for instance, to the source of life. ‘Life’ in the sense of bonding elements together. Goethe provided a later example of these bonding elements in his novel, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*, 1809).

In 1770, while a student in Straßburg, Goethe had read Giordano Bruno’s *Dialogo de la Causa* (1584), finding in it deep and fruitful insights. Like Goethe, Bruno was a poet and thinker for whom spirit and matter were joined in the world of being. For him, the Deity is one with nature and first cause of everything. In his diary, Goethe defended Bruno against Pierre Bayle’s dismissive judgment of the Italian’s ‘impiété et absurdité’. At the same time Goethe was exposed to Ossian, for whom everything human plays out outside in boundless, relentless nature. In Ossian’s world humans are like bubbles rising to the surface from the water’s depth only to be driven about by the elements and eventually to burst and return to their watery source. Nowhere in Macphersen’s poem, in Bruno’s treatise, or in Spinoza’s pantheism is there a trace of a personal God. By the time Goethe sat down to write *Werther*, he was already a pantheist.[[297]](#footnote-297)

At the beginning of Book 16 of *Poetry and Truth*, Goethe recounts how upon reading Spinoza’s *Ethics* in 1785 he experienced a tempering of his passions and gained a renewed and far-reaching perspective on the material and ethical dimensions of reality. The famed Spinoza-controversy reminded him of his own earlier (positive) reaction to the philosopher and other pioneering thinkers such as Giordano Bruno, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and Ossian who helped shape his view that nature operates according to eternal, necessary, even divine laws because even God cannot change them. The experience of the transitoriness of natural phenomena itself served only confirmed that belief.[[298]](#footnote-298)

Goethe was engaged at the time in geological studies. Not long after, Herder’s reading of Spinoza in *Gott, einige Gespräche* (1787), which Goethe read during his Italian journey (1786–87), inspired him to see examples of the Spinozist *hen kai pan* (one and everything) also in his botanical studies in Italy. Most saliently—and long before these influences—had Goethe formulated his religious views as a young man. That is the subject of the conclusion of Book 8 of *Poetry and Truth*. Goethe recalls how he constructed for himself ‘a very strange looking world’ based on neo-Platonic ideas influenced also by Hermeticism, mysticism, and cabalism. He begins by stating: ‘Ich möchte mir wohl eine Gottheit vorstellen, die sich von Ewigkeit her produziert’ (‘I was fully minded to posit a deity that reproduces itself, by itself, from eternity.’).[[299]](#footnote-299) Then he goes on to explain that ‘production’ presupposes a multiplicity of forms and options. To realize them, a second force must be imagined, then a third. The second goes by the name of ‘son’, the third closes the dialectic of the two to create a whole. Goethe explains: ‘These two had to continue the act of reproduction and they reappeared to themselves in the third entity, which was just as consistently alive and eternal as the others’.[[300]](#footnote-300) This is his version of the Trinity that is pure dynamic yet undivided potential.

However, Goethe muses, such perfection would seem to cut off the possibility of further creative production of forms and possibilities. Because the productive drive had to continue, a fourth element was needed. It proved to be a paradoxical one, for it encapsulated the infiniteness (*unbedingt*) of the Three, while simultaneously being set apart from them. The productive capacity that had led to the perfect Three was now allocated to this fourth element, which was none other than Lucifer ‘from whom all other essence was to proceed’.[[301]](#footnote-301) It was Lucifer who created the hosts of angels in Goethe’s cosmology. The fall of the angels—some following Lucifer, others remaining loyal to their origins—proved necessary to ensure a continuing evolutionary process. Everything material was heavy, firm, and opaque (‘schwer, fest und finster’), but proved nonetheless by descent from the Divine, if not exactly immediate to be just as absolutely powerful and eternal as its predecessors, the father and grandparents (‘durch Filiation vom göttlichen Wesen herstammt’; ‘ebenso unbedingt mächtig und ewig ist als der Vater und die Großeltern’).[[302]](#footnote-302)

Because the material world marked by a concentration of energy would eventually undermine itself, the Elohim assigned to matter the ability to expand. Through this assignation the creative impulse was restored to creation via the alternation between contraction and expansion; Infinite essence now had the capacity to expand and move toward the deity: ‘the real pulse of life was restored again, and Lucifer could not escape it influence’.[[303]](#footnote-303) All of creation is thus nothing more than a falling away from and a returning to the origins, of becoming and being.[[304]](#footnote-304) His rebellion against the Trinity expresses his longing for infinity, i.e., his desire to take the place of the Three. Lucifer and his realm are thus marked by being both finite and infinite. To restore the pure divine-like quality that had been lost with the Fall of Lucifer, a fifth force was required. That fifth element is man. He assumed the role of Lucifer in his longing for the Absolute but was also marked by growing awareness that he must always fall short due to his bounded material state. Yet, the notion of God-made-Man reassures the questing individual that s/he is made in the image of God and is called upon to draw ever closer to the Divine state.

Strikingly, Goethe does not cite Jesus in his explanation of the origins of the human drive for perfection. In concluding his ruminations on the nature of creation and of humankind’s position within it, he remains within the framework of matter and energy (even if he does not speak of energy per se):

genug, wenn nur anerkannt wird, daß wir uns in einem Zustande befinden, der, wenn er uns auch niederzuziehen und zu drücken scheint, dennoch Gelegenheit gibt, ja zur Pflicht macht, uns zu erheben und die Absichten der Gottheit dadurch zu erfüllen, daß wir, indem wir von einer Seite uns zu verselbsten genötiget sind, von der andern in regelmäßigen Pulsen uns zu entselbstigen nicht versäumen.

[It suffices if we will just recognize that our condition even though seeming to drag us down and oppress us, is such that we are still left with the opportunity, nay, the duty of raising ourselves up and fulfilling the plans of the deity. This is what we do when, while compelled on the one hand to concentrate into ourselves, we do not neglect, on the other hand, to expand, in regular pulsations, away from ourselves.[[305]](#footnote-305)]

Robert Heitner’s translation expresses Goethe’s meaning exceptionally well. His rendering of *verselbsten* and *entselbstigen* respectively as ‘to concentrate’ and ‘to expand’ carries through on Goethe’s foregoing analogy à propos the concentration and expansion of the universe. It is an ingenious way of underscoring the pulsating energy that comprises the dialectic of constituting and dissolving the Self that is at the core of Goethe’s neologisms which literally mean ‘to make the Self’ and to ‘unmake the Self’. It is also totally in line with his basic principle of systole and diastole that signify the pulsations of life.

In light of Goethe’s early reinterpretation of *Genesis* and cosmology, it is no wonder that Erich Trunz can conclude that death is for Goethe simultaneously a religious delimitation and a fulfillment of love (‘Der Tod ist für ihn gleichzeitig religiose Entgrenzung und Liebesvollzug’).[[306]](#footnote-306) Thus, Werther can logically claim that Lotte is *his* because she too belongs to the creative forces of the universe via the universal process of *verselbsten*/*entselbstigen* or concentration/expansion, becoming and being. They exist as one in that synergy. For Werther, we have seen, the highest value was not reason but sentiment (*Herz*), obvious from repeated instances since the opening lines of the novel. It is not surprising in a sentimental novel about youth that the heart would be the refrain, would constitute the chief organ for establishing a connection to the world. This was one of several options for Goethe to achieve a sense of boundlessness within the finiteness of physical existence that were capable of inciting the process of *entselbstigen*. He tried them out in different phases of his career.[[307]](#footnote-307) Werther’s solution, which we have seen from the outset, was to immerse himself in nature. He remained true to his heart as the portal to nature’s boundlessness in all its manifestations, whether as nurturing mother or self-consuming monster and torturous demon that follows him everywhere.[[308]](#footnote-308) Unlike Boyle, I do not see that the reciprocity between Werther’s heart and nature ever ‘disappeared altogether’.[[309]](#footnote-309) When Werther realizes that what *is* can never cease to exist but simply changes form, he is resolved to die. Lotte’s expression of love for him affords the sense of infinity and affirms that death is but a portal to it. Despite the numerous allusions to the Bible and Catholic practices, Werther’s approach is a distinctly secularized version of religious connection. Fulfillment is part and parcel of the world as constituted.

Like Mme de Lafayette’s *La Princesse des Clèves*, Goethe’s *Werther* is exemplary of the function of literature as confession, an admission of one’s faults and failings but also an acknowledgement of one’s strengths and advantages over others. Especially his capacity for boundless love makes Werther a worthy individual, worthier than most. The notion of Self in this work can be seen as a radicalized version of the love-motif as formative principle in *La Princesse des Clèves*. For the Princess, the great motivator was first to preserve her reputation and status in society by being faithful, after her husband’s death she continued along the chosen path out of a sense of guilt for not having loved him as she loved Nemours. Therein lies the difference between her fatal sexual attraction and Werther’s broadly based one. Both protagonists create a sense of Self that diverges from those around them. Yet Werther’s self-determination is not wholly internalized as it was for the Mme des Clèves. Her transcendence is rooted in a social concept of virtue, whereas Werther’s is anchored in ontological secularism.[[310]](#footnote-310)

Each work is the kind of looking glass that makes us want to grasp hold of and feel empathetically, as Goethe remarked in the citation at the chapter masthead. A true work of art, he noted in his autobiography, ‘neither approves nor censures, but instead develops sentiments and actions in sequence, and thereby illuminates and instructs’.[[311]](#footnote-311) In the end, it makes us reflect upon the facsimiles of ourselves encountered on the page. Mme. de Lafayette and Goethe each succeeded in encouraging empathy and understanding of their protagonists, whether s/he firmly establishes or decidedly loses the Self. Where do we go from this twofold condition? What other options are available to constitute the Self?

## Losing the Self: Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857)

But something may first be said of the reading of a novel. The beginning of criticism is to read aright, in other words to get into touch with the book as nearly as may be. It is a forlorn enterprise—that is admitted; but there are degrees of unsuccess.[[312]](#footnote-312)

### Overview

Gustave Flaubert’s (1821–80) *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province* (1857) recounts the life of a young, ambitious petite-bourgeois woman in the provinces. Flaubert found the subject matter repulsive because of its triviality and vulgarity and because of its platitudinous characters. Just what he needed to tame his own romantic tendencies blatantly manifest in his first novel, La *Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1849). He captured his general attitude in the famous phrase, ‘Que ma Bovary m’embête!’[[313]](#footnote-313)

Her tale has historical precedence. In 1848 in the town of Rys, the second wife of a Dr. Delamare, after a series of adulteries and extravagances was rumored to have poisoned herself and precipitated her husband’s suicide, leaving their daughter an orphan. A second historical incident, this time from 1840, involved a Madame Lafarge, a pampered and well-connected woman, who was found guilty of poisoning her vulgar, provincial husband. She was clearly nourished in her desired lifestyle by the reading of sentimental fiction. French poet and dramatist, Louis Hyacinthe Bouilhet, a school fellow of Flaubert, introduced him to the former event, while Louise Colet, Flaubert’s mistress, introduced him to the later. Using these historical accounts as a means to control his own romantic tendencies, Flaubert created his masterpiece of French and World Literature.

With its mundaneness and provincial French setting, the subject matter seemed little suited for global success. But by combining empirical observation and progressive themes in an aesthetically engaging style, Flaubert broke new ground. Critic Percy Lubbuck asserted a century ago that *Madame Bovary* ‘remains perpetually the novel of all novels’.[[314]](#footnote-314) British critic James Wood, Senior Editor at the *New Republic*, echoed this assessment more recently in contending that ‘Novelists should thank Gustave Flaubert the way poets thank spring: it begins again with him. He is the originator of the modern novel; indeed, you could say that he is the originator of modern narrative [...].’[[315]](#footnote-315) An endless line of writers acknowledged that debt. For instance, Allain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, practitioners of the nouveau roman in the mid-twentieth century, explicitly acknowledged him as a precursor. Zola, Chekhov and Joyce, Kafka, Sartre and Camus all took lessons from Flaubert. Flaubert’s innovativeness lies in his stunning use of detail and style.

The novel presents itself as a chronicle of provincial lives in three parts. Essentially, it is a chronicle of a petite-bourgeois married woman in the provinces. It is a tale of disenchantment with marriage and love, of ennui in general, of a political and literary climate which changed significantly since 1848. Emma Bovary appears as a female Don Quixote, and her story does to romanticism what the adventures of Cervantes’ Don Quixote did to chivalric romances. Exposed to crass reality, illusions/delusion popped and they both came crashing down to earth. In Emma’s case, it was a plunge from the heights of romantic expectation to the crassness of consumerism, money, and infidelity. Each of the three parts begins with an objective description. The three-part structure allows Flaubert to give his conceptions a beginning, a middle, and an end with a classical symmetry seldom encountered in novels.

A primary question for me in considering Emma’s attempts at identity transformation is whether her experiences amount to a tragedy. This question was also posed with regard to The *Princess de Clèves* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. To what degree, I ask, does her fate lie in her own hand? To what degree is she the victim of others? Of circumstances? In a sense then I am seeking a bridge between Werther’s solipsism and Emma’s attempts at self-affirmation. This is not necessarily an easy task, given the fact the *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is normally designated a work of Romanticism, whereas *Emma Bovary* is exemplary of the new realism of the nineteenth century. Concerning the ‘space’ that Emma occupies, we must of course consider her social position. Social position was of course a major factor in both the *Princess de Clèves* and *Werther*. But Flaubert renders the *faits diverse* of the socio-economic-political space as all encompassing. Realism in his hands is no more and no less than an undertaking to look at all the facts of a situation in the face, and then to shape them poetically into an integrated whole. The external factors also shape Emma’s psychological expectations of herself (and of others). Early on, for instance, the reader learns that writers such as Walter Scott, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Balzac and George Sand project desires that provide her with vicarious satisfaction. By soiling her hands with the refuse of old lending libraries, grew ever more irritated by discipline which proved ‘alien to her temperament’.[[316]](#footnote-316)

The action of the novel runs from ca. October 1827 to August 1846, roughly corresponding to the period between the July Revolution of 1830 and that of 1848. The era witnessed the rise of the middle class, already signaled in Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et Noire* (1830). The novel’s tripartite structure broadens the setting of Emma’s aspirations, starting from the narrowest of horizons in the village of Tostes (I), proceeding to the main locale, Yonville (II), and ultimately reaching the provincial capital, Rouen (III). Not that Emma wished to stop there, for she ‘wanted simultaneously to die and to live in Paris’.[[317]](#footnote-317) Her reading selections nurtured these yearnings. Lonely, disenchanted with married life, and increasingly disgusted with her husband, she longed for adventure. Early on we are told: ‘Down in her soul, the while, she was waiting for something to happen. Like a shipwrecked sailor, she perused her solitary world with hopeless eyes, searching for some white sail far away where the horizon turns to mist. She didn’t know what her luck might bring, what wind would blow it her way, what shore it would take her to, whether it was a sloop or a three-masted schooner, laden with anguish or crammed to the portholes with happiness’.[[318]](#footnote-318)

Part I describes Emma’s ‘process of self-repression’, as Geoffrey Wall aptly puts it.[[319]](#footnote-319) She tries to be a good wife, but becomes increasingly frustrated because Charles fails to recognize how unfulfilled she feels. He proves incapable of offering her what she craves. Hence, Part I is a study in the conditions of Emma's marriage. It is marked by two turning points that form a significant contrast: Charles’ and Emma’s garish peasant wedding in chapter 4 and the grand entertainment at the Château de la Vaubyessard in chapter 8. The peasant wedding, as garish as it is, marks the beginning of a new life for Emma, one filled with hope as the wife of the country doctor, whereas the second showcases how far removed her reality is from her dream world. Charles is the leading man who plays opposite her. Moreover, chapter 7 marks the point where Emma increasingly seeks relief in the dream world of romantic tales from her quotidian reality. The stark contrast between her transporting reveries and Charles’ plodding daily routine is starkly showcased in chapter 9. It conveys a pungent sense of the mechanicalness in Charles’ life and relationship to Emma for he tramps around like a mill-horse, focused solely on the trodden path. He is uninspiring, unambitious; his conversations ‘as flat as any street pavement’.[[320]](#footnote-320)

Part II then describes how she hopes to express her sense of self-being. And that is the process rendered in Part III of her chronicle which begins with the morphing of the Platonic lover, Léon, into a seducer like Rodolphe and ends with the demise of Emma’s bodily presence into nothingness. Part II studies Emma’s platonic romance with the young Léon Dupuis (ch. 6) and her carnal affair with the sophisticated paramour Rodolphe Boulanger (ch. 9). Through his own dream-like yearnings Léon awakens in her the feeling of being truly understood by another. Their Platonic relationship is supplanted by a carnal one with Rodolphe. He is an experienced paramour, who knows how to play upon her fantasies to gain his sexual ends. When he ultimately tires of her, he drops her without remorse, while she is cast into a deep depression at having deceived herself into thinking she could have a new, fulfilled life with him. What she experiences is similar to the disillusioning of her childhood fantasies in Part I. Real grounding of Self seems out of her reach.

Part II contains scenic and thematic pairings similar to the ones in Part I. However, these new pairings bring out even more fatally the variance between Emma and Charles: the unsuccessful operation on Hippolyte’s club foot (II, 11) and the opera in Rouen (III, 1). The first demonstrates Charles’ inadequacy as an Officer of Health (he is not a medically trained doctor). The botched operation becomes a symbol of Emma’s thwarted ambitions and of her growing aversion to her rather dull and limited husband, whereas the opera scene in Rouen underscores Emma’s romantic longings for a life far different from her mundane existence. The experience returns her to the escapist books of her childhood with their ‘seductive phantasmagoria of sentimental realities’.[[321]](#footnote-321) These antithetical strains are juxtaposed in the central chapters of the book where the agricultural fair with its emphasis on science and hard work takes place. It contrasts with Rodolphe’s seduction of Emma in a private space above the proceedings below. Rising debts incurred to support her desire for social advancement complicate her dilemma.

By revealing the train of consequences that leads to Emma’s death, Part III showcases how real grounding of Self seems out of her reach. It begins with the morphing of the Platonic lover, Léon, into a seducer like Rodolphe and ends with the disappearance of Emma’s bodily presence into nothingness. Money and financial troubles caused by the businessman L’heureux’s unconscionable usury hold the key to Emma’s radical loss of self-grounding. That despite her obsession with illusions of romantic sentimentality which Rodolphe clearly recognizes as ‘you love yourself too much’.[[322]](#footnote-322) The irony of the assessment is apparent in the fact that Emma loves herself as she imagines herself to be than as she actually is.

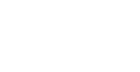
The interplay of cross purposes that was already noted in Part I (chapters 6–7) seems to culminate in a two-fold central staging here. First is the cathedral scene with the ensuing carriage ride in Rouen where Léon conceives of the church as a ‘bourdoire’ and consequently transforms the cab into one. Second is Emma’s deathbed scene that is marked by a tragic heaviness and is accompanied by a shift from the romantic vibes of the cathedral/carriage scene to the rancidness of a slow and torturous death by poisoning. Emma’s daughter, Berthe, ends up in a work house, while the chemist, Homais, Charles’s and Emma’s antagonist, replaces Charles as local health officer. Homais, ironically, is awarded the Legion of Honor despite his obsequiousness. Berthe’s fall and Homais’s rise poignantly underscore Flaubert’s critique of the impact of rising commerce and industry on social behavior.

### Things and Characters

Flaubert devoted great care to his sentence structures and paragraphing. Even the chapter, as he utilizes it, is in itself a distinctive literary genre, so Henry Levin claims in *Gates of Horn* (1963). The opening of each chapter is ordinarily a straightforward designation of time and place, whereas its conclusion habitually imposes some striking and unexpected effect; for instance, a pertinent image, an epigrammatic twist, a rhetorical question a poignant afterthought. By adapting the rhythms of his style to the movement of his characters’ thoughts, he developed what we know as point of view. His goal was to lift prose from the quotidian to the poetic. His manipulation of objects and details almost cinematographic. Nothing is superfluous, everything helps to carry the total burden of significance. Objects become symbols with extended metaphors common. Feeling is translated into visual images and objects. Flaubert’s commentary can also be inferred from the way he wields his scalpel-like pen. He gained such precision by reducing the original 3000 pages of text that he penned over the gestation period of the novel (1851–56) to just 350. A labor of love and an astonishing feat.

The cinematographic quality of Flaubert’s use of detail is evident in numerous details that focus on things, an approach that has been labelled ‘thingism’.[[323]](#footnote-323) For example, when we are introduced to Charles, it is via his silly patch-work cap that connotes his bumbling nature. Or the cigar case, that Charles finds after the ball at La Vaubyessard and Emma treasures as a memento. For her it retains the aroma of fashionable masculinity. The organ grinder’s miniature drawing room set that goes round and round on the mechanical organ captures the ennui of Emma’s existence and Charles’s first marriage is summed up by the withered wedding bouquet of Charles’s first wife.[[324]](#footnote-324) Emma’s own has similarly dried and withered. She pricks her finger on its wiring, then tosses it into the fire, transforming the dried petals into black butterflies. The patent leather shoe affixed to Hippolyte’s wooden leg is a major ironic symbol of Charles’s inadequacy.[[325]](#footnote-325) He should have remained within the bounds of the first-aid medical care at which he was competent. The move from Toste, which was marked by that competency, to Yonville signals his overextension even as it signifies Emma’s loss of proportion. Neither character grows as a result of the move with its promise of new opportunities. Homais persuades Charles to attempt the surgery on Hippolyte’s club foot— actually his stronger leg!—in the hope of advancing his own standing while not exposing himself to the dangers of failure. The townspeople conspire to persuade Hippolyte to go with the flow.

The unsuccessful operation affected Emma quite deeply too. While Charles fretted that he might have made a mistake and has ruined his reputation as a doctor, Emma turns harshly on him. Everything about him, his very existence, begins to repulse her. And why? Because she too is ruined. The narrator informs us that whatever remained of her tattered virtue ‘was collapsing beneath the frenzied assault on her pride’.[[326]](#footnote-326) No matter that it is a false pride. Exasperated, she departs, slamming the door in frustration and shaking the barometer off the wall which smashes on the floor. The act is yet another signifier. Because a shattered barometer is tantamount to signaling a precipitous drop in pressure and radical change in weather, it suggests that the entire scene represents a turning point in Emma’s downward spiral. Indeed, shortly thereafter she renews her affair with Rodolphe thinking that what she felt was love, whereas Rodolphe thought of love only as sex.[[327]](#footnote-327) The foregoing is but a sampling of Flaubert’s fascinating use of objects.

Realism is obviously manifest in Emma’s obsession with goods and fame (she has dozens of pairs of shoes and numerous dresses, bedecks herself with bracelets, rings, necklaces. They represent ‘something rather more solid than love’ to lean upon.[[328]](#footnote-328) The realism is further apparent in the pathology of Emma’s physical and mental states and in examples of individuals who mirror or contrast with her values. First and foremost is perhaps, the chemist and druggist, Homais. He is a negative figure to be sure is also seeking improved status through questionable means. Flaubert depicts him at times as a harmless busybody, dreamer, and a figure of fun. Yet Homais also embodies of a deeply satirical perception. He represents the upward mobile middle class of supercilious usurpers. Presenting himself as a deep thinker and analyzer, the narrator nonetheless remarks that ‘he sold himself, in fact, he prostituted himself’, uses the newspaper to gain influence of over public opinion and is ‘guided always by a love of progress and a hatred of priests’.[[329]](#footnote-329) All these characteristics are symptoms of an age loosened from enduring values, focused instead on public acclaim. Analogously, then, he is counterpoint to Emma’s quixotic classes with reality. While he rises socially, however, she falls.

L’heureux, the usurious merchant, fits into this category of negative characters, for he engages in deceptive business practices. He is ‘a wheedler, a crawler’ who slays people with his bills.[[330]](#footnote-330) He lures others into unnecessary indebtedness, nurtures Emma’s consumerism, and egregiously overcharges Charles at his most vulnerable moment when he is sorely distressed over Emma’s protracted illness. Following Rodolphe’s break-up with her, she is devastated at having to realize that Rodolphe correctly diagnoses the outcome of their liaison when he tellingly asks: ‘Do you realize to what an abyss I was dragging you, poor angel? [...] You were going along in blind confidence, believing in the future’,[[331]](#footnote-331) insensitive to the weariness that would eventually overtake their love and of the suffering she would experience. Ah, what wretched and senseless things are we, he exclaims. Dashed romantic yearnings cast Emma into a nigh comatose state with body and soul drained of animation. She is, indeed, but a thing. The need for funding for her care and the running of the household increases dramatically. After Emma’s passing, the money difficulties begin anew. Egged on by L’heureux, others make demands for payment for services and goods as well. The narrator pungently remarks: ‘Now everyone began to *help themselves*.’[[332]](#footnote-332) They took insolent advantage of Charles in his demoralized state. Thus, L’heureux’s deception is even more consequential than Rodolphe’s seduction of Emma, even though both exploit her as a ‘thing’ for their own gain. Is it all a matter of fate, as Rodolphe asserts? Perhaps. If the view of humans as wretched and senseless *things* extends to L’heureux and Homais. L’heureux’s usury is thus the ultimate cause of Emma’s and Charles’s demise and despair.

Contrasting minor characters of a positive nature include Dr. Larivière, a father figure who ‘practice[es] goodness without believing in it’.[[333]](#footnote-333) He is particularly worthy because his irreproachable life and tireless service of others over forty years. To others he even appears as a demigod, a philosopher-healer, neither arrogant nor easily taken in like Dr. Canivet. It is Larivière who aptly diagnoses Homais’s ineptness with his poignant pun on the root of the chemist’s problem as deriving from his lack of medical sense (‘le sens’) rather than from a physiological condition (‘la sang’): ‘Oh, it’s certainly not his blood that’s thickening’).[[334]](#footnote-334)

Another minor figure who nonetheless looms large is the aged farmer woman, Catherine Leroux. She represents a clear contrast to Emma, for she possesses the human qualities Flaubert really admired: the stoic virtues of patience, devotion, and dedicated work. All are foreign to Emma. Yet even Catherine’s reward for long years of devoted service proves highly ironic: she is awarded 25 francs for her achievement, whereas two pigs garner 60 francs! The Blind Man, who haunts Emma to the end, is a constant reminder of fleshly frailty. A *memento-mori* figure, he is also a thorn in Homais’s side, underscoring his own shortcomings, for the chemist is unable to heal him. Ultimately, Homais has the Blind Man committed to an asylum so as not to be reminded constantly of his own inadequacy according to the maxim ‘out of sight, out of mind’.

In general, the way Flaubert characterizes these individuals is implicitly if not explicitly counterpoint to Emma’s identity and thus helps to define her self-affirming or self-undermining attributes. They counteract Emma’s romantic visions. The people Flaubert treats sympathetically are those devoted to honest work and genuine service. Flaubert is also drawn to life’s victims such as the clubfooted Hippolyte or the pharmacist shop-keeper assistant Justin. Hippolyte suffers indirectly because of Emma’s pride, as does Justin who allows himself to be sweet-talked into granting her access to the arsenic used for her suicide. The four men in her life (Charles, Léon, Rodolphe, and Justin) define her negatively by fixating on the details of her appearance rather than on her person: her nails, her eyes, her teeth, hands, hair, feet.

Their vision of her, as Geoffrey Wall remarks, is decidedly fetishistic.[[335]](#footnote-335) Head over heels in love with her, Charles, for instance, ‘couldn’t stop himself continually touching her comb, her rings, her scarf’.[[336]](#footnote-336) His eagerness eventually turned into a routine: he embraced her at the same time every day. Intercourse was a kind of dessert after the meal. A habit like everything else in his routine.[[337]](#footnote-337) The other men instrumentalize her too. By treating her as an object, they fail to acknowledge that she has an inner Self and real needs. She is a thing, not a living being. Consequently, her life devolves into something ‘as cold as an attic that looks north’. Lacking recognition by others around her, she is susceptible to boredom which, ‘quiet as a spider, was spinning its web in the shadowy spaces of her heart’.[[338]](#footnote-338)

### Capturing the Essence

*Madame Bovary* is perhaps the most carefully through-composed book in literary history.[[339]](#footnote-339) Practically every page of the novel offers instances of Flaubert’s artful use of irony via salient juxtaposition and finely tuned attentiveness to linguistic nuance and character traits. He moves between registers; he cuts into the lyric with the prosaic; Flaubert was at pain to construct a line of prose that was rhythmical and sonorous like a verse of poetry. He could also be jarring. Most chapters end with a jolt.

To capture the affect of Flaubert’s interplay of verbal effects and rhythms in another language requires mastery of the medium, deep familiarization with the wider socio-cultural spectrum of the nuance, a finely tuned ear, historical and cultural knowledge. No wonder, that *Madame Bovary* has been translated twenty different times into English alone, the most recent an acclaimed version by novelist Adam Thorpe in an effort to present yet again the genuine Flaubert to English readers.[[340]](#footnote-340) It is not as if previous translations were necessarily wanting. ‘To compare several different versions of Madame Bovary’, Barnes avers, ‘is not to observe a process of accumulation, some gradual but inevitable progress towards certainty and authority [...]; rather, it is to gaze at a sequence of approximations, a set of deliquescences’.[[341]](#footnote-341) The mark of a great work of art is that it impels us toward ever new attempts at mining the richness of the original. Works that lack depth, perspective, and multivalence do not stand the test of time; they do not compel readers to reread even the original. In a very real sense, the translator’s experience parallels that of readers more generally according to Jauß’s theory of reception. Jauß rejected the structuralist valuation of the literary work as a timeless and unchanging object in favor of the dynamic relationship between ever new readers and the literary work as crucially alive.[[342]](#footnote-342) But this is not to say, in my estimation at least, that literary valuation lies primarily with the reader and not with the text. On the contrary, for a work to enjoy global recognition, it must have inherent literary value already. One imparted to it by its very first reader: the author. In this, I depart from Joosten/Parry and their application of Jauß and Pierre Bourdieu.[[343]](#footnote-343)

Capturing the linguistic nuance of a character’s rhythms is the greatest challenge for the translator. Those rhythms encapsulate the text’s literariness, constitute its ‘aesthetic wisdom’. Themes and character delineation pose much less a challenge. Because this is so, the latter are often selectively treated and lead to distortions of the original context. It is a fate that befalls many a text. Yet, the vagaries of reception should not blind us to the lasting value of a work. As we have seen in previous chapters, good writing has the capacity to make readers see, hear, smell, and feel. It has the capacity to raise awareness. It conveys the vibrancy of existence. What counts is the majesty and musicality of well-structured prose, its diction and syntax, the cadence of sentences long and short, their organization into paragraphs, verse or other codas. These are on full display in *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert characterized his novel as a poem with the capacity to evoke worlds. Jules de Gaultier developed a philosophy of *Bovarysme* based on it to explain the tendency humans have of seeing themselves other than they really are. It denotes a kind of escape into an idealized dream world.[[344]](#footnote-344) It is easy to see why Emma Bovary functioned as a female variant of Don Quixote. Similar to Cervantes’s dealing a death blow to medieval adventures, Flaubert sounded the death knell for Romanticism. In Emma’s case, the rise of the natural sciences and consumerism were major factors along with her solipsism.

Unsurprisingly, Paul de Man argues that Madame Bovary’s unending appeal is due to its ‘universality of theme, the quality of style, the truthfulness of the realistic and satirical detail’ that have retained their freshness ‘long after extra-literary motives for attracting attention to Madame Bovary had died down’.[[345]](#footnote-345) British critic Julian Barnes goes a step further. In his insightful review of Lydia Davis’s translation of the novel, Julian Barnes adeptly summarizes its impact with a linguistic appeal to both conservative and modern tastes when he writes: ‘*Madame Bovary* is many things—a perfect piece of fictional machinery, the pinnacle of realism, the slaughterer of Romanticism, a complex study of failure—but it is also the first great shopping and fucking novel.’[[346]](#footnote-346) While totally unexpected, the latter characterization as a shopping and fucking novel is quite accurate. Stylistically, the novel encapsulates various techniques: point of view, unusual grammatical configurations, modulation of tenses, the dropping of pronominal antecedents, known collectively as *le style indirect libre*. Examples include Emma’s decision to stop practicing the piano: ‘elle abandonna la musique. Pourquoi jouer? qui l’entendrait?’,[[347]](#footnote-347) which de Man renders as: ‘She gave up music. What was the good of playing? Who would hear her?’[[348]](#footnote-348) By adding ‘her’ to Flaubert’s text, de Man ‘unflattens’ Flaubert phrasing that should echo the line about Charles’s conversation being ‘plate comme un trottoir de rue’ and offering only ordinary, uninspiring ideas mouthed by everyone (‘et les ideés de tout le monde y défilaient dans leur costume ordinaire’).[[349]](#footnote-349) Geoffrey Wall remains closer to the original with his rendering: ‘Who would be listening’.[[350]](#footnote-350)

However, de Man is not the only translator to alter the original. Barnes provides a number of examples from other translators. For instance, in the manner that the narrator’s quip about Emma’s dawning realization at the opera in Rouen at the end of Part II: ‘Elle connaissait à présent la petitesse des passions que l’art exagérait.’ This calm, balanced sentence with triple alliteration of ‘p’ has proved to be a challenge. It is not just because *petitesse* means something like ‘paltriness’, something like ‘pettiness’. *Petitesse* does not have a negative connotation. Barnes contrasts four different translations, of which I cite just Davis’s 2010 and Francis Steegmuller’s 1991 version. Davis claims to have produced the most faithful rendering with ‘She knew, now, how paultry were the passions exaggerated by art.’ Barnes rejects it, for Davis missed the triple alliteration, turned *petitesse* into an adjective (‘paultry’), and reversed the grammar of the final phrase by substituting passive voice for the original active. Most offensive to Barnes’s ear is, however, the ‘wail of assonance and a stuttering of rhythm far from the original’ (‘knew, now, how’). By comparison, Steegmuller, whom Barnes considers the best freer translator, is more successful as he retains the winning alliteration and grammar: ‘Now she well knew the true paltriness of the passions that art painted so large.’ Stegmuller’s version is, indeed, better than Wall’s which misses out on the triple alliteration: ‘For now she knew the pettiness of the passions that art exaggerates’.[[351]](#footnote-351)

For his part, James Wood cites the difficulty of capturing Flaubert’s use of assonance. Charles is stupidly proud of having gotten Emma pregnant. The narrator informs the reader: ‘L’idée d’avoir engendré le délectait’ which Geoffrey Wall renders as ‘The thought of having impregnated her was delectable to him’.[[352]](#footnote-352) A respectable rendition. However, it totally fails to capture the music of the threefold assonance of the original with the repetition of the sound ‘ay’. Yet, an English version that endeavored to copy the French more literally would sound awkward: ‘The notion of procreation was a delectation’.[[353]](#footnote-353)

For Emma it was anything but. She must carry the child. Be uncomfortable, undergo labor. She sees only the downside of pregnancy. At least she was hoping for a son because a male is free to venture forth, explore, experience, and conquer. A woman, by contrast, is hemmed in by physical weakness and the inequity of the law. The narrator muses: ‘Her will, like the veil strung to her bonnet, flutters in every breeze; always there is the desire urging, always the convention restraining’.[[354]](#footnote-354) In fact, Emma wishes that she were a man. She gives birth on a Sunday about six in the morning just as the sun was rising. Sunday— morning—sun: all good omens promising a new beginning, new hope. Then the narrator announces pertly: –’C’est une fille! dit Charles’ (‘—It’s a girl!, Charles says’). The preceding hyphen offers pause, underscoring how disappointing the news is for Emma. The narrator dryly adds without further comment: ‘Elle tourna la tête et s’évanouit’ (‘She turned aside and passed out’).[[355]](#footnote-355) The pithiness of the sentences resounds loudly in the resonance chamber of Emma’s circumscribed existence. The short, quick, straightforward sentence structure is a major feature of Flaubert’s style, as if to announce that circumstances determine sense of restricted selfdom.

### Deromanticization—Desacralization

Most telling to my mind is the deromanticization and even desacralization of life that impact upon the individual’s ability to develop a sense of Self. One does really get lost without guidelines. It is as dangerous as having too much freedom with no idea of what to do with it. The pharmacist Homais’s oration on the science of chemistry, ‘the knowledge of the reciprocal and molecular action of all natural bodies’, exemplifies deromanticization. Science, pure and simple, is the ‘compensation of manure, fermentation of liquid, analysis of gas and influence of miasmas’. Chemical processes in the biological realm, e.g., explains the wilting of flowers and the decay of the human body. Homais goes on to propound:

What you need is knowledge of the composition of the substances concerned, geological strata, atmospheric conditions, properties of the soil, of minerals and rain water, density of the different bodies and their capillarity. And so on. And you need a thorough grasp of the principles of hygiene, to supervise and criticize the construction of buildings, the feeding of animals, the alimentary needs of servants. And what is more, Madame Lefrançois, you have to know your botany; be able to identify plants. Do you follow me? Which are salutary and which are deleterious [...].[[356]](#footnote-356)

Mais il faut connaître plutôt la constitution des substances dont il s’agit, les gisements géologiques, les actions atmosphériques, la qualité des terrains, des minéraux, des eaux, la densité des différents corps et leur capillarité! que sais-je? Et il faut posséder à fond tous ses principes d’hygiène, pour diriger, critiquer la construction des bâtiments, le régime des animaux, l’alimentation des domestiques! Il faut encore, madame Lefrançois, posséder la botanique; pouvoir discerner les plantes, entendez-vous, quelles sont les salutaires d’avec les délétères [...].[[357]](#footnote-357)

Homais’s scientific view of the world stands in immediate contrast to the ensuing dialogue between Emma and Rodolphe at the agricultural fair, where Rololphe holds forth on ‘dreams, forebodings, magnetism’ and ultimately ‘affinities’ in a romantically seductive move.[[358]](#footnote-358) He disclaims the traditional concept of duty that imposes upon us restriction and ignominy and castigates the passions. What of the passions, he asks, and then explains in marked contrast to the chemist: ‘Are they not the only beautiful thing there is on earth, the source of heroism, enthusiasm, poetry, music, art, of everything?’ Then he postulates two standards of duty: a little conventional one that men create to regulate one another, proclaims its authority loudly, and yet seems to change constantly and a second loftier one that is independent of social mores and is as inspiring and eternal as Nature itself.[[359]](#footnote-359) The grandness of his vision correlates to the romantic dream world so familiar to Emma. His seductive move is quite effective. Nonetheless, science and industry undermine its augustness and are poised fully to replace such soaring romantic sentiments as delusional.

The desacralization of the world is further evident in Flaubert’s transformation of the Rouen cathedral into a boudoir: ‘The church was arranged about her, the vaulting was curving over to receive into its shadow the confession of her love’.[[360]](#footnote-360) The setting reveals itself to be a prelude to the following striking, albeit indirect, sex scene with Emma and Léon in the frantic cab that races through the town’s streets in rhythmic tandem to their intimate exchanges inside:

—Où Monsieur va-t-il? demanda le cocher.

—Où vous voudrez! dit Léon poussant Emma dans la voiture. Et la lourde machine se mit en route.

Elle descendit la rue Grand-Pont, traversa la place des Arts, le quai Napoléon, le pont Neuf et s’arrêta court devant la statue de Pierre Corneille.

—Continuez! fit une voix qui sortait de l’intérieur.

La voiture repartit, et, se laissant, dès le carrefour La Fayette, emporter par la descente, elle entra au grand galop dans la gare du chemin de fer.

—Non, tout droit! cria la même voix.

Le fiacre sortit des grilles, et bientôt, arrivé sur le Cours, trotta doucement, au milieu des grands ormes. Le cocher s’essuya le front, mit son chapeau de cuir entre ses jambes et poussa la voiture en dehors des contre-allées, au bord de l’eau, près du gazon.

Elle alla le long de la rivière, sur le chemin de halage pavé de cailloux secs, et, longtemps, du côté d’Oyssel, au delà des îles.

Mais, tout à coup, elle s’élança d’un bond à travers Quatremares, Sotteville, la Grande-Chaussée, la rue d’Elbeuf, et fit sa troisième halte devant le Jardin des plantes.

—Marchez donc! s’écria la voix plus furieusement.[[361]](#footnote-361)

The alternation between frenzied activity and more peaceful movement of the carriage wandering aimlessly about the city-scape repeats itself with no discernible plan or direction. The coachman wonders what could motivate the couple to drive about randomly without stopping with curtains drawn causing the cab to shudder occasionally like a ship at sea.[[362]](#footnote-362) It was a strange sight, indeed. Toward the end of the escapade a naked hand extends out the window and disposes torn pieces of paper that flutter about like so many butterflies. It was the note Emma had penned, explaining why she could not meet with Léon. The white-butterfly metaphor plays upon the earlier black butterflies occasioned by the burning of the wedding bouquet.

Harry Levin remarks that Flaubert stage manages the scene of sexual culmination of the previously Platonic relationship by having the narrator express it initially via the pronoun *nous*, then objectifying it as *on* while scrupulously avoiding *je*. For his part, Percy Lubbuck characterizes his style as especially pictorial and self-distancing.[[363]](#footnote-363) People are rendered as objects, and objects take on a life of their own. The cab and its gyrations stand in for the intimate sexual act. In Flaubert’s novel, one immediately thinks of Charles’ unusual, composite school cap, the first wife’s withered wedding bouquet, the miniature drawing-room set on the organ grinder’s mechanical turnstile, the patent leather shoe affixed to Hippolyte’s artificial limb, Catherine Leroux’s bovine work habit, the blind man’s deus-ex-machina appearances, Emma’s caustic death scene. Obviously, as George Poulet has argued, ‘Details have an enormous cumulative power.’ While their multiplicity is *eo ipso* meaningless, their cumulative force and weight is notable. Especially in regard to Emma they exert weight and pressure on her, driving her relentlessly to her doom.[[364]](#footnote-364)

A salient example of desacralization is the description of the growing distance between husband and wife, aggravated by the contrast between Charles’s daily encounters with sickness and unpleasantness and Emma’s otherworldly dreaminess. While Charles desires to wipe from his consciousness the nasty encounters of the day, Emma longs for romantic fulfillment. A famous passage in Book I, chapter 7 invokes a sense of the adverse effects of routinization on their amorous relations:

Quand elle eut ainsi un peu battu le briquet sur son cœur sans en faire jaillir une étincelle, incapable, du reste, de comprendre ce qu’elle n’éprouvait pas, comme de croire à tout ce qui ne se manifestait point par des formes convenues, elle se persuada sans peine que la passion de Charles n’avait plus rien d’exorbitant. Ses expansions étaient devenues régulières; il l’embrassait à de certaines heures. C’était une habitude parmi les autres, et comme un dessert prévu d’avance, après la monotonie du dîner.[[365]](#footnote-365)

Once she had tried striking the flint upon her heart without getting any spark from it at all, and being moreover unable to understand what she did not experience, just as she did not believe in anything that came in unconventional form, she easily convinced herself that there was nothing startling about Charles’s passion. His eagerness had turned into a routine; he embraced her at the same time every day. It was a habit like any other, a favourite pudding after the monotony of dinner.[[366]](#footnote-366)

The depersonalization is hinted at by the metaphorical use of a flint stone (‘*une peu battu le briquet*’) and the devaluation of passion to listless routine and the irony of a planned and expected dessert; the latter should be pleasant and exciting but turns out to be as monotonous as the dinner itself. The long first sentence in the quotation is followed by four short almost staccato-like codas marked by a semi-colon, a period, two commas, and a final period. They disrupt the flow of words, indicate breaks for emphasis among the details presented. Wall’s choice of ‘favourite’ to render Flaubert’s calculating *prévu d’avance* (‘planned in advance’) underscores Charles’s particular routinization. For him, the expected sexual intimacy is, indeed, the high point of a dreary day. For Emma, however, that routine is a disappointment, for she had been primed by her reading in the convent to expect the unexpected, the flamboyant, the kindling of passion.[[367]](#footnote-367) The connotation of *prévu d’avance* is brought out more explicitly by the preceding use of *habitude* and of the ensuing clearly negative *monotonie*.

The heaviness of the routine returns in the famous death scene, which Flaubert renders without a hint of emotion. He describes her open mouth as a gaping black hole (‘*un trou noir*’), speaks of the life of her eyes fading in a viscous pallor (‘*ses yeux commençaient à disparaître dans une pâleur visqueuse*’), and concludes her dehumanization with the metaphor of the bed sheet acting like a heavy weight crushing down upon her: ‘*Le drap se creusait depuis ses seins jusqu’à ses genoux, se relevant ensuite à la pointe des orteils; et il semblait à Charles que des masses infinies, qu’un poids énorme pesait sur elle*’.[[368]](#footnote-368) Wall renders the passage passably as: ‘The sheet curved across smoothly from her breasts to her knees, making another peak at the tips of her toes; and to Charles it seemed as if an infinite mass, an enormous weight, lay pressing upon her’.[[369]](#footnote-369) Symbolizing the peripheral reality that shrinks down from all sides to lodge itself fully on the small space of her body, the bed sheet is yet another instance of what George Poulet identifies as ‘an extraordinary narrowing of space, a rush of all causal forces, gathering from the depth of the past and from the three dimensions of external space to converge on a central point’.[[370]](#footnote-370) That enormous weight is brought to bear not just on Emma’s consciousness as in Poulet’s argument but also on her physical being.

Emma is crushed by her thwarted romantic yearnings between bed sheets, by debilitating debt to support her growing consumerism, and by advancing public disrepute. The bed sheet of love assignations morphs into a death shroud. The weight of the world as it actually is crushes Emma’s once lively spirit, draining her body and will of resistance. All this the attentive reader must infer, for Flaubert does not draw explicit connections. For his part, Charles is unaware of what is going on with his wife. A final example from Part III, ch. 9 can serve to underscore the progressive dissolution evident in the entire narrative. I compare the Wall and de Man translations to demonstrate what often gets lost in translation and how important those differences are in assessing the nature of Emma’s selfhood.

Des moires frissonnaient sur la robe de satin, blanche comme un clair de lune. Emma disparaissait dessous; et il lui semblait que, s’épandant au dehors d’elle-même, elle se perdait confusément dans l’entourage des choses, dans le silence, dans la nuit, dans le vent qui passait, dans les senteurs humides qui montaient.[[371]](#footnote-371)

(Ripples were washing over the satin dress, as pale as moonlight. Emma was disappearing into its whiteness; and to him it was just as if, flowing out of herself, she were passing darkly into the things around her, into the silence, the night, into the passing breeze and the damp smell rising from the earth.)[[372]](#footnote-372)

(The watered satin of her gown shimmered white as moonlight. Emma was lost beneath it; and it seemed to him that, spreading beyond her own self, she blended confusedly with everything around her—the silence, the night, the passing wind, the damp odors rising from the ground.)[[373]](#footnote-373)

De Man’s translation is much less successful than Wall’s because of imprecise word choice and, more significantly, because he does not employ the imperfect progressive tense that Flaubert clearly preferred and marks his style. ‘Lost’ is not exactly the same as ‘was disappearing’ (*disparaissait*), and *se perdait* (‘was getting lost’) is not equivalent to ‘were passing darkly’. ‘Blended’, is bland while ‘confusedly’ is not ominous like ‘darkly’. While ‘lost’ and ‘disappeared’ both mean ‘no longer present’, ‘disappear’ is much more emphatic than ‘lost’. And *se perdait* also implies ‘forfeiting’ one’s separateness in this particular context. What is lost can be found again, but to conjure up a manifestation anew is no simple matter.

The rhythmically distinct codas sharply set off Emma’s gradual disappearance beneath the ‘shroud’ from the surroundings. Quite remarkable. The *disparaissait* marks a turning point that is intensified in the ensuing dissolution of her spirit into the environment. Moreover, *l'entourage* has more the feel of ‘in the circle of’ all that follows the fourfold repetition of *dans* than of the rather non-descript ‘everything’ which makes less evident Emma’s immersion in all the other phenomena of existence: silence, darkness, wind, damp scents. Here too liquefaction occurs as in ‘Ripples were washing over the satin dress.’ While a far cry from the liquification motif in Émile Zola’s *L’Assommoir* (1877), it is nonetheless notable here. All this contrasts with the positive thrust of the descriptions in a closely preceding paragraph: ‘*Les herbes aromatiques fumaient encore, et des tourbillons de vapeur bleuâtre se confondaient au bord de la croisée avec le brouillard qui entrait. Il y avait quelques étoiles, et la nuit était douce*’. (‘The aromatic herbs were still smoking, and the swirling blue vapours blended into the mist that was coming in through the window. There were few stars, and the night air was mild’).[[374]](#footnote-374) De Man renders the passage inefficaciously as: ‘The aromatic herbs were still smoking, and spirals of bluish vapour blended at the window with the entering fog. There were few stars, and the night was warm’).[[375]](#footnote-375) Although de Man renders the essential meaning of the passage, he unsuccessfully expresses the full connotational and aesthetic range of meaning by eschewing use of the progressive imperfect tense. Instead, he chooses to speak of ‘spirals’ (which are less turbulent than ‘swirling’) and fails to foreground the interaction of liquification within the room and from outside by inadvertently establishing a kind of barrier by writing ‘at the window’. Wall’s choice conveys a better sense of ongoing movement from the death-bed room into nature more broadly. Emma’s Self dissolves without hesitation or resistance ‘at the window’.

The merging of her being with natural things and movement is a far cry from what Goethe connotes with Werther’s return to natural processes in his *The Sorrows of Young Werther.* The difference impacts upon the question of whether we can consider Emma to be tragic somewhat similar to Werther. While it is true that Emma’s early education predisposed her to romantic reverie. Nonetheless, she is essentially at fault for her gradual slide into passivity and loss of interest in real-life circumstances. The turning point is the invitation to the dinner and ball hosted by the Marquis d’Andervilliers at La Vaubyessart. After that experience, her interest in cultivating an orderly home life quickly dissipates. She becomes ever more passive, putting off meaningful constructive activity: no more piano, no more drawing, no more needlework, no housework. The growing insensibility of her life is expressed metaphorically by the swarthy, black-whiskered organ grinder who appears regularly on an afternoon. The little mechanical figurines on the organ signify Emma’s own puppet, ennui-filled eternal recurrence.

Apparently, Emma had no Self to lose (or merge). Thus, she represents a radical departure from the willed self-authentication observable in the Princess de Clèves and Werther. Both these protagonists consciously take charge of their circumstances and stand for something despite the circumstances conditioning their ultimate fates. They do not simply resign themselves to external forces and ‘disappear’. To be sure, Emma commits suicide as does Werther.

However, hers is an escape not a returning home. The narrator informs us in Part III at the end of chapter 8 that, after her last terrible convulsive spasms, Emma simply ceases to exist: ‘Elle n’existait plus.’[[376]](#footnote-376) Historically, Emma’s is of course not the only trajectory that a woman could follow in the nineteenth century. But she does add a new and unexpected option in considering the making of the Self. She doesn’t. A brief contrast with other nineteenth-century female protagonists serves to underscore this point.

### Emma’s ‘Cousins’

Emma Bovary was but one of several notable female protagonists who went viral in the nineteenth century. There are too many instances in the literary canon as well as in popular literature (e.g., Fanny Lewald, Eugene Sue, E. Marlitt, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) to be able to cover them all. Nevertheless, it is useful to recall at least cursorily a couple of the most notable characters.

The female protagonists in Heinrich von Kleist’s novella *Die Marquise von O…* (1808) and Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879) are cases in point. The first is an unusual and intriguing little story set in Italy during the Napoleonic Wars and focuses on a beautiful, virtuous young widow, Guiliette. The second is set in contemporary Norway and features the virtuous young spouse of a prominent banker, Nora Helmer. Both female protagonists, who bracket Emma chronologically, have children like Emma. Unlike her, however, they are not adulterous and are socially integrated. Nonetheless, when their self-awareness is awakened through sudden revelations, they learn to embrace their ensuing outsider status. The Marquise because she is forced to, Nora because she chooses to. Nora opts for social unacceptability even after its ostracization is no longer mandated. Even though the setting of Kleist’s novella (the northern Italian town of M) and that of Ibsen’s play (the remote city of Skein), might be considered provincial, neither the novella nor the dramatization is cast as a provincial tale.

The Marquise of O’s sense of Self as dutiful mother and daughter is radically challenged when her doctor diagnoses her indisposition as pregnancy. She is dumbfounded. A widow with two young children, she has known no man since the death of her husband. The doctor is confounded because he cannot understand why she did not recognize her condition having twice experienced it already. He even chides her. Her parents, especially her father, with whom she resides on their estate, continually press her to admit who the father is. They dismiss her protestations to the contrary as obstinance. Obviously, the Marquise is distraught. She also does not wish her unborn child to be born without legal protections, as was then the case. She resigns herself to locate the father of her child and to wed him. Regardless of his social status. The story actually begins with her announcement in newspapers requesting that the father of her child appear at a specified time and date. Her father is Colonel G who commanded the citadel of the town M. He ultimately banishes her from his home. Her brother demands that the children remain, for she is no longer a fit mother. The Marquise furiously fends him off and departs with her children in tow. Her furious defense marks a turning point in her self-perception as a legitimate and autonomous agent adapting to her fate.

Devastated at being so radically misunderstood, she retires with her children to her deceased husband’s country estate at V to await the birth of her third child and plan her independent future. She has no idea of what to expect on the appointed date and time when the father is to make himself known. Another newspaper announcement declares that the father will indeed appear on the 3rd at 11:00am as stipulated. While the Marquise is forced out of family and society because she remains adamantly true to her inner conviction of innocence, she willingly accepts her ostracization as a small price to pay for her sense of self-worth and direction. Her deceased husband left her a considerable fortune, and because she is legally free act without male patronage, she is not inclined to enter into a new marriage bond that would make her legally beholden once again to a man. Nonetheless, she is willing to do so for the sake of her unborn child. Through a ruse, her mother claims that the stable hand has confessed to taking advantage of her as she slept in the sunroom. The Marquise, however, has no recollection of an encounter with the servant. Eventually, the mother believes her daughter is telling her the truth, takes her side against the father, and ultimately convinces him too of the Marquise’s innocence. But not before another earth-shattering and Self-challenging experience.

On the appointed day at the specified time, the noble Russian Count F appears at the parent’s estate. The Marquise is more flabbergasted than anyone else. How can this be? He was the ‘angel’ who had saved her from group rape by Russian infantry during the storming of the citadel. After the Count carries her to safety, she faints. The Count returns to the battle, and the citadel eventually falls to him. Before the Marquise can thank him, he moves on. Shortly thereafter the Marquise and her parents receive word that Count F has been killed in battle. His last words reportedly were ‘Julietta! Diese Kugel rächt dich!’ (Guillietta, this bullet avenges you!). The Marquise is astonished that the Count knew someone who had the same given name as she, but does not give it a second thought.

In a flash back, the news of the Count’s death proves to have been false. The war is concluded soon thereafter, and the Russian officer returns to Colonel G’s home to ask for the Marquise’s hand in marriage. Acknowledging that he and the Marquise are not well acquainted, he nonetheless wishes to conclude the marriage without delay. Favorably impressed by the Russian’s noble demeanor (and wealth), the Colonel suggests the Count reside with the family for a while so that all parties can get to know one another appropriately. However, the Count must decline this sensible offer because of a military commitment elsewhere. He promises to return as soon as he is able. It is during the Count’s absence that the Marquise learns she is pregnant and her father banishes her from his home, over the objections of the mother. When the Count returns from his second absence, he learns of these developments, seems unsurprised at her pregnancy, insists that she is innocent as she claims, and informs her brother of his continued desire to marry her. The brother considers him crazy. The Count seeks out the Marquise at V and repeats his desire to marry her. Still resolved to marry the unknown miscreant, she turns him away, forbids him to return, and flees back into the house, locking the door behind her. A sign of total rejection.

The mystery is solved when the Count explains how he took advantage of the Marquise after she had fainted when the band of soldiers moved toward her. But for the sudden appearance of their commanding officer who violently drove them off, the soldiers would have abused her. The soldiers were ultimately court marshalled and put to death (an act that weighed heavily on the Count). The Count was her hero, her saving angel! How could he suddenly be the devil, her debaucher?! She is dumfounded and is even moved to question God and the order of the universe.

The Marquise rejects marriage with the Count (even though he would be a perfect match). Remorseful and obviously duty-bound to make things right, he persists in wooing her. Hounded by guilt, he is, in fact, also in love with her. After a year, she reluctantly relents, but only after the Count signs a contract stipulating that he is entitled to none of the rights of marriage, while still being bound by all of a husband’s duties. In acquiescing, he ensures her continued independence. Additionally, he earmarks a huge sum for the new child and makes the Marquise his sole heir. Gradually, over more than a year, her mood tempers, and she eventually accepts him as her husband in the full sense of the word but without being legally bound to gain his approval for anything she wishes to do. While Kleist ends his novella on a somewhat happy note, the crisis of identification was acute for the Marquise. She emerges from the ordeal with a new awareness of autonomy as an early example of an *emancipé*. The Marquise’s experience and development are a far cry from Emma Bovary’s.

Similar to Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is based on historical facts. A personal friend of Ibsen, Laura Kieler experienced with her husband Victor what the play dramatizes. Ibsen portrays Nora Helmer’s journey to selfhood in graphic and memorable terms in a three-act structure. The play is set in a Norwegian town (Skein, Ibsen’s hometown?) in 1879. Despite Ibsen’s denial that he intended to write a feminist play, it proved to be a sensation, causing much heated debate. In recognition of its historical value, UNESCO included Ibsen’s manuscript in the Memory of the World Register in 2001. The Register is designed to memorialize extraordinarily impactful literary works.

Although she is living the ideal life of a 19th-century wife, Nora gradually comes to realize that she has been but a doll in a doll house designed by her husband, Torvald Helmer, and their social class. She is totally dependent on him, with no independent rights, and no sense of identity other than that of caring mother and dutiful wife. Simultaneously, she begins to understand that Torvald is really only interested in himself, in his social position, and has not really loved her for her person. She is no more than his little squirrel, his song bird, his trophy wife to be shown off at parties. When he learns that she once forged her father’s signature on a loan to finance a trip to Italy, he declares her wanton, immoral, and unfit to raise their three children. It does not matter that Nora designed the trip because Torvald’s doctor recommended it as a means to improve his failing health and that her father was indisposed at the time. Her good intentions make no difference, for a woman at the time could not conduct financial transactions without a man’s endorsement. From now on, Torvald determines, their marriage will be one of appearance only and that she will have nothing to do with the children.

Once she realizes how lacking she was of self-awareness and how restricted her life as a woman has been, Nora concludes that she, indeed, is an inappropriate role model for her children. But for reasons quite distinct from Torvald’s male morality that is linked to social convention and appearances. She discovers a second moral code, one that delves beneath the surface and comes from the soul. (Her sense of a second, more profound moral code contrasts with Rodolphe’s dual morality: one based on convention, the other on Romantic fantasy.) If she does not know who she is, how can she hope to instill a sense of self-worth in her children? She must first plumb her own depths. To do that, she must leave her children and Torvald. By venturing out into the unknown she hopes to find her essence and, hence, a proper direction. This is her decision even after Krogstad, an employee at Torvald’s bank who oversaw the fraudulent financial transaction, returns the promissory note. In doing so, he protects her from public exposure for fraud. But Torvald reveals how shallow he is. Instead of rejoicing for her at the turn of events, he only thinks of how he is now saved from being blackmailed by Krogstad who himself has a reputation as a forger and liar. Traits that Torvald cannot abide. Finally, she recognizes Torvald’s self-absorption for what it is. It opens Nora’s eyes to what needs to change. Not only must she change, so too must Torvald. He too must become aware of how wrong their marriage has been. A one-way street with no counter-traffic. For their marriage to work after having been awakened from their slumber, both Nora and Torvald must undergo a radical transformation. In fact, decisive for the principles of composition in the later 19th century is that the social formations, institutions, and the like are much more ‘finished’, more inhuman and machine-like in Ibsen than they were in Flaubert.

Her departure from the comfort and security of regulated domestic life is self-motivated, freely chosen. To leave home is but the first step toward self-affirmation. Exposure to an unknown world dominated by men is the surest way for her to develop self-awareness as an awoke woman. It offers a way out of then contemporary marriage as a kind of bondage, for Nora and Torvald’s union is a physical, not a spiritual one. She does not know how things will turn out. Yet she cannot hope for progress by remaining stuck in the status quo. There is nothing romantic about her motivation. Through her copying work to earn money to pay off her loan, she has already developed a sense of pride in work and discipline, something that her friend Mrs. Linde translucently represents. The future is tenuous, and yet she does not shy from accepting the responsibility for her own self-realization. Her plea for fair and reasonable treatment stands as a humanist ideal.

Nora’s decision and path obviously contrast significantly with Emma’s reasons for neglecting husband and child in favor of romantic exploits. Her plea for ‘reasonable’ treatment is much less substantive because it is grounded in fantasy rather than genuine experience. Via this stark contrast, Emma’s situation twenty years earlier gains in profile. Unlike Emma, Nora does not let experience, failure, and misdirection weigh her down.

Then there is Tolstoi’s *Anna Karenina* (1878), also acclaimed as one of the greatest realist novels of the era. An analysis of the web of historical, social, psychological, and philosophical interconnections that shape Anna’s situation and maintains an uneasy balance between her inner and outer worlds would take us too far afield. Suffice it to say that she also finds herself in an uninspiring marriage and fully integrated in high society. Like Emma, she too commits suicide after an adulterous affair and having been further hemmed in by an overbearing husband, Karenin. He appears to act machine-like as an unfeeling robot, programmed to adhere to prescribed logarithms no matter what. He represents, in a way, the unfeeling mechanicalness of the public and private spheres that Flaubert intimated a generation earlier.

In ‘Tolstoy and the Development of Realism’ (1936), Georg Lukács appropriately spoke of the ‘totality of objects’ in Tolstoy’s work.[[377]](#footnote-377) By it he meant the organized totality of social and institutional forces. Tolstoy renders public and private life as a living fabric. Despite the novel’s enormous length, *Anna Karenina* is written in the manner of a well-constructed drama, a *pièce bien fait* where everything has its place and purpose. Nothing is superfluous.

As often is the case in a drama, genuine passion disrupts the balance of that totality of forces and of Anna’s regulated life. The system breaks down at the point where she is forced to judge herself as society judges her. But the grounds of her self-condemnation differ from those for which society condemns. Her motivation is moral-spiritual rather than simply conventional. In her suicide, therefore, she acknowledges a moral covenant which has an objectivity and an existence outside herself. Tolstoy demonstrates this objectivity by adopting a perspective that represents Anna in her deteriorating relationship to the society generally.[[378]](#footnote-378) In the process, she is forced to reflect deeply upon what truly matters to her specifically. The outcome of her fatal attraction to Count Vronsky thus proves to be more significant than Emma’s acknowledgment of her wrongdoing with Léon and Rodolphe. Anna accepts personal responsibility more so than does Emma and in doing so asserts a sense of selfhood.

Theodor Fontane’s *Effi Briest* (1895) offers yet another contrasting model to Emma. Like Anna, she too enters an arranged marriage with an older, pedantic government official, Baron Gert von Instetten. She becomes bored when they are stationed in the provinces in the small Baltic town of Kessin far from Berlin her home town. With her husband often absent because of work. With limited social connections and little to do in Kessin, ennui overcomes her. Slowly she slips into an adulterous affair with the womanizer Major Crampas. For her it is but a dalliance and diversion. Ten years later, after the couple has returned to Berlin and Instetten’s career advances, he accidentally discovers the correspondence between Effi and Crampas that discloses the affair. Unsure whether he needs to demand a duel so long after the fact, he seeks advice from a friend who points out that as long as the affair had remained private, there would be no problem. Unfortunately, having confided in others, Instetten has now made it a public matter. Social convention requires him to challenge Crampas to a duel, whom he kills. Then he divorces Effi, gains custody of their daughter, and turns the daughter against her mother. As a result, Effi is totally ostracized. Because of the public opprobrium levelled on her, even her own parents feel they must banish her to remain in good social standing (like the Marquise of O).

Unlike Anna and Emma, however, Effi adjusts to her fate after suffering a protracted illness due to a nervous disorder caused by deep depression. Ultimately, she affirms her selfhood by acknowledging to Instetten that she has long regretted her misstep and now desires only to live out her remaining days as a recluse. Her parents, suspecting that they are partially responsible by having arranged to marry Emma off at too tender an age, relent and take her back onto the family estate. Telling is that Fontane has her parents ultimately question the moral appropriateness of their socially dictated actions. They too are factors in Effi’s tragedy. She dies alone. Only her dog has remained relentlessly loyal throughout.

The strongest of the female figures grouped around Emma is perhaps Avdótya (Yevdoksíya) Nikitíshna Kúkshina in Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Children* (1862). An early example of an *emancipé* and proto-feminist, Kukshina is an independent and self-willed spirit, but an eccentric who delights in her outsider status. Not quite so eccentric as Kúkshina, Ánna Sergéyevna Odíntsova, a wealthy widow of twenty-nine years, is an even more dominant as a female protagonist. Odíntsova holds a salon at her estate featuring nihilist friends. She claims to have no prejudices of any kind, not even strong convictions, as she pursues her life on the margins of society. She is not put off by obstacles and she has no real goal in life except to be independent in her thinking and choices. Kúkshina and Odíntsova are appropriate female counterparts to the main male protagonist, Yevgény Vasílevich Bazárov, a medical student. He takes ideas that we associate with Homais (materialism, science, and technology) a radical step further. Basarov is a representative of nihilism, a philosophy later associated (rightly or wrongly) with Nietzsche and Camus. Kúkshina and Odíntsova do not go as far, however, in their nihilism, a nihilism lurking behind the scenes in Flaubert’s novel.

These women might be considered (distant) cousins (if not exactly sisters) of Emma Bovary. Their social status is definitely different from hers as they all belong to the upper, wealthy classes, whereas she is a farmer’s daughter who marries up into the lower middle classes. Moreover, Emma is the only one who is led astray by her reading of sentimental novels, although the others also enjoy reading. These two factors—aspiring upward mobility and quixotic imaginings—impact Emma’s self-perception that never achieves grounding in a deeper sense of Self. The clash between her reaction to sentimental literature and Lotte’s reading preferences in Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* could not be more pungent. Literature for Lotte confirms her life situation; for Emma it offers an escape from her reality.

If Emma had, in fact, a sense that she has or could develop a Self, we might be able to liken her to notable male non-conformists such as Dostoevsky’s nameless Underground Man, Hermann Hesse’s Harry Haller, Albert Camus’s Meursault, or Günter Grass’s Oskar Matzerath. But she is not marked by any distinctive degree of their self-awareness. Unlike them, her interest is in becoming socially integrated and accepted. And she fails. More to the point are her female ‘cousins’ who are, or potentially could be, outsiders. In that role, they would then be able to turn the reader’s inquisitive gaze back on to the flawed reality depicted. This is, of course, what Flaubert does. But Emma is unaware of her offering a critique of things as they are.

*Fathers and Children* is ostensibly more polemical than *Anna Karenina*, *Effi Briest*, or *Emma Bovary*. Realism in literature, as is evident especially in *Anna Karenina*, *Effi Briest*, or *Emma Bovary*, depends upon a balance between the mind of inner consciousness and the world of outer forces. It is this balance of inward making and outward matching which creates the fiction of a shared reality. In literary realism such a balance is achieved by the co-operation on relatively equal terms of four factors: world, self, meaning, and language.[[379]](#footnote-379) In *Fathers and Children*, Turgenev uses the medical doctor Basarov and his philosophy of nihilism to demonstrate how this tenuous balance is disrupted. His character points the way forward to a dominant trait in literature subsequent to literary realism. Finding nothing significant to retrace, literature after the selective realism of the middle distance in Flaubert and Tolstoy—viewing things not too closely and not from too great a distance—is now faced with the novel task of having to create meanings, as it were *ex nihilo*. The eye is turned inward on the realm of consciousness.

The next literary example of efforts to grasp selfhood adopts a perspective from outside social mores. Its protagonist consciously offers a biting critique of things as they are as he seeks to assert himself. Nonetheless, there is no easy escape from oppressive reality.

## Losing the Self: Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864)

We do not know ourselves. We would be the ones to suffer if our whimsical wishes were granted. [...] Why, today we don’t even know where real life is, what it is, or what it’s called.

Left alone without literature, we immediately become entangled and lost.

(Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*)[[380]](#footnote-380)

### A Preliminary Note

With Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky’s (1821–81) *Notes from Underground* (1864) we enter a new phase in tracing efforts to understand the nature of self-affirmation and the development of selfhood. Hints of an eventual radical turn were already found in Goethe’s *Werther* and particularly in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. In his analysis of the changing tenor of literary realism, J. P. Stern remarked that works such as Goethe’s *Werther*, Benjamin Constant’s *Aldophe*, Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, and Proust’s *A la Recherche du temps perdu* appear to be refracted images cast by some masterpiece of realism now projected in the literature of inwardness. Only the sentient self is present; the fiction of an objective narrator is dispensed with. ‘In the literature of inwardness’, he contends, ‘the resistance of the world of shared reality is replaced by the resistance encountered by a self whose dominant characteristics are feeling, introspection, and recollection’.[[381]](#footnote-381) The nature of that turn is the organizing focus of my analysis of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (*Zapíski iz podpólʹya*, 1864). Like Nikolai Gogol’s *The Overcoat* (1842), Dostoevsky’s *Notes* proved transformative. Dostoevsky had Nikolai Gogol’s short story in mind when he conceived his first work, the novel *Poor Folk* (1846) but also Pushkin’s *The Stationmaster*. The tension between the sordidly realistic and the idealistically romantic resonates in *Notes* as well.

### Remarks on Translation

Before I get started, some remarks about the difficulties of translating from Russian to English is in order. The work’s title poses the first difficulty. Since Constance Garnet chose the formulation *Notes from Underground* in 1918, the title has mostly stuck in subsequent translations. *Zapiski iz Podpol’ya* literally means ‘Notes from Under the Floorboards’ and there are enough indications in the text that such is actually the case. But does it really matter? ‘Under the Floorboards’ is free of any inadvertent association of ‘From Underground’ with political subversion, conspiracy, or insurgency. On the other hand, the book does prove to be quite subversive in a philosophical, psychological, and literary sense. Besides, by now every English reader is familiar with the title, *Notes from Underground*. Nevertheless, we do well to bear in mind that *podpolye* designated in 1864 the hollow space under the floorboards that was inhabited only by rodents—and in Russian folklore—also by evil spirits and other unclean powers.[[382]](#footnote-382) They too are subversive. Perhaps even more dangerous than political conspirators. We might associate these demons with subconscious thoughts and feelings that proved highly disquieting at the time. And still do.

The text itself is highly colloquial. The reader of the original frequently encounters popular sayings and proverbs not normal to literary expression. Zinovieff and Hughes suggest that the colloquial language often forces translators to provide paraphrases and circumlocutions instead of literal translation. That would also explain why the many translations of *Notes* can differ so much from one another.[[383]](#footnote-383) Then, too, Dostoevsky coined new expressions, for instance, *antigeroy* (anti-hero) and had a preference for a grammatical quirk in Russian to add ‘—*ka*’ to substantives and sometimes verbs. The addition adds a diminutive form with a contemptuous nuance. For example, *strastishka*, the diminutive/ contemptuous version of *strast* (passion). Other examples include *ravratishka* (the contemptuous/diminutive of *razvrat*, debauch), which means something like ‘petty little debauches’. Similarly, the narrator talks about *podlinka nazlazhdenitsey*, or ‘mean little delight’ and describes the cabby’s horse as *loshadyoka*, a little, cheap horse. All these examples showcase the UGM’s dismissive attitude.

Then there are more substantial challenges such as the rendering of *soznaniye* which denotes ‘awareness’, ‘self-consciousness’, or ‘some subconscious state’. Zinovieff and Hughes prefer to translate the term as ‘awareness’, whereas Andrew MacAndrew favors ‘consciousness’ because it is more profound than just being aware. ‘Self-awareness’ tends more toward ‘consciousness’, especially when the self-reflective mental state is acute, in which case MacAndrew will sometimes write ‘lucidity’. Compared to the Zinovieff and Hughes translation, McAndrew’s rendering of the text comes across as being sharper and less refined. Not mellifluous. For instance, Zinovieff and Hughes write ‘I swear to you, gentlemen, that to be too much aware of things is an illness, a real, genuine illness’.[[384]](#footnote-384) By contrast, MacAndrews opts for ‘I swear that too great a lucidity is a disease, a true, full-fledge disease.’[[385]](#footnote-385) The acerbity seems more in line with Dostoevsky’s ‘erratic’ style in *Notes*. Lucidity is more precise and more to the central point of the UGM’s argument than ‘to be too much aware’ which seems rather mundane. ‘Disease’ is also more poignant, serious, and long-lasting than the general connotation of ‘illness’. Many other examples, could be cited.

The Constance Garnett (1918) version is most readily available as an e-text via Gutenberg.org and other sites. It lists the title as *Notes from the Underground* (i.e., with the definite article). ‘The Underground’ is, as noted, somewhat misleading. The title of Garnett’s original 1918 translation does not use ‘the’. Her translation of the text seems somewhat tamer than MacAndrew’s. Garnett writes, for example: ‘I used to be in the government service, but am no longer. I was a spiteful official. I was rude and took pleasure in being so.’[[386]](#footnote-386) MacAndrew’s choice of diction seems terser, more effective by leaving out ‘the’, using the contraction ‘I’m’, writing ‘not anymore’, and repeating ‘rude’ in staccato sequence: ‘I used to be in government service, but I’m not anymore. I was a nasty official. I was rude and enjoyed being rude’.[[387]](#footnote-387) Those changes enhance the paratactic quality and lend the sentence a different rhythm, one more in line with the ‘aesthetic wisdom’ discussed in Chapter I of this monograph.

Translation is a tricky business with no clear prescription of the best approach to produce the best result for a new audience. Translation always involves a hierarchy of fidelities. A more literal translation such as the well-received rendition of *Notes* by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Vintage Classics, 1994), is nonetheless not automatically the optimal solution. Paraphrasing, which avoids mellifluousness in remaining true to the intent of the original, is frequently preferable to convey the sense of the author’s intent while maintaining a feel for the uniqueness of his/her rhythms, diction, and tonalities. Pevear and Volokhonsky point out that Dostoevsky prefers blunt and crude terms such as *khoténiye*, a verbal noun meaning ‘to want’. And that is, they insist, what the author actually meant: a simple, elemental wanting. Hence, it is their choice of diction over various other renditions such as ‘wishing’, ‘desire’, ‘will’, ‘intention’, ‘choice’, and ‘volition’. It seems to me, however, that ‘wishing/desire/will’ are semantically closely related to ‘wanting’ because all four terms express an urge that is not necessarily aligned with the willful intent inherent in the triade ‘intention/choice/volition’.

In the foreword to their translation, Pevear points to a passage at the end of Chapter VII and the beginning of Chapter VIII where he finds eighteen instances of *khoténiye*.[[388]](#footnote-388) It is the section that deals with the metaphors of man as piano key, that compares human activity to that of an anthill, and speaks of the incessant urge to build roads. The nameless underground man (hereafter, shortened to UGM) rejects all these examples of neat systematization with the simple question: ‘what makes you so sure that abstention from acting contrary to one’s interests, as determined by reason and arithmetic is always to one’s advantage [*vygoda* = profit] and that this applies to mankind as a whole?’.[[389]](#footnote-389) Interests as determined by reason and arithmetic are different from the elemental drive at the root of ‘wanting’. The latter points forward to Nietzsche’s will to power which is expressed not just in human action but throughout the operations of nature and are not always to humankind’s advantage or profit.

Pevear and Volokhonsky also tend to foreground the moral over the psychological in rendering certain word choices. For example, they consider the second sentence of the novel, *Ya zloy chelovék*, to have been consistently mistranslated as ‘I am a spiteful man.’ And the mistranslation affects more than the tone of the narrator’s voice. Essentially, it lacks the nuance of the original. To be sure, they grant, *zloy* is the root of the Russian word for ‘spiteful’ (*zlóbnyi*) but it actually denotes ‘wicked’, ‘bad’, even ‘evil’. The opposite of *zloy* is *dóbryi* (good) and is encountered elsewhere in the narrative. MacAndrew conveys the notion of evilness by opting for ‘I am mean’.[[390]](#footnote-390) ‘Mean’ has an advantage over ‘wicked’ in its context, I aver, because it resonates both morally *and* psychologically with the first sentence of the novel: ‘I am a sick man.’ The nameless anti-hero is also an unattractive individual (the third sentence). Why does he characterize himself as ‘sick’, ‘mean’, and ‘unattractive’? Because there is something physiologically wrong with him, as he explains in the following sentences. A diseased liver perhaps? He should consult a medical doctor for his condition but refuses to. Perhaps he is ‘mean’ (‘evil’) because of his chronic ailment? In any event, because of its innovative, frenetic quality which favors abrasive, emphatic formulations that grate upon the ear, interrupts itself constantly, defies the reader, polemicizes, and contradicts constantly, Dostoevsky’s style in particular has long been a bone of contention. It has even been called ‘unliterary’.[[391]](#footnote-391)

In general, MacAndrew seems to have used Garnett as a point of departure. She was under pressure from her publisher to tone down the offensiveness and rough colloquialisms to make the text palatable to a wider audience. ‘Of the more recent translators’, Michael Heim comments, ‘MacAndrew tends to tone down Dostoevsky’s language even more than Garnett, thereby making him ‘an easier read’.’[[392]](#footnote-392) Making *Notes from Underground* an easier read is by no means a bad thing, especially in light of the fact that the hybrid text is frequently complex and confusing. What does matter is the ‘stratification of languages’ that echo in Dostoevsky’s works. These stratifications, noted Dostoevsky scholar Caryl Emerson remarked on Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal investigation of the writer, ‘do not exclude one another; they intersect and overlap, pulling words into various gravitational fields and casting specific light and shadow. Living discourse, unlike a dictionary, is always in flux and in rebellion against its own rules.’ Therefore, Dostoevsky’s style is essentially dialogic. In fact, he posits ‘a dualistic universe of *permanent dialogue*’ in which gaps abound and misunderstandings result. Communication is faulty. Understanding according to Bakhtin is a kind of imperfect translation.[[393]](#footnote-393) In his chapter on ‘Discourse in Dostoevsky’ Bakhtin explains that dialogic relationships are extralinguistic and are inseparable from the realm of discourse, ‘that is, from language as a concrete integral phenomenon’.[[394]](#footnote-394) Consequently, discourse is by its very nature dialogic. And what is language as a ‘concrete integral phenomenon’? It is an embodied, authored utterance that solicits a response. Bakhtin further elucidates: ‘Dialogic relationships are reducible neither to logical relationships nor to relationships oriented semantically toward their referential object, relationships in and of themselves devoid of any dialogic element. They must clothe themselves in discourse, become utterances, become the positions of various subjects expressed in discourse, in order that dialogic relationships might arise among them’.[[395]](#footnote-395) No wonder then that *Notes* is a semantically challenging and engaging text. It is a dialogic, semiotic event that invites discourse with the reader as well. The reader reacts to authored utterances, even to individual words and images that jump off the page.

As important as these reflections are, stylistic analysis does not play the same role in this chapter as it did in previous ones in regards to *Madame Bovary* and *Werther*. Characterization and thought (‘idea’ in Bakhtinian terminology) dominate here as is appropriate for a remarkable character who has assumed a spot in modern consciousness alongside Don Quixote, Hamlet, and Faust.

### A Realist in a Higher Sense

From the outset of his literary career Dostoevsky seemed aware that he was adding a new dimension to the conception of realism in fiction dominant in the mid-nineteenth century. And he was not disposed to keep his future commentators in the dark about it. Although he claimed that we all come from Gogol’s *The Overcoat*, his style was different. Nor was he as a writer associated with any definite social group. Rather, he regarded his work as having a universal significance that transcended tradition boundaries. He was motivated, he said, ‘with complete realism to find man in man’, that is, to locate the *idea* of man. He understood his innovation to be an attempt to represent in fiction spiritual phenomena that exceeded social practices and required, as Bakhtin labelled it, a polyphonic approach.[[396]](#footnote-396) In summing up the role of multi-dimensional dialogic discourse as a chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s innovative style in promoting a new vision of reality, Bakhtin ascertains that Dostoevsky’s works astound us first of all by their extraordinary diversity of types and varieties of discourse, types and varieties, moreover, that are present in their most extreme expression. Clearly predominant is vari-directional double-voiced discourse, in particular internally dialogized discourse and the reflected discourse of another: hidden polemic, polemically colored confession, hidden dialogue. In Dostoevsky almost no word is without its intense sideward glance at someone else's word.[[397]](#footnote-397)

Nevertheless, Dostoevsky endeavored to resolve psychological contradictions and ambiguity—of which there are many in his works—in terms of true and eternal humanness. In other words, he sought a solution with a moral component that is bound up with an emerging idea.[[398]](#footnote-398) It was a challenge, one full of contradictions. ‘They call me a psychologist’, he wrote in his *The Diary of a Writer* (1873–74, 1876–77, 1889–81). ‘It is not true. I am a realist in a higher sense; that is, I portray all the depths of the human soul.’[[399]](#footnote-399) Hence, he saw in Gogol’s characterization of Akaky Akakievich, the protagonist in *The Overcoat*, an instance of mere externalization. He missed in that novella an in-depth probing of the soul in favor of brilliant surface effects (e.g., the grotesque connotation of Akaky Akakievich as ‘shit’ and the fancifulness of the story’s conclusion). In a letter to his brother shortly after the publication of *Poor Folk* (which does share Gogol’s interest in the lower social classes) he remarked that critics like Belinsky (who published a very positive review of the novel) ‘find in me a new and original spirit in that I proceed by analysis and not by synthesis; that is, I plunge into the depths, and while analyzing every atom, I search out the whole; Gogol takes a different path and hence is not a profound as I’.[[400]](#footnote-400)

Compared with his landed-gentry contemporaries Turgenev and Tolstoy, Dostoevsky seems to have considered himself an intellectual proletarian with an entirely different outlook on life. The son of a doctor who studied engineering and associated with a radical liberal group that led to his arrest, condemned to death but sent instead at the last minute into Siberian exile for nigh ten years (1849–58)—first in prison, then in forced labor—, Dostoevsky definitely had different life experiences. And in prison he got to know outcast common people of Russia in a distinctive way.[[401]](#footnote-401) (During this time, he also experienced his first epileptic fits.) While Turgenev and Tolstoy chronicled the biographies of members of their class with side lights on peasant life, he wrote about off-center city dwellers living in marginalized worlds of their own. He thought that their realism dealt with typical and surface features of existence. He, however, preferred to shift the action from the external world to that of the mind and heart of his characters (much more radically, for example, than Tolstoy’s exploration of Levin’s spiritual crisis). The shift to depicting a character’s inner life constituted a deeper reality, one often enough marked by a tragic vision that is the quintessence of life itself. It lays the foundation for existentialism.

In general, Dostoevsky seemed to be opposed to systematic psychology. Intuition and self-observation as well as the observation of others largely account for his knowledge of the workings of the conscious and unconscious mind. While still in Siberia he planned to collaborate with a friend on the translation of the work of the German physician and zoologist C.G. Carus, *Psyche. Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Seele* (1846). Carus was the doctor who had studied the historical Franz Woyzeck who suffered from psychological delusions and was subjected to maltreatment by an experimenting doctor. He became the subject matter of Georg Büchner’s play, *Woyzeck*.[[402]](#footnote-402) Dostoevsky likely found in Carus the theory that an abnormal state of mind may, in fact, be the gateway to supernormal experience. Carus also theorized on the meaning of dreams which also might have influenced Dostoevsky’s frequent use of the dream motif in his writings.

The notion of the divided self that is evident in Carus’s theory is mirrored in Dostoevsky’s use of doubles in his fiction such as Raskolnikov and Svidrigoailov in *Crime and Punishment* or Ivan Karamazov and Smerdyakom in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Yet these doubles do not correspond to psychiatric notions of the split personality nor to commonly accepted symptoms of schizophrenia. Lawrence Kohlberg concluded, on the other hand, that ‘Dostoevsky’s consciously “split” characters do present classical symptoms of the obsessive-compulsive character, however. The “split” is not a separation of selves, it is an obsessive balancing or undoing of one idea or force with its opposite.’[[403]](#footnote-403) This seems to describe the invariable state of mind in the Doubles. They are men and women obsessed by contending forces such as love and hate, pride and meekness, belief in God and disbelief, and the struggle for dominance determines the actions of the characters and defines their personalities. This makeup of traits also includes the opposites of the meek and the self-willed.

The nameless anti-hero of *Notes from Underground*—the narrative ‘I’—is exemplary of this split consciousness. He is a profound analyst of the ideas and feelings of others, but even more so of his own. He is a ‘thinking Double’, a version of the Fichtean ‘I’ and ‘not-I’. In this respect he marks a significant advance in what has become known as heightened realism. Hence, *Notes* with its concentrated power of psychological analysis represents a turning point in Dostoevsky’s creative art. His method was unique in literature at the time.

A series of events shortly before writing *Notes from Underground* probably contributed to the genesis of its misanthropic tone. Firstly, trips abroad disillusioned him about Enlightenment ideals of rationality and Western materialism. Secondly, a parallel shift occurred from socio-political structures and mild-liberalism to a conservatism that reinforced his earlier shift to religious belief. Thirdly, his love affair with Polina Suslova, who turned out to be his female double, enriched his understanding of the conflicting hate-love feelings. Finally, both his wife and older brother died affecting his mood in writing *Notes from Underground*. Hence, as was the case with other works considered in this study, Dostoevsky’s short novel was also based on historical facts to a certain degree.

*Notes* is a kind of ideological prologue to the great novels for which Dostoevsky is renowned, for it contains their basic motifs in salient and pungent form. It is deemed to be a primary example of Russian naturalism, an extreme form of literary realism which we associate with the likes of Èmile Zola’s *l’Assommoir* and Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Die Weber* (The Weavers). It picks up on the theme of the marginalized and downtrodden in society, using the strategy of the grotesque to advance its purpose. Earlier examples of the grotesque in literature are Akaky Akakiavich in *The Overcoat* and the blind beggar in *Madame Bovary*.

The book is a hybrid work presented in two parts with narrated events presented in reverse order. Part I is a philosophical treatise that reflects upon the narrative events presented in Part II. Moreover, two time periods representing two stages in the evolution of the Russian intelligentsia is apparent in the two parts of the narrative: a rational and utilitarian one of the 1860s (Part I) and a sentimental, literary one set in the 1840s (Part II). Part I presents the UGM as a retired civil servant who reflects upon existentialist dilemmas. It offers a nihilistic version of progressivism and community that emerged from the dreamer’s disillusionments recounted in the second part.[[404]](#footnote-404) Part II is rendered from the perspective of the 24-year-old protagonist. It consists of various subplots that construct and deconstruct reality in a narrative attempt to define the Self in modern society. That society is perhaps best captured by the prominent social radical Nikolai Gavrilovich Cherneyshevsky’s influential utopian novel *What is to be Done?* (1863). The novel functions as the unexpressed target of the UGM’s diatribes and parodies.[[405]](#footnote-405) These disillusionments prompt the philosophic and derisive reflections of Part I.

Simply put, *Notes* is a self-lacerating monologue by a 40-some-year-old nameless narrator, the Underground Man, the ‘mouse’ under the floorboards, who rebels against the materialism, rigid systematization, and conformism of his age which he designates ‘our negative century’.[[406]](#footnote-406) His antics are designed to prove his individuality. With his characterization, Dostoevsky created the model for the modern, alienated anti-hero who will reappear as Meursault in Camus’s *The Stranger* and Oskar Matzerath in Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*. In fact, *Notes* is a kind of anti-narrative, for it deconstructs everything from the Enlightenment ideal of reason and progress (e.g., crystal palace) to the positive features of eros (e.g., the Liza subplot).[[407]](#footnote-407) In the end, the narrative exposes itself as nothing but a spiteful lie.[[408]](#footnote-408) No wonder that critics have long considered the text confusing, intriguing, even infuriating.

When one digs deeper, one discerns that the primary topic of all the philosophical and narrative reflections is a contention between reason and the will.[[409]](#footnote-409) Ultimately, the UGM concludes that there is a need for an ‘independent will’ for without it there can be no individuality. Why? Because the will has the power to enhance our consciousness of being alive and independent of the laws of nature and of logic. In fact, the narrator contends, things exist because one wills them into existence as, for instance, when he asserts: ‘it exists as long as my wishes [*khoténiye*] exist’.[[410]](#footnote-410) In this contention we find a prelude to Nietzsche’s celebrated ‘will to power’ as the *primum mobile*. Notable is that Nietzsche clearly stated that *Notes from Underground* profoundly impressed him, deepening his understanding of psychology.[[411]](#footnote-411)

Part I takes place in a ‘mousehole’. The perspective is from below and outside the normal social and mental parameters. A contrast is created between the man of thought and the man of action. In this dichotomy we hear an echo of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s split between Man Thinking (the critically reflective individual) and Thinking Man (the calculative agent of commerce, science, and industry). However, in Dostoevsky’s version, the intelligent man waffles and is indecisive. He is a spineless creature incapable of decisive action, whereas Man Thinking is never subdued by his instruments, books and reflection, nor cowed by public opinion. The nameless anti-hero’s spinelessness is due to his extreme ‘lucidity’ which is tantamount to a debilitating disease.[[412]](#footnote-412) Why a disease? Because it leads to a loss of self-respect and the will to act. ‘After all’, the UGM grants, ‘how can a man with my lucidity of perception respect himself?’[[413]](#footnote-413) He knows too much about his weaknesses and shortcomings.

And what is the cause of this lucidity? Uprooted from the soil, he has lost contact with the people and been too strongly affected by ‘education and European civilization’.[[414]](#footnote-414) Is there anything that he can do about his hyperconsciousness? Actually, once the process has begun, no. Again, why? Because the very essence of consciousness and thought is its unending search for ever new ‘primary’ causes. It is a kind of forever-voyaging to ever new horizons that proves to be yet ‘another natural law’.[[415]](#footnote-415) There is never any resolution. The UGM’s version of forever-voyaging is, therefore, a condemnation and not an affirmative act of agency as building up as with Virginia Woolf. Certain consequences are drawn from this disease of lucidity. Guilt, for instance, is inherent in life itself; forgiveness is inappropriate since life needs no apology. This notion plays out in Part II especially in regards to the prostitute Liza’s guilt, as shall be seen.

Related concepts are pleasure and suffering. The kind of pleasure that the anti-hero advocates is, however, a far cry from the normal understanding of pleasure, that is, as a delectable experience, uplifting. No, the UGM’s meaning is quite the opposite. It is derived from self-degradation. In its most acute form, it gives rise to a ‘pleasure of despair’ from which there is no escape, no hope of alleviation.[[416]](#footnote-416) The suffering that ensues plays a pivotal role, for it makes the protagonist continually aware that he is, in fact, alive. A number of previously mentioned metaphors showcase this affect. The first mentioned is the stone wall.

Humankind constantly runs up against a wall. Real ones, but more importantly metaphorical ones. On the normal man, the ‘spontaneous man’, a wall has a calming effect as if it solved a moral issue. But actually, a (stone) wall represents the constrictive laws of nature; all walls connote the conclusions of mathematics and of the natural sciences. Moreover, in the eyes of the UGM, all walls signify a false primary cause of ‘evil’.[[417]](#footnote-417) They constitute premature hypotheses that allow the man of action to plunge ahead with his engineering projects, his road building which convey a false sense of living because roads lead somewhere; they have an inherent ‘telos’ from the outset. Such ‘full-time engineering’ is a closed system encapsulated in the mathematical equation 2x2=4. Inalterable.

They are nothing more than ‘premature hypotheses’.[[418]](#footnote-418) Yet they make possible such engineering wonders as the crystal palace built of steel and glass in London in 1851 to celebrate the reign of Queen Victoria. The spontaneous man of action is caught up in this activity like ants engaged in an ‘everlasting piece of engineering’ in the making and maintenance of the anthill.[[419]](#footnote-419) The full integration of humankind into these ‘laws of nature’ transforms individuals into nothing but organ stops and piano keys that are mechanically controlled. Humans are thereby deprived of free will. How can one know whether such calculated efforts are really to one’s advantage? Anticipating Nietzsche’s free spirit, the UGM poignantly asks: ‘Can you define exactly what is in the interest of the human being? And suppose the interest of man is not only consistent with but even demands something harmful rather than advantageous? [...] is there an accurate scale of human advantages?’[[420]](#footnote-420) Whim plays a role here, for through it humans can demonstrate their individuality. Hence, humans are also drawn to chaos and disorder. Whim works somewhat like free will because it can convey a sense of contrariness, as if to say: I am not an organ stop! I am more than a piano key! Ultimately, the purpose of life is life itself. It is not road building; it is not the careful fashioning of construction sets.

Perhaps this is why Dostoevsky favored the carnivalesque, as Bakhtin labelled the stylistic trait in the author’s approach to capturing the nature of life in his *The Problems of Dostoevky’s Poetics*.[[421]](#footnote-421) During the rite of ancient carnivals, traditional norms were temporarily put aside. That enabled unrestrained festivity as we know it from contemporary *Fasching* and *Mardi Gras*. Costumes and masks allowed people from various social backgrounds to interact on an equal footing. A carnival is, hence, something like coordinated chaos, a madhouse, that awakens powerful emotions and creates a platform for authenticity.

The anti-hero latches onto his excruciating toothache to demonstrate that he is not simply subject to the laws of nature. He delights in the pain, suffers willfully and with enhanced awareness. Why? Because nature doesn’t feel the pain of *your* toothache’.[[422]](#footnote-422) *Your* toothache allows *you* to feel that you are, indeed, alive, that you are awake and wakeful. In a move that anticipates Nietzsche’s views on suffering and wakefulness, the UGM concludes: in that pain we recognize real life and get to know ourselves. But spontaneous man does not want pain in any form, be it a physical toothache, public humiliation, or mental anguish. That unwillingness makes a full life impossible.

### *Mise en Scène*

Having laid out his existential thinking in Part I, the nameless narrator transitions to concrete examples of what he has been arguing abstractly and metaphorically. ‘I made up stories about myself’, the anti-hero confesses, ‘and put myself through all sorts of adventures to satisfy, at any price, my need to live’.[[423]](#footnote-423) Because ‘the natural, logical fruit of heightened consciousness’ is boredom and inertia, he needs to wake himself up again and again. Desire is everything, for it is ‘the manifestation of life itself—of all of life—and it encompasses everything from reason down to scratching oneself’.[[424]](#footnote-424) (This definitely sounds life Nietzsche’s will to power.)

Writing everything down, he tells us at the end of Part I, is ‘more conducive to self-examination, and my confession will have more style’.[[425]](#footnote-425) Additionally, he comments that the writing process itself is a kind of therapy, for it might even provide some relief from his misery. Thus addressing his ruminations to imaginary readers is but a faint; he is only writing for himself. He does not expect to gain any readers. At least, that is what he claims. He might just be trying to delude himself. Like Rousseau’s *Confessions*, his writing is autobiographical except for the fact that he knows that he is lying half the time, out of cowardice. In any event, the first part of the book is written without a preconceived plan; he has merely jotted down whatever came to mind. Well, that is not quite true either. A pattern and structure are discernible to the watchful eye/I. The structure involves a willful alternation between building up and bonding the ‘I’ and tearing it down and dissolving it via the stories that the UGM tells about himself.

Part II of this anti-novel picks up on the confessional mode in decisive fashion so that, in the final analysis, *Notes from Underground* reveals itself to be essentially ‘a punishment and an expiation’.[[426]](#footnote-426) (Originally, *Notes* was entitled ‘A Confession’).[[427]](#footnote-427) The reader learns that the hole in the floorboards was already present in the protagonist’s heart which he tried to mask over through avid reading and when he grew sick of that and everything else, he turned to sordid, fearful dissipation to distract himself. The feeling of shame was always present. He longed to contradict and oppose. In the process, he wanted others to feel what he felt, to suffer what he suffered. Hence, the anti-hero not only self-flagellated in hopes of achieving expiation, but also lashed out at others, seeking to denigrate them to make them feel his own despair and anguish. The stary-eyed French and German romantics, he laments, believed that they could understand everything, see everything much more clearly than minds of a practical orientation. He considers them to be rogues, for the real world is not reflected in their romantically affirmative projections. Moreover, they ignore the fact that any ‘self-respecting man is bound to be a coward and a slave’ because he is self-aware and more highly developed than others.[[428]](#footnote-428)

Their positive vision of life is in his mind, therefore, flawed. In Part II he turns the vision on its head. As the protagonist repeatedly demonstrates that he considers himself more highly developed than others, psychological domination assumes a major role. Indeed, his self-definition is bound up with the agonistic sense of feeling better or worse than others. To that end, he intermingles fact and fiction in his confession. We might be tempted to relate his state of confusion to what Virginia Woolf would label the androgenous mind three generations later, which, she suggests, is a twilight zone, neither completely dark nor completely light. This hybridity, however, creates the possibility for ‘suggestive power’, which is the genuine mark of the androgenous mind. Creativity depends on the undivided state of the woman-manly which makes cross-fertilization possible. In the case of Dostoevsky’s anti-hero, the undivided state is the simultaneous urge to assert and negate the Self. The UGM admits that real consciousness is an example of his own ‘tangled logic’. Why? Because it is impossible to solve the problems of the world ‘without a pure heart’.[[429]](#footnote-429) Alas, his heart already has a hole in it. Unlike Woolf, then, Dostoevsky’s protagonist writes in a rage, not with great confidence.

Part II consists primarily of three episodes, in each of which represents the UGM seeks to demonstrate that he is unlike anyone else, and no one is like him. He defines himself *ex negativo*, as it were. First is the UGM’s run-in with the husky six-footer on the street, who accidentally bumps into him and for whom he refuses to make way in planned subsequent encounters. This episode demonstrates his dream of heroism and valor. Second is his visit with Simonov, an old school mate with whom he had sporadic contact, in his apartment. During that visit he gets himself invited to a farewell dinner that Simonov, Trudolubov, and Ferfichkinare— two other former classmates—are planning for yet another former school mate, Zverkov, who was leaving town. The UGM never got along with him and only intrudes upon the party in order to be spiteful and disruptive. This episode is designed to demonstrate his intellectual superiority over them who live (according to him) only on the surface.[[430]](#footnote-430)

Simultaneously, he longs for the kind of camaraderie that they enjoy and for which he himself is totally unsuited. Third is his affair with the prostitute Liza following the dinner for Zverkov. The encounter offers him a chance to live out his fantasy of caring and loving in a brothel. It continues the theme of the UGM’s dream of heroism, of playing the role of Liza’s savior. Yet, each of these potentially romantic scenarios is transformed into an anti-fairytale. Each is an example of contrariness, an attack on the falsification of truth via logical constructions. With each narrative the anti-hero constructs ‘a piece of bad literature’.[[431]](#footnote-431) His intent is to heap insult after insult upon himself. And that is exactly what happens in excruciating fashion at the dinner party.

Dostoevsky’s method of narration is the reversal of the usual understanding of literature as offering models for behavior and distraction that offer a kind of way out of the dilemma of not knowing what to join, what to keep up with, what to hate, love, etc. Most people have lost touch with reality and consider life in literature to be better, the UGM asserts. Those who take their cue from the projections of (romantic) literature are ‘still-born’. As a result, he informs his reader: ‘today we don’t even know where real life is, what it is, or what it is called’.[[432]](#footnote-432) Hence, his own anti-narratives underscore the need for humiliation and disgust in order to feel alive. Indeed, to demonstrate his individuality. ‘Oh’, he exclaims as the dinner party breaks up and the friends move on to a brothel, ‘if only they knew what thought and feeling I’m capable of and how sensitive and complex I am!’.[[433]](#footnote-433) Indeed, the three episodes illustrate how complex a character the Underground Man is. He is too aware of his complexity, alas, to be able to live life normally. A failure. A forlorn voice from under the floor boards of existence.

### Liza: Dreams of Attachment

A tender scene in chapter VI with Liza brings everything to a head. The ability to think and be sensitive make Liza and the UGM more alike. He enters her room detached, sullen, angry. Their conversation begins haltingly. He conducts what amounts to a cross-examination. She too is detached. Withdrawn. Sullen and unhappy with her situation. The protagonist begins to enjoy toying with words and with her emotions. At first, he pretends to be empathetic until he actually does take an interest and eventually admits to himself that he is no better than Liza. Liza has only recently come to the brothel, is fresh and attractive and can earn good money. But the antihero sketches out an image of what her life after a hard year would look like. Her freshness and beauty will have begun to fade, and she will not fetch the same sums. He explains how she will sink ever further into debt with her madame, so that she will never be able to afford to get out of her miserable condition. She will be ever more a slave. She will have sold her soul to the devil.

He presents this scenario graphically, admitting his own failings earnestly to demonstrate that he knows what he is talking about. To explain his demeanor upon entering the brothel, he states that he is essentially without feeling because he grew up without a family. If he were a father, he would love his daughters more than his sons and would do everything to ensure their happiness. Unfortunately, too many families are without love. No God exists, he laments, where there is no love. And ‘there is no reason either’.[[434]](#footnote-434) But love is a divine mystery.

To illustrate his point, he projects an image of a warm family life. It is designed to demonstrate that the coldness and antipathy they showed one another upon his entering her room are a far cry from the warmness and joy of love. ‘Imagine’, he says, ‘a pink little boy suckling at your breast. What husband would not be moved at such a sight? [...] isn’t it all happiness when the three of them—the mother, the child, and the father altogether? To experience these moments, one should be willing to go through much suffering’.[[435]](#footnote-435) He urges her to think about this alternative; she is still young and not unattractive, she could fall in love, marry, be happy. Think before it is too late, he urges her again. Think of the alternative: the life of a consumptive caught in a brothel as in a dark, dank basement. Alone.

He paints the picture of a ‘holy family’ with such feeling that Liza is moved. She exclaims emphatically: yes, that is right. It is what I felt too. By then he is no longer detached. His interest in her seems genuine enough even though he admits: ‘I felt weak and in the right mood, and besides, shamming so easily coexists with sincere feeling’.[[436]](#footnote-436) Sure, he is playing a game; but then again it has become more than just a game. What he says sounds like a book, as Liza rightly remarks.[[437]](#footnote-437) Indeed, such projections of happiness are frequently products of the imagination, so that literature becomes life. He too is animated by what he is saying, even though on some deep level he knows that he is lying. Then, again, life is literature.

When the UGM takes leave of Liza, he remarks on the transformation he has wrought with his ‘story telling’: her face is no longer sullen, distrustful, and obstinate as at first, her eyes were now beseeching, trusting, tender, shy.[[438]](#footnote-438) He is so moved that he gives her his address and urges her to come visit him. That leads to a second scene with Liza portrayed in chapter 9 that proves devastatingly awful as he deconstructs the rosy projection of salvation through confrontation with his dire reality: his miserable abode and his own tortured and conflicted personality, his free admission that he spoke like a book to gain control over her, to abuse and insult her like he had been insulted at the dinner party. All he wanted to do was to pass himself off as a hero, for he was furious at himself. So, he took his anger out on her. A classic case of displacement. His despotic act, his cynicism crushed her. And yes, he is a ‘louse’ because he is the ‘most disgusting, most laughable, pettiest, most stupid and most envious of all the worms of the earth’.[[439]](#footnote-439)

To his surprise, Liza understands him correctly, namely that he is irretrievably unhappy. Impulsively, she throws her arms around his neck in an embrace, so that he too loses control and begins to sob uncontrollably. Now she exerts control over him! Simultaneously hating her and feeling powerfully drawn to her, he seeks to regain the upper hand. His ‘need to dominate and possess’ is simply irrepressible. He cannot live ‘without having someone to bully and order around’.[[440]](#footnote-440) That is the very reason why he keeps his servant Apollon on who is the exact opposite of himself and who successfully resists his attempts at utter domination. The name Apollon recalls, of course, the Greek god of beauty, order, and harmony. It is as if he cannot live without Apollon ‘as though he were a chemical necessity for my existence’.[[441]](#footnote-441) The nameless anti-hero is the chaotic counterpoint to order and harmony. Although he is the master, he nevertheless has to do as Apollon wished. (A Mephistopheles/Faust relationship is evident here, with the negative and positive forces contending with one another in an endless cycle.)

Now the UGM has also invited Liza into his apartment, his ‘shell’ and ‘sheath’ where he could hide from humankind.[[442]](#footnote-442) She represents the possibility of goodness and harmony. To regain control over her (and his own emotions) in his wretched abode, he adds insult to injury by offering her money, a clear form of degradation and reminder that she is a prostitute (albeit by misfortune), not a burgeoning madonna. Rejecting the money, she leaves disappointed and devastated. After briefly reflecting on what he has done, the UGM calls after her, even running out into the street in search of her. Why? Because if he could apologize to her he could enhance his humiliation (while playing her like a yoyo). Humiliation, he states, is ‘purification because it causes the most corrosive, the most painful awareness’.[[443]](#footnote-443) And precisely that enhancement is the objective of these central scenes with Liza. They lash out at contemporary man who is still born: ‘for a long time we’ve been brought into this world by parents who are dead themselves; and we like it better and better. And we’re developing a taste for it, so to speak. Soon we will invent a way to be begotten by ideas altogether’.[[444]](#footnote-444)

All of the nameless antihero’s antics are designed to undercut this lifeless contemporary man. He is intent upon authoring himself as a being more alive, more vital, more conscious than those around him. Being begotten by ideas altogether surprisingly points forward to Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. They too seek authenticity as we shall see.

### Making Sense of ‘Confession’ and ‘Literature’

Freud’s paradigm of the socialization of the self-centered, sexually driven individual into a civilized being advanced in *Civilization and its Discontents* offers a fruitful approach to an analysis of these central scenes with Liza (and Apollon, whose name denotes order and harmony in contrast to the UGM). Freud recast our understanding of civilization, the purpose of which is now to promote individual happiness through the ‘art of living’ in a community. He makes ‘loving and being loved’ the center and source of all satisfaction.[[445]](#footnote-445) This requires ‘the transformation and rearrangement of [one’s] libidinal components’ that is essentially an ‘economics of the individual’s libido’.[[446]](#footnote-446) Purely erotic love morphs into more generalized forms of attachment, that prove to be the bonding elements of civilization. They even contain ‘an aesthetic attitude’, which is a form of compensation for and protection against the injuries inflicted by reality and the loss of love.[[447]](#footnote-447) None of this seems particularly apt to unlocking the meaning of *Notes from Underground*, even if the libido is present as background noise. More apt is the conclusion Freud draws about the rise and fall of civilizations.

Civilization with its discontents amounts to an unending dialectical dynamic of growth and restriction, of a clash between individual freedom and external necessity (Thanatos), of the tendency to inhibit and sublimate the individual’s sexual life and the tendency to expand the cultural unit from the family to ever widening communities with the goal of universal brotherhood.[[448]](#footnote-448) The projection of happy family life, his desire for inclusion in friendly dinner parties, his wish to be acknowledged as a free spirit all fit this pattern of ‘outreach’. Furthermore, the tension between freedom and restraint is anticipated in the UGM’s concluding assertion: ‘Take anyone and untie his hands, open up his field of activity, relax discipline, and . . . well, believe me, he’d immediately want that discipline clamped down on him again’.[[449]](#footnote-449) In particular, Freud’s interpretation of making the ‘subject independent of Fate’ via ‘internal mental processes’ allows us to comprehend more fully and accurately the process of defining the Self as the art of living that entails various *modes* of being human.[[450]](#footnote-450) A seriously new mode is apparent in the heightened consciousness that is the anti-hero’s defining character trait made apparent via his ‘double voicedness’.[[451]](#footnote-451) In his ‘forever taking into account internally the responsive, contrary evaluation of oneself made by another’, Dostoevsky’s narrative style seems to point forward to W.E.B. Du Bois’s ‘double consciousness’.[[452]](#footnote-452) In the Dostoevskian context, however, the UGM comes across as being obsessive-compulsive. In fact, his self-definition resides in this compulsive behavior. Hence, I do not agree with Bakhtin who argues that the UGM is hoping to be contradicted when he describes himself as spiteful, sick, mean, a worm, an ungrateful biped. He knows full well that he is sick, is suffering from a disease.

His story (which continues beyond what he actually wrote down but would only be a repetition of the established pattern) is, he grants, not literature per se but rather, as previously noted, ‘a punishment and expiation’.[[453]](#footnote-453) While the UGM leaves the door open to interpret his ruminations as being ‘a kind’ of literature, his purpose is to distinguish his writing from that which is generally accepted as literature. His confession is a personal confession wrapped in layers of parody and perdition. In that sense, his narrative is not simply a work of art. It *is* a personal document; nonetheless, it requires interpretation against the framing backdrop of life and mores more generally.[[454]](#footnote-454) Throughout the writing process the nameless anti-hero has experienced guilt and shame. Yet he could not stop himself. Punishment and expiation are required to make amends of sort for the numerous insults and acts of humiliation of which he is guilty. Repeatedly, he tries to dominate others in order to assert his own worth. Here the art of confessional writing amounts to what Helena Carvalhão Buescu and João Ferreira Durate label a matter of power relations between the roles of speaker and listener or of writer and reader.[[455]](#footnote-455)

Literary protagonists are often thrust from the heights of success and public approbation into the valley of aloneness, struggle, and despair. The fall, however, offers them an opportunity to discover what they are really made of. The meaning of life is essentially defined by how one makes sense of her/his moment of greatest adversity. Such works ask: How does moral renewal happen? Frequently, if not always, it connotes a period of self-reflection in the solitude of the ‘wilderness’ as a precondition for the successful recovery from adversity, from an exclusionary focus on the Self to an inclusionary one on meaningful relations. Dostoevsky presents a cynical alternative to such a positive view of rising from despair to renewed optimism. The whole purpose of such degradation is a consciousness raising that does not lead to harmonious resolution. In the Fichtean universe morality functions as the lodestar in the endless strivings of the I for self-realization.[[456]](#footnote-456) In Dostoevsky’s universe morality is supplanted by the agonistic tension between bonding and dissolution. Yet, the bonding process is ever present.

Hyperconsciousness makes bonding with others for any length of time nigh impossible. The *intus*, as Ortega y Gasset called the soul, is out of control. Why? Because, as David Brooks noted, the way out of division and alienation involves a negotiation of Self and Other along the lines of *shared* spaces, *collective* memories, and tastes.[[457]](#footnote-457) In the eyes of the nameless anti-hero, however, those shared spaces and tastes lack vitality, authenticity. While recognizing that specific commitments impart more substantial meaning and real joy to life—such as commitment to spouse and family or a vocation to so some good or dedication to the well-being of a community—the UGM is too focused on the inchoative moment when the process of growth transitions into decay.

As a result, Dostoevsky’s antihero is ‘lost’, unmoored, incapable of a lasting compassionate connection with an Other, a Not-I. His attempts at self-affirmation are all dead ends, for he consistently runs up against a wall against which he bangs his head in desperation. He has nothing else to lose.[[458]](#footnote-458) Such extreme self-awareness is self-destructive. Even if consciousness is essentially good, it can lead in extreme form to fragmentation. Hardly a positive model for modern humankind. But then literature—or perhaps ‘lying’—is a useful compensation. After all, the UGM exclaims, ‘Left alone without literature, we immediately become entangled and lost’.[[459]](#footnote-459) The early twentieth-century works considered in the next chapter address this fragmentation in literary fashion.

## Fragmented Self. The Prophet of Change: Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85)

[This life-drive] will want to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy—not out of any morality or immorality, but because it *lives*, and because it *is* will to power.[[460]](#footnote-460)

### Why Write?

With his long and varied reception, Friedrich Nietzsche has proven to be one of the most influential thinkers of the Western world. Initially understood by few, then heralded as the prophet of the avant-garde, usurped by the politics of National Socialism, fêted as the epitome of existentialism, revered by semioticians, and claimed as the inspiration for French postmodernism, Nietzsche has appeared in an everchanging light. Every attempt to schematize his philosophy or to reduce it to a single fundamental concept has met with mixed results.[[461]](#footnote-461) Considering his skepticism regarding all dogmatic thinkers,[[462]](#footnote-462) it is little wonder that the effort to reduce his thought to compact understanding has been unsuccessful. The suggestion to view Nietzsche’s ‘antinomian thought’ itself as his methodological principle and the primary purpose of his philosophy is useful, for it is ultimately rooted in his famous concept of the will to power.[[463]](#footnote-463) On the other hand, Peter Pütz’s claim that Nietzsche’s legacy remains a largely untapped source ‘for the building of an intellectually radical, but also freer, world’ provides an impetus in plotting the course of this present study.[[464]](#footnote-464)

The Nietzsche I wish to highlight is the ‘lord of the dance’ within the total economy of life and the demythologizer of myth. In his analysis of Nietzsche’s art of interpretation, Henrik Birus rightly emphasizes Nietzsche’s dictum that one must ask new questions if one would hear new answers.[[465]](#footnote-465) As a new kind of prophet, Nietzsche was substantially different from other seers such as Socrates or Christ, yet they were the primary foils of his own thought. Far from constituting a unified doctrine, his message essentially demythologized the prophet. In this regard, Nietzsche continued the radical questioning Dostoevsky introduced in *Notes from Underground*, where he demystified the author, so to speak. Central to the argument in this chapter are interrelated works from the 1880s: *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1884–86), and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).

However, the focus here begins with *Beyond Good and Evil*, for it is considered a glossary of *Zarathustra* and is Nietzsche’s attempt at writing a ‘natural history of the higher man’ (his favorite designation for this project in those years). *Zarathustra* is subsequently analyzed as the monumental modern myth-making event of the late nineteenth century, analogous to the mythologizing power of *Faust* in the late eighteenth century and of *The Tin Drum* in the mid-twentieth century. Since truly innovative developments that challenge preconceived notions often do not take root for some time, it is not surprising that Nietzsche’s revolutionary thought did not immediately enter general consciousness. Although he was avidly read in some circles around 1900 and in the 1920s, he was not broadly received (in and outside Germany) until the second half of the twentieth century. Then he rapidly emerged as a modern classic, which fulfilled his own prophecy that the Germans might someday read him. What he wrote in the 1880s was too new, too multivalent, too passionate for the general reader’s taste.[[466]](#footnote-466)

The delay in his broader reception was due no doubt in part to the reading modes then dominant. But then Nietzsche must bear some responsibility for the delay, for he insisted that he was not driven simply by a wish to be understood broadly. On the contrary, he also desired *not* to be understood.[[467]](#footnote-467) The desire for limited comprehensibility and his choice of aphorisms and parables over traditional narrative forms is related to notions of chaotic movement and periodic centers of lucid order on a grander scale. That interconnection explains why he would even consider writing ‘a book for all and for none’, as he subtitled *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Echoing Dostoevsky, he stated laconically: ‘Books for everybody, are always malodorous books’.[[468]](#footnote-468) To write for everyone is to write for no one. His reader must be like himself: a rugged individualist in intellectual matters. Besides writing and reading are not the same thing as living. Nietzsche much preferred life to idle reading (as did the Underground Man). In *Zarathustra*, he suggested that the spread of literacy is subversive because it eventually corrupts not only writing but also thinking: ‘Another century of readers—and the spirit itself will [begin to] stink’.[[469]](#footnote-469) Like Dostoevsky’s nameless anti-hero, he nonetheless, took pen to hand, unable to deny his own inherent drive to master his environment. But why, then, do you write? Nietzsche asks himself in *The Gay Science.* He answers his own question by insisting that he *must* write: he has found no other means ‘of *getting rid of*’ his thoughts.[[470]](#footnote-470) Like so many chaotic ruptures and tremors (e.g., volcanic eruptions, earthquakes), writing is tantamount to a rearranging of powerful forces. Writing is ordering. ‘I am not a man’, he claimed, ‘I am dynamite’.[[471]](#footnote-471) Like the Underground Man, he wanted above all to animate in explosive fashion.

Since he considered thinking itself to be action and because he saw writing to be an extension of thinking, writing proved to be an essential part of living for him after all.[[472]](#footnote-472) In any event, the fact that he did not write easy books can be seen as an attempt to animate rather than to persuade his reader.[[473]](#footnote-473) The best interpreter, therefore, is the one who suffers a thousand burdens and struggles to gain insight.[[474]](#footnote-474) *Zarathustra* (1882–85) and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) force us by their very style to see things in an unaccustomed way. It is not simply a matter of adopting a perspective proffered by Nietzsche, but rather of finding a medial perspective between the positions of author and reader. That in-between-space is the site of innovation. And that space is constantly shifting. Such was Nietzsche’s intent throughout. So, it seems, as it was for Dostoevsky in *Notes from Underground*.

### The Total Economy of Life

The overarching theme of Nietzsche’s opus—especially that of the 1880s—is the ‘total economy of life’ that embraces the full range of human emotion and instinct.[[475]](#footnote-475) That outlook on life was rooted in a biological understanding of the relationship between body and spirit, between the creative individual and his various life-worlds. After spring 1885, the reorientation of Nietzsche’s thinking became even more pronounced with an expansion into the inorganic realm and the incorporation of the physical concept of force/energy (‘Kraft’) in the initial formulation of ‘will to power’ (‘Wille zur Macht’).[[476]](#footnote-476) In a fragment from June/July 1885, Nietzsche specified that the will to power is manifest in ‘every combination of force’ (‘in jeder Kraft-Kombination’).[[477]](#footnote-477) In fact, the essence of being is equated with process itself (‘Die Prozesse als ‘Wesen’’).[[478]](#footnote-478) Three years later, in another fragment, he spoke of the ‘will to accumulation of force’ and wondered whether this will to energy increase should be hypothesized for chemical reactions and cosmic order as well (‘Der Wille zur Accumulation von Kraft’).[[479]](#footnote-479) Thus, he was thinking in terms not only of a constant level of energy, but also of energy fluctuation with periodic knots of energy vying with one another for superiority. He labels the concept ‘maximizing an economy of energy use’ (‘Maximal-Ökonomie des Verbrauchs’).[[480]](#footnote-480) The genius was simply one of these energy knots (‘Kraftzentren’). In fact, every individual can be viewed thusly.

Nietzsche’s purpose in *Beyond Good and Evil* seems to be an extension of Dostoevsky’s aim in *Notes*, for it is to confront ‘the terrible basic text *homo natura*’ in a rigorously scientific manner, the way that the rest of nature was confronted in the age of positivism.[[481]](#footnote-481) His purpose is to get back to the text that has ‘*disappeared beneath the interpretation*’, to ground existence in the ‘reality of our instincts’, and to disclose the essence of every living thing as ‘a fundamental organic function’.[[482]](#footnote-482) (Compare the Underground Man’s claim that he is sick, suffering from a disease, maybe caused by his liver.) Then, too, Nietzsche claimed that the genius is a being who impregnates or gives birth and who is perhaps not so rare that he would deserve special notice.[[483]](#footnote-483) Moreover, life itself at its very core was nothing but ‘appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one’s forms, incorporation, and at the least and mildest, exploitation’. (That certainly sounds like Dostoevsky’s anti-hero.)

So, what is the individual human being for Nietzsche? S/he is ‘a delicate, empty, elegant, flexible mold which has to wait for some content so as ‘to form’ itself by’; the individual is ‘without content’ and without a prescribed ‘self’. [[484]](#footnote-484)The definition echoes, at least to a degree, what we found in *Notes from Underground*. Later Robert Musil will adopt it in *Man Without Characteristics* (1930). Portrayed thusly, man is a mere vehicle for giving shape and form to experience and sensation. Apparently, there is no Self, just a series of selves. Or, maybe again, there is something more basic to the text of being human? Perhaps already expressed in the venting of energy, the so-called will to power? This life-drive, Nietzsche explains further, ‘will want to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy—not out of any morality or immorality, but because it *lives*, and because it *is* will to power’.[[485]](#footnote-485) Speaking paradoxically (and in direct opposition to Kant), Nietzsche asserts that the human being is neither an end and ultimate purpose of ‘the *rest* of existence’ nor is s/he even ‘a beginning, a begetting and first cause’.[[486]](#footnote-486) The individual is part and parcel of nature at large. We encountered this thought in Goethe’s *Werther* and again in *Notes*. Nietzsche earns the title of philosopher of the future, I suggest, by virtue of his deeper theorizing of the embeddedness of humankind in natural forces themselves.

In a world constantly in flux, it might seem logical to reject the notion of a more unified Self in favor of ever-changing selves. Yet, Nietzsche does suggest that the human being is something more than a mere vessel for all kinds of content, after all. Why is that, again? The most alive individual is a creator of values, a commander and lawgiver, whose ‘knowing’ is ‘*creating*’ and whose will to truth is ‘*will to power*’.[[487]](#footnote-487) Such a human being lives life unphilosophically, unwisely, and imprudently (much like the Underground Man) ‘and bears the burden and duty of a hundred attempts and temptations of life’*.[[488]](#footnote-488)* This individual is Nietzsche’s philosopher of the future.

The genuine philosopher is a creative individual capable of imagining and experiencing extraordinary things nonstop. Metaphorically, she is like the summer storm, pregnant with ever new lightning bolts and resounding with rolling claps of thunder that extend in all directions.[[489]](#footnote-489) The paradoxical description offered of the Self is, then, the terrible basic text *homo natura* itself: the will to power in its agonistic wholeness. The human being is both reactive and proactive, a mere mold and vessel but also a creator and builder of molds. This is why Nietzsche insists upon using the personal pronoun *mein* (my) to leave his imprint in such formulations as ‘*my* judgment’, ‘*my* thoughts’, ‘*my* way’.[[490]](#footnote-490) We find similar signatures in *Will to Power* and in *Zarathustra*.[[491]](#footnote-491) In this light we can understand Alexander Nehamas’s conclusion that the traditional distinction between *being* and *becoming* dissolves for Nietzsche.[[492]](#footnote-492) Being *is* becoming.[[493]](#footnote-493) Luigi Pirandello in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), Hermann Hesse in *Steppenwolf* (1927) and Günter Grass in *The Tin Drum* (1959) later explore this basic text of *homo natura* as simultaneously being and becoming. Ostensibly, they are preceded in their efforts by Dostoevsky in *Notes from Underground*.[[494]](#footnote-494)

Essentially, Nietzsche formulates a new concept of aesthetics when he laconically notes that aesthetics makes sense only in terms of natural science, ‘like the Apollonian and Dionysian’. ‘Chemical changes in inorganic nature’, he conjectures, ‘are perhaps artistic processes too.[[495]](#footnote-495) With these conjectures, he provides a new way of seeing. And we can understand his ‘dance of life’ as emanating from Dionysus, the god of the dance who deconstructs ordered worlds, thereby making way for new ones by Apollo, the god of harmony and order. With good reason, then, Nietzsche devotes the final aphorism of *Beyond Good and Evil* to Dionysus.

### Zarathustra—Post-Biblical Prophet

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche’s most famous work and self-proclaimed best book dating back to 1881, explores these ideas in narrative form. We can read the work as an original hybrid of literature, philosophy, and science. But of primary interest here is the notion of the higher man who eschews the straight and narrow path, who sees things in new ways, who bears the burden of repeated temptations and attempts at negotiating life.

The prophet Zarathustra is framed by the first (1882) and second (1887) editions of *Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (The Gay Science), into which Nietzsche injected parts of *Zarathustra* under the rubric ‘Incipit tragoedia’, and by *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Beyond Good and Evil), which is generally seen as a glossary of *Zarathustra* and whose origins go back to long before *The Gay Science*.[[496]](#footnote-496) One school of thought considers the ‘novel’ that consists of a series of aphorisms and parables to be a literary failure, whereas a second one accords more weight to the author’s characterization of Zarathustra as his audacious, intellectual ‘son’.[[497]](#footnote-497) An evidently essential tension exists between these two (extreme) attitudes toward Nietzsche as littérateur on the one hand and as analytical thinker on the other. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, literature and philosophy converge to such an extent that we can legitimately speak of the work as philosophical fiction, a descendant of eighteenth-century versions of the genre, though definitely not a satire in the vein of Voltaire’s *Candide*. (Nietzsche himself calls it ‘legendary’.) While it does tell a story, character portraiture and narrative plot are clearly not its forte; the development of ideas through parable and metaphor, however, is. In this more rarified sense, *Zarathustra* is a philosophical anti-novel like Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground,* which Nietzsche had read in French translation and much admired.[[498]](#footnote-498) As such, it is closer to the immediacy of life than to the abstractions of philosophy. Its aphoristic style makes visible connections among energy knots of insight, creating an effect not unlike that of the human observer peering with eye and imagination into the night sky and discerning constellations of bright lights rather than a mere jumble of luminous points.

Despite its underdeveloped analytic structure and syncopated style, *Zarathustra* quickly emerged as one of Nietzsche’s most enduring works, achieving the status of a cult book and serving as a kind of ‘handbook of revolution’ for many readers.[[499]](#footnote-499) Its topic is life on earth and how most appropriately to live that life. To be sure, the novel addresses various kinds of circular motion associated with earthly existence: circumlocutions, orbiting material bodies, and revolutions of thought. Both movements of mass and of thought prove to be symptoms of an unseen event. In fact, some see the concept of the cyclical eternal return as the work’s internal structuring principle.[[500]](#footnote-500)

Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation of Richard Strauss’s symphonic poem, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1896), in his classic science-fiction movie, *Space Odyssey 2001,* contributed to the book’s popularity beyond the walls of academe. The novel itself continues to be read voraciously in both philosophy and literature classes at colleges across the United States. Perhaps precisely because of its (disputed) literary quality, *Zarathustra* did not attract the attention of philosophers until the late twentieth century.[[501]](#footnote-501)

Above all, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* can be considered an elaborate parody of the Bible.[[502]](#footnote-502) Zarathustra appears as the modern Messiah who descends the mountain at age thirty to gather disciples and to teach them about the new man and the new vision of life. While ostentatiously aimed at deconstructing myth, the work paradoxically contributed to the making of a new one, fulfilling Nietzsche’s prophecy that the book would be read as widely as the Bible. Indeed, Nietzsche saw himself as heralding a new style and a new era (‘Zeitrechnung’).[[503]](#footnote-503) Utilizing myth in this way underscored his belief that we cannot live without legends, parables, and dicta. The paradoxical quality of the novel is readily apparent in the fact that Zarathustra desires only disciples who are independent thinkers and who will resist following slavishly in his footsteps. His followers must be creators of values, makers of new paths, and strong-backed individuals who can bear heavy burdens and endure repeated disappointment. Key issues raised here include the will to power, the nature of being human, the new man (overman), the need for balance, and the eternal return.

A product of the early 1880s, this novel is out of step with its time (‘ein unzeitgemäßer Roman’).[[504]](#footnote-504) It consists of four parts and narrates the oracular pronouncements of the prophet Zarathustra organized around parables, and a few episodes from his life. Essentially, it represents an anti-philosophical attitude. Nietzsche states that Part I was to be composed in the style of the first movement of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, probably to imply both the contemplative crescendo marked by a counterpoint of lyrical fluidity and explosive outburst of punctuated energy, in short, an emphatic announcement. Moreover, the topic is announced as ‘Chaos sive natura’ (chaos or nature) a manifest response to Spinoza’s ‘deus sive natura’ (God or nature). Apparently, chaos was to replace God as the creative principle in the new order of things. What Nietzsche urges is the repositioning of humanity within the total economy of nature as a constituent part, not as its teleological end.[[505]](#footnote-505) In its final version, Part I of the novel describes the prophet’s preparation for his descent from the mountain to spread the word. Himself still inexperienced and idealistic, Zarathustra sings the praises of self-overcoming.

Part II narrates the protagonist’s encounters in real life among men. A radical shift of focus occurs away from putative enthusiasm toward the corporeality of experiencing the world. That would explain the choice of title for this section: ‘On the Corporealizing of Experience’ (‘Von der Einverleibung der Erfahrungen’). Nietzsche literally means ‘corporealizing’/’incorporation’ as an enfolding in the body. If thought is paramount in Part I in which Zarathustra reverses the message of Christ shedding his blood and denying his body to redeem humanity, then *performing* the thought rises to the fore in Part II. Prophetically, Zarathustra declares his fundamental message unequivocally: ‘Of all that is written I love only what a man has written with his blood. Write with blood, and you will experience that blood is spirit.’ This is a reference to Christ’s shedding of his blood to redeem humankind. Writing with blood is thus tantamount to deep conviction. Earlier Zarathustra had proclaimed even more provocatively: ‘[B]ody am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body’ (‘Leib bin ich ganz und gar, und Nichts ausserdem; und Seele ist nur ein Wort für ein Etwas am Leibe’).[[506]](#footnote-506) In this instance, the body actually displaces the spirit at center stage, a move widely considered to be pioneering.[[507]](#footnote-507)

Part III is the most ‘interior’ of the sections, for it is here that the ‘final bliss of the solitary’ (‘vom letzten Glück des Einsamen’) is celebrated.[[508]](#footnote-508) Instead of experiencing release and happiness, Zarathustra sinks into a deep melancholy because he senses that he is locked into the physiology of being (cf. letter of 3 September 1883 to Heinrich Köselitz, i.e., Peter Gast). The central theme here is eternal recurrence, which represents a kind of revocation of the initial optimism of Parts I and II that humanity can progress, that death can be overcome, that happiness and tranquility can be achieved. Seminal is the section labeled ‘The Convalescent’ (‘Der Genesende’), for it is there that Zarathustra—the ‘godless’ one, ‘the advocate of the circle’—formulates his ‘most abysmal thought’.[[509]](#footnote-509)

In a sense, Zarathustra replaces God in Part III in that he has come not to announce and prepare the way as the Messiah did for a better world but rather to teach a new way of living on earth that is without hope of an afterlife or of eternal bliss. Zarathustra explains: ‘We have no wish whatever to enter into the kingdom of heaven: we have become men—*so we want the earth*’.[[510]](#footnote-510) His message dispenses with the transcendent and distant Deity. He counsels that ‘eternally the ring of being remains faithful to itself’, that it requires nothing outside itself and is governed by the cycle of generation and degeneration.[[511]](#footnote-511) Ultimately, he reformulates the concept of soul as ‘destiny’ (‘Schicksal’), the ‘circumference of circumferences’ (‘Umfang der Umfänge’), and the ‘umbilical cord of time’ (‘Nabelschnur der Zeit’).[[512]](#footnote-512) That is why Zarathustra states that he has given back to the soul ‘the freedom over the created and uncreated’.[[513]](#footnote-513) Man’s destiny is to be earth-bound while experiencing an upward impulse. At the heart of Part III, then, is creation/eternal re-creation. The thought of non-transcendence is the cause of his despondency.

The new mythology of eternal recurrence comprises a kind of ‘God-less theology’.[[514]](#footnote-514) Humanity must manage without the concept of transcendence or the belief in redemption from solitariness, sadness, suffering, and corporeality. Zarathustra’s own self-overcoming thus proves to be a model for all humankind. Because of the primary directive to overcome self, it proves difficult to state precisely who or what Zarathustra is or represents[[515]](#footnote-515). This echoes Nietzsche’s puzzlement over the fact that his readers find him eccentric. How can he be ‘ex-centric’, he wonders, if he has no center?[[516]](#footnote-516) As Zarathustra asserts in his initial oracular pronouncements, ‘In every Now, being begins; round every Here rolls the sphere There. The center is everywhere. Bent is the path of eternity’ (‘In jedem Nu beginnt das Sein; um jedes Hier rollt sich die Kugel Dort. Die Mitte ist überall. Krumm ist der Pfad der Ewigkeit’).[[517]](#footnote-517)

Part IV essentially summarizes the content and intent of the preceding three parts. In doing so, it re-emphasizes Zarathustra’s dedication to his own self-overcoming after the momentary despondency toward the end of Part III. Its tone, dithyrambic-enfolding (‘dithyrambisch-umfassend’), underscores the overarching topic: ‘Anulus aeternitatis’, or ring of eternity.[[518]](#footnote-518)

In sum, we can distinguish three purposes underlying the novel: (1) to announce the new order; (2) to destroy the old order; and (3) to prepare the transition from the old to the new. The latter lacks, however, ‘the divine tablets vouchsafed to Moses’ to guide the way.[[519]](#footnote-519) Each phase corresponds to the three parts of the novel’s original conception.

### The Dancing Motif—The Higher Man—Self

The new prophet, the higher man, must be first and foremost a dancer. Saliently, Nietzsche remarked to his friend Erwin Rohde on 22 February 1884: ‘My style is a *dance*’.[[520]](#footnote-520) The *Übermensch* (overman) is the complex individual who most fully represents the oppositional forces of expansion and appropriation and contraction and shutting out that are characteristic of the will to power. That requires agility and fleetness of foot. The overman is contrasted to the ‘last man’ and the false free spirits who are small and small-minded, that is, the copiers and imitators whom Dostoevsky’s Underground Man despises.[[521]](#footnote-521) In an essay on Nietzsche from the year 1903, Döblin correctly identified Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* as being marked by a heightened intensity of living (‘erhöhte Lebensintensität’) and of power (‘Macht’), together with an enhanced sense of differentiation (‘gesteigerte Differenzierung’).[[522]](#footnote-522) Enhanced consciousness is, of course, a sign of complexity. Indeed, Nietzsche equates ‘higher’ with ‘more complex’. Zarathustra, the prophet of the overman and harbinger of the new is a paradoxical character, for he seeks disciples who are not willing to be his followers in the traditional sense. Hence, Zarathustra is already an example of the overman he announces. A parody of the Biblical story of salvation and a reversal of Platonic idealism rather than a philosophical argument in the conventional sense, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* turns much previous thought on its head. Perhaps even philosophy is turned upside down. When Zarathustra descends the mountain as the new law-giver, he proclaims: ‘Human existence is uncanny and still without meaning, a jester can become man’s fatality. I will teach men the meaning of their existence—the overman, the lightning out of the dark cloud of man.’[[523]](#footnote-523)

Arriving at the base of the mountain, Zarathustra finds nothing whole—no human beings— only ‘fragments and limbs of men’. He finds humans ‘in ruins and scattered as over a battlefield or a butcher-field’.[[524]](#footnote-524) His coming is aimed at making them whole again, but not whole in the transcendental sense of an expanded *intus*, a soul, that eschews the maimed body to flee into a Utopian Eden. Zarathustra’s purpose is to reconstruct the fragments and limbs into whole individuals through a delicate balance of downward and upward forces, i.e., weight and lightness. But what does *that* mean? It means that Zarathustra, as a complex individual, unites within his person agonal forces of instinct, conscious will, even un-will. He is a ‘seer, a willer, a creator, a future himself and a bridge to the future—and, alas, also, as it were, a cripple at this bridge: all this is Zarathustra’.[[525]](#footnote-525) Moreover, he unifies into a whole all that which is ‘fragment and riddle and dreadful accident’ by transforming fragments into coherent structures, by solving riddles, and by recasting that which is outside his power into an object of his will.[[526]](#footnote-526) Above all, Zarathustra is a creator and artist, as are all ‘higher men’.[[527]](#footnote-527) Terry Eagleton, Alexander Nehamas, and others emphasize this Dionysian moment of self-formation in the authentic artwork.[[528]](#footnote-528)

Through the act of willing, Zarathustra teaches humanity that it can master the past, control the present, and codetermine the future. This amounts to mastering human destiny, to transforming forces and events outside of human control into products of human will. In other words, Zarathustra teaches that humankind needs to negate determinism and nihilism by embracing the eternal return of events as a paradoxical means of ‘progressing’ toward the ideal of the overman. The acts of determination amount to ‘story telling’. Since the concept of eternal return with its reversal of temporality stands in contrast to the progressive, temporal-sequential view of history characteristic of modernism, it appears as a postmodern proposal.[[529]](#footnote-529) Similarly, we can contend that Nietzsche’s famous metaphor of the gateway (*Torweg*) to designate the present moment (*Augenblick*) is entirely modern. Edmund Husserl explains its significance in the following manner. The essential element of consciousness is an inner awareness of time (‘inneres Zeitbewußtsein’), especially of the present moment (‘das Gegenwartsbewußtsein’) as an actual now of sensation (‘als aktuelles Jetzt der Empfindung’). However, the present moment is not a unitary point in the flow of time (‘punktuell’) but rather marked by an extension, expansion, or aftershocks of what went before. Consequently, we can conclude that the present moment (*Augenblick*) retains a past moment (‘Retention’) as well as portends a future one (‘Protention’).[[530]](#footnote-530)

The goal of the overman is achieved by going over the common herd man, under modern man (that is, those reduced to fragments and limbs), and deeper into man. Thus, he perceives the need for a simultaneous overview (‘Überblick’), panoramic view (‘Umblick’), and penetrating gaze (‘Tiefblick’). Ultimately, it is a question of embracing what it means to be human in the fullest possible sense and not being selectively drawn to that which is only pleasant and contented. And it means that one cannot submissively follow the lead of another, even Zarathustra’s lead. Consequently, his disciples are independent thinkers who resist following slavishly in his footsteps, who are themselves makers of new paths, and who can bear the burden of a thousand lives.

The key to success, for those who heed Zarathustra’s call, lies in achieving a tenuous balance between reaching too far and not reaching far enough. Thus, filled with a ‘double will’ of over- and under-extension, Zarathustra (and with him the overman in general) remains a torn individual. One part of his being strives like Goethe’s Faust upwards to the heights, and another throws him down into the abyss. Here we can also draw a link to the Underground Man with his cynical and romantic traits pulling him in opposite directions. Or, as Zarathustra expresses himself paradoxically; his glance ‘plunges’ into the heavens, while his hand would ‘grasp and hold onto the depths’.[[531]](#footnote-531) (Notable is Nietzsche’s reversal of rising and falling movement, as if to emphasize their complementarity.)

But then the unexpected happens: the opposing motions of falling and rising are combined into an agonistic and reciprocal movement. The original fall from grace is transformed in *Zarathustra* into a rising to the demands of the earth. Whereas the greatest sin for the archangels and for Adam and Eve was to sin against God, now the ‘most dreadful thing’ is ‘to sin against the earth’, the ground of all things.[[532]](#footnote-532) The driving force in life is twofold: the force of gravity and the desire to resist it. ‘I would believe only in a god who could dance’, Zarathustra confides to his listeners.[[533]](#footnote-533) One can no longer believe in the traditional God because modern science has dismantled the foundations of belief in a God of the ordered universe. This development led the madman in *The Gay Science* to proclaim that modern man has killed God; he foreshadows the views of the anti-prophet Zarathustra.[[534]](#footnote-534) The dance, then, appears as an appropriate simile to express the character of the higher man and of the higher culture Nietzsche envisions. ‘The *dance* is not the same thing as a languid reeling back and forth between different drives’, he explains. ‘High culture will resemble an audacious dance; as aforesaid, why one only needs a great deal of strength and suppleness.[[535]](#footnote-535)

This balancing act of opposing forces is, then, Nietzsche’s answer to defining the Self which is called upon to be the creator of an identity higher than the fragments (‘selves’) produced by the too dominant forces of specialization, vocational training, and/or the pressures of social mores. While the Over Man remains an unattainable ideal, the concept proves for Nietzsche to be a potentially powerful bonding influence. The parables and metaphors that structure the argument of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* explain this balancing act further. The metaphor of man as a rope strung over an abyss is one of the most famous.[[536]](#footnote-536) But there is no need to pursue these individual exemplifications of the basic idea further in our current context.[[537]](#footnote-537) Suffice it to say that Zarathustra affirmed life in all its vagaries and erratic movements. His advocation of wakeful resistance to the force of gravity, to the pressures of conformism, and to mechanical, unthinking repetition ultimately define his Self.

## Fragmented Self— Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921)

The man will die, the writer, the instrument of creation; the creature will never die.

(Pirandello, *Six Characters*)[[538]](#footnote-538)

### A Philosophical Writer

In his ‘Author’s Preface’ of 1925 to *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), Luigi Pirandello drew attention to two kinds of writers: ‘historical’ and ‘philosophical’. His differentiation hints at questions about popularity and authenticity. These questions should be viewed against the backdrop of the ‘aesthetic wisdom’ inherent in enduring literary works. Pirandello averred:

To me it was never enough to present a man or a woman and what is special and characteristic about them simply for the pleasure of presenting them; to narrate a particular affair, lively or sad, simply for the pleasure of narrating it; to describe a landscape simply for the pleasure of describing it.

There are some writers (and not a few) who do feel this pleasure and, satisfied, ask no more. They are, to speak more precisely, historical writers.

But there are others who, beyond such pleasure, feel a more profound spiritual need on whose account they admit only figures, affairs. Landscapes which have been soaked, so to speak, in a particular sense of life and acquire from it a universal value. These are, more precisely, philosophical writers.[[539]](#footnote-539)

He places himself in the category of philosophical writer. For these writers, writing is not just about narrating for narrating’s sake as is the case with historical works that seek to chronicle characters, events, and circumstances in clear and comprehensible fashion. The pleasure offered by historical writing falls short of the deeper sense of satisfying fulfillment that literary works with a philosophical thrust have to offer. Surely, it would be an oversimplification to ascribe greater popular appeal to historical writing and less to the philosophical mode.

Yet, reader involvement is likely to be more pronounced in philosophical musings that force one to look beneath the surface, to connect dots. While one might quibble with Pirandello’s strict duality of historical versus philosophical and might object to his use of the term ‘philosophy’ in his particular context, we nevertheless are well advised to remember the attraction of eighteenth-century French *philosophes* and their concept of popular philosophy. The content and presentation of their work remained vigorous in subsequent eras. More active reader involvement is of course not limited to works of philosophical substance. The lines between popular literary appeal and philosophical discourse are not strictly drawn. Nietzsche, for instance, was as much a philosopher in his narrative *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Also sprach Zarathustra*, 1883–85) as Fichte was in his *Science of Knowledge* (*Wissenschaftslehre*, 1794–95). Both afford pleasure. Nietzsche attracted a wider audience.

In general, Pirandello was concerned with such philosophical questions as the search for truth, whether Truth actually exists, the nature of reality, the conflict between being as a fixed state and being as a mutable condition, the contingency of action and thus of the Self, and the act of creation. Of pre-eminence in the following is, of course, the question of whether the individual has *one* definite personality (a Self) or whether s/he has many selves depending upon the shifting contexts or whether there is a combination of the two. The Character, simply called The Father, expresses this point saliently: ‘in my awareness that each of us thinks of himself as one but that, well, it’s not true, each of us is many, of so many [...] according to the possibilities of being that are in us. We are one thing for this person, another for that’.[[540]](#footnote-540) To put it another way in the words of Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), the primary question posed here, is: ‘In what does the enduring nature of man consist, which alone makes understanding between us [intersubjectivity], and our solidarity [unity], possible at all?’[[541]](#footnote-541) We will also encounter these themes in Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*.

Beyond the concept that the human being constitutes not one personality but multiple ones depending upon any given situation and the way one is viewed by others from the outside, Pirandello’s exploration of Self versus self involves an intimate connection to the concept of chaos in nature itself as will become evident. Interestingly enough, Pirandello was born in Kaos near Agrigento, Sicily, and would have been aware of the Greek connotations *xaos*. The essential philosophical question is whether being *is* form or whether it is *having* a form. What is the difference? Everything that *has* form is subject to change and decay, whereas that which *is* form is immutable and eternal. A human being, for example, *has* form because of her/his very nature; individuals change. The Characters, on the other hand, born of the author’s imagination and then abandoned, are static and unchanging.[[542]](#footnote-542) They are fixed ideas and will never die, but ‘The man will die, the writer, the instrument of creation; the creature will never die’.[[543]](#footnote-543) Thus, we can conclude that the Actors *have* form as opposed to the Characters. Only through pretense (i.e., acting) can the reality of the Characters be realized. Pretense of course seems to echo Nietzsche’s idea that all explanations of organic and inorganic matter amount to interpretations rather than an exposure of *das Ding an sich*. It doesn’t matter whether we are talking about the ‘soft’ or the ‘hard’ sciences. Life is, as we have previously seen, is literature— an old notion, by the way, traceable to the trope that life is but a dream. The Characters are *en*actors; that is, they give rise to interpretation, which is the role of the actors. The need to interpret also opens up a psychological dimension to constituting the self. The idea and the acting never match up totally. The Characters represent a ‘universal family catastrophe’.[[544]](#footnote-544) It is the drama that the Father is so eager to play out and explain. The structure of the play highlights these issues.

### Breaking with the Expected

Some thirty years before writing for the stage, Luigi Pirandello wrote novels and short stories without achieving much fame. Much of what he proposes in his dramas, however, was already formulated in the earlier works.[[545]](#footnote-545) Yet it is as a dramatist that he achieved fame, particularly in Italy after 1918. In fact, he ranks as the most innovative Italian playwright of the early 20th century. Among his most famous plays is *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (*Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*), which is part of a trilogy.[[546]](#footnote-546) Like the other two parts, *Each in his own Way* (1924) and *Tonight We Improvise* (1930), the play—’a comedy in the making’, as the subtitle announces—remains incomplete and interrupted. Even open-ended. Ready for a repeat. Together they represent theater in the theater that makes visible all theatrical elements: characters, actors, author, director/manager, prompter, stage hands, technicians, critics, and spectators external to the action portrayed. The play is without clearly marked scenes and acts. Some translators (e.g., Musa) designate two acts, others three (e.g., Storer). It is more accurate to speak of segments or sections that are clearly marked in the stage copious stage directions and that the Director (also translated as Manager) endeavors—without success—to mold into a logical sequence of scenes and acts.[[547]](#footnote-547) However, he can only work with what the Characters offer him piecemeal. In any event, we can reasonably speak of an introduction which announces both the preparations for a theatrical rehearsal of *Il Giuoco delli parti* (*The Rules of the Game*) and an exposition of the underlying philosophical, moral, and psychological dilemma faced by the Characters who unexpectedly appear. Then follows a scene in Madame Pace’s shop, a house of ill repute. And, finally, a garden scene (which Bentley designates ‘The Scene’) that represents a sort of denouement/catastrophe because of the tragic outcome. The pivotal actions of this final scene are portended in the opening section.

When the play opens, the curtains are already up, there is no set, and the back wall is visible. With this approach Pirandello created ‘il teatro dello specchio’ (a mirror theater). At its premier in Rome, *Six Characters* proved puzzling to many, receiving a mixed reception with shouts from the audience of ‘*Manicomio*!’ (Madhouse!) and ‘*Incommensurabile*!’ (beyond the pale). It was a reaction to the play’s illogical progression. That, in turn prompted Pirandello to write an introduction explaining his method here and elsewhere. This he does not do, however, not until the drama’s third edition in 1925. Ultimately, Pirandello’s creative mind earned him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1934.

The play is a kind of play within a play, but totally unlike what happens in *Hamlet* and is very convoluted. The play is essentially about the interchange between pretense and reality, the creative process itself which is a kind of game that plays itself out again and again. (Here we might recall Brodkey’s claim that serious reading is a ‘dangerous game’ and Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal return.) However, when the ordinary process is reversed to create credible situations out of fantastic ones, we want to speak of that reversal as madness (which we will also see in *Steppenwolf*). The title of *Six Characters* is explained at the outset. The characters have been created but then abandoned by their author. Thus, they have no guide and must find their own way, must play out ‘the painful drama’ which resides inside them, not contained in any authoritative ‘script’ or ‘book’.

A stock acting company under the management of a Director assisted by a Prompter and Property Man is preparing to rehearse a play, actually *The Rules of the Game* by Luigi Pirandello himself, which the Manager considers quite incomprehensible. Moreover, the dramatist *wants* to be incomprehensible! But they could find nothing better. The preparations are unexpectedly interrupted by the arrival of six strange people named only by their respective roles: The Father, The Mother, The Son (age 22), The Stepdaughter (age 18), The Boy (age 14), and The Child (girl, age 4). The stage directions assign each dominant emotional traits: Father = remorse/gentle with harsh outbursts; Stepdaughter = revenge/impudent; Son = disdain/supercilious indifference; Mother = mater dolorosa/scared and crushed; the Boy = a mess, the Child = innocence/unawareness.[[548]](#footnote-548) Their intrusion is, of course, most unwelcome. The Director is incensed and demands that the Characters immediate leave, but the Father explains that they are unfinished characters in search of an author to finish their story. While their author conceived them, he decided against putting them in a drama. They now come to the theater for help, for only in the theater, the Father argues, can they come to life. We are ‘lost’, the Stepdaughter states. ‘Adrift, the Father adds. Then he goes on to say: ‘we want to live [...] for a moment at least. In you’[[549]](#footnote-549). We could be your new play, the Stepdaughter interjects almost jubilantly. The Director is taken aback and has no desire to deal with madmen. But the Father rightfully points out that no one knows better than the Director ‘that Nature employs the human imagination to carry out her work of creation on to a higher plane!’[[550]](#footnote-550) The Father highlights the natural laws involved in this interaction between nature and self when he explains: ‘one may be born to this life in many modes, in many forms—as tree, as rock, water, or butterfly ... or woman. And that ... characters are born too’.[[551]](#footnote-551) His drama lies in the fact that he is judged by one incident alone.[[552]](#footnote-552)

### Guilt—Shame—Tragedy

The Characters begin to argue among themselves whereby details of their situation become clearer. The Father pleads with the Director to let them perform the ‘drama’ inside them; the Stepdaughter foretells the end of the story, while the Mother does not want to be reminded of anything. Other fragments of their tale are revealed by The Son. The Father and the Mother had one child together, The Son, before separating. The Father noticed an affinity between the Mother and his secretary and encouraged her to take up with him because he himself was preoccupied with his own concerns. She bears the secretary three more children: The Stepdaughter, The Boy, and the Child. Then the secretary dies, leaving The Mother and her illegitimate children in abject poverty. The comely 18-year-old daughter falls into the hands of Madame Pace, a modern procuress. During an encounter in Madame Pace’s shop, the Father solicits sex from the Stepdaughter who is playing coy, so that she is not entirely innocent. He claims that he did not recognize her, although she is unconvinced. Just at the moment of their embrace, the Mother walks in on the two and is aghast. He is your father! Mother and daughter react with disgust.

Having learned of their dire straits, however, the Father insists that the Mother and her illegitimate children come live with him. The illicit relationship between the Father and the Stepdaughter proves pivotal in the tragedy and is a chief motivator for the Father’s desire to play out the drama, as a way of exculpating himself. Moreover, he wishes to make amends for having coupled his wife with his secretary. For her part, the Stepdaughter is motivated to prove the Father cannot make his guilt right; and she seeks revenge for the life to which he has ‘condemned’ her. The Mother is burdened with shame and guilt and prefers not to be reminded of her situation. The Son is angry with everyone whom he rejects as family because he feels rejected by his mother at an early age when she went off to start a second family. Of these Characters, the Father, the Stepdaughter, and the Son are the most lucid, representing reason to a greater or lesser degree, although the Son describes himself as a character that, ‘dramatically speaking, is unrealized’.[[553]](#footnote-553) The Mother, Boy and Child (neither of whom speak) are natural forces.

The Director’s interest is piqued. While not an author, he agrees to stage their story, even though the jeering Actors are in disbelief. Nevertheless, they come around and observe how the Characters reveal their inner passions in order to take over their ‘rolls’ themselves. The Director calls for a brief twenty-minute break. The Characters return and begin to perform their story, beginning with a scene at Madame Pace’s shop, a house of ill-repute. She remonstrates The Stepdaughter, suggesting that she must work as a prostitute to save The Mother’s job. Then the action moves to the scene between The Stepdaughter and the Father. The Stepdaughter expresses loathing when she states: ‘You! You! I owe my life on the streets to you. Did you or did you not deny us, with your behavior, I won’t say the intimacy of home, but even that mere hospitality which makes guests feel at their ease? We were intruders who had come to disturb the kingdom of your legitimacy’.[[554]](#footnote-554) She recounts how the father would come to her school to watch her and thus he knew who she was in Madame Pace’s atelier. The Mother is unable to watch. The Son is full of disdain for his mother and her three step-siblings. The Directors labels this ‘Scene I’ and instructs his actors to observe closely because he intends for them to perform the scene themselves.

After the Father and the Stepdaughter act out half of the scene, the Director stops them so that the Actors may perform what they have observed. The Characters break into laughter as the Actors try to imitate them, amused when the Actors use the wrong intonation and gestures. This gives rise to a discussion by the Father over the pretense of the Actors compared to the inner reality of the Characters themselves. The Characters want to play themselves. There is no need for actors; they cannot know what the Characters feel inside. The Father, who loves to philosophy to the exasperation of both the Director and Stepdaughter, explains: ‘And how can we understand each other, sir, if, in the words I speak, I put the sense and value of things as they are inside me, whereas the man who hears them inevitably receives them in the sense and value of the world inside him? We think we understand each other but we never do’.[[555]](#footnote-555) The Son repeats the argument later in the Garden Scene, expanding upon it by introducing the Narcissus motif but now distorted and non-reflective. The Son tells the Director: ‘We are not inside you, not in the least, and your actors are looking at us from the outside. Do you think that it is possible for us to live before a mirror which [...] throws back at us an unrecognizable grimace purporting to be ourselves?’[[556]](#footnote-556) Thus, the Characters reject the Actors as unsuitable to resolving their pain and dilemma.

The Director must be their ‘author’, not in the sense of writing their tragedy but in terms of writing down what he observes scene by scene. The Characters can offer him a rough sketch, then the Director can rehearse it with them, making sense out of the scenes. But rehearse it with them, the Characters, not the Actors, for they are more real and truer than the Actors who are engaged in a game of play-acting, a stagecraft that must provide ‘the perfect illusion of reality’. However, the Characters have no reality outside this illusion. The idea and its manifestation are not the same. And heightened consciousness is the goal in seeking unity of the individual Self. As Jaspers argued: ‘Unity is sought at a higher level in the totality of the world of human being and creating’.[[557]](#footnote-557) Why? Because ‘The idea of unity is concretely present in the consciousness of universal possibilities’ that have to be expressed in life, even the life of the theater.[[558]](#footnote-558) Thus, the Characters must play themselves on the stage. The Director relents and allows The Characters to perform the rest of the scene, deciding to hold rehearsals with the Actors later. But that never happens.

The final section of the play is the Garden scene which is a chaotic mixture of unexpected events, dissention among the Characters about what happened to the family and why, disbelieving interjections by the Actors, the Director scratching his head in wonderment. We learn (again) that the Father sent for the Mother, the Stepdaughter, the Boy, and the Child, to come back and live with him. The Son remains resentful at having been abandoned by the Mother and does not consider the others part of his family. The scene ends with The Child drowning in a fountain with the Boy standing near with a strange look in his eyes. Suddenly, the Boy disappears behind a tree and commits suicide with a revolver. The Stepdaughter runs out of the theater through the audience, laughing madly. The Director, confused over whether everything was real or not, remarks: ‘Fiction! Reality! To hell with all of you! [...] Things like this do not happen to me, they’ve made me lose a whole day’.[[559]](#footnote-559) Rehearsals are put off to the following day. Lights are turned off. The Son, The Mother, and The Father remain shadow-like in maudlin poses on stage. It is all quite chaotic.

### Self—Consciousness—Meaning

One might conclude from this convoluted tale and the philosophical explanations offered by the father, that Six Characters is all about the illusion of having a personality. As it turns out, there is more to the message. In expressing themselves—their particular passions—on stage where ‘magic’ becomes reality, are actually trying to give meaning to their lives. The Father is most aware of this effort when he states: ‘Well, if you want to take away from me the possibility of representing the torment of my spirit which never gives me peace, you will be suppressing me: that’s all. Every true man, sir, who is a little above the level of the beasts and plants does not live for the sake of living, without knowing how to live; but he lives so as to give a meaning and a value of his own to life. For me this is everything’.[[560]](#footnote-560) His incessant rationalization of why he acted as he did is an attempt to organize individual fleeting moments of passion or indiscretion into a coherent narrative. He refuses to be defined by single, individual acts. And it takes courage to say these things, for it like a confession revealing the ‘red stain of shame [...] in the human beast’.[[561]](#footnote-561) The Father is, essentially, engaged in consciousness raising. To attain this goal, he insists that we must live fully in the transitoriness of existence; we must live a life ‘beyond good and evil’ and we must live in ‘presentness as eternity in time’, as Jaspers formulates the interaction between the cerebral idea and its manifestations in life.[[562]](#footnote-562) In this regard, we would do well also to recall that the only time Freud spoke of consciousness in *Civilization and Its Discontents* it was in association with guilt (*Schuldbewusstsein*). And that ‘the sense of guilt is at bottom’, he remarks, ‘but a topographical variety of anxiety’, adding that ‘Anxiety is always present somewhere or other behind every symptom’.[[563]](#footnote-563)

His reference to ‘every true man, who is a little above the level of beasts and plants’ implies that self-awareness is the primary difference between humans and other biological organisms. In having his lead Character state this point, Pirandello anticipated contemporary theories of how consciousness arose: it is the ultimate result of evolutionary sequence. Through a process called selective signal enhancement, the human organism filters out via its nervous system only a few of the myriad external stimuli that cannot all be recognized without resulting in chaos. The stimuli chosen for special note are those most important to the organism’s survival with which a sense of anxiety is associated. Over a span of 600–700 million years, the process of selective signal enhancement became ever more refined until we recognized how what neuroscientists call ‘peripersonal neurons’ interact with what psychologists named ‘personal space’. The former monitors the actual space around the body, whereas the latter measures the tolerable social safety buffer around the body that can be much larger.

These issues seem to lurk behind Pirandello’s thinking in *Six Characters*. The resultant awareness can be acute as in the case of someone like the Father (or the Nature-attuned Werther or the overly lucid Underground Man) who all have a sense of guilt and who become nigh obsessive compulsive in their fixations. ‘No aspect of our world’, Ross Andersen remarked, ‘is as mysterious as consciousness, the state or awareness that animates our every waking moment, the sense of being located in a body that exists within a larger world of color, sound, and touch, all of it filtered through our thoughts and imbued by emotion’.[[564]](#footnote-564) As a result, consciousness could be fundamentally rooted in the universe. Consciousness of Self, therefore, might very well be just the multisensory view from within an avatar.

The Father might then be understood as an avatar, that is, as an embodiment of a concept or philosophy who is seeking life and evolution in an awareness of his actual origins. He is motivated by a ‘Demon of Experiment’ to get it all out. The rationalization of his individual acts could, of course, simply be an attempt to mitigate his sense of guilt and shame. But then life is constituted by life and shame by actual intended deed or by mere thought. Life is the loss of innocence. We all begin with the stain of mortal sin, so the Catholic Church teaches. This ‘primal guilt’, Freud concludes, ‘was also the beginning of civilization [...] [for it] was in existence before the superego and therefore of conscience.[[565]](#footnote-565) A conflict arises between the need for the authority’s (superego) and the urge toward instinctual satisfaction (id/ego). Where is the truth? In any event, it is true enough that facts related to any incident are necessary for a full understanding of what happened in the family drama the Six Characters carry within them. As the father explains, ‘a fact is like a sack. When it is empty, it won’t stand up’.[[566]](#footnote-566) Hence, he persists in supplying facts because he is convinced that selfhood is not exhausted by the accumulation of individual acts but by an enhanced awareness of their contingencies. To be sure, humankind is ein *Seiendes* (living, mutable organism) as well as being called to realize its individual *Sein* (unitary essence ) as the ultimate goal. Consequently, the human being is a questioning existence (‘das fragende Seiende’), a more or less fixed being within the flow of history (his *Dasein*). Activity—better: agency—is his essence (*Wesen*).[[567]](#footnote-567) The Self is projected in the eternal illusion of the idea each Character represents. Lucidity is of course the goal but it entails an awareness of deep-seated guilt (*Schuldbewusstsein*), with which one must contend. Pirandello’s theater is a precursor of Hermann Hesse’s the Magic Theater, to which we now turn.

## The Fractured Self: Herrmann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* (1927)

Die Bücher sind nicht dazu da, unselbstständige Menschen noch unselbstständiger zu machen, und sie sind noch weniger dazu da, lebensunfähigen Menschen ein wohlfeiles Trug- und Ersatzleben zu liefern. Im Gegenteil, Bücher haben nur einen Wert, wenn sie zum Leben führen und dem Leben dienen und nützen, und jede Lesestunde ist vergeudet, aus der nicht ein Funken von Kraft, eine Ahnung von Verjüngung, ein Hauch von neuer Frische sich für den Leser ergibt.[[568]](#footnote-568)

### Adrift

Herrmann Hesse’s tenth novel, *Steppenwolf*, has been a perpetual success since its first publication in 1927. Initially ignored by scholars, it became wildly popular as a counterculture manifesto of the 1960s and 1970s (esp. in the USA, UK, and Japan), and has sold millions of copies. It demonstrated along with his other works his ‘Sympathie für die Opfer jeder Bevormundung’, a direct consequence of his own strict pietistic upbringing which he had rejected and which drove him to a suicide attempt at age 15.[[569]](#footnote-569) But because of its composition and thematic range, the novel has also been rejected—or worse falsely understood. This lack of attention to structure and to relativizing of themes led to mis-readings and misunderstanding, especially during the heyday of its reception in the 1960s. The novel was read, for instance, as an idealization of the outsider, as a plaidoyer for drug use (hashish and opium are specifically mentioned in the novel, later generations added mescaline and LAD), as a glorification of uninhibited sexuality, as a defense of suicide, and as a radical critique of the ideal of technological progress.[[570]](#footnote-570) While Hermann Hesse, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Goethe Prize for Literature in 1946, indeed raises all these issues, they are only means to an end, not his actual message.[[571]](#footnote-571) Hesse lamented the misplaced emphasis on the negative and extreme. In the afterword to the Swiss edition of *Steppenwolf* (1941), he wrote: ‘Aber es wäre mir lieb, wenn viele von [meinen Lesern] merken würden, daß die Geschichte des Steppenwolfs zwar eine Krankheit und Krisis darstellt, aber nicht eine, die zum Tode führt, nicht einen Untergang, sondern das Gegenteil: eine Heilung.’[[572]](#footnote-572) Just as it was impossible to fathom the full range of topics raised in the previous literary works, I must be selective in deciding what to highlight in *Steppenwolf*.[[573]](#footnote-573) Alexander Mathäs has recently offered an insightful and innovative analysis of the conflicting trends in *Steppenwolf* that he locates in a space between situated Humanism and free-wheeling Posthumanism. The novel, Mathäs opines, ‘dislodges Idealistic concepts of wholeness and self-perception and replaces them with a[n] open-ended process of self-searching’.[[574]](#footnote-574) The question for me, not surprisingly, is whether the Self is displaced by a series of changing ‘selves’, as Mathäs seems to insinuate.

The preceding analyses of *Notes from Underground*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* bring to the forefront of considerations a major theme often associated with existentialism: the individual set adrift. An unspoken *Leitbild* was thus the ancient metaphor of a shipwreck with spectator (‘Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer’) that cultural historian and philosopher Hans Blumenberg traced through the ages. Of particular interest throughout was human identity as constituted both by the active involvement in being ship wrecked oneself and the passive spectatorship of someone else’s calamity. In this regard, a consistent theme emerged. Namely, as Emil Du Bois-Reymond, a pioneer of physiology, put it metaphorically: humankind has to accept its fate of being driven about by wave, wind, and current. In playing on the same motif, historian Jakob Burckhardt labelled a chief result of the nineteenth-century era of revolutions: consciousness of the provisional. To be sure, we would like to know what wave drives us in the ocean, yet ultimately, we must recognize that we are the wave itself.[[575]](#footnote-575) This development seems to culminate in Herrmann Hesse’s novel of 1927 and will take a new turn in the following chapter dedicated to Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* (1942). A main characteristic of Harry and his fellow outsiders is an acute lucidity, itself also a main feature of existentialism. The protagonist is aware of being caught in a present moment of time. More accurately: caught between moments of time that—despite their interrelatedness— represent a kind of continuity.

While the works previously scrutinized do not specifically announce themselves as such, Harry Haller’s *Der Steppenwolf* clearly states that it is a document of its time. A particularly unsettled era. A time of *Umbruch*, *Zusammenbruch*, *Aufbruch*. ‘Haller belongs to those who have been caught between two ages, who are outside of all security and simple acquiescence’, the feigned editor of the overall text informs us in his preface.[[576]](#footnote-576) Security and a sure sense of direction were the general tenor of the times that framed the earliest works analyzed in the foregoing humanist tradition: *The Princess de Clèves* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, although they too succeeded in charting new paths. But it was not until *Madame Bovary* that Flaubert consciously juxtaposed the Romanticism of the earlier nineteenth century and the Positivism of the latter half. Romantic yearnings clashed with the new values of science, industry, and consumerism. Flaubert accords the latter as much significance as the self-affirmations of the protagonists themselves. The Underground Man continues the critique, now sharpened without Flaubert’s softening irony. The Father in *Six Characters* was adept at drawing special attention to his existential dilemma in trying to bridge the gap between creative imagination and distorting reality.

Now it is Harry Haller’s turn to engage the spectator of a disastrous shipwreck, for it is his fate ‘to live the whole riddle of human destiny heightened to a pitch of a personal torture, a personal hell’.[[577]](#footnote-577) At the outset, we learn that Harry, much like the Underground Man, is a sick man. He suffers from a sickness of the soul, not unlike Werther’s *Weltschmerz*. Moreover, we are told of Haller’s unusually delicate sensibility, his frightful loneliness, that he is a genius of suffering. We also learn of his self-contempt, of his sheer egoism—all a result of the fact that ‘he had thought more than other men’ and hence could see others and himself more objectively.[[578]](#footnote-578) If the heart was the major theme in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the intellect stands front and center in *Steppenwolf*. Harry had what Ortega y Gasset called the ‘look’. The ‘Steppenwolf’s look pierced our whole epoch, its whole overwrought activity, the whole surge and strife, the whole vanity the whole superficial play of shallow, opinionated intellectuality’.[[579]](#footnote-579) His look penetrated even deeper, as did that of the Underground Man and Zarathustra. The feigned editor and author of the ‘Preface’ informs us: ‘It went right to the heart of all humanity, it bespoke eloquently in a single second, the whole despair of a thinker, of one who knew the full worth and meaning of man’s life’.[[580]](#footnote-580) As a result, all progress towards the sublime, the great and enduring in man [what will emerge as ‘the golden track’ in the novel] was revealed to be but a ‘monkey’s trick’. It is the same dilemma, as we shall see, that is at the heart of the clash between pretense and reality in *Six Characters*. Now, however, reversed. But I am getting ahead of myself. First, one must keep in mind the structure of the novel whose fundamental narrative principle is that of perspectivism. Statements are made but are often later questioned and relativized so that the novel’s message and truth require deeper looks of discernment to be properly understood.

Of central importance is the way that *Der Steppenwolf* was utilized as an exercise in moral therapy both for its author and its readers over generations.[[581]](#footnote-581) Hesse composed it in a state of personal and historical crisis of loneliness and despair.[[582]](#footnote-582) The accepted world view had been thrown off kilter by Nietzsche’s *amor fati*, which demands introspective self-questioning, and by his sweeping re-evaluation of values, especially regarding the psycho-physical interpretation of humankind, the concept of the *Übermensch*, the denunciation of the superficial, so-called herd mentality. Nietzsche’s influence permeates the novel on multiple levels. Albert Einstein’s influence is less pronounced, yet he also shattered ‘the foundations of thought’.[[583]](#footnote-583) Nonetheless, the classical idealistic tradition continued to make itself felt.

These competing forces naturally tear at the individual’s sense of self-agency. Moral therapy is therefore here understood as the act of learning how to deal with conflicts arising from the human being’s desire for self-development within the restraints imposed by various life worlds: cultural-intellectual, religious, and socio-political. Seen from the perspective of the author, we can speak of his (or her) intent to provide a source of therapy to readers unnerved and sent adrift by historical trends, distraught at the devaluation of spirit in the wake of consumerism and instrumentalized reason, suffering from disorientation in a world gone awry. Grasping for something—a plank—to maintain a hold on the self, to keep from succumbing to the waves of change.

### Structure

The novel originated in connection with *Siddhartha* (1922) and *Tagebuch eines Entgleisten* (1922). Thematically, these works share much in common, for instance, the ethical value of confessional literature, frequent references to Nietzsche, the promise of music as a synthesis of contrary forces, and the problematizing of Hesse’s pietistic upbringing. Shortly after completing Steppenwolf, Hesse gave a lecture to Carl Gustav Jungs (1857–1961) ‘Psychological Club’ in Zurich. He chose to discuss a passage from the latter part of the narrative, from the section labelled ‘The Magic Theater’.[[584]](#footnote-584) It is not a linear narrative, but one marked by predominant experiences and thoughts organized by metaphors and analogies. It is more a matter of psychological exposure rather than mere methodical analysis.

Harry Haller’s journey leads through the pain and chaos of hell to the clarity and order of Goethe and Mozart and back through the pain and chaos of the underworld. That journey with its themes of suffering and desire for tranquil spaces is reflected metaphorically in the ‘game of life’ present in the various parts of this novel that Thomas Mann considered to be reminiscent of James Joyce’s experimentally *Ullyses*.[[585]](#footnote-585) Kuhn also sketches out important points of interpretation: aesthetic innovation combined with continuation of older traditions (*Henrich von Ofterdingen*, *Faust*); polarities; laughter as reconciliation strategy, C. J. Jung’s theory of individuation; the role of the outsider; an anti-technology attitude.[[586]](#footnote-586)

The novel consists of several sections that differ significantly from one another, even as they explore the same range of themes. A ‘Preface’ written by the nephew of Harry Haller’s landlady opens the narrative. Harry Haller’s own record of his time during his stay in the boarding house follows. Next follows a ‘Treatise on the Steppenwolf’ which is not penned by Harry himself but someone unrelated to Harry who can paint a portrait of the Steppenwolf ‘with the air of loft impartiality’. This author actually ‘knew more and yet less of me than I did myself’, Harry concedes.[[587]](#footnote-587) In other words, the Treatise is an interpretation of Harry by a third hand. Immediately following this section, a poem is inserted that Harry had written about the Steppenwolf as well, a self-portrait in doggerl. Each pointed to the same fact: ‘my self, as it then was, was shattered to fragments’.[[588]](#footnote-588)

Then follows a long narrative in first person that includes dream episodes, concert visits, a visit and discussion with a professor friend, sexual discoveries with the seductive Maria, and above all a deepening friendship with Hermine, a dance-hall girl who turns out to be Harry’s double and mirror. Her role is key to Harry Haller’s enlightenment. She is the active agent of Zarathustra’s message of the dance and laughter as curatives to the overpowering influence of gravity (i.e., the dwarf). Hermine introduces Harry to various night clubs, explicitly explaining to Harry: ‘You need me to teach you to dance, and to laugh, and to live’.[[589]](#footnote-589) Each of these actions is designed to demonstrate how Harry must overcome his lethargic despondency. To achieve the necessary detachment of all that drags him down, Harry must obey Hermine in all things, must learn to love her totally without reservation. And, in the end, she will command him to kill her (which he does in the Magic Theater). This last command is meant to free Harry Haller from all external directives once he has achieved the genuine independence of spirit that will allow him to concentrate on developing his Self without guidance. At the end of this narrative section, A second poem is inserted, ‘The Immortals’, which summarizes the difference between Harry’s fetid lived reality on earth and the inspiring ideal of a heavenly harmony that views the turbulence below with indifferent detachment.

Thereafter the first-person narrative picks up again, with Harry slipping in and out of his wolfishness. Then comes the critical section labelled ‘The Magic Theater’ which is intended for madmen only and demands that one leave one’s mind behind. The theater is not for everyone, and Hermine is to be found in ‘hell’, that is, the lower basement level of a dance club. He enters the theater to discover that ‘everything had a new dimension, a deeper meaning’.[[590]](#footnote-590) He finds Hermine, dressed as the boy, Herman, to highlight her hermaphroditic nature; she is symbolic of the unity of the sensual and the spiritual as in antiquity. Then follows the Masked Ball for which Hermine had prepared him over the previous months. At the Ball Harry experiences a dissolution of his unified self in the rhythmic flow of the mass of swirling dancers, the ‘mystic union of joy’.[[591]](#footnote-591) It proves to be a ‘nuptial dance’ that leads to relief from his personality, now aided by the partaking of drugs provided by Pablo, a jazz saxophonist and one of Harry’s teachers, whom he first met at the Black Eagle. Pablo explains to him:

The pleasant dance from which you have just come, the Treatise of the Steppenwolf, and the little stimulant that we have only this moment partaken of may have sufficiently prepared you. You, Harry, after having left behind your valuable personality, will have the left side of the theater at your disposal, Hermine the right. Once inside [the Magic Theater], you can meet as you please.[[592]](#footnote-592)

The Magic Theater proper takes up the final part of *Steppenwolf*. It plays out in various scenarios the lessons Hermine has taught Harry, mirroring and enacting the message of the ‘Treatise of the Steppenwolf’.

### The Game of Life—Learning to Swim—Learning to Laugh

The poly-perspectival narrative structure with its refrain-like emphasis on the need to develop the full potential of the personality is designed to showcase ‘the game of life’. The prelude to that game is, however, a putting aside of one’s accustomed personality. Harry had been driven by a longing for a home outside the flow of time. His desire is to escape reality, a desire that takes the form of suicide (on his fiftieth birthday, he decided), or a recourse to Mozart’s harmonious symphonies or Goethe’s lofty ideals.

Pablo points out what the Steppenwolf has known all along without quite recognizing it: his personality as a wolf-man is a prison. If he were to enter the Magic Theater—’a world of pictures, not realities’— as he is, Harry Haller would see everything through the old spectacles of the Steppenwolf.[[593]](#footnote-593) Without shedding his Steppenwolf identity—his ‘highly esteemed personality’—he can learn nothing new, cannot learn to play the game of life as intended by the laws of nature.[[594]](#footnote-594) Furthermore, Harry is thoroughly aware that intellectuals like him are out of place in the world as it is. They are useless. They are humorless. And the Magic Theater is above all ‘a school of humor’ where he is to learn to laugh. Laughter is possible when the human being ceases to take him/herself so seriously.[[595]](#footnote-595) In addition to the several teachers Harry encounters—Hermine, Pablo, the seductive Maria—several passages are central to this dominant doctrine. Even though Harry makes sundry holes ‘in the web of time and rents in reality’s disguise’ (here we recall Einstein’s theory of relativity), his personality as animal-spirit Steppenwolf retains its hold over him after all his experiences in the Magic Theater. The struggle to find the right Self is relentless. A ‘sorrowful wave’ bears him on.[[596]](#footnote-596)

The water motif is sounded early on in the novel when Harry Haller cites a passage from the Romantic poet, Novalis:

‘Most men will not swim before they are able to.’ ‘Is that not witty?’ he asks his landlady’s nephew. ‘Naturally, they won’t swim! They are born for the solid earth, not for the water. And naturally they will not think. They are made for life, not for thought. Yes, and he who thinks, what’s more, he who makes thought his business, he may go far in it, but he has bartered the solid earth for the water all the same, and one day he will drown.’[[597]](#footnote-597)

This interpretation mirrors Harry Haller’s split personality between wolf and man. The Treatise of the Steppenwolf goes into great detail on the matter. He feels oppressed by his Steppenwolf side, seeing it as wild, dangerous, pernicious, anathema to all decent life that must be controlled. Yet, he feels that his man side is likewise hemmed in, ‘crushed and imprisoned by that sham existence’ of the bourgeois.[[598]](#footnote-598) Bourgeois values favor a ‘temperate zone without violent storms and tempests’ maintained by a sense of ‘obligation and service’, what Nietzsche called the herd mentality and Werther rejected as uninspired, lifeless.[[599]](#footnote-599) The problem derives from a valuation of the visible human body as the expression of a confined personality. It gives rise to ‘the fiction of the ego’.[[600]](#footnote-600) A view of the ego as a unified tension of a duality of forces, is blind to the reality of the human being as actually composed of a whole variety of impulses that pull in many different directions. Rather, humans are more like ‘an onion made up of hundreds of integuments, a texture made up of many threads’.[[601]](#footnote-601) Man is a ‘narrow and perilous bridge between nature and spirit’, whereby the wolf is aligned with nature, whereas the spirit is the intellect. ‘With the ‘man’ he packs in everything spiritual and sublimated [...] and with the wolf all that is instinctive, savage, and chaotic’.[[602]](#footnote-602) So-called ‘man’ is never more than a temporary bourgeois compromise. In reality, the human being is multitudinous, ‘by no means a fixed and enduring form’.[[603]](#footnote-603)

Harry is indeed one of those who have made thought his business. And even though he is an expert in oriental philosophies that reject the notion of a fixed ego oscillating between body and spirit and ‘perceive that the self is made up of a bundle of selves’—Buddhism, Hinduism, perhaps a touch of Taoism—he has lost his firm footing.[[604]](#footnote-604) But he ignores here Novalis’s claim that mankind will not learn to swim until it has to. And while it might seem indisputable that humankind has been made for the solid earth, a later development of the water motif makes clear that we are all born into a muddy stream of being that bears us along: ‘From the very start there is no innocence and no singleness. Every created thing, even the simplest, is already multiple. [...] Every birth is a separation from the All’.[[605]](#footnote-605) Notable is the alignment of innocence with singleness, guilt with multiplicity. We must learn to swim in that stream, not against it. There is no swimming back to the source. The way forward is downstream. Its muddy waters—here a play on Nietzsche’s concept of uncontested guilt—imply that humankind is tainted from birth, quite separated from the innocence of the Immortals.

Suicide is related to the notion guilt and flowing stream. Suicidal individuals, we learn early in The Treatise of the Steppenwolf, do not actually commit suicide. They live on the edge, overcome with a deep sense of guilt. Their aim in life is not to struggle toward perfecting the self, but to escape from the reality of that struggle by returning to the origins: the Mother, God, the All. In acting this way, they paradoxically benefit the contented bourgeois herd by providing the vital force of rejuvenation untypical of the normal members of the bourgeoisie. Not a few of these invigorating outsiders reside among the herd and keep it developing in more beneficial ways. Harry is willing to die, but not to live, even though his idol, Goethe, clearly states in a dream sequence that truly outstanding individuals are those who are determined to live.[[606]](#footnote-606) That is why in the final scene of the Magic Theater Harry Haller is sentenced to eternal life. Why? Because he confused the phantasmagoria of the Magic Theater with reality, he has killed a reflection of Hermine with a reflection of a knife, has misused the theater ‘as a mechanism of suicide’, and demonstrated himself to be totally devoid of humor.[[607]](#footnote-607)

Just before the judgment (reminiscent, by the way, of the son in Kafka’s *Das Urteil* being condemned to life with the river and bridge images), Harry dreamt of another of his admired immortals, Mozart, whose *The Magic Flute* he treasures. In the illusion, Mozart fixes up an old radio to play his music over the airways. Harry is appalled. The tinny sound bears no resemblance for him to the ideal played in the perfect musical hall. Mozart just laughs at him mockingly, as if to say: Oh, come on! Just enjoy what does make it through. When you listen to the radio, Harry, you witness the eternal war between the idea and its manifestation. The Divine cannot be perceived without contamination in the human world. Not surprisingly, Harry’s sentence reads: ‘You are to live and to learn to laugh. You are to learn to listen to the cursed radio music of life and to reverence the spirit behind it and to laugh at its distortions’.[[608]](#footnote-608) This is of course easier said than done. Repeatedly, Harry will have to stand in front of his reflection in the long mirror and watch how his visible self falls in a thousand shards to the ground. From these shattered pieces he is to reconstruct himself. Each reconstitution will be different, not unlike our understanding of Nietzsche’s eternal return. It is a return not of the self-same but of self-similar. Finally, Harry Haller understands what his actual fate is and accepts it, determined to learn to play the game of life better at each repeat.

### Self

His sentence/execution would seem to support the argument humans do not have a unified Self but consist of an ever-changing array of selves. An onion, therefore, not an avocado with a firm core? Here I can only recount my earlier argument regarding the relationship between Self and self. Augmented, nonetheless, by Hesse’s own reflection in an article that has a direct bearing on Steppenwolf: ‘Zarathustras Wiederkehr’ (1919; ‘Zarathustra’s Return. A Word to German Youth’). Hesse penned the piece in two-and-one-half days, then published it anonymously. It was a plea to German youth not to succumb anew to idol worship or to give in to the herd mentality, but to look inward to themselves for guidance. To secure our future, he writes, ‘we must not begin at the tail end, with political methods and forms of government, but at the beginning, with the building of the personality’.[[609]](#footnote-609) Of particular importance in regards to the question posed above about the relationship between the Self and selves, are the sections labelled ‘Destiny’ and ‘World Betterment’.

If there is one thing that makes humans god-like, it is to know human destiny, Hesse intones. Unfortunately, few men know their destiny because so few actually live their lives, being too distracted by hero-worship, the pursuit of business, or a preoccupation with superficial entertainment and simply consuming. ‘Learn to live your lives!’ Hesse exclaims. ‘Learn to know your destiny!’[[610]](#footnote-610) Hesse’s aversion to all forms of coercion stems from his own early experiences. That destiny does not lie in imitating some external model. Rather, it is specific to each individual, ‘so destiny grows in each man’s body, or if you will you may say: in his mind or soul’.[[611]](#footnote-611) In other words, destiny comes from ‘his innermost being’. And it is here that Hesse implicitly references Nietzsche’s famous ‘become what you are’. Any form of ‘destiny’ that comes from outside simply lays the individual low.

All this clearly envisions the Self as an entity that grows organically from a seed planted at birth in all human beings. The adoption of multilayered ‘selves’ as the dominant message of *Steppenwolf* is thus starkly relativized. The novel emphasizes the man-as-onion metaphor as a way of deconstructing a false understanding of a unified personality. It clears the way to a deeper comprehension of how the Self emerges and grows organically in interaction with the individual’s environment (*Umwelt* and *Mitwelt*). The human being is, as we have learned, ‘ein Chaos von Formen, von Stufen und Zuständen’.[[612]](#footnote-612) To grasp those forms, stages, and conditions, one must delve ever deeper into the process of becoming human.[[613]](#footnote-613) *Menschenwerdung* is, therefore, a natural process, not a purely psychological one. Suffering is part and parcel of the process, for action and suffering are one. Without either there is no real living. In sum, ‘man suffers destiny’. And Hesse adds quite tellingly: ‘Destiny is earth, it is rain and growth. Destiny hurts’.[[614]](#footnote-614) The echo of Nietzschean thought is unmistakable here, as it is in the concluding sentiment of ‘World Betterment’: a few individuals—free spirits unburdened by busyness and false idols—are the path to true world betterment.[[615]](#footnote-615)

All this can be read as an exercise in moral therapy. This the approach taken by Eugen Drewermann with his two essays on Hermann Hesse in *Das Individuelle gegen das Normierte verteidigen*. He speaks of the ‘Selbstheilungskraft der Seele’ in the context of complexity theory (which is another useful tool in analyzing *Steppenwolf*).[[616]](#footnote-616) Drewermann’s characterization of the author as therapist echoes Nietzsche’s vision of humankind and role of the poet when he opines: ‘Der Psychotherapeut wie der Dichter leisten im Kampf um die Persönlichkeit etwas menschliche Entscheidendes, etwas in die Zukunft Weisendes, indem sie indirekt zeigen, daß man die moralischen Wertungen *abbauen* muß, wenn man dem anderen nahekommen will, und auch er selber muß versuchen, die moralische Dauerzensur seines Überichs zu *unterlaufen*’.[[617]](#footnote-617)

Notably, the body connects human being inextricably to natural forces more universally. That will never change. Growth without nourishment and decay is not possible. Via the intellect, on the other hand, humankind seeks to embellish natural forces, even supersede and displace them. But the true calling of the intellect is to seek the ‘die goldene Spur’ despite the ailing body.[[618]](#footnote-618) ‘Goldene Spur’ is translated as golden track, although’ Spur is a mere trace. Yet it is described as a hint of the Divine, of eternal classical values whose recognition gives the Steppenwolf the strength to continue to live.[[619]](#footnote-619) And it promises a return to innocence and metamorphosis back into the All (‘ihre Rückkehr zur Unschuld, ihre Rückverwandlung in den Raum’).[[620]](#footnote-620) Why the paradox? Because suffering enhances self-awareness. Explains how heightened consciousness can utilize suffering to appreciate that which is noble and lofty and transcends the tumult of existence. In short, is an answer to the question of *how* one should live. The Treatise of the Steppenwolf explicitly states that we must have as if we had not, that we must ‘must live in the world as though it were not the world, to respect the law yet to stand above it, to have possessions as though ‘one possessed nothing’, to renounce as though it were no renunciation’.[[621]](#footnote-621) Why? Because in the grand scheme of the universe, the human lot is not the sole determining factor. Agency controls the mind, but not external circumstance. The lines from the inserted poem, ‘Die Unsterblichen’ (‘The Immortals’) address this point directly:

Eure Sünden sind und eure Ängste, Euer Mord und eure geilen Wonnen

Schauspiel uns gleichwie die kreisenden Sonnen [...].[[622]](#footnote-622)

(All your sins and anguish self-affrighting, Your murders and lascivious delighting

Are to us but a show

Like the suns that circling go [...].)[[623]](#footnote-623)

Human experiences fundamentally obey the same laws of nature that govern the movement of the stars. The world knows nothing of up and down. The Immortals enjoy a detached view which allows them to judge ‘sins’, ‘anguish self-affrighting’, ‘murders’, and ‘lascivious delighting’ and hence permit their Humor. Three other verses in the poem put it thusly: ‘Breathing blessedness and savage heats, / Eating itself [humankind] and spewing what it eats, / Hatching war and lovely art’.[[624]](#footnote-624) The distancing of one’s Self from one’s selves makes this ‘renunciation’ and laughter possible. To achieve that state of mind is the objective of the game of life with its varied chess pieces and shattered fragments of Self.

### Magie des Buches

Like ‘Zarathustras Wiederkehr’, the essay ‘Magie des Buches’ (1930) continues the doctrine of self-determination advocated by Nietzsche and Karl Jaspers. If Hesse’s ‘Zarathustra’s Return’ echoes R. W. Emerson’s call to the youth to cultivate the Self by rejecting the lure popular culture, the fame of industry and reputation, the ‘Magic of the Book’ anticipates Harold Brodkey’s call to reject mere entertainment in favor of an intimate reading of texts that probe the deeper meaning of what gives worth to the individual and meaning to her/his life.

Hesse begins his essay with reference to the universal appeal of the written word as something sacred and magical. Naming and writing were originally magical acts designed to take hold of nature through the spirit.[[625]](#footnote-625) But today, he laments, it seems that the life of the intellect is now open to everyone, so that the ability to read and write is nothing more than the ability to breathe.[[626]](#footnote-626) The written word has lost its magic. Radio and film—while not without value in their own right—are increasing used to entertain the masses and contribute inadvertently to a devaluing of serious, creative literature. To be sure, the laws of the spirit change as little as those of nature itself and cannot simply be dispensed with. Hölderlin, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche rank higher on the creative intellectual scale, Hesse avers, than Marlitt or Emanuel Geibel.[[627]](#footnote-627) The path to transforming one’s reading experience to real experiences that can benefit life itself. Reading is, of course, not without its dangers in that one can be led astray. But when done appropriately, reading closely leads to much greater benefit than works produced for mass consumption and entertainment. Hesse cogently concludes:

Das Geheimnisvolle und Große nun bei diesen Lese-Erfahrungen [e.g., Goethe’s *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*] ist dies: je differenzierter, je feinfühliger und beziehungsreicher wir zu lesen verstehen, desto mehr sehen wir jeden Gedanken und jede Dichtung in ihrer Einmaligkeit, in ihrer Individualität und engen Bedingtheit, und sehe, daß alle Schönheit, aller Reiz gerade auf dieser Individualität und Einmaligkeit beruht.[[628]](#footnote-628)

(Now, the mysteriousness and grandness associated with these reading experiences [e.g., of Goethe’s novel, *Elective Affinities*] is this: the more we read with greater precision, more sensitivity, and with greater openness to [textual] allusions, so much more do we recognize every idea and every literary work in their uniqueness, in their individuality and narrow conditions. We see that all beauty and all allure reside precisely in this individuality and singularity.)

As Hesse remarked in a letter of 1932, *Der Steppenwolf* is carefully constructed like a fugue and has taken on a form as perfect as he could manage; it is playful and can even dance.[[629]](#footnote-629) Of course, it was not appropriately read by every reader. The novel is one of those unique works that has found a mass audience that Hesse characterized as dependent on others (‘unselbstständig’) and unfit for life (‘lebensunfähig’) in search of a cheap substitute for genuine life (‘ein wohlfeiles Trug- und Ersatzleben’) (see masthead). Yet it also found attentive, reflective readers for whom the novel retains that original magic of the written word that inspires rejuvenation and freshness. For these readers, the narrative provides a vade mecum to renew Self and purpose in a world that has become unanchored by all those forces that Hesse (and Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Pirandello) feared would deprive the individual of a unique sense of Self.

## The Self and the Absurd: Albert Camus, *L'Étranger* (1942)

I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother really—I felt that I had been happy and that I could be happy again.[[630]](#footnote-630)

### The Background

Albert Camus (1913–60) was born into extreme poverty in Algiers. His father, an impoverished agricultural worker originally from Alsatia, was drafted into the army was killed at the Battle of the Marne in 1914 in WWI. Fortunately, a teacher recognized Camus’ intellectual potential and encouraged him. Eventually, he was able to attend the University of Algiers where he earned a doctorate. To put himself through school, he had to work various odd jobs. In 1935 he co-founded the Théâtre du Travail company with some friends (later: Théâtre de l'Équipe, 1937). There he worked as producer, adaptor, actor and theorist, producing plays by Malraux, Gide, Dostoevsky and others along with his own original works. The purpose of the group was to provide good plays for working-class audiences. In 1938 he began working for the leftist newspaper *Alger républicain*. When it was banned, he moved to Paris in 1940 to become editor-in-chief of the *Paris-Soir* but was soon laid off after fleeing the invading Germans. After sojourns in Lyon and back in Algiers, he returned to Paris in 1943 and joined the Resistance.

Using a pseudonym, he continued his political journalism and edited the important underground newspaper, *Combat*. As an acclaimed novelist, dramatist, essayist, journalist, and moralist he enjoyed a position of prominence among the French intellectual elites in the 1940s and 1950s. Along with Sartre he was a representative of existentialism and the absurd, capturing the mood and atmosphere of those coming of age in those decades. When he was awarded the Novel Prize for literature in 1957, he was only forty-four and considered the recognition a mistake; it should have gone to Malraux, he remarked. Camus thought that he had his best work still ahead of him when he was tragically killed in an automobile accident in 1960.

*L'Étranger* has the feel of a working-class novel as well. He gravitated to such themes as happiness and suffering, natural beauty, the horror of death, and the indifference even the incomprehensibility of life. The first cycle of his writing composed between 1942 and 1944 focused on the concept of the absurd that is closely related to existentialism. This group includes *L'Étranger*, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, and *Caligula*. European existentialism appears in different forms, depending on the philosopher developing the concept such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, or Jean Paul Sartre. Leading up to them, as we have seen, are also Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and Karl Jaspers reveal certain related traits. A common element is to all is the need to take responsibility for one’s own actions at each moment of time. One is, so to speak, ‘condemned’ to be free (Sartre). Humans are fundamentally agents which makes action unavoidable.[[631]](#footnote-631) Hence, this results in one being made acutely aware of living in a present moment (‘*Gegenwartsbewusstsein*’), as Edmund Husserl notes;[[632]](#footnote-632) and history amounts to ‘a field for experimentation’.[[633]](#footnote-633) These constraints lead to enhanced self-consciousness, to an awareness that one is confronted by an enigma, a puzzle to be solved. This dilemma raises the question once again: where does the Self fit into this scheme of being totally subject to the pressures of the moment while also being called upon to act? Does the human being have a special imprint to apply, or is s/he merely reactive to the contingencies of presentness? Born into the material reality of one’s body, in a material universe, one finds oneself inserted into being, Sartre argued in *L'Être et le néant* (1943). For him there can be no form of self that is ‘hidden’ inside consciousness. Hence, his famous dictum: existence precedes essence.[[634]](#footnote-634) Published one year earlier, *The Stranger* sketches out a similar trajectory. The question to be explored in my analysis of Camus’s novel, is whether he too believed that existence precedes essence.

The absurd for Camus arose in response to the experience of Great Depression, World War II, massive pauperization and rationalized annihilation. It signaled a major breakdown in the Enlightenment’s project particularly of the reconciling power of reason itself. Hence, the Absurd confounds our sense of logic, thwarts our desire for a happy and coherent existence.[[635]](#footnote-635) Camus freely admitted: ‘I am not a philosopher, because I do not believe in reason enough to believe in a system. What interests me is knowing how we must behave, and more precisely, how to behave when one does not believe in God or reason.’[[636]](#footnote-636) Camus offers an answer to the question of how to behave under these circumstances at the conclusion of *The Stranger*.

The human need for survival apparently outstrips the human need to attribute meaning to life. The silence of the universe in offering guidance other than the drive for survival becomes insufferable. We are set adrift. We might expect to find a struggle between Freud’s death instinct (Thanatos) and the contrary bonding force (Eros). In the works scrutinized previously in this study, eros played a major role. It proved to have an especially healing effect on Harry Haller. The drive for survival by itself does not answer the deeper quest for meaning for which humans yearn. There has to be a bonding moment as well. The absurd lacks Eros.

Camus developed his ideas on the absurd in the philosophical essay, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1955) which reveals the influence of Søren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche among others.[[637]](#footnote-637) He developed his ideas on the nature of the absurd by using the myth of Sisyphus to illustrate his point. As is known, Sisyphus was condemned to roll a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down again. This action he had to repeat constantly. Not surprisingly, the theme also lies at the heart of Camus’s successful first novel published the same year, *L'Étranger* (1942, tr. as *The Outsider*, 1946). Yet, for Camus, the absurd was a point of departure, not an end. In this regard, we might see a parallel to Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* whose absurdity is also anchored in philosophical depth. However, whereas the *Six Characters* seek an author to answer their questions, *The Stranger* discards the notion of external affirmation totally.

### Translators’ Notes

*The Stranger* is very controlled art; the narrative is deliberately simple, its austerity captured well in Matthew Ward's American translation compared to Gilbert’s British tailoring. The characters are limited as well. The main characters include: Meursault (the protagonist), Maman (his mother), Salamano (an old man and his dog), Raymond Sintès (a dubious character and ‘friend’), Marie (Meursault’s girlfriend), Céleste (restaurant owner and Meursault’s friend), Thomas Pérez (Maman’s special friend), Masson (Raymond’s friend). But perhaps the most significant major player is non-human yet central to the novel’s action: the sun. *L'Étranger* was originally translated as *The Outsider* (1946) by Stuart Gilbert, but he changed the title in its second edition to *The Stranger*. That title has proven to be the preferred rendering since then, even though internal textual evidence would justify the choice of ‘outsider’.[[638]](#footnote-638) While ‘stranger’ is also an outsider of sorts, the connotations extend further. ‘Stranger’ suggests being alien to the surroundings in which s/he finds her/himself. In that sense, the protagonist, Meursault, is an ‘alien’ in his world and not just in the sense of being a Frenchman—a so-called *pied-noir*—in Algiers that was a French territory from 1830–1962 and thus enjoyed more rights and liberties than the native Berber and Algerians. A further connotation of *étranger* is ‘foreigner’ which is likewise applicable to Camus’s status as a colonist in Algeria.

His outsider status, as we shall see, is thus different from Harry Haller’s, the Underground Man’s, or Werther’s. The root word, ‘strange’, also describes the style of this innovative novel chronicling the final days of its anti-hero, for that style is unconventional, like nothing we have seen previously encountered in this study. While Camus revealed in his Notebooks that he aspired to an ‘American style’ already practiced for instance by Hemingway, Faulkner, and Dos Passos, he perfected the style of terse simple sentence structure in *The Stranger* that tended toward minimalism. Important facts, events, and personal experiences are reduced to simple, straightforward formulations nigh void of descriptive or explanatory embellishments. Translator Matthew Ward cites a representative example that runs like a refrain throughout the narrative’s: Meursault’s encounter with the old Salamano in the darkness of their apartment building stairwell. Meursault remarks matter-of-factly: *‘Il était avec son chien.’* A simple statement without explanation. Ward renders it in the same manner as Camus: ‘He was with his dog.’[[639]](#footnote-639) No need to add any transitional phrases or to interpolate meaning to make the terseness understandable as does the British translator Stuart Gilbert did in his widely distributed rendition of the novel: ‘As usual, he had his dog with him.’ At the end of the narrative, Meursault equates the dog to the role of ‘wife’ for old Salamano. That being the case, the adding of ‘as usual he was with his dog’ means something else. To say ‘as usual he was with his wife’ suggests that Salamano was occasionally also seen with other women. That, of course, is not Camus’s meaning.

Another example is the opening line of the novel: ‘*Aujourd’hui, maman est morte*.’ Ryan Bloom notes that translators keep getting it wrong.[[640]](#footnote-640) He of course has the right answer: ‘Today, Mamam died.’ The explanation offered is fully in line with how the plot of The *Stranger* unfolds. Writing in the *Guardian*, Guy Dammann ascertains that ‘Some openers are so prescient that they seem to burn a hole through the rest of the book, the semantic resonance recurring with the persistence of the first theme in Beethoven’s fifth symphony’.[[641]](#footnote-641) Bloom is displeased with Gilbert’s rendering of this iconic opening line as ‘Mother died today.’ Somehow it seems too terse and does not quite capture the nuances of the original. The linguistic fluency of any good translator, he remarks, senses that the syntax of ‘Aujourd’hui, maman est morte’, is less fluid in English when translated literally as ‘Today, Mother has died.’ The way around this unevenness is to write ‘Mother died today.’ The formulation strikes the English reader as smoother, more natural. Yet one wonders whether changing the sentence’s syntax, might also alter the intended nuances of Camus’s actual meaning? Nonetheless, Gilbert’s formal rendering of Mother has remained until Ward decided to retain the original French, ‘Maman’, a term that easily resonates with similar designations by young children around the world. Think of ‘mommy’, ‘mama’. Mama/Maman’ is closer to what Camus meant. Still, something feels off in English, if one were to translate the sentence as ‘Mommy died today.’ That is too childish. Too far removed from the sober objectivity of the function-designator, ‘Mother’, that lacks the endearing warmth of the more intimate ‘mommy’ or ‘mama’. Connotationally, ‘Maman’ lies between the extremes of distant formality (mother) and the too intimate and endearing (mommy). Here, we might recall the role designations in Pirandello’s *Six Characters* where the Mother has but one connotation. In Camus’s case, his mother was not very communicative (she was partially deaf and had trouble speaking). Both Camus and Meursault longed for a more intimate relationship with their mothers but were incapable of achieving it. Consequently, Meursault was confined to living in the present moment: no past, no future. That is, until Maman died, transforming ‘today’ into a fleeting moment in time that has now passed with her death rather than being a permanent presentness. Maman plays a major psychological role in the fiction right up to the very end, even though we never experience her alive except through Thomas Pérez and her caretaker. (More about this later.) For all these reasons of nuance, Bloom considers ‘Today, Maman died’ the appropriate solution.

### The Narrative

The novel is the portrait of an ‘outsider’ who is condemned to death (Meursault) less for killing an Arab than for having shown no remorse at his mother’s passing whose death and burial occupy the first chapter. (In any event, the killing of an armed Arab at the time would scarcely have led to a conviction. Egregious to be sure. But we should remember that Camus published a report on the miserable state of the Muslims in the Kabyle region that brought him public notice and moved the Algerian government to take action.) The fact that Meursault never says any more than he feels and refuses to conform to the expectations of others irritates those who inhabit the novel with him. In a very real sense, Camus strips reality of all embellishments, presenting the reader only with what the body is capable of experiencing. In this way, he expresses the existentialism associated with Sartre (e.g., *La Nausée*, 1938). The underlying principle of that philosophical school is: ‘existence precedes essence’. Camus presents the reader of *The Stranger* with the essence of the protagonist’s life: the routine of work, sex, food, an environment dominated by an arid landscape, and the constant, baking heat of the sun. The body is therefore seemingly more important in defining the self than is the intellect or, more precisely, than human consciousness itself which has been the hallmark of the modern individual since Werther and the nameless underground man.

The parameters of Meursault’s life are marked by his Maman’s death and burial (beginning frame) and then his own imminent death/execution (closing frame). Each is marked by his mother’s, then his own desire for an existence ‘where [he] could remember this life’.[[642]](#footnote-642) Meursault had never given much thought to the meaning of his life. He just moved from routine to routine. Yet, his final insight that the ability to remember his life experiences indicates that he finally breaks through the wall of indifference that prescribed his life, prospects, and surroundings. This is Camus’s ultimate message. We now look at the stages that lead to this burgeoning consciousness that Meursault can actually be a self-affirming agent of meaning rather than being merely a manipulated plaything of the universe.

The novel consists of two parts. Part One begins with notification of Maman’s death and concludes with Meursault fatally shooting an Arab five times with a revolver. It marks a clear turning point in the narrative. Part Two is devoted to his imprisonment, trial, and pending execution. The initial high moment of an actual emotional response is reached in the scene where Meursault and Marie are swimming in unison with their surroundings (chapter 6). The emotional high point of the second part of the novel is manifest in Meursault’s angry reaction to the priest who has come to console him in his prison cell. The first is an instance of bonding (Eros), whereas the second is closer to dissolution (Thanatos). Both contribute to Meursault’s sense of Self. More on this later.

The crux of the novel is perhaps best expressed in Meursault’s answer under questioning to the prosecutor and why he could not answer as directly and fully as the investigator wished: ‘I answered that I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself and that it was hard for me to tell him what he wanted to know’ about his feelings for his Maman. I suppose I loved her, is all he could respond even though he showed no emotion at her funeral. He added that his life seemed like a game to him, admitting that ‘my nature was such that my physical needs often got in the way of my feelings’.[[643]](#footnote-643) Then, too, he avers much later: ‘my fate was being decided without anyone so much as asking my opinion’.[[644]](#footnote-644)

### Indifference and the ‘I’

Nevertheless, the most striking terms to describe Meursault’s attitude are indifference, monotony, lack of ambition, guilt, and the idea that he sees no way out of his situation.[[645]](#footnote-645) It is all the same to him, for example, whether he mourns Maman’s passing, lets Raymond use him to seek revenge on his girlfriend, whether the robot-woman sits non-conversing at his restaurant table, whether he marries Marie or not although he does not apparently love her, whether he moves to Paris to run a new branch of his boss’s business even though his boss had singled him out for promotion and Marie would love to relocate to Paris, etc. The best he can say about his life is that he is not unhappy. The reader gets but one glimpse that he knows in what happiness might consist. And that is the swimming episode with Marie Cardona, a former typist in his office, when he remarks: ‘The water was cold and I was glad to be swimming. Together again, Marie and I swam out a ways, and we felt a closeness as we moved in unison and were happy’.[[646]](#footnote-646)

Céleste, the restaurant owner, considers himself Meursault’s friend, freely admitting that Meursault tended to be withdrawn and only spoke if he had something to say. Raymond’s friend, Masson, and old Salamano also testify at Meursault’s trial. Masson emphasizes that Meursault is a decent man, an honest man. Salamano appreciated the fact that Meursault was always kind to his dog and honest in explaining why he put his mother in an assisted-living home: she did not speak to him, he had little to say in response, and he could not care for her properly. An unexpected benefit of putting her in the home was a chance for her to make new friends. But at trial none of that mattered.

What did weigh heavily in the prosecutor’s argument was Meursault’s decision to go to the movies and then swimming with Marie the day after Maman’s burial where he had slept and smoked, displaying no signs of mourning. That, in the eyes of the prosecutor, is Meursault’s real transgression, not killing the Arab. Meursault is accused of being ‘a monster without morals’ [...] ‘of burying his mother with crime in his heart’.[[647]](#footnote-647) The prosecutor is convinced that a profound, fundamental, and tragic relationship exists between the two acts of emotionless burial and cold-blooding shooting of the Arab. His lawyer had argued that Meursault was guilty of murder but offered an explanation, thereby seeking to rescue a sense of Self for his client. The prosecutor on the other hand proclaimed him guilty *without* any explanation, stating only the facts, no presumed intentions other than being a ‘monster’ and acting with ‘crime in his heart’. Neither involves a positive concept of ‘I’ as beneficial or revelatory of an anchored Self. On his way back to his cell, Meursault senses that something fundamental has changed. His explanations made no difference. He concludes that chance decides everything. Volition is inconsequential. Thus, he reasons ‘familiar paths traced in summer skies could lead as easily to prison as to the sleep of the innocent’.[[648]](#footnote-648)

Additionally, the routine structure underlying each of these designators of indifference, fate, and routine is the over-riding motif of the hot, glaring sun that occurs repeatedly at each critical turn of the plot. Because of its oppressive presence, the sun assumes the role of a major ‘actor’ in the narrative. That role consists mainly as a wordless, implicit commentator on the actions of the protagonist like that of the Greek chorus in antique drama. For instance, in the lead-up to his shooting the Arab, Meursault refers constantly to the heat and glaring sun: ‘By now the sun was overpowering. It shattered into little pieces on the sand and water. [...] The whole time there was nothing but the sun and the silence’.[[649]](#footnote-649) (‘Le soleil était maintenant écrasant. Il se brisait en morceaux sur le sable et sur la mer. [...] Pendant tout ce temps, il n’y a plus eu que le soleil et ce silence.’)[[650]](#footnote-650) Raymond turns back toward the summer house after following the Arabs along the beach for a while. Meursault accompanies him back to the steps leading up the house from the beach. But does not climb the stairs with Raymond, explaining why he instead decides to return to the Arabs:

I went with him as far as the bungalow, and as he climbed the wooden steps I just stood there at the bottom, my head ringing from the sun, unable to face the effort it would take to climb the wooden staircase and face the women again. But the heat was so intense that it was just as bad standing still in the blinding stream falling from the sky. To stay or to go, it amounted to the same thing.[[651]](#footnote-651)

(Je l’ai accompagné jusqu’au cabanon et, pendant qu’il gravissait l’escalier de bois, je suis resté devant la première marche, la tête retentissante de soleil, découragé devant l’effort qu’il fallait faire pour monter l’étage de bois et aborder encore les femmes. Mais la chaleur était telle qu’il m’était pénible aussi de rester immobile sous la pluie aveuglante qui tombait du ciel. Rester ici ou partir, cela revenait au même.)[[652]](#footnote-652)

The logic is unmistakable. He does actually decide to stay or go; the burning sun moves him like fragmented pieces of light dancing willy-nilly on the surface of wave and sand. On the other hand, mention of his unwillingness to confront the women, suggests some self-direction in his decision to go back. In any event, he reacts mainly according to bodily impulses.

The blazing sun robs him of his will to act entirely on his own. It makes everything— whatever action he might undertake—seem indifferent. A moral choice is not the issue in his reluctance to confront the women or to return to where the Arab is. He speaks in terms of physical sensations: he ‘strained every nerve in order to overcome the sun and the drunkenness it was spilling over me’.[[653]](#footnote-653) The drunkenness suggests a lack of control. When Meursault pulls the trigger, not once but four more times, all he could feel where ‘the cymbals of light crashing on my forehead’ (*L'Étranger*: ‘Je ne sentais plus que les cymbales du soleil sur mon front’).[[654]](#footnote-654) The sun, he remarks was similarly unbearable as it was the day that he buried his Maman.[[655]](#footnote-655) Nonetheless, he did recognize that by firing the pistol he had destroyed the happiness of experiencing the harmony of beach and sun earlier that day when swimming in the cool water with Marie, feeling especially close to her. That was, in fact, the first explicit hint that Meursault is capable of an emotion other than mere indifference to everything since his physical being is causally dependent on his environment, both *Umwelt* (external physical surroundings separate from us but with which we stand in a causal relationship) and *Mitwelt* (an individual’s conditioning social and cultural environment).

The end of Part Two of the novel provides a second incidence of dawning emotion. It is his veritable outburst of very strong emotions in conversation with the chaplain. This time, however, the outburst clearly betrays a moral basis. Like the pistol he rapidly fires at the end of Part One, his exclamations of anger and irritation shoot out of him in rapid succession. The theme of guilt—’you always feel a little guilty’—is reiterated, now generalized to include everyone being equally guilty.[[656]](#footnote-656) We are all subject to the same fate, Meursault opines, and all would be condemned one day too. The notion is reminiscent of views expressed by the Underground Man, Zarathustra, and Harry Haller.

The novel concludes with Meursault’s telling remark in an otherwise austere and blanched textual fabric: ‘For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman. I felt I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a ‘fiancé’, why she had played at beginning again [...]. So close to death Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her. And I felt ready to live it all again too’.[[657]](#footnote-657) That in itself is a protest against the meaninglessness of life and an affirmation of the value of existence over non-existence. He looks up into the night sky alive with signs and stars, giving himself over to its gentle indifference, discovering a brotherly affinity with its luminosity.[[658]](#footnote-658) The zenith of insight is reached with Meursault’s final wish in the final sentences of the novel that he be greeted ‘with cries of hate’ on the day of his execution so as to feel less alone.[[659]](#footnote-659)

Those cries of hate, like his own (finally!) violent response to the chaplain, constitute a protest against the absurdity and vacuity of human existence. Leave me alone with your God, he shouts. I do not want to waste the little time I have left on him. Meursault expresses here Camus’s own lack of belief in God cited at the beginning of this chapter. When the chaplain places his hands on Meursault to comfort and pray for him, Meursault erupts and becomes physical, replying: You seem to be sure of everything. Yet with your focus on the supposed afterlife, you live like a dead man. All I know is that ‘Throughout the whole absurd life I’d lived, some dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future [...] and as it passed this wind levelled whatever was offered to me at the time’.[[660]](#footnote-660) To claim that the chaplain has lived like a dead man is ironic, to be sure, given Meursault’s own lack of genuine emotion until this point in the narrative.

In any event, what did it all matter? To shoot or not to shoot? Salamano’s dog was worth just as much as his wife. The little robot-woman was just as guilty as the Parisian woman Masson had married. So what if he married Marie or not or that she now offers her lips to another? So what if Raymond and Céleste were both equally his friends, although Céleste was a much better man? All those considerations seem so indifferent to him. The only kind of after life that he might imagine is one where he could remember this life! Here is the awakening of consciousness. In early mental development there exists no precise differentiation between the Self and the external world. In a sense, therefore, Meursault has acted childlike throughout. And, as Freud had posited, our own individual body is the source of our self. But in imagining an afterlife where the endless days would not simply run into each other without leaving an imprint, he would be able to better differentiate among choices that previously seemed inconsequential.

His rage creates an opening for inspiration. He notices the luminous night sky. Alive, as he describes it. And he is part of it. The acts of his protesting the chaplain and his own last wish that he be loudly derided by the masses makes feasible the assigning of a positive value to his Self and the life to which he had been ‘condemned’. Awakening even so late in the plot is a significant development. It moves Meursault to a position on a trajectory toward the claims of the nameless Underground Man and the Father in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* who seek to take charge of their stories. The answer, however, lies not in an external author, but as Harry Haller learns at the end of his tale (which is simultaneously a new beginning), he must author himself. His mirror image is constantly breaking into fragments requiring reconstitution.

The hint of an incipient awareness suggests that essence is antecedent to existence after all, while not denying the pivotal role that existence plays in giving form to the *Ich*. It is analogous to looking at one’s own reflection in the mirror of the universe and realizing that one is one with it. Not narcissism, but mutuality. This is why Meursault senses a brotherly relationship to the stary canopy above. The insight marks what Freud called perception consciousness that is focused first on our own bodies. In itself passive, it is nonetheless a necessary step toward the interactive stance of recognizing the body as one of many other kinds of bodies. Tzvetan Todorov labels this expansion of awareness ‘themes of the self’, because the individual’s interaction with the world leads to fundamental instantiations of the self. These interactions as constitutive ‘I’-building factors are also the subject of Horst Daemmrich’s thematic study.[[661]](#footnote-661) Just as the universe constantly remakes itself, so must we. Ultimately, we must be our own author.[[662]](#footnote-662) And the only space to constitute meaning and gain a sense of self-direction appears to be through suffering and the ability to remember. That is why Meursault is ready to start all over again. Rational reflection does not dictate this choice; the will plays the predominant role. Key to this movement is the ability to bond with others on a level deeper than coincidental ‘friendships’. As it turns out, the main themes of Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* are remembrance, empathy, and the re-emergence of a Self repressed by years of rampant, death, destruction, and suffering. To achieve that end, Grass has recourse to a rich style of magical realism in contrast to Camus’s existentialist minimalism. The tin drum replaces God much like the sun dominates Meursault’s growing consciousness.

## Defining the Self Anew: Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum* (1959)

My hair is standing up like a brush ready for action and in each of my blue eyes is reflected the determination to wield a power that would have no need of vassals or henchmen.[[663]](#footnote-663)

There’s another rendering now; but one text. All sorts of men in one kind of world, you see. (Melville, *Moby Dick*)[[664]](#footnote-664)

### From Minimal to Magical Realism: Structure and Narrative Voice(s)

*The Tin Drum* is like no other novel discussed in this study of the relationship among the Self, selves, and the ‘I’. That does not mean that it does not resonate with ideas and concepts raised in the previous works. If, on the very early end of the spectrum, Madame de Lafayette’s *The Princess of Clèves* is about the protagonist’s becoming aware that she can develop her own concept of Self in in opposition to accepted norms, Grass’s *The Tin Drum*, at the other end of our time frame, is about a protagonist with an exceptionally strong sense of Self at odds with his time and fellows who are forced by him to awake from their collective slumber.

After generations of forced conformity, then years of terror, death and destruction, *The Tin Drum* engages in a long process of remembering and confronting reality as lived against a broad kaleidoscope of private and public events. Grass’s goal is the re-emergence of genuine self-awareness within the broader public of his contemporary readers rather than just within Oskar who, as we quickly learn, is clairvoyant at birth. Grass’s rich style of magical realism contrasts with the style of each of the preceding works analyzed, even with the phantasmagorical scenes in Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*. In *The Tin Drum* we encounter a narrative voice distinct from previous instantiations of it: the tin drum itself. On it, Grass recreates the rhythms of life in the fullness of good and evil. It is Grass’s dominant narrative voice. If the sun could dominate Meursault’s actions and incipient consciousness, the tin drum *is* the instrument of consciousness raising. The musical rhythms constitute a narrative voice that overrides traditional voices of self-expression and remembrance. Those rhythms have to be interpreted of course.

The novel tells the story of Oskar Matzerath in three books divided into forty-six unnumbered chapters and covering the years from 1899 to 1954. Book One narrates Oskar’s origins and early education until the outbreak of World War II. One of the many highlights and turning points of this first section is Oskar’s decision not to grow beyond his third birthday because his mother promised him a tin drum at age three. The prospect was clearly referable to his father’s plan to have him take over the family grocery store at twenty-one. The promise of the tin drum made all the more sense in light of a moth drumming at his birth. His fall down the cellar stairs on his third birthday was a ruse to offer the grownups an explanation for his lack of subsequent development.[[665]](#footnote-665) Alfred Matzerath is blamed for the ‘accident’. Book One ends on *Kristallnacht*, November 9, 1938.

Book Two covers the years 1939–45 and is devoted to Oskar’s life with the drum, to several scintillating sexual exploits, his competition with Jesus, his leadership of the street gang, ‘The Dusters’, and an intricate interweaving of personal and historical experiences during the war. The section ends with the death and burial of Alfred Matzerath, one of Oskar’s presumptive fathers (the other being Jan Bronski, his mother’s cousin). Oskar is now twenty-one and decides to live without the drum, casting it into Matzerath’s open grave. Book Two ends with a growth spurt from 3 feet to 4’1’, a sign that Oskar is ready to enter the adult world without the mask of a three-year-old. It represents a second major turning point.

Book Three recounts the era of reconstruction 1945–54 when Oskar attempts to live without the drum, enter society, work as a stonemason, an artist model, then as a professional musician after the artist Raskolnikov recognizes that the drum is missing in his rendition of Oskar in ‘Madonna 49’.). Ultimately, Oskar has himself arrested as a murder suspect in the ring-finger case involving nurse Dorothea, a neighbor, whom he had failed to seduce. Claiming responsibility for her death was his plan to be admitted to a mental hospital, away again from the world of grownups. The third section ends with two chapters (Ch. 44 ‘The Ring Finger; ch. 46 ‘Thirty’) that recall all the major developments in Oskar’s lived experience; it is a kind of resumé of the entire novel.

The dominate metaphor of the final chapter is an endless escalator rising ceaselessly from the depths to the surface and back again. It is symbolic of his imminent discharge from the mental asylum as fully self-responsible thirty-year old. He must start again to accept responsibility for life and history. The ending is thus a return to the beginning. Like Harry Haller, Oskar Matzerath will have to learn how to swim in the muddy waters of existence. Obviously, his sense of Self predates existence. This fact is underscored by his clairvoyance from birth to his determination to act out the will to power without gathering disciples. This will to power is manifest in his clear-sighted blue eyes that see through all the brown-eyed adults and recalls, of course, Nietzsche (see masthead citation).

If Flaubert was bored by his story of Emma Bovary that took him many years to write, Grass, just 31 years old, wrote feverishly in Paris from 1956–58. He was as surprised at the immediate success of his narrative centered on a grotesque gnome, Oskar Matzerath, and other social outcasts, as Flaubert was over the feverish response to his provincial Emma. Small-town Emma and diminutive Oskar are, at face value, two unlikely candidates for world-literature status. Perhaps, in a sense, all great literature is rooted in the provincial and the small. Moreover, Grass employs a narrative strategy that exceeds the range of the narrative voice dominant in the other works. In fact, Grass’s strategy is quite distinct from that of any work discussed in the previous chapters. Whereas Hermann Hesse utilized more than one narrative voice, they mirrored one another.

Grass assigns his protagonist a bitonal narrative voice as well as third-person perspectives on him. (Oskar refers to himself as both ‘I’ and ‘Oskar’, often in the same sentence, thereby alternating between identification and self-distancing.) That decision leads to stylistic innovations that help draw out the relationships among Self-’I’-selves so that the usual distinction between fictitious/foreign and real/familiar begins to break down and dissolves the difference between an ‘outside’ objective world of things referred to and a separate, subjectively intimate ‘inside’ one of how they are perceived. Even inanimate objects (e.g., comb, drumming machine, wooden figurehead, onion) have a narrative voice. The tin drum is especially important. Grass’s preferred the musical rhythms he produced via drumming. Oskar carries on a dialogue with his drum, asking it all sorts of questions such as: ‘I wished to know, for instance, whether the light bulbs in our bedroom were forty or sixty watts.’[[666]](#footnote-666) He poses the question repeatedly because they were ‘the light bulbs of his creation’.[[667]](#footnote-667) He asks the drum: ‘Nun wollen wir doch mal sehen, was du bist, wo du herkommst’.[[668]](#footnote-668) Oskar asks ‘what am I?’ which Manheim misses by substituting ‘who’ for ‘what’. An important difference: ‘Let’s see who you are and where you come from’.[[669]](#footnote-669) Concurrent with the tin drum, Oskar develops yet another ‘voice’: his own vocal cords. Used not for speech but for producing ear-shattering, glass-shattering sound waves whenever his tin drum is threatened, later to seduce passers-by to steal from store-front windows whose glass he has cut out.[[670]](#footnote-670) Then too the drum makes Oskar ‘realer’ than Jesus who does not drum and because Oskar can recreate all the rhythms of life.[[671]](#footnote-671)

Hence, like Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* requires intimate (re)reading in order to access the many textual nuances. Perhaps even more so than was the case with *Madame Bovary*, the reader of *The Tin Drum* is induced to accept the pleasure of the *very act of reading* the text (cf. Roland Barthes) rather than in merely *having* read it. Each page of Grass’s novel requires attention, for each offers the experience of aesthetic wisdom (as discussed in ch. 1 of this study), dotted with unusual conceits, analogies, and metaphors. John Irving sums up the general response in his review of Grass’s autobiography *Peeling the Onion* in *The New York Times Book Review*: ‘At the ages of 14 and 15, I had read *Great Expectations* twice — Dickens made me want to be a writer — but it was reading *The Tin Drum* at 19 and 20 that showed me how. It was Günter Grass who demonstrated that it was possible to be a living writer who wrote with Dickens’s full range of emotion and relentless outpouring of language. Grass wrote with fury, love, derision, slapstick, pathos — all with an unforgiving conscience.’[[672]](#footnote-672)

Like *Madame Bovary*, *The Tin Drum* was well received far beyond the borders of its provincial origins and prompted award-winning films. Each displays the sensitivity to the *creative use of language* that ‘deconstructs all normative distinctions between the intralinguistic and the interlinguistic, the intraidentitarian and the interidentitarian’ that Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan speaks of in his assessment of ‘World Literature, by Any Other Name?’ (2016).[[673]](#footnote-673) Each expresses the modernity of the past. Both *Madame Bovary* and *Die Blechtrommel* represent a starting-point for new methods of meticulous narration that resounded far and wide, following the dominance of Romanticism and the Fascist hollowing out of language respectively. Ostensibly concerned respectively with the adulterous exploits of a country doctor’s wife in a petty Norman town and a sex-obsessed diminutive drummer who prefers to hide away (under tables, skirts, in wardrobes, under rostrums etc.), *Madame Bovary* and *The Tin Drum* offer much more than a racy story line or a different view of historical events. On the other hand, their narrative styles are a far cry from the minimalist aridity of Camus’s *The Stranger* or the imaginative interplay of realities in Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*. Each variation, however, leaves a lasting impression on the reader. Noteworthy, nonetheless, is Grass’s admission that he had a special affinity to Camus’s anti-idealistic attitude and that his *Myth of Sisyphus* left a deep impression with its emphasis on engaged thinking and the triumph of the sensual. Literature became a way of seeing things in a new way for Grass.[[674]](#footnote-674)

One such lasting impression is what the narrator Oskar Matzerath states at the outset of his autobiography. Various options are available to a writer, he remarks. S/he can begin in the middle and narrate the action from that point forward or backward, can switch back and forth between the two, can act as if time and space can be collapsed or extended and then declare that s/he has solved the space-time continuum problem. S/he could also declare that it is, given the traumatic events of recent history, impossible to write a novel anymore but then move on to write a blockbuster. Oskar has also been told that novels cannot have heroes anymore because we have lost our individualism and are now all *Massemenschen*, merely part of the masses.

Simultaneously, however, Oskar contests the view that individuality has been lost in the wake of fascism and the pressures of a consumerist society. He, for instance, and his caretaker Bruno, are still individuals. They refuse to conform. They are drawn to the labyrinthian whether in artistic creations or life’s networks. They can be heroes, albeit not in the traditional sense.[[675]](#footnote-675)

On the other hand, how can the reader be sure that he, Oskar, is a reliable narrator? First of all, we must consider the opening line of the novel that is no less famous nor less salient than *L’Étranger*’s: ‘*Aujourd’hui, maman est morte*.’ The opening line of *Die Blechtrommel* reads poignantly: *‘Zugegeben: ich bin Insasse einer Pflege- und Heilanstalt’* (‘Granted: I am an inmate in a mental hospital’).[[676]](#footnote-676) The reader is taken aback. If Oskar is in a mental institution, why is he there? Especially when he goes on to say that he has finally achieved his objective: his white-lacquered metal institutional bed (‘weiß lackiertes metallenes Anstaltsbett’). It is his consolation and the potential basis of his faith if the administration would raise the bars on the bed even higher to keep visitors away from him. They come every week to ‘get to know themselves through me’ and to bask in the glow of their own sense of duty well done.[[677]](#footnote-677) Because of its whiteness, the bed emerges in the ensuing narrative as a major symbol, as do all references to white (e.g., a nurse’s uniform). But the reader does not know anything at this point.

Then, in his first conversation with Bruno, Oskar admits that he has lied in telling him about his past. Oskar is not even sure whether he remembers events accurately. Moreover, he begins the actual narration of his life long before he was born; that is, he narrates his lineage beginning with his maternal grandmother, Anna Bronski Koljaiczek. To prompt his memory, he uses certain aids. First and foremost is the cherished family photograph album which he calls a ‘family cemetery’ with ‘an epic scope’ and ‘metaphysical geometry’.[[678]](#footnote-678) He later adds ‘synthetic photo personalities’ of himself and his music friend Klepp.[[679]](#footnote-679) Other points of reference include history books, favorite literary works (Rasputin and Goethe), news casts, and above all the rhythms of the tin drum itself. But more about all that later. He writes his autobiography on ‘virgin’ white, unlined paper without anyone knowing except for Bruno. Oskar persuades him to buy a 500-page reem of ‘unschuldiges’ (innocent) paper.

### New Beginnings—*Vergegenkunft*

*Die Blechtrommel* designates new beginnings in a number of ways. Based on a reading from the novel in the loosely organized group of writers known as Gruppe 47, it was awarded the Literary Prize of the Group in 1958. The Gruppe 47 was designed to promote unknown, innovative writers. Since then, the reception of Günter Grass’s mid-twentieth-century classic has been both dynamic and controversial. Its reception has been traced from being an ‘epileptic capriole’ to a world classic, from a scandalous work to a masterpiece far beyond its catalytic role in forcing German readers to confront their recent past, a process known as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Fifty years after its first publication in 1959 it was even designated the most important German novel of the second half of the twentieth century.[[680]](#footnote-680) Immediately upon its publication, *Die Blechtrommel* occasioned comparisons with the artistic prose of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*. It was celebrated at a reenactment of the picaresque novel á la Grimmelhausen’s *Die Abentheuer des Simplizissimus*.[[681]](#footnote-681) And its elaborate baroque style astonished readers.

It was quickly translated into French, where it became a classic, then into numerous other languages including Chinese, Dutch, Finish, Italian, Polish, and Swedish. Ralph Manheim received the PEN translation prize for his 1964 rendering of it into English. For the Poles, the novel came to represent a missing link in Polish literary history.[[682]](#footnote-682) García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, Nadine Gordimer, Lobo Antunes and Kenzaburo Oe have all felt Grass’s impact. In 1999, forty years after its publication, the Nobel Prize Committee awarded Grass the prize for literature, highlighting *The Tin Drum* as ‘dadaism in action in everyday German provincial life’ that represented ‘a new beginning after decades of linguistic and moral destruction’ in Germany.[[683]](#footnote-683) This kind of linguistic distinction and interlinguistic dissemination is part and parcel of Damrosch’s argument for world literature.[[684]](#footnote-684) But it does not tell the whole story.

Remarkable in the case of Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* are the pungency of his language, its rhythms, semantic nuances, its tonal register, the plethora of images and symbols, its wild conceits, innovative reconstructions of myths, and blasphemous retooling of Catholic beliefs (e.g., Oskar as the new Jesus, Black Mass).[[685]](#footnote-685) Ralph Manheim essentially captured all this in his prize-winning translation, *The Tin Drum* (Random House, 1961). And he did so even without the benefit of Grass’s later practice of inviting his translators to discuss his work with him. Based on those experiences, Grass convinced his publisher to commission a new English translation to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the novel’s publication in 2009. The new translation is by Germanist Breon Mitchell.[[686]](#footnote-686) It is not that Grass was unhappy with Manheim’s version.

Nevertheless, Mitchell is charged with replicating Grass’s original text more faithfully by not breaking up the baroque syntax (that could run to twenty lines of text) into individual sentences, shortening them, or omitting material. Unlike Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* with its more limited references to history (economics and chemistry), Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* is thick with allusions to history, literature, and mythology. They require glossing for full appreciation. Its labyrinthine style is marked further by the tentative grasping of memories contrasted by precise, single-minded observations, and appeals to olfactory, auditory, and tactile senses. The book is a panoramic *tour de force* that engages mind, body, and imagination. The dominance of mythological constructions is fully in line with Edmund Husserl’s elucidation of the concept of an eternal present.[[687]](#footnote-687) It is related, I suggest, to Grass’s own comment on *Vergegenkunft*. To be sure, the novel narrates past time, but past and future come together in what Grass later was to call ‘Vergegenkunft’. The coinage itself is a combination of ‘*Ver*gangenheit’ (past), ‘*Gegen*wart’ (present), and ‘Zu*kunft*’ (future) and connotes an eternal present pregnant with past and future events.[[688]](#footnote-688)

The short-lived free city of Danzig/Gdańsk (1920–1939), wedged in between Germany and Poland on the Baltic Sea, is hardly a proper model of Germanness. (The action of two thirds of *Die Blechtrommel* is centered on Danzig.) Oskar’s preference for secluded spaces under tables and skirts, in cupboards, attics, under rostrums, and in clock towers underscores a decentralizing perspective, yet one clearly located within the social structures of his era. His ultimate goal is, in fact, to return to the womb, the state of the unborn.[[689]](#footnote-689) Why would any of this appeal to an international, world audience? In the end, though, like the provincial Emma Bovary, Oskar was seen to represent human qualities that transcend a particular time and a localized place. And he echoes Harry Haller’s vain desire to swim against the current in order to return to the source of the muddy waters of life that carry him along. To return to the innocence of non-existence, of non-consciousness is Oskar’s goal. Yet, as an astute observer as an insider/outsider, he is overly conscious of everything, of the vulgar and brutal, of the outcasts, the sexually stimulating, the nobility of spirit.

As a hedge against vulgarization of the spirit, hermeneutic readings functioned centrally in our reflections on Nietzsche, Pirandello, Camus, Hesse, and now Günter Grass. All addressed what Hans Blumenberg christened making the world readable.[[690]](#footnote-690) In this capacity, Grass considers the function of the author to be that of a contemporary (‘Zeitgenosse’), a late bloomer (‘Spätzünder’), and a ghoul or vulture (‘Leichenfledderer’).[[691]](#footnote-691) All these roles are on display in *The Tin Drum*.

### Narrated/Narrative Time

Günter Grass addresses the ways in which one—innocently at first, then complicitly, even consciously—gets caught up in events that spin out of control. His narrative approach is to compare and contrast battle-field experiences with simultaneous sexual exploits and every-day experiences on the home front.[[692]](#footnote-692) Grass’s creative renewal of German syntax and diction is well known. Here too practically every page of the *Die Blechtrommel* offers examples of Grass’s innovative verve. In his hands people are turned into objects, while objects assume a life of their own. Not coincidentally, an object serves as the title of Grass’s mid-twentieth-century opus, clearly contrasting with the iconic persona Flaubert chose for his mid-nineteenth-century classic. As for Grass’s inventive text, recurrent things readily come to mind: the white metal asylum bed, grandma Bronski’s five potato-colored skirts (ch. 1), the grey moth—Oskar’s avowed master teacher—that ‘drums’ between, the two sixty-watt electric bulbs at Oskar’s birth (ch. 3), the severed eel-infested horse’s head on Good Friday (ch. 12), Herbert Truczinski’s quivering scar-filled back (ch. 14), the wooden galleon-figure Niobe that draws Herbert (and other men) to a violent demise (ch. 15), the Polish post office (ch. 18), the elaborate suicidal drumming machine that homosexual green grocer Greff builds to escape arrest and shame (ch. 25), the machine-gunned nuns on Normandy beach (ch. 27), the thirty-foot diving board as a symbol of taking the plunge into responsibility (ch. 31), the Nazi party pin on which Oskar’s presumptive German father Alfred Matzerath chokes to death (ch. 32), the fevered carousel-dream of distraught children during Oskar’s growth spurt (ch. 34), the Black Wicked Witch (recurrent), the patent-leather belt (ch. 39), the ring finger (ch. 44), and the escalator at novel’s end (ch. 46).

Sure, Grass plays on all kinds of ancient and Christian myth and signs of the Zodiac, but the predominance of objects or objectified individuals, underscores the author’s need to contrive new sources of memory, new ordering principles, a new more acerbic mythology for the amnesiac post-war years. To create through them an eternal present of narrated and narrating time. He takes the thingism of *Madame Bovary* a drastic step further. In contrast to Flaubert’s tacit approach, Grass has his narrator explicitly inform the reader that things are witness to human foibles; they, too, have a memory, one better than humans, presumably because of the lack of conscience and hence of guilt. They are, however, more than mere symbols; they are the essence of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, of coming to terms with the past. Why? Because they can say what humans have repressed. They are repositories of memory and simultaneously sources of deeper philosophical and mythological meaning. Oskar explains:

Heute weiß ich, daß alles zuguckt, daß nichts unbesehen bleibt, daß selbst Tapeten ein besseres Gedächtnis als die Menschen haben. Es ist nicht etwa der liebe Gott, der alles sieht! Ein Küchenstuhl, Kleiderbügel, halbvoller Aschenbecher oder das hölzerne Abbild einer Frau, genannt Niobe, reichen aus, um jeder Tat den unvergeßlichen Zeugen liefern zu können.[[693]](#footnote-693)

(Today I know that everything watches, that nothing goes unseen, and that even wallpaper has a better memory than ours. It isn’t God in His heaven that sees all. A kitchen chair, a coat hanger, a half-filled ash tray, or the wooden replica of a woman named Niobe, can perfectly well serve as an unforgetting witness to every one of our acts.)[[694]](#footnote-694)

When everyday artifacts suffice as witnesses to human tragedy and comedy, one has no need of the all-seeing eye of God. Each of the objects, man-made or natural, has a story to tell; one only needs to learn how to read the signs. The entanglement of human activity, human artifacts, and biological processes is highlighted from the outset of the novel. They reflect on the concept of Self and the development of the ‘I’ in direct and indirect ways.

### Translators and Narrative Voices

One longer passage from the beginning of the novel that describes non-human actions at the moment of Oskar’s birth creates difficulty for the translator seeking to capture the feel, meaning, and cultural-biological resonances of the original German as they offer options for accepting or avoiding personal responsibility for one’s actions while also suggesting that the individual’s decisions are essentially a matter of destiny. I include both Manheim’s and Mitchell’s renditions of the original passage:

Längere Zeit mütterliches und väterliches Versprechen gegeneinander abwägend [Vater: ‘Er wird später einmal das Geschäft übernehmen’; Mutter: ‘Wenn der kleine Oskar drei Jahre alt ist, soll er eine Blechtrommel bekommen’], beobachtete und belauschte ich, Oskar, einen Nachtfalter, der sich ins Zimmer verflogen hatte. Mittelgroß und haarig umwarb er die beiden Sechzig-Watt-Glühbirnen, warf Schatten, die in übertriebenem Verhältnis zur Spannweite seiner Flügel den Raum samt Inventar mit zuckender Bewegung deckten, füllten, erweiterten. Mir blieb jedoch weniger das Licht- und Schattenspiel, als vielmehr jenes Geräusch, welches zwischen Falter und Glühbirne laut wurde: Der Falter schnatterte, als hätte er es eilig, sein Wissen los zu werden, als käme ihm nicht mehr Zeit zu für spätere Plauderstunden mit Lichtquellen, als wäre das Zwiegespräch zwischen Falter und Glühbirne in jedem Fall des Falters letzte Beichte und nach jener Art von Absolution, die Glühbirnen austeilen, keine Gelegenheit mehr für Sünde und Schwärmerei.[[695]](#footnote-695)

(Carefully weighing and comparing these promises, maternal and paternal [father: ‘One day he will take over the family business’; mother: ‘When little Oskar turns three, he should receive a tin drum.’], I observed and listened to a moth that had flown into the room. Medium-sized and hairy, it darted between the two sixty-watt bulbs, casting shadows out of all proportion to its wing spread, which filled the room and everything in it with quivering motion. What impressed me most, however, was not the play of light and shade but the sound produced by the dialogue between moth and bulb: the moth chattered away as if in haste to unburden itself of its knowledge, as though it had no time for future colloquies with sources of light, as though this dialogue were its last confession; as though, after the kind of absolution that light bulbs confer, there would be no further occasion for sin or folly.)[[696]](#footnote-696)

(Weighing maternal and paternal promises against each other carefully and at some length, Oskar observed and listened to a moth that had flown into the room. Medium-sized and hairy, it wooed the two sixty-watt bulbs, casting shadows out of all proportion to its wingspan, enveloping, filling, enlarging the room and its contents with flickering motion. What stayed with me, however, was less this light-and-shadow play than the sound produced by the moth and the light bulb: the moth chattered away as though in haste to unburden itself of its knowledge, as though it had no time for further cozy chats with fonts of light, as though this dialogue of moth and bulb were now its last confession, and once the absolution dispensed by light bulbs was granted, there’d be no further chance for sin or ecstasy.)[[697]](#footnote-697)

Grass’s text consists of three sentences; Manheim and Mitchell also render them as three. Grass’s *längere Zeit* Manheim renders more freely as ‘carefully’ rather than the expected ‘for some time’ or ‘at some length’ (Mitchell’s choice). Then he completely omits the ‘Oskar’, a clarifying apposition to the *ich*. For his part, Mitchell retains the name but omits the ‘I’. Why is it important to keep both? Because Oskar, the narrator of his tale, alternates between the first and third person in referring to himself, alternating between identification and distancing. The bitonal voice is a self-distancing technique in the novel that suggests that the ‘I’ is not responsible for everything it does in the narrated exploits.

The moth Manheim and Mitchell both translate as having flown into the room. However, their ‘had flown’ does not fully capture the happenchance nature of the event, perhaps even the connotation of it happening ‘by mistake’ that is inherent in the German *verflogen*; that is, chance events of nature. Similarly, Manheim fails to capture the meaning of *umwarb* when he says that the moth ‘darted between’. The literal meaning of *umwerben* is ‘to woo’, which Mitchell replicates. ‘To woo’, however, clearly denotes a self-mandated love attraction of the moth to the light, whereas ‘darted between’ merely connotes such intimacy. A big difference that is aesthetically significant. ‘Darting’ allows additional levels of meaning. For instance, the light does the wooing, not the moth. The two light bulbs lure the moth to its self-destruction.[[698]](#footnote-698)

Mitchell is more successful in rendering *Inventar* as ‘contents’ rather than the non-descript ‘everything in it’. ‘Inventory’ in this instance also includes the people in the room, thus reducing them to objects equally subject to the ‘quivering motion’. Mitchell avoids Manheim’s mistake of conflating *deckten*, *füllten*, *erweiterten* into one verb: ‘filled’. The conflation deflates the impact of Grass’s baroque repetition of terms that enhances the expanding nature of *zuckender Bewegung* and that eventually leads to death. Its hectic ‘twitching’ quality (*zuckend*) is understated in Manheim’s choice of ‘quivering motion’ that lacks the sense of ‘last gasping’, although the hectic ‘darting’ between the two light sources better prepares the reader for the throws of death than does Mitchell’s ‘wooing’. Moreover, it is still better than Mitchell’s opting for ‘flickering’ that suggests ‘going on and off’ of the light and shadow play. To be sure, Mitchell may have been trying to suggest that the light source is repeatedly blocked. Does the moth absorb the light that is grows weak and erratic and is perhaps about to die out? Yet, it fails to convey the hectic sense of fluttering about. The light ultimately kills the moth.

Successful is Manheim’s choice of ‘dialogue’ to describe what transpired between moth and light bulbs and which is later described first as *Plauderstunden* (hours of casual conversation), then as *Zwiegespräch* (confidential colloquy, dialogue). Mitchell remains closer to Grass’s formulation in describing the ‘dialogue’. The moth did, indeed ‘chatter’ (*schnatterte*) in haste, as if to unburden itself of knowledge. The latter reference is to the Biblical sense of knowledge as both growing close to God as well as falling away from God as in the serpent’s exhortation to eat of the apple and know what God knows (‘sicut erit deus’). Hence, the equivalence of chatter with confession. Yet, the moth’s ‘confidential colloquy’ leads to death, not salvation. Therefore, my preference for the morbid ‘twitching’ over the merely dynamic ‘quivering’ or ‘flickering’ and my questioning of the choice of ‘to woo’ for *umwerben*.

Furthermore, Manheim remains more faithful to the original when he speaks of ‘the kind of absolution that light bulbs confer’ than Mitchell does when he eliminates the tell-tale ‘kind of absolution’. These light sources do not provide forgiveness in the Catholic sense that was Grass’s upbringing so that ‘a kind of’ is a meaningful qualifier. I also think that Manheim’s rendering of *Gelegenheit* as ‘occasion’ is more accurate in context than Mitchell’s preference for ‘chance’, although the latter is understandable. ‘Occasion’ denotes an external background event, whereas ‘chance’ drags the subject into the forefront a bit too much. Manheim also opts to render *Schwärmerei* (unbridled enthusiasm) as ‘folly’, whereas Mitchell goes for ‘ecstasy’. While ‘ecstasy’ might well be a foreshadowing of Oskar’s sexual escapes, ‘folly’ is more in tune with knowledge, sin, and confession. Hence, it is the better choice. Finally, Manheim’s choice of ‘sources’ of light seems preferable to me than Mitchell’s ‘fonts’ of light. Why? Because ‘sources’ delves deeper than the rather superficial ‘fonts’.

The moth, Oskar informs the reader a bit later, became his master and describes its flitting back and forth between the light bulbs as a *Trommelorgie* (‘orgy of drumming’).[[699]](#footnote-699) We are also informed that Oskar’s drumming could resolve evil into its rhythmical components.[[700]](#footnote-700) In *The Tin Drum*, drumming proves to be a universal, existential—even ontological—principle:

Heute sagt Oskar schlicht: Der Falter trommelte. Ich habe Kaninchen, Füchse und Siebenschläfer trommeln hören. Frösche können ein Unwetter zusammentrommeln. Dem Specht sagt man nach, daß er Würmer aus ihren Gehäusen trommelt. Schließlich schlägt der Mensch auf Pauken, Becken, Kessel und Trommeln. Er spricht von Trommelrevolvern, vom Trommelfeuer, man trommelt jemanden heraus, man trommelt zusammen, man trommelt ins Grab.[[701]](#footnote-701)

(Today Oskar says simply: The moth drummed. I have heard rabbits, foxes, dormice drumming. Frogs can drum up a storm. Woodpeckers are said to drum worms out of their hiding places. And men beat on basins, tin pans, bass drums, and kettle drums. We speak of drumfire, drumhead courts; we drum up, drum out, drum into.)[[702]](#footnote-702)

(Today Oskar says simply: The moth drummed. I’ve heard rabbits, foxes, and dormice drum. Frogs can drum up a storm. They say woodpeckers drum worms from their casings. And men beat on timpani, cymbals, kettles, and drums. We have eardrums and brake drums, we drum up excuses, drum into our heads, drum out the corps.)[[703]](#footnote-703)

The paragraph from which these lines are drawn continues for another fifteen lines, but these six sentences sufficiently convey a sense of the whole. Manheim’s translation again captures the rhythmic quality of Grass’s prose, remaining faithful to the text except for the curious omission of ‘grave’ in the phrase: ‘*trommelt ins Grab*’; it is downgraded to a non-specific ‘drum into’. Why not simply retain ‘drums (in)to the grave’? That is what Oskar later wishes to do upon his mother’s death: ride her coffin drumming into the grave until everything rots away and returns to the earth.[[704]](#footnote-704) Mitchell seems even further off the mark, for he omits *ins Grab* entirely, but does not hesitate to add to Grass’s text what is not even insinuated: ‘we drum up excuses’, ‘we drum into our heads’.

Moreover, the difficulty of capturing the aesthetic nuances of the original tension between the ‘I’ and the environment become evident in such designations as *Unwetter*, *Gehäuse*, *Trommelrevolver*, and the plural form, *Trommeln*. To be sure, *Unwetter* denotes a ‘storm’. But it is an especially turbulent one, like a ‘thunder storm’ that is accompanied by lightning and thunder. ‘Tempest’ might have been a better aesthetic choice here. Manheim chooses to translate *Gehäuse* (housing) as ‘hiding places’, thereby recapturing some of the personal anxiety associated with *Unwetter*. Mitchell goes for ‘casings’ which seems illogical to me because worms do not have casings. *Trommelrevolver* (double-action revolver) is not translated at all by either expert. For some reason, Manheim substitutes ‘drum courts’ (*Trommelgerichte*) for the weapon, while Mitchell opts for ‘ear drums and brake drums’ (although a ‘brake drum’ is not really a drum). And the plural form of drums Manheim and Mitchell deem better transposed as specific forms of drums (‘bass, kettle’ vs. ‘timpani, cymbals, kettles and drums’). These apparent misfires are perhaps nothing more than peccadillos in otherwise fine translations. Yet the quality of the passage is not entirely reflected as it affects the relationship between Self and world.[[705]](#footnote-705)

Drumming is also tightly associated with the sexual act and all things living. Ultimately, Oskar drums not just to recall the past but also, as stated, to find the way back to the womb and innocence.[[706]](#footnote-706) While Oskar survives the war as a little person, he doesn’t evade the guilt. For example, he drives his mother to her grave; he is responsible for the death of his uncle Jan Bronski (Oskar’s biological father), and he causes his presumed father Alfred Matzerath to choke on his Nazi Party pin while the cuckold is machine-gunned to death by Russian soldiers.

At his burial, Oskar decides to no longer drum, a turning point at the end of Book One. In the novel, the narrator also considers writing a treatise on lost innocence by comparing and contrasting the permanent 3-year-old Oskar with the hunchbacked, voiceless drumless post-3-year-old Oskar. But the age division does not solve the question of guilt incurred because even the three-year old was guilty. Throughout his narrative, Oskar engages in a game of guilty/not guilty (‘ein Spielchen Schuld-Unschuld’: Here one could embark on an essay about lost innocence, a comparison between two Oskars, the permanently 3-year-old drummer and the voiceless, tearless, drumless hunchback. But that would be an oversimplification and would not do justice to the facts: even in his drumming days, Oskar lost his innocence more than once and recovered it or waited for it to grow in again; for innocence is like a luxuriant weed.[[707]](#footnote-707)

The challenge of translating specific symbolic scenes is great. One of the first is the description of Agnes Koljaiczek’s conception (Oskar’s mother) in the grey potato fields under Anna Bronski’s potato-colored four skirts enshrouded by the smoke of the dying fire like a fifth wide skirt. For a good thirty minutes she sighs loudly and rolls her eyes repeatedly while uttering the names of the Holy Family and her saints. After the two policemen in pursuit of Joseph Koljaizcek, who had taken refuge under those skirts, finally depart, she rises slowly and painfully from her sitting position: ‘meine Großmutter [erhob sich] so mühsam, als hätte sie Wurzeln geschlagen und unterbräche nun, Fäden und Erdreich mitziehend, das gerade begonnene Wachstum’.[[708]](#footnote-708) The interplay of this unusual seduction scene with the Gaia (Mother Earth) motif is unmistakable and been carefully prepared in the meticulously detailed descriptions preceding this climax. Manheim renders the passage as: ‘Only when the uniforms [policemen] had become staggering dots [...] did my grandmother arise, slowly and painfully as though she had struck root, and now, drawing earth and fibers along with her, were tearing herself out of the ground’.[[709]](#footnote-709) He leaves out the phrase ‘das gerade begonnene Wachstum’ (the inchoate growth) that refers to her becoming one with the earth, to be sure, but also to the conception of new life in her. An important nuance to my mind. Grass had prepared the reader by describing Koljaizeck’s silent pleading to hide under the skirts as occurring in the stillness ‘as on the first day of Creation or the last’.[[710]](#footnote-710) On a number of different levels, this chapter 1 is all about creation and new beginnings.

Other examples that challenge translators include the whimsical ‘metaphysical geometry’ of Oskar’s family photo album,[[711]](#footnote-711) the body as inscribed history (‘Herbert Truczinski’s Back’),[[712]](#footnote-712) Albrecht Greff’s suicide drum machine, the drumming-induced *homo lacrimans*, and the multiple associations of sex, drumming, violence, and death with the severed ring finger: ‘drumstick, scar, cartridge case, ring finger’),[[713]](#footnote-713) and of course the mechanical escalator—that ‘gentle, easygoing contrivance’ on which Oskar felt quite at home despite his ‘terror, despite the Witch’ who haunted him since the neighborhood children taunted him with the ditty and game, ‘Ist die schwarze Köchin da?’ (translated as ‘black wicked witch’.[[714]](#footnote-714)

All these instances pose a daunting challenge to the would-be translator who must try to capture Grass’s unusually ornate conceits, extended metaphors, rhythmical structuring of life into discrete units of meaning, his invitations to fabulation, the interwoven references to mythical or historical events, and to other literary works. Translation is always a challenge; even very fine translations transform the original in some unintended ways, for each translation *is a reading*. The mark of a world-class piece of literature will consistently invite attempts to render them anew in a new tongue. No wonder that there have been repeated attempts to translate *Madame Bovary* and *Die Blechtrommel*.

As it turns out, Oskar had no choice but to drum: the way back to the womb was closed off. The umbilical cord cut. The path leads one way only: forward into life through the myriad rhythms of nature to death in the interplay of Eros and Thanatos, the ‘flickering’ of light and shadow play. Or as Grass poetically formulates the inevitable: the final absolution that the light source imparts as it entices the garrulous moth to spill all its knowledge until it has nothing else to give. Here we can recall Pirandello’s Six Characters or Camus’s Meursault. This modern vision is a far cry from the much-analyzed final scene ‘Mountain Gorges’ of Goethe’s *Faust II* that draws the knowledge-and experience-seeking protagonist’s immortal remains up into the heavenly light. One should note that it is not a bad conscience (*Gewissen*) that would seek absolution; rather it is knowledge itself (*Wissen*). Goethe’s Faust is a scientist and truth seeker. Because of his relentless striving, he is redeemable. For Oskar, however, there is no redemption at the novel’s close. The final image/metaphor is that of Oskar Matzerath (the last name is a blasphemous play on ‘Nazareth’) riding the up escalator at the Maison Blanche station in Paris. Riding that escalator that has no first step but is rather a continuum, Oskar sees himself alternately as Dante returning from hell and as Faust returning from the Mothers. (*Die Mütter* are the source of all living forms in Goethe’s myth.) Arriving at the surface, Oskar presents himself as Jesus to the Interpol agents waiting for him.

In Grass’s grotesque variation of the Faust motif, there is no escaping the world, even as there is no way out in Camus’s myth of Sisyphus. Paradoxically, the end of the novel is actually a beginning, for Oskar Matzerath is about to be released at symbolic age of thirty from the mental institution, cleared of the murder in the ring-finger case, and forced to reenter life burdened with the knowledge acquired over thirty years. His task—and the readers’—is to confront that past, to come to terms with their knowledge of what went on during the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. Grass imaginatively distorts and exaggerates his personal experiences as he presents his readers with the Polish-German dualism of Danzig, the creeping Nazification of average families, the attrition of the war years, the coming of the Russians, and the complacent atmosphere of West Germany’s postwar economic miracle. All this earned him a reputation as the moral conscience of Germany.

Perhaps the dominance of things having memories is a better was to prompt readers to remember what they have selectively forgotten or repressed than the voice of a normal narrator. In any event, drumming up *Wissen* is so much more powerful than direct appeals to *Gewissen* (conscience) in the *Tin Drum*. The original drumming orgy at Oskar’s birth is repeated throughout the narrative,[[715]](#footnote-715) reaching an early crescendo in green grocer Greff’s unforgettable, elaborate drumming machine constructed to stage his own suicide, his solution to guilt and shame over homosexual acts with underage Nazi youths. Surely, suicide is not the answer in dealing with guilt. Grass offers other examples of primitive, guilt-inducing behavior whether as the German attack on the Polish post office in Gdansk, Mountbatten’s military exploits in Burma, the sea battle between Japanese and American aircraft carriers in the South Pacific, war reports from the Eastern and Western fronts, or the Desert Fox’s exploits in North Africa. Grass repeatedly interweaves in his narrative war- and peace-time activities, private and public affairs. All is consistently organized according to the principles of drumming. After all, ‘drumming until death’ is the message Oskar’s master, the brown moth in intimate dialogue with the two sixty-watt bulbs, announced at his birth.

We have seen that Grass plays with all kinds of ancient and Christian myths. Thus, it might not seem like too much a stretch to see Oskar as the reincarnation of what the ancient Greeks identified as Phanes (protogenos), the primordial god of creation in the Orphic cosmogony. The generator of life hatched from the world egg without mother or father. Phanes was the driving force behind reproduction in the early cosmos. The world-egg was conceived of as a primordial mix of elements split into its constituent parts by Chronos (time) and Ananke (inevitability). The Orphics equated Phanes with the elder Eros (Desire) of Hesiod's *Theogony*. We might wish to label Oskar proto-rhythmos, the drumming variant of protogenos, the orchestrator of cosmological rhythms.[[716]](#footnote-716) His drumming does bring things to light, the function of Phanes. And he does alternate between light and dark. And the attraction to the two light sources does convey heightened consciousness, the need to confess one’s knowledge and transgression.

### A Conclusion of Sorts

What is the place of books, translated or original? To provide the words and facts, to be sure, but also to convey a ‘feeling’ to which readers can react emotively and not just intellectually. Total engagement of the spirit is what matters. Books without readers are fragments; only individuals reading them complete the signification. For that reason, the Melville quotation stands in the masthead of this essay. For that reason, the anonymous quotation regarding the rejection of actual far-flung geographical locations in favor of the virtual spaces of the mind immersed in a book in one’s own room shares the masthead’s prominence with Oskar Matzerath’s reference to the individual will to power. The virtual spaces of the mind are forever changing. A well-wrought work of art activates the highly complex sets and subsets of neural networks that enable us to see, hear, smell and feel the experiences behind the words and gestures of the text. To highlight those universal sensory experiences in multiple lingual contexts is the task of serious literature. As the key to aesthetic experience across national borders, the strategies of literary translation and analysis enrich the experience of being at home anywhere in the world— regardless of a work’s point of origin—when the reader is attuned to the values of a genuinely communicative community. The objective of *The Tin Drum* is to recreate that kind of communicative community that had been lost. This objective can only be achieved through confrontations of the Self with the world—the will to power— so that a higher level of lucidity can be achieved in the development of the ‘I’.

Literary works that compel readers to confront the absurd, profane, and violent conditions of life have universal application. They never grow old. *The Tin Drum*, reread thirty years after its first publication is just as fresh, just as new as in 1959.[[717]](#footnote-717) In turn, it and similar works compel translators to attempt their transportation into other linguistic forms of expression and into other cultural contexts. They too are readers. Very close readers who develop an intimate relationship with the text in the way that Harold Brodkey advocated. What makes a work of fiction canonical, then, is its inexhaustible ability to raise consciousness through the aesthetic experience of attraction, revulsion and reflection.

## Epilogue: Forever Voyaging … Toward Lucidity

A good book leads to alterations in one’s sensibilities and often becomes a premise in one’s beliefs. One associates truth with texts, with impressive texts anyway; and when trashy books vanish from sight, it is because they lie too much and too badly and are not worth one’s intimacy with them.[[718]](#footnote-718)

This study has been about the formation and dissolution of the ‘I’ in literature. I began with a view of the surrounding terrain: changes in publishing and reviewing practices coupled with remarks on the kind of intimate reading that a canonical work of literature necessitates. In order to consider how the traditional European literary canon deserves to be treasured, I had to reflect upon how a literary canon is formed and how cultural capital accumulated and interpreted. The first section of this study is devoted to those widening considerations.

The longer second section is devoted to detailed examination of select works from the end of the Baroque to the Enlightenment era and from there to the second half of the 20th century. I have endeavored to trace the historical evolution of how the concept of the Self and the notion of the ‘I’ took shape from the Renaissance to post-WWII literature. My focus was purposefully on the confrontations and definitions of the Self, the ‘I’, and the idea of selves in the works themselves. What became obvious is that a writer indeed requires a room of one’s own to create and gain insight. It proves to be a process of a continuing voyage, as Virginia Woolf put it. Its ultimate goal is to enhance self-awareness and self-affirmation.

But dangers were discovered in the giddy journey from dictated identity to appreciating one’s own agency. Too much lucidity can prove debilitating, as Dostoevsky’s nameless Underground Man learned, causing him to see himself as ‘sick’ and ‘despicable’. On the other hand, we somewhat surprisingly discovered that the individual Self is interlocked with natural processes more universally. Goethe’s *Werther* gives us the first hint of that interconnection with the dichotomy of *Verselbsten* / *Entselbsten* (constituting the Self, dissolution of the Self) in terms of nature itself. Camus points to the fiery sun as the catalyst, whereas Grass concludes that the drumming motif is derived from nature and is not simply the willful act of his diminutive anti-hero, Oskar. In fact, Oskar appears as the reincarnation of what the ancient Greeks identified as Phanes was the primordial god (*protogenos*) of creation in the Orphic cosmogony. His name literally signifies ‘bring to light’; that is, make manifest. The generator of life hatched from the world egg; he was the driving force behind reproduction in the early cosmos. The world-egg was conceived of as a primordial mix of elements split into its constituent parts by Chronos (time) and Ananke (inevitability).

The Orphics equated Phanes with the elder Eros (Desire) of Hesiod's *Theogony*. Therein, we might want to see a faint link to Freund’s concept of Eros, which for him represented a bonding force in contrast to Thanatos, the drive toward dissolution. These contending forces give rise and fall to whole civilizations as well as to individual fates. In the transition from Renaissance to Modernity, humans come to replace the gods. The experience is simultaneously liberating and frightening. We continue to seek the cause of our actions outside ourselves in destiny. Nonetheless, we slowly realize that we have both an ‘outside’ as well as an ‘inside’.

As a result, this study has led to the insight that human consciousness emerges from inanimate cosmological and chemical interactions. Self-awareness, self-determination allows the human being to contemplate her/his origins, to develop technologies to peer into deep space and capture images of the beginning of time. We stand in awe of its beauty, its awesome energy, its evolution from the simple to the complex. The examples of the European literary canon examined in the preceding pages have prepared the way. To unlock the insights requires attentive intimacy with the texts themselves. When the writing is successful it never grows old. It lives in an eternal present.

Madame de Lafayette’s *La Princesse des Clèves* pioneered the way as arguably the first psychological novel in the modern European tradition. It was also innovative because a woman penned it; that encouraged many another woman to take up writing. And women have been constant catalysts both as break-away self-portrayers and as objects portrayed in novels from Charlotte Buff to Emma Bovary, Anna Koljaiczek and Lucy Rennwand. Lafayette’s novel did not become a cult book. With his *The Sorrows of Young Werther* Goethe opened the flood gates for sentimental writing with social commentary. It too marked the beginning of the modern European psychological novel and inspired numerous imitators. However, *Werther did* become a kind of cult book, if often for the wrong reasons. It was falsely understood, for instance, as a defense of suicide. Flaubert pushed the boundaries of realistic description, psychological insight, and social criticism even further with his *Madame Bovary*, introducing economic and scientific commentary into a detailed narrative based on historical events. Like *Werther* it was sharply critiqued as immoral and blasphemous, causing quite a conservative backlash. *Madame Bovary* set a new standard for narrative fiction, becoming a mainstay in literary classrooms.

Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* featured an anti-hero as protagonist bent on undoing common perceptions and values. It proved to be an early expression of existentialism designed to raise consciousness while simultaneously exposing the difference between Self and selves and the dangers of an ‘I’ marked by too intense self-consciousness. Pirandello’s absurdist play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, upended audience/reader expectations further by openly questioning why there is no author to help them understand themselves and resolve their dilemmas. Observers were forced to think in new ways about how confronting others and reality define the Self.

Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* was the radical philosophical novel that advocated a re-evaluation of values in pursuit of self-affirmation. It also questioned whether anyone could prove to be a reliable narrator. Hence, it preferred allegories, parables, and metaphors as narrative strategies. It definitely became a cult book, although abused by the Nazis and broadly misunderstood. Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* plays on many of the motifs and ideas found in *Zarathustra* as it narrates autobiographical aspects of its author rendered as an outsider. It became a cult book for the 60s generation but for the wrong reasons: the sex, the hallucinogenic drugs, the phantasmagorical scenes, the discussion of suicide. Camus’ *L’Étranger* took the absurd in an existentialist context further in unembellished fashion, employing a minimalist approach. Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* extended the symbolic, absurd, and grotesque still further in creating an integrated quilt of the personal, the local, and world historical. His style is highly elaborate. Neither became cult books despite the innovatively disruptive impulses imparted to the world of letters.

Nonetheless, all the novels mentioned enthralled and puzzled generations of readers and found imitators. Each complicated understanding the concept of Self. Each captured the critical spirit of its time—Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romanticism, Realism, fin-de-siècle, interwar period, postwar Germany—presenting a documentation of the times tied to quintessentially outside figures, each with a message to deliver.

Despite their differences, each is messianic in its message of hope in a misguided, increasingly unanchored politico-societal age. Three of the most recent works are bound together by several factors: First, *Zarathustra*, *Steppenwolf*, and *The Tin Drum* can be viewed as modern variations on the Faust theme (the latter two include numerous allusions to Goethe’s *Faust*), for their protagonists all look for deeper meaning. By contrast to all the other protagonists, even of the earlier works, *The Stranger’s* Meursault is intellectually uncurious. Second, the narrative time frame of *Die Blechtrommel* more or less encompasses the epochs dealt with in the other three novels from the Wilhelmine to the Adenauer years. Third, while the Princess de Clèves, Werther, and the Underground Man critiqued society, Zarathustra is the first major voice to express deep skepticism about hitherto unquestioned values. Meursault follows suit but not so loudly.

And, fourth, *Steppenwolf* and *Die Blechtrommel* are heavily indebted to Nietzschean ideas such as the reevaluation of values, the will to power, and the new man. Like Nietzsche with his aphoristic style, Hesse with his phantasmagorical interludes, Grass breaks the reader’s usual horizon of expectations (‘Erwartungshorizont’) with his iconoclastic approach.[[719]](#footnote-719) All are taboo-breakers. If *The Stranger* was seen to express the absurd and indifference, *The Tin Drum* is often labelled as grotesque and obscene.

Strikingly, one can argue that all these later masterpieces have their roots in the Princess de Clèves and Werther having found their individual voices. None of the authors mentioned set out to write a normative work of literature; they only wanted to do the best they could. They explored how one fits in or does not fit into the world. Always in the background, even unspoken, is the desire ‘to be at home’. And Nietzsche’s insight that ‘the center is everywhere’ (*die Mitte ist überall*) applies equally to their play with perspective’.[[720]](#footnote-720) In fact, we should think of Benedict Anderson’s famous notion of imagined communities as being ‘narrated communities’ from the very outset.[[721]](#footnote-721) What people think informs the narratives they tell. They draw their narratives, no doubt, from selective memory. In turn, narrations received also inform what people think, so that the usual distinction between fictitious/foreign and real/familiar begins to break down and dissolve the difference between an ‘outside’ objective world of things referred to (beginning with the body) and a separate, subjectively intimate ‘inside’ one (Gasset’s *intus*). Literature has long been known to create possible worlds that, upon repetition, begin to feel very real indeed. Identities are formed and transformed via intimate interaction with imagined communities as well as lived ones.

At the beginning of this study, I stated that my interest was not only in the affirmation of Self in canonical works of literature but also in literary history per se. Even as I consider it a loss when the traditional canon is no longer taught but also a shame that contemporary students are rarely exposed to literary history as a topic valuable in its own right. In his essay, ‘The Meaning of History’ (1953), philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) offers cogent reasons for considering each of these topics in tandem and proffers answers to both questions. As for the Self, he does not speak of it specifically but rather of the need for lucidity. Of course, we are part and parcel of the cosmos. Then again, we are more than the ‘foreground aspect of the inert processes investigated by astronomy and astrophysics’.[[722]](#footnote-722) We are of course biologically determined. Then again, we are more than mere heredity, for since the dawn of human existence ‘acquired from pre-history, there stands as it were humanity’s capital, which is not biologically inheritable, but a historical substance, a capital that may be increased or squandered. It is something that is real prior to all thought’.[[723]](#footnote-723) So, what is it? The cultural capital evident in canonical literary works?

This proposition addresses an apparent enigma: we are products of cosmic processes but seemingly exceed them. Even in light of scientific advances since the 1950s that allow us to look beyond the foreground aspects of physical processes, the enigma stands. What is our unique capital and what is its source? Jaspers’ explanation has to do with the ‘fundamental fact of our existence’. And what is that? It is that ‘we appear to be isolated in the cosmos’ because of a particular ability that humans—and apparently only humans—have.[[724]](#footnote-724) What isolates us from the cosmos is our ability to reflect upon its operations: our spirit, our *intus*. Human history begins with the ability to be conscious.

But even pre-human history is important, for it eventually led to the manifestation of spirit and the accumulation of capital.[[725]](#footnote-725) To understand history as a whole, we must distinguish between the ‘history of nature’ which is ‘mere happening’ (*Geschehen*, *Ereignis*) and has no awareness of itself. It is first known by humans, because the human I/eye can look upon the world in a way previously impossible.[[726]](#footnote-726) The concept of history as a whole seeks to take into account this innovative role of the spirit. A distinguishing mark of all natural processes is movement. ‘Humankind as a whole is [also] a life process’.[[727]](#footnote-727) The unity of the mere happening of nature and the agency of the human spirit ‘is sought at a higher level in the totality of the world of human being and creating’.[[728]](#footnote-728) A deep structure is seemingly at work. It involves a never-ending process that cannot attain its goal of unity. Yet, ‘History remains movement, under the guise of unity, accompanied by notions and ideas of unity’.[[729]](#footnote-729) The same holds true for humankind. The goal of history is understood to be a nurturing of civilization in general and the humanization of humankind specifically. Unity, however, is always but a goal, not an actualized fact.

In this search, we are continually led to ‘the frontiers’ for it is at the margins where we obtain ‘the most extreme horizons’.[[730]](#footnote-730) Here, we are reminded of Ortega y Gasset’s comments on the nature of horizons. ‘Heightened consciousness [...] is our goal’.[[731]](#footnote-731) The goal of unity of man within the processes of history consists not in the acquisition of and implementation of knowledge per se, ‘but in the radiant moments of the most profound lucidity of consciousness, of essential revelations’ encountered along the way.[[732]](#footnote-732) To attain this goal, we must accept fully the transitoriness of existence and seek to live a life ‘beyond good and evil’.[[733]](#footnote-733) The latter is adopted from Nietzsche’s meaning of the terms. Furthermore, we must be prepared to live in a constant present: ‘What matters is the demand for presentness as eternity in time’; that is, transitoriness as the actual state of affairs.[[734]](#footnote-734) This ‘presentness’ is an existential factor comparable to Nietzsche’s gateway (*Augenblick*) where past and future are conjoined. It is what Günter Grass later designated *Vergegenkunft*.

Jaspers speaks metaphorically of human consciousness as the ‘crest of a wave, a peak above a broad and deep subsoil’.[[735]](#footnote-735) It captures the essence of human bifocality: being a part of unconscious ‘happening’ while also gaining a higher perspective that makes one self-aware of being carried along. Together with the history of nature itself, then, humankind is also marked by the history of consciousness which, in turn, proves to provide the basic building blocks of cultures. Like nature, cultures evolve, becoming more diversified and complex while remaining essentially the same. Our own era, we can concede with Jaspers, is determined by the ‘consciousness of crisis’.[[736]](#footnote-736) This sense of crisis is especially acute with encounters at the frontiers. We need history to understand ourselves; it is for us memory. We need it not for factual knowledge, but as ‘an active element in our lives’.[[737]](#footnote-737) To summarize, the consciousness of crisis allows us to contemplate history in a more acute way and perhaps help us better understand who we are and how our situation influences the sense of Self and the evolved ‘I’. That is why the importance of knowing about literary history is as critical as familiarity with the traditional canon. The latter is the result of a growing organism.

In the foregoing clear echoes of Nietzschean thought are audible. Indeed, all the foregoing reflections apply to the stages of manifestations of consciousness evident from the *Princesse de Clevès* to *Werther*, *Notes from Underground*, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *Zarathustra*, *Steppenwolf*, *The Stranger*, and *Die Blechtrommel*. They and other works considered in this monograph manifests a growing level of lucidity. Sometimes, it leads to a loss of perceptive insight. Many authors have remarked as Russel Banks did in a talk Literary-Arts program in Portland, Oregon, on December 9, 1999 that serious literary works require more intimacy than even good artistic films.[[738]](#footnote-738) A film can run in an empty theater and still be a film. But a book only comes to life when it is read intimately. That is what I have tried to showcase in the textual analyses undertaken in this study. That is why I cite Brodkey in the masthead caption.

Perhaps a concluding word about the role of book reviews in creating literary classics is in order before closing out this analysis of traditional canonical works of European literature. Traditionally, editors and critics endeavored to be measured and objective, but the pressure to produce desirable consensus and thus to enhance marketability has noticeably increased. Even for literary journalists, who tend to be holdouts in the process of intellectual erosion, presence on the *NYT’s* best-seller lists is often about promotion. And, clearly, the increasingly frequent insertion of snippets of praise at the beginning of a book is meant to allure potential readers to buy the book. The transition in approach is evident in the special Book Review section of the *New York Times* of October 24, 2021, ‘Celebrating 125 Years of the Book Review’. This is both a positive and a negative development, because the intimacy of the reading act often recedes to the background of attention.

Neurologist Joseph Collins (1866–1950), co-founder of the New York Neurological Institute, penned a review of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* that might not pass muster today. Collins seems dismissive of the work when he launches his evaluation with a commentary on how off-putting the text is: A few intuitive, sensitive visionaries may understand and comprehend *Ulysses*, James Joyce’s new and mammoth volume, without going through a course of training or instruction but the average intelligent reader will glean little or nothing from it—even from careful perusal, one might properly say study of it—save bewilderment and a sense of disgust. It should be companioned with a key and a glossary like the Berlitz books. Then the attentive and diligent reader would eventually get some comprehension or Mr. Joyce’s message.

It might seem unusual that a neurologist penned this first review until we recall that Collins also authored books about literature alongside his professional studies, e.g., *The Doctor Looks at Literature* (1923). The faint-hearted reader might not read beyond the review’s opening paragraph let alone actually be induced by it to take the novel in hand. Then, again, Collins probably hits the mark with his initial judgment and later suspicion that only ten readers would slog their way through this behemoth, and five of those readers do so simply as a demonstration of a *tour de force*. Collins himself has read the text twice. This allows him to appreciate the innovativeness of Joyce’s writing and thinking style. Collins declares the novel to be ‘the most important contribution [...] to fictional literature of the 20th century’, capable of immortalizing its author.[[739]](#footnote-739) Despite the exceptional extraordinariness of the novel, in the end Joyce comes across as ‘one of the sanest geniuses’ that Collins has ever met. Moreover, he has ‘learned more psychology and psychiatry from it than [he] did in 10 years at the Neurological Institute’.[[740]](#footnote-740)

This brief review stands out for its frank assessment, depth of perception, and prognosis of the novel’s staying power. Like any good book review, it offers readers via contrasts and analogies insights not achievable on their own.[[741]](#footnote-741) Such reviews offer insights into more books than the reader could actually read. Such a review is like a synthesizing web of neuro networks that provide critical inputs from various sources. For serious critics, ‘book reviews are the front lines of culture and politics, where ideas are tested before they harden into the dogma in the mouths of pundits’.[[742]](#footnote-742) The essence of a canonical work, I suggest, is similar to the testing of ideas before they become platitudes through the well-intended yet debilitating repetition of intermediaries seeking to chart the ‘right’ path.

We also do well to recall Hermann Hesse’s ‘Eine Bibliothek der Weltliteratur (1929; A Library of World Literature) published by Reclam. He assembles a long list of works drawn from Ancient, oriental, Arabic, and European traditions from the earliest eras. At the outset he cautions his reader not to be intimidated by the numerous works cited. Not quantity but quality is the key factor. What is the purpose of even assembling such a list, he asks, and anticipates the answer in his opening sentence which reads: Genuine education is not directed to a particular end but has, like any striving for perfection, its own internal sense (‘Echte Bildung ist nicht Bildung zu irgendeinem Zweck, sondern sie hat, wie jedes Streben nach dem Vollkommenen, ihren Sinn in sich selbst’).[[743]](#footnote-743) He compares the exercise of the mind to physical exercise to build up the strength, health, and abilities of the body all of which improves one’s self-confidence. Physical exertion is strenuous. But worth the benefits achieved. The strivings for *Bildung* are no different, he avers. They lead to an invigorating and strengthening expansion of our consciousness, an enrichment of our possibilities for life and happiness (‘ein beglückendes und stärkendes Erweitern unsres Bewußtseins, eine Bereicherung unsrer Lebens- und Glücksmöglichkeiten’).[[744]](#footnote-744) Moreover, the striving for *Bildung* is a never-ending journey—a forever voyaging in the universe and experience of timelessness. It helps us to give meaning to our lives, to interpret the past and to look fearlessly to the future.[[745]](#footnote-745) It comes from reading carefully. About the same time as Collins and Hesse, the literary critic Percy Lubbuck concluded in similar fashion that the pages of a book present a succession of moments that the reader visualizes and presents anew. He fears, however, that few will actually commit themselves to memory. Most are likely to soon disappear, through the writer’s fault or the reader’s. ‘In any case’, he sums up, ‘the page that has been well read has the best chance of survival; it was soundly fashioned, to start with, out of the material given me by the writer, and at least it will resist the treachery of a poor memory more resolutely than a page that I did not thoroughly recreate’.[[746]](#footnote-746)

These insights are as relevant today and they were then. They sum up in a nutshell the objective of my examination of how the Self is formed, lost, and regained via creative attention to strategies to confront and define the Self and its distortions (the selves) in the emergence of an ‘I’ on nigh every page of a canonical work. That is why I subjected representative passages to intense scrutiny. In sum, one can consider Confronting/Defining the Self: Formation and Dissolution of the ‘I’ from Montaigne to Grass as offering an apology for the study of literature and the humanities in an era when technology and commerce dominate our consciousness, drive our daily expectations, and shape our career goals.[[747]](#footnote-747)

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1. Michael Holquist, ‘Radical Challenges—Radical Questions’, in ‘Can “Neuro Lit Crit” Save the Humanities?’, *New York Times*, April 5, 2010 <<https://archive.nytimes.com/roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/05/can-neuro-lit-crit-save-the-humanities/>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is a main reason why I have not included longer narratives from the German Romantic tradition. John B. Lyon, *Crafting Flesh, Crafting the Self: Violence in Early Nineteenth-Century German Literature* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2006), examines, for instance, Friedrich Hölderlin’s *Hyperion* (1797, 1799) and Clemens Brentano’s *Godwi* (1801/02) in depth. Unfortunately, neither has achieved an international status comparable to the representative works I examine. Lyon’s interest in violence, wounds and trauma are also quite different from my own, although he does utilize Fichte’s and Freud’s respective concepts of consciousness via confrontation as interpretive tools. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jacob Brogan, ‘Why Pursue a Career in the Humanities?’, *Washington Post Magazine*, March 14, 2022 <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/03/14/modern-language-association-](https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2Fmagazine%2F2022%2F03%2F14%2Fmodern-language-association-convention%2F%3Fitid%3Dhp_magazine&amp;data=04%7C01%7Cjohn.a.mccarthy%40vanderbilt.edu%7Caaf036fd0f664dfa644308da0b870e14%7Cba5a7f39e3be4ab3b45067fa80faecad%7C0%7C0%7C637834971972647267%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&amp;sdata=AegK6YFqKjHKz68sBNFFUqohpjn%2F%2Bt0XYlkkutRjf7c%3D&amp;reserved=0) [convention/?itid=hp\_magazine](https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2Fmagazine%2F2022%2F03%2F14%2Fmodern-language-association-convention%2F%3Fitid%3Dhp_magazine&amp;data=04%7C01%7Cjohn.a.mccarthy%40vanderbilt.edu%7Caaf036fd0f664dfa644308da0b870e14%7Cba5a7f39e3be4ab3b45067fa80faecad%7C0%7C0%7C637834971972647267%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&amp;sdata=AegK6YFqKjHKz68sBNFFUqohpjn%2F%2Bt0XYlkkutRjf7c%3D&amp;reserved=0)>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Roland Greene remarks in his MLA presidential address of 2016, ‘Literature and Its Publics: Past, Present, and Future’, that his friend George Andreou, an editor at Alfred A. Knopf, ‘likes to say that in his business the readership of serious literature in [the USA] is believed to be 50,000 people’. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 131(3): 594–602 (p. 601) <DOI: 10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.594>. For much of its history, the industry of literary book publishing in the USA was an industry dominated by rich, white males. Until the 1960s Black authors were dependent upon white editors and publishers to achieve broad recognition. A niche of small Black-owned publishers arose in the mid-1960s but had limited success. All this is beginning to change with the introduction of Black editors at leading publishing houses such as Lisa Lucas, the publisher of Pantheon and Schocken Books. There is an incipient awareness that publishers must move away from a nigh total focus on white reading audiences in order to prosper. The jury is still out on whether this shift in audience focus will succeed and how broadly. See Marcela Valdes, ‘Can Books Start a new Chapter?’, *New York Times Magazine*, June 26, 2022, 29–35, 47, 49. Reader responses to the Valdes essay point out something Valdes does not mention. Namely that Salman Schocken introduced a whole series of diversified, little-known, marginalized authors to America such as Sholem Aleichem, Hannah Arendt, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Elie Wiesel. Readers also point out that Erol McDonald, who is Black, began a thirty-year stint as executive editor of Pantheon long before Lisa Lucas’s appointment as the imprint’s publisher. ‘Re: Diversity in Publishing’, *New York Times Magazine*, July 10, 2022, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ron Charles, ‘Harry Potter and the Death of Reading’, *Washington Post*, July 15, 2007, B1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). A sixteenth printing of the volume appeared in 2012 with a new foreword, in 2016 a new paperback edition with a new preface by the author appeared. Specifically on literature and the arts, see Chap. VI: ‘Cultivating Imagination’ (pp. 95–120). Nussbaum makes a plea for a traditional model of education, one designed to promote human development rather than offer vocational training. Her approach stands out by drawing upon both Western and non-Western sources. In her preface to the 2016 edition, Nussbaum takes due note of some improvement in the American situation, while also noting how deeply her book has resonated around the world evidenced by the sixteen translations of the work (p. xiii). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mark E. Roche makes this argument in his *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010). Then, too, the pages of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *ADE Bulletin*, the *ADFL Bulletin*, and *Academe* frequently provide similar pleas and warnings. Examples of efforts to educate a wider audience about the value of literature include the emphatic mission statement of Brill publishers <<https://brill.com/page/MissionStatement/mission-statement>> and of its blog ‘Humanities Matter’ <<https://brill.com>>, the awarding of $479,000 in 2019 by the NEH to the PBS Foundation to develop a series of short films on literature <<https://www.pbs.org/foundation/blogs/updates-from-the-pbs-foundation/pbs-neh-grant/>>, and MLA projects to highlight the value of literature for a wider public <<https://www.mla.org/Convention/MLA-2021/Participating-in-Humanities-in-Five>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A prominent example is Harvard comparatist David Damrosch. He has been especially productive in drawing attention to the interrelationships between national and world literatures. By examining the broad scope of Comparative Literature, its historical emergence, present manifestations, and future prospects, he draws a picture of the discipline as a restless, experimental, self-critical spirit that traditionally utilizes a methodological pluralism. See *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. by David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), which offers portraits of comparative thinkers and global poetics from antiquity to the present in global perspective. See also David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022); David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) and the *Journal of World Literature* 1.1 (2016), ed. by David Damrosch. Other contributions to the recent debate include *German Literature as World Literature*, ed. by Thomas O. Beebee (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); and *Taking Stock: Twenty-Five Years of Comparative Literary Research*, IFVAL 200, ed. by Norbert Bachleitner, Achim Hölter, and John A. McCarthy (Leiden: Brill, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jacob Brogan offers a maudlin assessment of the 2022 MLA Annual Convention in Washington, DC, which was a hybrid of in-person and virtual sessions (‘Why Pursue a Career in the Humanities?’). COVID-19 wreaked havoc with traditional academic conferences by depressing participation and preventing one of the excitements of intellectual cross-fertilization. Brogan nonetheless points out a radical change in attendance over the years. In 1968, 11,750 participants attended the conference. In contrast, only 4,395 showed up in 2022. That radical decline is due in no little part to changes in hiring patterns in the humanities. In 2007–08 the MLA’s jobs report recorded 3,506 openings across English and other languages. The number of openings had declined precipitously a decade later to 1,411 in 2019–20. Reduced legislative funding, skeptical trustees, altered priorities, a general devaluation of the humanities, and bloated administrative positions—all in the name of corporate efficiency—play a large part in this transformation <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/03/14/modern-language-association-](https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2Fmagazine%2F2022%2F03%2F14%2Fmodern-language-association-convention%2F%3Fitid%3Dhp_magazine&amp;data=04%7C01%7Cjohn.a.mccarthy%40vanderbilt.edu%7Caaf036fd0f664dfa644308da0b870e14%7Cba5a7f39e3be4ab3b45067fa80faecad%7C0%7C0%7C637834971972647267%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&amp;sdata=AegK6YFqKjHKz68sBNFFUqohpjn%2F%2Bt0XYlkkutRjf7c%3D&amp;reserved=0) [convention/?itid=hp\_magazine](https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2Fmagazine%2F2022%2F03%2F14%2Fmodern-language-association-convention%2F%3Fitid%3Dhp_magazine&amp;data=04%7C01%7Cjohn.a.mccarthy%40vanderbilt.edu%7Caaf036fd0f664dfa644308da0b870e14%7Cba5a7f39e3be4ab3b45067fa80faecad%7C0%7C0%7C637834971972647267%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&amp;sdata=AegK6YFqKjHKz68sBNFFUqohpjn%2F%2Bt0XYlkkutRjf7c%3D&amp;reserved=0)>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Deidre Shauna Lynch and Evelyne Ende, eds, *Cultures of Reading*, *PMLA*,133.5 (Oct. 2018) and *PMLA*,134.1 (Jan. 2019): 9–200. Leah Price and Seth Lerer, eds, *The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature*, *PMLA*,121.1 (Jan. 2006). Even these substantial collections represent only the tip of the iceberg. One need only recall, for instance, the monumental *Handbuch des Lesens*, hrsg. von Bodo Franzmann, Klaus Hasemann, Dietrich Löffler und Erich Schön unter Mitarbeit von Georg Jäger, Wolfgang R. Langenbucher and Ferdinand Melichar (Munich: Saur, 1999) that examines the immaterial culture of reading practices. Roger Chartier, for his part, straddles the divide between the material and immaterial in his *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. by Lydia Cochrane (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994). Robert Darnton focuses more on the material culture of books in his *A Literary Tour de France: The World of Books on the Eve of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) and *Pirating and Publishing: The Book Trade in the Age of Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press , 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Holquist, ‘Radical Challenges—Radical Questions’, n.p. Absent from my deliberations is the graphic novel that poses a whole set of intriguing questions about words as representation and their transformation into narrative images. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Daiyun Yue, ‘Comparative Literature in the 21st Century’, *Journal of Cambridge Studies* 2 (June 2009), 2–14 (p. 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I pursue the question of literariness in ch. 1, ‘Comparative Literature: Being at Home in the World’, in *Taking Stock*, ed. by Bachleitner, Hölter, and McCarthy, pp. 11–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Thus does Virginia Woolf argue in *A Room of One’s Own*. Foreword by Mary Gordon (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981), p. 71. Stendhal famously used the metaphor of the mirror in *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830) to characterize the function of the novel. He did so not naïvely, but to ward off the censors. He knew that the novel functioned more like a prism than as a mirror of reality. Morris Dickstein reinterprets the mirror metaphor, tracking it mainly in American literature in *A Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Horst S. Daemmrich, *Self-Realization: Analysis of a Primary Literary Theme* (New York: Peter Lang, 2021). Daemmrich’s book was published after I had almost completed my own study of confronting/defining the Self. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., pp. 159, 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Popular Music and the Poetics of Self in Fiction*, ed. by Norbert Bachleitner and Juliane Werner (Leiden: Brill, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. On the death of the subject and the fractured self, see, e.g., Sam Han, ‘The Fragmentation of Identity: Post-structuralist and Postmodern Theories’, in *Routledge Handbook of Identity Studies*, ed. by Anthony Elliott (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), pp. 83–99; Stuart Hall, ‘Who Needs “Identity”?’, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 2003), pp. 1–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. Bachleitner and Werner, *Popular Music*, pp. 4–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Hall, ‘Who Needs “Identity”?’, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Simon Frith, ‘Music and Identity’, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Hall and du Gay, pp. 108–27 (p. 109). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See, e.g., Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. ix. Our moment (in the USA at least) is marked by contentious political debates about ‘culture wars’ that have morphed into conservative uprisings against perceived (and overblown) perils of teaching diversity (or ensuring public health safety). Often the debate revolves around the meaning of words that have been detached from the substance of historical etymologies and affective vocabulary. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This thinking is traceable to Friedrich Schelling who posited a unity of consciousness and matter that ‘makes it possible for transcendental idealism to value irrational, unconscious, and physical experience’, as John Lyon puts it (*Crafting Flesh*, p. 30). See also Dale E. Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 119–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962). See also Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Winchester, MA: Faber and Faber, 1995), who focuses on literary fiction in print, but does not distinguish between different kinds of electronic media in his (negative) review of them. Birkerts worried that the latter would lead to enhanced distractedness and superficiality. See also Mairead Small Staid, ‘Reading in the Age of Constant Distraction’, *Paris Review*, February 8, 2019 <[https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/02/08/reading-in-the-age-of-constant-](https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/02/08/reading-in-the-age-of-constant-distraction/)

    distraction/> [accessed August 29, 2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Lucinda Riley, *The Seven Sisters*, *The Storm Sister*, *The Shadow Sister*, *The Pearl Sister*, *The Moon Sister*, *The Sun Sister*, *The Missing Sister* (Pan McMillan, 2014–21). Lucinda Riley’s *Seven Sisters* has gained a large international and devoted audience for her historical novels despite their length—or perhaps because of it—but surely because of their striving for authenticity in rendering the sisters’ search for Self in shifting social, cultural, and geographical locations. Of course, I am aware that writers as demanding as Tolstoy rushed their writing of such works as *Anna Karenina* in order to meet the press deadlines of the *Russian Messenger* published on a set schedule 1875–77. Many canonical works of long narrative first saw the light in periodical publications, especially in the nineteenth century, long before the television industry adopted the strategy of stories-in-installments in the twentieth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Will Self, ‘The Printed Word in Peril: The Age of Homo virtualis Is upon Us’, *Harper’s Magazine* (October 2018), 21–31 (pp. 24, 28, 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Book Presence in a Digital Age*, ed. by Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Kári Driscoll, and Jessica Pressman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). Starting from the idea of media plurality, *Book Presence in a Digital Age* explores from a contemporary perspective the surprising resilience of print literature and innovative book art in the late age of print. The editors point to such innovations as the typographic experiments of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) or Steven Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts* (2008). They also note accordion books like Anne Carson’s *Nox* (2010), and cut-ups à la Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010). Then, too, there are collages like Graham Rawle’s *Woman’s World* (2005), erasures like Mary Ruefle’s *A Little White Shadow* (2006), and reinventive mix-ups like Simon Morris’s *Re-writing Freud: The Interpretations of Dreams* (2005), iv. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Charles Finch, ‘Autofiction for the Twitter Era: What Tweets and Emojis Have Done to the Novel’, *New York Times Book Review*, December 1, 2019, p. 17. Autofiction is a further aspect of this revolution in book production. And web traffic also now figures largely even in critical reviews. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *L'amica genial, Storia del nuovo cognomen, Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta, Storia della bambina perduta* (2012–14). Published in English as *My Brilliant Friend*, *The Story of a New Name*, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2012–15). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Hence, Finch concludes: to ‘read Knausgård or Ferrante, or indeed other writers of what critics have called autofiction (such as Teju Cole or Rachel Cusk) was less to enter a story than to spend a while as another person’ (p. 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Sari Altschuler and David Weimer, ‘Texturing the Digital Humanities: A Manifesto’, *PMLA*,135.1 (Jan. 2020), 74–91 (p. 74). Altschuler and Weimer make an argument for the ‘texturing’ of screen texts, that is, imparting to the flat-screen reading experience a tactile feeling. They offer a genuinely exciting manifesto for going beyond the visual in charting the future of the digital humanities that bears similarities with traditional print culture. Their essay is part of Alison Booth and Miriam Posner, eds, ‘Special Topic: Varieties of Digital Humanities’, *PMLA*,135.1 (Jan. 2020), 9–151. The question nevertheless remains as to whether digital projects have the same staying power with readers as print culture has. The screen book does not keep still and does not remain intact. It risks offering less opportunity for tarrying and thus for genuine probing. Will the screen book prove to be ephemeral, providing only momentary entertainment like pulp fiction or perhaps crime fiction à la James Patterson (who is actually quite good)? [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Annie Del Principe and Rachel Ihara admit to reading in such a manner in ‘Reading Is Not One Thing’ on the MLA Style Center (posted August 27, 2019, on the MLA website) and think that scholars generally react in similar fashion, so that ‘we’ are not much different from the students we teach. If we want students to read as carefully, then we need to train them to read with attention to detail and nuance. (That is, as I know from long years of personal experience, what upper-division and graduate-level courses at colleges and universities are designed to do.) Their sampling is based on their experience of students in humanities courses at two-year colleges <[https://style.mla.org/variability-of-reading practices/?utm\_source=mlaoutreach&utm\_medium=email&utm\_campaign=sourceaug19](https://style.mla.org/variability-of-reading%20practices/?utm_source=mlaoutreach&amp;utm_medium=email&amp;utm_campaign=sourceaug19)> [accessed ust29, ] A conference at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach (June 20–22, 2022) titled ‘The Persistence of Reading in a Digital Age’ further attests to the general debate on reading as cultural practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Percy Lubbuck, *The Craft of Fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921), p. 2, para. 13 <[https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18961/18961-h/18961-h.htm>.](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18961/18961-h/18961-h.htm) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*, 2 vols (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), i, xv. She speaks of an ‘unacknowledged revolution’ (i, xii). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. John A. McCarthy, ‘The Poet as Journalist and Essayist: C. M. Wieland’, *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik*,12/1 (1981): ‘Part One: From Poet to Popularizer—A Descriptive Account’ (pp. 104–38) and ‘Part Two: Wieland as Essayist—The Cultivation of an Audience’, *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik*, 13/1 (1982), 74–137. Reprinted in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, vol. 335, ed. by Lawrence J. Trudeau (Farmington Hills, MI: Layman Poupard/Gale, 2017), pp. 204–50; and my ‘Lektüre und Lesertypologie im 18. Jahrhundert (1730–1770). Ein Beitrag zur Lesergeschichte am Beispiel Wolfenbüttels’, *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 8 (1983), 35–82. For a profile of readers that is representative of readership across national borders, see also Rolf Engelsing, *Analphabetentum und Lektüre. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Lesens in Deutschland zwischen feudaler und industrieller Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1973); Eric Schön, ‘Geschichte des Lesens’, in *Handbuch Lesen* (Munich: Saur, 1999), pp. 1–85 (esp. pp. 24–37). Ralph Schenda offers an overview of readership in the long nineteenth century in his *Volk ohne Buch: Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der populären Lesestoffe 1770–1910* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1970) as does Reinhard Wittmann in *Buchmarkt und Lektüre im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert Beiträge zum literarischen Leben 1750–1880* (Berlin: Max Niemeyer, 1982). Wittmann devotes chapters specifically to the literary author and the literary readership (pp. 154–230). I estimated that Wieland, an internationally renowned and best-selling author of the late eighteenth century in Germany, reached a ‘fit’ readership of some 250,000 out of the total population of some twenty-four million German speakers; i.e., 1 percent of the German-speaking population (pp. 229–30, 239–40). These one percenters were drawn from aristocratic upper bourgeois circles, military officers. His works were translated into several European languages, reaching a wider audience even abroad. On reader typologies in the eighteenth century, see *Leser und Lektüre im 18. Jahrhundert*. Hg. von Rainer Gruenter (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Michael Bérubé, Hester Blum, Christopher Castiglia, and Julia Spicher Kasdorf, ‘Community Reading and Social Imagination’, *PMLA*,125.2 (Mar. 2010), 418–25 (pp. 419–20). Other classes of readers are ‘light’ readers (1–5 books read annually) and ‘moderate’ readers (6–11 books annually). The ‘frequent’ class accounts for 12–49 books, whereas the elite ‘avid’ group reads more than 50 books per year (419). In general, the authors’ approach is ‘externally’ determined. Factors outside the individual psyche dominate; too little attention is accorded to what goes on in the reader’s mind and affective reactions during the reading act. Consequently, independent contemplation and individual empathetic response to textual clues are underrepresented. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Cf., e.g., , ‘Simulating Fiction: Individual Differences in Literature Comprehension Revealed with fMRI’, *PLOS ONE*, February 11, 2015 <https://doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0116492>. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Weimer, ‘Texturing the Digital Humanities’, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., pp. 85–86. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences keeps tabs on reading rates in the USA. An academy article of July 15, 2019, titled ‘New Evidence on Waning American Reading Habits’ reports its newest (pre-pandemic) findings: ‘The percentage of American [adults who read at least one book for pleasure](https://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=92) in the previous year fell to the lowest level on record in 2017 (below 53%). The greatest decline in book-reading rates occurred among adults under the age of 55.’ The report goes on to note that as of 2017, only ‘about 40% of American adults had read at least one [type of humanistic text](https://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatorDoc.aspx?i=31390) in the past year. The rates were similar for literature [...] Over 55% of Americans with at least a bachelor’s degree had read a novel or short story in the past year.’ By comparison less than 35 percent of high-school graduates read a work of literature <[https://www.amacad.org/news/new-evidence-waning-american-reading-](https://www.amacad.org/news/new-evidence-waning-american-reading-habits) [habits>](https://www.amacad.org/news/new-evidence-waning-american-reading-habits) [accessed September 25, 2021]. Amy Watson, ‘Average Reading Time in the U.S. 2018–2020, by Age Group’, *Statista* (July 26, 2021) and ‘Reading Habits in the U.S.: Statistics and Facts’, *Statista* (July 16, 2018), reports that:

    The average daily time spent reading by individuals in the United States in 2020 amounted to 0.34 hours, or 20.4 minutes. Adults over the age of 65 were the most avid readers, and those aged 75 or above spent almost an hour reading each day. Meanwhile, those between the ages of 15 and 19 years read for just 8.4 minutes per day on average.

    <https://www.statista.com/statistics/412454/average-daily-time-reading-us-by-age/> [accessed September 25, 2021]. Additionally, ‘Only 1.01% of adult Americans read scholarly journals in 2018.’ <[https://www.statista.com/topics/3928/reading-habits-in-the-us/>](https://www.statista.com/topics/3928/reading-habits-in-the-us/ ) [accessed September 25, 2021]. And if reading proficiency ratings in public schools is deemed a marker of future reading habits, the future does not look promising because reading proficiency levels in grades 4, 8, and 12 remains mediocre. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. ‘Stavanger Declaration on the Future of Reading’ <https://ereadcost.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/StavangerDeclaration.pdf>. The foregoing citations are from the same page. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. These are the so-called ‘Four Percenters’ (Bérubé et al., ‘Community Reading and Social Imagination’, p. 419). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Greene, ‘Literature and Its Publics’, p. 601. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. This view is most cogently formulated in Kant’s famous essay, ‘Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’ (‘Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?’, 1784). Stephen Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Penguin, 2018) is a more recent example of what I mean about multipliers. The best-selling mystery author, James Patterson, continues the outreach effort. He has sold nigh 400 million copies of his books worldwide and proved to be a tireless champion of the power of books and reading. In 2015, he created ‘JIMMY Patterson Books’ that focuses on publishing high-quality, entertaining books for children by talented authors and illustrators to encourage pro-reading initiatives. Additionally, he has donated millions of dollars in support of teacher education, libraries, and bookstores. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Laurent Dubreuil, ‘Nonconforming: Against the Erosion of Academic Freedom by Identity Politics’, *Harper’s Magazine*, September 2020, 61–66 (p. 66). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Hermann Hesse, ‘Eine Bibliothek der Weltliteratur’, in H. Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke in 12 Bänden*, xi: *Schriften zur Literatur I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1976), pp. 335–72 (pp. 344–45):

    We move on now to our task of setting up a small but good catalogue of world literature. In doing so, we immediately encounter a fundamental principle of all intellectual history: that namely the oldest of works are least to grow old. What today is fashionable and creates excitement can be discarded again tomorrow; what is new and interesting today, is it no longer tomorrow. [my translation] [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200828-the-remarkable-cult-of-elena-ferrante>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Les Trois états du capital culturel’, in *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 30 (1979), 3–6. Bourdieu’s ideas were elaborated upon and criticized. Cf., e.g., John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) which focuses on the educational system and uses examples from English-language literatures. Instead of speaking in terms of exclusion and inclusion from/in the canon, Guillory substitutes agents of cultural transmission such as schools, curricula, and syllabi. For her part, Bourdieu’s student, Pascale Casanova, broke the national bounds of Bourdieu’s application of cultural capital by emphasizing the hierarchies of culture and the global distribution and availability of canonical Western literature unbound by political space in her *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. In his 2015 Presidential Address to the ACLA [American Comparative Literature Association], ‘A Comparative Frame of Mind’, Ali Behdad suggested that ‘literature should be secondary; we are [first] comparatists.’ Michael Swacha picks up on Behdad’s notion in ‘Comparing Structures of Knowledge’, June 15, 2015 <[https://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/comparing- structures-knowledge-0](https://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/comparing-structures-knowledge-0)>. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Woolf, *Room of One’s Own*, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Hesse, ‘Eine Bibliothek der Weltliteratur’, *Gesammelte Werke*, xi: 372: ‘Lesen lernen im höhern Sinne kann man nicht aus Zeitungen und nicht aus zufälliger Tagesliteratur, sondern nur aus Meisterwerken.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Judah Goldin, ‘On the Fifth or Sixth or Seventh Rereading of Agnon’s *Days of Awe—*Maybe More’, in S. Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe: A Treasury of Traditions, Legends and Learned Commentaries Concerning Rosh Ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur and the Days Between Culled from Three-hundred Volumes Ancient and New* (New York: Schocken, 1965), pp. vii–xxx (p. vii). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, pp. xiv, viii, xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Hence, it is more useful to think in terms of agents of cultural transmission, as Guillory argued in 1993, rather than to assume intentional exclusions from the literary canon based on race or gender. The latter confuses the political with the literary. To be sure, Guillory does not intend to privilege class over race and gender any more than Goldin seeks to privilege Hebrew traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. It is not simply a matter of assembling a collection of texts to put on display. Sarah Thornton uses the label ‘subcultural capital’ to refer to the age and gender categories and traits even of popular culture: ‘Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder [...] Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections’ (Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), pp. 27–28). While imitations of even literary characters can be expressed in terms of dress codes (e.g., Werther), alternative music (e.g., jazz in *Steppenwolf*), or accouterments (e.g., the drum in *The Tin Drum*), their adoption as fashionable exclusivity does not reflect the foundational concept of the Self promoted here. The collection of music recordings like books and art works of cultural capital are no more significant when they function as mere adornment. The original moral impulse of the canonical work has to be activated in order to be authentic and genuinely meaningful. It is not a question of standing apart (youth) or of fitting in (classical mainstream). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. John Guillory, ‘The Common Core and the Evasion of Curriculum’, *PMLA*, 130.3 (May 2015), 666–72 (p. 0) (emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., pp. 666–72 (esp. p. 670). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. See William Franke’s proposal for the notion of ‘*omni*universality’ to designate more accurately the processual nature of universality as something ‘always only *in the making*’ in ‘The Canon Question and the Value of Theory: Towards a New (Non-)Concept of Universality’, in *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, ed. by Liviu Papadima, David Damrosch, and Theo d’Haen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 55–71 (p. 55). Why more accurate and appropriate? Because it moves us from the *unit*ary to the *omni*-directional, a move that requires alertness and attention to moving details in the act of reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Arnold Weinstein, *The Lives of Literature: Reading, Teaching, Knowing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 2, 10, 15, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. The best-selling mystery author, James Patterson, who has sold ca. 400 million copies of his numerous books globally, recognized the importance of showing the way when he established ‘JIMMY Paterson Books’ in 2015 to lure younger readers into the habit of reading. The proceeds of the new imprint support teacher education scholarships. Moreover, he has donated millions of dollars to libraries and bookstores. In other words, he is one of the multipliers outside the teaching profession itself <https://www.jimmypatterson.org> [accessed April 20, 2022]. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Anne Ruggles Gere, ‘Re-visioning Language, Texts, and Theories’, *PMLA*,134.3 (May 2019), 450–58. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid., p. 456. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Franke, ‘Canon Question and the Value of Theory’, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, pp. ix–x. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Guillory devotes the second part of his study to a reconstruction of the category of literature. See also Arnold Weinstein, *Fictions of the Self, 1550–1800* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990); Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), esp. chs X–XI; Paul J. Korshin, ed., *The Widening Circle: Essays on the Circulation of Literature in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976) which covers history of the book and reading in England, France, and Germany; Reinhard Wittmann, *Buchmarkt und Lektüre im 18. Und 19. Jahrhundert. Beiträge zum literarischen Leben 1750–1880* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1982), esp. pp. 192–231; John A. McCarthy, ‘“Plan im Lesen”: On the Beginnings of a Literary Canon in 18th-Century Germany (1730–1805)’, *Komparatistische Hefte* 13 (1986), 29–45; Alexander Mathäs, *Beyond Posthumanism: The German Humanist Tradition and the Future of the Humanities* (New York: Berghahn, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Simona Bertacco and Nicoletta Vallorani, *The Relocation of Culture: Translations, Migrations, Borders* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), examine these issues for contemporary fiction and its relationship to global humanities and education objectives (esp. their conclusion, ch. 5: ‘Melting Wor(l)ds’). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), *Science of Knowledge with the First and Second Introductions* (1794–95) = *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath. In *Fichte: Science of Knowledge* (*Wissenschaftslehre*), ed. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970; 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); *New Presentation of the Science of Knowledge* (*Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy* [*Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*; 1796–99; and *The Vocation of Man* [*Bestimmung des Menschen*, 1800]). = *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (student lecture transcripts, 1796–99). *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy* (*Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, unpaginated, subsection titled ‘The “I” as the Principle of Philosophy’. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Cf. Günter Zöller, ‘Fichte, Johann Gottlieb (1762–1814)’, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <[https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-](https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/fichte-johann-gottlieb-1762-1814)maps/fichte-johann-gottlieb-1762-1814> [accessed June 18, 2019]. Francis Fukuyama, ‘Mistaking Identity’, *Harper’s Magazine* (May 2022), pp. 11–14, presents a modern version of this interaction that is at the core of the current ‘deep cognitive crisis’ associated with the uses and abuses of identity politics to connote dominance rather than emancipation. ‘At the heart of the liberal project’, he remarks, ‘lies the assumption that if you strip away the customs and accumulated cultural baggage that each of us carries, you’ll find an underlying moral core that we all share and can recognize in one another’ (p. 12). Consequently, ‘Liberalism, with its premise of universal equality, needs to be the framework within which identity groups struggle for their rights’ (p. 14). This moral substratum is key to my undertaking. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Dan Breazeale, ‘Johann Gottlieb Fichte’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/johann-fichte/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. The early German Romantic writers, in particular Novalis, picked up on the idea of individual freedom, applying it to literary construction as a process of becoming. Novalis remarked: ‘To make Romantic is nothing but a qualitative raising to a higher power. In this operation the lower self will become one with a better self.’ *Logological Fragments* I 66, in Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 60. Cited by Gerard Kuperus, ‘The Self as Becoming a Work of Art in Early Romantic Thought’, *Idealistic Studies* 46.1 (2017), 65–77 (p. 76). Yet, even this ‘becoming one’ remains essentially a process of approximation rather than total fulfillment. See among others Jochen Schulte-Sasse (ed.), *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), esp. 91–92, 102–05, 109–10, 123–26, 239–40, 242–45. Kuperus relies exclusively on Schulte-Sasse. He does explain the relationship between becoming as an aesthetic process and the Self as an ethical being. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. *In Fictions of the Self* (1981) Arnold Weinstein views the self as a ‘generous, eye-opening rather than soporific fiction’ that ‘displays a rich spectrum of responsive affirmations’ (p. 7). For him, there is no ontologically anchored Self. Stephen Prickett, *Secret Selves: A History of Our Inner Space* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), is a far-ranging study of secret spaces of the mind where a sense of self develops and is nurtured. Prickett examines texts ranging from the Bible to Holocaust diaries, confessions, novels, and artistic renderings. Yet, he does not distinguish between acquired sense of selves and a foundational notion of Self evident in other studies of the topic. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), devotes part of chapter 11, ‘The Ego and the World’, to Fichte (along with Novalis and Schelling), pp. 361–76. Seigel also emphasizes that for Fichte the I is pure agency, the *manifestation* of [human] life rather that the product of life and that life follows the same movement from self-containment to reflection as the I (pp. 372–73). This paradoxical contention reflects a shift in Fichte’s thinking about the I as the first principle of activity before 1799 to ‘the ground and the reality of the I’ after the turn of the century. Seigel does not speak much about the morality of the self-realizations. Daemmrich does introduce moral implications in his *Self-Realization*. An alternation between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* is an absolute necessity in realizing the self (cf. p. 159). The latter opens the way for intellectual and spiritual growth that also conveys to readers ‘a vision of human potential’ and ‘raise serious questions about the apparent predetermination of existence’ (p. 162). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Cf. the 1690 print reproduced here from blogs.princeton.edu or the 1573 anon. oil painting in the Rijksmuseum. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), p. xvi. Repeated in David Brooks, ‘The Moral Peril of Meritocracy’, *New York Times*, April 7, 2019, SR, pp. 1, 5. Brooks is unaware of the mountain-climbing motif in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–86) that is tied to constituting the Self. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Frith, ‘Music and Identity’, p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Brooks, *Second Mountain*, p. xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. While Brooks warns against taking the two-mountain metaphor too literally and allows for deviations from any specific norm, his model could have taken more into account the insights of child psychology and the maturation process (*Bildung*) nurtured by parents, schools, and religious institutions. They place restraints on unrestrained egoism (e.g., inward form) even on the way up the first mountain. Of course, reading and books can prompt reflection and act as guides. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Scholars also speak of this ‘Second Enlightenment’ as the need for a ‘new’ Enlightenment. See, e.g., Stephen Eric Bronner, ‘Interpreting the Enlightenment: Metaphysics, Critique, and Politics’, *Logos*, 3.3 (2004) <[www.logosjournal.com/bronner\_enlightenment.pdf>;](http://www.logosjournal.com/bronner_enlightenment.pdf) Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*; E. O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Random House, 1998). On the inter-relational dimension, cf. also John A. McCarthy, ‘The Old/New Enlightenment: From the Compossible to the Complex’, *German Quarterly*,94.1 (winter 2021), 49–66. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. With their embedded ‘palimpsestic memory’ deceptively simple memetic fairy tales can prove transformative. Responses to and applications of fairy-tale memes in diverse media can be found around the world. The memes are capable of transcending borders to offer new insights within altered cultural parameters. Maria Tatar speaks of ‘palimpsestic memory’ in ‘National / International / Transnational: The Brothers Grimm and Their Fairy Tales’, in Andrew Teverson (ed.), *The Fairy Tale World* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 80–91 (p. 82). She uses it to express the transformative potential of fairy tales. They are, she argues in concert with other contributors to the volume, able to convey something new without ignoring past experiences and their embedded cultural memories. Teverson’s edited volume is widely considered to be definitive because of its broadly based analysis of fairy tales from every continent and in diverse media. As a result, the fairy tale emerges as world literature, not unlike *A Thousand and One Nights* with its origins in Indian folklore transmitted to Mesopotamian, Persian, Egyptian, Arabian, and ultimately European narratives. Among many other contributions to the topic of cross-border transmissions, see *German Fairy Tales and Folklore in a Global Context*, Laurie Ruth Johnson, Angelika Kraemer, Carl Niekerk (eds.), *The German Quarterly*,94.2 (spring 2021). Bonding and dissolution via cultural transmission also play a role in fairy tales for the evolution of the Self. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Forms of life-writing (non-fictionalized biography, autobiography) about ‘contested selves’ do not play a major role here. The literary works examined in the following are traditional novels and narratives, albeit with a frequent confessional tone. Katja Herges and Elisabeth Krimmer, eds, *Contested Selves: Life Writing and German Culture* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2021) focus, for instance, on marginalized voices expressed primarily in memoirs, interviews, letters, diaries, and graphic novels rather than in more traditional literary forms such as novels and narratives. I am more interested in an aspect of the vagaries of self-reflection that Florian Lippert and Marcel Schmid pursue in their edited volume, *Self-Reflection in Literature*, IFAVL 201 (Leiden: Brill, 2019). Their collection of essays examines reiterations and meanings of a fundamental myth in Western culture recurrent over centuries: the story of Narcissus. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground, White Nights, The Dream of a Ridiculous Man, and Selections from The House of the Dead*. A new translation with an afterword by Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1995), ‘Z’s Prologue’, #7: 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. He actually began his project via engagement with individual studies without having an overarching theory that could bond the various elements together to form a cohesive whole. Belatedly he did find such a glue in his repeated insistence that the three dimensions of the corporeal, the relational, and reflectivity are the determinants of self-existence. But neither individually nor conjointly are they adequate to answer his questing for the *essence* of selfhood. The actual glue is the intelligent agency made possible by reflectivity that is capable of interpreting the nexus of the fluid interconnections among the three realms (Seigel, *Idea of the Self*, p.23). This interpretive agency proves even more critical than any of the individual dimensions by themselves. One should not conclude, however, that such interpretive agency is tantamount to another Intelligent-Design argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Seigel, *Idea of the Self*, pp. 652–53 (p. 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Ibid., p.653. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Ibid., pp.553–58. This view of scientific ‘truths’ is echoed by Richard P. Feynman, *The Meaning of It All: Thoughts of a Citizen Scientist* (Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1998). The book is based on the John Danz Lectures that Feynman delivered at the University of Washington in April 1963. On life as literature, see Alexander Nehemas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Seigel, *Idea of the Self*, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Ibid., p.31 et passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Thomas Nagel makes this distinction central to his definition of selfhood. In his terminology, the ‘I’ is ‘first-person’ selfhood, whereas the other ‘Not-I’ is ‘third-person’ selfhood. See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere,* revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Paul Ricœur argues in similar fashion in *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990) where he opposes a Nietzschean-inspired ‘cogito brisé’ to the classic Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum* which leads Ricœur to embrace ‘d’une philosophie de l’action’ (see esp. chs 3–4). Moreover, Ricœur emphasizes the role of narrative in forming a sense of Self (chs 5–6), and accords morality and conscience a central role (chs 7–8). The latter is much less prominent in Seigel’s account. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. José Ortega y Gasset, *Man and People*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Norton, 1957), p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Biographical introduction by Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Seigel, *Idea of the Self*, pp. 654–58. Seigel adds Freud as a kind of afterthought, feeling somewhat ‘guilty’ about not having included the founder of psychoanalysis in the body of his text. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 115 and 1–2 respectively (et passim). Sperber elaborates upon Richard Dawkins’s exposé of the gene–culture nexus with his coining of the term ‘meme’ to explain units of culture in *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976)*.* But Sperber feels that Dawkins remains too close to the Darwinian theory of evolution as the survival of the fittest. Thus, his preference for an ‘epidemiology of representations’ (pp. 1–2 et passim). He intends his approach to be a complementary expansion of Dawkins’s memes as units. For him cultural replications are rather ‘limiting cases of transformations’ (p. 118) that take advantage of the mental modularity of the brain to create cultural diversity via a process of cognitive efficiency (pp. 119–50). [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, pp. 32–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Ibid., pp. 35–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Ibid., pp. 28–30, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Ibid., p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Ibid., pp. 55–59. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Ibid., p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Woolf, *Room of One’s Own*, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Gasset, *Man and People*, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), pp. 58, 66–67. Originally, *Le Plaisir du Text* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), pp. 93–94, 104–05. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Harold Brodkey, ‘Reading, the Most Dangerous Game’, *New York Times*, November 24, 1985, section 7, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, p. 59; *Le Plaisir du Text*, pp. 93–94. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Woolf, *Room of One’s Own*, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Richard Wright, *Black Boy*,pp. 272–73. Emphasis added. The book was completed in 1943 in two parts under the title ‘Black Confession’. But Wright retitled it for his agent as ‘American Hunger’. The first section of the book was published in 1945 for Book of the Month Club as *Black Boy*. In 1977 a restored version appeared with both parts with the title, *American Hunger*. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. David Brooks, ‘A Case of Mental Courage’, op ed, *New York Times*, August 23, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Like so many other members of the reading class over the ages, (East)-German writer Christa Wolf (1929–2011) asserted: ‘Without books, I am not I’ (‘Denn ich, ohne Bücher, bin nicht ich’. In C. Wolf, *Lesen und Schreiben. Neue Sammlung: Essays, Aufsätze, Reden*, 2 vols (Berlin, 1989), ii, 22). Without books one runs the risk of being largely uninscribed, of being a *tabula rasa*. In their introduction to *Empowering Contemporary Fiction in English: The Impact of Empowerment in Literary Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), Ralf Hertel and Eva-Maria Windberger claim that the concept of empowerment has not been applied to literary studies (pp. 8, 11). Long before the term ‘empowerment’ became a catch word in social, feminist, and postcolonial studies, the phenomenon was at the core of literary narrative. Thus, their claim about novelty is not entirely accurate. Only when they speak about how literature ‘might help readers locate themselves’ by expanding their horizons and expectations through role models to transcend perceived limitations do they successfully distance themselves from the overriding paradigm operative in the social sciences (p. 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Woolf, *Room of One’s Own*, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Wesley Morris, ‘Toni Morrison Taught Me How to Think’, *New York Times*, August 7, 2019 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/books/toni-morrison-death-remembrance.html>> [accessed August 7, 2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 1 of ‘Conclusion’. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Michael Bérubé, Hester Blum, Christopher Castiglia, and Julia Spicher Kasdorf, ‘Community Reading and Social Imagination’, *PMLA*,125.2 (Mar. 2010), 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Ibid., pp. 419–20. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Woolf, *Room of One’s Own*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Cf. Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, ‘Introduction’ and beginning of ‘Conclusion and Speculations’ (pp. 1–2). Unlike her, however, I do not draw such a strong distinction between the writing process and its product in earlier narratives of self-consciousness (e.g., *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*) on the one hand and on a perceived shift to a focus on the ‘concretization’ of the text via the reading process in later works (e.g., Gide’s *Journal des faux-monnayeurs*, Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*) on the other. Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) was one of the first critics to confront the implications of narrative narcissism. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Pinker concludes, that ‘Moral reasoning requires proportionality’ (*Enlightenment Now*, p.47). [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘The American Scholar’, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Joseph Collins, *The Doctor Looks at Literature: Psychological Studies of Life and Literature* (New York: Doran, 1923), p. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Faith Beasley and Katharine Ann Jensen, ‘Introduction’, in *Approaches to the Teaching of Lafayette’s La Princesse de Clèves* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1998), p. 5. The volume offers a number of useful introductions to the novel’s innovative features and significance for French literary history. Very informative is Joan DeJean’s reconstruction of Lafayette’s authorship in ‘Classics in the Making’ published in *Femmes et Littérature. Une histoire culturelle*, i: *Moyen Âge–XXIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2022) (read in pre-publication manuscript made available by the author). [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. DeJean, ‘Classics in the Making’, pp. 16–17, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Noted French literary historian Joan DeJean examines the role of women writers in the transition from *histoire* to *nouvelle* and the intertwining of politics and narrative fiction in her acclaimed monograph, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), esp. ch. 3: ‘What Is an Author? Lafayette and the Generation of 1660–80’, pp. 94–126. DeJean argues that, similar to Scudéry’s approach, Lafayette’s tender geographies cannot be detached from the context of their creation. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Cited by Robin Buss, ‘Introduction’, Mme de Lafayette, *The Princess de Clèves*. Translated with Introduction and Notes by Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Letter of Madame de Lafayette to Joseph Marie de Lescheraine of 1678, cited in Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette, *The Princess of Clèves, Contemporary Reactions, Criticism*, edited and with a revised translation by John D. Lyons (New York: Norton, 1994), p. 121. Citation augmented at times by phrasing from Robin Buss’s version in square brackets when the latter seems to capture finer nuance. The Norton critical edition also contains valuable documents chronicling the novel’s early and later reception. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Joan DeJean, ‘The Politics of Genre: Madeleine de Scudéry and the Rise of the French Novel’, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 29.3 (Fall 1989), *Women, Gender, Genre*, 43–51, presents an earlier example which Mme de Lafayette and her collaborators surely new well: Scudéry’s multivolume *Artamène, ou le Grand Cyrus*. Assessing this traditional novel as an incubator for appreciating the way Scudéry utilizes the nexus of historical fact and narrative fiction to comment on contemporary issues in the process of birthing the modern novel, DeJean contends, for instance:

     *Artamène* is a unique example of *bel esprit* not only produced during civil war but as a commentary on the actions and the effects of such conflict [i.e., Fronde years]. As such, the vision of heroism that it presents, in particular, is a far cry from the unproblematic tale of military prowess at the service of the monarchy [...]. Rather, Scudéry formulates an intricate questioning of the right to kingship in which controversial issues—Who deserves to be king? Should merit play a role in the designation of a monarch?—are discreetly woven in filigree throughout her tales of love unrequited and deferred. (p 47)

     Similarly, Scudéry questions the traditional role assigned to women, creating a new vocabulary to express new ideas about merit and self-determination (this content downloaded from 129.59.95.115 on October 23, 2021). All use subject to <<https://about.jstor.org/terms>.> DeJean updates her assessment in ‘Classics in the Making’. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburg, *Versuch über den Roman* (1774; reprint, Stuttgart, 1965), xiii: ‘Die Romane entstanden nicht aus dem Genie der Autoren allein; die Sitten der Zeit gaben ihnen das Daseyn.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. de Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Ibid.,p. 10–11; pp. 33–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. On the historical meaning of *préciosité*,see Roger Lathuillere, *La Préciosité: Etude historique et linguistique* (Geneva: Droz, 1966). The citation is from Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), who lists the varied fields of knowledge in which sensibility operated (p. 8). Although aimed at the English tradition, Ellis’s remark can easily be applied to the situation of Madame de Lafayette, who created a ‘heteroglossia’ in Hunter’s sense of the term (*Before Novels*, pp. 22–25). On Lafayette’s relation to sensibility, see DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns*, ch. 3, ‘A Short History of the Human Heart’ (pp. 78–121). [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Bethany Wiggin, *Novel Translations: The European Novel and the German Book, 1680–1730* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Raymond Picard, *Two Centuries of French Literature* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), pp. 122–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,pp. v, 4, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Ibid.,p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Ibid., p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Ibid.,pp. 17–18, 28–29. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Ibid.,p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Ibid.,p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Ibid.,p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Ibid.,p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Ibid.,pp. 47–48. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Gasset, *Man and People*, p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Cf. e.g. de Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,pp. 7, 48, 88–89, 91, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Gasset, *Man and People*, p.117. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Cf. de Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Joan DeJean, ‘Lafayette’s Ellipses: The Privileges of Anonymity’, *PMLA*,99 (Oct. 1984), 884–902 (pp. 896–97). In general, I am indebted to DeJean’s illuminating reading of the novel with its emphasis on the significance of ellipsis as simultaneously signifying a presence and absence in Lafayette’s writing for autonomy (e.g., p. 890). Richard H. Moye, ‘Silent Victory: Narrative, Appropriation, and Autonomy in *La Princesse de Clèves*’, *MLN*,104.4 (Sept. 1989), 845–60, French issue tends to use ‘avowal’ for *aveu* (although not consistently). [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. DeJean, ‘Lafayette’s Ellipses’, p. 897. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,p. 66: ‘Songez seulement que la prudence ne veut pas qu’une femme de mon âge et maîtresse de sa conduite demeure exposée au milieu de la cour’), *La Princesse de Clèves*, Bibliothèque électronique du Québec, Collection À tous les vents, vol. 1285: version 1.0; pp. 186–87. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,p. 66. / *La Princesse de Clèves*, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. De Lafayette, *La Princesse de Clèves*, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*, p. 66. / *La Princesse de Clèves*, p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. La Fayette had already portrayed a ‘wildly irrational case of love’ in Zayde that suggests a radically different view of human psychology. See DeJean, ‘Classics in the Making’, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,p. 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Ibid.,p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Ibid.,pp. 89–91. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Ibid.,pp. 100–04. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Ibid.,p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Ibid.,p. 91. ‘La passion n’a jamais été si tendre et si violente qu’elle l’était alors en ce prince. [...] il s’abandonna aux transports de son amour, et son cœur en fut tellement pressé qu’il fut contraint de laisser couler quelques larmes; [...] elles étaient mêlées de douceur et de ce charme qui ne se trouve que dans l’amour’ (*Princesse de Clèves*, La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec, Collection À tous les vents Volume 1285: version 1.0; pp. 257–58). [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,p. 86, cf. p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Ibid.,p. 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. DeJean, ‘Lafayette’s Ellipses’, p. 899. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Ibid.,p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Ibid.,p. 89; de Lafayette, *Princesse de Clèves*, 147–48.

     il vit beaucoup de lumières dans le cabinet; toutes les fenêtres en étaient ouvertes, et, en se glissant le long des palissades, il s’en approcha avec un trouble et une émotion qu’il est aisé de se représenter. Il se rangea derrière une des fenêtres qui servaient de porte, pour voir ce que faisait Mme de Clèves. Il vit qu’elle était seule; mais il la vit d’une si admirable beauté qu’à peine fut-il maître du transport que lui donna cette vue. Il faisait chaud, et elle n’avait rien sur sa tête et sur sa gorge que ses cheveux confusément rattachés. Elle était sur un lit de repos, avec une table devant elle, où il y avait plusieurs corbeilles pleines de rubans; elle en choisit quelques-uns, et M. de Nemours remarqua que c’étaient les mêmes couleurs qu’il avait portées au tournoi. Il vit qu’elle en faisait des nœuds à une canne des Indes, fort extraordinaire, qu’il avait portée quelque temps, et qu’il avait donnée à sa sœur, à qui M. de Clèves l’avait prise sans faire semblant de la reconnaitre pour avoir été à M. de Nemours. Après qu’elle eut achevé son ouvrage, avec une grâce et une douceur que répandaient sur son visage les sentiments qu’elle avait dans le cœur, elle prit un flambeau et s’en alla proche d’une grande table, vis-à-vis du tableau du siège de Metz, où était le portrait de M. de Nemours; elle s’assit, et se mit à regarder ce portrait avec une attention et une rêverie que la passion seule peut donner. (*La Princesse de Clèves*, La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec, Collection À tous les vents, vol. 1285: version 1.0; pp. 254–55) [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. For a close reading of the pavilion scene that moves in the same direction as my interpretation, see Kurt Weinberg, ‘The Lady and the Unicorn, or M. de Nemours à Coulommiers: Enigma, Blazon and Emblem in *La Princesse de Clevès*’, *Euphorion*,71.4 (1977), 306–35. Reprinted in de Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*, pp. 191–205 (p. 196). Weinberg designates the two chambers of the pavilion as the chambers of the princess’s heart divided between the more public antechamber and the inner sanctum of her private thoughts and feelings. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*, pp. 164–70. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. *La Princesse de Cl*è*ves, Dossier de Genevi*è*ve Winter*, p. 24 <<https://www.furet.com/media/pdf/feuilletage/9/7/8/2/0/7/2/8/9782072862083.pdf>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,pp. 102, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Moye, ‘Silent Victory’ (p. 846, nn. 2–3) cites a number of other studies devoted to the ideal of *repos* in the novel. See especially Harriet Allentuch, ‘The Will to Refuse in the *Princesse de Cleves*’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*,44 (1975), 185– 98; Domna Stanton, ‘The Ideal of “repos” in 17th-Century French Literature’, *L’Esprit Createur*,15 (1975), 79–104. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,p. 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Ibid.,p. 104; de Lafayette, *Princesse de Clèves*, 169.

     Par vanité ou par goût, toutes les femmes souhaitent de vous attacher; il y en a peu à qui vous ne plaisiez ; mon expérience me ferait croire qu’il n’y en a point à qui vous ne puissiez plaire. Je vous croirais toujours amoureux et aimé, et je ne me tromperais pas souvent; dans cet état, néanmoins, je n’aurais d’autre parti à prendre que celui de la souffrance; je ne sais même si j’oserais me plaindre. On fait des reproches à un amant; mais en fait-on à un mari, quand on n’a qu’à lui reprocher de n’avoir plus d’amour ? Quand je pourrais m’accoutumer à cette sorte de malheur, pourrais-je m’accoutumer à celui de croire voir toujours M. de Clèves vous accuser de sa mort, me reprocher de vous avoir aimé, de vous avoir épousé, et me faite sentir la différence de son attachement au vôtre? Il est impossible, continua-t-elle, de passer par-dessus des raisons si fortes; il faut que je demeure dans l’état où je suis, et dans les résolutions que j’ai prises de n’en sortir jamais. (*La Princesse de Clèves*, La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec, Collection À tous les vents, vol. 1285: version 1.0; pp. 297–98) [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. De Lafayette, *Princess of Clèves*,p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. This action stands in contrast to Racine’s *Phèdre*, who poisons herself to rid the world of her impurity. In this regard, DeJean notes:

     *Aveu* in the sense of ‘confession’ enters French literature in classical theater, most famously in Racine’s *Phèdre* (1677), in which it refers to the heroine’s revelation of Hippolyte’s name and thereby of her crime of passion. For Phèdre, the *aveu* is the text of her unraveling, mark of the self-dispossession that leads directly to her suicide. Lafayette rejects this (male) view of female revelation as loss of self. (‘Lafayette’s Ellipses’, p. 897)

     Mme. de Clèves retains her purity through self-negation. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. *La princesse de Clèves, La Fayette, un roman classique ou précieux?* Bac EAF 2022 <[http://www.sujetscorrigesbac.fr/pages/preparer-l-epreuve-anticipee-de-francais/travailler-et-preparer-la-sequence-roman-pour-l-eaf/dissertations-bac-de-francais-2020-le-roman/la-princesse-de-cleves-la-fayette-un-roman-classique- ou-precieux-bac-eaf-2020.html](http://www.sujetscorrigesbac.fr/pages/preparer-l-epreuve-anticipee-de-francais/travailler-et-preparer-la-sequence-roman-pour-l-eaf/dissertations-bac-de-francais-2020-le-roman/la-princesse-de-cleves-la-fayette-un-roman-classique-ou-precieux-bac-eaf-2020.html)>. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Moye, ‘Silent Victory’, p. 847. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Wiggin, *Novel Translations*, p. 65. On gallantry, the rise of the novel, and new Enlightenment ideals, see also John A. McCarthy, ‘The Gallant Novel and the German Enlightenment, 1670–1750’, in *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France, and Germany*, ed. by Alan Charles Kors and Paul J. Korshin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), pp. 185–217. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. DeJean, ‘Lafayette’s Ellipses’, pp. 898–99. Germany around 1700 also experienced a similar emergence of affective style anchored in a growing reliance on feeling (*emotion* and *sensibilité*) in contrast to the political maneuvering of the (high) aristocracy driven by a desire for revenge and self-advancement. The newly emergent German ideal of *Gelassenheit* (equanimity, self-possession) was semantically related to *indifférence* and especially to *repos*. It was, moreover, an objective for both sexes (McCarthy, ‘Gallant Novel’, pp. 187–89). On this *Vorsubjektivismus* (antecedent subjectivism), see Heinrich Tiemann, *Die heroisch-galanten Romane August Bohses als Ausdruck der seelischen Entwicklung in der Generation von 1689–1710*, Dr.phl. Diss., Kiel, 1932), p. 116. Tiemann forcefully asserts: ‘Das entscheidend Neue ist die Überwindung des Aktivismus; man strebt nach völlig gelassener Lebenshaltung; Übung der Geduld ist das höchste Ideal’ (p. 75: ‘Decidedly new is the rejection of political activity; the new goal is a completely relaxed attitude; the exercising of patience is the highest ideal’). [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Katharine Ann Jensen, ‘Making Sense of the Ending: Passion, Virtue, and Female Subjectivity’, in *Approaches to Teaching Lafayette’s* The Princess of Clèves, ed. by Faith E. Beasley and Katharine Ann Jensen (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1998), pp. 68–75:

     Her refusal to marry the man she desires is an exceptional act [...] because it defies patriarchal norms according to which women act in men’s interest, not on behalf of their own desires. Though the princess, in fact, concedes to these norms by enlisting her duty to her husband to shore up her argument against Nemours and to achieve self-preservation and peace of mind, her refusal to marry Nemours is, finally, a profoundly self-conscious, self-affirming act based on experience and on insight into the destructive consequences of male sexual privilege, the disempowering force of desire, and the confining structure of marriage. [...] What the princess wants more than the momentary pleasure of sexual fulfillment is the lasting benefit of self and a life she can control. (pp. 74–75)

     An exceptional act, yes. But not without precedence. Joan DeJean points out that the *précieuses* also rejected marriage (‘Classics in the Making’, p. 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Brodkey, ‘Reading’, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Joan DeJean, ‘1654’, in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Joan DeJean, ‘Mapping the Heart’, 77. The article reproduces the text of a lecture given at the Einstein Forum in Potsdam in June 1999 <<https://www.mvbz.fu-> [berlin.de/wissenschaftskommunikation/publikationsfoerderung/querelles\_jahrbuch/qjb\_bd07/qjb\_bd07\_072- 085.pdf](https://www.mvbz.fu-berlin.de/wissenschaftskommunikation/publikationsfoerderung/querelles_jahrbuch/qjb_bd07/qjb_bd07_072-085.pdf)>. A more detailed version is available in DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns*, ch. 3: ‘A Short History of the Human Heart’ (pp. 78–122). [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Gasset, *Man and People*, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Louis Skye, ‘*The Princess of Clèves*: A Lively Retelling of a Classic Tale’, October 8, 2019. *The Princess of Clèves*, adapted by Claire Bouilhac and Catel Muller (EuRoPe Comics, Sept. 2019) <[https://womenwriteaboutcomics.com/2019/10/the-princess-of-cleves-a-lively-retelling-of-a-classic-tale>.](https://womenwriteaboutcomics.com/2019/10/the-princess-of-cleves-a-lively-retelling-of-a-classic-tale/) [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Geoffry Turovsky, ‘Literary History Meets the History of Reading: The Case of *La Princesse de Clèves* and Its (Non)readers’, *French Historical Studies*,41.3 (August 2018), 427–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. *The Feminist Encyclopedia of German Literature*, edited by Friederike Ursula Eigler, Susanne Kord (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 6; E. Coromina Pou, ‘The First Translations into Catalan and Spanish of *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678): A French Classic Ushering in the Modern Novel’ <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324693202\_The\_first\_translations\_into\_Catalan\_and\_Spanish\_of\_La\_Prin](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324693202_The_first_translations_into_Catalan_and_Spanish_of_La_Princesse_de_Cleves_1678_A_French_classic_ushering_in_the_modern_novel) [cesse\_de\_Cleves\_1678\_A\_French\_classic\_ushering\_in\_the\_modern\_novel>.](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324693202_The_first_translations_into_Catalan_and_Spanish_of_La_Princesse_de_Cleves_1678_A_French_classic_ushering_in_the_modern_novel) [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. ‘Man denkt nicht über sich, wenn man sich im Spiegel betrachtet, aber man fühlt sich und läßt sich gelten. So ist es auch mit jenen moralischen Nachbildern, an denen man seine Sitten und Neigungen, seine Gewohnheiten und Eigenheiten, wie im Schattenriß, erkennt und mit brüderlicher Innigkeit zu fassen und zu umarmen strebt’ (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, in *Werke in 14 Bänden*, Hamburger Ausgabe, ed. by Erich Trunz (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1982), ix, 464). The English translation is cited according to *Goethe’s Collected Works*, 12 vols, iv: *From My Life. Poetry and Truth*, ed. by Thomas P. Saine and Jeffrey L. Sammons, trans. by Robert R. Heitner (New York: Suhrkamp, 1987), xi, 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated with an introduction and notesby Michael Hulse (New York: Penguin, 1989), pp. 14–16. In some instances, I find Hulse’s translation misses the mark a bit and, hence, add my deletions and substitutions in square brackets. Hulse’s translation is much more accessible than Victor Lange’s (1949) version that was thoroughly revised for *Goethe’s Collected Works*, 12 vols, ed. by David E. Wellbery (New York: Suhrkamp, 1987–88), xi, 3–87. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. See also Michael Hulse, ‘Introduction’, Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 14–16. Mary Shelley includes *Werther* as one of the three books that Frankenstein used to form his view of the world. The other two are Plutarch’s *Lives* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*! Napoleon claims to have read the book seven times. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Erich Trunz (ed.), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, Goethes Werke, 12 vols, 6th edn (Munich: Hanser, 1965), vi, 535. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Goethe, *Goethe’s Collected Works*, iv, 432; Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, ix, 589: ‘Denn wie es nur eines geringen Zündstoffes bedarf, um eine gewaltige Mine zu entschleudern, so war auch die Explosion, welche sich hierauf im Publikum ereignete, deshalb so gewaltig.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. This is frequently noted in numerous reviews. See, e.g., Trunz (ed.), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, vi, 528–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, ix, 588. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, Book, ?, May–September 1772. Wolfgang Kayser traces the novel’s origins in ‘Die Entstehung von Goethes Werther’, *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 19.1 (1941): 430–57. Nicholas Boyle fleshes out the story of Werther by integrating Goethe’s experiences, correspondence, and other poetic works of the era (his own and those of others) in his monumental biography, *Goethe*: *The Poet and the Age*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1:162–86 et passim. As an aside, I might remark that Goethe clearly anticipates in this passage the more recent trends of ‘nature writing’ and material ecocriticism that opens the senses to all aspects of nature, enhances an awareness of all living things in their uniqueness, and leads to harmony with them. Nature Writing is characterized by the entwinement of such subjective experience and the insights of objective natural science. On his website Ron Horten, explains very much in the manner of Goethe that nature writing is relational, for instance: ‘It is about the interconnections, the interrelationships, that form our world. Nature writing binds people to the natural world with words of understanding, respect, admiration, and love’ (Ron Harton, [editor@naturewriting.com](mailto:editor@naturewriting.com) (<https://naturewriting.com/about/>). [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. On an ‘ecological aesthetics’ complemented by an ethical underlayment, see Richard Nordquist, ‘What Is Nature Writing? Definition and Examples’, updated April 14, 2017 <[https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-nature-writing-](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-nature-writing-1691423) [1691423](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-nature-writing-1691423)>. See also Heather Sullivan, ‘New Materialism’, in *Ecocriticism. Eine Einführung*, ed. by Gabriele Dürbeck and Urte Stobbe (Cologne: Böhlau, 2015), pp. 57–67 (p. 57); Simone Schröder, ‘Deskription. Introspektion. Reflexion, Der Naturessay als ökologisches Genre in der deutschsprachigen Literatur seit 1800’, in *Ökologische Genres Naturästhetik—Umweltethik—Wissenspoetik*, ed. by Evi Zemanek (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), esp. pp. 9–56 and 340–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Astrida Orle Tantillo, *Goethe’s Modernisms* (New York: Continuum, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Jane K. Brown, *Goethe's Allegories of Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Penn Press, 2014), p. 144. See also K. R. Eissler, *Goethe. Eine psychoanalytische Studie*, i (Frankfurt a.M.: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1983), esp. Part I, ch. 3, pp. 133ff., for a psychoanalytical interpretation of the biographical background of the Werther character. More recently, Gerhard Oberlin, *Goethe, Schiller und das Unbewusste. Eine literaturpsychologische Studie* (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Ibid., 106; ‘merkwürdig’, Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 86–87. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Nicholas Boyle, Goethe: *The Poet and the Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 176, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Ibid., pp. 28, 49, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Ibid., p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Ibid., p. 111; Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 111; Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 133–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Boyle, *Goethe*, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Ibid., p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Tantillo, *Goethe’s Modernisms*, pp. 3, 25. Tantillo is primarily interested in presenting a view of Goethe that answers questions plaguing our contemporary world evident in discussions of the boundaries of personal freedom, the impact of digital media, the role of public education, loss of community spirit, or the excesses of religious empowerment. On the principle of compensation, see also pp. 5, 7, 10, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Boyle, *Goethe*, p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Cf., e.g., Uwe-K. Ketelsen, *Die Naturpoesie der norddeutschen Frühaufklärung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974). *Physikotheologie* should not be misconstrued to be synonymous with the contemporary conservative theory of Intelligent Design despite some superficial similarities. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 39, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Ibid., p. 39. In addition to the explicit citation of *Miss Jenny* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Werther and Lotte make veiled reference to popular contemporary works by Sophie LaRoche, Christoph M. Wieland, and Johann T. Hermes, all of which deal with domestic scenes or matters of the heart (see Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 39). Werther’s own loving descriptions of domestic scenes and conversations reveal the attraction they exert on him too: for instance, the famous bread-cutting scene when he first meets Lotte where she—in the role of her deceased mother—is caring for her siblings; the picturesque scene of the square in front of the inn with the two young boys patiently awaiting the return of their mother; Werther playing with Lotte’s young siblings; or the encounter with the obviously infatuated farmhand. All take place in the opening pages of the narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Ibid., p. 125; Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Jutta Assel, ‘Werther-Illustrationen. Bilddokumente als Rezeptionsgeschichte’, in *Die Leiden des alten und neuen Werther*, ed. byGeorg Jäger (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1984), pp. 57–105, 190–208. Assel covers the period from 1770 to 1870. Sentimental and Biedermeier styles dominate; they mirror the taste of the expanding middling classes. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 48. / Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Boyle, *Goethe*, p. 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. The blurred lines are also apparent in *Faust* which dates from 1775. Goethe labels *Faust* as a dramatic poem, although its protagonist also represents the fulfillment of aspirations rather than thwarted good intentions. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Herbert Schöffler, ‘*Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. Ihr geistesgeschichtlicher Hintergrund’, in H. Schöffler, *Deutscher Geist im 18. Jahrhundert. Essays zur Geistes- und Religionsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), pp. 155–81 (p. 181). [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Tantillo avers:

     Werther’s story, however, presents a much more complex case in which an extreme example of modern individualism is subtly contrasted against an older, more communally ordered tradition. Thus, rather than being a whole-hearted endorsement of modernity, Werther’s inability to cope with the newer ways highlight what has been lost in the older traditions. (*Goethe’s Modernisms*, p. 21 and ch. 3)

     Tantillo stands in stark contrast to Boyle’s position on the modernity of *Werther*. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethics and Treatise on the Correction of the Intellect*, trans. by Andrew Boyle and rev. by G. H. R. Parkinson (London: Dent, 1993), pp. 269, 275–76, 93–96, 194. Alfred Schmidt, ‘Natur’, in *Goethe Handbuch*, ed. by Bernd Witte et al., 4 vols (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1998), iv.2, 755–76, goes into great detail regarding Goethe’s evolving attitude toward nature. On ‘Gott-Natur’, see Günter Niggl, ‘*In allen Elementen Gottes Gegenwart*’*: Religion in Goethes Dichtung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010), p. 40. Chapters 1 (‘Goethe und das Christentum’) and 2 (‘Goethes Religiosität’) are most relevant here (pp. 9–60). Niggl traces the three stages of Goethe’s religious views as they evolved from early confessional orthodoxy to close familiarity with Holy Writ, and his personal use of Christianity (‘Privatgebrauch’) in the wake of his reading of Gottfried Arnold’s *Unpartheyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie* (1699/1700). See also Peter Hofmann, *Goethes Theologie* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001), pp. 330–54. In a letter of June 9, 1785 to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi Goethe spoke of ‘das Dasein ist Gott’ (WA IV, vii, 62–64). [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. The verb ‘fehlen’ is sometimes rendered as ‘to rob’ or ‘to lose’ or ‘to give ourselves up’. However, ‘to rob’, ‘lose’, or simply ‘to give up’ do not strike me as being entirely apt renderings of the German in this context. ‘Fehlen’ actually means ‘to lack’ in the sense of being missing or absent. It does not denote depriving someone of something through force or through accidental misplacement, or through renunciation. Of course, to lack something could be the result of deprivation and giving up. However, the overall context of the narrative fabric does not readily point to a willful act, intervention by another, or an accident. It all points toward a process. Therefore, I prefer to translate ‘fehlen’ as ‘to lack’. It too conveys the idea that something once present is now gone due solely to nature’s agency. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Ibid.; Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 569. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. e.g., Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 62, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 63; Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Ibid., p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Ibid., pp. 120–25. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Ibid., p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Ibid., p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. The historical precedent for Werther’s suicide was that of Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem. Charlotte was modelled on Heinrich Adam Buff’s then 19-year-old daughter, Charlotte Sophie Henriette (1753–1828) with whom Goethe became infatuated during his sojourn in Wetzlar. Subsequently, she married Christian Kestner. Charlotte had informed Goethe that they could not be more than friends. Kestner was the historical model for Albert. In November 1774, Kestner stated that Goethe invested himself in Werther in the first part of the novel, then inserted Jerusalem into the character in the second part. There are any number of other historical precedents. Werther’s birthday (August 28) is the same as Goethe’s; Werther abruptly leaves Wahlheim on September 10, the same day and month that Goethe abruptly departed from Wetzlar. See Hulse, ‘Introduction’, Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 5–11. Eric Trunz provides a wealth of information on the origins and contemporary reception of Werther in his edition (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 514–60). Other valuable resources include Kurt Rothmann (ed.), *Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Die Leiden des jungen Werthers. Erläuterungen und Dokumente*, Universal-Bibliothek. Nr. 8113 (Philipp Reclam jun., Stuttgart 1971) and Boyle, *Goethe*, pp. 168–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. ‘Als einziger Schuldiger in diesem aus *einer* Kraft gestalteten Drama bleibt eben diese blind waltende eine Kraft, die den Menschen durch sein bestes schuldig werden läßt, um ihn dann der Pein zu überlassen’ (Schöffler, ‘*Die Leiden des jungen Werther*’, p. 181). [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 26–31. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. The translation of ‘wenn’ in the original as the conditional ‘if’ is not justified by the context in which it occurs. ‘Wenn’ can of course be translated as ‘if’ connoting a supposition, but it frequently simply denotes the temporal ‘when’ as in ‘whenever’, that is as a recurring event. Hence, I substitute ‘when’ for Hulse’s ‘if’. My alteration is further justified by the preceding ‘wenn/when’-clauses, which Hulse appropriately translates as ‘when’. I have also altered ‘lie peacefully’ to simply ‘exist’ because Hulse’s rendition is an unnecessary embellishment. The German original reads: ‘wenn’s dann um meine Augen dämmert, und die Welt um mich her und der Himmel ganz in meiner Seele ruhn wie die Gestalt einer Geliebten—dann sehne ich mich oft und denke’ (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 26–27.

     Wenn das liebe Tal um mich dampft, und die hohe Sonne an der Oberfläche der undurchdringlichen Finsternis meine Waldes ruht, und nur einzelne Strahlen sich in das innere Heiligtum stehlen, ich dann im hohen Grase am fallenden Bache liege, und näher an der Erde tausend mannigfaltige Gräschen mir merkwürdig werden; wenn ich das Wimmeln der kleinen Welt zwischen Halmen, die unzähligen, unergründlichen Gestalten der Würmchen, der Mückchen näher an meinem Herzen fühle, und für die Gegenwart des Allmächtigen, der uns nach seinem Bilde schuf, das Wehen des Alliebenden, der uns in ewiger Wonne schwebend trägt und erhält; mein Freund! Wenn’s dann um meine Augen dämmert, und die Welt um mich her und der Himmel ganz in meiner Seele ruhn wie die Gestalt einer Geliebten—dann sehne ich mich oft und denke: Ach könntest du das wieder ausdrücken, könntest du dem Papiere das einhauchen, was so voll, so warm in dir lebt, daß es würde der Spiegel deiner Seele, wie deine Seele ist der Spiegel des unendlichen Gottes!—Mein Freund—Aber ich gehe darüber zugrunde, ich erliege unter der Gewalt der Herrlichkeit der Erscheinungen. (*Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 9) [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Goethe’s natural-science studies are based on his conviction that we humans occupy the middle ground between the grandiose and the miniscule realms of nature. Cf., e.g., Margrit Wyder, *Goethes Naturmodell: Die Scala Naturae und ihre Transformationen* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. The original form of the poem, altered slightly in 1789, was titled ‘Gesang der lieblichen Geister in der Wüste’ (‘Song of the Lovely Spirits in the Desert’) (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, i, 143). [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Elsewhere I apply the process approach to Goethe’s *Faust*. See J. A. McCarthy, ‘Cognitive Mapping: Adam, Venus, and Faust’, in *The Present Word: Culture, Society and the Site of Literature*, ed. by John Walker (Cambridge: Legenda, 2013), pp. 22–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. The female friend is most likely a reference to the older Susanne von Klettenberg, a Pietist, who was an inspiration to young Goethe during his long convalescence from a serious illness in 1768–70. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 30–31.

     Wenn ich die Einschränkung ansehe, in welcher die tätigen und forschenden Kräfte des Menschen eingesperrt sind; wenn ich sehe, wie alle Wirksamkeit dahinaus läuft, sich die Befriedigung von Bedürfnissen zu verschaffen, die wieder keinen Zweck haben, als unsere arme Existenz zu verlängern, und dann, daß alle Beruhigung über gewisse Punkte des Nachforschens nur eine träumende Resignation ist, da man sich die Wände, zwischen denen man gefangen sitzt, mit bunten Gestalten und lichten Aussichten bemalt—Das alles, Wilhelm, macht mich stumm. Ich kehre in mich selbst zurück, und finde eine Welt! Wieder mehr in Ahnung und dunkler Begier als in Darstellung und lebendiger Kraft. Und da schwimmt alles vor meinen Sinnen, und ich lächle dann so träumend weiter in die Welt. (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 13) [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 29 et passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Ibid., pp. 31, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Ibid., p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 14; Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 44. About the same time Goethe expressed his intimacy with nature in the poem, ‘Auf dem See’ (1775), composed after an outing on Lake Zurich. The opening lines read: ‘Und frische Nahrung, neues Blut / Saug ich aus freier Welt.; Wie ist Natur so hold und gut, / Die mich am Busen hält!’ (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*,i, 102). In the initial version of the poem Goethe expressed the physicality of the Self’s bond with nature even more forcefully by using the metaphor of an umbilical cord: ‘Ich saug’ an meiner Nabelschnur / Nun Nahrung aus der Welt. / Und herrlich ist rings die Natur, / Die mich am Busen hält’. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, i, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. See, e.g., John A. McCarthy, ‘The “Pregnant Point”: Goethe on Complexity, Interdisciplinarity, and Emergence’, in *Goethe, Chaos, and Complexity*, ed. by Herbert Rowland (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 17–31; John A. McCarthy, ‘Erscheinung, Erscheinen (Manifestation)’, *Goethe-Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts* 1.2 (Nov. 2021) <doi:10.5195/glpc.2021.31>. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Tantillo, *Goethe’s Modernisms*, pp. 7–8. In her long chapter titled ‘Werther the Evangelical’ (pp. 69–118), Tantillo applies the principle of compensation to Goethe’s use of the narrative to cleanse and unify his own divided spirit by contrasting the poet’s elaborate recounting of his mood that led him to write the novel and the protagonist’s descent into self-destruction. The writing saved Goethe from a similar fate (pp. 99–100). Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, xiv, 317. Tantillo offers a perspicacious analysis of Pietistic and especially Catholic presence in the novel, which I find intriguing although somewhat troubling because she totally ignores the Catholic mystical tradition that, to my mind, is even more to the point. In any event, I do not agree that Werther’s ‘self-destruction’ that results from passionate and irrational self-absorption has to be seen as a failure of his personal making (p. 101). Her purpose is to argue for Goethe’s ‘exculpation’ via confessional literature, not to exculpate Werther himself. Also, she has decided not to look at the pro-Werther side of interpretations of the novel in favor of reading the novel through the lens of contemporary evangelical affinities (pp. 73–74, 76, 83–84). Werther’s spiritual progression mirrors, I suggest, the mystic’s ever-increasing intensity of spirituality. But I choose not to follow a purely religious path in favor of a naturalistic one. Spirituality remains, nonetheless, a dimension of the *intus*–*extus* argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. Astrida Orle Tantillo, *The Will to Create: Goethe’s Philosophy of Nature* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Carsten Zelle, *Angenehmes Grauen. Literaturhistorische Beiträge zur Ästhetik des Schrecklichen im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Ibid., p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Ibid., p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Ibid., pp. 63–64. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Ibid., p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Ibid., p. 33. Goethe was probably thinking of Anna Elisabeth Stöber who committed suicide in Frankfurt a.M. on December 29, 1769, having been deserted by her lover. Goethe was convalescing in Frankfurt at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. Tantillo, *Goethe’s Modernisms*,p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 29, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, Book, ?, September 1772. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. See, e.g., Brian I. McInnis, ‘Haller, Unzer, and Science as Process’, in *The Early History of Embodied Cognition 1740–1920. The Lebenskraft-Debate in German Science, Music, and Literature*, ed. by John A. McCarthy et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 99–121; Heather I. Sullivan, ‘Agency in the Anthropocene: Goethe, Radical Reality, and the New Materialisms’, in *Early History of Embodied Cognition*, ed. by McCarthy et al., pp. 285–304; Monica Ledoux, ‘*Lebenskraft*, Radical Reality, and Occidental Medicine: How Science Is Leading Us back to a Holistic View’, in *Early History of Embodied Cognition*, ed. by McCarthy et al., pp. 305–14. John A. McCarthy, ‘Introduction: Life Matters’, in *Early History of Embodied Cognition*, ed. by McCarthy et al., esp. pp. 26–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. An older spelling of *wert* included a silent ‘h’: the Indo-Germanic root is obvious in *werth*/worth. For some unobvious reason, Jane Brown misses the crucial comparative form, ‘Werther’, rendering it as ‘worthy’. See Brown, *Goethe's Allegories of Identity*, end of ch. 1, ‘Representing Subjectivity’ <<https://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/toc/15236_toc.html>>. Tantillo does not address the issue of Werther’s name. The thrust of her argument in her Werther chapter is to demonstrate that ‘Werther is not, in the end, the poster-child for modern individualism.’ Seen from the perspective of social restraint, the claim is true enough. However, it fails to explain why Goethe considered the protagonist ‘worthier’ than others depicted in the novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 12, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Ibid., p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Ibid., p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Brown, *Goethe's Allegories of Identity*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Hulse mistranslates ‘ein trüber, neblicher Tag hält sie bedeckt’, as ‘they are clouded by cheerless mists’. He takes ‘sie’ to be a plural form referring to ‘Augen’ rather than the singular form referring to ‘die Sonne’, which is the closer, hence appropriate referent. Werther’s eyes are not clouded over; the sun is. He sees quite clearly. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 126–27.

     Zum letztenmale denn, zum leztenmale schlage ich diese Augen auf. Sie sollen, ach die Sonne nicht mehr sehn, ein trüber, neblicher Tag hält sie bedeckt. So traure denn, Natur! Dein Sohn, dein Freund, dein Geliebter naht sich seinem Ende. Lotte, das ist ein Gefühl ohnegleichen, und doch kommt es dem dämmernden Traum am nächsten, zu sich zu sagen: das ist der letzte Morgen. Der letzte! Lotte, ich habe keinen Sinn für das Wort: der letzte! Stehe ich nicht da in meiner ganzen Kraft, und morgen liege ich ausgestreckt und schlaff am Boden. Sterben! Was heißt das? Siehe, wir träumen, wenn wir vom Tode reden. Ich habe manchen sterbenden sehen; aber so eingeschränkt ist die Menschheit, daß sie für dieses Daseins Anfang und Ende keinen Sinn hat. Jetzt noch mein, dein! Dein, o Geliebte! Und einen Augenblick –getrennt, geschieden—vielleicht auf ewig?—Nein, Lotte, nein—wie kann ich vergehen? Wie kannst du vergehen? Wir *sind* ja!—Vergehen!—Was heißt das? Das ist wieder ein Wort, ein leerer Schall, ohne Gefühl für mein Herz. ... Sterben! Grab! Ich verstehe die Worte nicht! (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 116) [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Cf. Schöffler; Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 578–79. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. e.g., Lotte clearly states: ‘Warum denn mich, Werther? just mich, das Eigentum eines andern? just das? Ich fürchte, es ist nur die Unmöglichkeit, mich zu besitzen, die Ihnen diesen Wunsch so reizend macht’ (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 102–03). How significant this insight is, Goethe made unmistakable when he has Werther exclaim his striving for infinity in terms anticipating the essential drive in *Faust*:

     Was ist der Mensch, der gepriesene Halbgott! Ermangeln ihm nicht eben da die Kräfte, wo er sie am nötigsten braucht? Und wenn er in Freude sich aufschwingt oder im Leiden versinkt, wir er nicht in beiden eben da aufgehalten, eben da zu dem stumpfen, kalten Bewußtsein wieder zurückgebracht, da er sich in der Fülle des Unendlichen zu verlieren sehnte? (ibid., p. 92)

     Lotte plays a role for Werther that Gretchen plays for Faust in his attraction to the ‘Eternal Feminine’. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, 90. ‘Ja, es ist so. Wie die Natur sich zum Herbste neigt, wird es Herbst in mir und um mich her. Meine Blätter werden gelb, und schon sind die Blätter der benachbarten Bäume abgefallen’ (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 76–77). [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Ibid., p. 112. ‘wie gern hätte ich mein Menschsein drum gegeben, mit jenem Sturmwinde die Wolken zu zerreißen, die Fluten zu fassen! Ha! und wird nicht vielleicht dem Eingekerkerten einmal diese Wonne zuteil?’ [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. See, e.g., Katie Mack, ‘We Are Stardust. And Big Bang Dust. Neutron Star Collisions Are Essential to Our Origin Story’, *Cosmos*, July 5, 2019 <[https://cosmosmagazine.com/space/astrophysics/we-are-stardust-and-big-bang-dust/>.](https://cosmosmagazine.com/space/astrophysics/we-are-stardust-and-big-bang-dust/) [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Here I adapt John Noyes’s argument regarding the relationship between the cosmological and the phenomenological meanings of *Welt* in Goethe’s vocabulary: J. Noyes, ‘Welt (World)’, *Goethe-Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts*, 1.2 (Nov. 2021) <doi:10.5195/glpc.2021.48>. In the following, I combine it with Eric Trunz’s far-ranging yet superbly insightful and pointed analysis of *Werther* in his *Goethes Werke* (1965), Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*,vi, 536–60. More contemporary Goethe research tends to neglect Trunz. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, ix, 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. As is well known, in *Faust* Goethe labelled this realm the situs of the Mothers (die *Mütter*). [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. Boyle, *Goethe*, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Herbert Schöffler, ‘*Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. Ihr geistesgeschichtlicher Hintergrund’, in H. Schöffler, *Deutscher Geist im 18. Jahrhundert. Essays zur Geistes- und Religionsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), pp. 155–81 (pp. 160–63, 171, 173). Schöffler’s review of the major intellectual developments that dominated around 1770 (religious dogmatism, Cartesian rationality, deism, pantheism) is still quite valuable for understanding Werther’s world. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. ‘Diese [pioneering thinkers like Spinoza, Giordanno Bruno, and Leibniz] überzeugen sich von dem Ewigen, Notwendigen, Gesetzlichen, und such sich solche Begriffe zu bilden, welche unverwüstlich sind, ja durch die Betrachtung des Vergänglichen nicht aufgehoben, sondern vielmehr bestätigt werden’ (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, x, 78. And a little later: ‘Die Natur wirkt nach ewigen, notwendigen, dergestalt göttlichen Gesetzen, daß die Gottheit selbst daran nicht ändern könnte’ (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, x, 79). Cf. also *Tag- und Jahreshefte* 1813. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, x, 511. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, ix, 351; Goethe, *Goethe’s Collected Works*, iv, 261–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Goethe, *Goethe’s Collected Works*, iv, 262, ‘diese beiden mußten nun den Akt des Hervorbringens fortsetzen, und erschienen sich selbst wieder im Dritten, welches nun ebenso bestehend lebendig und ewig als das Ganze war’ (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, ix, 351). [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Goethe, *Goethe’s Collected Works*, iv, 262. ‘Dieses war nun Luzifer, welchem von nun an die ganze Schöpfungskraft übertragen war, und von dem alles übrige Sein ausgehen sollte’ (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, ix, 351). [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, ? [Dichtung und Wahrheit Book 8?] [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Goethe, *Goethe’s Collected Works*, iv, 262 ‘der eigentliche Puls des Lebens war wieder hergestellt, und Luzifer selbst konnte sich dieser Einwirkung nicht entziehen’ (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, ix, 352). [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, ix, 352–53; Goethe, *Goethe’s Collected Works*, iv, 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, ix, 353; Goethe, *Goethe’s Collected Works*, iv, 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, iv, 543. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. One was deed/doing which became the core motivator of *Faust*. Another was the idea of a moral imperative that could give lasting significance to the individual’s transience. An example is provided in the astronomical observatory scene of *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeymanship* (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, viii, 119–20). A third option was renunciation (*Entsagung*), for example, *Elective Affinities*. These pathways to experience infinity were not open to Werther. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Goethe, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, pp. 65–66; ‘mir untergräbt das Herz die verzehrende Kraft, die in dem All der Natur verborgen ist’ (Goethe, *Werke in 14 Bänden*, vi, 5; end of letter of August 18, 1771). [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Boyle, *Goethe*, pp. 173–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. T. J. Reed, ‘Goethe as Secular Icon’, in *Present* Word, ed. by John Walker, pp. 44–51, argues that secular writing such as Goethe’s ‘has its own modest transcendence’ independent of any religious doctrine. It ‘consists in transcending the limits of human lifetimes by rescuing transient existence into the relative permanence of cultural memory and celebration’ (p. 48). Reed contends that Nicholas Boyle has too strong a tendency to undervalue Goethe’s belief in fulfillment in the here-and-now. Reed provides greater detail in his review essay of Boyle’s *Goethe* in T. J. Reed, ‘Existence and Transcendence: Premises and Judgments in Nicholas Boyle’s Goethe’, *Oxford German Studies*, 30 (2001), 157–82. For Goethe’s part in the overall process of secularization in the course of the eighteenth-century, see also T. J. Reed, *Mehr Licht in Deutschland. Eine kleine Geschichte der Aufklärung* (Munich: Beck, 2009), pp. 105–09. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Goethe, *Goethe’s Collected Works*, iv, 433. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Lubbuck, *Craft of Fiction*,section I, para. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Yvan Leclerc, Danielle Girard, and Jean-Eudes Trouslard, *Extraits de la correspondance de Gustave Flaubert. Les* *‘années Bovary’—1851 à 1857*, ‘La difficulté d'écrire Madame Bovary’. See especially the letters to his confident Louise Colet #458, 529, 543, 547, 556 (Sept. 19, 1852, July 12, 1853, Aug. 26, 1853, Sept. 1, 1853, Oct. 17, 1853). <<https://flaubert-v1.univ-rouen.fr/bovary/atelier/lettres/MB_difficultes.html>.> Only the letter of September 19, 1852 is included in the letters translated for *Madame Bovary: Background and Sources, Essays in Criticism*, ed. with a new translation by Paul de Man (New York: Norton, 1965), pp. 309–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Lubbuck, *Craft of Fiction*,section V, para. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. James Wood, ‘The Man Behind Bovary: A Review of Frederick Brown, *Flaubert. A Biography* (Little, Brown, & Co., 2006)’, *New York Times Book Review*, April 16, 2006, pp. 1, 10–11 (p. 1). See also James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Picador, 2008), e.g., p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, trans. by Geoffrey Hall (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 28–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Ibid., p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Ibid., p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Ibid., Intro., xvii [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Ibid., p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Ibid., p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Ibid., p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Any number of critics have explored this aspect of Flaubert’s style. One of the best who also considers nineteenth-century French realism in general is F. W. J. Hennings, *The Age of Realism* (London: Penguin, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Cf. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, pp. 1f., 43f., 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Ibid., pp. 53, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. Ibid., p. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. Ibid., p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Ibid., p. 140; see also p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Ibid., pp. 284, 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Ibid., p. 108 [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Ibid., p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Ibid., p.[?]. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Ibid., p. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Ibid., p. 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Ibid., Wall, ‘Introduction’, p. xxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Ibid., p. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Ibid., p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Harry Levin’s illuminating analysis of the novel has lost none of its luster since its first publication as ‘*Madame Bovary*: The Cathedral and the Hospital’, *Essays in Criticism*,2.1 (Jan. 1952), 1–23; it was later incorporated into his now classic *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Novelists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) and reproduced in Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by de Man, pp. 407–25. The reprint in the Norton edition is cited here and in the following. The thousands of pages of drafts of ‘Les manuscrits de Madame Bovary’ are now available with transcriptions as an ‘édition intégrale sur le web’, provided by the Université de Rouen <[www.bovary.fr/folios\_liste>](http://www.bovary.fr/folios_liste) [accessed November 28, 2017]. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by Adam Thorpe (London: Random House, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Julian Barnes, ‘Writer’s Writer and Writer’s Writer’s Writer’. Review of *Madame Bovary: Provincial Ways*, by Gustave Flaubert, translated by Lydia Davis, in *London Review of Books*, 32.22 (2010), 7–11 (p. 11). Lance Hewson addresses such ‘deliquescences’ in *An Approach to Translation Criticism: Emma and Madame Bovary in Translation* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011). To judge the significance of differences, he constructs two scales of measurement. One distinguishes between justifiable and simply wrong translations, the other to define ‘divergent similarity’, ‘relative divergence’, ‘radical divergence’, and ‘adaptation’. Hewson looks at three versions of *Emma Bovary* (pp. 129–64). In seeking to assess the affects of translations, Hewson was preceded by others. For example, Jörn Albrecht, ‘Bedeutung der Übersetzung für die Entwicklung der Kultursprachen’, in Harald Kittel et al. (Hg.), *Übersetzung-Translation-Transduction*,3 vols (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), ii, 1088–1106. Cf. also Werner Koller’s catalogue of equivalency criteria which Albrecht uses to judge the success of a translation: W. Koller, ‘The Concept of Equivalence and the Object of Translation Studies’, *Target*,7.2 (1995), 191–222. I go into these issues in ‘The “Great Shapesphere”: An Introduction’, in *Shakespeare as German Author: Reception, Translation Theory, and Cultural Transfer*, ed. by John A. McCarthy (Leiden: Brill, 2018), esp. pp. 56–66. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Hans Robert Jauß, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 171–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. In particular they refer to Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art. Génèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Jules de Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1921). This study was first published in 1902 and was preceded by *Le Bovarysme, la psychologie dans l’œuvre de Flaubert* (Paris: Librairie Lépold Cerf, 1892). [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by de Man, p. vii. The critical essays included in this Norton edition point to the various reasons for the novel’s unabated appeal. See especially those by Percy Lubbuck, Eric Auerbach, and George Poulet along with Harry Levin. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. Barnes, ‘Writer’s Writer’, p. 7. Barnes points out, by the way, that Paul de Man did not actually translate the novel; his spouse did. <https:/[/ww](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n22/julian-)w[.lrb.co.uk/v32/n22/julian-](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n22/julian-)barnes/writers-writer-and-writers-writers-writer> [accessed January 10, 2018]. As we shall see in a later chapter, a similar assessment could be made of Grass’s chronicle of human foibles and social outsiders. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Levin, ‘*Madame Bovary*’, in *Madame Bovary: Background and Sources*,pp. 407–25 (p. 413). [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by de Man, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province. Roman*. La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec. Collection *À tous les vents*,vol. 715: version 2.01, p. 86 (= folio 81) <<https://beq.ebooksgratuits.com/vents-xpdf/Flaubert-Bovary.pdf>> [accessed January 10, 2018]. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Ibid., p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. Ibid., p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Wood, ‘Man Behind Bovary’, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 70.

     Elle souhaitait un fils; il serait fort et brun, elle l’appellerait Georges; et cette idée d’avoir pour enfant un mâle était comme la revanche en espoir de toutes ses impuissances passées. Un homme, au moins, est libre; il peut parcourir les passions et les pays, traverser les obstacles, mordre aux bonheurs les plus lointains. Mais une femme est empêchée continuellement. Inerte et flexible à la fois, elle a contre elle les mollesses de la chair avec les dépendances de la loi. Sa volonté, comme le voile de son chapeau retenu par un cordon, palpite à tous les vents; il y a toujours quelque désir qui entraîne, quelque convenance qui retient. Elle accoucha un dimanche, vers six heures, au soleil levant.—C’est une fille! dit Charles. Elle tourna la tête et s’évanouit. (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*, pp. 182–83) [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Part 2, ch. VIII; Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*, pp. 274–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Ibid., pp. 115–16; Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*, pp. 296–97. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 195. The full passage in the original with reference to illuminated, angelic visage, and perfumed aura reads: ‘L’église, comme un boudoir gigantesque, se disposait autour d’elle; les voûtes s’inclinaient pour recueillir dans l’ombre la confession de son amour; les vitraux resplendissaient pour illuminer son visage, et les encensoirs allaient brûler pour qu’elle apparût comme un ange, dans la fumée des parfums’ (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*, pp. 492–93). [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*, pp. 501–02 (cf. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, pp. 193–99). The rest of the passage provides further detail of the meanderings real and symbolic:

     Et aussitôt, reprenant sa course, elle passa par Saint-Sever, par le quai des Curandiers, par le quai aux Meules, encore une fois par le pont, par la place du Champ-de-Mars et derrière les jardins de l’hôpital, où des vieillards en veste noire se promènent au soleil, le long d’une terrasse toute verdie par des lierres. Elle remonta le boulevard Bouvreuil, parcourut le boulevard Cauchoise, puis tout le Mont-Riboudet jusqu’à la côte de Deville. Elle revint; et alors, sans parti pris ni direction, au hasard, elle vagabonda. On la vit à Saint-Pol, à Lescure, au mont Gargan, à la Rouge-Mare, et place du Gaillard-bois; rue Maladrerie, rue Dinanderie, devant Saint-Romain, Saint-Vivien, Saint-Maclou, Saint-Nicaise,—devant la Douane,—à la basse Vieille-Tour, aux Trois-Pipes et au Cimetière monumental. De temps à autre, le cocher sur son siège jetait aux cabarets des regards désespérés. Il ne comprenait pas quelle fureur de la locomotion poussait ces individus à ne vouloir point s’arrêter. Il essayait quelquefois, et aussitôt il entendait derrière lui partir des exclamations de colère. Alors il cinglait de plus belle ses deux rosses tout en sueur, mais sans prendre garde aux cahots, accrochant par-ci par-là, ne s’en souciant, démoralisé, et presque pleurant de soif, de fatigue et de tristesse. Et sur le port, au milieu des camions et des barriques, et dans les rues, au coin des bornes, les bourgeois ouvraient de grands yeux ébahis devant cette chose si extraordinaire en province, une voiture à stores tendus, et qui apparaissait ainsi continuellement, plus close qu’un tombeau et ballottée comme un navire. Une fois, au milieu du jour, en pleine campagne, au moment où le soleil dardait le plus fort contre les vieilles lanternes argentées, une main nue passa sous les petits rideaux de toile jaune et jeta des déchirures de papier, qui se dispersèrent au vent et s’abattirent plus loin, comme des papillons blancs, sur un champ de trèfles rouges, tout en fleur.

     Puis, vers six heures, la voiture s’arrêta dans une ruelle du quartier Beauvoisine, et une femme en descendit qui marchait le voile baissé, sans détourner la tête. (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*, pp. 501–03) [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Levin, ‘*Madame Bovary*’, p. 412; Lubbuck, *Craft of Fiction* (1921), in the Norton edition, pp. 349–57 (pp. 353–55). [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. George Poulet, ‘Circle and Center: Reality and *Madame Bovary*’, *Western Review*,19 (summer 1955), 245–60, reprinted in the Norton edition, pp. 392–407 (p. 394). While Poulet examines a specific passage describing a dinner scene, his argument is applicable to any number of others detailed descriptions in the novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*, p. 92 (I, ch. 7: La levrette Djali—définitif, folio 91) <<http://www.bovary.fr/folio_visu.php?mode=sequence&folio=1003&org=2&zoom=50&seq=91&ppl=3>> [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Ibid., p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*, p. 673. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 270. De Man renders the first part of the passage more adroitly, I think, but avoiding the flowing smoothness of transition from breasts to knees to toes, thereby underscoring the harshness of the scene. He also uses the plural form, ‘masses’, as if to suggest that much had gone wrong in Emma’s life: ‘The sheet sunk in from her breast to her knees, and then rose up at the tips of her toes, and it seemed to Charles that infinite masses, an enormous load, were weighing upon her’ (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by de Man, p. 241). [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. Poulet, pp. 394–95. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*, pp. 679–80 (III, ch. 9: Homais et le curé face à face—définitif, fol. 470) <[http://www.bovary.fr/folio\_visu.php?mode=sequence&org=2&zoom=50&seq=470](http://www.bovary.fr/folio_visu.php?mode=sequence&amp;org=2&amp;zoom=50&amp;seq=470)> [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Wall, Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, pp. 272–73. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by de Man, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province*, p. 679; Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by de Man, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. Wall’s translation falls short of the original which he renders as: ‘Her life had ended’ (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, p. 267). Paul de Man is more literal and accurate with his ‘She had ceased to exist’ (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by Paul de Man, 238). [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Georg Lukács, ‘Tolstoy and the Development of Realism’, in *Studies in European Realism* (1950; repr. London: Merlin Press, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. Ibid., p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, p.203. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Stern, *On Realism*, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. by Kyril Zinovieff and Jenny Hughes (London House, Richmond: Alma Classics, 2010, repr. 2014), ‘Introduction’, p. vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Ibid., p. ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Ibid., p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Andrew R. MacAndrew, *Dostoevsky. Notes from Underground, White Nights, The Dream of a Ridiculous Man, and Selections from House of the Dead*. New translation and an afterword by Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. by Constance Garnett (University of Adelaide Library, 2014), web edition published by eBooks@Adelaide, p. 1. The text appears to be from Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *White Nights, and Other Stories*, trans. by Constance Garnett (New York: Macmillan, 1918). A comparison of eight different translations of the first page of the book can be found at: <https://web.archive.org/web/[20131109182920/ht](http://comparetranslations.com/index.php?page=2&amp;id=241)tp://comparetra[nslations.com/index.php?page=2&id=241>](http://comparetranslations.com/index.php?page=2&amp;id=241). However, MacAndrew is not one of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, p.91. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Richard Pevear, ‘Foreword’, in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. and annotated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhjonsky (New York: Vintage, 1993), pp. xxi–iii (p. xxi). [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Ibid., p.90 [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Pevear, ‘Foreword’, p. viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Michael Henry Heim, ‘Approaching the Real Russian Thing: *Demons*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky, transl. and annotated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Alfred A. Knopf)’, *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 1994, p. 1 <<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-10-16-bk-50750-story.html>>. Heim praises the Pevear–Volohonsky translation of *Demons* because of their attention to the polyphony of voices in the dialogue. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. The foregoing citations are drawn from the ‘Editors Preface’ in Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson with an introduction by Wayne C. Booth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. xxix–xliii (pp. xxxi–xxxiii). Emerson bases her translation on *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* (Moskow, 1963) which, in turn, dates back to an earlier, shorter 1929 version of the study. The online text was used <<https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/2027/heb.08865>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, pp. 181–269 (p. 183). Of particular importance is Bakhtin’s analysis of *Notes* in subsection 2, ‘The Hero’s Monologic Discourse and Narrational Discourse in Dostoevsky’s Short Novels’ (pp. 204–37). See also Bakhtin’s essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 288–93. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Ibid., pp. 32–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Ibid., p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Ibid., pp. 87–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Cited in Simmons, *Introduction to Russian Literature* (1965), p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Cf., for example, V. N. Maikov who wrote in 1847:

     Mr. Dostoevsky’s creative method is original in the highest degree, and he is the last person to be designated an imitator of Gogol. [...] Both Gogol and Mr. Dostoevsky portray actual society. But Gogol is primarily a social writer and Mr. Dostoevsky a psychological one. For Gogol the individual is significant as representative of a certain society or circle; for Dostoevsky society is interesting only to the extent that it influences the personality of the individual. (Cited in Vladimir Seduro, *Dostoyevsky in Russian Literary Criticism, 1846–1956* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 11) [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to His Family and Friends*, trans. by Ethel Colburn Mayne (London: Chatto & Windus, 1917), e.g., p. 62 (letter to brother Michael of February 22, 1854) <[https://ia800701.us.archive.org/16/items/lettersoffyodorm00dostiala/lettersoffyodorm00dostiala.pdf>](https://ia800701.us.archive.org/16/items/lettersoffyodorm00dostiala/lettersoffyodorm00dostiala.pdf) [accessed May 3, 2022]. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Cf. Seduro, *Dostoyevsky in Russian Literary Criticism*,18. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Lawrence Kohlberg, ‘Psychological Analysis and Literary Form: A Study of the Doubles in Dostoevsky’, *Daedalus* 92.2 (1963), 345–62 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026782>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. Cf. Pevear, ‘Foreword’, p. xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. Ibid., pp. xiv–xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. Ibid., pp. 109, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Ibid., pp. 202–03. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. Cf., e.g., Alexey Alyushin, ‘Acting Contrary to Rationality and Instincts: The Inherent Similarity of Dostoevsky’s “Self-Will” and Max Scheler’s “Spirit”’, *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*,39.1–2 (2016), 19–32. Rather than using Scheler’s notion of ‘spirit’ as a point of comparison, I gravitate to Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. In her last conversation with Nietzsche on May 6, 1887, Resa von Schirnhofer reported that she spoke with him about interesting books she had recently read. One that left a deeper impression than the others was Dostoevsky’s *The House of the Dead*. At his point Nietzsche vehemently interrupts her, stating that he had been about to tell her about his discovery of Dostoevsky. Now she had beaten him to it. He recommended that she read *The Underground Man*, which he labeled an ‘extraordinarily fascinating book’. What fascinated him was above all the psychology. Cited by Sander L. Gilman (ed.), *Conversations with Nietzsche—A Life in the Words of His Contemporaries*, trans. by D. J. Parent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 193. Much has been published on the primacy of the will to power in Nietzsche’s thought. For its application to literature, see John A. McCarthy, *Remapping Reality: Chaos and Creativity in Science and Literature (Goethe—Nietzsche—Grass)*, IFAVL 97 (Rodopi: New York, 2006), esp. ch. 3: ‘Grounding Creativity—Nietzsche and the New Universe’, pp. 111–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Ibid., p. 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Ibid., p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Ibid., p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Ibid., pp. 94–95. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Ibid., p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Ibid., p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Ibid., p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Ibid., p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Cf. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, pp. 122–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Ibid., p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. Ibid., p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. Ibid., p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Ibid., p. 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, pp. 127, 125–26. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Ibid., p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Ibid., pp. 140–59. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Ibid., p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Ibid., p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. Ibid., p. 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. Ibid., p. 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Ibid., pp. 173–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. Ibid., p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Ibid., p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Ibid., p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. Ibid., pp. 182–97 (p. 197). [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. Ibid., p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Ibid., p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Ibid., p. 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Ibid., p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, pp. 32–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. Ibid., pp. 34, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. Ibid., pp. 30–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. Ibid., pp. 55–59. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Ibid., p. 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, p. 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. Bakhtin thinks of *Notes* as a work of art and not as a confession in the usual, personal sense:

     And [*Notes*] is in fact an authentic confession. Of course, ‘confession’ is understood here not in the personal sense. The author’s intention is refracted here, as in any *Ich-Erzählung*; this is not a personal document but a work of art. In the confession of the Underground Man what strikes us first of all is its extreme and acute dialogization: there is literally not a single monologically firm, undissociated word. From the very first sentence the hero’s speech has already begun to cringe and break under the influence of the anticipated words of another, with whom the hero, from the very first step, enters into the most intense internal polemic. (pp. 228–29) [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. Helena Carvalhão Buescu and João Ferreira Durate (eds.), *Stories and Portraits of the Self* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 8–10, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. Cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), *Science of Knowledge with the First and Second Introductions* (1794–95) = *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath. In *Fichte: Science of Knowledge* (*Wissenschaftslehre*), ed. Peter Heath and John Lachs (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970; 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. Brooks, *Second Mountain*, p. xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Cf. Isra Daraiseh, ‘The Literary Unconscious: Ideology and Utopia in the Nineteenth-Century Realist Novel in England and Russia’ (Ph.D dissertation, University of Arkansas, 2015), ch. 5: ‘Nothing Left to Lose: The Quest for Freedom in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* and Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilvich*’. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*,#259. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. Peter Pütz, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (Stuttgart: Meztler, 1967); Peter Pütz, ‘Nietzsche: Art and Intellectual Inquiry’, in *Nietzsche: Imagery and Thought*, ed. by Malcolm Pasley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 1–32; and, more recently, Robert Holub, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Twayne, 1995) offers concise, readable accounts of the main tendencies in Nietzschean scholarship. For example, (1) scholars have given up the attempt to seek overall harmony in Nietzsche’s ‘system’ (Bertram, Löwith, Jaspers, Horkheimer, Adorno, Heidegger); (2) scholars have reduced Nietzsche’s complex views to a simplified dimension (e.g., for Alfred Baeumler, it is will to power; for Georg Lukaçs, it was the destruction of reason); (3) others have emphasized the unity of Nietzsche’s thought in the pathology of his mind, sketching in biographical studies early signs of his pending insanity before 1889; (4) some have endeavored to render Nietzsche’s life and work as a harmoniously integrated succession of historiographical and philological stages of development; (5) and, most recently, yet others have traced the origins of postmodernism and deconstruction to Nietzsche’s theory of life as a fundamental act of interpretation. On the exploiting of Nietzsche by French postmodernists (Lyotard, Derrida, Deleuze, Irigaray), see Keith Ansell-Pearson and Howard Caygill (eds.), *The Fate of the New Nietzsche* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1993); *Looking After Nietzsche*, ed. by Laurence A. Rickels (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990); and Peter Levine, *Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), esp. ch. 8, ‘Nietzsche Today’ (pp. 151–86), and ch. 9, ‘The Postmodern Paradigm’ (pp. 187–214). [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1988), xiii, 189. Hereafter cited as *KSA* by volume and page (or aphorism) number. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. Peter Pütz, ‘The Problem of Force in Nietzsche and His Critics’, in *Nietzsche: Literature and Values*, ed. by Volker Dürr, Reinhold Grimm, and Kathy Harms, *Monatshefte* Occasional Volumes, No. 6. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), pp. 14–28, argues that the antinomian approach is a new attempt at a ‘Gesamtschau’ (encompassing view) of Nietzsche’s philosophical content and methodology (p. 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Pütz, ‘Problem of Force in Nietzsche and His Critics’, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Nachlaß I* (Musarion),iii, 338: ‘Man muß neue Fragen formulieren können, wenn man neue Antworten erhalten möchte.’ See Henrik Birus, ‘Nietzsche’s Hermeneutical Considerations’, in *Nietzsche: Literature and Values*, ed. by Dürr et al., pp. 66–80. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. Nietzsche, *KSA*, vi, 167; xiii, 540–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, #381; see also Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* #27, #44, #290. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*,#29. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.40. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*,#93. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. *Ecce homo. Wie man wird, was man ist*, Warum ich ein Schicksal bin, 1 <<https://gutezitate.com/zitat/264752>.> Writer Sue Prideaux chooses Nietzsche’s famous dictum as the title for her popular biography, *I Am Dynamite! A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018). Prideaux clearly writes for a popular audience rather than a scholarly one, a point that reviewers of the German translation emphasize: *Ich bin Dynamit. Das Leben des Friedrich Nietzsche* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2020). Surely, because of the energetic and engaging tone the book has proved nonetheless quite successful on both sides of the Atlantic. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. Nietzsche, *KSA*,xii, 17–19; Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, #458. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 41. In an unpublished preface to a planned study entitled ‘Der Wille zur Macht: Versuch einer Umwerthung aller Werthe’ (Will to Power. An Attempt at the Re-evaluation of all Values) Nietzsche called *Zarathustra* his most profound book. *Will to Power* was to be his ‘most independent’ Nietzsche, *KSA*,xiii, 194. See also *Götzen-Dämmerung* (Nietzsche, *KSA*,vi, 153). [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. In the prelude to *Gay Science* (#23), he cautions: ‘Leg ich mich aus, so leg ich mich hinein; / Ich kann nicht selbst mein Interpret sein. / Doch wer nur steigt auf seiner eignen Bahn, / Trägt auch mein Bild zu hellerm Licht hinan’ (Nietzsche, *KSA*, iii, 357). [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*,#23. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Cf. Giorgio Colli, Nietzsche, *KSA*,xi, 722–25. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Nietzsche, *KSA*,xi, 560. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. Nietzsche, *KSA*,xiii, 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. Ibid. The full passage reads: ‘nicht bloß Constanz der Energie: sondern Maximal-Ökonomie des Verbrauchs: so daß das *Stärker-werden-wollen von jedem Kraftzentrum* aus die einzige Realität ist—nicht Selbstbewahrung, sondern Aneignung, Herr-werden-, Mehr-werden-, Stärker-werden-wollen’ (ibid.; emphasis in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*,#230. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. Ibid., #38, 36, 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. Ibid., #206, 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. Ibid.,#207. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. Ibid., #259. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Ibid., #207. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Ibid., #211. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. Ibid., #205. [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. Cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*,#292. Cf. also Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 259. For a more detailed argument regarding the total economy of existence and humankind’s place within the webwork of enhanced energy states, see McCarthy, *Remapping Reality*, pp. 116–23, 127–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. Nietzsche, *KSA*, ix, 524. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Cf., e.g., *Will to Power* where he explains *his* view of the universe. ‘My’ recurs in the pivotal conclusion:

     It is rather energy everywhere, the play of forces and force-waves, at the same time one and many, increasing here and diminishing there, a sea of forces storming and raging in itself, forever changing, forever rolling back over incalculable ages to recurrence, with an ebb and flow of its forms, producing the most complicated things out of the most simple structures; producing the hottest, the most turbulent, and most contradictory things out of the quietest, most rigid, and most frozen material, and then again from the play of contradiction moving back into the delight of consonance, still affirming itself in this uniformity of its courses and its years, blessing itself as that which must return eternally, as a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness: this, my *Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, eternally self-destroying, this mysterious world of twofold voluptuous delight; this, my ‘beyond good and evil’, without aim, unless there is an aim in the bliss of the circle, without will, unless a ring feels goodwill to itself [...]—This world is the will to power—*and nothing else!* And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides! (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*,pp. 549–50, #1067) [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, p.172. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. When you get to the very bottom of everything by eliminating such concepts as subject–object, cause–effect, and being–becoming, Nietzsche concludes, nothing remains but dynamic quanta and their essential tensions: ‘[T]heir essence lies in their relation to all other quanta, in their ‘effect’ upon the same. The will to power is not a being, not a becoming, but a *pathos—*the most elemental fact from which a becoming and effecting first emerge’ (*WP* 339, #635; cf. also #581, #617). The focus on *pathos*, a reductionist move, is important because it highlights the inchoative moment in a more salient fashion than is achieved by stopping at the notion of becoming. Becoming itself is already a kind of existence, whereas the Greek *pathos* signifies more precisely ‘event’, ‘occasion’, and ‘passion’. Each in its own way addresses the birthing state, so to speak: the space or state from which becoming emerges. [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. In fact, Nietzsche admitted to the strong influence of *Notes* on his own thinking. He constantly refers to Dostoevsky in his notes and drafts throughout the winter of 1886–87. He also wrote abstracts of several of the Russian’s works. Cf. Jacob Reisberg, ‘Redemption for Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: A Comparative Analysis’, *Vestnik*,October 20, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachlaß I* (Musarion): ‘Die chemischen Verwandlungen in der unorganischen Natur sind vielleicht auch künstlerische Prozesse’ [= Kröner Bd. 82, S.56]; ‘Aesthetik hat nur Sinn als Naturwissenschaft: wie das Apollinische und das Dionysische.’ (*Nietzsche*, *KSA*,7:395, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1869–74*). My translations. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. Nietzsche, *KSA*, xiv, 345–46. Thematically, *Beyond Good and Evil* reaches back into Nietzsche’s school years, when he authored an essay (1858) on the concept of ‘gut und schlecht’ (‘good and bad’) in Theognis’s thought. Chronologically, the first version of *Beyond Good and Evil* predates the publication of *Gay Science*. In order to enhance the readability and accessibility of my text, I will cite Nietzsche’s works in translation and provide the original German when it adds important nuance. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. See, e.g., J. P. Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 21, 157–59. Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche’s Zarathustra* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. xv. In a letter to the publisher E. W. Fritsch, Nietzsche refers to his ‘verwegenen Sohn Zarathustra’ (cited by Colli and Montinari, *Chronik zu Nietzsches Leben*, Nietzsche, *KSA*,xv, 160). [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. On February 23, 1887, Nietzsche wrote to Franz Overbeck in passionate praise of *Notes from Underground* (translated as *L’esprit souterrain*). Nietzsche remarked upon an ‘Instinkt der Verwandtschaft’ between himself and Dostoyevsky and characterized the work as a hybrid of two novellas: ‘die erste eigentlich ein Stück Musik, sehr fremder, sehr undeutscher Musik; die zweite ein Geniestreich der Psychologie, eine Selbstverhöhnung des γνῶθι σεαυτόv [gnothi seauton]’. Cited in Colli and Montinari, *Chronik zu Nietzsches Leben*, in Nietzsche, *KSA*,xv, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. Rosen, *Mask of Enlightenment*, p. xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. John Carson Pettey, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical and Narrative Styles* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), p. 32. Pettey cites Bernard Pautrat, *Versions du Soleil: Figures et système de Nietzsche* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), p. 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Nietzsche’s Zarathustra* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), broke with the main tendency in Nietzsche scholarship to dismiss *Zarathustra* as a peculiar work largely devoid of conceptual content and argumentative sequence. She insisted that the work be taken seriously in its own right, stressing above all its experimental and literary qualities. Pettey (1998) took a similar approach, placing Zarathustra within the context of Nietzsche’s earlier writing and contrasting it with the dominant literary styles of the era (realism, naturalism, neoromanticism). Utilizing more traditional (H. Weinrich, J. Stenzel) and more modern theories of narrative (J. Derrida, H. White), he illuminated Nietzsche’s distinctive diegetic and mimetic style (pp. 45–71; 73– 100). This allowed Pettey to explore briefly Nietzsche’s early reception (pp. 1–21). As late as 1995, Stanley Rosen presented his own study of the philosophical content of the novel, *Mask of Enlightenment*, as distinctive because of its exclusive focus on the work. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. Cf. Pettey, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical and Narrative Styles*, pp. 113–21. Other models identified include Plato’s *Phaedrus* (Rosen, *Mask of Enlightenment*, p. 60), *Thousand and One Nights* (p. 6), Dante’s *Inferno*, and Apuleius’s satirical *Golden Ass* (esp. for Part IV of *Zarathustra*) (Higgins, *Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, pp. ix–xviii, 206–32, 233). I would add Goethe’s *Faust*. [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. Nietzsche, *KSA*,xv, 187–88 [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. Pettey, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical and Narrative Styles*, p. 140 [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. In an unpublished fragment from winter 1882–83, he likened the human being to a collection of atoms totally dependent upon the energy fluctuations around it, yet, like every individual atom, incalculable in its movements, a thing unto itself. Nietzsche muses: ‘Der Mensch eine Atomgruppe vollständig in seinen Bewegungen abhängig von allen Kräfte-Vertheilungen und -Veränderungen des Alls—und andererseits wie jedes Atom unberechenbar, ein An- und-für-sich’ (*KSA*,x, 150). Rosen suggests that the complex operations of nature replaced God in Nietzsche’s new scheme of things (Rosen, *Mask of Enlightenment*, p. 19). Margot Fleischer, *Der ‘Sinn der Erde’ und die Entzauberung des Übermenschen:* *Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Nietzsche* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993), p. 120, also discerns this trend from creative God to creative chaos. However, she rejects the extension of the will to power to inorganic and organic nature as unconvincing (pp. 250–54). Alastair Moses, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Nature and Cosmology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), posits a link between the central concept of the eternal return and the natural pulsations of contraction and expansion in the universe (p. 295). [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.34;Nietzsche, *KSA*,iv, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. Cf. Fleischer *‘Sinn der Erde’*,pp. 53–56, 259. Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), seeks to locate Nietzsche’s biologism within the context of nineteenth-century scientific debates. His focus is on the health of the body, with special interest in evolution and degeneration. By doing so he is able to demonstrate that Nietzsche’s physiology of art and humankind is backed up by the (pseudo)science of his day. Although Nietzsche was not alone in mirroring that debate metaphorically and analogically, his use of the language and conceptions of science ‘was more wide-ranging, more total than that of his immediate successors’ (e.g., Max Scheler, Oswald Spengler, Georg Simmel, Theodor Lessing, Ludwig Klages) (p. 211). [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. Nietzsche, *KSA*, ix, 520. [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. Cf. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp.215–21; Nietzsche, *KSA*, iv, 270–77. [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.316. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. Ibid., p.217. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. Ibid., p.222; Nietzsche, *KSA*,iv, 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. *Nietzsche*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.222. [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. Stern, *Study of Nietzsche*, p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. Cf. Fleischer *‘Sinn der Erde’*,pp. 61–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
516. Nietzsche, *KSA*,xv, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
517. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.218; *Nietzsche*, *KSA*,iv, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
518. Nietzsche, *KSA*,ix, 520. [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
519. Rosen, *Mask of Enlightenment*, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
520. Cf. Stern, *Study of Nietzsche*, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
521. *Nietzsche*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 17, 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. Alfred Döblin, ‘Zu Nietzsches Morallehre’ (1903), in *Nietzsche und die deutsche Literatur*, ed. by Bruno Hillebrand, 2 vols (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1978), i, 331–58 (p. 348). [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. *Nietzsche*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.20; ‘Unheimlich ist das menschliche Dasein und immer noch ohne Sinn: ein Possenreißer kann ihm zum Verhängnis werden. Ich will die Menschen den Sinn ihres Seins lehren: welcher ist der Übermensch, der Blitz aus der dunklen Wolke Mensch’ (*Nietzsche*, *KSA*,iv, 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
525. Ibid., p.139. [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
526. Ibid., p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
527. Ibid., p. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
528. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 238; Nehamas, *Nietzsche*,pp.194–95; del Caro, *Dionysian Aesthetics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1980), pp. 52–54. Julian Young, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 136–39. Notably, Nietzsche further believed that in the human being ‘*creature* and *creator* are united: in man there is matter, fragment, excess, clay, mud, madness, chaos; but in man there is also creator, sculptor, the hardness of the hammer, the divine spectator and the seventh day’ (‘Im Menschen ist *Geschöpf* und *Schöpfer* vereint: im Menschen ist Stoff, Bruchstück, Überfluss, Lehm, Koth, Unsinn, Chaos; aber im Menschen ist auch Schöpfer, Bildner, Hammer-Härte, Zuschauer—Göttlichkeit und siebenter Tag’ (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*,#225; *Nietzsche*, *KSA*,v, 161). Passive and active forces coalesce in narrative self-affirmation. [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
529. I take exception to Nehamas’s contention that eternal recurrence has little if anything to do with the nature of the universe, that its model is not evident in Nietzsche’s reflections on thermodynamics, and that its psychological use of it ‘is quite independent of any theory of the physical universe’ (*Nietzsche*, pp.6, 142, 167). I side with the majority of critics who contend that the phrase does indeed designate a quality of external reality and is not simply a strategy for developing a more psychologically nuanced view of the self /Self (p. 150). [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
530. Christoph Helferich, *Geschichte der Philosophie: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart und Östliches Denken* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1985), p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
531. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.142, also p. 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
532. Ibid., ‘Prologue’ #3. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
533. Ibid., p.41. [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
534. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, #125. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
535. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale with an introduction by Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), i, #251, p. 119; and #278. In a move that faintly echoes the binary notions of ‘double consciousness’ (W. E. B. Du Bois) and the man/woman brain (V. Woolf), Nietzsche posits a ‘double-brain, as it were two brain-ventricles’ (‘ein Doppelgehirn, gleichsam zwei Gehirnkammern’) that enables humankind to reach a higher culture in which the requirements of both scientific inquiry (*Wissenschaft*) and humanistic impulses (*Nicht-Wissenschaft*) interact to regulate human health. Each keeps the dominance of the other in check. See *Menschliches, Allzu Menschliches I* (Nietzsche, *KSA*,ii, 208–09). [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
536. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue, #4; Nietzsche, *KSA*,iv, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
537. I discuss key metaphors and parables such as the tightrope walker, the human body, the jester, the dwarf, the gateway (*Augenblick*), the snake and the shepherd in detail in McCarthy, *Remapping Reality*, pp. 242–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
538. Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, English version and introduction by Eric Bentley (New York: New American Library, 1998), p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
539. Pirandello, ‘Preface to *Six Characters in Search of an Author*’, ibid., pp. xviii–xxx (p. xix). Bentley’s translation is reprinted from *Pirandello’s Major Plays*, trans. by Eric Bentley (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991) and is based on the Pirandello’s final revision of the play. Moreover, the endnotes include all the deletions from the first version. *Naked Masks. Five Plays by Luigi Pirandello*, ed. and with an introduction by Erich Bentley (New York: Dutton, 1952), contains the Edward Storer’s translation of the play’s first version, which has been the most widely available since 1952. Bentley, acclaimed playwright, critic, and translator, considers it to be literal but often erroneous (Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, p. 76). [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
540. Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
541. Karl Jaspers, ‘The Meaning of History’, Part III of *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. by Michael Bullock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
542. Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author and Other Plays*,trans. by Marc Musa (New York: Penguin, 1995), ‘Introduction’, pp. ix–x. Musa’s version does not contain Pirandello’s ‘Preface’ of 1924. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
543. Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
544. Bentley, ‘Introduction’, in Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, p. xii; Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, pp. 28–29. [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
545. Musa, ‘Introduction’, Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author and Other Plays*,trans. pp. xxii–xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
546. The Italian text is available at <<https://gutenberg.org/files/18457/18457-h/18457-h.htm>.> [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
547. Pirandello uses the term ‘Direttore-Capocomico’. Direttore designates a managing director or manager, whereas Capocomico signifies an actor manager, who did direct plays in the Victorian era and was also an actor. The present-day term for director is ‘regista’. Thus, as Bentley explains, the ‘Direttore-Capocomico is an intermediary figure between the old actor managers and the new directors. ‘Translator’s Notes’, Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, p. 75. Bentley translates the term as ‘director’ as a kind of compromise. [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
548. Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
549. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
550. Ibid., p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
551. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
552. Ibid., p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
553. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
554. Ibid., p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
555. Ibid., p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
556. Ibid., p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
557. Jaspers, ‘Meaning of History’, pp. 236; cf. pp. 229, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-557)
558. Ibid., p. 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
559. Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-559)
560. Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in *Naked Masks. Five Plays by Luigi Pirandello*, 269f. [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
561. Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
562. Jaspers, ‘Meaning of History’, pp. 247–48. [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
563. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Standard Edition, trans. and ed. by James Strachey with a biographical introduction by Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), pp. 98–99. [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
564. Ross Andersen, ‘A Journey into the Animal Mind. What Science Can Tell Us about How Other Creatures Experience the World’, *The Atlantic* (March 2019) <[https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/03/what-the-crow-knows/580726/?utm\_source=pocket&utm\_medium=email&utm\_campaign=pockethits](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/03/what-the-crow-knows/580726/?utm_source=pocket&amp;utm_medium=email&amp;utm_campaign=pockethits)> [accessed June 3, 2022]. Reprinted in *Best American Science and Nature Writing 2020*, ed. with an introduction by Michio Kaku (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020), ch. 6. On the evolutionary theory of the origins of consciousness, see Michael Graziano, ‘A New Theory Explains How Consciousness Evolved: A Neuroscientist on How We Came to Be Aware of Ourselves’, *The Atlantic* (June 6, 2016) <<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/06/how-consciousness-evolved/485558/>>. Drawn from Michael Graziano, *The Spaces Between Us: A Story of Neuroscience, Evolution, and Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-564)
565. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-565)
566. Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
567. See Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) explanation in *Sein und Zeit* (1927), discussed in Helferich, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-567)
568. Hermann Hesse, ‘Über das Lesen’ (1911), *Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden*. 11. Band: *Schriften zur Literatur I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1976), pp. 142–47 (p. 145). [↑](#footnote-ref-568)
569. Volker Michels, *Zukunftsland China. China im Werk von Hermann Hesse*, pp. 11–12. [↑](#footnote-ref-569)
570. Cf. Michels, *Zukunftsland China*, pp. 11–12. [↑](#footnote-ref-570)
571. Beginning in 1914 Hermann Hesse engaged in political commentary, even though he had volunteered for the army but was rejected as unfit for service. His anti-war sentiment, pacificism, and critique of state propaganda was published in numerous newspapers. In 1917 he was cautioned to temper his political writing. But he persisted as he sensed the growing war-mongering and was particularly alarmed by the NS-cultural policies evident in the 1930s. In 1912 he had permanently moved to Switzerland, later taking on Swiss citizenship to escape those pressures (1924). The Nazis banned the publication of Hesse’s works in Germany in the years 1939–45 as undesirable. Hesse’s publisher, Peter Suhrkamp was arrested by the Gestapo in 1944. After the fall of the Nazi regime, Hesse’s works were once again able to be published in Germany. The awarding of the Nobel and Goethe Prizes can therefore also be seen as a political statement, an impression reinforced by his receiving the Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels (Peace Prize of the German Publishers Association) in 1955. Martin Pfeifer, *Hesse Kommentar zu sämtlichen Werken* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), includes a detailed timeline of Hesse’s life and works (pp. 43–70). [↑](#footnote-ref-571)
572. Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden*. 11. Band: *Schriften zur Literatur I* (Frankfurt.a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1976), 53. English translation in Holt: ‘But I would be happy if many of them [my readers] were to realize that the story of the Steppenwolf pictures a disease and crisis—but not one leading to death and destruction, on the contrary: to healing’ (Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, trans. by B. Creighton, p. vi). [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
573. Cf., e.g., the useful and far-ranging materials related to *Steppenwolf* in *Materialien zu Hermann Hesses Der Steppenwolf*, ed. by Volker Michels (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973). In documenting the book’s origins and reception that resonated internationally, it includes texts by Hesse and (auto)biographical documentation. Additionally, Michel includes Hesse’s reflections on the novel in his letters and other documents, augmented by texts penned in the context of *Steppenwolf*. The second half of the volume reproduces a selection of texts by third hands, from writers and critics (pp. 251–400). They provide an overview of the novel’s reception to the early 1970s. For a more recent overview, see Ingo Cornils (ed.), *A Companion to the Works of Hermann Hes*se (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009) which includes sixteen original contributions on Hesse generally. Of special note is Martin Swales’s essay on *Steppenwolf* (ch. 7). Additional material available in Pfeifer, *Hesse Kommentar*, pp. 226–39. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
574. Alexander Mathäs, ‘Between Humanism and Posthumanism: Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*’, in *Beyond Posthumanism: The German Humanist Tradition & the Future of the Humanities* (Spektrum: Publications of the German Studies Association, vol. xxii) (New York: Berghahn, 2020), pp. 238–60 (p. 241). [↑](#footnote-ref-574)
575. Both cited in Hans Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer. Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997). Du Bois-Reymond: ‘Man hat sich auf das Treiben im Meere dauerhaft einzurichten’ (78); Burckhardt: ‘Wir möchten gerne die Welle kennen, auf welcher wir im Ozean treiben, allein wir sind diese Welle selbst’ (p. 74). [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
576. Hermann Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, Introduction by Joseph Mileck, trans. by Basil Creighton (New York: Holt, 1990), p. 22. First published in the United States by Henry Holt, 1929; revised edition published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston in 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-576)
577. Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, trans. by Creighton, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-577)
578. Ibid., p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-578)
579. Ibid., p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-579)
580. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-580)
581. For instance, theologian Eugen Drewermann characterized Hermann Hesse‘s writing and reviewing as efforts to maintain vitality. They offer medicine to ailing readers ‘pedagogically, psychologically, politically, morally, and religiously’: ‘*Pädagogisch, psychologisch, politisch, moralisch, religiös*—in fünf Bereichen mindestens hat er [Hesse], der Bücher nur schrieb, um lebendig zu sein, und Bücher nur rezensierte, wie man Kranken Medikamenta empfiehlt’ (Drewermann, *Das Individuelle gegen das Normierte verteidigen*, p. 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-581)
582. Cf. Mathäs, ‘Between Humanism and Posthumanism’, pp. 238–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-582)
583. Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, trans. by B. Creighton, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-583)
584. Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, p. 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-584)
585. Ibid., p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-585)
586. Ibid., pp. 269–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-586)
587. Ibid., p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-587)
588. Ibid. Daemmrich’s *Self-Realization* explores the theme of the shattered self in his chapter 5 (pp. 87–109). [↑](#footnote-ref-588)
589. Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, trans. by Creighton, p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
590. Ibid., p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-590)
591. Ibid., p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-591)
592. Ibid., p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
593. Ibid., p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
594. Ibid., p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
595. Ibid., p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
596. Ibid., p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
597. Ibid., p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
598. Ibid., p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
599. Ibid., pp. 52–53. [↑](#footnote-ref-599)
600. Ibid., p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-600)
601. Ibid., p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-601)
602. Ibid., p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-602)
603. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-603)
604. Ibid., p. 58. Hesse’s grandfather was a Sanskrit scholar, his father was a missionary in India for a number of years. His mother was born in India. He traveled to India (actually Shri Lanka) from September to December in 1911. Among the works devoted to Hesse’s knowledge of India and oriental philosophies see Vridhagiri Ganesham, Das Indienerlebnis Hermann Hesses (Bonn, 1974) and Felix Lützkendorff, ‘Hermann Hesse als religiöser Mensch in seinen Beziehungen zur Romantik und zum Osten’, Diss. Leipzig, 1932. [↑](#footnote-ref-604)
605. Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, trans. by Creighton, pp. 63–64. [↑](#footnote-ref-605)
606. Ibid., p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-606)
607. Ibid., p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-607)
608. Ibid., p. 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-608)
609. Hermann Hesse, *If the War Goes On*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux/Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 375–85. [↑](#footnote-ref-609)
610. Hesse, ‘Zarathustra’s Return’, p. 376. [↑](#footnote-ref-610)
611. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-611)
612. Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, p. 71; similarly, p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-612)
613. Ibid., pp. 76–77. [↑](#footnote-ref-613)
614. Hesse, ‘Zarathustra’s Return’, p. 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-614)
615. Ibid., p. 385. [↑](#footnote-ref-615)
616. Eugen Drewermann, *Das Individuelle gegen das Normierte verteidigen: Zwei Aufsätze zu Hermann**Hesse*(Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp. 17–18, 39–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-616)
617. Ibid., p. 34. Renate Voris, ‘Adolf Muschg, Literatur als Therapie? Ein Exkurs über das Heilsame und ds Unheilbare’, in *Poetik der Autoren. Beiträge zur deutschsprachigen* Gegenwartsliteratur, ed. by P. M. Lützeler (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1994), pp. 57–79. [↑](#footnote-ref-617)
618. Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, p. 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-618)
619. Ibid., pp. 29, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-619)
620. Ibid., p. 174. Erich Heller, ‘Zarathustra’s Three Metamorphoses: Facets of Nietzsche’s Intellectual Biography and the Apotheosis of Innocence’, in *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 301–26, offers an analysis of a central motif in Zarathustra that is applicable to the transformations Harry Haller’s spirit must undergo from the camel to the lion to the child. The camel is an obedient beast of burden that races through the desert to a prescribed destination. It has no will of its own. The lion represents a rebellious wild, effort to assert its own will, although it continues to share characteristics with the camel as a beast of burden. The third stage of the evolution is the child who represents innocence, forgetting a new beginning a game ... and is capable of laughter (pp. 308–09, 315–17, 320–21). [↑](#footnote-ref-620)
621. Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, trans. by Creighton, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-621)
622. Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-622)
623. Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, trans. by Creighton, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-623)
624. Ibid., p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-624)
625. Hermann Hesse, ‘Magie des Buches’ in Hermann Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, xi: *Schriften zur Literatur I*, ed. by Kuhn (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 244–45 (p. 245): ‘Bei allen Völkern ist das Wort und die Schrift etwas Heiliges und Magisches, das Benennen sowie das Schreiben sind ursprünglich magische Handlungen, magische Besitzergreifungen der Natur durch den Geist, und überall ist die Gabe der Schrift als göttlicher Herkunft gepriesen worden.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-625)
626. In the essay from 1911 titled ‘Über das Lesen’ Hesse had remarked: ‘Die meisten Menschen verstehen nicht zu lesen, und die meisten wissen nicht, warum sie lesen’ (Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, xi, 142): Most people do not understand how to read; and most do not know why they read. [↑](#footnote-ref-626)
627. Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, xi, 249–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-627)
628. Ibid., p. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-628)
629. Ibid., p. 76: ‘“Der Steppenwolf” ist so streng gebaut, wie ein Kanon oder eine Fuge, und ist bis zu dem Grade Form geworden, der mir eben möglich ist. Er spielt und tanzt sogar.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-629)
630. Camus, *The Stranger*, pp. 122–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-630)
631. Helferich, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-631)
632. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-632)
633. Jaspers, ‘Meaning of History’, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-633)
634. Jean Paul Sartre develops these ideas in *L'Être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1943). [↑](#footnote-ref-634)
635. David Sherman, *Camus* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 21–55 (pp. 23–25). [↑](#footnote-ref-635)
636. Cited by Oliver Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. by Benjamin Ivry (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 408. [↑](#footnote-ref-636)
637. On Nietzsche’s reception in French in the 1940s, see Allan D. Schrift, ‘French Nietzscheanism’, in *The History of Continental Philosophy*, vol. vi, *Post-Structuralism and Critical Theory’s Second Generation*, ed. by Alan D. Schrift (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2010), pp. 19–46. On Camus’s knowledge of Nietzsche, see the essay by S. K. Keltner and Samuel J. Julian in *The History of Continental Philosophy*, ed. by Alan D. Schrift (one-volume hardcover), vol. iv, *Phenomenology: Responses and Developments*, ed. by Leonard Lawlor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), ch. 2, ‘The Origins of Existentialism in Pre-War France’, pp. 1193–1216. [↑](#footnote-ref-637)
638. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. by Matthew Ward (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-638)
639. Matthew Ward, ‘Translator’s Note’, in Camus, *The Stranger* (1988), pp. v–vii (p. vi). [↑](#footnote-ref-639)
640. Ryan Bloom, ‘Lost in Translation: What the First Line of *The Stranger* Should Be’, *New Yorker*, May 11, 2012 <[https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/lost-in-translation-what-the-first-line-of-the-stranger-should-be>](https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/lost-in-translation-what-the-first-line-of-the-stranger-should-be) [accessed June 22, 2022]. [↑](#footnote-ref-640)
641. Cited by Bloom, ‘Lost in Translation’, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-641)
642. Camus, *The Stranger*, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-642)
643. Ibid., p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-643)
644. Ibid., pp. 98, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-644)
645. Ibid., pp. 8, 17, 20, 41, 81, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-645)
646. Ibid., p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-646)
647. Ibid., p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-647)
648. Ibid., p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-648)
649. Ibid., p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-649)
650. Albert Camus, *L’Étranger* (1942) <[https://archive.org/details/albertcamus-letranger-1942\_20190820/page/n43/mode/2up?view=theater>](https://archive.org/details/albertcamus-letranger-1942_20190820/page/n43/mode/2up?view=theater>.) [accessed June 28 2022]. [↑](#footnote-ref-650)
651. Camus, *The Stranger*, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-651)
652. Camus, *L’Étranger*, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-652)
653. Camus, *The Stranger*, p. 57, Camus, *L’Étranger*, p. 57:

     Et chaque fois que je sentais son grand souffle chaud sur mon visage, je serrais les dents, je fermais les poings dans les poches de mon pantalon, je me tendais tout entier pour triompher du soleil et de cette ivresse opaque qu’il me déversait. À chaque épée de lumière jaillie du sable, d’un coquillage blanchi ou d’un débris de verre, mes mâchoires se crispaient. [↑](#footnote-ref-653)
654. Camus, *The Stranger*, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-654)
655. Ibid., pp. 15, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-655)
656. Ibid., p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-656)
657. Ibid., p. 122; Camus, *L’Étranger*, pp. 95–96:

     Pour la première fois depuis bien longtemps, j’ai pensé à maman. Il m’a semblé que je comprenais pourquoi à la fin d’une vie elle avait pris un ‘fiancé’, pourquoi elle avait joué à recommencer. [...] Si près de la mort, maman devait s’y sentir libérée et prête à tout revivre. Personne, personne n’avait le droit de pleurer sur elle. Et moi aussi, je me suis senti prêt à tout revivre. [↑](#footnote-ref-657)
658. Camus, *L’Étranger*, p.96: ‘devant cette nuit chargée de signes et d’étoiles, je m’ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde. De l’éprouver si pareil à moi, si fraternel enfin, j’ai senti que j’avais été heureux, et que je l’étais encore.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-658)
659. Camus, *The Stranger*, p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-659)
660. Ibid., p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-660)
661. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. from the French by Richard Howard with a new foreword by Robert Scholes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 120–21. An alternation between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* is an absolute necessity in realizing the self (cf. Daemmrich, *Self-Realization*, p. 159). The latter opens the way for intellectual and spiritual growth that also conveys to readers ‘a vision of human potential’ and ‘raise serious questions about the apparent predetermination of existence’ (p. 162). [↑](#footnote-ref-661)
662. In discussing Lefebvre’s reinterpretation of Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return in the 1940s, Alan Schrift (*French Nietzscheanism*, p.24) cogently remarks in this regard that Lefebvre’s existentialist Marxist vision of the future prompts him to see the Nietzschean Imperative as according ‘existence an infinite density: “Live each moment in a way that you will to relive it eternally”’ [‘Vis tout instant de sorte que tu veuilles toujours le revivre’]. There doesn’t exist an eternity and a pre-existent truth that fatalistically determines us. On the contrary: we create eternity, our eternity!’ Henri Lefebvre, *Nietzsche* [Paris: Éditions Sociales Internationales, 1939], p. 87. I, however, argue that Camus hints that a ‘pre-existent truth’ exists within each individual that motivates her/his need to start anew. [↑](#footnote-ref-662)
663. Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, trans. from the German by Ralph Manheim (New York: Random House, 1961). The later Vintage International edition (New York: Vintage, 1990) will be cited throughout. The German original makes the allusion to Nietzsche clearer: ‘Da stehen mir die Haare wie eine putzsüchtige Bürste auf dem Kopf, da spiegelt sich in jedem meiner blauen Augen der Wille zu einer Macht, die ohne Gefolgschaft auskommen sollte’ (‘Das Photoalbum’, *Grass, Die Blechtrommel*, p.70). [↑](#footnote-ref-663)
664. Melville, *Moby Dick*, ?. [↑](#footnote-ref-664)
665. Grass, *Tin Drum*, pp. 62–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-665)
666. Ibid., p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-666)
667. Ibid., p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-667)
668. Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*, p. 740. [↑](#footnote-ref-668)
669. Grass, *Tin Drum*, p.559. [↑](#footnote-ref-669)
670. Ibid., p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-670)
671. Ibid., p. 143. For an examination of the ontological meaning of the drumming motif and its relation to good and evil in *The Tin Drum*,see McCarthy, *Remapping Reality*,pp. 265–319. [↑](#footnote-ref-671)
672. John Irving, ‘A Soldier Once’, *New York Times Book Review*, July 8, 2007, first page. Irving offers a spirited defense of Grass against critics of his integrity and moral authority caused by the revelation that Grass—at age 17— was a member of the Waffen SS before being captured by the Americans and released at age 18 <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/08/books/review/Irving.html> [accessed 13 July 13, 2022]. See also John Irving, ‘Günter Grass Is My Hero, as a Writer and a Moral Compass’, *Guardian*,August 19, 2006. Frank Trommler, ‘German Intellectuals: Public Roles and the Rise of the Therapeutic’, in *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*, ed. by Michael Geyer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), pp. 35–58, remarks how much the historical panorama has changed in the twentieth century. Germany is no longer ‘a giant screen on which individual conduct could be enlarged and redeemed for socialism or history’ (p. 36). What remains is the small and local: ‘the betrayal of personal or intellectual loyalties’ (p. 36). To be sure, he is speaking in reference to Christa Wolf‘s *Was Bleibt?* (1989) (cf. pp. 47–48). He is not addressing the broad criticism leveled at Grass after the late revelation of his Waffen-SS past. But the remarks about the shift from the big screen of historical events to the small, local betrayals of personal or intellectual perceptions is relevant to both *The Tin Drum* and Grass’s later fall from grace. [↑](#footnote-ref-672)
673. Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, ‘World Literature, by Any Other Name?’, *PMLA*, 131.5 (Oct. 2016), 1396–1404. Striking is the absence of a colonial undercurrent in either *Madame Bovary* or the *Tin Drum* that does not categorize literatures into ‘major and minor, center and periphery, and canonical and vernacular’ modes (p. 1403). [↑](#footnote-ref-673)
674. Klaus Stallbaum, ‘Literatur als Stellungnahme. *Die Blechtrommel* oder Ein aufgeräumter Schreibtisch’, in *Text + Kritik. Zeitschrift für Literatur 1: Günter Gras*s, 6th rev. edn (Munich: Text + Kritik, 1988), pp. 37–47 (pp. 37, 39). [↑](#footnote-ref-674)
675. Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002), p. 12. This chapter is based in part on my essay ‘Being at Home in the World’ and in part on the *Tin Drum* chapter in my *Remapping Reality*. [↑](#footnote-ref-675)
676. Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*, p. 9; Grass, *Tin Drum*, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-676)
677. Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*, p. 10; Grass, *Tin Drum*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-677)
678. Grass, *Tin Drum*, pp.49,55. [↑](#footnote-ref-678)
679. Ibid., p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-679)
680. Stefan Neuhaus, ‘Vom Skandalroman zum modernen Klassiker: Die Rezeption von Günter Grass’ Roman *Die Blechtrommel* im deutschsprachigen Raum’, in *The Echo of Die Blechtrommel in Europe: Studies on the Reception of Günter Grass’s The Tin Drum*, ed. by Jos Joosten and Christoph Parry, Radboud Studies in Humanities 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 22–40; Veronika Schuchter, ‘Von der “epileptischen Kapriole” zum Nobelpreis: Die *Blechtrommel* als Paradigma der deutschsprachigen Literaturkritik’, in *Echo of Die Blechtrommel*, ed. by Joosten and Parry, pp. 41–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-680)
681. On the picaresque, see Wilfried van der Will, *Pikaro heute. Metamorphosen des Schelms bei Th. Mann, Döblin, Brecht, Grass* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1972) and Manfred Kremer, ‘Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* und die pikarische Tradition’, *German Quarterly*,46.3 (1973), 381–92. They assemble a whole list of characteristics that are mirrored in Grass’s novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-681)
682. Adam Krzeminski, ‘Die Blechtrommel: Ein Klassiker für Deutsche und Polen’, *Zeit Online*, Literaturkanon 19, *Zeit*,30 (2012) <[http://www.zeit.de/2012/30/L-Kanon-Grass/komplettansicht>](http://www.zeit.de/2012/30/L-Kanon-Grass/komplettansicht> ) [accessed November 28, 2017]. See also Mirostaw Ossowski, ‘*Die Blechtrommel* in Polen: Der mühsame Weg zum Erfolg’, in *Echo of Die Blechtrommel*, ed. by Joosten and Parry, pp. 63–76. On the European reception of the novel more generally, see Joosten and Parry, ‘Reading *Die Blechtrommel* throughout Europe: Introduction’, in *Echo of Die Blechtrommel*, ed. by Joosten and Parry, pp. 1–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-682)
683. ‘Nobel Prize for Literature 1999—Press Release’ <Nobelprize.org>.Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. January 18, 2018 <[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\_prizes/literature/laureates/1999/press.html>.](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1999/press.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-683)
684. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-684)
685. The mythological dimensions of the novel have been frequently analyzed. See, e.g., Glenn A. Guidry, ‘Theoretical Reflections on the Ideological and Social Implications of Mythic Form in Grass’ *Die Blechtrommel*’, *Monatshefte*,83.2 (1991), 127–46; Edward Diller, *A Mythic Journey: Günter Grass’ Tin Drum* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1974); David Roberts, ‘Aspects of Psychology and Mythology in *Die Blechtrommel*: A Study of the Symbolic Function of the “Hero” Oskar’, in *Grass: Kritik Thesen Analysen*, ed. by Manfred Jurgensen (Bern: Francke, 1973), pp. 45–73. [↑](#footnote-ref-685)
686. Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, trans. by Breon Mitchell (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-686)
687. See the detailed analysis of Hussert’s time concept in Inge Römer et al., *Husserl—Zeitbewusstsein und Zeitkonstitution* (Berlin: Springer Science+Business Media, 2010), esp. Kapitel 2, pp. 17–116: ‘Husserl—Zeitbewusstsein und Zeitkonstitution’, June 2010. The authors remark: ‘Entscheidend für die beiden erläuterten Komponenten der lebendigen Gegenwart ist, dass weder die Urhyle noch das Ur-Ich selbst schon zeitlich, selbst schon in einer Zeit sind. Sie sind in ihrem untrennbaren Zusammenspiel erst das, was zunächst immanente Zeit, die Husserl zuweilen Urzeit nennt, und höherstufig objektive Weltzeit hervorbringt’ (p. 90). For Husserl, there is no transcendental grounding of the Self, that is, not a *Sein* but a *Seiendes* in Heidegger’s terminology <https:/[/ww](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/226813460_Husserl_-_Zeitbewusstsein_und_Zeitkonstitution)w[.researchgate.net/publication/226813460\_Husserl\_\_Zeitbewusstsein\_und\_Zeitkonstitution](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/226813460_Husserl_-_Zeitbewusstsein_und_Zeitkonstitution)> [accessed July 22, 2022]. [↑](#footnote-ref-687)
688. Grass, ‘Schreiben nach Auschwitz. Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesung’ (1990), in Grass, *Der Autor als fragwürdiger Zeuge*, pp. 195–222 (p. 215). [↑](#footnote-ref-688)
689. Grass, *Tin Drum*, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-689)
690. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-690)
691. Günter Grass, ‘Schreiben in friedloser Welt’, Rede zur Eröffnung des 72. Internationalen PEN-Kongresses, Berlin, May 23, 2006 [2007], 4–5 <[https://www.pen-deutschland.de/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Rede\_Grass\_230506\_01.pdf>](https://www.pen-deutschland.de/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Rede_Grass_230506_01.pdf) [accessed July 16, 2022]. [↑](#footnote-ref-691)
692. e.g., Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*, pp.320ff., 366ff., 399–400. [↑](#footnote-ref-692)
693. Ibid*.*,p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-693)
694. Grass, *Tin Drum*, pp. 192–93. [↑](#footnote-ref-694)
695. Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*, pp. 52–53. [↑](#footnote-ref-695)
696. Grass, *Tin Drum*, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-696)
697. Grass, *Tin Drum*, trans. by Mitchell, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-697)
698. Of course, there are other examples of fatal attraction in the novel where the wooing is initiated by an object. One of the most prominent is the wooden figurehead of Niobe in the Maritime Museum, who lures men to their deaths. Herbert Truczinski, a guard at the museum and Oskar’s neighbor often allows Oskar to accompany him. Herbert commits suicide by ramming one edge of a double-edged axe into Niobe and impales himself on the other edge in seeking union with the lifeless figurehead. Another ‘thing’ that poses a fatal attraction for men is the triangle. The triangle refers directly to Maria Truczinski’s pubic area and those of all women (Grass, *Tin Drum*, pp. 279–80). The triangle is later associated with Lucie Rennwand, a serpentine seductress who is a stand-in for Lucifer. Her family name highlights how men are induced to run up against a wall repeatedly (*Rennwand* = run into wall). It is she who plays the major role in seducing the dusters (‘die Stäuber’), the street gang which Oskar commands as Jesus, to acknowledge their guilt in the allegory of jumping off a 10-meter diving board into an empty pool. Only Oskar refuses to jump, thus not falling for what he calls the second temptation of Jesus (Grass, *Tin Drum*, p.385). Things—real and allegorical—have not only memory but also act as lures. [↑](#footnote-ref-698)
699. Grass, *Tin Drum*, p. 48; Grass, *Tin Drum*, trans. by Mitchell, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-699)
700. Grass, *Tin Drum*, p. 566. Of his drumming, Gottlieb Vittlar, a satanic-like serpentine figure, remarks late in the novel: ‘For what made me take a liking to him [...] was precisely his particular variety of evil, that drumming of his, which resolved evil into its rhythmical components’ (ibid.). Phanes (Phanês) was just such an ontological principle. A mystic divinity in the system of the Orphics, Phanes is also called Eros, Ericapaeus, Metis, and Protogonus. He is said to have sprung from the mystic mundane egg, and to have been the father of all gods, and the creator of men (Proc. *in Plat. Crat.* p. 36; Orph. *Arg.* 15; Lactant. *Instit.* i, 5) (*Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*). [↑](#footnote-ref-700)
701. Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-701)
702. Grass, *Tin Drum*, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-702)
703. Grass, *Tin Drum*, trans. by Mitchell, pp. 35–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-703)
704. Grass, *Tin Drum*, p. 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-704)
705. While the Manheim and Mitchell translations are both accomplished, laudable, and well received, neither is a perfect reading of Grass’s novel. For the reasons cited in the foregoing, my references in the text are to the Manheim version. [↑](#footnote-ref-705)
706. Cf. Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*, p.229. [↑](#footnote-ref-706)
707. Ibid., pp.498–99.

     Man könnte jetzt ein Traktat über die verlorene Unschuld beginnen, könnte den trommelnden, permanent dreijährigen Oskar neben den buckligen, stimmlosen, tränen- und trommellosen Oskar stellen. Das jedoch entspräche nicht den Tatsachen: Oskar hat noch als trommelnder Oskar mehrmals die Unschuld verloren, gewann die wieder zurück oder ließ sie nachwachsen; denn die Unschuld ist einem fleißig wuchernden Unkraut zu vergleichen. (Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*,p. 656)

     Manheim misses the playful nuance of ‘das Spielchen von Schuld-Unschuld’ when he renders it flatly as ‘reflections about innocence and lost innocence’ (*Grass*, *Tin Drum*, p.499). [↑](#footnote-ref-707)
708. Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*, p.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-708)
709. Grass, *Tin Drum*, p.24. [↑](#footnote-ref-709)
710. Grass, *Tin Drum*, pp.21–22; Grass, *Die Blechtrommel*, p.18. [↑](#footnote-ref-710)
711. Grass, *Tin Drum*, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-711)
712. Ibid., pp. 169ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-712)
713. Ibid., p. 568. [↑](#footnote-ref-713)
714. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-714)
715. Chapters 40 ‘Klepp’ and 44 ‘The Ring Finger’ also repeat the memories that his tin drum has called up and keeps eternally present. Actually, the repetition of the drumming motif introduced in ch. 3 ‘Moth and Light Bulb’ happens even more often (chs 6, 14, 28, 30). His interpretation of the family album (ch. 4) forces him to interpret what he has not always witnessed. Chapters 39 ‘In the Clothes Cupboard’ and 44 ‘The Ring Finger’ repeat the events of ch. 1 ‘The Wide Skirt’ and ch. 12 ‘Good Friday Fare’. [↑](#footnote-ref-715)
716. His further story is also of interest in our context. As first king of the universe he passed the royal scepter to his daughter Nyx (night). In turn, she handed it down to her son Uranus (heaven) until the Titan Kronos seized it. Zeus defeated the Titans, assuming the scepter as the ultimate ruler of the cosmos. Some commentators also say that Zeus devoured Phanes in order to absorb his power and redistribute it among a new generation of gods, the Olympians. After long using the Olympians as guides to living and explanations for phenomena, humans ultimately replaced the Olympians. We might see this evolution as analogous to growing lucidity. [↑](#footnote-ref-716)
717. Jürgen Manthey, ‘*Die Blechtrommel* wiedergelesen’, in *Kritik + Krise* 1 (1988), 24–36. Similarly, Heinrich Vormweg, ‘*Die Blechtrommel* forever. Das Bild des politischen Menschen Grass’, in *Kritik + Krise* 1(1988), 128–32. [↑](#footnote-ref-717)
718. Brodkey, ‘Reading’, pp. 2, 44–45 (p. 2, cols. 2–3). [↑](#footnote-ref-718)
719. Jauß, ‘Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft’, p. 200. Moreover, Jauß claims that the specific function of literature is not exhausted in its narrative function. Literature raises questions about the personal and social contexts rendered; it does not simply mirror them: ‘Aus alledem ist zu folgern, daß die spezifische Leistung der Literatur im gesellschaftlichen Dasein gerade dort zu suchen ist, wo Literatur nicht in der Funktion einer *darstellenden* Kunst aufgeht’ (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-719)
720. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Kritische Studienausgabe 15 vols, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1988), iv, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-720)
721. Cf. *Narrated Communities—Narrated Realities: Narration as Cognitive Processing and Cultural Practice*, ed. by Hermann Blume, Christoph Leitgeb, and Michael Rössner, IFAVL 183 (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-721)
722. Jaspers, ‘The Meaning of History’, in *German Essays on History*, ed. by Rolf Sältzer, with a foreword by James J. Sheehan, German Library, vol. 49 (New York: Continuum, 1991), pp. 204–48 (p. 211). [↑](#footnote-ref-722)
723. Ibid., p. 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-723)
724. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-724)
725. Jaspers’s concept of human capital differs from Pierre Bourdieu’s as discussed in Chapter 2 of this study. It applies to all humans around the world and is not weighted down with the notion of a dominant culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-725)
726. Jaspers, ‘Meaning of History’, *German Essays on History*, p.208. [↑](#footnote-ref-726)
727. Ibid., p.209. [↑](#footnote-ref-727)
728. Ibid., p.236. [↑](#footnote-ref-728)
729. Ibid., p.237. [↑](#footnote-ref-729)
730. Ibid., p.240. [↑](#footnote-ref-730)
731. Ibid., p.246. [↑](#footnote-ref-731)
732. Ibid., p.229. [↑](#footnote-ref-732)
733. Ibid., p.247. [↑](#footnote-ref-733)
734. Ibid., p.248. [↑](#footnote-ref-734)
735. Ibid., p.246. [↑](#footnote-ref-735)
736. Ibid., p.205. [↑](#footnote-ref-736)
737. Ibid., p.204. [↑](#footnote-ref-737)
738. Russell Banks, Podcast (Literary-Arts-Archive) <<https://literary-arts.org/archive/russell-banks-rebroadcast/>> [accessed 21 July 2022]. [↑](#footnote-ref-738)
739. Collins, *Doctor Looks at Literature*, p. 0. [↑](#footnote-ref-739)
740. Joseph Collins, ‘Ulysses’, *New York Times*, Book Review Section, May 18, 1922. Reprinted in *New York Times*, ‘Celebrating 125 Years of the Book Review’, October 24, 2021, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-740)
741. For a more thorough review of *Ulysses*,see Collins, *Doctor Looks at Literature*, ch. 2, pp. 35–60. Collins concludes that Joyce has held up a mirror to life, especially its underbelly and provides the attentive reader with a mosaic of the human psyche (p. 57). In reality, the book is ‘a moving picture with picturesque legends, many profane and more vulgar’ (p. 50). [↑](#footnote-ref-741)
742. Christian Lorentzen, ‘Like this or Die: The Fate of the Book Review in the Age of the Algorithm’, *Harper’s Magazine*,April 29, 2019, pp. 25–33 (pp. 32–33). Collins offers an intriguing caveat to the traditional approach to book reviewing which, he avers, too frequently misses the mark: ‘If journals whose purpose is to orient and guide unsophisticated readers, and to illuminate the road that prospective readers must travel, would give the “once over” to books when they are published and the review ten years later, it would mark a great advance on the present method’ (*Doctor Looks at Literature*, p. 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-742)
743. Hesse’s ‘Eine Bibliothek der Weltliteratur’, p. ?. [↑](#footnote-ref-743)
744. Ibid., p. ?. [↑](#footnote-ref-744)
745. ‘ein Unterwegssein im Unendlichen, ein Mitschwingen im Universum, ein Mitleben im Zeitlosen. [...] sie hilft uns, unsrem Leben einen Sinn zu geben, die Vergangenheit zu deuten, der Zukunft in furchtloser Bereitschaft offenzustehen’ (Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke in 12 Bänden*, xi, *Schriften zur Literatur I*. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1976), pp. 335–72 (p. 337)). [↑](#footnote-ref-745)
746. Lubbuck, *Craft of Fiction*, p. ?. [↑](#footnote-ref-746)
747. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno launched a similar endeavor in the 1940s. Mark Roche renewed the defense of the humanities with his exploration of *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (2004), the *German Quarterly* drew renewed attention to the role of literature specifically in German Studies (*GQ* 80.1 (winter 2007), 97–105), and the MLA published a historical review of relevant assessments in *Profession 2012*. Many others such as Martha Nussbaum have enriched the discussion since then. [↑](#footnote-ref-747)