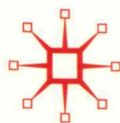


DIGRESSIONS IN EUROPEAN LITERATURE

FROM

**CERVANTES
TO SEBALD**

**EDITED BY
ALEXIS GROHMANN
AND CARAGH WELLS**



Digressions in European Literature

From Cervantes to Sebald

Edited by

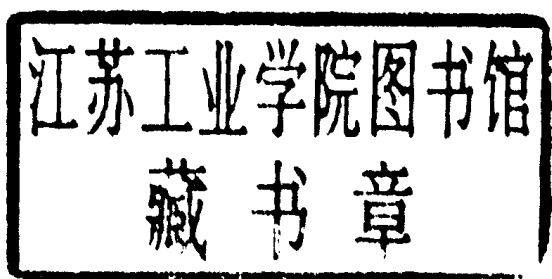
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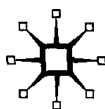
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Digressions in European Literature

Also by Alexis Grohmann:

COMING INTO ONE'S OWN: The Novelistic Development of Javier Marías

LITERATURA Y ERRABUNDIA

ALLÍ DONDE UNO DIRÍA QUE YA NO PUEDE HABER NADA. TU ROSTRO
MAÑANA DE JAVIER MARÍAS (*Edited with Maarten Steenmeijer*)

EL COLUMNISMO DE ESCRITORES ESPAÑOLES (1975–2005) (*Edited with
Maarten Steenmeijer*)

For Ross Chambers

Foreword

Ross Chambers

Forgive me, reader, for plucking at your sleeve and interrupting your train of thought. But that's what forewords do; and I did want to draw your attention to the phenomenon of digression, and how hard it is to pin down.

Whatever the context may be, digression seems to be always already active within it: it is a vehicle for whatever it may be that was inevitably repressed by the defining of the context. So it is inherently oppositional in character, which is to say wily, deceptive, uncanny and even perverse. I like that! Where there is a law, digression is on the side of desire; where power reigns, it represents the strength of the weak. The defined, the delimited, the regulated meet in digression a principle of untidiness, drift and disorder – the relaxation of energy and the prospect of coming apart that haunts the tightest of methodical constructs, the strictest of systems, the tidiest of organizations. It is a parasite, living off the cultural conventions that it simultaneously undermines and even, eventually, bids fair to demolish. It is the noise of discourse, the static of thought, preventing routine and keeping things lively.

Something that helps digression to get away with its vocation for oppositionality is that it so readily passes as a mere lapse or error, a failure of logic or attention that seems negligible and eminently forgivable. Considered as a figure of speech, it is a rhetorical device that mimes a delinquency, then – or alternatively an errancy that has become available as a trope. If you take it to be an actual slip-up, you may very well have missed the point. There are readers, for instance, who are irritated by *Tristram Shandy* or *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and wish the author would 'come to the point'. Whatever Sterne or Proust's point may be, they have missed it. Still, I do understand how they feel – and anyway, their supposedly naïve reaction is necessary, is it not, to validate the point (whatever it may be) of texts such as these? Without guileless readers to miss the point, masterpieces of long-windedness like *Shandy* and the *Recherche* would simply not have a point to make. They would be pointlessly wasting their time, and ours.

The scholarly authors of the essays in this collection – I confess to being one of them – have done their level best to grapple with such conundrums and to define the point of the many examples of literary digressivity that have caught their attention. Like Freud, who knew

when a cigar was a phallic symbol and when it was just a cigar, we can tell, I assure you, when a digression is a trope and when it is just sloppy writing. That said, however – and admirable as such efforts are – I do hope, dear reader, that in the end you will agree with me that the *real* reason we haven't completely wasted our time is that, inadvertently or otherwise, we have also taken a step or two towards measuring the sheer elusiveness of literary digressivity. For digression is like that other most slippery of rhetorical practices, irony, in that its vocation does seem to be to impose on analytic criticism the usefully chastening maxim that the more you succeed the more you fail, and the more you fail, the better you succeed.

There, the prefacing is done now. We can return to our separate paths. Thank you, though, for the opportunity to chat a bit; phone me sometime and we'll do lunch. I'd like to hear your thoughts on zeugma.

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We would like to thank the following for their help in making this book possible in its present form: all the contributors, who so willingly embarked on this adventure with us and without whose goodwill, patience, diligence and lucidity the book would probably never have come to fruition; Stergios Delialis, for designing the book cover, and Vetti Karvounari and Kostas Kalogirou for their assistance in this regard; the *Robert Walser-Stiftung* and *Keystone* for permission to reprint a manuscript page by the Swiss author; the Department of Languages at Clemson University for paying for the rights to reprint the said image; Paula Kennedy, Ben Doyle and, especially, Monica Kendall of Palgrave Macmillan for their steadfast editorial assistance; Jane Horton, for the splendid index; and, last but not least, Ross Chambers, loiterly trail-blazer and patron saint of this collection (as Judith Hawley puts it), for his good-humoured support of the project throughout, not least by way of many transatlantic telephone conversations, letters and faxes over recent years (but strictly no e-mails). This book is dedicated to him.

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Contents

| | |
|--|-------|
| <i>Foreword by Ross Chambers</i> | ix |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | xi |
| <i>Notes on Contributors</i> | xii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| <i>Alexis Grohmann and Caragh Wells</i> | |
| 1 The Twists and Turns of Life: Cervantes's <i>Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda</i> | 9 |
| <i>Jeremy Robbins</i> | |
| 2 Digressive and Progressive Movements: Sympathy and Sexuality in <i>Tristram Shandy</i> ; or, Plain Stories | 21 |
| <i>Judith Hawley</i> | |
| 3 <i>Little Dorrit</i> : Dickens, Circumlocution, Unconscious Thought | 36 |
| <i>Jeremy Tambling</i> | |
| 4 Concerning Metaphor, Digression and Rhyme (Fetish Aesthetics and the Walking Poem) | 49 |
| <i>Ross Chambers</i> | |
| 5 Henry James, in Parenthesis | 64 |
| <i>Ian F. A. Bell</i> | |
| 6 A Slice of Watermelon: The Rhetoric of Digression in Chekhov's 'The Lady with the Dog' | 82 |
| <i>Peter J. Rabinowitz and Corinne Bancroft</i> | |
| 7 'Let's Forget All I Have Just Said': Diversions and Digressions in Gidean Narratives | 94 |
| <i>David H. Walker</i> | |
| 8 Errant Eyes: Digression, Metaphor and Desire in Marcel Proust's <i>In Search of Lost Time</i> | 106 |
| <i>Margaret Topping</i> | |
| 9 Virginia Woolf and Digression: Adventures in Consciousness | 118 |
| <i>Laura Marcus</i> | |

| | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 10 | Stealing the Story: Robert Walser's <i>Robber</i> -Novel <i>Samuel Frederick</i> | 130 |
| 11 | Negotiating Tradition: Flann O'Brien's Tales of Digression and Subversion <i>Flore Coulouma</i> | 143 |
| 12 | 'Going On': Digression and Consciousness in <i>The Beckett Trilogy</i> <i>Edmund J. Smyth</i> | 156 |
| 13 | Straight Line or Aimless Wandering? Italo Calvino's Way to Digression <i>Olivia Santovetti</i> | 169 |
| 14 | Roving with a Compass: Digression, the Novel and the Creative Imagination in Javier Marías <i>Alexis Grohmann</i> | 181 |
| 15 | The Sense of Sebald's Endings ... and Beginnings <i>J. J. Long</i> | 193 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 205 |

Introduction

Alexis Grohmann and Caragh Wells

If we accept that literature and, in particular, verbal narratives, especially longer prose narratives such as novels, are digressive by their very nature, since, as Peter Brooks has intimated and Ross Chambers has confirmed, all narratives can only come into existence as narratives *per se* by not following the straight line, the shortest path, that leads from their beginning to their end, that is, they can only take shape as narratives by distancing their endings from their beginnings through, at the very least, Brooks's minimally complicated detour or deviance (because otherwise there would simply be no narrative), then the question of digression in literature is one of degree rather than being absolute. It becomes a question of the extent of digressiveness of a work, that is, rather than one of kind or essence (the digressive *versus* the non-digressive varieties). Since there are, therefore, following this line of reasoning, strictly speaking, no non-digressive works, there are merely narratives that could be said to be more digressive than others (either on the level of story or on that of discourse or both), and some in more ways than one.

This is the type of literature studied in this book, beginning with a work by one of the founding fathers of the modern novel, *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* by Cervantes, a narrative of *peripeteia* arguably more digressive than his *Don Quixote*, and ending with a look at the writing of one of the most suggestively errant authors of the contemporary period, W. G. Sebald. The course charted through European literature, though by no means comprehensive (any attempt at comprehensiveness would, in any case, have been an illusory and therefore impossible enterprise) – there are no doubt notable omissions, such as Montaigne, Swift, Diderot, Flaubert, Joyce, Nabokov or Bernhard – does, we trust, allow us to glimpse, albeit somewhat waywardly (but perhaps

this errancy is not an entirely inappropriate purposive lack of method in a book on digression), how many of Europe's major writers from the early modern period to the present day have run forth (*excursus* derives from *excurrere*), turning aside from a main path (*digression* stems from *digredi*) and producing thus a *παρέκβαση* (*parekbasis*, a temporary distancing, turning away from the subject), which exceeds the order or structure of the main subject, as Quintilian saw digression, wandering off Descartes's apparently singular right path of reason and reflection, and allowing Sterne's sunshine to flood their pages.

The chapters are arranged chronologically in the order of publication of the most important narrative or narratives discussed in each, and we have avoided any divisions, for the reason that digressions have formed part of the narrative form since Ancient times, at least, and evolve across historical boundaries and through an interrelated trajectory, with later narratives feeding on previous ones, as is borne out very clearly in the chapters that follow. Our focus on the European novel (for the most part – Chambers, as well as looking at Baudelaire, also reads two non-European poets through the prism of Baudelaire; needless to say, we understand Europe to include the British Isles), is due to the fact that 'in the richness of its forms, the dizzyingly concentrated intensity of its evolution, and its social role, the European novel (like European music) has no equal in any other civilization', as Milan Kundera would have it (1988: 143), even though this has entailed regretfully casting aside such crystallizations of the art of digression as, say, *Moby Dick*; or, *the Whale*. And while we acknowledge the persistence of digressive writing across the centuries since the rise of the novel, our selection of essays illustrates how mainly twentieth-century European prose narratives not only pay homage to earlier, founding digressive texts, such as *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*, but also signal an expansion in literary experimentation and its digressive tendencies.

Traditionally, digression has been neglected or viewed as something to be corrected by both rhetoric and also theory (not usually considered a trope nor a legitimate rhetorical practice), literary or otherwise, with notable exceptions such as Randa Sabry's *Stratégies discursives* (1992) and Ross Chambers's *Loiterature* (1999). So, for instance, in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, J. A. Cuddon's definition is that of 'material not strictly relevant to the main theme or plot of a work. Sterne proved himself an incorrigible digressionist in *Tristram Shandy*' (1999: 226). Of course, had Sterne been reformed and his digressiveness rectified, there would simply have been no narrative, but those who view digression with suspicion do not dwell on such matters; as

Pierre Bayard sums it up, 'rhetoric's dream is that digression not be digressive', and the same could have been said of the yearning of literary theory and criticism, until fairly recently (Bayard 1996: 24).

This corrective tendency notwithstanding, digression is an intrinsic part of the narrative form from its very beginnings, to be found even in the relatively linear simplicity of early epic narratives. One need only think of Homer's *Odyssey*, an epic poem made up of the episodic nature of Odysseus' attempt to return home and of innumerable narrative digressions, one of the better-known ones being the excursus on the origins of Odysseus' scar, famously discussed by Auerbach: Odysseus, having finally returned to his home in Ithaca as a stranger who guards himself from being recognized upon finding his house and wife besieged by the Suitors, is afforded the courtesy of having his feet washed by Eurycleia, and the old maid recognizes her master by a scar; the diachronic progression of narrative is at that moment interrupted by the story of the boar hunt many years prior, during which hunt Odysseus was struck and scarred by the boar's tusk (Book 19, ll. 393–467). The *Odyssey* is a wandering journey prolonged by adventure, which, in theory, like so many truly digressive works, not least Cervantes's or Proust's, is a form of work that has the latent quality of lending itself to being prolonged considerably, like life itself (if it is not cut short): Odysseus' adventures might have been multiplied and, thence, his journey home, dilated; Don Quixote, though he dies at the end, might have been made to live by his author much longer and to have become involved in many more episodes; Marcel's narration, too, might have carried on for a yet greater number of volumes than the ones of which it is made up. Hence, the dilatory practices of many narratives enhance both the narrator's and the reader's desire to prolong the pleasure indefinitely, as Chambers puts it (the other desire of what may constitute a divided attention being the desire to know what will happen [Chambers 1999: 20]). And this prolongation of narrative time can inevitably be read as a struggle to keep the end of the story but also, by implication, that of life, at bay. Thus, digression is intimately related to a seeming excess generated from within the text and the things that writers do with their texts that may take us to various *beyonds*.

Digressions constitute a path of a certain order pursued through associations of a not necessary linear and simple kind. And, more often than not, the intricacy of associations effected in digressive texts reflects the complexity of the world contemplated, as Leo Spitzer once said of Proust's prose in particular; nothing is simple in the world and, therefore, nothing is simple in a digressive form of writing, governed, as it