Contents

So go ahead and tell everyone: this is what the future holds, the future is radiant and wonderful. You should all love it, yearn for it, work for it, accelerate its approach, and transfer as much from it into the present as you possibly can: your present life will be radiant and good, rich in joy and pleasure exactly in proportion to your ability to infuse some future into it while you still have time.

—Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*;
Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream, chapter 4.16

Говори же всем: вот что в будущем, будущее светло и прекрасно. Любите его, стремитесь к нему, работайте для него, приближайте его, переносите из него в настоящее, сколько можете перенести: настолько будет светла и добра, богата радостью и наслаждением ваша жизнь, насколько вы успеете перенести в неё из будущего.

—Николай Чернышевский, *Что делать?*

Acknowledgments

This book project arose from my participation in an interdisciplinary DFG research group based at the University of Konstanz (2012-2014): "What If – On the Meaning, Relevance, and Epistemology of Counterfactual Claims and Thought Experiments."

I would like to extend my warmest thanks to those colleagues who have provided thought-provoking discussions, perceptive insights, and criticism while this book was being researched and written: first of all, Riccardo Nicolosi; Jurij Murašov; Wolfgang Spohn; Julian Reiss; John Beatty; Mirja Lecke; Maria Mikhailova; Fedor Poljakov; Muireann Maguire; Natalia Mikhalenko; Eliane Fitzé; the anonymous peer reviewers of the book manuscript; and many others. Some of the chapters of this book develop the argumentation of my articles listed in the Bibliography.

My deepest gratitude is reserved for my family and friends, for their love, moral support, and unwavering faith in me throughout my research.

Introduction

> A suffocating smell of sulphur flooded the room. The hands of the large wall clock began to move faster and faster and soon disappeared out of sight in their frenzied rotating motion. The pages of the loose-leaf calendar were being noisily torn off on their own and were flying up to the ceiling, filling the room with a whirlwind of paper. The walls got somehow distorted and started to tremble. [...] Exhausted by his effort, Aleksei collapsed onto some sofa, which had never been there before, and lost consciousness.[1]

This is the way in which Alexander Chaianov's protagonist Aleksei ends up in the future land of peasant utopia, as an unknown force transports him from the year 1921 to 1984. While spending a quiet evening in his Moscow apartment at the end of a long day, Aleksei, a civil servant in the newly established Soviet Russia, is musing over a volume of Herzen. He then asks aloud, presumably with the volume's author in mind, if liberal thinkers can come up with a viable alternative to socialism. No sooner has he uttered these words that time and space become displaced as described above. The point is that sometimes a rhetorical question addressed to a utopian writer can bring about dramatic life changes and propel us along a completely unexpected path, lined with inspiring new insights and acute disillusionment alike. The questions that this book is about to examine all start with "What if": What if Aleksei were sent to the ideal future? What if the ideal future of humanity turned out to be a less than ideal disaster? And what if such experimentation in thoughts, conveyed via literary fiction, could give us new knowledge and instruct us about the best future choices?

---

1 "В комнате удушливо запахло серой. Стрелки больших стенных часов завертелись всё быстрее и быстрее и в неистовом вращении скрылись из глаз. Листки отрывного календаря с шумом отрывались сами собой и взвивались кверху, вихрями бумаги наполняя комнату. Стены как-то исказились и дрожали. [...] Истощённый усилиями, Алексей опустился на какой-то диван, никогда не бывший здесь раньше, и сознание его покинуло." Aleksandr Chaianov, *Puteshestvie moego brata Alekseia v stranu krest'ianskoi utopii* (Moscow: Kniga po trebovaniiu, 2012), 5. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. See also the discussion of this passage in chapter 5 below.

The future of civilization has always held an irresistible fascination for the human mind. One of the aims of this book is to find out to what extent literary thought experiments can enable us to explore both future prospects and their roots in the present and the past. Modern Russian literature has produced a particularly rich and revealing array of forecasts dealing with the future evolution of society, as many generations of Russian intellectuals, especially writers, have addressed their country's complex history in this way. The resulting literary evocations of the future are sometimes radiantly optimistic utopias, sometimes nightmarishly pessimistic dystopias, and occasionally a mixture of both: typically, a utopia that has gone wrong and turned into its antithesis. Within this broad class of visions of the future, the present study focuses on selected utopian and/or dystopian works of Russian prose fiction written between 1840 and 1960. These include both under-researched and well-known short stories and novels by Vladimir Odoevsky, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Alexander Bogdanov, Aleksei Tolstoy, Alexander Chaianov, and Nina Berberova. Most of the chosen texts can be considered to contain a counterfactual thought experiment: in other words, a systematic and intrinsically plausible narrative based on unreal assumptions and attempting to prove or disprove a particular hypothesis or to argue a specific point. In the works in question, a characteristic starting point for such a counterfactual scenario is as follows: "X is an event or a series of events that has never taken place and probably never will. For purely experimental purposes, let us suppose that X happened. Now, if X were the case, then Y would occur…" This is a specific variety of the more general category of thought experiments, which can be concisely defined as mental constructs, expressed in language and giving a possible detailed narrative answer to the question "What if X occurred?," where X is an event that may or may not take place, including any impossible events.

Thought experiments and counterfactual reasoning play an important cognitive role both in the social and in the natural sciences,[2] having contributed to great discoveries such as those by Galileo and Einstein, to name but a few. And yet the significance of (counterfactual) thought experiments in literary fiction has rarely been analyzed to date, especially with close attention to specific texts and their stylistic features. This is precisely what this book does: by connecting literary fiction and those great achievements of science that have been brought

2 For more detail, see, for example, Dorothee Birke, Michael Butter, and Tilmann Köppe, eds., *Counterfactual Thinking—Counterfactual Writing* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2011); and Thomas Macho and Annette Wunschel, eds., *Science and Fiction. Über Gedankenexperimente in Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Literatur* (Frankfurt/M: Fischer, 2004).

about by thought experimentation, this pilot study conducts a preliminary examination of the following key issues: How do thought experiments function in literary works? And how do such works change the way we think? In fact, thought experiments in the social and natural sciences often use a procedure that is of fundamental importance to literary fiction and can be considered to be a distinctive feature of literature: that of narrative development. In other words, they simply tell a good, or at least convincing, story. If this strategy can bring about major breakthroughs in the sciences, then surely similarly illuminating processes must be taking place in literature? This is one of the central questions to be investigated, on the example of a representative corpus of Russian texts that serve as an appropriate test case for this task. The topicality of this approach becomes particularly evident if we consider the current worldwide emphasis on interdisciplinarity and impact as key features of scholarly research. In this instance, the subject area of literary studies gains a significant interdisciplinary dimension thanks to a cross-fertilization with philosophy and scientific method; and literary analysis ultimately strives to achieve an impact on human thought and its wider applications by shedding light on the cognitive uses of specific narrative methods and forms.

In the latest literary-theoretical scholarship in the field, counterfactual thought experiments are typically defined as "mental arrangements that [...] cannot be realized" and that have the following structure: "If *a* then *b*, where the antecedent *a* and the consequent *b* are more or less elaborate verbal expressions [and] at least one of the assumptions is, at the moment they are made and relative to a certain (shared) knowledge, *obviously false* to both the author and the addressee."[3] At the same time, it is worth recalling the famous definition of the thought experiment given by Ernst Mach, the German philosopher, around 1905. He presents the thought experiment as a method that bridges the gap between reality and the imagination and is therefore shared by the arts and the sciences. This definition stands at the origin of the term and its wide-ranging uses in modern philosophy of science and related fields:

3 Andrea Albrecht and Lutz Danneberg, "First Steps toward an Explication of Counterfactual Imagination," in *Counterfactual Thinking—Counterfactual Writing*, ed. Dorothee Birke, Michael Butter, and Tilmann Köppe (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 13–14. As Albrecht and Danneberg point out, a counterfactual thought experiment thus defined strongly overlaps, and even coincides, with what they call a counterfactual imagination (ibid., 12–14).

> Beside the physical experiment, there is also another type of experiment, which is being extensively conducted on a higher intellectual level—the thought experiment. The project maker, the dreamer, the novelist, and the poet of social or technical utopias all engage in thought experimentation. Yet the solid businessman and the serious inventor or researcher also do the same. They all imagine certain circumstances and associate with this imaginary vision the expectation, or the supposition, that particular consequences may take place. […] It is much easier for us to control our thoughts than to influence physical facts. We experiment with thoughts at a lower cost, so to speak. Therefore, it is not surprising that the thought experiment is often conducted before the physical experiment, with the former acting as preparation for the latter.[4]

In addition to the idea that thought experiments are as important as real, physical experiments, Mach also suggests that an underlying distinctive feature of most thought experiments is variation, or the playing out of multiple alternative scenarios: "As we can see, the fundamental method of the thought experiment is the same as that of the physical experiment: that is, the method of *variation*. Via a variation of circumstances, continuous if possible, we can expand the scope of the idea (expectation) that is associated with them […]."[5] For the purposes of this study, I will also assume that a (literary) thought experiment aims to produce some kind of reader response and has a specific scholarly or ideological hypothesis as its starting point, which it attempts to confirm and/or undermine using a range of stylistic and rhetorical means. This book analyzes the selected

---

4 "Außer dem physischen Experiment gibt es noch ein anderes, welches auf höherer intellektueller Stufe in ausgedehntem Maße geübt wird—das Gedankenexperiment. Der Projektenmacher, der Erbauer von Luftschlössern, der Romanschreiber, der Dichter sozialer oder technischer Utopien experimentiert in Gedanken. Aber auch der solide Kaufmann, der ernste Erfinder oder Forscher tut dasselbe. Alle stellen sich Umstände vor, und knüpfen an diese Vorstellung die Erwartung, Vermutung gewisser Folgen. […] Unsere Vorstellungen haben wir leichter und bequemer zur Hand, als die physikalischen Tatsachen. Wir experimentieren mit den Gedanken sozusagen mit geringeren Kosten. So dürfen wir uns also nicht wundern, daß das Gedankenexperiment vielfach dem physischen Experiment vorausgeht, und dasselbe vorbereitet." Ernst Mach, "Über Gedankenexperimente," in his *Erkenntnis und Irrtum—Skizzen zur Psychologie der Forschung* (Leipzig: Barth, 1906), 186–187.

5 "Wie man sieht, ist die Grundmethode des Gedankenexperimentes, ebenso wie jene des physischen Experimentes, die Methode der *Variation*. Durch wenn möglich kontinuierliche Variation der Umstände wird das Geltungsbereich einer an dieselben geknüpften Vorstellung (Erwartung) erweitert. […]" Ibid., 191.

narratives on the structural and stylistic level so as to show what epistemic and cultural value these thought experiments have within and beyond their fictional framework.

At this point, it is important to differentiate between thought experiment and utopia and/or dystopia. Undoubtedly, thought experiments have much in common with utopias and dystopias: as we have seen above, even Ernst Mach points out that "the poet of social or technical utopias" engages in thought experimentation. Thought experiments, utopias, and dystopias all have a rhetorical function, which means that they all try to bring across a particular point and to influence the opinions of their readers in some way. A utopia is a text that depicts an imaginary perfect state or society, while a dystopia evokes exactly the opposite: an imaginary society in which everything has gone wrong. Some, but not all, utopias and dystopias are written in the format of thought experiments, but not all thought experiments are utopias or dystopias. The crucial difference is that utopias and dystopias primarily presuppose an evocation or even a description of a *state* of things, which implies a static vision of an imaginary society. Such an evocation or description may be present in a thought experiment, but there is another absolutely essential condition that every thought experiment has to meet: a thought experiment must contain a *narrative* (this is possible, but not at all obligatory for a utopian or dystopian text). So in contrast to the inherently *static* evocation, which is sufficient for utopias and dystopias, a thought experiment always implies a *dynamic* evolution of a narrative, which unfolds as assumption *a* precipitates consequences *b*, *c*, and so on. Moreover, as Mach explains in our quotation above, a thought experiment is often characterized by the principle of variation, or the playing out of multiple alternative scenarios. So frequently, it is not enough to give merely a single narrative: instead, in a thought experiment, we tend to be confronted with several narratives simultaneously, which constitute several alternative paths of evolution that may unfold under particular circumstances.

The texts chosen for this book are all utopias and/or dystopias written in the thought experiment format: and this is what distinguishes them from the vast body of utopian and dystopian writing that is otherwise available. The dynamic nature of the thought experiment also permits to override a rigid distinction between a utopia and a dystopia: as we shall see, several of our chosen texts start off as a utopia that eventually treacherously turns into a dystopia, or threatens to do so. While this may disrupt a classification into utopian and dystopian texts, such a transformation fits perfectly naturally into the unfolding narrative of a thought experiment, as part of its dynamic evolution. Ultimately, approaching our chosen texts as thought experiments, rather than simply as utopias or

dystopias, enables us to see them as part of a larger international constellation of thought experimentation, not only in literature, but also in the social and natural sciences. We gain major new insights as a result: 1) we unravel the ingenious experiment-related techniques that these texts use to influence and convince the reader; 2) consequently, we gain a deeper understanding of the underlying ideological agenda of these texts; 3) we discover further new dimensions in these works as we begin to see how they position themselves towards Thomas Malthus, both as the inventor of the rhetorical thought experiment and the author of the notorious theory of population—this key aspect will be discussed next.

With regard to the thought experiment format, the selected texts can all be linked to *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) by Thomas Malthus, in which the British economist and philosopher conducts a series of counterfactual thought experiments—some of the first of their kind—relating in vivid narrative form the downfall of an initially perfect imaginary society.[6] Malthus uses his thought experiments for argumentative purposes, with the aim of persuading his readers of the accuracy of his population theory and the inadequacy of other social theories, such as William Godwin's egalitarianism, as depicted in his book *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). Throughout his *Essay*, Malthus argues that if a society is very prosperous and food production is at its maximum, population will grow exponentially, thereby causing a drastic decrease in prosperity, which is then followed by a drop in population growth. Consequently, if population size is to remain in proportion to the world's resources, poverty and misery will always exist, according to Malthus. One of his persistent ideas is that humanity is subject not only to an inevitable shortage of resources, but also to accompanying famines, wars, and epidemics, all of which allegedly contribute to keeping population growth in check. In the age of the coronavirus pandemic, this point of view unexpectedly assumes a startling new relevance, even though Malthus's population theory has largely lost its power of persuasion by now, as will be discussed below. Consequently, any creative responses to Malthus in Russian fiction become more topical and interesting than ever in the post-2020 world.

The literary texts analyzed in the present study have been chosen because they both focus on visions of the future and meet the following key criteria, all of

---

6 See Riccardo Nicolosi, "Kontrafaktische Überbevölkerungsphantasien. Gedankenexperimente zwischen Wissenschaft und Literatur am Beispiel von Thomas Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) und Vladimir Odoevskijs *Poslednee samoubijstvo* (*Der letzte Selbstmord*, 1844)," *Scientia poetica* 17 (2013): 55.

which makes these works ideal for studying thought experiments in literary fiction: 1) in the same way as Malthus, the chosen texts employ thought experiments within an argumentative framework; 2) moreover, all of the authors mention Malthus and/or the problem of (over)population directly in the text; 3) most of the authors also discuss Malthus's theory in detail in their personal and/or critical writings, which will be cited later in this book when relevant. For our pilot study, argumentative clarity and concision are more important than quantity, which is why the number of chosen works is limited. Without a doubt, other excellent texts meeting similar criteria can be analyzed in future research on thought experiments, building on the conclusions made in this book.

And yet, despite the fruitful connections with Malthus mentioned above, the Russian writers often arrive at conclusions that are quite different from those in the *Essay*. In mainstream Western scholarship, it is often intuitively assumed that much of Malthus's pragmatic pessimism is inherently rational, despite a longstanding tradition of Malthus critique on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet the historical and social conditions in Russia have always been so radically different from those that Malthus takes for granted, that his ideas have readily prompted numerous alternative views and scenarios in Russian in the course of the two hundred years since the publication of the *Essay* in 1798. A selective comparative analysis of Malthus's theory and its literary reception in Russia, as undertaken in the present study, therefore generates new refreshing insights, in particular on the meta-level of argumentative reasoning and cognitive structures: the book tests the proposition that, in literary fiction, thought experiments act as evidence that may change the reader's degree of belief in a particular hypothesis or its negation, with special attention to future forecasts. Independently from this persuasive effect, literary thought experiments may clarify specific intellectual contexts or undermine the intellectual validity of entire classes of conceptual constructs.

The method used for the analysis is interdisciplinary, combining critical tools from the disciplines of literary studies and philosophy. First of all, a number of foundational philosophical terms are employed within the fabric of literary analysis, in particular concepts such as probability and evidence.[7] Similarly, a

---

7 On probability, see, in particular, Gerd Gigerenzer, Zeno Swijtink, Theodore Porter, Lorraine Daston, John Beatty, and Lorenz Kruger, *The Empire of Chance: How Probability Changed Science and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); as well as Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); idem, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and idem, *An Introduction to Probability and Inductive Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

differentiation between three different types of thought experiments in literary fiction is used to try and assess to what extent the selected texts imply a plausible connection to empirical reality. Specifically, we are going to distinguish between counterfactual thought experiments, hypothetical thought experiments, and fictional models. In this context, it is worth noting, as based on the standard analytical approach used in philosophy, that thought experiments can be either counterfactual (showing something that will never take place in reality) or hypothetical (portraying a development that has some probability of being true). A closely related notion is that of models, which "usually offer an idealized simplification or abstraction with regard to an intended purpose."[8] The process of "simplification or abstraction" is what thought experiments (of both types) and models have in common. However, in the case of fictional models, "What is crucial here is the claim that the resemblance between the model and the modelled leads to true assertions."[9] In other words, among the three kinds of constructs in question, which can all overlap with each other, models have the strongest link to reality: we shall assume that a fictional model creates a step-by-step approximation of a real scenario that is most likely to unfold under specific circumstances. In a nutshell, all literary thought experiments play out a story based on the initial question "what if," as discussed above. However, a counterfactual thought experiment contains a narrative that is improbable or impossible; a hypothetical thought experiment demonstrates a probable sequence of events, while the plot of a fictional model is as close to an accurate prediction of real developments as possible. Accordingly, some of this book's novelty will result from such attention to modality, which can be defined as the distinctive degree of realizability or plausibility that one may associate with the utopian projects described in the chosen works of fiction.[10] On the one hand, this characteristic modality of literary thought experiments is different from that of literary representation

2001). Probability appears in the present study not in the mathematical sense, but mainly in terms of a discussion of the extent to which certain reader responses are more or less likely—so it is a critical commentary that works with estimated probabilities, rather than with certainties. In this way, a balance between interpretative openness and closure is preserved. On evidence, see Julian Reiss, "Empirical Evidence: Its Nature and Sources," in *The Sage Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Sciences*, ed. Ian C. Jarvie and Jesús Zamora-Bonilla (London: SAGE, 2011), 551–576.

8 Albrecht and Danneberg, "First Steps," 22.

9 Ibid.

10 On modality in literature, see Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); idem, *La Pensée du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); idem, *The Lives of the Novel: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). On modality from a philosophical point of view, see, for example, Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

generally, and, on the other hand, it will be argued that the scenarios of utopian (and/or dystopian) thought experiments in literature are not always intended to be considered as unequivocally impossible. This focus on the modal ambiguity of utopia and dystopia leads to a dialectical twenty-first-century development of the traditional premises of utopian thought and writing, starting from Plato and underpinned by the etymology of "utopia" as meaning a "non-place" or a "non-existent place," famously coined by Sir Thomas More.

At the same time, the thought experiments analyzed remain inherently literary, which is why the critical method also encompasses a detailed analysis of narrative strategies, as based on the long-established strength of literary scholarship: the close commentary. In this book, three key conceptual tools will be used to make the commentary both textually and theoretically grounded in the specific thought experiment context: reader response; *reductio ad absurdum*; and the somatic effect of literature. All of these aspects are concerned with the interaction between the text and the reader: in each case, we consider this interaction from a somewhat different angle. For the purposes of this study, it will be assumed that reader response is the broadest category, a category that encompasses both *reductio ad absurdum*, as a rhetorical strategy aiming to produce the reader's disbelief, and somatic effect, as an inherent quality of dramatic literary representation triggering the reader's empathy with the characters portrayed. While *reductio ad absurdum* and somatic effect are helpful conceptual tools that are closely linked with two major (and contrasting) types of reader response (disbelief and empathy), other features of literary discourse will be analyzed, too, with close attention to the kinds of reader response they may generate.

The rhetorical device of *reductio ad absurdum*, a favorite technique of classical Greek thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, primarily consists in accepting a particular assumption as correct (a feature shared with thought experiments) and then playing out its logical development until it becomes clear that the initial premise results in ridiculous, absurd, or untenable consequences; therefore, the original assumption contains contradictions and must be false.

In the chosen texts, the strong rhetorical orientation of *reductio ad absurdum* typically supports the argumentative purpose of the literary thought experiment at hand, which is one of the reasons why the effect of the text on the reader is of crucial importance. This is also true for those texts that do not necessarily feature a *reductio ad absurdum*, since they still strive to have an effect on the reader as the thought experiment unfolds. I shall therefore apply reader response theories, especially those by Wolfgang Iser and Michael Riffaterre, to evaluate the overall epistemic and cultural impact of the thought experiments in question on the reader. In an essay first published in 1974, Wolfgang Iser provides

a highly relevant description of the reading process as a joint venture of author and reader: "the literary work has two poles, […] the artistic and the esthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the esthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader […]—*though this [realization] in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text*. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence […]" (emphasis added).[11] The phrase in italics pinpoints the effect of the text on the reader, which Iser further highlights as follows:

> What is normally meant by "identification" is the establishment of affinities between oneself and someone outside oneself—a familiar ground on which we are able to experience the unfamiliar. The author's aim, though, is to convey the experience and, above all, an attitude toward that experience. Consequently, *"identification" is not an end in itself, but a stratagem by means of which the author stimulates attitudes in the reader* [emphasis added].[12]

Paraphrasing Georges Poulet and then giving his own interpretation, Iser pithily concludes: "the thoughts of the author take place subjectively in the reader, who thinks what he is not. […] These are the ways in which reading literature gives us the chance to formulate the unformulated."[13]

Iser's work has been a lasting inspiration for a host of effective reader response-oriented textual analysis approaches that have been invented since. Elaine Nardocchio has brought together a remarkable constellation of such approaches in her edited volume of 1992, *Reader Response to Literature: The Empirical Dimension*.[14] Among the many excellent essays of this book, several are particularly relevant to the present study. Rosanne Potter's method is based on traditional rhetorical analysis, more precisely on "the correlations of reader

---

11 Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" [1974], in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 50.

12 Ibid., 65.

13 Ibid., 66–68. For an overview of some of the most significant theories of reader response, see Elaine Nardocchio, "Introduction" and "The Critic as Expert: Part II," in *Reader Response to Literature: The Empirical Dimension*, ed. Elaine Nardocchio (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 1–11, 265–278.

14 *Reader Response to Literature: The Empirical Dimension*, ed. Elaine Nardocchio (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992).

responses with semantic and syntactic data."[15] She concludes: "My research confirms Iser's view of the text as an aesthetic object which makes the reader react. One way dramatic texts make expert and non-expert readers react is through contrasts between the presence and the absence of easily-recognized features in the dialogue assigned to characters."[16] Indeed, in my own method I am similarly going to focus on specific patterns of language and meaning in prose texts that attract the attention of the reader. In the course of her analysis, Potter also notes a key practical feature that most reader response approaches have to adopt: "When one seeks the common cues, the ones that work on all readers, a coarser sieve will limit fine distinctions and keep related impressions together."[17]

Teresa Snelgrove's method in the same volume involves a statistical analysis of narrative patterns, focusing on the frequency of occurrence of different types of narrative structures in the text.[18] While statistical analysis is beyond the scope of our discussion of thought experiments, Teresa Snelgrove makes a significant comment on the connection between figurative language and reader response. Indeed, this connection is essential to the method to be used in the present study: "Similes and metaphors, which also contribute to narrative complexity, are usually classed as comment modes since they clearly indicate the presence of a guiding aesthetic hand and usually appeal to something within the realm of the reader's experience that exists independently of the fiction."[19] Another important factor that shapes reader response is empathy: "Readers respond to private rhythms by reconstructing the emotions felt by the characters. Although their abilities to empathise might differ widely, all readers possess the mechanism to construct the emotion once they have recognised the patterns."[20]

Empathy receives in-depth attention in László Halász's article in the same volume. On the basis of thorough empirical research involving the reading of short stories by Maupassant and Kafka by several test groups of individuals, Halász concludes that literary texts elicit much stronger empathy and a more pronounced emotional response than other types of texts:

---

15 Rosanne G. Potter, "Reader Responses to Dialogue," in *Reader Response to Literature: The Empirical Dimension*, ed. Elaine Nardocchio (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 16.

16 Ibid., 28.

17 Ibid.

18 Teresa Snelgrove, "Reading Structures: The Systematic Analysis of the Structure of Narrative Texts," in *Reader Response to Literature: The Empirical Dimension*, ed. Elaine Nardocchio (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 120.

19 Ibid., 130–131.

20 Ibid., 133.

> As for the empathetic judgment of the character's behavior, the short story readers could imagine themselves in the place of the master, but not in the place of the manservant, to a greater extent than the paraphrase and summary readers could. [...] While "actor" and "fiction" were the most frequent categories as among the literary text readers [*sic*], "observer" plus "hearsay" and "non-fiction" were typical among the expository-descriptive text readers. [...] Literary text readers could be sharply separated from the other two text readers [...] by the higher ratio of the use of more personal linguistic forms, words expressing feelings and emotions, and more detailed responses.[21]

So empirical research by both Snelgrove and Halász supports the idea that readers' emotional involvement with characters plays a significant role in the overall effect achieved by a literary text.

Furthermore, Theresa Snelgrove, Willie van Peer, László Halász, and Robert de Beaugrande all pinpoint the importance of the interplay between the expected and the unexpected within reader response. Snelgrove discusses the violation of reader expectations as a manipulative stratagem on the part of a literary text: "The reader, expecting the report of an emotion to be followed by the report of an action that has a causal relationship to the emotion, can find no such linkage, and feels at sea. The complex rhythms allow the narrator to control the reader's response by creating confusion and/or surprise."[22] Van Peer introduces the highly pertinent theory of foregrounding in this context, whose origins he traces back to Jan Mukařovský, Roman Jakobson, the Russian Formalists, and Aristotle's *Poetics*:[23]

> The term "foregrounding" refers to the fact that literary texts, by making use of some special devices, direct the reader's attention to their own formal or semantic structure. Some parts of the text are thereby promoted into the "foreground." These textual

---

21 László Halász, "Self-Relevant Reading in Literary Understanding," in *Reader Response to Literature: The Empirical Dimension*, ed. Elaine Nardocchio (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 234, 239.

22 Snelgrove, "Reading Structures: The Systematic Analysis of the Structure of Narrative Texts," 133.

23 See Willie van Peer, "Literary Theory and Reader Response," in *Reader Response to Literature: The Empirical Dimension*, ed. Elaine Nardocchio (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 139.

> locations are given more attention, and in the reader's perception they play a relatively more important role in the act of interpretation.[24]

Foregrounding enables the text to have a direct effect on the reader:

> In general, a strong pragmatic content may be ascribed to the concept of foregrounding, referring, as it does, to the way in which a reader processes a literary text, or, alternatively, how an author may realize specific effects in the reader. The text, as a medium and prerequisite of the communicative process, still bears the traces set out by the author in order to guide the reader in a particular direction.[25]

Foregrounding is a dynamic notion and functions thanks to parallelism and deviation:

> The devices by which foregrounding is produced originate in the basic mechanisms of deviation and parallelism. The latter comes into being through repetitive structures: some verbal configurations are (partly) repeated, thereby attracting the reader's attention, and hence being promoted into the foreground of text response. [...] The second device which may cause foregrounding effects is that of deviation: some kind of rule, maxim or convention is flouted by the text. This may involve rules of the language, literary conventions, the reader's expectation or a reference to some state the reader knows in reality to be false or improbable. It is also possible that a deviation is brought about against a pattern set up by the text itself. All these instances of deviation create some degree of surprise in the reader and are thereby drawn into the foreground.[26]

Referring to work by Willie van Peer and William Paulson, Halász brings our attention to the fact that "Because they are continually disrupted by new unpredictabilities, literary texts are not predictable. In literary-artistic communication,

---

24 Ibid., 139.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 140.

one must construct 'a pattern out of what interrupts patterns.'"[27] Finally, Beaugrande puts forward a working hypothesis about the fundamental role of literary reading that closely coincides with the propositions of the present book: "literary reading […] may have important 'fall out' for other human processes, such as the acquisition and application of knowledge, or the balancing of the expected with the unexpected.[28]

The above approaches work in a dynamic continuity with Iser's theory of the reading process, as well as with certain features of the critical commentary method developed by his colleague Michael Riffaterre, in particular in his 1966 essay on Baudelaire's poem "Les Chats," followed up in his book of 1971. Riffaterre's method is especially suitable for the chosen corpus of works. One of its key advantages is that it can be used even without collecting extensive statistical information about the reactions of actual readers, as I will show later. Giving due credit to the inspirational ideas developed in recent research in the area of reader response criticism, in particular to the empirical studies, as discussed above, I am going to update Riffaterre's procedure both with my own judgement and with borrowings from the somatic theory of literature by Douglas Robinson.[29] Riffaterre's key criterion for analysis is reader response, the inherent subjectivity of which he eliminates by two techniques: 1) "empty the response of its content"—that is, only the fact that a reader response has taken place is registered, and not its content;[30] 2) "multiply the response"—that is, one collects a statistically reliable number of "signal" responses to the same text, preferably by a group of cultivated readers, constituting a "superreader" in Riffaterre's terminology. The "superreader" for "Les Chats" thus includes Baudelaire, other poets, translators, critics, dictionaries, students, and "other souls."[31] Riffaterre's main terms for critically reconstructing the reading process in this way are

---

27 Halász, "Self-Relevant Reading in Literary Understanding," 240, quoting William R. Paulson, *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988).

28 Robert de Beaugrande, "Readers Responding to Literature: Coming to Grips with Realities," in *Reader Response to Literature: The Empirical Dimension*, ed. Elaine Nardocchio (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 199.

29 Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature: Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

30 This approach has been corroborated in later research and fits in well with a number of recent studies. A good example of such continuity is Rosanne Potter's pertinent observation on the need for simplicity when designing reader response tests: "When one seeks the common cues, the ones that work on all readers, a coarser sieve will limit fine distinctions and keep related impressions together." Potter, "Reader Responses to Dialogue," 28.

31 Michael Riffaterre, "Describing Poetic Structures: Two Approaches to Baudelaire's 'Les Chats,'" *Yale French Studies* 36–37: *Structuralism* (1966): 214–215.