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Editor's Note

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EDITOR'S NOTE

RUSSELL SCOTT VALENTINO

Tolstoy tells a story somewhere about a reader who once asked him what he meant to say in a certain passage of *Anna Karenina*. His reply has always seemed to me both absolutely correct and filled with the hubris of the great artist addressing his public: If I wanted to tell you what I intended in that passage, he said, I would have to write the whole novel again from the beginning. Editors don't typically have much patience with the correctness of this thought, but authors will find it comforting. Did you think I was joking, the *auteur* wants to insist? If I explained it to you, it would be something else, wouldn't it? I created what I created in the form in which I created it! Do I need to write one version for the good readers and a bunch of simplified ones for everyone else?

One hundred years after Tolstoy's death, the anniversary of which is this year, we are far from being beyond such questions. Indeed, with the growth of digital and online publishing, the form in which literature is presented to a reading public and the manner in which that public takes it in, shares it, and comments upon it have assumed even greater importance than when Anna first came out onto the platform, clutching her little red handbag as she stared at the railroad tracks. To some in our midst the changes in the contemporary publishing world represent a triumph of the new over the decrepit, a chance to inhale the ether and soar to new heights. To others, they can seem as nightmarish as a Russian peasant speaking French, like omens of our own demise.

We have tried to steer a middle course in the current redesign of *The Iowa Review*, neither sailing away into the ether nor slinking off into a backwater. As we celebrate our fortieth anniversary in 2010, we wish to re-emphasize our commitment to what has made TIR a centerpiece of contemporary American letters while exploring the opportunities that new technologies and new ideas about the world make available today. You can find more and other aspects of the new *Iowa Review* at www.iowareview.org. Please let us know what you think (iowa-review@uiowa.edu).

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In taking over as editor from David Hamilton after his thirty-two years of sure-handed guidance, I have once or twice caught glimpses of myself—as if from another’s perspective—as one of those twelve-year-old Chinese Olympic gymnasts whom you look at and think must lack the requisite life experience to be appropriately nervous about what she has got herself into. When Brooks Landon, David’s colleague, learned that I had taken on the job, he said to me, “Russell, I think you are throwing yourself on a hand grenade. But it’s a really great hand grenade to be throwing yourself on.” He was no doubt speaking from a position of requisite life experience, having observed from up close David’s work on TIR over the decades, which he characterized in another context as “genius, award-winning genius,” and also as “shockingly selfless.” And so the grenade. Until recently, I have been able to concentrate on the greatness of the grenade, so to speak, while David has been throwing himself on it for many years. This metaphor has done its work, and I shall leave it behind now, with yet another grateful bow to Mr. Hamilton’s long service. I have inherited all the quality and good will he shored up through his devotion and sense.

The switch from one editor to another can be a traumatic thing for a magazine and a reading public, so here again we have steered a middle course: some of the work in this issue—from the liquid solemnity of Elisabeth Benjamin’s “Scarce Lit Sea” to the outlandishly apt Texish of Denis Johnson’s *Purvis*, from the Lilliputian manipulations of Carrie Etter’s “Imagined Sons 18” to the hybridic searching of Stephen Kuusisto’s “Essay Written at 2 a.m.”—some of these and the other works between these covers were chosen under David’s editorial guidance and some of them, under mine. If you can tell the difference, we’ll send you an *Iowa Review* apron (staff members may not play).

It should go without saying that, by contrast to the apparent orneriness of Tolstoy’s response to his reader, our readers can rest assured of the far humbler spirit in which we present the current issue.

The Iowa Review