Experiencing Powerful Prose

R. L. Victoria Pöhls, Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics & Goethe Universität Frankfurt (Germany); Mariane Utudji, Sorbonne Nouvelle University (France)

Storytelling has been described as "an act, an event, one that has the power to produce change, and first and foremost to produce change between narrator and narratee" (Chambers 1984: 74). While this may be true for all kinds of narratives, literary prose seems especially likely to provide both emotional and cognitive pleasure and thus to be perceived as 'powerful'. But what exactly makes readers describe a text with this still somehow mysterious descriptor, 'powerful'?

This volume collects answers to this question from literary scholars, linguists, and empirical reader-response researchers. By elucidating the effects on readers as well as their responses which convincingly describe such a reading experience, we interrogate the widely used term 'powerful', providing insight into the understudied potentialities of prose texts. We ask how an author's stylistic choices inform a text's embodiment and interpretation by a reader in the act of reading (aloud). And we attempt to sketch out how an analysis of a given text moves from introspection to the gathering of objective data to the generation of an interpretation on the basis of the accumulated data. While still subjective, such an interpretation is nevertheless informed enough to allow for hypotheses about other readers' experiences that are generalizable and can be tested empirically.

1. Authorial Style

The stylistic value and significance of any literary text are located in what linguist Michael Halliday calls "the ideational function of language", namely, the way the author's language organises and conveys the cognitive realities of real or fictitious experience (Leech/Short 2007: 26). According to the lin-

guist's functional model of language, "all linguistic choices are meaningful, and all linguistic choices are stylistic" (ibid.: 27). As a consequence, only linguistic analysis "may prompt, direct, and shape [the reader's intuition] into an understanding" (ibid.: 4). To comprehend the stylistic value of a fiction text, one thus needs to focus on the author's "choices of language which do not involve changes in the fictional universe" (ibid.: 29). In other words, one ought to comprehend how the author has worked "in language", "as text-maker", rather than focus on the diegesis[1] that he or she, "as a fiction-maker", has created "through language" (ibid.: 30). Roman Jakobson's theory of "[w]hat makes a verbal message a work of art" (Jakobson 1960: 350) serves as a useful guide. Stylistic value can be understood as inhering in "the poetic function of language", which Jakobson defined as the "dominant, determining function of verbal art." It is this function, which promotes "the palpability of signs" and deepens "the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects" (ibid.: 356), that must be identifed and investigated, rather than the "referential" or "denotative" function (ibid.: 353) of language in a fiction text.

The interdependence between the impact created by a powerful text and the language it is made of can be demonstrated through stylistic and linguistic analysis. As French linguist Sandrine Sorlin puts it, stylistics aim to "figure out how a given utterance (written or oral) uses the potentialities of language to fulfil a given purpose in a specific context of production and reception" (Sorlin, 2014: 12, our translation).[2] The reading experience provided by a given text is due mainly to the linguistic choices consciously or unconsciously made by its author. Sébastien Salbayre and Nathalie Vincent-Arnaud therefore maintain that any utterance should be comprehended as "an actual aggregate of signs, of clues" that proceeds from the utterer's own mental operations (Salbayre/Vincent-Arnaud 2006: 19, our translation)[3] because as linguist Antoine Culioli has shown, any utterance is necessarily "modulated" by its utterer (Culioli 1999 : 47).[4]

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1 The word *diegesis* refers to the fictional setting, events, and characters that make up a work of fiction, the text world.

2 "[L]a stylistique vise à saisir la façon dont un discours (écrit ou oral) utilise les potentialités de la langue à des fins spécifiques dans un contexte particulier de production et de réception" (Sorlin 2014: 12).

3 "[L]e discours apparaît comme un véritable agrégat de signes, d'indices de ce qui se trame, se tisse dans l'intériorité du sujet parlant selon une stratégie mentale qui lui est propre" (Salbayre & Vincent-Arnaud 2006: 19)

4 "[I]l n'existe pas d'énoncé qui ne soit modulé" (Culioli 1999: 47)

2. Oral Performance and Reading Aloud

The manner in which a piece of writing will be orally performed is informed by the reader's interpretation and understanding of the text, which partly determines the effects the literary passage is likely to produce on that same reader. Although all of this depends to an extent on readers' subjectivity, it also results from the text itself, namely, the textual elements it is composed of and the way these are combined, that is to say, the stylistic value and significance of the text. Interestingly, this has already been proven empirically for poetry (see Menninghaus et al. 2018) — objective acoustic measurements of both professional and non-professional recordings showed that poems feature distinct and text-driven pitch and duration contours and that these are correlated with subjective perceptions of melodiousness by listeners — and it can be hypothesised that similar effects may also be found for prose.

Historically, oral storytelling has been a valuable means of expression and transmission of skills, knowledge, and culture from generation to generation, and this tradition is still alive today in western civilisation, where it has taken new forms, including the reading aloud of literary texts in various kinds of media, such as audiobooks and films. This may well contribute to a phenomenon we have all experienced while reading enjoyable literary texts that deeply move us: the urge to read such passages aloud, as if they were poems or songs meant to be embodied through the human voice — our voice being a potential vehicle of energy and emotion and the best means at our disposal to release the full power of a prose text by transforming into a sensuous material. Not only does such performance enable the reader, and possibly an audience, to revel in the physicality of the selected texts, it can actually be part of the stylistic analysis of a literary excerpt, being an effective way to highlight the specific linguistic components and workings of the text.

3. From Subjective Interpretations to Hypotheses of Reader Response

The commitment to "show precisely how texts produce meanings" (Bell et al. 2021) lies at the core of various linguistic theories (see Sorlin 2014: 12–13). One could add to it the commitment to explain accurately why texts stir emotional responses and how they generate other effects connected to the reading, e.g., effects on (strengths of) propositional beliefs, planned action, or changed self-

understanding. These pragmatic methods strive for rigorous textual analysis and are the only way to avoid a haphazard approach that, because it is not anchored in the linguistic material of the text, is prone to lead to irrelevant interpretations (see Gardes Tamine 2010: 6).

While such an analysis relies on "objective data" that can be recreated by other researchers, it provides "a (necessarily subjective) interpretation" (Sorlin 2014: 13, our translation)[5] as the effects attributed to the text are in most cases based on introspection and a subjective reading experience. There is no need, however, to stop at this point. Literary studies which take texts seriously as aesthetical and cultural objects implicitly or explicitly make claims beyond individual experience. Even when not working in an empirical manner, the work of linguists and literary scholars can be more than an entry in a personal reading diary. Taking introspection and the individual experience as a starting point, how can stylistic analyses and hermeneutic interpretations of literary texts advance *informed hypotheses* about the interaction between textual features and a readerly experience which is not the researcher's own?

Stylistic or hermeneutic practices regularly acknowledge the ambiguity specific to literary fiction and embrace the possibility of consequently varying interpretations, pointing to the ways different readers might construct differing text worlds (see Werth 1999; Gavins 2007) or favour one line of interpretation over another. Even if an analysis only highlights one particular reading or strand of interpretation, it is generally presented as one of many possible interpretations and reading experiences instead of as the only true description. Contemplating varying textual interpretations, it is possible to arrive at informed hypotheses regarding the connection between differing interpretations and the *diversity of readers*: the assumed 'model reader' multiplies when assumptions about the reading experience consider how experience, knowledge, psychological make-up, cultural background, or group affiliation might result in varied experiences. Still, the nature of these imagined readers remains idealised; when making hypotheses about the connection between readerly features and experiences, one of course has to extrapolate which features of one's own reader persona are responsible for the effects a given text

5 "[C]e que toutes les analyses stylistiques ont en commun, c'est la recherche d'une certaine rigueur dans l'analyse textuelle. En effet, en analysant les signes que fournit le texte, la stylistique s'appuie sur des données "objectives" pour proposer une interprétation (nécessairement subjective)" (Sorlin 2014: 13)

has had on oneself, and such self-reflection always remains sensitive to error and bias.

A similar type of self-reflection may also pertain to the *reading situation*: (stylistic) analysis — which in most cases is a long process involving multiple re-readings, facilitated by (digitally enhanced or manual) tools for counting or contrasting certain features, one that draws upon earlier research and background literature — is all in all a reading and interpretation situation quite unlike most experiences with literary fiction. Employing such a self-reflective step in meticulous stylistic analyses or interpretations that draw heavily on non-obvious intertextual references is an advancement in scholarship. It allows us to hypothesise on the prominence and noticeability of stylistic features and determine which features are so foregrounded, prominent, or remarkable that they will not fail to have an effect on most readers who are sufficiently attentive, by contrast with other features that might escape notice on first reading, or will only be apparent to a trained eye, or require considerable background or genre knowledge.

We believe that literary linguists and literary scholars are ideally equipped for these kinds of self-reflective explorations (which does not mean they are infallible): for us, too, there is a first reading, we can reflect on interpretation skills only acquired through our studies and insights gained merely by using sources or tools after our first impression has already been made.

Although scholars and researchers cannot from their armchairs determine which interpretations and effects will be educed amongst a general readership, we can and do assume that certain understandings of texts rely on commonly held semantic interpretations or widespread genre knowledge, or that certain stylistic features ordinarily evoke certain feelings and can thus be hypothesised to be shared by many. Such triangulations which take insights from other disciplines into account can partly "mitigate the singularity of subjectivity by generalising it" (Stockwell 2021: 176).

A successful analysis thus clarifies the textual cues our own reading experiences are built upon, and can be understood as advancing *informed hypotheses*. These ideally communicate precisely which textual features are believed to elicit which response in which reader under which circumstances and do so in a falsifiable, testable way.

4. From Hypotheses to (Empirical) Testing

But which quest for knowledge stops at the level of hypothesising? How can these hypotheses be evaluated or assessed? Stylisticians and literary scholars have traditionally 'tested' their findings on colleagues and peers, who are thus imagined as 'other readers'. Do these readers believe the hypotheses put forward to be sound, or do they challenge, e.g., the advanced understanding of the emotional effect a piece of writing most likely elicits in readers? Which part of the argumentation do they disagree with and why?

Such scholarly exchanges are not 'tests' in the scientific sense, of course, and while they have led to valuable findings, they are nonetheless limited. They do not investigate real-life contexts and real-life readers, apart from the few directly involved in the exchange. This is not necessarily a shortcoming. If we are interested in a literary work's possible meanings and impact, then it is worth taking account of any sound analysis by an individual reader that elucidates why the work is powerful for him or her, given that aspects so far hidden to us (or all other readers) might thus be revealed, enriching our understanding of the literary work in question.[6]

If on the other hand we are interested in speculating about readers' reactions and hypothesising about the way texts are processed and represented in their minds — which is not only at the heart of cognitive linguistics, stylistics, and poetics, but is also the centre of attention of empirical aesthetics and literary studies — then one can understand empirical methods as "a natural extension" of these perspectives on reading and the mind (Bell et al. 2021: 5). While most literary scholars have yet to engage with it, empirical research can be very fruitful: long-standing theories, including Roman Jakobson's theory of poetic parallelism, have been refined, verified, and sometimes even proved wrong as a result of empirical and experimental research (see Menninghaus 2021). This suggests that when followed by an empirical study, the stylistic analysis of and ensuing hypotheses about a text's appeal, emotional effects,

6 Often the scope or aim of an analysis is not made explicit because the steps of self-reflection are not taken or at least not reported on. If that is the case, researchers cannot be sure whether an interpretation aims to explain textual mechanisms most likely to influence a general or specific audience, or is solely putting forward one possible idiosyncratic interpretation, showing the text in a light so far unobserved, but uninterested in the minds of other beholders. As argued above, we believe it is important to make this explicit.

or influence can address questions that lie beyond the reach of 'traditional' linguistics or literary studies, while making use of the vast knowledge accrued in the 'classic' fields of stylistics, linguistics, narratology, etc. While some of this volume's contributors are already doing empirical reader-response research, we expect that most such work will be carried out in "agenda- and expertise-specific cooperations" (Menninghaus 2021: 127) and interdisciplinary teams.

However, only if engaging with methodologies borrowed or adapted from psychology, sociology, and cognitive science achieves greater acceptance within research communities working non-empirically, will such results increasingly be of interest to a broader community apart from those working in the field of reader-response research or empirical literary studies. While the methodological divide has been pointed to as the main reason why results from empirical studies are not more broadly discussed within adjacent fields, another reason also seems plausible to us. We advance the hypothesis that the inclination to engage unfamiliar (empirical) methodologies and modes of research will increase if the research questions they address investigate and challenge concepts or theories more in line with traditional scholars' interests. While positive examples provided by interdisciplinary teams or researchers with a multidisciplinary background can already be found, stylisticians, cognitive linguists, and literary scholars could speed up the process of generating significant findings by offering rigorous, retrievable, and replicable analyses of their close readings (see Simpson 2014: 3–4) which inform well-grounded hypotheses about the cognitive and emotional effects of (certain works of) literature on (certain) readers in (certain) reading situations. This approach allows us to treat individual works attentively, as the singular pieces of art they are most often experienced as, without having to consider them as either generic or exemplary of a certain genre or period, or by contrast, having to focus exclusively on reactions to very specific textual features.[7] Empirical work starting off from those premises, based on hypotheses so derived, will, on the other hand, be guarded from the familiar criticism that they do not contribute to the scholarly debate or only investigate areas of minor interest.

7 For more on the possible over- and under-specificity of empirical and experimental research methodologies dealing with literature as stimulus material, see Stockwell (2021) and Stockwell/Whiteley (2014).

The thirteen articles gathered in this volume investigate a variety of textual, stylistic as well as readerly, psychological features responsible for the effects powerful prose texts may elicit in readers. Such close readings, as demonstrated by the articles collected here, can identify the textual features responsible for the text's impact on readers and ultimately tackle the underlying question: if all linguistic choices are potentially *meaningful*, which ones are *powerful* and thus responsible for the audience's reactions to a given text?

Part I, "Emotional Experiences", explores positive, negative, and mixed emotional reactions as significant contribution to an evaluation of 'powerfulness'. Special attention is paid in these chapters to the interconnection of style features with type, strength, and duration of emotional effects and the possibility that different (types of) readers might react very differently to the same literary text.

In "A Psycho-Biological Approach to Suspense and Horror: Triggers of Emotion in a Passage from Lewis's *The Monk*", **Peter Wenzel** emphasises the psycho- and neurobiological aspects of the named emotions, but also reflects on the historical and cultural causes of their effects. He provides preliminary empirical evidence supporting his analysis of powerful devices for triggering these suspense and horror in readers. At the same time, his investigation gives an insight into cultural circumstances and stylistic features of this classic Gothic novel that may well explain the difference in the experiences had by contemporary readers and the book's original readership.

Elina Valovirta's focus on an often-overlooked genre demonstrates that literature does not always have to rely on a build-up of suspense or engage its readers in acts of gap-filling to create a sense of excitement or involvement. In her chapter, "Repeated Pleasure: Reading the Threesome Ménage Romance as Digital Literature", she examines the effect mechanisms of paratextual information, textual strategies like realism, point of view, and repetition, as well as the affordances of digital reading itself, all of which creates a reading experience within the affective matrix of pleasure, fascination, titillation, and arousal.

Mahlu Mertens discusses the narrative possibilities of representing a "world without us" in Ontroerend Goed's play of the same name for an audience or reader who obviously still exists. In "Negating the Human, Narrating a World Without Us", she argues that part of the text manages to evoke, through its list-like form, tense, and accompanying rhythm, mixed feelings

of sadness *and* comfort in the face of human extinction — instead of the feeling of 'activist melancholia' often elicited by ecological elegies.

In "Refiguring Reader-Response: Experience and Interpretation in J.G. Ballard's *Crash*", **Ciarán Kavanagh** seeks to establish a methodological basis for reader-response analysis and to give substance to theory through its deployment in his study of Ballard's novel, a text which combines and subverts multiple frameworks. His chapter thus focusses on the microcosmic, line-by-line reading experience provided by two excerpts that exemplify Ballard's clinical over-description of damaged and refigured bodies, as well as on macrocosmic interpretive frameworks relating to genre, embodiment, and aesthetics.

Part II, "Coming to the Fore", finds the answer to the question — which textual features contribute to a powerful reading experience? — in unexpected places that are usually unnoticed or ignored by readers themselves. Subtle stylistic features — such as metaphorical realms, vividness of described settings, rhythm, and layout — can be determining factors when one accounts for the powerful reading experience provided by some literary prose texts.

Christine Chollier provides a semantic reading of the passage of *The Great Gatsby* in which the protagonist's death is suggested. Her chapter, "Lives and Deaths of Gatsby: A Semantic Reading of a Key Passage in a Powerful Text", highlights the text's ambiguity, as well as its proleptic semantic features, its euphemising strategy, and its meaningful semantic clusters as textual elements that contribute to the text's powerfulness, because, she hypothesises, they succeed in impacting readers both emotionally and intellectually.

Kimberley Pager brings to light the stylistic features that make up the powerful opening of *Jane Eyre*. Her chapter "Introducing Jane: The Power of the Opening" demonstrates how the eponymous heroine is implicitly presented and constructed through the use of pathetic fallacy, iconicity, and features pertaining to discourse. As these three types of devices contribute to the protagonist's characterisation, they potentially influence the reader's perception of Jane at a very early point in the story.

In "Performing Rhythm Through Enunciation: Prose Versus Poetry", **Maryvonne Boisseau** proposes to investigate the rhythms of a prose excerpt and a short poem whose common topic is the description of a lighthouse. She assumes that whatever response a text elicits, its constitutive rhythm is a cardinal element that governs the way it is received when read aloud. Her study, which is based on the key notions of enunciation, rhythm, and points

of prosodic condensation, shows how a prose extract from a book classified as non-fiction may induce a reader's response akin to that prompted by a poem.

Alice Labourg focusses on the opening of *The Mysteries Of Udolpho*, which has the effect of a metaphorical landscape painting as it emerges through what critics have called Ann Radcliffe's "word-painting". Her chapter, "The Pictorial Paradigm of La Vallée: A Text-Image Reading of the Incipit of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*", investigates the powerful visual effects of the passage on structural, thematic, symbolic, and semiotic levels. Labourg draws our attention to the structuring movement of the picturesque gaze, construing the evocation of the landscape as a pictorial matrix and delving into the text's semiotic pictoriality.

Part III, "Readers, Characters, Authors", analyses different forms of readerly engagement and meaning-making processes prompted by a felt connection between readers, (fictional) character(s) or (imagined) authors stimulated by textual features. While the terms sympathy, empathy, identification, and character engagement are often used interchangeably by scholars, the contributions focus on the role different textual devices might play in readers' constructions of characters, authors or themselves (as readers).

Tahir Wood argues that fictional communication necessarily involves three types of agents: character, author, and reader. "The Nature of the Agonistic in a Pragmatics of Fiction" examines why, in order to achieve overall coherence in the reader's eye, the assumption of authorial intention is necessary, whether readers know the author's identity or not.

In "The Relevance of Turning a Page: Monotony and Complexity in §25 of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*", **Sixta Quassdorf** focusses on the text's power to elevate readers into a pleasurable state of discerning the relevant in a seemingly repetitive and thus presumably boring piece of text. Despite (or because of) the strong cognitive effort they demand, tiny stylistic features — such as the text being laid out in columns, the use of inverted commas, or the use of short sentences — effectively address both readers' cognitive faculties and their sensory modalities, and thus allow readers to view themselves as a collaborator in the meaning-making process, grasping the text's critical political dimension as possibly intended by the author.

Maria-Angeles Martinez's chapter, "The Language of Engagement and the Projection of Storyworld Possible Selves in Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*", explores stylistic possibilities hypothesised to draw readers into a sto-

ryworld early on. Multiple textual markers which encourage readers to blend self-images with their mental constructs of the story's' protagonists are identified at the beginning of Bolaño's' novel. The article examines the abundance and distribution of varying forms of personal deixis, i.e., markers indicating mental activities or contracted forms, and other textual features in both the Spanish original and the English translation. It then discusses whether readers of these two versions might be left with different impressions due to the translator's choices.

Constance Robert-Murail's chapter, "'Smuggling in Accidental Poetry': Cognitive and Stylistic Strategies of a Stammering Teen in David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green*", explores the passage that dramatises the onset of the 13-year-old protagonist's stammer. The close stylistic reading it provides highlights the juxtaposition of the teenager's pathological speech impairment and his bustling, bubbling inner monologue. The article points out diverse textual features that trigger a strong form of empathy in readers, who find themselves caught between frustration and delectation as the young protagonist's palliative strategies allow Mitchell to smuggle in moments of 'accidental' poetry and humour.

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