

PERSONAL RESONANCE TO LITERATURE:

A Study of Reminders while Reading

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The theory is proposed that the feeling of personal resonance when reading literary texts arises when the reader is reminded of personal experiences from the past in which the reader had an active role. Also it is argued that readers' appreciation of literary texts can be better understood in terms of mobilization of such empirical self-knowledge than in terms of general knowledge of texts and routine sequences of action. The theory does not presuppose any vaguely defined concept of 'self' or invoke special mental entities to account for the phenomenon of personal resonance but deals only with the structure of a person's knowledge of past experience. An experimental study is presented, comparing reminders while reading a short-story and an expository text of equal length by means of a novel method of 'self-probed retrospection'. It was found that the texts elicited an equal number of reminders, but in the reminders elicited by the literary text, the subject was more often an actor than an observer or receiver of information. In the memories elicited by the expository text the reader was most often a passive receiver. Furthermore, reminders occurred more often in the beginning of the texts than in the end, most pronounced in the literary text.

1. Introduction

1.1. Appreciating a fictional world

In everyday life we get to know a lot of events and happenings from other people and from media. Such reported events (Larsen (1988)) are immersed in the context of the real world and can be validated as such. If they at some point seem invalid we tend not to believe them or we suspect some hidden motive on the part of the reporter.

What we read in literary stories is also reported events, only in this case we know that they are fictional – non-veridical – even before we start reading. We do not reject the events and figures in advance, nor start looking for sinister motives on the part of the author – unless one's purposes of reading

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are special, of course. On the contrary, we willingly suspend our disbelief to let the fictional world unfold in our minds. This does not mean that we refrain from any evaluation of the contents of the story. It only means that the reader is not concerned with the *veridicality* of the story but rather with its '*verisimilitude*' – the semblance of real life.

Indeed, verisimilitude seems to be a decisive feature of 'good' literature. Bruner (1986) has argued that literary works of art can be conceived as hypotheses about the world in the same way as scientific hypotheses. In Bruner's terms they both constitute possible worlds. The difference is that the value of artistic hypotheses does not presuppose that they can be tested but that they 'fit different human perspectives and that they be recognizable as "true to conceivable experience": that they have verisimilitude' (ibid.: 52). S.K. Langer (1953) argues in a very similar way that 'The poet's business is to create the appearance of "experience", the semblance of events lived and felt, and to organize them so they constitute a purely and completely experienced reality, a piece of virtual life' (p. 212). So, it would seem to make a difference to the reader whether he is faced with a literary text or an expository text, a difference which might influence the process of understanding.

In a discussion of the prospects of making computers understand literature, Abelson (1987) distinguishes between ordinary text *comprehension* and literary *appreciation*, which is more personal and 'deep', and argues that appreciation, opposed to ordinary comprehension, probably cannot be simulated by computers because they lack bodily and emotional experience and a personal, autobiographical memory. Similarly, Spiro (1982) argues that besides a coherent, logical understanding there is a second stage of 'long-term evaluative understanding', which is especially clear with literature. In this stage, 'an evaluatively charged experience of the situation's personal relevance' is the result of successful understanding.

If literary appreciation is different from ordinary text comprehension, how can we approach the difference? From the perspective of cognitivist psychology, one would start looking at the kinds of knowledge that the reader mobilizes during the process of reading and brings to bear on comprehension or appreciation. Two classes of such knowledge may be distinguished, text knowledge and world knowledge. *Text knowledge* includes, first, linguistic knowledge of the lexicon and grammar of the language(s) used in the text. Second, pragmatic knowledge of speech acts and conventional text structures ('story grammars', genres, etc.; see, e.g., Rumelhart (1975); Kintsch (1977); Mandler and Johnson (1977)) is employed to make sense of the overall composition, to generate inferences and expectations about what is to come, suspense or surprise, and so on.

Research in the last 15–20 years (beginning with Winograd (1972)) has drawn attention to a different class of knowledge that we shall call *world knowledge*. This is knowledge concerning the non-linguistic reality to which

the text refers. Most texts do not refer to the world immediately present to the reader's senses. In order to 'fill in' the gaps that are necessarily (and often deliberately) left in any linguistic description of reality, the reader must therefore rely on his or her knowledge of regularities that exist in the world. Particularly in a fictional text, the reader must construct an understanding of the imaginary world the text is dealing with. So far, most study has been devoted to readers' knowledge of well-known contexts (conceptualized as 'frames', see Minsky (1975)) and routine sequences of actions (the 'script' concept of Schank and Abelson (1977)). Frames and scripts represent general world knowledge that is distilled from a person's experience plus, presumably, information he or she has been told by others.

1.2. Personal resonance to literature

General knowledge like scripts and frames may provide some background for experiencing a literary story to be true to conceivable experience – to have verisimilitude. However, it is hardly sufficient to explain one of the most conspicuous aspects of reading literary texts which seems closely connected with the perception of verisimilitude in a story, namely, that a reader feels a literary work to be deeply relevant and personally meaningful to him or her – the work elicits a *personal resonance* in the reader, so to say. This experience of personal resonance may not occur very often, and it may also occur when reading non-fiction; but phenomenologically it appears to be a particularly important ingredient of 'great' literary experiences. Moreover, different readers – even with similar background and similar present circumstances – may react very differently to a given work at this level.

We believe that this phenomenon of personal resonance, rare as it may be, is indicative of important aspects of literary appreciation which have been neglected by the schema-theoretical approach. This may be a general limitation that springs from the emphasis of schema theory on computer simulation. As mentioned above, Abelson (1987) has argued that it may be impossible to make computers simulate literary appreciation, and Spiro (1982) claims that the schema-theoretical approach stops at the point when a coherent, logical understanding of a text has been achieved, thus neglecting 'long-term evaluative understanding'.

Personal resonance to a text is hard to account for if we assume that readers apply only common linguistic knowledge and general world knowledge in the process of reading. Do we have to invoke explanatory concepts outside the sphere of text-understanding, then, like assuming that some unique 'self' or 'personality' of each individual becomes 'involved in' or 'related to' the text content? This does not seem a very good idea since the concept of self in psychology is highly problematic. Indeed, Epstein (1973) has argued that the reason that definitions of the 'self' are often circular or without adequate

referents is that there really is no such thing. The self-concept is rather a self-theory that people construct about themselves (cf. Neisser's (in press) 'conceptual self').

A few other concepts which have been proposed to explain personal involvement or resonance to literature should be mentioned here. In psychoanalytic theory it is held that appreciation of literature consists in vicarious fulfilment of latent wishes during reading (Dust (1981)). The symbolic content of literature elicits a state of primary-process thinking in the reader which serves the same function of wish-fulfilment in disguise as dreams do (see Martindale (1981: 355 ff.) for an extended discussion of this theory).

In S.K. Langer's (1953) theory of connotational semantics it is held that literature (and art in general) are *symbolic* articulations of connotational aspects of experiences that cannot be expressed directly by language. In everyday life such experiences ('feelings') are fragmentary, transient and non-coherent, but in the literary work of art they are abstracted and given a coherent symbolic expression or 'form', as Langer puts it. In this framework great literary experiences are based on perception of a significant articulation of the reader's own experienced life of 'feeling', which is recognized:

'The criterion of good art is its power to command one's contemplation and reveal a feeling that one recognizes as real, with the same "click of recognition" with which an artist knows that a form is true.' (p. 405)

Both of these very different theories emphasize personal involvement as an important aspect of literary appreciation. But the mental entities they invoke to account for it appear empirically inpalpable. In the following we propose a theory which attempts to account for the phenomenon of personal resonance in literature in a way that is empirically tractable and does not involve explanatory concepts from outside the sphere of text-understanding.

1.3. *Empirical self-knowledge and personal resonance*

In addition to general world knowledge people possess vast amounts of *specific knowledge* (cf. Larsen (1985)), including knowledge of particular objects, places, and persons (among them oneself) and knowledge of particular events that have occurred in the world (among them one's personal experiences). Specific knowledge is hierarchically organized at many levels: particular objects and persons, single events, event chains, generalized events, overarching life eras, enduring themes and motives, etc. (see Neisser (1986)). Like general knowledge, such specific knowledge can be activated by a variety of cues, including words and thoughts. We may then become conscious of that particular past experience, remember it.

Probably, the prototypical instance of remembering to most people is precisely their personally experienced, autobiographical memories. The subcat-

egory of a person's knowledge of specific occurrences and facts that involve himself in some way may be considered the person's *empirical self*. It is the knowledge he has of what he has done, who he knows, how they have reacted to him, where he has been, what events he has witnessed, what places he has lived in, and so forth (cf. the concept of remembered self in Neisser (in press)). In the course of life such knowledge is constantly being changed and structured to form a person's autobiography, and, at a higher level, it is also an important source in the abstraction of an identity or self.

The theoretical assumption of the present research is that the experience of personal resonance to a text occurs when pieces of this self-knowledge are mobilized during reading. Mobilization need not result in conscious remembering, and it can probably take place at any level of the knowledge hierarchy. However, when a piece of knowledge is activated by cues from the text, though not immediately becoming conscious, we assume that it can be brought into the reader's consciousness more easily than other, non-activated, parts of his knowledge (cf. priming and spreading-activation phenomena). When this happens, the reader is consciously reminded of an earlier experience, or an ensemble of such experiences (cf. Schank (1982)).

Notice that in this account conscious reminders are not assumed to have a causative role in producing the experience of personal resonance, they are only symptoms that indicate that a relation to the reader's personal knowledge has been established at some level. The conscious memory 'symbolizes' that some personal concerns are becoming involved, similar to the role that Neisser (1981) ascribes to autobiographical memories in general.

The present conception of reminders during reading is rather different from the one that is implied by Schank's theory of reminding (1982). In his view the main function of reminders of past experiences is to form adequate expectations to a novel and unusual situation. Entirely routine events do not evoke reminders, they are assimilated to general scripts without effort. Unusual situations deviate from the person's scripts, however. A similarity between deviating characteristics of a past and a present episode will bring the past experience to mind so that the new situation can be understood and dealt with in terms of the old one.

In Black and Seifert's (1985) opinion the theory implies that 'good literature is that which maximizes reminders from the life of the reader', apparently assuming that literary stories are more deviant or unusual in some way than ordinary stories are. From this follows that reminders during reading are indicative of problem-solving rather than of personal involvement, as we assume. Such a view leads to a mechanical explanation of personal resonance to literature, for instance that it is brought about by some adequate number of reminders. In our theory, the decisive feature is not the number of reminders but rather their 'depth' or level in the hierarchy of self-knowledge.

Another problem inherent to Black and Seifert's account of reminders

during reading literature is the notion that literary stories are more *deviant* in some way than 'ordinary' stories – like news, political accounts, jokes, reminiscences, etc. In an extended discussion of this common notion, László (1983) argues that it might not be valid since non-literary stories often deviate from schemata-based expectation too. Therefore there is reason to believe that 'literary texts must have some other distinguishing characteristics' (p. 9). This viewpoint is supported by one of the results of the experiment to be presented below, that an expository text and a literary one elicited the same *number* of reminders whereas the *content* of the reminded experiences differed.

2. A study of reminders in literature

The theory outlined above provides both the rationale for our empirical method and the hypotheses to be examined in the experiment. The method attempts to catch memories of personal experiences evoked during 'natural' reading, to determine which cues in the text elicit them, and to examine their content. We simply ask readers to be attentive to those occasions during reading when they come to think of something they have experienced. In order to disrupt the normal reading process as little as possible, the reader is asked to just put a mark at that point in the text where the reminding occurred. Immediately after finishing reading, the reader is questioned about each reminding by going through all his marks in the text, one at a time.

We do not assume that all of these conscious reminders would have occurred without the special attitude or set installed by the instructions. But the argument is that the set to report conscious reminders creates a 'top-down' search process which picks up knowledge elements mobilized by the basic, 'bottom-up', process of relating the text to the reader's personal experience. When brought to consciousness and later verbalized, these knowledge elements may become elaborated and embedded in further memories and reconstructions which to some extent complicate interpretations, of course. Elsewhere we discuss more fully this method of 'self-probed retrospection' in relation to thinking-aloud methods and general empirical problems with literary texts (Larsen and Seilman (1988)).

2.1. *Experimental hypotheses*

The main hypotheses of the present study of reminders during reading of literature concern, first, the content of reminders and, second, their distribution over text segments.

Content. We hypothesize that during reading of a literary text, reminders will be more personal in character than when reading a piece of expository

prose (even though the exposition is well written and has an interesting topic). We consider three categories of reminded experiences to instantiate a decreasing order of degree of personal relevance:

- (1) Events with the reader as participating *actor*
- (2) Events with the reader as direct but non-participating *observer*
- (3) Events reported to the reader by others (the person as indirect observer, or *receiver*)

In other words, the prediction is that a literary text will generate relatively more actor events whereas an expository text will generate relatively more receiver events. Contrary to Black and Seifert (1985), we do not expect any difference with respect to number of reminders, provided that the texts are equally interesting to the readers.

Distribution. We hypothesize that more reminders will be generated in the beginning of a text than at the end because the reader has to construct a representation of the universe of discourse (the 'possible world') with which the text is dealing (cf. Bruner (1986; ch. 2)). Once this representation is constructed, the text universe can become self-sustaining without requiring support from the reader's personal universe – the text takes control of the reader, so to speak. This is supposed to occur with both literary and expository texts. But the skewing of the distribution of reminders towards the beginning is predicted to be more pronounced in a literary text because fictional universes usually require more extensive constructive activity from the reader than factual ones (László (1983)).

2.2. *Method*

Subjects

Twenty psychology students (average age 24 years) served as unpaid subjects. They were randomly assigned to two groups of 10 subjects, the Literary Text group and the Expository Text group.

Texts

Two texts of approximately the same length (about 3000 words) and readability (assessed by the LIX measure of Björnsson (1971)) were chosen for the study. The *literary text* was a short-story by the Swedish author Pär Lagerkvist, *Kælderetagen* (translated into Danish). This story had received the highest score on a measure of aesthetic value among five stories investigated by Malmstrøm and Poulsen (1979). The *expository text* was the opening chapter from Brøndsted (1973) dealing with global, socio-political problems of population growth. It was judged to be a well-written, fact-oriented text that would arouse interest among educated readers.

Reminding Questionnaire

A questionnaire to be answered for each reminding elicited by the text was designed, consisting of eight questions with multiple choice or rating scale response formats. The questions concerned the source of the reminded experience; its age, concreteness, vividness, and importance; the subject's emotional reactions; and how often the subject had thought about this experience before.

Procedure

Subjects were run individually. They received written instructions before being given the text. The task was described as 'to be attentive to when during reading you come to think of something you experienced at some time... It does not matter whether (it) is directly related to the content of the text or not.' The instructions also emphasized that reminders might concern either something directly experienced or something read or heard about. When a reminding occurred, the subject was required to mark with a pencil the spot in the text that elicited it and then to read on, as far as possible in his or her 'usual manner'; conscious searching for reminders and assessment of their appropriateness or value were discouraged. Finally, it was stressed that the questionnaire to follow upon reading would not go into sensitive content of experiences and that the subject would be free to leave questions unanswered.

Subjects were left to read the text at their own pace. After reading, the experimenter handed them one questionnaire form for each of their marks in the text and overlooked their filling in of the forms.

2.3. *Results*

Methodological observations

The task of marking reminders seemed to interfere very little with reading. Some subjects expressed surprise that they so easily got reminders during reading, once they had their attention directed at it. None of them reported that they had exerted any particular effort at this task. It also seemed easy to remember the reminders after reading was finished; subjects were unable to recall what they had been reminded of in only 15 cases out of 272 (5%). On the other hand, we had no certainty that they remembered correctly; this methodological problem was evaluated in an additional experiment (see Larsen and Seilman, (1988: exp. 2)). It was found that subjects were able to remember correctly 90% of self-constructed keywords to their reminders. Therefore, a similar level of remembering the contents of the reminded episodes may be assumed.

Frequency of reminders

A total of 135 occurrences of reminders were marked in the literary text, 137 in the expository text. Of the 15 forgotten cases, 4 came from the literary, 11

from the expository text. (In the results below, there are additional missing data due to omitted answers in the questionnaires.)

The incidence of reminders shows that with the present texts, expository prose is equally capable of eliciting reminders as literary prose, thus not supporting Black and Seifert's (1985) deviation-theory of reminders in literature. In a methodological perspective the result can be interpreted as a sign that our choice of expository text was successful in providing material that was seen as interesting and relevant by the subjects. Thus, further differences can hardly be ascribed to some general inferiority of the expository text, e.g., salience of contents or entertainment value.

Content of reminders

Subjects themselves classified the reminded experiences in respect to the source (or mode) of the experience. The obtained frequencies are presented in table 1. The table shows that the literary text generated twice as many reminders of experiences in which the person had taken an active part as did the expository text. On the other hand, the latter elicited more reminders of reading or hearing about things, i.e., references to communicated information like books or television. This pattern confirms our hypotheses, and it lends credibility to our theory that the experience of 'personal resonance' when reading literature has to do with mobilization of one's previous, personal experiences.

It is interesting that the 'intermediate' category of experiences where the person was an observer was more common in readers of the expository text (though not significantly so); this suggests that the important feature is not whether information is gained from direct experience or from reports, but rather whether the person is actively participating in events as contrasted with

Table 1

Frequencies of reminders according to mode of personal involvement in the remembered experiences.

Mode of involvement	Text groups				Significance of group difference
	Literary		Expository		
	No.	%	No.	%	
Actor	80	61.5	39	33.1	$p < 0.05$
Observer	18	13.9	27	22.9	n.s.
Receiver	32	24.6	52	44.1	n.s.
Total	130	100.0	118	100.1	$p < 0.05$

Note: Significance value in the bottom line concerns a comparison of the two text groups in terms of differences between number of Actor and Non-actor (Observer + Receiver) reminders. All group comparisons done by Mann-Whitney test.

passively receiving information. Literature seems to connect particularly with knowledge that is personal in the sense that one is an agent, a responsible subject interacting with one's environment.

Data about other content aspects of the reminders – age of experience, emotionality, perceived importance and vividness, previous 'rehearsal' – did not disclose any striking differences between the two texts.

Distribution of reminders

To investigate the hypotheses about the distribution of reminders over the duration of the texts, each text was divided into three segments of equal length. The total number of reminders in each segment can be seen in figure 1. It is evident that the frequency of reminders decreases over segments in both texts, as predicted. The decrease is only significant in the literary text (Friedman one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.01$). However, the trend towards a more steep decrease in the literary than in the expository text, which agrees with our prediction, is not significant.

We believe that the distribution of reminders supports our theory that reminders are conscious manifestations of a process of recruiting previous, specific knowledge in order to understand the text one is reading. This recruitment is naturally more pronounced in the beginning of the text where a framework or schema for understanding – a universe of discourse – must be constructed. With the present pair of texts, we have not been able to confirm that a literary text will require more intense mobilization of knowledge in the beginning than an expository text. Generally speaking, much more research is

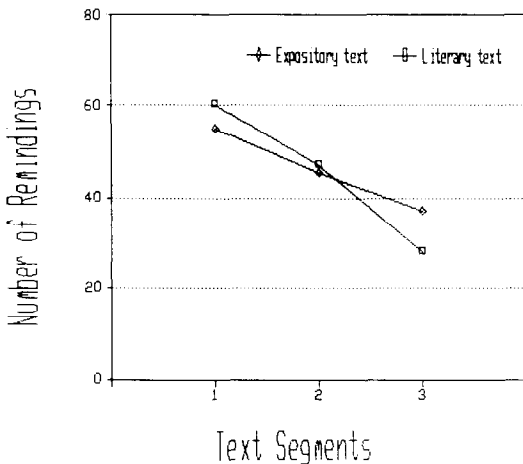


Fig. 1. Distribution of reminders (absolute numbers) over segments of the two texts.

necessary to reveal the conditions that necessitate mobilization of specific knowledge on the part of the reader and thus elicit reminders.

2.4. *Discussion*

This paper has explored the experience of personal relatedness of literary works – their ‘personal resonance’ – by means of studying the reminders of specific experiences that occur during reading. The novel method we devised – self-probed retrospection, i.e., marking places of reminders in the text and recalling the reminders after reading – did not seem to disturb the normal reading process, in particular if it is compared to a ‘think-aloud’ method that would stop the subject’s reading and interrogate about each reminding as it occurs (Larsen and Seilman (1988)). The most serious problem of the method is that the subject may not correctly recall the experience of which he or she was originally reminded. Even though we have previously shown that self-generated keywords to the reminders are recalled very well, it may still be suspected that subjects to some unknown extent reconstructed the reminders at the time of interrogation. Such reconstructive activity poses a particular problem because the context where it occurs (when the whole text has been read) is different from the context of the original reminding. Therefore, the outcome of reconstruction is almost bound to differ from the original in some respects.

With these methodological problems in mind, consider the results of the study. First, we have found that, compared to an expository text, a literary text generates more reminders of experiences in which the reader was an active participant and less reminders of experiences where he or she was a passive recipient of information. In this sense, the literary work to a greater extent mobilized knowledge in which the reader was personally involved, as claimed in the theory of resonance to literature that we proposed. Notice that the personal involvement of the reader, according to this formulation, does not presuppose any vaguely defined or downright mysterious concept of the reader’s ‘self’ or ‘person’. Personal involvement consists very concretely of relating the text to experiences in which the reader had an active role and therefore must be personally responsible for.

Secondly, we found that the mobilization of knowledge, as indicated by reminders, occurred particularly in the beginning of the texts. This is consistent with the idea that reminders indicate recruitment of knowledge for the purpose of constructing a framework of understanding, specific to the text at hand. We could not confirm that the literary text required more extensive knowledge mobilization at the beginning than the expository text, though a trend in that direction was present.

We do not expect that these findings will hold irrespective of the texts that are studied; one literary and one expository text are obviously a minimal

sample. On the contrary, it should be an interesting task for future research to study the textual conditions that elicit reminders and the contents of such reminders more closely.

Problems that we are currently investigating include the influence of both text-variables and personal experience-variables. Thus, in the experiment reported in this article we noticed that, in the literary text, purely descriptive passages seemed to elicit relatively many reminders in the subjects, whereas passages concerning action and communication elicited almost none. This is surprising in relation to experiments which indicate that action-cues are better reminders of autobiographical memories than cues concerning thoughts and contexts (see Brewer (1988)). On this background, we are planning an experimental study of the ability of action and description passages to evoke reminders from readers.

Furthermore, an experiment in progress (in collaboration with J. László) concerns a stylistic device in literary texts, namely the influence of 'point of view' (László (1986)) on reminders during reading. Point of view refers to the angle of regard that the reader is given to events and characters in a story. Basically, one can distinguish between an inside and an outside point of view. By an inside point of view one is given direct access to the thoughts and feelings of characters, whereas such information is only indirectly present when an outside point of view is used in the text. This experiment springs from the theory that passages with an inside point of view invite the reader to share the perspective of a character, and thus summon reminders from the reader's personal life. Moreover, the experiment studies the effect of subjects' cultural-historical background on reminders in relation to various content aspect of a literary text.

Finally, we are planning experiments to provide more detailed information of the concrete content of reminders that occur while reading literature. Such information will be of great importance for the evaluation of the theory of reminders as indicative of personal resonance.

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