CHAPTER 11

Experimental Approaches to Reader Responses to Literature

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WHY EXPERIMENTAL APPROACHES?

The question I will pursue here is, at first sight, an obvious one to ask. What are readers doing when they read a literary text? Despite several decades of work on reception, however, including such notable books as Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* (1978), few literary scholars have thought of asking ordinary readers what occurs when they read. To ask a student in a literature class what occurs is, of course, likely to be a biased question, given the asymmetric balance of power created by the expectations and the assessments that govern classroom discourse (see, however, Steig, 1989). Yet plenty of anecdotal evidence suggests that readers are influenced or moved by the literary texts they read. Why is this apparently common and important experience so little studied? In this chapter I will discuss how systematic, experimental approaches to literary reading have been developed, and consider the questions raised by an empirical approach.

The paradigms within which literature is typically studied and taught have ruled against an experimental approach. Literary theorists, despite extensive theorizing, have been content to remain at what we might regard as a pre-theoretical level: literary theories cannot be right because they cannot ever be wrong. There is no evidence that could confute a literary theory, thus such writings are strictly speaking no more than interpretations. Literary theorists, like Galileo's inquisitors, refuse to examine evidence for literary reading in the empirical sense; offered a telescope, they rule that such an instrument cannot exist, or that it exists only as an ideological construct rather than a tool to aid perception. Thus Jonathan Culler (1981) argued:

> there is little need to concern oneself with the design of experiments, for several reasons. First, there already exist more than enough interpretations with which to begin. By consulting the interpretations which literary history records for any major work, one discovers a spectrum of interpretive possibilities of greater interest and diversity than a survey of undergraduates could provide. (p. 53)

No doubt the study of published interpretations has its own merit, but it is no answer to the question of how texts are actually read. Filtered out of printed interpretations are details of how a reader arrived at her understanding of the text; printed accounts are also likely to be subject to distortions and repressions of various kinds that misrepresent the act of reading. Above all, what is usually given in print is an interpretation, but this is not necessarily what a reader reading "non-professionally" is aiming to produce, thus a reliance on printed interpretations for a study of literary reading has little ecological validity (although it offers an interesting approach to the history of criticism: e.g., Zöllner, 1990).

The question of interpretation is, itself, a troubled one. Whether readers typically generate interpretations is, of course, an empirical question. Yet for academic study, it still seems to be the case, as Stanley Fish (1980) asserted over 20 years ago, that "like it or not, interpretation is the only game in town" (p. 355). Is this one reason why literary studies has lost its public role in the United States (and perhaps elsewhere)? Stephen Greenblatt (2003), when President of the MLA, commenting on the state of his profession, remarked that "in the public perception, it is as if we were cut off from the rest of the world, locked in our own special, self-regarding realm" (p. 8). At the same time, enrolments in literary studies have been steadily declining, whether in the United States, in Canada, or in Europe. Moreover, surveys of literary reading in the United States by the National Endowment for the Arts over the last two decades have shown a steady decline in the number of people reading literature. According to their report *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (released on July 8th 2004), over the two decades from 1982 to 2002 literary readership at all ages has declined by 10%, with the steepest drop in the younger ages (18-24) of 28%; and the rate of decline has been accelerating. Whether this is related to "our society's massive shift toward electronic media for entertainment and information," as the NEA chairman suggests in his preface, is not clear from the survey.

If a decline in reading and in literary study is indeed in progress, then literary scholarship may in part be driving it. In our classrooms we may too persistently have called on readers to marginalize their

personal experience of literary texts in order to participate in the game of interpretation. A survey I carried out 10 years ago showed that for student readers the requirement to interpret literary texts was often a major disincentive to further study (Miall, 1996). Thus, experimental research on reading, as a way of finding out what occurs during literary reading, can be regarded as an essential step to reconsidering our approach to literature, in particular, toward rethinking the emphasis given to interpretation.

The evidence against interpretation being an aim of the ordinary reader is rather strong. For Vipond and Hunt (1984), for example, literary reading was best characterized as "point-driven," in contrast to reading for story, or reading for information. But when they turned to empirical study, it proved quite difficult to detect point-driven reading. In their main study of the issue, a questionnaire survey of over 150 student readers of John Updike's story "A & P," only about 5% were found to be engaged in a point-driven form of reading; readers were more likely to adopt a story-driven approach, that is, to read for plot. While Vipond and Hunt note that a point is not an interpretation, it is clear that it represents a step toward interpretation. So it is important to bear in mind that student readers, who are likely to be closer to the ordinary reader outside the academy, do not usually derive points from their reading when reading normally. When we are reading for pleasure, we might aim to form a relation with the author, as Vipond and Hunt suggest, but this is not because we expect the author to make a point, but because we expect a literary author to offer a certain kind of experience.

Supporting evidence against interpretation comes from one of our studies (Miall & Kuiken, 1999). Thirty readers were asked to think aloud after reading each segment of a story that we had divided into 84 segments (the story was "The Trout" by Sean O'Faolain). The comments readers made were analyzed in detail and grouped into 14 types. Among these the most frequent type of comments (33.6%) related to explaining a character ("Julia will do it again for the excitement"); next came quotations from the text (21.5%), which we found to correlate highly with the presence of foregrounding in the quoted passages, suggesting that readers were savoring the quality of the writing and mulling over how to understand such passages; next were queries about local meanings in the text (10.1%), ("I wonder if Julia is afraid"); other types of commentary referred to style, expressions of surprise, or to the reader's emotions. One of the smallest categories, a mere 2.1% of all comments, was what we called "thematizing," e.g., "Again we have the symbolism of the trout in a prison." It is these comments that come the closest to what Vipond and Hunt mean by "point": they

represent the moments when a reader is beginning to work out an interpretation of the story. In this example, the reader is elaborating her sense that the trout is like the main character, Julia, who is trapped in a prison of her parents' expectations; both will have broken free by the end of the story. But this analysis shows that during the course of reading such comments are quite rare. Readers appear to be engaged in a rather different set of activities: contemplating what characters are doing, experiencing the stylistic qualities of the writing, reflecting on the feelings that the story has evoked. In this particular study we also asked readers to make comments about their responses to the story as a whole after they had read it. Here, as might be expected, there were more comments consisting of points. Interestingly, though, these comments tended to refer to the personal meaning of the story for the reader, such as insights into aspects of the reader's childhood, or their enjoyment of the character. One reader, for example, says: "I can really respond to how the little girl must have felt. . . . I think it's neat that she can show that kind of compassion." Almost no readers began to offer interpretations of the story for its own sake, apart from any personal interest they might have in it.

Experimental studies, then, are unlikely to provide evidence for particular interpretations. But they do provide insights into what readers are able to tell us about their responses to literature, and in the next section I discuss some of the main types of research design employed in such studies. In the last section I will take up several issues raised by the experimental study of literature.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND SOME FINDINGS

In considering experimental approaches to literary reading, the first main difference in experimental methods to note is between studies that manipulate a literary text in order to isolate a particular effect, and studies with an intact text. The first approach is derived from the concept that different experimental conditions (i.e., different versions of the same text) will reveal how a particular aspect of the text influences readers. For example, in the studies by Vipond and Hunt (1984) I referred to earlier, the notion of "point" was made specific by identifying it with a specific type of feature that Vipond and Hunt termed "evaluations." They proposed that the narrator indicates how he or she "feels about an event, character, utterance, or other story element" by creating unexpected text elements, such as figurative language, an unusual word, deviant syntax, and the like. For the reader these evaluations are "deliberate invitations to share a meaning with the storyteller" (Hunt & Vipond, 1986, p. 58). In an experimental study

they presented one group of readers with the original version of a short story, and another group with the same story with evaluations rewritten in neutral prose: e.g., the evaluative phrase "they camped around the room" was replaced with the more neutral expression, "they sat around the room." Shown a list of phrases taken from the story after each page and asked to indicate what they had particularly noticed while reading, readers with the original version chose the evaluation phrases significantly more often than readers with the rewritten version chose the equivalent neutral phrases (Hunt & Vipond, 1985).

Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) argue that "the careful manipulation of the text . . . allows one to identify covariation between features of the text and corresponding reader constructions and . . . allows much stronger and more precise inferences concerning causes" (p. 24). Although their own studies show the value of this approach, textual manipulation can also introduce unexpected, secondary side-effects that, while unrelated to the variance that the experimenter hopes to isolate, also influence readers. The elicitation of information from readers must be designed so as not to be confounded by the secondary changes in the text. In the Hunt and Vipond example the passages that are rewritten lose the connection they had in the original, where an aura of disorder and implicit violence, as in "they camped around the room," primes response to a series of "evaluations." To rewrite the passages introduces a series of questions about what literary qualities of the story may have been lost, not only the evaluative function. Although the general question to readers, what was noticed, provides an index of reader differences that is informative, it is not clear from this study what readers were noticing.

A study of a similar literary concept that we carried out (Miall & Kuiken, 1994) involved experiment without manipulation. Readers notice evaluations because they stand out from the local norm of the text. Similarly, we argued that the various stylistic features known as foregrounding also attract readers' attention. Our hypothesis was that paying attention during reading requires more time, and that readers would find passages rich in foregrounding both more striking and more evocative of feeling. To test this we analyzed a series of short stories for the presence of foregrounding, and developed an index of foregrounding in each segment (roughly one sentence) based on the presence of features at the phonetic, syntactic, and semantic levels. Instead of manipulating a text, each text itself provided a naturally varying level of foregrounding from low to high. If readers pay attention to foregrounding, then we can expect their reading times per segment to show covariance in line with its presence; and when asked to rate the segments for feeling or strikingness, higher ratings should correlate

with elevated levels of foregrounding. In a series of studies with three literary short stories, these are the effects we found in each case. In addition, whether our participants were experienced senior students of English literature or beginning first year students of Psychology with little commitment to or experience of literary reading, our results were virtually the same, suggesting that response to foregrounding occurs regardless of degree of literary training—a finding that challenges the standard view that literary response depends on acquiring the relevant conventions and genre knowledge (e.g., Rabinowitz, 1998).

This study is an example of the use of single texts in which we hypothesize that intrinsic determinants influence the reader. A second type of study involves finding or creating extrinsic determinants that can be supposed to influence the reader. For example, Zwaan (1991) theorized that readers deploy "particular cognitive control mechanisms" specific to the genre they are reading. He proposed that literary reading would invoke a different set of controls from reading in a newspaper. He chose six short stories taken from either newspapers or from novels that could be read in either a newspaper or a literature condition. In other words, participants were told that they were reading from a newspaper or from a literary text. Participants read the texts on a computer which recorded reading times. As Zwaan predicted, the "literature" condition readers read more slowly than the "newspaper" readers—about 10% more slowly; in addition, when asked about their memory for the texts, it was found that literary readers had formed a stronger sense of the surface features of the texts, that is, of their stylistic features.

Another example of a frame approach is a supplementary study by Vipond and Hunt (1984). While looking for "points" among readers of a short story, they created a condition in which readers first read a supposed letter from an East German reader (this was in the 1980s) who claimed to find that the story illuminated understanding of his own position. Readers who received the story preceded by this frame generated more "points" in their comments.

While the studies I have mentioned suggest the existence of a specific literary form of reading, they leave open some important questions. Is reading in a literary mode (however we might define that) driven by the frame in which we encounter a text or by features of the text itself? Zwaan's (1991) study seems to point to the first possibility; the studies by Miall and Kuiken (1994) and Hunt and Vipond (1986) seem to point to the second. Given the rejection of literariness by recent literary theorists, the question is a critical one for empirical study. Terry Eagleton (1983) expressed a now common view: there can be "no 'essence' of literature whatsoever . . . any writing may be read

'poetically'" (p. 9). Thus given the right frame we would read a railway timetable as literature. It follows, says Eagleton, that we should

> drop the illusion that the category "literature" is "objective," in the sense of being eternally given and immutable. Anything can be literature, and anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature—Shakespeare, for example—can cease to be literature. Any belief that the study of literature is the study of a stable, well-definable entity, as entomology is the study of insects, can be abandoned as a chimera. (pp. 10-11)

We read a text as literary, in other words, only because we find it in a literary frame (e.g., the back cover of a book tells us it is literary). The materiality of the book has also been held to influence reading. For example, N. Kathleen Hayles (2002) insists that "the physical form of the literary artifact always affects what the words (and other semiotic components) mean" (p. 25; cf. Genette, 1997). These views challenge the power of the literary text to preserve its meaning regardless of context: whether we find *Hamlet* in a leather-bound folio or on the computer screen, does *Hamlet* remain essentially the same? The question calls for empirical study.

A third kind of study involves comparison of two or more texts. A simple but effective method developed by Seilman and Larsen (1989) was applied to comparing a literary text (a short story) with a non-literary, or expository text (an essay on population growth). Their method required what they termed "self-probed retrospection," one of a class of methods that depends on the reader's self-report (such as the collection of ratings from readers in Miall and Kuiken, 1994) rather than an "objective" measure such as reading times. Larsen and Seilman (1988) argue that their method is less disruptive than the think-aloud method that requires readers to make comments after each sentence. In their study readers were asked to make marginal check marks while reading whenever a passage reminded them of something they had experienced. After reading the text participants were given a short questionnaire to complete about the experience related to each marked passage: its age, concreteness, perspective (from what position was the experience viewed), etc. On average they found that readers were able to remember 95% of the experiences. Although a similar number of "remindings" was elicited by both the literary and expository texts, twice as many "actor-perspective" remindings were elicited by the literary text, while the expository text elicited more "receiver" remindings (things read or heard about). Thus literary reading, they remark, "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" (Seilman & Larsen, p. 174). Other measures of remindings (age, vividness, etc.) showed no significant differences. Interestingly, remindings were found to occur more frequently in the opening section of each text, and more frequently with the literary than the expository text. This suggests that readers initially need to mobilize specific personal information to contextualize the world of a literary text.

Readers of literary texts thus appear to draw more explicitly and frequently on their active personal experiences, a process that might be held to distinguish literary from other kinds of texts. Rather than attempting to define what is literary by a text's formal features (stylistic deviations, narrative form, or generic features), this points to an interactive process underlying literariness: a literary text is more likely to speak to the individual through its resonances with the individual's autobiographical experiences. To learn more about such resonance and what it means for the reader, however, we must turn to the think-aloud method, despite the well-known problems that have been supposed to render verbal protocols questionable (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; but see also Ericsson & Simon, 1980, 1984).

Thus, in a fourth kind of study, readers are asked to think aloud about a text during or after reading it. Either the text is presented section by section and readers comment after reading each section; or, in another model based on the "self-probed retrospection" of Seilman and Larsen (1989), readers make marginal check marks while reading whenever they find a passage striking or evocative; after reading they return to each passage and comment on what they were thinking while they read each marked passage. Both methods tend to generate lengthy protocols which must be transcribed and analyzed. Here, two alternative strategies for content analysis are (1) to apply a previously designed category system to the protocols, or (2) to develop categories from whatever is found in the protocols themselves.

An example of the first type, the application of pre-prepared categories, is a study of Andringa (1990). Readers of a Schiller short story were instructed to "think aloud" about all that came to mind after each of nine sections of the story; an interviewer was present to prompt and to question participants. Readers in the study ranged from beginning students of literature to professors. Two levels of analysis were applied when categorizing responses: first, speech acts (acts, metacomments, emotions, evaluations, arguments, references to text); second reception acts (emotive reactions, (re)constructive, forming bridges between constituents, elaborating, identifying). Among her findings, most notable was a sequence she found often among the less

experienced readers: emotion, evaluation, then argument. This "seems to be a regular sequence": the emotion, as she put it, "initiates, selects, and steers the way of arguing" (p. 247). To refine this view of emotion has been one important aim of an alternative method that we have developed, called Numerically Aided Phenomenology (Kuiken & Miall, 1995, 2001).

In this method categories of analysis emerge from the readers' statements. Also, unlike standard psychological studies of reading, which are "laden with presuppositions appropriate to the study of reading comprehension rather than reading experience" (Kuiken & Miall, 1995), the method is designed to be as open to readers' descriptions of their reading experiences as possible.

The process involves a systematic comparison of statements made in all the verbal protocols (typically, we will collect responses from at least 30 readers) in order to identify similar expressed meanings; these are paraphrased, producing what we term "constituents." No preconceived categories are employed. The constituents, we argue, are natural kinds, not presuppositions brought to the study by the researcher. The constituents are then re-expressed at three different levels, from close to the original statement to the most general category. For example,

Level 1: Dogs do not say "bark bark"
Level 2: I negatively emotionally respond to literary style (phrase/word)
Level 3: I emotionally respond to a literary device

At the most general level, this enables us to count the proportion of responses that are made in a given category (here, emotional response to an aspect of style). But the method has at least two further analytical benefits.

First, the resulting categories can be used to create matrices of occurrences of constituent by reader, amenable to cluster analysis. These allow for the discovery of distinctive types of reader response based on similarities in occurrence of a range of different types of constituent. In one study, for example, we found four distinctive types of reading that we termed: 1. Reading resistance; 2. Emotional engagement; 3. Story-line uncertainty; and 4. Aesthetic coherence (Kuiken & Miall, 2001). Second, the development of meanings across a set of responses can be studied and their determinants examined. We have, for example, recently focused on the impact of reading on the reader's self-concept and how this manifests through what we term "self-modifying feelings." In several studies we have adopted the "self-probed retrospection"

method in which readers are asked to choose several passages from the text they had marked and to think aloud in response to each passage. In a study of readers of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," comments by one group of readers were characterized by what we termed "expressive enactment." Here we found the emergence of comments involving resonance of the reader's feelings with the world of the text. In particular, "there was evidence of blurred boundaries between the reader and narrator, as though they were temporarily identified as members of the same class." This feature often takes the form of the use of the pronoun *you*, as in this commentary "So in a way you would be feeling kind of cursed and haunted" (Kuiken, Miall, & Sikora, 2004, p. 187). In a number of readers' comments we find the expression of an affective theme that is re-expressed and modified across the course of their commentaries on successive passages. We also found that readers in the expressive enactment group cited autobiographical memories less often in relation to the poem than readers in other groups, a finding that, in part, helped us distinguish two kinds of identification with the narrator of the poem: similes of identification (e.g., this emotion is like something I have experienced), and metaphors of identification (e.g., this experience in the poem is my experience—as with the use of the pronoun *you* to speak inclusively).

The fourth type of study, especially the phenomenological method I have just outlined, is at a considerable distance from the more typically "experimental" models, especially those involved in manipulating a literary text to create two or more experimental "conditions" that are expected to elicit differing responses from readers. The liability of this latter kind of study is the possible loss of what is distinctively literary when the variables influencing a reading are thus strictly delimited. The liability of the phenomenological type of study, in contrast, is its dependence on a degree of connoisseurship in categorizing and interpreting verbal protocols, and in the problem of its generalizability, i.e., what it would mean to attempt to replicate it. At the same time, the complexity of literary response, and the extraordinary variability in the texts that have usually been deemed literary, suggests that only a wide range of experimental methods will suffice to capture what, if anything, is distinctive to literary reading.

ISSUES FOR THE EMPIRICAL STUDY OF LITERARY READING

In my survey of experimental methods I have already mentioned several issues that face research in this field. In this section I will single out four for specific discussion.

What is Literary?

An ambivalence over literariness has influenced a number of scholars of reading. For example, in his book *Cognitive Poetics*, Peter Stockwell (2002) tells us that since "there is nothing inherently different in the form of literary language, it is reasonable and safe to investigate the language of literature using approaches generated in the language system in general" (p. 7). Similarly, in *Psychonarratology*, Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) indicate their acceptance of "the assumption [of discourse analysis] that literary language is not distinct from, but rather an instance of, ordinary language, and that consequently it is processed as such by readers" (p. 29). To assume that methods of literary analysis drawn from cognition will be adequate for all tasks forecloses the possibility of establishing what may be distinctive to the experience of literature. Whether literature can be distinguished is, properly, an empirical question, thus to develop experimental tools likely to elicit a specifically *literary* response must be a primary aim of research in this field. If "high" literature, as we might call it, calls upon characteristically different modes of reading, then it should be possible to demonstrate this (without, of course, disparaging the role of readers when reading popular fiction, which has its own values).

Delimiting the Literary

A separate question is how literature stands in relation to other forms of language, other media, or advertising. Since younger readers in particular are now likely to be exposed to such media from an early age, we must ask what influence these media may have on the skills or aptitudes required for literary reading. (So far, it appears to me, almost no research has yet been done on the literary aspects of other media.) Little is known about how ordinary readers choose their reading, what different kinds of media they choose, how they respond to it, how it compares in their view with other forms of leisure activity such as video gaming or going to the movies, what difference it makes to their lives, and what cultural or historical processes impact the activity of reading. Better information on this is important in its own right, but would also enable us to develop a more effective classroom environment for literary studies.

Normative Assumptions

We must ask whether in our studies of literary reading our research designs embed hidden assumptions about the kind of reading we think should be occurring. Should we, or even can we, avoid such

assumptions? For example, in the phenomenological work I described, when comparing similes and metaphors of identification, it is tempting to pay closer attention to readers demonstrating metaphors of identification since these appear to involve a more radical commitment of the self to the text being read. But is this to argue that such readings are to be preferred, or are better than those of other readers whose protocols cluster in our other groups? This issue raises larger questions about the place of literary reading in society that are ethnically and historically inflected, and which have been little studied outside the troubled domain of literary theory.

Empirical Studies Require History

It could be argued that by studying readers now, and by studying only those narrow aspects of reading amenable to experimental study in particular, we have neglected to consider not only how reading may be determined by history, but have overlooked the possibility that reading in the past may have operated differently (Darnton, 1990). Here two additional contexts seem required, although neither so far has had more than a marginal influence on empirical studies of reading. First, we should attempt as far as possible to recover reading experiences from the past and subject the evidence to as much empirical rigor in our analysis as we do to verbal protocols collected now. For example, the recent work of Rose (2001) has provided rich information on numerous working class memoirs from the previous three centuries in which acts of reading and their effects are described, often in considerable detail. Second, developments in cultural analysis by evolutionary psychologists suggest that the evolutionary determinants of literary reading must now be seriously considered as a framework for understanding its present significance. What underlying, species-specific proclivities have led to the emergence of a literary culture in every human society in the world? Findings on this issue would lend stability and direction to the field of empirical studies of literary reading (Boyd, 1998; Miall, 2001).

Beyond Empirical Research

How, finally, might we make evident the relevance of empirical research and its findings, and how can we invite debate on its significance from our colleagues who teach literature in schools and universities? What difference might awareness of empirical findings make to how one teaches? As empirical study matures and takes account of a wider range of literary experiences and historical contexts, perhaps it will begin to influence the thinking of literary scholars in the mainstream. But at the present time of writing the likelihood of

such a development is by no mean clear, especially as the field of empirical research is itself a mosaic of different methods and incompatible assumptions. To begin to resolve the declining status of literary studies and even of literary reading itself, however, empirical study seems the most promising candidate: it undertakes, after all, to give central place to the experience of real readers, placing on the agenda for the first time the richness, range, and personal significance of reading in our culture.

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CHAPTER 12

Studio Thinking: How Visual Arts Teaching Can Promote Disciplined Habits of Mind

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In the current climate of educational accountability, arts educators must answer two fundamental questions so that the arts will retain a place within public education: (1) What kinds of thinking skills do arts teachers strive to instill? (2) How can students learn these skills? It is not enough to say that the arts teach "how to paint or draw" or that the arts teach creative expression. We need to go beneath the surface and discover what underlying cognitive and social skills are imparted to students when the arts are taught well.

In the 1980s and 1990s, arts educators tried to skirt these fundamental questions and instead justified arts education by reference to what transferred from the arts to other "more basic" school subjects (Fiske, 1999). For example, a 1995 report by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities claimed that "teaching the arts has a significant effect on overall success in school," and notes that both verbal and quantitative SAT scores are higher for high school students who take arts courses than for those who take none. (Murfee, 1995, p. 3). According to these kinds of arguments, the arts should be in our schools because they help students learn to read, because they boost math performance, and because students who take more arts classes do better on their SATs.

New Directions in Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts

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