

The form of reading: Empirical studies of literariness[☆]

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Abstract

The assumption that formal features in literary texts typically shape response, which has been a theme of literary theory almost since its beginnings, has been rejected by poststructuralist critics. If formal features are considered, they argue, this is because social or institutional conventions direct readers' attention to them. We argue that this claim is unsupported by empirical study. Studies designed to confirm the conventionalist position in fact show the reverse. Our examination of readers' judgements of literariness in two studies, Hoffstaedter (1989) and Hanauer (1996), and a review of our own findings (Miall and Kuiken, 1994), suggest that response to formal features is based on human psychobiological, cognitive, and psycholinguistic processes. We conclude with some observations about why response to formal features may be a significant part of literary reading.

“Isn't this the most elusive and private of all conditions, that of the self suspended in the medium of language, the particles of identity wavering in the magnetic current of another's expression? How are we to talk about it?” (Birkerts, 1994: 78)

1. The dismissal of formalism

Literary theory in recent decades has dissolved one form of elitism and replaced it with another. One specialized ideology, according to which immersion in a timeless literary canon fostered personal sensibility and cultural refinement, has been found more historically constrained than its advocates cared to realize. That doctrine has been replaced by an equally specialized ideology grounded in an ontology of linguistic impermanence. Within this 'postmodern' perspective, the examination of lit-

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erary diversity, from high to low art, from privileged to underprivileged cultures, promises an egalitarian appreciation of the extent to which readers are 'thrown' into socio-historical contexts that embody particular conventions for identifying literariness and guiding reading.

As proponents of this new 'sensibility', literary scholars continue to produce readings of texts and elaborations of literary theory in an institutional culture that is inhabited almost exclusively by fellow scholars and senior students. While this transformed elite 'lives' its specialized ideology, almost no attention is given to the ordinary reader, who, outside of that institutional culture, continues to read for the pleasure of understanding the world of the text, rather than for the development of a deconstructionist or historicist perspective. The concerns that an ordinary person revisits while exploring a literary text, such as its style or narrative structure, its author's relation to the reader, or its impact on the reader's understanding or feelings – such concerns now seem of little interest.

Even the primers being produced for the beginning literature student often focus on theory rather than literature. For example, Durant and Fabb (1990) devote the bulk of their nine chapters to theoretical concerns. Students learn about Leavis and Lacan before they are invited to engage a single literary text in any depth. Literary texts, as this book seems to imply, are arraigned at the bar of the Court of Theory, where constructivists and deconstructionists, new historicists and neo-marxists, are council for prosecution as well as judge, and the literary text is either found guilty of crimes of class, patriarchy, or race, or declared indifferent to human concerns as the inhabitant of a world of pure language.

We suggest that such views are misleading and ultimately self-defeating: the institutionalization of literature in these ways is likely to damage the cultural role of literature and diminish its standing among the reading public. The disjunction between professional concerns and the interests of ordinary readers outside the academy already seems profound. If the gap is to be narrowed, it may come from focusing once again on the formal aspects of the literary text through which, we will argue, the ordinary reader's concerns primarily can be located. However, in contrast to earlier, now discredited versions of formalism that explicitly forbade interest in readers, we argue that the formalist dimension of reading can be examined effectively only in cooperation with actual readers. By studying the experience of literary reading and its outcomes, we will begin to map the interaction between reader and text and discover what formal structures created within that interaction warrant reference to such reading as 'literary'. From this perspective, too, we will develop a more ecologically valid approach to understanding the role and functions of literature in general. Why have all cultures, as far as we know, developed a literary culture, whether oral or print? Why do people seek out and read novels and poems, or go to watch plays?

Recent literary theory, as is well known, has legislated against the assumptions of formalism, but this is only one part of a general assault on a range of assumptions that have informed critical practice since the time of Dryden or Boileau, and in some cases, since Aristotle. The ascription of agency to the author and, in some quarters, to the reader, has been abandoned; also gone is the sense of the poet or writer as a maker, someone who creates: the standard poststructuralist view is that texts are

made out of other texts (as Barthes puts it, “woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages”), their mode of being lying in the “infinite deferment of the signified” (Barthes, 1977: 160, 158). In this perspective a literary work has no inherent structure or unity: “there is no autonomy proper to the text”, asserts Harari, introducing the work of the poststructuralist theorists collected in the 1979 anthology *Textual strategies* (1979: 70). Critical theory itself now claims a place alongside the literary texts it purports to discuss: as a mode of production it is said to equal the work of literary authors in importance and creativity, although it has to be said that outside the academy almost no one is reading it, unlike the continued wide readership for literary texts from Shakespeare to Seamus Heaney.

Of course, it may be the case that the vision of today’s theorists will become the standard wisdom of tomorrow, just as we all (or almost all) now live within a world view shaped by Darwin and Einstein. However, modern arguments about literary meaning lack one dimension that, in the end, made the arguments of Darwin and Einstein compelling: today’s theorists produce no evidence to back up their claims other than their own experience and assumptions and their appeals to other theorists. The empirical dimension, in other words, is absent: naturalistic investigation is considered futile. While Darwin’s views were supported, for example, by his observations on a series of finches, and Einstein’s universe of time and space has been confirmed by measurements of the speed of light, the major claims of poststructuralist theory have not been supported, to our knowledge, by a single empirical study. Studies of literary meaning are carried out within a purely theoretical framework, in which, as Storey has put it, it is assumed that “the human ‘subject’ is ‘indeterminate’, the artifact of history and culture and language alone” (Storey, 1993: 48). The study of reading thus becomes a study of the conventions of reading, given by history, culture, or language. Study of actual readers is ruled out of order by theorists such as Culler (1981: 121): what is of interest, he argues, are the conventions that determine reading, not the experience of real readers; what these conventions might be is, of course, decided a priori by Culler and his colleagues. This refusal to check theoretical presuppositions against the reading practices of actual readers calls into question the recent, almost universal dismissal of formalism. Yet *the claims of formalism*, as proposed, for example, by critics from Coleridge to Wimsatt, *have not been falsified by any empirical investigation of whether formalist dynamics underlie the literary reading of ordinary readers.*

In fact, Culler’s dismissal of actual readers as worthy of study is founded on a serious misconception, in which Culler’s antipathy to both formalism and empiricism are oddly yoked. Speaking of Fish’s shift of attention to the interpretive process, Culler notes this advantage:

“[I]t frees us from the notion that the poem is some kind of autonomous object which ‘contains’ its meaning as an inherent property. That notion has unfortunate consequences; it suggests that the reader, like a good empiricist, should approach the poem without any preconceptions so as to read only what is there in the text. The implication that the ideal reader is a *tabula rasa* on which the text inscribes itself not only makes nonsense of the whole process of literary education and conceals the conventions and norms which make possible the production of meaning but also ensures the bankruptcy of literary theory, whose speculations on the properties of literary texts become ancillary ...” (Culler, 1981: 121)

Not only do these remarks reveal an undue anxiety that literary theory might be ancillary; more seriously, they create an image of empirical procedure that is a caricature, an activity that somehow gets underway with no prior conception of what is significant (ignoring in the process both scientific method and the findings of psychology). Culler, in other words, has already decided what data would be elicited by an empirical study of the formalist hypothesis, and declares this to be invalid and a danger to both literary education and literary theory. But among literary theorists of his school, Culler's maneuver is not unusual: the image of formalism he sets up is a straw man, which he then demolishes with no difficulty. Meanwhile, the significant questions posed by formalism are left unanswered. These include questions about which Culler appears anxious, although he formulates them in a way that precludes empirical study: to what extent is a formalist approach to a literary text the result of literary education; how much is a formalist reading due to interpretive conventions and how much to psychological processes independent of education; what is supplied by the text while reading and what by the reader; when formal features are provided by the text, do all readers uniformly interpret their meaning.

At the heart of the formalist proposal, which we elaborate more fully later, is the constructive and transformative nature of the interaction between reader and text. This engagement is driven by textual features that include distinctive and systematic language forms; the resulting interpretive processes in the reader are distinctive to the literary domain. Perhaps the central issue of formalism is that of 'literariness': the claim that literary texts possess certain distinctive forms and features not found in other types of text. It has been common, for example, to attribute 'foregrounding' to literary texts, following Mukarovsky's well-known formulation (1964/1932). From this perspective, literary texts are distinguished by the systematic use of figurative and stylistic devices at the phonetic, grammatical, and semantic levels (Van Peer, 1986; Miall and Kuiken, 1994a). But if this claim can be invalidated, then other concomitant claims asserted by formalism become untenable. Thus, it is this position that we will now examine in more detail, by reviewing several theoretical and empirical studies, including our own. After that review we will suggest some of the wider implications of the concept of 'literariness' for the function of reading in culture.

2. Literariness

Along with formalism itself, the arguments for literariness have been almost universally rejected by leading literary academics. For example, Fish asserts: "It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities" (Fish, 1980: 326). Similarly, Eagleton has stated:

"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." (Eagleton, 1983: 10–11)

Eagleton, like Fish, sees literariness as an institutional construct, an artifact defined by the current purposes of a specific 'interpretive community'. At the same time, his statement indicates one source of the confusion that surrounds the issue. A literary experience is created through the interaction of a reader and a text; the object of study is not objectively given as insects are to entomology. By assuming that formal accounts of literariness require a 'stable, well-definable entity' Eagleton essentializes the object in order to dismiss it. Formal properties can be shown, by linguistic or narrative analysis, to inhere in texts, but these do not constitute 'literariness' until they incur a certain quality of attention from a reader. The question at issue, as Fish's remark shows, is whether readers pay attention only within certain institutional contexts, or whether our psychobiological and psychological organization predispose us to bestow such features with the kind of attention we then recognize as characteristically literary.

Literature, of course, does not function in a social vacuum. Like language itself, for which our brains are pre-programmed before birth, actualization of the response we recognize as literary depends upon the shaping influence of experiences within a human community. But to speak of the social contexts within which art is recognized does not preclude pointing to the 'natural' foundation of its effects, as though the agencies of nature and culture were mutually exclusive (cf. Storey, 1993: 62). Thus, Mukarovsky, who shows that the borderline of the 'aesthetic' shifts across time according to social conditions, also appeals to the bodily rhythms of the blood and of breathing in understanding music, or to the physics of colour that underlie painting. Such 'constitutive' principles, he argues, provide an essential context against which changes in aesthetic norms are perceived (Mukarovsky, 1970: 29–31). Yet the argument against literariness, by essentializing the literary object, prevents investigation of the 'natural' basis of response.

Similar problems are apparent among significant theorists of literature in the empirical tradition. In his paper 'Advice on theoretical poetics', Van Dijk (1979) presented arguments that are now almost universally accepted. There are, he said, no properties of discourse that are not common to literary and non-literary fields. For example, the principle of 'coherence' is of interest equally to students of literary and non-literary discourse. In enumerating the features of so-called 'poetic language', there are few that appear to be distinctive to literature (1979: 598–599). Thus, he concludes, "there is no serious way in which the notion of 'poetic language' could be defined: no language forms are exclusively used in literature, or *not* used in literature, or even in poetry" (1979: 601). Of the socio-cultural system that involves writers, readers, critics, professors of literature, etc., he remarks, "there are no sufficient or necessary properties of 'literature' in any of these contexts".

'Literature' in his view is a set of social practices. Van Dijk would ask for "a more or less empirically warranted account of what people (in some context) call 'literature'" (1979: 602). More generally, he would discard literature as a defining context for research: "I ... would suggest that a theory of literary texts should be based on a more general *theory of discourse*, as it is developed within the new inter-discipline of *discourse studies*" (1979: 598).

The position elaborated by Van Dijk, which coincides in important respects with that of Culler, is based on a theoretical view of discourse in general. However, his position is framed in a way that precludes empirical investigation. It rules out the concept of 'literariness' a priori, by defining it as a set of 'poetic features'. Reified in this way, we are prevented from asking whether, even if such features do occur in all types of discourse, particular occurrences or conjunctions of poetic features elicit a response distinctive to literature. We should also ask whether discourse theory has the appropriate tools for the empirical study of such responses (Miall and Kuiken, 1994b). For example, does the linguistic principle of 'coherence' apply with the same meaning in a literary as in a non-literary context?

Schmidt (1982) has taken a position similar to Van Dijk's. The attempt to locate attributes of literariness in surface features of texts, he claims, is an 'ontological fallacy'. It is "the human processes performed on such features that define the attributes in question" (1982: 92), but such processes are switched on, as it were, not by the text, but by adoption of what Schmidt terms the Aesthetic Convention. Participants in the aesthetic realm behave according to "the norms and meaning rules valid for the aesthetic interaction in that situation" (1982: 52); they respond to "various signals which alert a receiver that aesthetic interaction is intended. ... These signals are not objectively given in the text, but must be realized by the receiver and intended by the producer" (1982: 55). Empirical support for this view is provided by Zwaan (1991), who showed that, when readers were presented with relatively ambiguous texts that could be construed as either from a novel or from a newspaper report, readers in a 'literary perspective' condition read more slowly and were able to recall more surface features of the texts than those in a 'newspaper perspective' condition. This suggests that socially constructed norms predispose us to identify a text as literary, and that the process of attending to literary features is a product of acculturation and education, and, therefore, subject to historical conditioning. What is 'literary' at one time may cease to be so at another time.

While this argument has some validity, it presents several difficulties. First, although Zwaan's study is suggestive, his texts were carefully chosen to avoid manifestly 'literary' features. Thus, his study shows specifically that a marginally literary text (there is, of course, no clear dividing line) is amenable to reading from either a 'literary' or 'newspaper' perspective. However, more distinctively literary texts may attenuate or even eliminate such flexibility. Second, the strong conventionalist position held by Fish, Eagleton, and Schmidt (and criticized elsewhere by Zwaan, 1993: 9–11) argues that the recognition of texts as literary is due *only* to institutional norms. But this denies the possibility that the inherent properties of literary texts, even when presented within an aesthetic context, mediate the aesthetic response rather than norms associated with that context. It is, as teachers of literature know, one thing to present a text as aesthetic; it is another matter to have the text read aesthetically. Third, the strong conventionalist position overlooks the emergence of aesthetic response outside the institutional contexts usually regarded as transmitting those conventions. It becomes more difficult to explain, for example, the discovery of Dickens or Shakespeare by miners and factory workers in the nineteenth century (Rose, 1993). In sum, both aesthetic

conventions and inherently literary features of a text are likely to contribute to the reading experience.

Schmidt seems to find the following argument decisive: “If there were such a thing as a ‘poetic function’ or a ‘poetic competence’ divorced from actual use, then a given text would either be poetic or non-poetic for all members of a language community at every moment – a conclusion that can easily be disproven” (1982: 94). On the contrary, let us suppose we present a given text, such as Shakespeare’s Sonnet no. 73, to a random selection of people in the street. How many would assert that it is not a poem? Only those, surely, unable to understand the question, and hence not in position to evaluate the text as poetic or non-poetic. Like the theorists we noted earlier, Schmidt’s position precludes asking whether response to Sonnet no. 73 could be based in part on qualities of the text that all competent readers recognize as literary. In fact, the basic premise of a social constructivist theory such as Schmidt’s is not seen as an empirical issue, and yet the question whether the qualities of certain texts initiate the institution of literature is at bottom an empirical one, and could be asked in relation to the historical evidence.

In this essay our object is more limited, since we will focus on whether textual features, rather than readers’ expectations, are responsible for initiating literary processing of a particular text. Specifically we will discuss those textual features known as foregrounding, which have been described by Mukarovsky (1964/1932) and examined empirically by Van Peer (1986) and Miall and Kuiken (1994a). We will critically reconsider two studies (Hoffstaedter, 1987; Hanauer, 1996) that tested whether ‘literariness’ is a convention and then review evidence from our own research indicating that ‘literariness’ resides in foregrounded textual features. Although foregrounding is only one component of literariness (other components are probably found in aspects of narrative structure or in forms specific to various genres), we propose that the processes specific to foregrounding offer principles capable of generalization to other distinctive components of literary response.

3. Empirical studies

Echoing Van Dijk and Schmidt, Hoffstaedter (1987) declares her “basic assumption” to be “that poeticity ... is a property of text processing rather than a property of texts”. It “takes place”, she says, “under specific text and context conditions and depends also on specific dispositions of the reader” (1987: 75). Her study, which sets out to show this empirically, in fact achieves the opposite, pointing to the conclusion that poetic features determine text processing regardless of context.

In her study, 24 texts ranging from a Celan poem to a passage from a history text book were presented in either a newspaper or poetry reading context. They were then rated on how poetic they were thought to be: only ten of the texts showed significantly different scores, according to the two conditions. In other words, a number of texts were rated as poetic regardless of context. Hoffstaedter concludes that “the influence of the context condition depends on whether certain text properties occur which may cause poetic text processing. If, for instance, there

are many properties which potentially contribute to a poetic processing, then the context information has little influence, i.e. the text is processed poetically in any context" (1987: 80). This conclusion is incompatible with Schmidt's Aesthetic Convention.

Hoffstaedter also assumed that literary experience is a determining factor in whether texts are read 'poetically' or not. Thus, her study employed two groups of readers, students of literature and of engineering. One of her measures asked readers to underline words and phrases deemed poetic in the 24 texts. For the text she reports in detail, the engineers selected half the number of words selected by literature students, 33% vs. 67%, a very significant difference. The data are presented in Hoffstaedter's Fig. 2 (1987: 81; here reproduced as Fig. 1), which shows the percentage of underlinings across 21 words in three lines of a Celan poem. At first sight, this seems strong evidence that literary training influences what will be found poetic. But look again: a noticeable feature of the chart is the similar proportion of underlinings made by the two groups: a line found highly poetic by the literary group also occurs in a high position relative to other lines in the engineers' group. In fact, the percentages for the two groups are highly correlated, $r(19) = .60, p < .01$. Thus, while the engineers appear less confident or committed in their judgments, they seem able to discriminate between levels of 'poeticity' in this text as accurately as the more highly trained literature students.

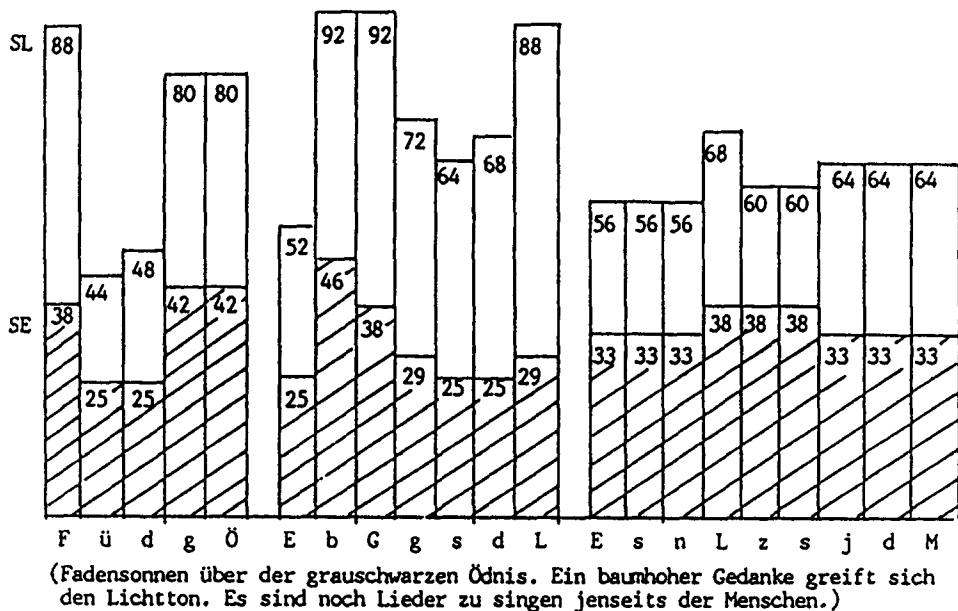


Fig. 1. Comparison of the underlinings (per word in %) of 25 students of literature (SL) and 24 students of electrotechnics (SE) in Celan's 'Fadensonnen'. From Hoffstaedter (1987: 81), reproduced from *Poetics* 16, with permission.

In both these studies, then, Hoffstaedter's data point rather firmly towards accepting the formalist hypothesis that literariness is a quality of texts, perceived independently of context or literary training. Recognition of poetic features appears to be based on understanding of the language, i.e., what is appropriate to 'normal' usage and what to 'poetic' usage. Interestingly, Hoffstaedter also studied the effect of linguistic competence. With learners of German, performing the same underlining task, a more striking set of differences emerged: the underlinings of the less competent speakers of German were fewer and corresponded far less clearly with those of the native speakers. Compared with the literature students, the underlinings of native speakers showed a very similar profile, $r(19) = .83$, $p < .001$; two groups of learners of German showed statistically unreliable levels of correspondence (Group 1: fairly competent, $r(19) = .08$; Group 2: low competence, $r(19) = .30$; there is no significant difference between these correlations). Linguistic competence thus appeared to be a more significant influence on judgement of what was found poetic than literary experience, as Hoffstaedter notes (p. 83).

In Hanauer's (1996) recently published paper, he describes two main views on how judgments are made of what is poetic: the 'traditional', which gives a central place to formal features of a text, and the 'conventionalist', which emphasizes the conventions that are applied during reading, such as Schmidt's Aesthetic Convention. Hanauer sets out to test the conventionalist and formalist positions against empirical evidence, and for this purpose he sees the text categorization judgment as critical. Incidentally, a moment's reflection will suggest that this categorization judgement creates a somewhat improbable situation: in real life we are rarely in doubt about what kind of a text we are reading. Nonetheless, the evidence reported by Hanauer is suggestive.

Hanauer used two texts. Each was a poem in which Hanauer manipulated 'poetic' features in two ways. First, the phonetic features were altered to produce versions that were low, middle, or high (original version) in such features. For example, in the Joyce poem used, the first line of the 'low' version is 'The twilight changes from purple'; its original version reads 'The twilight turns from amethyst'. Secondly, the graphic form was manipulated by removing initial capitalization, and then by rewriting the lines as prose. Participants were presented with nine versions of the poem that varied these dimensions in every combination. The readers were then asked to rate each version on a continuous scale running from 'clearly a poem' at one end to 'clearly not a poem' at the other. Readers were of two kinds, novice (entry level literature students) and experienced (holding a degree in literature). The study was replicated with both poems and with both types of reader, with generally similar results.

The ratings of the novice group, especially at the lower end of the scale, were lower than those of the experienced group: as in Hoffstaedter's study (and our own studies), the less experienced readers seem less committed to the act of reading. Hanauer takes this as support for the conventionalist position. It should be noted, however, that to the extent that more of the poetic features are present the closer are the judgements of the two groups of readers. Our own graph based on Hanauer's data for the first poem (see Fig. 2) shows this more clearly than Hanauer's report:

the more poetic the text, the more judgements of it are independent of literary experience, an argument for the formalist view.

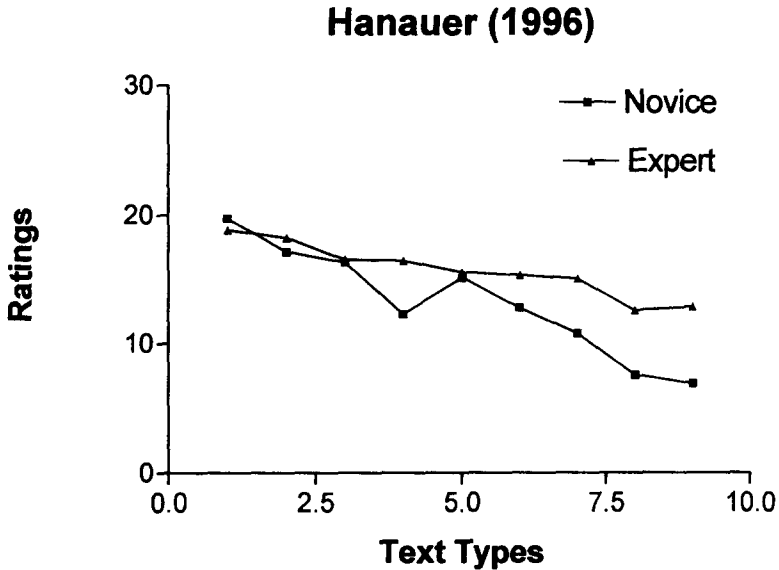


Fig. 2. Mean text categorization ratings for nine different versions of a poem.
Derived from Hanauer (1996).

More striking, however, is the fact that the distribution of judgements across the different texts was largely the same in both groups, as our graph, as well as Hanauer's own (see Fig. 3), show: in other words, novice readers were as competent as experienced readers in placing texts on a poetic scale according to the degree to which they possessed graphic or phonetic features, a finding that corresponds closely to our reading of Hoffstaedter's data. Like Hoffstaedter, the judgements of the novice readers occur at a lower level than those of the experienced readers, a finding that appears to support the conventionalist view. But the close correspondence of the judgements clearly speaks for the formalist view, as the high correlation between them shows: $r(7) = .94, p < .001$. As Hanauer notes: "both novice and expert literary readers were found to be sensitive to the use of graphic and phonetic information in making poetry categorization judgements and ... these information sources were integrated in a similar way" (p. 371).

Hanauer concludes that formal features play an important role in categorizing texts. However, "While sensitivity to formal textual features and the way to integrate this information may stay constant, the value assigned to these textual features was seen to change according to literary educational background" (p. 374). This last comment seems apt: literary education, among other things, enables a reader to build interpretive strategies upon the observed textual features, that is, to assign them a value within the larger unfolding sense of meaning of the text as a whole. But this is

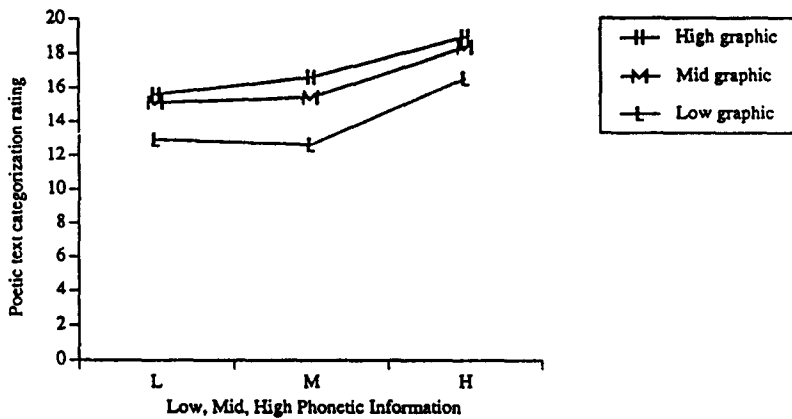


Fig. 3. From Hanauer (1996), reproduced from *Poetics* 23, with permission.

not a strong argument for the conventionalist position. If we take the formalist position to argue for the initiation of poetic processing through readers' recognition of poetic features, then the weight of evidence in Hanauer's study is largely in favour of it.

Our own research, particularly the set of studies we reported three years ago in *Poetics* (Miall and Kuiken, 1994a), can also be seen as evidence for the formalist view, although our main purpose in conducting the studies was not to arbitrate between the two opposing views, as in Hanauer's work. We set out, rather, to ask the question, 'What is the purpose of poetic features?' Or, more precisely, 'What is distinctive about readers' responses to foregrounding?' One answer is provided by Shklovsky's (1964/1917) well-known formulation: poetic devices make the referents of the literary text 'strange'; perception is lengthened and we seem to see and hear more vividly; a stone becomes stony. As László (1990) showed, one effect of reading literature is the formation of more vivid imagery than when reading newspaper reports; and he notes a comment of Paivio (1985) that emotions are associated with images rather than with propositions. Foregrounding, then, elicits a more immediate, vivid, and personal response from a reader. Needless to say, a reader need not be consciously aware of responding to foregrounding in order for this effect to occur. In our work on foregrounding we have attempted to study the process of response to such literary devices. What, psychologically, appears to signify the encounter with foregrounding?

We took three literary short stories by O'Faolain, Woolf, and Mansfield, and coded each segment (roughly one sentence) for foregrounded features at the phonetic, grammatical, and semantic levels. We then elicited several measures from readers, such as reading times per segment and ratings for affect and strikingness. We also employed two types of readers: experienced students of literature, most in their third or fourth year of studies, and introductory psychology students, who had little experience of literature. With both groups we obtained significant correlations between foregrounding and the reading times and ratings data. Both groups read the

Woolf and Manfield stories, and it is notable that the level of correlations with foregrounding is almost the same in both groups. This finding lends support to the hypothesis that all readers appear sensitive to foregrounding, regardless of literary training.

It was also noteworthy that the overall means of the ratings provided by the two groups differed consistently: our experienced readers gave higher affect and strikingness ratings than the psychology students (e.g., mean affect ratings for the Woolf story were 2.98 and 2.62 respectively; strikingness ratings were 3.04 and 2.79; these differences were significant on a *t*-test, $p < .05$; similar results were found with the Mansfield story.) This suggests that the inexperienced readers were less committed to the reading or less interested in it. Yet, both groups appear to have been almost equally responsive to the presence of foregrounding. For example, the mean reading times of the two groups that read the Woolf story correlated highly, $r(84) = .89$, $p < .001$, as did their affect ratings, $r(84) = .88$, $p < .001$, and both the timing and affect data correlated significantly with the presence of foregrounding.

In addition, the foregrounding measure correlated significantly with ratings for uncertainty, which we also collected for several stories. This has led us to propose that foregrounding initiates interpretive activity in the reader, first by defamiliarizing the referent of the text (the strikingness rating provides one measure of this) and by arousing feeling; then, the resulting uncertainty causes the reader to search for a context in which the new material can be understood, a process in which feeling plays a key role. Feeling may be the route to relevant concepts, memories, or experiences that the reader has not yet applied to understanding the text. A study of Andringa (1990) seems to support this proposal: examining verbal protocols gathered in response to a literary text, she found that expressions of emotion in response to a literary text tended to be followed by evaluations and arguments. This sequence of events provided the main impetus to the development of an interpretation.

Here, we would suggest, lies one of the natural bases of literary response. If the defamiliarization induced during literary reading disturbs the automatic assignment of meaning, then, as Reuven Tsur has argued, disturbing the categorization process “makes lowly categorized information, as well as rich pre-categorical sensuous information, available to consciousness” (Tsur, 1983: 8). This, Tsur adds, “gives the organism great flexibility, adaptability to ever-changing physical or mental environments”. In other words, the moments of feeling initiated by defamiliarization provide the context within which recategorization can unfold. Elsewhere (Miall, 1995) we have presented neuropsychological evidence for this view of feeling.

If the reader, following defamiliarization, is searching for an interpretive context, we might also expect to find readers considering a wider range of ideas than at other moments in the text when interpretation is more straightforward. This is the implication of another study we conducted. When readers are asked to talk aloud about a story, and we then classify the various statements that readers make in response to each segment, we find that a wider range of different statements corresponds to the more highly foregrounded segments (i.e., the number of *types* of statements in our analysis correlates with foregrounding: partial correlation, $r(82) = .25$, $p < .025$, controlling for syllables). Foregrounded passages, then, are strong candidates for locat-

ing moments of indeterminacy in interpretation, and these in turn provide the germinating points for the subsequent development of interpretations of the text. Thus foregrounding appears to play an important role in the interpretive process (cf. Miall and Kuiken, 1995).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that the empirical evidence available on the issue tends to support the formalist hypothesis rather more strongly than the opposing positions. Moreover, we agree with Van Peer, who argues that the theory of literariness “describes and explains a number of fundamental issues of literature in a powerful and elegant way” (Van Peer, 1995: 315). As we remarked at the outset, however, to adopt this position is not to return to the dogmatic formalism of the affective fallacy (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954), but to move forward to more fruitful ground – that of research with actual readers. This research will address the possibility that certain components of reader response, such as the defamiliarization and feeling response to foregrounded text, are ‘natural’. Far more general than literary conventions, these components of response may be based on psychobiological, cognitive, and psycholinguistic processes that do as much to shape institutional ‘conventions’ as they are shaped by them (see Miall, 1995, for a fuller discussion).

Our brief review of the debate and some of the evidence, suggests that such research might profitably focus on several related areas. We state these in terms of the following propositions:

- (1) Literary texts possess distinctive properties that include foregrounding (although further research will perhaps refine our conception of these properties). There is, of course, no definable cut-off beyond which a text is non-literary; rather, foregrounded features occur in a continuum of texts from the clearly literary to the clearly non-literary.
- (2) Response to foregrounding, i.e., experiencing a text as literary, depends on a reader’s linguistic competence, not on literary experience or training. The fundamentals of this competence are ‘natural’, that is, based on psychobiological, cognitive, and psycholinguistic processes characteristic of ordinary readers.
- (3) The encounter with foregrounded features plays a formative role in the interpretive effort of a reader. This is, of course, unlikely to be the only influence: text genre, narrative features, etc., also play a major role, varying according to context.
- (4) The kind of text processing initiated by foregrounding is distinct from that modeled in discourse processing theory, involving schema creation rather than schema extension or modification (cf. Miall and Kuiken, 1994b; Miall, 1989).

Each of these positions has some support from empirical studies, but the available research is limited. Thus, we make the usual and predictable call for further research. Why, however, would such research matter to the broader community – especially

the community in literature departments that we discussed earlier, which has largely written off the formalist position as untenable?

In brief, we would argue that literary reading takes its place within a larger cultural ecology, with roots that go far back in history and prehistory, and which has adaptive consequences in the life of the individual and culture of which we are, perhaps, hardly aware as yet. At the same time, the value of literary reading is conferred by a kind of contract that the reader makes with a text: by treating it as a single, albeit complex, communicative experience, the reader comes to recontextualize or redefine some significant aspect of experience. A reader taking up a literary text thus makes several related commitments that guide the act of reading. Let us call these the Formalist Contract. At this stage in our understanding, there are four components in this contract:

(1) *The bounded text*

During reading the reader treats the text as a whole thing, bounded and complexly interconnected. We would set this against the more recent dispersion model, from Barthes (1977) to Landow (1992).

(2) *Communicative intent*

The reader is prepared to assume that new understanding can be acquired from reading, that the act of reading can in itself be made creative by the encounter with the text. This opposes the ‘always already’ of poststructuralism in which it is argued that a text can only exist by replicating existing textual fragments and strategies.

(3) *The openness of reading*

Foregrounding in the text, among other features, arouses memories, feelings, a sense of self, of empathy, etc., which the reader places at the disposal of the reshaping functions of the text. A corollary of this position is that readings will vary, often in major ways, between individuals from the same community. This opposes Fish’s (1980) notion of the interpretive community.

(4) *The adaptive function of literature*

If the dynamics of literary reading lie in defamiliarization, anticipation, schema formation, etc., then the primary function of literary reading is to equip us to better understand and respond to our environment. Literature is able to do this by invoking and reshaping our feelings ‘offline’, that is, in isolation from behaviours and actions in the every day world that have real consequences.

We cannot help concluding that this view of literature is not only more constructive, but more plausible, than the view that has been emerging from the advocates of poststructuralist literary theory.

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