

The Processualities of Literature

Herbert Grabes

Justus-Liebig University, Giessen, Germany

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that the processual aspect of literary works of art deserves much more attention than it normally receives by readers, critics, and theorists. The most important reason for this is seen in the fact that texts since the advent of print culture have been disseminated and passed on in written form and that in the medium of writing the processual character of language is only insufficiently taken care of by a cultural convention of arranging and approaching the presented signs in an particular sequence. Whereas in an oral culture the dynamic processuality of a speech or recitation was directly experienced by the listeners, the spatial arrangement of signs in writing enables and even entices readers and critics to read this or that part of a written text in a sequence of their own making. What remains out of focus is that in doing so they miss the particular semantic profile and aesthetic character of the work as created by the author—a procedure particularly hurtful in the case of literary works of art. There is hope, however, that this will somewhat change by our moving towards a performance culture.

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That literature—like music—is a temporal and processual art that can unfold its semantic and aesthetic potential only in a sequential manner seems to be so much taken for granted that it gets no special attention. That this processuality, however, does deserve closer scrutiny is due to the very fact that it normally is not in the foreground of the reader's consciousness nor focused on by critics or literary theorists, although it is a central aspect of the experience of literature.

From Processuality to Processualities in Print Culture

One of the major reasons for this may lie in the fact that the reader's "voicing" of literary texts has been progressively silenced by dissemination and transmission through print culture. The earlier primacy of orality and manuscript culture meant that the audience of a bard, storyteller, public reader, or priest had first-hand, often communal experience of the dynamic and processual character of literary works. Written texts appear more like material objects whose elements are simultaneously given and which can be approached by the individual reader in manifold ways according to his own liking. The spread of literacy, after all, enabled individual and introspective reading in the *Bible* rather than requiring that it be read sequentially from beginning to end. What thereby remains hidden is the fact that the notational system of writing depends not only on a linguistic and a

cultural code in order to function effectively, but also on a conventional rule determining the sequence in which spatially arranged linguistic signs are to be apprehended—in the West from left to right along a horizontal line, from the top line down to the bottom line on the page, and from the front page to last one, consecutively, in the physical order of a pamphlet or book's composition. Though writers usually compose their works in the expectation that readers will respect this rule, being readers themselves they also know that one can leaf through a book and read a passage here and there to get a feel for the way it is written, or that one can, overcome with curiosity, break the rule and read the ending of a detective story early on in order to find out “who done it”.

Written literary texts, like all written texts, allow for a variety of processual experiences, and this is a major reason why the title of the author's talk mentions the “processualities”, not “the processuality”, of literature. It is also why J. M. Cameron's (1962) minimalist definition of a poetic text as “these words in this order” (p. 145) is indispensable if one wants to ensure textual identity, provided it pertains not only to their spatial arrangement but also to their apprehension according to the above-mentioned cultural rule or social compact. It is only in this case that we are “reading” in terms of a mental processing of the text as presented by its author; in all other cases, “reading” is actually also “writing”: What we “read” is then a text we ourselves, in the process of apprehension, compose from elements of somebody else's text. While this may not always be of major importance, it certainly is so in the case of a literary work of art, because of its aesthetic dimension. In many ways, such a written text is like a musical score—and one would certainly not speak of “the same work” if a conductor had an orchestra play parts of the score of, for instance, a Beethoven symphony in a different sequence. There are, of course, still manifold interpretive options when a score is played in its given sequence, and as we shall see, the same holds true for the individual readings of the same printed literary text.

Experimenting with Processuality

How important the conventional rule of a particular sequential apprehension of signs normally is becomes evident when authors experiment with multiple sequences or even leave the ordering of the parts entirely to the reader. Since the advent of Modernism there has been a major trend of “writing against time” (Grabes, 1996) that first led to a weakening of sequential structure by fragmentation and collage and the concomitant suggestion to deviate from the traditional rule of apprehension. Well-known examples are Andrej Belyj's cubist novel *Petersburg* (1913), T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). At a later stage, the imperfect sequential notation of texts by their spatial presentation in writing was exploited by offering the option of reading the parts of a literary text in several sequences and thus to create several works on the basis of one written text. In the blurb of the 1962 Weidenfeld edition of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the book is called a “do-it-yourself detective story”, because the reader can decide the sequence in which the various parts of what is presented as a critical edition of a narrative poem are read. Or Julio Cortázar in his novel *Rayuela* (English: *Hopscotch* (1966)) suggests in the introduction two sequential patterns, so that there can be two works created from the same text. The first one consists of a linear reading of the chapters 1-56, leaving out the chapters 57-155 which are therefore designated as being “expendable”; a second reading (and work) includes these chapters, beginning with chapter 57 and continuing with the one mentioned at the end of each chapter. A similar strategy is used by Michel Butor in *Boomerang* by having parts of the text printed in different colors, so that one may either follow the sequence of parts in one color only or read the whole book without paying heed to the coloring. Even

in such cases, however, “the *possibilities* which the work’s openness makes available always work within a given *field of relations*”, as Umberto Eco has pointed out in *The Open Work* (1989), adding that “[t]he author is the one who proposed a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development” (p. 19). This, however, no longer obtains when the potential sequences of apprehension become practically countless, as was the case when experimentation reached a further stage in the postmodern era. B. S. Johnson went so far as to present the 29 chapters of his novel *The Unfortunates* (1969) loosely in a box, with only the first and last marked as such, and Mark Saporta in his *Composition No. 1* (1962) offered his readers no more than a batch of unnumbered pages, printed on one side, which according to the author’s instruction on the cover of the box “may be read in any order. The reader is requested to shuffle them like a deck of cards”. Like other postmodern “innovations”, such a far-going abandonment of authorial control had already been attempted in early modern times by the Italian and Russian Futurists. In *Zang-Tumb-Tumb* (1914), for example, Marinetti demonstrated his poetics of “free words” by abandoning even syntactical sequence and promoting multiple relations between single words, and Mayakovsky in his early poems also for that purpose arranged the words on the page in a spatial design.

The Empowerment of Readers and Critics by “Spatializing”

Such radical experiments remained, however, rare exceptions, and they rather confirmed than actually weakened the normal procedure that authors use the sequential presentation as an important structuring device. They can therefore not serve as a justification for the frequent use of spatial metaphor in narratology that began with Joseph Frank’s early essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (1945) and was continued by critics like Sharon Spencer (*Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel*, 1971), Joseph A. Kestner (*The Spatiality of the Novel*, 1978), and Jeffrey R. Smitten and Ann Daglistany who edited the critical anthology *Spatial Form in Narrative* (1981). That it was less the special character of modernist literature than the turn towards structuralist thought in literary theory and criticism that was responsible for this “spatializing” can be closely observed, for instance, in the employment of architectural metaphor in Gérard Genette’s chapter on “Literature and Space” (“La littérature et l’espace”) in *Figures II* (1969).

What further played a role is the widespread and well-established practice among literary critics of taking particular elements or parts of a literary text out of their sequential placement and arranging them, for purposes of illustration and discussion, in a way that, they think, best serves their particular interpretation. This is a major reason why interpretations of a literary text can sometimes differ radically. Such critics forget that the specific meaning of elements and parts of a text depends on a given placement and that in order to grasp it one has to write a travelogue of the sequence of discoveries in the reading process rather than present a mapping of a territory of one’s own creation. Apart from critics and students preparing for an exam, readers do, after all, read for the experience of reading a text and not for having read it, just as a piece of music is normally listened to for the experience of listening, and not for having listened to it. Of course, different readers may be particularly attracted by different things on the way, but at least the sequence of apprehension as planned by the author stays intact and there is a chance that the aesthetic dimension of the literary work of art can be experienced. For, contrary to Roland Barthes’ view that written texts are “orphaned”, their fate is only then left to the whim of critics with autistic leanings when they are no longer read in the sequence determined by the author. It is not the case that the

“birth of the reader must be at the cost of the author” (Barthes, 1977, p. 148); the author must “die” only for the birth of a critic who gives up being a reader of somebody else’s text, because he/she wants to be an author himself/herself, creating a text of his/her own from the text he/she pretends to interpret.

Processualities in Reception Theory and Possible Worlds Theory

What is at stake—at least with regard to literary texts, because of their aesthetic dimension—was already worked out in detail as early as 1937 by the Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden in his *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, revised and published in German in 1968 and in English in 1973. What Ingarden focused on therein was the “structure of the sequence of parts in a work” and the “temporal perspective” in the “concretization of the literary work of art”, aspects that were investigated even more thoroughly by Wolfgang Iser in *Der Akt des Lesens* from 1976 (English *The Act of Reading*, 1978) when reception theory became stronger after the main aspects had been stressed by, for instance, Riffaterre (1971):

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of a reading which moves in the same direction as the text itself; i.e. from the beginning to the end. Unless this “one way” movement is respected, an essential aspect of the literary phenomenon will be misunderstood—for a book unfolds (as in antiquity a *volumen* was literally unrolled), and the text is subjected to progressive discovery, a dynamic perception which is constantly changing, where the reader not only moves from surprise to surprise but also sees, as he moves progressively forward, a change in his understanding of what he is reading as each new element confers a new dimension on earlier elements, which it repeats and develops. (pp. 327-328)

What makes it worth taking up the subject again now is not primarily the fact that the processualities ineluctably bound up with the literary work of art are still not adequately taken into account in most of the now prevalent versions of literary theory; it is above all advances in the field of cognitive psychology and the heightened awareness of the cultural conditioning of individual worldmaking and understanding that permit a better description of what takes place in the experience of literature and also compels correction of earlier views.

One of the most important innovations arising from the symbiosis between psychology and mind science is the so-called schema theory, involving the conceptualization of more complex patterns such as mental models. This has to do with what Marie-Laure Ryan in her article on “Possible Worlds Theory” (2005) called the “principle of minimal departure”, which stated that “when readers construct fictional worlds, they fill in the gaps [...] in the text by assuming the similarity of the fictional worlds to their own experiential reality” (p. 447). The schemata and mental models acquired early in life by readers to help construct their view of the everyday world with objects, happenings, characters, and their actions in time and space will also be used in the creation of an imagined worldmaking motivated and guided by their reading of a literary text. More recent mind-science experiments yielding insight into the neural activity of the brain show that schemata and models based on oft-repeated activation of certain neuron patterns derive not only from real-life experiences but also from imagined ones. Accordingly, readers not only use their previous reading to cope with fresh encounters, but also create further templates during reading which they may subsequently apply in real-life experience. This has a number of consequences for an understanding of the reading process in general and for the processualities of literature in particular. It entails, namely, that the schemata and models readers use are only in part quite general and to a great extent culturally conditioned. According to the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson (1986), this also pertains to the selection of a particular schema as the most relevant among several (Strasen, 2008, p. 156). It

is thus logical that the reader's cultural conditioning should influence the experience of the literary work of art.

This is all the more so because a reader's selection from his archive of schemata and models also involves options for synthesis and integration and therefore has direct consequences for the reading process as such. As both Ingarden and Iser have shown, the reader's relation to the text is not that of an observer to an object but that of engagement in a process of constant interaction and continuous synthesizing—in Iser's terms, that of a "wandering viewpoint". What is called a "viewpoint" must not, however, be taken as an empty, merely formal, and quite general ability to integrate a plurality of newly observed and memorized elements. It is the full mental capacity of the reader, comprising the individual archive of integrative patterns and the formation of complex systems as well as the agency of choosing between available options under the influence of cognition, acquired habits, and desire. For this reason, the process of reading is not long obstructed by gaps in the chain of textual information or when contradictory data have to be dealt with. Such gaps will either be filled or jumped, depending on the coping strategies available to the individual reader. What takes place is a sequence of transformations, each determined not only by the "knowledge of the world" acquired through real-life experience or previous reading, but also by the "cognitive set" applied in sense-making strategies as well as by the affective stance towards what is encountered and coped with. Emotional factors must be taken into consideration along with cognition, because, as Ruthrof (1981) has pointed out, "reading is always problematic in terms of the text's unfolding situations to which the reader is juxtaposed as he constructs them. [...] Reading, not unlike writing, is coming to terms with such situations" (p. 72).

The Dynamics of the Reading Process

To grasp the true complexity of the reading process, one has to reckon with the fact that, ideally, it is not only all the textual information from what has already been read that goes into each new transforming synthesis but also all earlier transformations, along with their individual features, and that the same pertains to the ever new formations of the horizon of expectation. As there is no tangible information yet regarding what will happen in the future, its creation in the imagination is determined to an even higher degree by the reader's preferred schemata and mental models, especially those regarding causal chains of events, story-lines, and typical patterns of human behavior.

Worth special mention with regard to the subsequent replacement of expectations by information in the reading process is a profile of more general validity. When getting into a text, readers, in their sense-making, initially rely to a large extent on schemata and models of their own preference; then, as information accrues by reading on, the initial choice of schemata and models is partially or wholly confirmed or contradicted, and after a while some macro-schemata emerge as optimally functional. As Strasen has pointed out in investigating the stability of schemata, from then on the readiness to acknowledge, or even the ability to notice, contradictory, or more radically differing new evidence diminishes to such an extent that instead of the necessary restructuring of what is already there, the new evidence is suppressed. The author came across a pertinent example of this strategy when dealing more recently with a new view by Margit Sichert of Marsha Norman's shocking play *'night, Mother* (1981). It showed that in the 26 years since its first publication, the authors of all interpretations succumbed to the strong initial support in the play for traditional schemata motivating suicide—to such an extent that quite contradictory evidence coming later was ignored completely—or most probably not even noticed. A

decisive factor here may well have been the fact that the theme of child abuse that was later hinted at was taboo until recently, which brings us to the cultural conditioning of the processualities of literature.

The Impact of Cultural Embedding

Most of the insights into the reading process that have been presented so far bear out the fact that though processual structuring as such may be of a quite general nature, the actual processes taking place in the mind of particular readers tend to be understandably quite individual in detail. One could therefore argue with good reason that there are as many different processes (and consequently as many concretized literary works—though not texts) as there are readers. Fortunately, however, this is not the whole truth: As readers who have grown up in the same or a similar culture share not only a significant portion of their cognitive set or archive of schemata and mental models, but also of affective patterns and their expression, authors can be confident that readers from their own or a similar culture who apprehend their texts in the given order will react to them in their fictional worldmaking in such a way that their semantic specificity and aesthetic quality are accessible and shareable.

The plot thickens, however, when readers belong to a culture whose shared schemata and mental models are quite different from those of the author. Even when the text is read closely in the sequence established by the author, the result can be totally opposite from what was intended. I. A. Richards, one of the first person to study the influence of the reader's "universe of discourse" on the actualized meaning of a text, reported in the 1930s that when teaching Shakespeare's *King Lear* in China, his students started laughing, because the high esteem for old age in their culture made it inconceivable for them that an old man who acted as stupidly as Lear could be anything but the protagonist of a comedy. And it remains an open question whether such a severe lack of cultural fit can be mended by commentary, because it also includes a basic emotional stance. Thus, the fact that our fictional worldmaking is to a considerable extent culturally conditioned guarantees literary communication between members of similar cultures, but creates problems when author and reader belong to quite different cultures. This and many more aspects of "the cultural ways of worldmaking" are discussed in a recent critical collection with the same title edited by Vera and Ansgar Nünning and Birgit Neumann.

Textual Sequence, Second Readings, and Aesthetic Experience

Yet, for all the reader's contribution, the complex synchronous meaning that results from a final synthesis of all intermediate stages of sense-making—a synthesis that our desire for coherence demands, despite sometimes quite contradictory evidence—remains largely dependent on what the text has schematically offered. Here is Ruthrof's (1981) description of what happens at the end of a first reading:

With the reader's response to the last word of the text, the reading process, and, consequently, also the story undergo a decisive change. The reader's forward orientation, his accumulation and his protentions and his openness for the gradual modification of his concretizations are suddenly replaced by an attitude of preparedness for the experience of a meaningful total configuration. (p. 76)

This configuration starts changing again at the start of a second reading, and this is one of the most convincing pieces of evidence for the processualities of literature. But there is no consensus about whether a second reading enhances or diminishes the aesthetic experience of a literary text. What can be assumed is that the archive of schemata and models activated in the reader's processing of textual information and imagining of the

fictional world will have at least changed somewhat, as the renewed process of reading takes as its point of departure the “final” synthesis achieved at the end of the first reading. For that reason, the aspect of the “what” in the renewed fictional worldmaking will take less of the reader’s attention and there will be a stronger focus on the “how”, the strategies by which it is motivated and guided by the text. Some theorists hold that this reflexive aspect is an indispensable precondition for an aesthetic apprehension of a literary text, hence for the experience of the literary work of art. Others—for instance, the late Susan Sontag, in her plea for an “erotics of art” (1966, p. 14)—fear that the analytic approach connected with the reflexive mode will destroy too much of the imaginative potential and impact of literature (take away the magic, so to speak), by revealing the magician’s tricks. The author personally shares the optimistic view tendered by Kleist in his essay on the puppet theatre—that when reflection is maintained to its end, or to perfection, the natural gracefulness can be again experienced in the artificial construct: “we have to eat of the tree of knowledge a second time to fall back into the state of innocence”.

Conclusions

What remains to be looked at are the consequences for literary theory and literary studies of the fact that we also have to cope with the processualities of literature, not merely with the relatively stable materiality of written texts as objects. First, it does not mean that the study of these objects, as material notations of “these words in this order”, has become less important. It is these notations, after all, that like a musical score guide the particular processes they motivate and of which they are a base. These notations or texts as objects that are transposable into different contexts are also responsible for the fact that there are plural literary processualities rather than a single processuality.

Further, the insight that the experience of the literary work of art is highly individual is not borne out by empirical investigation of actual reading processes—at least not in the present state of cognitive psychology and mind science. Instead, two other options seem promising. The first, in the field of literary theory, pertains to the important role played by sequentiality in the constitution of the literary work by means of an interaction between text and reader. What happens in this interaction is a constant synthesizing of past and present information with the aim of fictional worldmaking and a constant restructuring of these syntheses during the reading process. Whereas traditional structuralists move from the literal “spatiality” of the distribution of signs in the physical text directly to the metaphorical spatiality of the synchronic structures of meaning—ignoring the fact that in order to get from the one to the other, readers have to apprehend and process the signs in a particular sequence—the task of an adequate kind of structuralism will be to develop models of how particular sequences of signs are transformed into particular synchronous systems of meaning by processes in which each later stage ideally incorporates all earlier stages. This, of course, is a tall order, also for the critic, who, in interpreting particular works, will have to pay much more attention to sequence—not only in detective stories, but also in general.

The other feasible option, or rather, urgent demand is to take properly into account the fact that the schemata and mental models suggested by textual signs and structures, along with those employed by readers in sense making, are to a large extent culturally conditioned. This entails a sharper focus in cultural research on the study of the cognitive sets, emotional patterns, and hierarchies of values that are dominant in a given culture. When we know more about the schemata and mental models prevalent in the culture in which a literary text was composed, we can much better imagine the calculated impact of the details of the fictional world (re)presented and of the

presentational strategies involved. Such an investigation will, of course, have to encompass not only literary texts but also other text sorts that have, or have had, a major influence within the respective culture.

So, what finally seems desirable for literary studies is an investigation of the creative processes that are applied to texts as material objects, the cultural processes within which these texts were created, and the cultural processes within which these literary studies are conducted. In any case: processes.

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