Thinking and Feeling like the Ancients? Studying Emotion and Cognition through Reader Response

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Much has changed in literary studies over the past 50 years–since the time when they were revolutionized by reader-oriented, structuralist and many other new approaches–and yet, the prevailing method of studying how a literary text from earlier periods was originally understood has essentially remained the same: Literary scholars usually resort to the method of what is called historical reception analysis ("Historische Rezeptionsanalyse"). They try to reconstruct the facets of the text's 'historical spectrum of meaning' ("historisches Bedeutungsspektrum", Mellmann/Willand 2013: 264) by searching for and analysing historical media sources such as authors' comments, written remarks by members of the original audience, or utterances of contemporary critics. They must assess the relevance of such reception documents by selecting them on the basis of comprehensible criteria. In the optimum case, researchers can select these documents in a representative manner, sifting and sorting them according to sociographical variables, and thus put into practice what may be considered a near-empirical historical approach (cf. Mellmann/Willand 2013: 277–278 for this process). The reception documents often also allow us to infer what other works, influences, or states of knowledge were important for the interpretation and perception of the texts under study.

This kind of historical reception analysis appears to be the most useful approach when there are enough representative historical testimonies from actual subjects. But when this is not the case, historical reception analysis reaches its limits. Faced with this situation, what other methods could help us to gain knowledge about how a historical audience perceived a text? Is there anything else a researcher can do than coming up with guesses about what the historical audience might have felt? Here, we would like to discuss this problem from a cognitive and empirical perspective.

It is obvious, of course, a modern audience is quite culturally distanced from ancient texts which—cognitively speaking—concerns three kinds of schemata (cf. Cook 1994):

1. *Different world schemata, i.e. modern readers' different cultural knowledge and experiences.* Ancient texts are set in a context of entirely different social conditions, different world views, and different modes of behaviour. Modern readers' responses to ancient texts are therefore likely not to be the same as those of the original audiences.
2. *Different text schemata, i.e. different expectations concerning the kind of discourse in which literary texts are presented*. Frequently, modern literary texts convey the experiences of the characters with the help of internal focalisation and free indirect style. Ancient narratives make use of such narrative devices much less frequently (see, however, Luke 15:16–19 and Iliad 9.593–94), which is again likely to make the responses of modern readers to them different from those of the original audiences.
3. *Different language schemata*. Every language has its own terms and concepts, which can usually be transposed only insufficiently into those of a different language and also change with time.

However, to a greater degree than other approaches to literature, cognitive approaches are able to bridge cultural and historical distance, since they are particularly interested in the emotional dimension of literary texts. From a cognitive viewpoint, emotions are, at least in their basic design, a pan-human, universal phenomenon, and narrative in particular is intimately bound up with emotion (cf. Hogan 2003). If basal embodied mechanisms play a central role in readers' processing and experiencing of narrative texts, it cannot be denied that reader responses must always be similar in certain respects, even if the readers come from very different times and cultural backgrounds (cf. Cairns 2016: 179-181). That is why we think that the following five emotion- and/or cognition-focussed approaches might be relevant also for the study of ancient texts.

Approach 1: Biologically Founded, Universal Human Themes

Even more than cognitive literary theorists, bio-semiotic and bio-poetic approaches have drawn attention to universal, emotion-loaded themes in literature. Convinced that art and literature must be understood in the framework of evolution, these approaches have tried to pinpoint basic biological needs that are crucial for the survival of all species, such as
[1] self-defence (fight and flight),
[2] self-maintenance (detecting food and nurturing offspring) and
[3] self-propagation (mating and reproduction)

as well as deep-seated instincts and motivations linked to them, such as
[1] fighting and defending resources,
[2] keeping a family together and practising parental care,
[3] engaging in courtship, sexual selection and sexual conflict (cf. from a bio-semiotic perspective, Koch 1993: 154–159; for similar attempts at classification: Eibl 2004; Carroll 1995, 2008 and Boyd 2009).

In this framework, it becomes possible to account for the high affective potential of many virtually universal literary themes—namely, corresponding to the above-mentioned order:
[1] heroic battles, great duels, victory, defeat and death,
[2] problems of home, of childhood and parent-offspring-relationships,
[3] sexual romance, jealousy, temptation and adultery.

In addition, there are motifs that carry a very high emotional load because they are based on the strictly tabooed transgression of the boundaries between the three survival programmes (cf. Koch 1993: 159), which concerns cases of parent- or child-murder (mixing up programme [2] with [1]), incest with a parent (mixing up [2] with [3]), or sadism and vampirism (mixing up [3] with [1]). Likewise, infringements of other principles that are significant for the survival of most species like bonding and cooperation (cf. Eibl 2004; Boyd 2009) provide much cross-cultural affective appeal (cf. e.g. rivalry between brothers, cheating in social relations, and all sorts of treachery). Prototypical cross-cultural genre patterns, famously classified by Hogan (2003: 232–233; 2018: 148–151) into romantic, heroic and sacrificial tragi-comedy, are also

related to the above-mentioned programmes, which is why they universally trigger strong emotions of joy, wonder, sadness, moral disgust or anger (cf. ibid.). Finally, narrative space in the form of feared and safe places (cf. Hogan 2018: 148) can easily be pinned down to evolutionary roots. In spite of all differences between cultures and periods, then, the mere content of literary texts allows for the prediction of their probable emotional effects on original audiences.

Approach 2: Character-Reader Relationships

Besides the topic, a narrative is, for most readers, defined by its characters. When readers engage with a character, interwoven cognitive processes take place: Readers a) create a mental model of the character (in a specific text situation and over the whole narrative) (cf. Schneider 2001), b) respond to this character model emotionally and cognitively, and might c) relate or blend parts of their self-concept (their mental representation of themselves), which are triggered by narrative cues, with parts of the character model to create "imagings of the self in storyworlds" (Martinez 2014: 119).

Based on the emotional and cognitive evaluation, and the degree to which readers engage in imagining themselves in the storyworld or in the position of a character through blending, the relation between characters and readers can be described as one of sympathy (feeling of understanding most often based on perceived similarity), pity or compassion (feeling *for* a character due to misfortune), of cognitive empathy (through understanding another's perspective), of emotional empathy (through feeling *with* the character what he or she is believed to feel), of empathic concern (sensing what the character could need), admiration (seeing the character as worthy of respect), or disapproval in varying emotional intensity.

At all stages of this process, cultural and time sensitivity as well as individual variation play a role. For instance, the creation of a character model relies on cultural codes and knowledge about stock characters, which can be genre-dependent and time-specific, and often requires or invites filling the

unnarrated gaps to arrive at a more complete or person-like character. This can contribute to significant variations in character models between (ancient and modern-day) readers. Nevertheless, characters often feature near-universal elements due to their embeddedness in common character constellations (e.g. love triangles or generational conflicts) that are based on the above mentioned cross-cultural genre patterns.

Moreover, the way a character is described in the text through explicit and implicit characterisation, as well as through evaluation by narrators and characters, and presented through a particular perspective, most likely contributes to some convergence of readers' emotional and cognitive responses to characters. While we are far from a full understanding of the relations between textual feature combinations and experienced reader-character relations (even in contemporaries of the same cultural background), one of the promising candidates to systematically influence readers' perception of characters is *mode of narration*: authorial narration with an omniscient narrator potentially provides moral orientation for readers (cf. Nünning 2015: 118), third-person narration might lead readers to draw on their own experiences to understand the character (Dixon et al. 2020), whereas a first-person perspective might foster stronger perspectival alignment (cf. Lamm et al 2007; Ames et al. 2008).

When shifting our attention from the character to the reader, we have to acknowledge the great amount of variety between persons' self-concepts, and the different self-schemas or possible selves that are triggered by partly ambiguous narrative cues. In theory, this variability allows for very idiosyncratic responses to characters. On the other hand, while of course also finding these, empirical reader response studies highlight that narratives regularly trigger similar parts of the self-concept in readers (cf. Martinez & Herman 2020).

While empirical studies of course draw on modern-day readers, one can argue that the mentioned textual features might similarly have affected readers in ancient times (cf. Rüggemeier & Shively, eds. 2021 for a pioneering discussion).

Approach 3: Emotional Shifts of the Plot and Hoped-for Affective Outcomes

Audiences tend to make inferences about the further course of a story at any stage of its plot (cf. the study of plot in Cognitive Narratology from Ryan 1991 to Kukkonen 2020; and for an application to biblical exegesis Finnern & Rüggemeier 2016: 242–246). Empathising or even identifying with the protagonist (and possibly other characters) as outlined above, they will try to anticipate possible complications in the course of the events and imagine both preferred and undesirable possible outcomes (cf. Tan 1996/2011: 126). More concretely, when the story focuses on a conflict or a task to be completed by the protagonist, the readers or listeners are likely to judge the consequences of the situation as if it concerned themselves, experiencing strong emotions triggered either through innate response mechanisms or through the activation of personal memories (cf. Hogan 2003: esp. 140–190). The story will usually also contain one or several turning points that go along with emotional shifts. Such shifts are a prime structural principle of storytelling and, as empirical reader response studies have shown, will contribute considerably to the persuasiveness of a story (cf. Appel et al. 2021: 190–191), provoking responses like contempt for ethically damnable character traits, pity for characters suffering undeservedly, and anger about the success of unethical acts (cf. Hogan, 2003: 188, with reference to an empirical case study). In addition, the moral and affective judgements of an audience are cognitively and affectively steered by what some scholars (cf. Mellmann 2016: 167) have termed "Verlaufsgestalten", i.e. expected general plot patterns such as the principle of poetic justice, the opposition of departure and return home, separation and reunion, threat and recovery, crime and detection. Repeated in stories time and again, these hoped-for affective outcomes lend themselves to being employed by the writers of a time for strongly corroborating certain social rules and conventions (cf. Eibl 2004: 259–269). In summary, then, a close analysis of the course of the plot of a narrative, its emotional shifts and expected outcomes can tell us much not only about the affective input of ancient narratives but also about probable beliefs and moral convictions of ancient readers.

Approach 4: Computational Text Analysis

While the emotion-centred approaches presented so far tried to find time-independent commonalities of audience responses by looking at the level of world schemata and also some higher-level text schemata, there are also cognitive and empirical approaches that search for an objectifiable affective potential of texts at the level of their language. Thus, since the 1990s James W. Pennebaker and others have continuously developed an efficient method called LIWC ("Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count") for studying the various emotional and cognitive components present in a text's vocabulary. Particularly promising in the new field of such quantitative methods is Arthur M. Jacobs's "Sentiment Analysis", a computational psychometric method that is based on a tool named *SentiArt* and is able accurately to predict the emotion potential of individual text segments (esp. fearful passages and scaring characters). As is explicated by its inventor, "the tool uses vector space models together with theory-guided empirically validated label lists to compute the valence of each word in a text by locating its position in a 2d emotion potential space spanned by the words of the vector space model" (Jacobs 2019). As is generally known, however, there is the problem that more than in the case of other items of vocabulary, the meaning of emotion words differs widely from language to language (cf. e.g. Cairns 2016: 181). Thus, translation problems would constitute a particular challenge if one tried to apply computational tools like *SentiArt* to ancient texts. To reach sufficient reliability of such methodological instruments, it will therefore be indispensable to conduct prior empirical cross validation of Hebrew, Greek or Roman word lists and their translated English equivalents.

Approach 5: Experimental Reader Response Research

Despite different world, text, and language schemata: Is there still a way to fruitfully investigate questions of reader response apart from historical reader reception research? In areas where no(t enough) reception documents exist to answer their questions, can researchers gain insights through experimental

reader response research?

To make this more concrete: When, for example, Michal Bar-Asher Siegal and Yaara Yeshurun are interested in the relationships between late ancient Jews and Christians and the role of Rabbinic satire within them, many interesting aspects cannot be investigated through historical research: Presumably, as elements of parody and satire were widely used in this genre, this is indicative of the knowledge of Christian traditions on the part of the authors. But what about the listeners? What kind of knowledge do they need to fully "get the joke" or find it funny? How much of the parodistic meaning is conveyed through body language and voice alone (as these texts were often performed in front of an audience)? And if their knowledge does not fully match that of the authors, what do they take away from it?

So if one identifies passages that are hypothesised to be meant in a humorous way (see e.g. Diamond 2011; Pawlak 2019), an interesting experimental setup could involve modern-day readers. Researchers could assess their reactions to the texts as well as their relevant pre-reading knowledge (or, if nowadays no such knowledge can be expected, provide relevant information in differing degrees to some of the participants, but not others) and then correlate the perceived funniness and background knowledge. It would be possible to further include different test conditions: one where the text is read silently, one where an audio is played in which tone of voice underscores the satirical meaning, and one where the text is performed to provide the audience with the most possible hints as to the intended humorous meaning. In such a reader-response study one could further investigate other factors that might have played a role apart from background knowledge: individual attentiveness, personal ingroup or outgroup bias, etc.

Results of this experiment could well enhance our understanding of historical audiences (even though it would then have to be accompanied by a historical analysis of which societal groups or actors would have possessed the amounts of knowledge which were shown, hypothetically speaking, to make a difference).

We chose this example to put forward the hypothesis that experimental reader-response research can be fruitful (only), if researchers can justify that a) the perceptions, reactions, or feelings they intend to study are based on basal

cognitive and/or embodied mechanisms and that b) cultural influence can be controlled or minimised in their experiment.

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