Literary Interpretation as a Sign Process: Applying Linguistic Tools to the Analysis of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's Poem “An den Mond”

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Interpretation, as an activity making explicit what is implicit in a given text is as old as language, is not confined to any special discipline. Applied to literary texts it is practiced by editors, biographers and historians as well as by journalists, school-teachers, and literary scholars. On the other hand, literary interpretation as a special genre of texts is not older than two hundred years. It is the scholarly counterpart of literary critiques and has developed out of them. The present study takes account of all kinds of interpretive activities that have shaped the present genre of literary interpretation. As in present-day Anglo-American usage there is no single word denoting the writer of an interpretation, I use “critic” and “scholar” alternatively, depending on the context.

Why should one read and write literary interpretations? This question has been answered many times. Whole schools of literary criticism have arisen, and continue to arise, with large-scale programs and verbose justifications. Yet historically all these programs and justifications tend to lose their credibility rather quickly because their proponents never actualize them in practice.

What then is this practice? How do people read and write literary interpretations? This latter version of the question can be answered more realistically. Since modern linguistics and the philosophy of science have provided us with powerful instruments of analysis, it has become possible to confront all theoretical and programmatic declarations with a thorough examination of what actually goes on in literary interpretation. And if we analyze word by word what critics do in practice instead of what they say they do in their more philosophical moments, we can expect to obtain empirical data which can then also serve as a reliable basis for a valid theory of literary interpretation.
Of course, within the restricted space available here the methods and results of such an investigation can only be exemplified for a small number of cases. In order to avoid comparing incompatibles, one has to choose an object-text which is popular and therefore often analyzed, one which is short and therefore easily comprehensible, and one which is established and therefore a reference text for a long and historically representative series of literary interpretations. A text which fulfills all of these requirements is Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s poem “An den Mond” [To the Moon].\(^1\) It is one page long, was written nearly two hundred years ago and has been interpreted in more than a hundred metatexts (in English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Polish, Russian, and other languages). The metatexts extend from one to forty pages. I shall use examples from this material (cf. Posner 1967\(^2\) and especially an extensive text of Chapter 7: “Linguistic tools of literary interpretations: Two centuries of Goethe criticism” in the book of Posner 1982: 161–185; for its relevant parts, published also in Russian, see Posner 2003), and show how they are related to Goethe’s poem.

Are there really any linguistically describable relations between a literary text and its interpretations? I submit that there are and that, further, they can be analyzed by postulating a finite (and in fact quite small) number of linguistic rules (cf. Ploetz 1972), which transform the expressions of the literary text into expressions of a corresponding interpretation. Of course, literary interpretation cannot be fully reduced to linguistic transformation. It depends crucially on additional information about the author and his time, and about the world and society of the

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1 The poem was written between 1776 and 1789 and first published in 1789 (cf. Goethe, 1787–1790: VIII, 153). For an edition of the text with all its versions see Meschke (1957: 128–131). As one may check respective sources, the first draft of the poem came down to us among the letters from Goethe to Frau Charlotte von Stein. It was not dated and probably originated in the years between 1776 and 1778. There were also notes for singing added. The second draft comes from the poet’s writings of 1789. While the first outline developed at the end of Goethe’s Sturm und Drang period or may be in his early Weimar time, the second outline had been elaborated 10 years later, eventually in Italy (editors note).

critic. As it turns out, however, all such additional information is somehow connected with the literary text, and what interests us here is just how this is done linguistically.

To be sure, the question one must pose goes beyond most of the work that has been done so far in formal linguistics. We must find out not only (a) which linguistic transformations are actually applied by the critic in passing from the object-text to his interpretation of it; but also (b) in which way each of them contributes to the communicative function of the interpretation as a whole.

What is at stake here is a functional grammar that can predict what particular pragmatic effect a particular syntactico-morphemic operation performed on the object-text will have on the reader of the interpretation. But our investigation also has relevant historical aspects. It confirms that the origin and development of certain linguistic tools of interpretation can be systematically correlated with the rise of certain literary epochs.

Principles that govern the creation of metatexts are connected significantly with principles that govern the creation of the object-texts of the times. This has, of course, been said before. But I have never seen it proved in detail. In what follows, I shall give a survey of the historical development of the continental European practice of interpretation as it is documented for Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s poem “An den Mond” (1789) [To the Moon].

3 The German version given here is taken from Goethe 1827–1830 (cf. Goethe, 1948–1971: 1, 71). The English is a word-for-word translation, preserving as far as possible the word-order and syntax of the original. See Posner 1982: 163.
At the beginning of modern literary criticism, one finds a striving for precise aesthetic judgment and well-founded justification. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1890: 74) writes:

I have never disliked anything more in my life than criticism of poems. [...] The followers of Klopstock, however, have done what one can do. [...] They have *anatomized his poems into all their beauties*, and they have *indicated the reasons for their admiration* of them (emphasis mine: RP).

It is in the literary journals of *Enlightenment* and *Sentimentalism* that we find the results of these procedures. Depending on their outlook, the critical writers select either beautiful spots or mistakes of the poem and
comment upon them. Compare what the Austrian professor of rhetoric Martin Span (1821) has to say about Goethe’s text:

“Silently” in the second line is pleonastic; for the moon never spreads its light loudly.
What it is to “release the soul” has to be figured out by the reader; one is only given to understand that the moon has released the other souls fully, but that of the poet only in part.
The flawed asyndeton of the second stanza betrays that “mildly” and “soothingly” have had to change places in order to force a rhyme for “field” at all costs.
That the moon’s gaze should be “soothing” makes one suppose that the region is suffering a painful illness.

The linguistic means used by Span are short quotations followed by evaluating predicates, and small justificatory clauses. The quotations serve to identify the relevant passages in the object-text and to present their qualities to the reader. The justificatory clauses contain common sense arguments backing the evaluations.

Like most other sentimental or rational critics, Span did not see a need to characterize any poetic interrelations among the passages quoted. There is no attempt to take into account the complex unity of the poem as a whole.

That can, of course, only be achieved when there is an independent frame of reference against which the poem as a whole can stand out in relief. It would require the construction of a second level in addition to the object-text, which could function as a basis of explanation for its origin, content or effect.

The belletristic literature of Romanticism was the first to provide such a second level for Goethe’s “To the Moon”. In his novel Der Mondsüchtige [The Moonstruck], Ludwig Tieck (1953 [1838 /1935/ [1931]) creates a fictional context in which he embeds the text of the poem. The novel leads its hero into situations which would have been suitable environments for the production of the poem and which, therefore, seem also to provide optimal conditions for its adequate reception (recital, or perusal). One of these situations is characterized as follows (Tieck 1838: 67):

A bitter and sweet aroma exuded from the buds and the young, sap-filled leaves of the trees. The chestnuts had opened their fat capsules, and like limp green hands the green leaves of the chestnut-trees hung in the murmuring breeze. The beech-trees
had not yet turned green. I went along the river, which was my favorite walk, when the full moon rose above the mountains. Full of desire I looked at it.

‘You fill again bush and valley silently …’

If we compare Tieck’s introductory text with Goethe’s poem, we discover that it is nothing but an extended prose version of it. The following linguistic operations can be registered:

1. Tieck concretizes Goethe’s description of landscape by adding details (“bush” becomes “chestnut-trees” and “beech-trees”, the “river” becomes “the hero’s favorite walk”);
2. Tieck intensifies it (the “moon” becomes a “full moon”, the “valley” becomes surrounded by “mountains”); and
3. Tieck renders it more dynamic (an aroma “exudes” from the buds, there is a “murmuring breeze” and the moon “rises”).

When the moon reaches its highest point, Tieck’s prose merges into Goethe’s lyric. In this way, the metatext prepares the reader for the reception of the object-text. It supplies him with significant details of scenery, a model landscape in which to situate the fictional events of the poem. And it takes away from him the burden of making inferences by formulating them explicitly in advance. Showing how the hero is affected by his perusal of the poem, it also stimulates the reader to have his own experience of the poem as a whole.

The creation of such external contexts simulating the conditions of genesis and reception for a given poem was quite popular in Romantic literature. We find not only poems embedded in novels, but also novels consisting entirely of sequences of poems.4

In the Biedermeier period, however, the interpretive study is dissociated from literary genres and becomes itself a non-literary genre. In it, the poem is not only contextualized externally, but reconstructed from the inside. This is done by the creation of an internal context, which is designed to make the fictional events appear more coherent and natural. Karl Ludwig Kannegießer, for instance, who published a series of

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4 Cf. Koberstein (1858), who understands Goethe’s poems as documents of his emotional life and groups them in such a way that they constitute a story of his love affairs. Compare also statements like that of Franz Jelinek (1888: 16), who claims: “Goethe’s poem ‘To the Moon’ is a fitting crown for that love-novel in songs which centers around Lili.”
interpretive studies of German poems in 1835, makes clear what must have gone on in the mind of the lyrical protagonist when he turned to the river. To Goethe’s: “Oh that one to one’s torment/Never forgets it!” Kannegießer conjectures (1835: 163): “Could I erase my memories by a drink from Lethe”, suggesting that it is this idea that made the protagonist turn to the river, calling out: “Flow, flow, dear river!”

Kannegießer’s main instrument of interpretation, however, is a peculiar kind of paraphrase. Instead of quoting Goethe’s first two stanzas he writes (1835: 162):

[d] It is a pale, silver light [...],
[a] it spreads [...] universally around all terrestrial things [...] and does so silently [...]  
[c] it spreads over his field [...],
[b] it [...] releases the poet’s soul.

If we leave out the first sentence, which is a periphrasis of the word „Nebelglanz“ [misty glow], and change the order of the other three sentences from (a), (c), (b), to (a), (b), (c), we see that each of them has a root in one of the first three sentences of the poem: the subjects are referentially identical, the verbs are nearly the same (with only one exception), the objects are synonymous, and the texts hardly differ in length.

But if this is so, why did Kannegießer write a different text at all? The answer becomes evident if we compare the metatext with the object-text again. Kannegießer’s paraphrase is obtained from Goethe’s poem by the following linguistic transformations:

(1) **objectivization** – where second person becomes third person (in verbs and pronouns)

(2) **descriptivization** – the oblique mode is transformed into the descriptive mode (imperative becomes indicative)

(3) **literalization** (de-metaphorization) – metaphorical meanings are rendered as literal meanings (“bush and valley” is transformed into “all terrestrial things”, “the moon spreading its gaze” is transformed into “the light spreads”, “misty glow” is transformed into “pale, silver light”)

(4) **generalization** – specifying adverbials are deleted (“again”, “also”, “at last” disappear) and general ones are added (“universally” in sentence [a]).
The effect of these operations is clear:

Through *generalization* the individual character of the lyrical situation is sacrificed in order to enable anyone to participate in that situation at any time.

Through *objectivization* the reader is included in the communication between the protagonist and nature, the moon no longer being the only addressee of the speaker but the common counterpart of speaker and reader.

Through *descriptivization* the fictional world is connected with the reader’s own experience. (In fact, Kannegießer (1835: 162) verifies the poem writing: “So it is indeed, and the expression is as true as it is simple”.) This operation enables the reader to incorporate the lyrical scenery into the factual world and so participate in the events of the poem without inner reservations.

Through *literalization* the meaning of the literary text is rendered in a directly understandable way, showing the reader that it is not at all unreasonable.

But how does Kannegießer himself relate his text to Goethe’s poem? This is done by regularly inserting appositional phrases: After “a pale, silver light” he explains: “a misty glow if compared with the light of the day, with the golden beams of the sun”; after “silently” he conjectures: “because the moon is the lantern of the calm night”; and after “field” he adds: “a gentle and comprehensive word which is primarily used to refer to the soul.”

These insertions reintroduce Goethe’s words into Kannegießer’s paraphrase. Although they constitute what Kannegießer has to interpret, they are assigned the grammatical function of merely elucidating Kannegießer’s paraphrase. By this operation Kannegießer’s interpretation takes over the role of the poem itself. It is not only syntactically congruent with it but also parallel in its rhetorical development: the general, objective, descriptive, and literal reformulation in the introductory

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5 Cf. Kannegießer (1835: 162, emphasis mine: RP). Compare the complete German formulation: „Es ist ein blasses, silbernes Licht, nur ein Nebelglanz im Vergleich mit der Helle des Tags, mit den goldnen Strahlen der Sonne, aber es verbreitet sich eben so allgemein über alles Irdische, über Busch und Thal, und zwar still, weil der Mond nur die Leuchte der ruhigen Nacht ist, es breitet sich über sein Gefild, ein sanftes, allgemeines, doch zunächst von der Seele zu verstehendes Wort, es lächelt den Menschen an und löset die Seele des Dichters.“
parts of the interpretation gradually assimilates into Goethe’s text; and from the fourth stanza on the scholar’s formulations are as specific, subjective, and metaphorical as those of the poet. Kannegießer follows Goethe even in addressing the river when he writes (1835: 163, emphasis mine: RP): “As quickly as your waves roar along the valley, as quickly the happy moments of my life have disappeared [...].” This is the point at which Kannegießer entirely succeeds in leading his reader into the lyrical scenery of Goethe’s poem.

*Biedermeier* interpretations use internal contextualization to make the sequence of the poetic events appear unified and natural. But they don’t yet attempt to foreground the *emotive development* of the author, the protagonist, or the reader of the poem. That doesn’t happen until *Late Romanticism*.

In his interpretation of Goethe’s poem, Victor Hehn (1848: 100) tries to reproduce in his readers the poetic effects of its formulations by characterizing them in appreciative style one after the other:

- Euphony of indescribable charm flows with gentle wave from word to word, from verse to verse.
- Incomparable in its beauty is the picture of the moon spreading its glance [...].
- Sweetly soothing, although still gentle and mournful, is the conclusion.

Explicit though they are, these characterizations never mention the psychological subject that is supposed to experience the effects in question. And even in his direct paraphrase of the poem Hehn tends to abstract from any psychological subject involved. Where Goethe makes the protagonist say: “Every echo is felt by my heart/ Of glad and somber time, / [...]. Flow, flow, dear river! / Never shall I be glad, / [...] Oh that one to one’s torment / Never forgets it!” (see stanzas III–V), Hehn (1848: 100) suggests that “past and present, happiness gone by and the pain of its loss, all impressions of former times, all lust and pain flow together [...] in one mixed mood.”

Hehn’s metatext gives the impression of feelings, attitudes and emotions floating around freely in an atmosphere of twilight. That atmosphere is meant to surround not only the fictional events, but also the production and the reception of the poem. External and internal contexts are deliberately amalgamated. The roles of the author, the
protagonist, and the reader of the poem, which Biedermeyer scholars had taken pains to keep separate, seem to merge into one.

Why does Hehn use these impersonal formulations? He wants to reenact the production of the poem and its events and thereby give his reader as intensive an experience of the emotive side of the poem as possible.

Such intentional confusion, however, is rigorously corrected during the period of Realism. Instead of giving global interpretations scholars begin to specialize in writing biographies of the author, essays in textual criticism of the poem, or studies in the history of ideas of its readers.

Albert Bielschowsky, for instance, takes the object-text as a biographical source for the reconstruction of the mental states the author went through in the five weeks prior to writing the poem. He decomposes the poetic content into four different parts. Calling them “motives” and making use of the systematic ambiguity of this technical term, he states: “The poem develops out of several motives”.6 This is how Goethe-biographers managed linguistically to switch from a semantic description of the poem to a biographical description of its creation.

The Goethe-philologists applied similar patterns of inference when taking the various historical versions of the poem as documents for the critical reconstruction of the perfect text. And so did the historicists

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considering these versions and their changing popularity as documents for particular developments in the history of ideas.

The continued introduction of newly discovered historical facts, biographical hypotheses and critical distinctions, however, made it increasingly difficult to do justice to the literary text as a complex but unified experience of the contemporary reader. Because they were overspecialized, the biographical, philological and historical contexts lost their function in making the poem understandable as a whole. In the end the critical intentions and methods of the period of Realism, though contrary to those of Late Romanticism, had somewhat similar effects: they made any attempt at a contextualization of a given literary text appear absurd.

The consequences soon became apparent in the new movement for aesthetic education [Kunsterziehungsbewegung], which sympathized with Impressionism and Art nouveau. Its followers tended to reduce all verbalization in connection with poetry to a minimum. Only the poem itself was to be read, and if there was any need for explanation it had to be given in parentheses with the first or second reading. Compare the way in which the Austrian school-teacher Friedrich Bauer (1894) proposed to read the third and the ninth stanza of Goethe’s poem:

Every echo is (now) felt by my heart
Of glad and somber time,
(And so)
I pass between joy and pain
(whether I remember this or that)
In my solitude.
[...]
That which, not known by humans
(i.e., by the great crowd)
Or not thought of
(i.e., not appreciated according to its value),
Through the labyrinth in the breast
(i.e., through the enigmatic depth of the soul)
Passes in the night.

This is the opposite of what Kannegießer did: rather than embed the words of the poem in the interpretation, Bauer embeds the words of the interpretation in the poem. Such a procedure, however, is aesthetically not very pleasing either, and so the question of interpretation dissolved in
the end in global attacks on “the damage done to poetry by explanation”.7 In 1906, Arthur Bonus (1906: 332) extended the verdict on explanation to even the simplest kinds of paraphrase, complaining:

[...] there was a continued and forced addition of all those things which not to have said and not to have perceived proved the aesthetic genius of the poet. [...] Isn’t it a paradoxical idea that the poet’s revelations should be better understood when they are presented not in the poet’s formulations but in the version in which Herr Lehmann verbalizes his own understanding of them? But it is even worse: not his own understanding, but that which he thinks suitable for students and school children.8

With these remarks a representative of an educational movement that had seen its legitimacy in trying to improve the treatment of art in schools returned to a practice that had patterned school education until the Age of Enlightenment (see Bonus 1906: 333): “the learning by heart of unexplained texts”. Due to the postulate that every interpretation should itself be a work of art, all interpretation was abandoned. What remained was the slogan: “The poetic text and only the poetic text should exert all its fascination.”

Even when the prohibition of paraphrasing poems gradually lost its power after World War I, the ban on the construction of biographical, philological or historical contexts to explain a poem remained intact. The consequence of this was that literary scholars continued using the linguistic operations of realistic interpretation, but cut themselves off from its sources of factual information.

In his revised version of Bielschowsky’s biography of Goethe, Walter Linden (1928: II, 359) continued to analyze the content into motives but no longer paid attention to the biographical aspect of this analysis claiming that “any biographical occasion, no matter what it may be, is transcended by the inner significance of the poem”.

Emil Ermatinger (1921a: 174) continued to describe the plot of the poem, but refrained from any philological conjectures, stating that “the temporal sequence in which the propositions are expressed by the poet,

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7 This is the title of an essay by Arthur Bonus (1906).
8 “Herr Lehmann” does not (only) refer to John Doe but to one of the main proponents of the Kunsterziehungsbewegung, Rudolf Lehmann, who had written a long programmatic essay on the aesthetic way of interpreting poetry, taking Goethe’s “To the Moon” as his example (cf. Lehmann 1905)
and the spatial position in which the things are conceived by him represent no logical or causal connection”.

Max Kommerell (1943: 25) continued to characterize the effects the poem had on the readers, but gave no attention to their historical background, suggesting that “the reader is already contained in the poem”. As he stated “It is the tone of the poem that has the power to put whoever listens to it into its mood”.

Such premises served to give continental European scholars of the twenties and thirties new confidence in the importance of verbalizing their reception of literary texts again. As it seemed no longer feasible to provide a level of explanation for the poem by constructing an outer context – be it exterior or interior to the plot – they began looking for a special inner content. Instead of giving a biographical motivation from the outside they investigated the so-called “inner motivation” of the fictional elements by a central organizing idea.9 Instead of looking for causal connections within the fictional world they compared the general character of the fictional elements”.10 Instead of studying the historical aspects of the individual reception process they concentrated on the typical immediate responses of the average person reading the literary text”.

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9 Cf. Ermatinger (1921a: 256): „Diese Idee ist nun der Mittelpunkt, von dem aus die innere Motivierung oder Organisation des ganzen Stoffes bedingt ist.“ P. 267: „Durch die innere Motivierung ist die Einheit und Geschlossenheit einer Dichtung bedingt.“

10 Cf. Ermatinger (1921a: 282): „Auch bei der Lyrik ist die innere Motivierung, wenn ihr auch die strenge Kausalität abgeht, doch Einheit der geistigen Haltung, und nur, wo diese vorhanden ist, wirkt ein Gedicht wahr.“

Ernst Cassirer and Hermann Pongs had rediscovered Goethe’s definition of a symbol for the arts: “A symbol turns [...] an idea which is otherwise inexpressible [...] into an image, such that the idea remains always unattainable but infinitely effective in this form [...]]”\(^{12}\)

Taken in this way a symbol embodies all and only those qualities which Linden, Ermatinger, and Kommerell were looking for in a literary text:

Eluding the enchainment of cause and effect and comprehended only in its ideal content [...] it transcends the sphere of existence [...] (Cassirer, 1956/1923: 190).
For the observer it opens the opportunity to extend its notion to “the deeper meaning, which is inherent in any significant work of art” (Pongs, 1960: 41).
It differs from cognate notions in that the symbol not only expresses, represents, or signifies what it stands for, but is endowed with its power (Kommerell, 1943: 15).

Backed by this philosophical conception, the notion of a symbol began to occupy a prominent place in literary studies as well. “Symbol” became the common technical term for: a creative motive without biographical motivation; a fictional event without causal connections; and a receptional effect without historical reminiscences. As such it was turned into a weapon against any attempts from within the sciences to interfere with the new practice of interpretation.

As an outgrowth of these developments, Symbol-Oriented Interpretation became more of a linguistic exercise than literary criticism had been since the days of Kannegießer and Hehn. It was marked by the creation of new and efficient procedures of text-processing yielding
illuminating reformulations of the object-text. Max Kommerell, for example, used a special technique of summarizing. Applied to Goethe’s poem, it reads thus (1943: 100):

The phrases gone through here are:

[I, II] the pure distance of contemplation of life;
[III] the comprehensiveness of memory;
[IV] the irrecoverability of the moments of love;
[V 1, 2] the certainty of the past;
[V 3, 4] the pain of not being able to forget;
[VI 1, 2, VII] restless change;
[VIII, IX] The poem ends in the certainty of one’s possession of oneself – separate from the world – which is shared by a friend.

This metatext records the changes in the content of consciousness of a reader slowly reading the poem. Each stage roughly corresponds to a sentence in the poem. Each description is essentially obtained by application of a simple linguistic transformation: nominalization of the finite verb. Compare, for instance, how “restless change” develops out of lines VI 1, 2 of the poem:

(1) “Rush on, river, along the valley / Without calm and rest.”
   By reordering into basic word order we obtain:
(2) “Without calm and rest rush on along the valley, river.”
   By nominalization of the finite verb and adaptation of the surface case relations we obtain:
(3) “Calm and restless rushing on along the valley by the river.”
   By abstraction through deletion we obtain:
(4) “restless rushing on.”
   By lexical generalization we obtain:
(5) “restless change.” This is what Kommerell writes.
   By further nominalization of the second order attribute we could of course also obtain:
(6) “restlessness of change”, which differs from (5) in foregrounding,

It is evident that this kind of heavy abstraction must destroy the syntagmatic relations in the poem. But this is not done by accident; for it opens the way for paradigmatic association. Although Kommerell’s metatext exemplifies only one of several procedures applied by symbol-oriented interpretation, it clearly shows where the new frame of reference
was to be found: it is supplied by the linguistic and cultural paradigms to which the constituents of the object-text belong.

Of course, the destruction of the syntagmatic relations in the text takes away an important restriction on the actual meaning of the words and makes them free to take on any of their potential lexical meanings when they enter new combinations. Thus, if impressionistic interpretive studies were characterized by decontextualization what we have here can be called detextualization. It makes possible a dialectical unfolding of all distinctions and oppositions connected with the meaning of a word.

Compare what the French literary scholar Albert Fuchs (1947: 324) writes about the semantic value of the word „Nacht“ in Goethe’s poem:

(1) By the external opposition of night versus day we obtain:

- darkness instead of light,
- silence instead of noise,
- rest instead of motion,
- deep thought instead of shallow striving.

(2) By internal unfolding of life at night we obtain:

- happiness as well as distress,
- freedom as well as oppression,
- harmony as well as chaos,
- love of life as well as anxiety.

The phonematic value of the word „Nacht“ [night] is described by Fuchs (1947: 312) as follows:

The softness of the n and the strong, but not disturbingly harsh sonority of the a are like an appeal to softness without banality. The sudden arrest of the resonant vibrations by the cht acts as an invitation to retreat into oneself.

[...] The final cht (in „Nacht“) cleanly stopping the resonance expresses guardedness against unfocussed sentiment, against sentimentality.

After what was said about possible consequences of detextualization for the constituents of the object-text, these passages from Fuchs come as a surprise: Even the most imaginative scholar would not have thought of associating the word „Nacht“ [night] with these ideas, had he not read Goethe’s “To the Moon” before. It is not the word „Nacht“ that invites one to “retreat into oneself” but the verses:
Blessed one who from the world
Without hate shuts oneself in (VIII 1, 2).

And it is not only the word „Nacht“ but the last two stanzas of the poem that express “guardedness against unfocussed sentiment.” This example shows how symbol-oriented interpretations make use of the freedom attained by detextualization. They do not get involved in chaotic secondary semantization. They take the primary meanings of other parts of the poem and project them onto prominent words. In the case of Goethe’s poem the centers of projection are nouns denoting natural phenomena easily perceivable by the senses: „Mond“ [moon], „Fluß“ [river], and „Nacht“ [night].

Surprisingly enough, this method of projection seems to conflict with the one postulated in the Jakobsonian characterization of the poetic function of language. According to Roman Jakobson (1960: 358):

[...] the basic modes of arrangement used in verbal behavior [are] selection and combination. If “child” is the topic of the message, the speaker selects one among the extant, more or less similar, nouns like “child”, “kid”, “youngster”, “tot”, all of them equivalent in a certain respect, and then, to comment on this topic, he may select one of the semantically cognate verbs – “sleeps”, “dozes”, “nods”, “naps”. Both chosen words combine in the speech chain. The selection is produced on the base of equivalence. [...], while the combination, the build up of the sequence, is based on contiguity.

But in poetry, Jakobson says: “equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence”. In his view, the poetic function of language “projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination”.

Diagram 1. Equivalence as a constitutive device of the syntagm in poetry according to Roman Jakobson

If the Jakobsonian kind of projection can be illustrated as in the Diagram 1 (see Posner, 1971: 211), then the practice of symbol-oriented interpretations has to be rendered in the way as it is shown in Diagram 2.

Diagram 2. Contiguity as a constitutive device of the paradigm in poetry according to Walter Linden.

Thus, for Linden (1928: II, 359):

[…] the moon symbolizes eternal powers and reassurance in them, release of emotions, clearing of the soul, recognition of the strength of inner life. The river with its roaring symbolizes movement, and eternally flowing life touching the heart with pain and joy, taking away the dearest things and leaving only memories behind.
For Fuchs (1947: 310; see also 312, 324):

*Nacht* resumes and materializes all that has been said since *selig*.

By enumerating a number of items which are all equivalent in being affected by the moon (or the river, respectively), Linden’s formulation takes the form of a paradigm. What Linden has done to construct it is to select items from within a syntagm and combine their meanings to form the symbolic content. This is the opposite of what an ordinary writer does who selects items from paradigms and combines their meanings to form a syntagm.

According to Jakobson, a poet produces syntagms by taking a number of equivalent items from a paradigm and combining them to make a text; Linden, however, produces paradigms by taking a number of contiguous items from a syntagm and combining them to make a symbol. Whereas Jakobson promotes equivalence to the constitutive device of the syntagm, Linden promotes contiguity to the constitutive device of the paradigm in poetry: symbol-oriented interpretation projects the principle of contiguity from the axis of combination into the axis of selection.

But these differences must not be taken to be contradictions. Their character becomes evident when we take into account that Jakobson describes the production process whereas Linden verbalizes a way of reception. Far from being incompatible, the practice of interpreting poetry as performed by symbol-oriented interpretation and the practice of writing poetry as described by Jakobson complement each other.

There is only one criterion of the poetic function of language: *The poetic function projects the principles of equivalence and contiguity onto each other’s fields of application*. This criterion is neutral with respect to the modalities of language use: Writers apply it in projecting the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination; interpreters apply it in projecting the principle of contiguity from the axis of combination into the axis of selection. Thus, the two kinds of projection are but two sides of the same coin.

But can the two processes also be said to be the reverse of each other? Not for every kind of text. To make them so, the object-text must fulfill a requirement that reminds one-of Ermatinger’s principle of “inner motivation” (1921a: 250–289; see footnotes 9 and 10): it must be possible for the reader to reconstruct from the text the paradigms which
the writer employed when writing it, and that is only possible if at least certain parts of the object-text “are organized by a central idea”.

When there are no items in the object-text which are at the same time contiguous and equivalent in referring to the same background phenomenon, there is no material that lends itself to symbolic projection. It should be obvious that this is just a special case of the neutral criterion of the poetic function of language as formulated above.

The way in which the apparent contradiction between Jakobson’s postulate and Linden’s practice was resolved indicates an essential merit of symbol-oriented interpretation: it has contributed more than any other approach developed so far to an understanding of the process of reception in literature. That process is reconstructed in the following way:

(1) All examined characterizations of the symbolic content keep closely to the order of presentation in the object-text. Thus, they verbalize the cognitive activity of any reader comprehending the lines of the text one by one and relating their content to central concepts in his mind.

(2) Moreover, in poetry of the relevant kind, the process of reception involves five stages:

(a) By their content, the lines of Goethe’s poem make the moon stimulate a number of mental processes in the protagonist: “reassurance, release of emotions, clearing of the soul, recognition of the strength of inner life”.

(b) By identification with the protagonist, the imaginative reader re-experiences these effects of the fictional moon when reading the poem.

(c) As the poetic function of the language directs the reader’s attention towards the message, he associates these effects with the word “moon” in the text of the poem.

(d) The associations in question are transferred from the word to its referent, the real moon, when the reader encounters it in real-life situations.

(e) Having experienced the real moon stimulating “reassurance, release of emotions, clearing of the soul, recognition of the strength of inner life”, the reader feels confirmed when reading Goethe’s poem anew (feedback to [b]).
Reception taking such a course can be regarded as a process of secondary conditioning (cf. Razran 1949): the poem serves as the conditioning stimulus; the fictional moon in (a) and (b), the word “moon” in (c), and the real moon in (d) function as conditioned stimuli; and the effects of the fictional moon on the protagonist in (a), the effects of the fictional moon on the reader in (b), the effects of the word “moon” on the reader in (c), and the effects of the real moon on the reader in (d) can be regarded as secondary conditioned responses of increasingly higher order in the sense of Ivan Petrovich Pavlov’s distinctions (1927). Any reader having been conditioned in this way will be ready to say, with Kommerell (1943: 15):

In Goethe’s poem moon (or river, or night, respectively) not only expresses, represents, or signifies what it stands for, but is endowed with its power.

The process that conditions symbol-formation may, in its various stages, be reinforced by the reading of metatexts:

1. contextualization of the Tieck-Kannegießer-Hehn type facilitates the transition from the protagonist’s experiences to those of the reader (cf. [b]: identification);
2. explication de texte à la Fuchs supports the transition from the fictional world to the words of the object-text (cf. [c]: word-association); and
3. paradigm-formation à la Linden encourages the transition from the words of the object-text to the real world (cf. [d]: generalized association).

At the end of this survey, it would be interesting to investigate a genuinely structuralist interpretation of Goethe’s poem. Of course, this type of interpretation is applicable to it, too; and it has been applied several times, the first attempt having been made as early as 1927 by Marianne Thalmann (1927).

But in the present context such an investigation would not add much to what is already known about the merits and shortcomings of structuralist methods of interpretation in general.13 I therefore propose to revert once more to my initial question putting yet another slant upon it:

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13 For a detailed study of structuralism as a method of interpreting poems, see Posner (1971 /1969/ or also 1972).
Why have people read and written literary interpretations throughout this period?

The study presented here should have made one thing quite clear: they have not done so primarily to learn external data or to present unknown facts about the author, text, or reception of the poem. They have done so because interpretations can help the reader establish a personal relation to a given work of literature. And this cannot be achieved primarily by being equivalent with the object-text in one way or another, but by being different. It is the deliberate: (a) change of viewpoint and perspective, (b) change of centrality and focus, (c) change of foreground and background, and (d) change of the whole frame of reference, which make a reader of the interpretation sensitive to the peculiar qualities of the literary work.

In just how many ways, an interpretation can differ linguistically from the object-text and just which functions these differences can fulfill has yet to be discovered. But I do hope that my report has indicated how these questions can be dealt with. Systematic historical analysis complemented by relevant linguistic experiments will eventually yield a reliable theoretical basis for a solution to the classical problem which faces any practical critic, literary scholar, or teacher of literature.

References


Kommerrell, Max 1943: *Gedanken über Gedichte.* Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.


