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Interpretation and Emotion Effects in Literature : Reading Contemporary Experimental Poetry

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Translation and Interpretation

Practicing the Knowledge of Literature





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Raul Calzoni / Francesca Di Blasio /
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Translation and Interpretation

Practicing the Knowledge of Literature

A Volume in Honour of Angela Locatelli

With 8 figures

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**UNIVERSITÀ
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Interpretation and Emotion Effects in Literature: Reading Contemporary Experimental Poetry

It is normally assumed and experienced that literature has an emotional impact on us. In classical poetics, to move (*movere*) was one of the functions imposed on literature, essentially linked with its moral function (*docere*) and enhanced by the function to delight (*delectare*). I claim that despite the changes in the ways in which contemporary literature moves us – moving suggests ethical and ideological engagements – this formula can still guide us in the interpretation. To consider how a literary text moves us, informs and aesthetically satisfies are essential to understanding it. An excellent example of this is Angela Locatelli's article "The Moral and the Fable",¹ which has inspired the following essay. In my essay, I consider how contemporary poetry moves us, by moving teaches and, despite provoking "ugly feelings" also delights us. I understand *being moved* as being innerly and bodily affected by a text and not only in a positive, enhancing sense. Considering negative emotions and emotion effects is also highly relevant to exploring the emotional impact of texts. In contemporary literature especially, focusing on feelings of aversion provoked by the text, is necessary to understanding how the text works: it has been claimed that the key to contemporary poetics and aesthetics is disgust rather than beauty.²

Thus, interpreting literature essentially involves considering affective sense-making: finding out how the text *moves* us. It is true that modern(ist) literature challenges the prescriptions and supposed harmonies presupposed by the classicist poetics and rhetoric but the interpretation of literary works still presupposes the disentangling of the relationship among the above-mentioned three functions of literature. Even the kind of modernism practising "coldness" and

1 Angela Locatelli, "The Moral and the Fable: A Fluid Relationship in Artistic Literature", in *Values of Literature*, ed. by Hanna Meretoja, Saija Isomaa, Pirjo Lyytikäinen and Kristina Malmio (Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2015), pp. 47–62.

2 Cf. Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Emotion*, transl. by Howard Eiland (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 124–128.

“immorality” moves us emotionally and ethically.³ To focus on the affective is, in a certain way, a return to the basics, because the attitudes of modernism also turned literary criticism and scholarship away from emotions and *movere* and it is all the more important if we accept, as I claim we should, the tenets of contemporary ethical “sentimentalism”, based on multidisciplinary studies and empirical findings in such fields as the neurosciences, biology and psychology. According to this school, emotions regulate our moral judgments or intuitions and rational judgments come – if they do – only afterwards.⁴

My approach is based on the study of emotion effects that sees all elements of a literary text to be positively or negatively “valenced” or value-laden.⁵ Utilizing words or phrases that in the language or cultural context carry affective power is the basis of the networks of affective value that are formed in the text. The combinations created in the text manipulate what we already know or feel about language and the world around us. The emerging emotion effects guide the interpretation and an analysis of how these effects are produced allows us to understand more clearly how literature works.

In my essay, I focus on the affective resources of experimental poetry via a case study of a much praised, award-winning Finnish work, Harry Salmenniemi’s *Texas, sakset* (Helsinki: Otava, 2010). Although clearly a work of poetry, Salmenniemi’s text is not a collection of poetry: it is rather a large, complicated textual collage where the parts make sense only within the whole. It flows forward in an apparently chaotic and multiform way, and only eventually do the connections between lines, pages and other elements begin to appear. The work’s more than 150 pages are unnumbered so that it is not possible to refer to specific pages. Moreover, within the whole, the unit to be considered is usually the spread, not the page. The work is exemplary in showing how contemporary poetry uses a rich array of resources to move us, an array that goes well beyond the persuasive devices usual in argumentative rhetoric. Similar strategies are conspicuous in

3 See, e.g., Friederike Reents, *Stimmungsästhetik. Realisierungen in Literatur und Theorie vom 17. Bis ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015), pp. 257–262.

4 See Patricia Churchland, *Brainstorm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Alice Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) and Jesse Prinz, ‘The Emotional Basis of Moral Judgments’, in *Philosophical Explorations* vol. 9/1 (2006), pp. 29–43.

5 See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, ‘How to Study Emotion Effects in Literature: Written Emotions in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’’, in *Writing Emotions. Literature as Practice*, ed. by Ingeborg Jandl, Susanne Knaller, Sabine Schönfellner, and Gudrun Tockner (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017), pp. 247–264; Pirjo Lyytikäinen, ‘Passions Against the Grain: Decadent Emotions in Finnish Wilderness’, in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. By Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (New York & Oxford: Routledge, 2020), pp. 87–101. For the idea of valences, see Fabrice Teroni, ‘Emotionally Charged – The Puzzle of Affective Valence’, in *Shadows of the Soul: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Emotions* (New York & London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 10–19.

many forms of experimental poetry that, since surrealist and Dadaist literature, has developed and flourished on the contemporary scene. To interpret these texts, the reader must consider a vast variety of affective aspects and their interplay with other factors, including moral issues.

The thoughts and feelings evoked by these works of poetry are – more clearly than is the case with more conventional literature – not only related to what is said and told (to the semantic contents conveyed) but also largely to how this is said and, especially in Salmenniemi's case, to how it is displayed. Instead of interpreting the meaning(s) of words or sentences or the qualities of “verses”, the most important challenge is to make sense of combinations, juxtapositions and what is often counted as the “material” aspects of literature: its lay-out, font and all the purely visual aspects of the book and its pages.

If we presuppose that our reception in reading is based on seeing and interpreting what could basically be viewed as black marks on a paper, the visual field seems to be absolutely dominant in *Texas, sakset*, as the “marks” are really foregrounded and include non-signifying stripes, pictures and corrections (as if after proofreading). However, the mentioned presupposition is hardly ever true in any deeper sense. Instead, written (“visible”) language not only evokes the “sounds” and the audible text but also suggests every single thing mentioned. Normally, we don't even notice the black marks on the paper because we immediately “see” what is conveyed by them.⁶ Actually, it is one of the effects produced by experimental poetry to make the black marks visible by interfering with the process of automatic sense-making. When the automatic process is inhibited by non-sense words, by misspelling and breaking down words, by cross-overs, variable fonts, non-linearities and so on as it is in Salmenniemi's book, we begin to really look at the page. But then: even a black stripe on a page begins to signify and convey emotions connected to the whole. The “material” makes sense.

Provoking negative emotions

Texas sakset (“Texas, scissors”) offers the reader a kaleidoscopic, fragmentary vista on the contemporary world or even on the human world *tout court*. The title in Finnish is a word play or a palindrome: we all know Texas but here “Texas” alludes, in particular, to the film series *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *sakset* which is Finnish for scissors reads backwards as Texas, when we perform the little

6 For a useful discussion of how complex our perceptual experience is and how we do not necessarily see what is available and how we “see” absent things or the “presence of absence”, see Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

transmutation of *ks* to *x* (as the author does in the text, although not in the title). In the first place, scissors, that potentially contribute to the murder theme refer to the textual composition of the collection; its method is supposedly cut-and-paste. We can imagine the author cutting all kinds of texts and then, sitting on the floor in the midst of his piles, mixing and rearranging them into what is his own work: the composition made of ‘ready-made’ notes.⁷

The method is openly presented as textual violence: everything in this collection is cut out of some other text without respecting the content or context out of which it is drawn.⁸ On the contrary, the cut pieces often gain odd meanings in the new context. Parts of words or phrases are erased, words are distorted or cut, individual letters are scattered around and so on. At the same time, all marks and fragments have or acquire meanings that, together, compose a chorus of voices most often expressing worries and concerns from modern everyday life. The leading theme of violence – present, past and (presumably) future – is connected to the powerlessness and depressive symptoms of the victims of modern life and framed by a general sense of ennui and futility.

Ultimately, how does this canvas work to produce a plethora of negative emotional effects on the reader? Salmenniemi’s 150 pages or more vary in style and structure. Some are intensively packed with fragments, words and fragments of words in a variety of fonts and font sizes; here we cannot speak of verses except on rare occasions when fragments of old poetry are quoted. Then, some pages are quite empty or have only occasional black stripes in corners or across the page and some pages and spreads contain only one word or two. Both the beginning and the end of the book follow this latter pattern with quasi-empty pages, whereas the middle contains mostly fully packed spreads as if to imitate a sort of dramatic curve. In a sense, the black stripes of variable breadth and prominence frame this drama and strike the reader with anxiety even before they read.

The beginning sets the tone. After several empty pages, there is a page with the pronoun “*minä*” (I) in small size in the middle of the page and then the next spread gives us, similarly, “*kuin silmä*” (like an eye) and “*silmä*” (eye), before we begin to have pages with more words and phrases, whose connection with each other is not obvious, but which seem to qualify the “I”, the speaker on the first page. At some point, this I identifies – among other things – with a statue and marble, which then allude to the fairy tale “Happy prince” by Oscar Wilde: “the swallow does not want to leave the statue and dies of cold”. This gives a new meaning to the connection of the eye and the statue-like I. In Wilde’s tale, the

7 In an interview at the University of Helsinki in 2019, Salmenniemi himself described the process like this.

8 See Anna Helle, ”*On olemassa kivun alue minne vitsi ei yllä*”: *Harry Salmenniemen Texas, sakset ja väkivaltaiset affektit*”, in *Tunteita ja tunteuksia suomalaisessa kirjallisuudessa*, ed. by Anna Helle and Anna Hollsten (Helsinki: SKS, 2016), pp. 108–127.

statue of the prince has sapphires as eyes and gives them to poor people with the help of the swallow. When winter comes, the swallow stays and dies of cold. The allusion introduces the reader to the ironic and tragic tone of Salmenniemi and adds a dimension to the fragments about happiness, that recur in the text and the complicated relationship of hardness and fragility, cruelty and generosity and the irony of fate that haunt *Texas, sakset*. At the same time, this is just one small strain in the network of suggestive associations that seem to introduce the reader into a labyrinth without Ariadne's thread.

In fact, to follow the associations and try to find motivations for individual fragments or map the allusions does not seem to be the most relevant way to interpret Salmenniemi's collection. The semantic analysis is relevant in so far as to make the reader aware of the recurring themes and the main methods of selection and combination used by the author. Nevertheless, at the core of Salmenniemi's work are the relationships between the affectively laden fragments and the affective atmosphere created by the interplay of the visual and textual, on the one hand, and the experiential world, on the other hand.

Apart from the open violence theme, the fragments offer a vision of everyday life in the contemporary world emphasising societal problems, drug-addiction, inequality and fear, anxiety and melancholy with a whole spectrum of mental disorders and their medicalisation. The occasional allusions to happiness or other positive emotions seem to drown amid topics provoking negative emotions. Some pages are filled with the trade names or informative labels of drugs to treat mental disorders. The "ready-made" fragments from books, journal articles and letters to the editor are given with no comments, although some apparent comments on the method are included among them: "Even half of a reply opens up great statements". The overall banality and the mostly depressing or just trivial factual statements produce an uncomfortable and mildly disgusting or depressing effect on the reader: "every fifth Swedish child lives in a family of alcoholics"; "every fifth is afraid of their boss every day"; "his schizophrenia got worse with time"; "he smoked heroin behind the mall" "she has made a long career as midwife" and "being afraid of getting fat, they vomit everything they have eaten". Even the juxtaposition of so many disparate statements and fragments of life of so many different people (of whom we have no other information and do not even know which fragments possibly describe the same person) creates a numbing effect: there are too many! However, the reader is occasionally activated: discerning among the people some famous politicians or historical and even mythical figures (e.g., Grendel from *Beowulf*) encourages the reader to try to identify various representations. The reader may wonder, who is the person described as follows: "He talks simultaneously of Baltic Sea, Rhein and Styx and combines concentration camps and Christian suffering mysticism". This is probably a citation from some book but it is hardly necessary to know the source

of the interpretation. The forms of human thinking and the historical thinkers or heroes are shown in highly ironic light by these quotations, especially when the fragments about illustrious men are mixed with fates of anonymous ordinary people facing unemployment, violence or just some banal incidents of everyday life.

Considering the phrase “in Buchenwald I eat ice-cream” on a page seemingly gathering some tourist experiences reveals the general emotion effect produced in the reader. This fragment may be connected to a phrase on the next page: “thousands and thousands of people have died so that I could be here and look at the ruins and eat ice-cream”, although the reader may also connect this to “Colosseum”, which is mentioned just before. These and many similar fragments evoke real atrocities, past and present but simultaneously convey the unbearable lightness and absurdity of contemporary life. This impression is sustained and strengthened by references to fictive atrocities and a “media-attitude” that ironically turns even Christ’s passion into a show. Jesus “speaks”: “you can watch me now as I bleed ...”; “as a bonus we can mention that I am the son of god”; “*Bye bye Peter, hold your chin up and put new bait on the hook . . .*” and so on. The irony – symbolized by the stone eye or marble – creates a critical distance but does not save the reader from the disgust, ennui and despair about the world that assaults the seeing eye. In the text there is not a single open comment, just this skilfully collected cavalcade of negatively valenced bits and pieces, where even mere letters and stripes become threatening.

Texas, sakset makes us consider how emotional attunement (*Stimmung*) and affective meanings are transferred to “innocent” letters and forms. The contamination of neutral words or sayings by the context applies also to these, practically non-meaning entities. The context which makes the letters x and z become “visible” and appear with aggressive presence is developed in the parts of the book where seemingly innocent alphabetical lists appear. We already know that x belongs to the murder context because of its associations with what “Texas” stands for but it is elaborated with other associations connecting it to inequality, power and sex. On the first pages elaborating z we have “this Z”, “z”, “zenith”, “zettel” and so on and many apparently aleatory words like “zucchini” but there are also allusions to Zorro (and his sign, usually drawn with the sword) and, for some reason, this z section is interfered by the recurring BSE and allusions to the mad cow disease it signifies. The recurring “zeppelin” associates with the war theme that occasionally arises throughout the text. And the “zooming” is exclusively threatening after the interlude, where a “z-eye” is strangely mentioned and all the possible combinations of the Finnish word for eye (“*silmä*”) are given (like “*slimä, msilä, mliäs*” and so on). Since the mysterious beginning of the book, the “I” like an “eye” seems to be watching every step. The reader is led towards a sort of paranoia, where every letter, finally, becomes suspect. Another

strategy to exasperate the reader makes the reading process itself quasi impossible: the pages are fully packed with disparate phrases, pieces of words, crossed-out expressions, lists, odd letters without words, with drawings and allusions to mental disorders; the net effect is to create a hallucinatory experience of contagion by this textual disorder.

Stupefying the reader?

But how to describe the overall emotional effect produced by this kaleidoscopic canvas? We cannot close our eyes from the disgusting but banal spectacle of the world. Somehow the ice cream in Buchenwald seems to tell us what we are. To try to verbalize the effect, the concept of *stuplimity* discussed in Sianne Ngai's book *Ugly Feelings* may be helpful.

Ngai forms the term in opposition to sublimity, which as such, expresses the first non-beautiful emotion that was accepted to the aesthetic theory of the eighteenth century.⁹ However, whereas sublimity can be interpreted as a cathartic feeling, *stuplimity* denies any cathartic effects: the reader dwells in uneasiness and all the negative affects evoked by the text in question.¹⁰ In Ngai's book, *stuplimity* stands as one ugly feeling among many but I suggest that it could characterize a more general effect and mood or *Stimmung*, spreading in contemporary literature although already recognizable in older literature. Thomas Bernhard's *Frost* and his later works are intriguing examples. In Finland, Bernhard is, not accidentally, very much *à la mode* amongst many young authors. This *Stimmung* seems to involve disgust, anxiety and irritation. Even if melancholic, it does not incite the audience to peaceful melancholic contemplation in face of the incurable misery of the world but rather suggests uneasiness and guilt.¹¹

Texas, sakset illustrates how *stuplimity* works in poetry. The traditional way of reading poetry involves appreciating individual verses, skilful rimes and metaphors. Even if modernism spoiled the uniform or harmonious tone and introduced ironical and paradoxical twists with its "flowers of evil", the art of powerful verses was, at least to some extent, retained. Nothing of this remains in *Texas, sakset*. To read the individual fragments is a pain not only because of what is told but how it is said. The sheer banality of the individual pieces can be

⁹ See Menninghaus, *Disgust*, pp. 44–46, 63–67.

¹⁰ Ngai writes: "The feelings I examine here [besides *stuplimity*, they include irritation, anxiety, envy and paranoia] are explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release". (Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*. (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 6–7.

¹¹ Cf. Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 4–10.

interpreted as a violence against the aesthetically attuned reader. All these voices from banal every day, the plain matter of fact prose and the clichés that replace thinking, seem to kill poetry altogether. Moreover, even innocent or positive contents are “spoiled” by the appalling banality of expression. Thus, the disgusting canvas seems to exercise its violence by making the reader feel affective antipathy and, maybe, feel the need for one of the antidepressants “advertised” in the text. *Stuplimity*, in this sense, may retain a critical and ethical message or a teaching (*docere*), despite the disgusting and morally shattering effect of the textual world. We may, however, wonder, where lies the delight that makes us (according to classical ideas) swallow the drug.

Strange fascination

How is it with *delectare* in modern times? Texts seriously resisting the empathic engagement by readers and engaged in shocking rather than pleasing, proliferate. Contemporary literature is particularly keen on cultivating negative tones or moods that evoke ugly feelings. These feelings are often marked by ambivalence and even if literature often can recuperate from these negative effects for a *critical* function, they do not, as such, contribute to the pleasure of reading. Thus, the texts imbued with triggers that evoke ambivalent and unpleasant emotion effects, seem to present a special challenge to the reader. Why do we still engage in reading these texts if they do not delight us? Especially when we are far from the somewhat guilty fascination called forth by many decadent texts and the graphic descriptions of extreme fiction (like *American Psycho*) where our interest in unconventional erotics, blasphemy, violence and all the dark sides of humanity is fed by ample details.¹² In *Texas, sakset*, despite its theme of violence, the graphic details are never at the forefront. The implied atrocities and a general atmosphere of threat may provoke some anxiety in the reader but that is not what fascinates in this work.

Still, it is undeniable that Salmenniemi’s text attracts and offers pleasures of reading. With its playful irony, its skill and open delight in exposing the reader to all the banalities and clichés by which we verbalize our life and history, *Texas, sakset* not only stupefies but also fascinates. Ironically, the paradoxical twist that haunts modern literature, is quite consciously exploited in the work. We may see the following as an ironical comment of the author to his work:

12 Tero Eljas Vanhanen, *Shock Tactics & Extreme Strategies: Affectivity and Transgression in Late Twentieth-Century Extreme Fiction* (University of Helsinki: Unigrafia, 2016) provides ample discussion on these matters.

violence, erotica, contrasts, similarities, movement,
illusoriness, mixing truth and fiction,

exaggerations, metaphors, allegories, paraphrases,

this goes much better than anything in my life before

Texas sakset involves the reader in a game by its experimental poetics and this literary game is what triggers the interest of readers: the readers are incited by curiosity and the will to learn about the connections, about how the game functions, and an admiration of the way different connections are made and how things work together. The *stuplimity* itself may spread melancholic apathy rather than incite one “to good conduct” but this play still enhances positive aesthetic emotions and aesthetic satisfaction is still there. However, is this a guilty pleasure like eating ice-cream in Buchenwald? Is it one of the basic paradoxes of literature that this kind of highly skilful and artistic literature seems to dance on corpses? Furthermore, we may ponder on the role of the textual violence, which, I claim, is satisfying in the face of human stupidities? It works like revenge on the world. These questions provoked by *Texas, sakset* I must leave unanswered. I just point to the move Angela Locatelli makes in her article: we should consider the meta-ethical dimensions of literary works. The uneasy and ambivalent atmosphere of works like *Texas, sakset* calls for further discussion.

