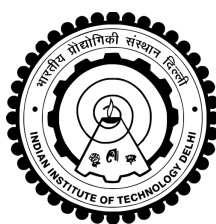


**FORMS OF ENCHANTMENT: A THEORY AND CASE
STUDY OF THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF POETRY**

SUMITA SHARMA



DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY DELHI

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by

SUMITA SHARMA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Submitted

**In fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of doctor of
philosophy
to the**



INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY DELHI

JULY 2024

*For Sanjay,
who ran the world
while I wrote*

THESIS CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled FORMS OF ENCHANTMENT: A THEORY AND CASE STUDY OF THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF POETRY submitted by SUMITA SHARMA, to the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, for the award of the degree of PhD, is a bona fide record of the research work done by her under my supervision. The contents of this thesis, in full or in parts, have not been submitted to any other Institute or University for the award of any degree or diploma.

Prof. Angelie Multani

Professor

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

IIT Delhi

Hauz Khas

New Delhi – 110016

Date: 25 July 2024

Place: New Delhi

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Sumita Sharma

Date: 25 July 2024

Place: New Delhi

ABSTRACT

“How do works of art move us and why?” asks Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique*. My thesis asks a similar question: How does poetry move us and why? But this has not been an easy question to answer. Despite the importance given to practices of close reading, literary studies have not yet developed methods to systematically study the language of poetry. This thesis brings cross-disciplinary insights to develop an understanding of why and how the linguistic strategies used in poetry can modulate the aesthetic experience of a reader. I focus on the process of reading and show that it is in the fulfilment or failure of readers’ linguistic intuitions about incoming text that their aesthetic experience emerges. I illustrate this using science fiction poetry as my case study. I also use corpus stylistic methods to give empirical evidence for the validity of my approach.

Keywords: aesthetic experience; close reading; corpus stylistics; linguistic intuitions; science fiction poetry.

सार

“कलात्मक रचनाएँ हमें क्यों और कैसे प्रभावित करती हैं?” रीटा फेल्स्की अपनी पुस्तक द लिमिट्स ऑफ क्रिटिक (आलोचना की सीमाएँ) में पूछती हैं। इस शोध प्रबंध में भी कुछ ऐसा ही प्रश्न पूछा गया है: कविता हमें क्यों और कैसे प्रभावित करती है? परंतु इस प्रश्न का उत्तर देना सरल नहीं रहा। यद्यपि साहित्यिक अध्ययन में सूक्ष्म विश्लेषण को अत्याधिक महत्व दिया गया है, अभी तक कविता के भाषाई अध्ययन की कोई व्यवस्थित प्रणाली विकसित नहीं की गई है। इस शोध प्रबंध में अंतर-विषयक अंतर्दृष्टि की सहायता से यह समझने का प्रयास किया गया है कि कविता के भाषाई स्वरूप पाठकों को क्यों और कैसे सौंदर्य अनुभव प्रदान करते हैं। मैं पढ़ने की प्रक्रिया पर ध्यान केंद्रित करते हुए यह दर्शाती हूँ कि किस प्रकार आगामी शब्दों को लेकर होने वाले पाठकों के भाषाई अंतर्ज्ञान की पूर्ति या विफलता में उनका सौंदर्य अनुभव उभरता है। मैं अपनी केस स्टडी के रूप में कल्पविज्ञान कविताओं का उपयोग करके इसे उदाहरित करती हूँ। इसके अतिरिक्त, मैं अपने दृष्टिकोण की वैधता के अनुभवजन्य साक्ष्य देने के लिए कॉर्पस शैलीगत प्रणालियों का भी उपयोग करती हूँ।

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Introduction

If I read . . . [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know. Is there any other way?

—Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*

What if Emily Dickinson could have somehow travelled forward in time and found herself in a mid-twentieth century New Critical poetry classroom? Her statement would no doubt have been dismissed as an indication of what was labelled an “affective fallacy”—a naïve aesthetic response unbecoming of the sophisticated and critical close readers these classrooms were trying to produce. Skipping ahead another half a century, Dickinson would witness the stirrings of an “affective turn” in literary (and cultural) studies where we—researchers, faculty, students—are making a *re-turn* to something that the ordinary, lay reader has always known: that a poem is about how it makes one feel. In this brave new affect-oriented world, Dickinson, a seemingly naïve reader, could also be a valued critic.

But, how? How does Dickinson write about her affective aesthetic response in this twenty-first century classroom? Could she write a paper listing all the moments of awe and epiphany that the text inspired? Yes and no. It should be good enough but would be seen as falling short of standards of academic rigour. Perhaps she could trace the source of her feelings to the craft—forms and figurations that mould a poem out of ordinary, everyday language and lead to the reader’s aesthetic experience. But how would she join the dots? How would Dickinson, or any critic, draw a line from the poem’s craft to the reader’s

aesthetic affective experience? Stephen Ahern begins the introduction to his anthology, *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text*, with just such an observation: “When it comes to accounting for affect, it’s not yet known what a critic can do” (1). My study is an attempt in that direction. I propose a model of reading and analysing poetry that accounts for the ordinary reader’s aesthetic affective responses by correlating it with the linguistic strategies used in the text.

My focus is not just on what Nigel Fabb has called “strong” aesthetic experiences but also on the “minor discrepancies which are continuous features of literary language” and which seem to give us “an ongoing mild sense of surprise, a kind of mood of surprise as opposed to a sudden burst of surprise” (*A Theory of Thrills, Sublime and Epiphany* 142). It is this “ongoing mood of surprise,” that my own thesis examines.

The questions that I ask in order to construct this model of reading and analysis are:

1. Who is an ordinary reader of poetry and why do we need to talk about her? What does it mean for an ordinary reader to have an aesthetic experience?
3. How and why does this aesthetic experience emerge? That is, how do the textual strategies used in a poetic text organise and modulate the reader’s aesthetic experience? Why do these textual strategies produce an aesthetic effect at all?
4. How might one talk about the aesthetic experience of poetry both as an ordinary reader and a sophisticated literary critic?

The primary focus of this study is to show why it is that poetry can modulate the aesthetic experience of the reader through priming and surprisal. In order to do so, I look at one particular kind of deviation, which is when readers are primed to expect one or more words but different words follow. The use of repetition is one good example of that. The other example is to use conventionalised and formulaic language to create such effects. In fact, even repetition is effective because it breaks language’s normative frequencies.

I situate my study in the moment of reading, when a reader goes over a poem line by line and word by word. As the poem unfolds, an ephemeral space opens up between the reader and the poetic text. It is in this space that words and sounds combine in new and familiar ways to make meanings emerge or drop, leaving the reader feeling surprised, delighted, mystified, bewildered or even in awe—a range of experiences I subsume in this study under the term “enchantment.” Etymologically, the verb “enchant” can be traced to the Latin *incantare*: to “cast a (magic) spell upon” (Harper). For poetry to enchant, then, is to use language as if casting a spell upon the reader, capturing the reader’s attention and drawing her out of the ordinary and the everyday into the space, indeed the state of the extraordinary—that which is outside or beyond the ordinary. Much like Dickinson’s response above, this extraordinary state is experienced by the reader as a shift in her perceptual, affective and cognitive states. This thesis defines aesthetic experience in terms of such a shift and examines some of the processes whereby the language of poetry brings it about. More importantly, it attempts to explain why these processes can prompt an aesthetic experience in the reader.

My use of the term enchantment serves two purposes. First, it helps define aesthetic experience as an experience wherein the reader is pulled away from conventional structures of knowing and towards that which falls outside of what may be cognisable and/or intelligible. The aesthetic, it may be said, emerges when practices of enchantment interfere with conventional knowing. Although this interference has given the term “aesthetic” the negative connotation of “ideological mystification” (Attridge, *Moving Words* 28), my study circumvents the mystification/demystification binary and reads enchantment as a trigger in the production of newness. I ground this aspect of this study in the quasi-mystical philosophy of Georges Bataille, particularly his conception of “non-knowledge” and what he calls “inner

experience.”¹ For Bataille, the breaking of the rules of language in poetry displaces or sacrifices meaning and leads to “inner experience”: “[P]oetry . . . is, I believe, the sacrifice in which words are victims” (*Inner Experience* 135). Such displacement causes a “slippage into silence” which is for him the “central point of the sacred experience of poetry” (Hussey 122). This study reads the shift in the reader’s perceptual, affective and cognitive states as a slippage into silence, into non-knowledge, and maps the reader’s aesthetic experience of poetry onto Bataillean inner experience.

If anything, it is the practices of narrowly focused poetic interpretation which prevent the production of new modes of thought. Interpretation then, is an example of what Bataille calls a “restricted economy” (Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy”), one emerging from a focus only on the production of cognisable meaning and a disregard for other kinds of value. In Bataille’s system, the “restricted economy” is contrasted with what he names the “general economy” which signifies abundance, excess and expenditure. To read poetry for an aesthetic affective experience and not just for what it is about and can mean, is to experience it in all its abundance.

My second purpose in using the term enchantment is a corollary of the first. To speak of its enchantments is to set poetry in radical opposition to the rhetoric of disenchantment which seems to have loomed large over Western/Westernised cultural spaces for over a century, and particularly so within academic spaces. Given the widespread adoption of this rhetoric, indeed framework of disenchantment, an obsession with meaning and interpretation has been at the core of poetry studies for about a century now— despite the scepticism introduced by poststructuralism or even the more recent aesthetic turn with its affective and ethical approaches. Surprise, bewilderment and awe, long recognised by poets (and readers)

¹ Leslie Anne Boldt’s translation of Bataille’s original French term “*l’expérience intérieure*.”

as integral to aesthetic effect, have either been sidelined by a more or less aggressive critical hermeneutics—a “hermeneutics of suspicion”, as Paul Ricoeur called it (qtd. in Felski, “Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion”) or, since classroom situations continue to require close and formalist reading strategies (Culler, “The Closeness of Close Reading” 20), have been summarily addressed through the naming and illustration of literary devices, but without an adequate explanation of other, more subtle strategies, especially within non-metrical, non-formal and plain language poetry. This thesis shows how such subtle strategies can also be analysed for their aesthetic potential.

By reclaiming enchantment as a category for the study of poetry I position myself within the postcritical, post-hermeneutic and self-consciously ethical tradition proposed by Rita Felski, Michel Chaouli, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Terry Eagleton and others. Although close reading remains integral to my own practice, I do not restrict its scope to the production of cognitively perceivable effects which follow the logic of Weberian disenchantment (such as in the rejection of affectivity in poetry). Instead, I use close reading in combination with corpus linguistic methods to show that a reader’s aesthetic experience of a poetic text can emerge by simply responding to its alternating demands for greater or lesser effort in processing its language (since the degree of processing effort required can contribute to the reader’s responses of either surprise or stasis, respectively). Any other interest in the text’s semantic or symbolic content is preceded by this first encounter with the language of the text. For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on this initial experience alone. In fact, given that every reader’s first encounter with the poetic text begins with the processing effort they apply—and there is a rich history of such studies in pragmatics and Relevance Theory—,² I insist that every reader’s first experience of a poetic text is an aesthetic affective experience;

² See Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s *Relevance: Communication, and Cognition*. A good introductory resource on this theory is Billy Clark’s *Relevance Theory*.

only interpretation-focused critics have tended to deny it while others have faltered in accounting for it due to a lack of conceptual tools and vocabulary.

Thus, while there has been an epistemic shift towards affectivity across the humanities and social sciences, literary studies have yet to offer practicable theses for the systematic analysis of affect in poetry (Ahern 2). This thesis attempts to fill that gap by combining conventional close reading practices with methodological support from two distinct disciplinary fields which have shown great initiative in bringing their own tools to the study of poetry's affects. The first field is that of usage based linguistics whereby I present corpus derived evidence for why a certain word, phrase, syntactic structure or construction may be experienced as familiar or new, thereby determining the degree of processing effort it demands and the experience of stasis or surprise that it engenders. Supporting my methods here are also a set of conceptual tools from across a range of other distal and proximate disciplines such as cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics; pragmatics and relevance theory; construction grammar; communication and information theory. The second disciplinary field is that of empirical studies within neuroaesthetics which I reference in order to corroborate the validity of my corpus derived evidence.

Finally, I also offer a philosophical hypothesis grounded predominantly in the work of Bataille and show why the alternation between familiarity and newness may be experienced as aesthetic. I focus particularly on Bataille's conceptions of inner experience and non-knowledge, and read aesthetic experience as a form of inner experience. I also refer to his concepts of restricted and general economy to argue that poetry can be regarded as falling within the general economy of excess and expenditure. I read this excess of energy as playing out in the excess of information presented in poetry in the form of various kinds of repetitions: structural, rhythmic, lexical and phonetic. Expenditure, or sacrifice, in Bataille's system, is when words fail to convey meaning and are sacrificed: "Poetry is the sacrifice in

which words are victims” (*Inner Experience* 135). Poetry’s deviations are thus read as sacrificial expenditure which leads to inner experience.

Finally, I demonstrate my approach by using a corpus of science fiction poetry for my case study. This is a genre of poetry that derives its name from science fiction (SF)—a genre of prose writing which is acknowledged as a mode of enchantment in its own right. My aim is to show how and why the aesthetic effects generated by SF poetry exceed and/or intensify those that have been identified as integral to prose SF, such as that of cognitive estrangement (Suvin). Why and how, in other words, does SF poetry enchant more and differently than prose SF?

This case study is important at this time when SF poetry is only just beginning to be studied in academic spaces and readers can benefit from a set of protocols for reading this genre of poetry. These protocols are particularly important since, as discussed above, they counter perceptions of the inaccessibility of poetry in general as well as the obsession with interpretation that has defined poetry studies for close to a century now. Were SF poetry to be studied using an interpretative framework that ignores its linguistic and formal aspects and pays attention to its science fictional aspects alone, such an approach would not do justice to the interesting new aesthetic experiences that it can offer its readers.

It also helps, I must add, that since SF poetry has not been studied in academic spaces, with a few exceptions, of course, it serves as a suitable corpus for testing out my model of reading. It is particularly helpful in that unlike most other poetries that are either famous enough for readers to have formed opinions about *how* they would prefer reading them, or display similarities with well-known styles of poetry, SF poetry is new and as yet unexamined.

Finally, my choice of SF poetry for the case study of what is otherwise a general theory of poetry is also a self-consciously political choice in that it recovers a tradition of

poetry writing that has been marginalised by an increasingly rigid understanding of what counts as good poetry. Such marginalisation is, of course, not peculiar to this genre but to the bulk of poets and poetries since the mid-twentieth century, as Jed Rasula has shown in

Wreading: A Poetics of Awareness, Or How Do We Know What We Know?

Background to the Study

When poets, readers and critics refer to poetry's aesthetic effects, they typically speak in terms of the ineffability, inscrutability, and unparaphrasability ascribed to it (respectively, I might add). To acknowledge this can, and should be, enough. But there is a resistance to poetry today that is often attributed to the real and perceived difficulties that it presents. Consequently, an obsession with meaning and interpretation has been at the core of poetry studies for about a century now even as proximate modes of art such as song and music continue to be enjoyed without the burden of listeners having to understand them. Other modes have not been so fortunate; as Cubist artist Pablo Picasso had complained in an interview in 1935, "Everyone wants to understand art. Why not try to understand the songs of a bird?" (Barr 274).³ On a similar note, and reacting to what she called the "philistinism of interpretation" in literature (8), Susan Sontag had proposed a few decades later, "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" ("Against Interpretation" 14).

Today, there may still be no erotics of art, at least in academia, but there has been an aesthetic turn that ropes in affective and ethical approaches to art and literature. One prominent voice is that of Felski who speaks of the "attachments" we form with works of art (*Hooked*, 2020). On a slightly different note, Chaouli appeals for a "poetic criticism," for a change in the very stance with which poetry is to be read and critiqued—that of vulnerability, of allowing to expose ourselves to what speaks to us (21). Poetry, I might add, not just

³ 1935 was also the year when Picasso gave up painting for a long time and started writing poetry.

requires but demands such vulnerability, for only with a vulnerable and receptive reader can it work its aesthetic effects—a reader willing and ready to be enchanted.

This is not to state that the issue of understanding does not figure in the reading of poetry. Since poetry is a verbal art—as has been brilliantly discussed by Ruqaiya Hasan in *Linguistics, Language, and Verbal Art*—, cognitive engagement can be said to lie at the core of its aesthetic effects. However, to speak of cognitively triggered aesthetic effects is not the same as engaging in acts of interpretation that discount readers’ aesthetic affective responses. My purpose in this thesis is to show how a poetic text uses the reader’s cognitive apparatus to create aesthetic effects. In particular, my model treats the processing effort that goes into reading as a form of engaging with the text, as suggesting by Felski (*The Limits of Critique*). A receptive reader’s engagement with a text, however, can only emerge from a place of trust, trust in the author to design an aesthetic affective experience for the reader. Here, a phrase used by Ihab Hassan in a tangentially-related context becomes useful: an “aesthetic of trust” (310-314). I repurpose this phrase here to speak of the ethics of trusting the author which leads to the aesthetic effect intended by the poet.

Methodology

Language is the material out of which poetry is made. And yet, linguistic approaches to poetry are few and far between, a situation attributable, it might be said, to the split between the disciplines of literature and linguistics in the latter half of the twentieth century. Admittedly, my own training is in literary studies and not in linguistics. However, in my attempt to study how poetry creates its aesthetic effects I follow certain current approaches to the linguistic analysis of literary texts, especially in the field of corpus linguistics. Since linguistics is a vast and highly advanced field, my research has only selected a few approaches which assist in making sense of poetic language and its aesthetic effects.

In what follows I will give a brief overview of some of my conceptual tools. In choosing to look at how the ordinary reader reads, I do not presume that such readers possess any specialised knowledge of poetic terms and traditions. Even though, as Tobias Skiveren states, no reader is completely unschooled (171), I shall assume this schooling only to the extent that the reader is careful to be attentive when reading (or listening to) poetry. I shall also assume that the poetic text in question is written in as simple a language as can be, presenting no great difficulties, semantic or syntactic, so as to be completely comprehensible. One might wonder, where is the scope for aesthetic pleasure in such a text? But most poetry from the last few decades has exhibited such ease and accessibility and can still be considered aesthetic.

What would be an ethical approach to the study of SF poetry and why is it important to my study of aesthetic experience? In an early book, *The Uses of Literature*, Felski names enchantment as one of her four proposed modes of engaging ethically with a literary text (the other three being recognition, knowledge and shock), and asks readers and critics “to look *at*, rather than *through*, the literary work, to attend to the act of saying rather than only the substance of what is said” (20; my emphasis). Without devaluing the role of hermeneutics, and without ascribing naïveté to experiences of wonder and enchantment, Felski asks her students, and perhaps us: “How do works of art move us, and why? Are certain features of texts more likely to trigger empathy or recognition, absorption or disorientation?” (*The Limits of Critique* 180-181). More recently, Felski has identified even critics’ attachment to literary texts as a form of care for what they interpret (*Hooked* 128). While my own study is an attempt to address a question similar to hers—how and why does poetry enchant the reader?—I refine Felski’s take on attachment by proposing that every reader of poetry is, to begin with, an ordinary reader who experiences the text as designed.

The question of *how* is, and has always been, more amenable to formal study. I show

how poetry elicits such feelings, how it moves and enchants us, not just with what it says, its substance or subject matter, but also with how it says it, in “the act of saying,” its style. To speak of style and subject matter thus, in seemingly contrastive terms, is not to simply resurrect old debates about the relative values of form and content—whether content uses form as a medium or form determines content. It is, instead, to develop a diffuse and nuanced understanding of how the form-content⁴ complex engages the reader’s attention in ways which allow her to intermittently disengage from everyday habits of perception and cognition. Such disengagement—as I claim in my answer to the question of *why*—, lies at the very core of the reader’s aesthetic experience. Enchantment, in this dispensation, is coeval with such disengagement. When I speak of forms of enchantment in my title, it is this form-content complex that I refer to.

Thus, while my study builds upon established formalist and neo-formalist theories of poetry which pivot on challenges to readers’ perceptual and cognitive processes—from the Russian Formalist emphasis on defamiliarisation, New Critical treatises on ambiguity, paradox and irony, the poststructuralist insistence on the indeterminacy of meaning and even the more recent rejection of hermeneutics in favour of digitally retrieved metatextual information as a kind of meaning—, it does not stop at illustrating such practices. My objective is to identify the link between such practices of inducing disengagement and the reader’s aesthetic experience.

Embedded in the question of how a poem can move a reader is the question of why it can do that. Why is it that poetry’s challenges to readers’ perceptual and cognitive processes lead to an aesthetic experience? There may be no definite answer to this question of *why*. But it is a question worth asking if the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure is to be understood as a valid

⁴ Terry Eagleton calls the idea of form and content being “entirely at one” an “incarnational fallacy” (*How to Read a Poem* 59).

and indeed vital endeavour. The elision of readers' own reading contexts and motivations for reading has led to a hierarchisation within poetry studies where interpretation ranks supreme while the ordinary reader's enjoyment is barely acknowledged—this despite significant efforts made within reader response criticism. However, where reader response criticism falters is perhaps in its continued focus on meaning-making. Here too, the privilege accorded to interpretation is not fully challenged; only its contours change. My own study, informed as it is by Bataille's conception of non-knowledge (section 3.3), shows how the reader is made to forego conventionalised meaning-making processes, and why this can prompt an aesthetic experience. For example, I show how a poetic text facilitates or inhibits access to incoming content by manipulating the reader's presuppositions and predictions regarding next words, thereby effecting in her experiences of stasis, gratification, surprise or even bewilderment. I also show how a text's formal features such as repetition, elision, syntactical inversion, etc., allow for content to be aggregated in the reader's memory to form what can be called units of newness the apprehension of which may be aesthetic.

My approach is a phenomenological approach to the extent that it is in the act of realisation of the text, or concretisation, Wolfgang Iser's adaptation of Roman Ingarden's original term *konkretisiert* (Iser, "The Reading Process" 279), that the aesthetic effect takes place. "Reading" is a verb and a verbal noun. It is also a metaphor. We "read" objects, people and situations as much as we read text on a page or a screen. Reading is, thus, decoding and more. Within literary/poetry studies in particular, reading is not simply a cognitive process where readers move their eyes over words and lines trying to grasp the semantic content of the text. When it comes to literary and cultural studies, reading refers to in-depth study and interpretation that draws in theoretical and conceptual tools from diverse discursive fields. And that has its value. But this study is not about how to interpret poetry. It is about the aesthetic experience of a reader in the moments before she begins to interpret the poetic text.

To reiterate, this study does not seek to invalidate the role of interpretation in the aesthetic experience of the reader. Nor does it deny that interpretation offers its own forms of transcendence effects which may render the experience aesthetic. And yet, transcendence may also be available through other means which remain on the level of the language of the text. Thus, I take a phenomenological approach to reading which accounts for the reader's engagement with the text in the moment of reading. It is in the gradual unfolding of the text that the reader's aesthetic affective response can be modulated. I show that poetic texts do this by using the reader's linguistic intuitions to either produce a state of stasis (by repeating lexical, semantic, rhythmic, structural or sonic elements) or of surprise—an aesthetic affective “state” in this dispensation.

Despite the focus on the reader's engagement with the poetic text, my approach does not fit squarely within a reader-response theoretic. But, given that my focus is on the reader's aesthetic responses to a text, and how these responses are modulated by the textual strategies used, I include perspectives from a range of proximate disciplines. I use insights from linguistics, along with its sub-disciplines such as pragmatics and relevance theory, construction grammar (a fairly recent development), communication theory and information theory. Such a wide net need not imply a dilution in rigour, however, since literary studies has always maintained a degree of eclecticism in the selection of its tools. Even literary formalism, if one were to look for precedence in this particular regard, has always been thus. Caroline Levine speaks of the muddled (“hodge-podge”) manner in which the vocabulary of formalism has been put together in literary studies—from “rhetoric, prosody, genre theory, structural anthropology, philology, linguistics, folklore, narratology, and semiotics” (2).

While literature departments are making a turn to ethics and affect, other disciplines have also turned to literary texts, armed, as it were, with newly developed tools from their own disciplines. With this, newer approaches to readers' aesthetic experiences have emerged,