

Introduction

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The following collection of essays complements three books I have published on the pragmatics of literature (Engler, *Reading and listening*; Engler, *Poetry and Community*; Engler, *Constructing Shakespeares*).¹ Beside the semantic and the syntactic sign relations the pragmatic one is often overlooked in literary studies, despite its fundamental nature.

Professors of literature often have the role of priests. They introduce the community of students to canonical works (or works they would like to be canonical). They repeatedly deal with certain works—such as Shakespeare’s plays or Goethe’s poems—and interpret them (always assuming their high value). It is repetition of this (but not only this) kind that makes sure the works remain in the canon, and they also confirm the authority of those who officiate at these occasions. Ritual repetition characterises a good part of university teaching. Ritual then takes over totally at the end of students’ university life, in ceremonies and often donning traditional garb.

As scholars, professors also have another role beside teaching, that of testing and questioning tradition, to remain in religious imagery, as theologians, even heretics.

Canon traditionally refers to the “collection or list of books of the Bible accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired. Also transferred, any set of sacred books; also, those writings of a secular author accepted as authentic.”² Somewhat surprisingly, the first use of *canon* for a literary text is documented only in 1953.³

Literary scholars tend to treat canonical texts like theologians, editing them critically, trying to determine their origin and their authenticity. They read and interpret them in ways that go well beyond those of an educated reader and find truths in them that are closed to others.

Unlike the common sender-message-receiver model, where something seems to be handed over, the communication model proposed by speech act theory, , sees the recipients

¹ See Appendix for details.

² OED canon 4.

³ OED 3.a. The canon and the text. C. J. Sisson, *Shakespeare: Complete Works* p. xviii (heading).

as experiencing an extension and change of their cognitive environment, an event rather than an object.⁴

Throughout my career as a professor of literature I have been of the conviction that before taking for granted certain texts as canonical—and therefore worth special attention—we should find out how they achieved this status. In other words: we should study canonical text not like priests but like religious studies scholars.

I have published essays on the topic mainly in two areas: Shakespeare and poetry. As I find the issues of continuing and perhaps even greater relevance in poetry, I am now collecting also those essays on poetry, complementing them with unpublished material. I have tried to avoid repetitions; I let some of them stand because they document how I have tried to promote my cause in various places and media.

Putting the essays together I have also noticed how my views have developed over the years, becoming more radical. I have therefore decided to arrange the essays more or less chronologically.

This has also been a personal journey, and, as it often happens when looking back, I have realized this has followed a certain pattern.⁵ Where my academic interests are concerned, I first began to be attracted by questions of the media, which led me on to issues of orality and literacy, and from there to anthropology and questions of how cultures maintain their stability with the help of ritual repetition. This in turn made me ask how certain works of literature acquire a status—that of a classic—that is instrumental in shaping cultures.

What in retrospect may look like orderly progress was in fact a complex process, often determined by non-academic experiences. I cannot resist the temptation to give a short account of these. At the beginning there was a question of language and identity, a very Swiss problem. Dialects are used in conversation by everybody on all kinds of topics

⁴ In a historical context, it may be of interest that Raymond Williams, in *Keywords*, describes the change in meaning of the word *literature* in the eighteenth century from “the skill in dealing with written texts”⁴ to “a body of imaginative texts” Williams 183–88.

⁵ I have put my C. V. and a list of my publications on my website <<https://BalzEngler.ch>>

and do not mark social hierarchies.: I grew up in one city, Basel, with parents who had moved there from the Zurich area. The dialects of the two regions are markedly different, and I can still speak either of them, depending on the person I am talking with, but I never learned the characteristic Basel guttural /r/. This miniscule fault had grave consequences: People kept asking me “But you are not from here, are you?” Feeling both inside and outside put me in a distinct position.

As a German-speaking Swiss I have also been exposed to two quite different variants of language, Standard German in writing and dialect in daily conversation. This made me aware that orality and literacy are not characteristic of two mutually exclusive types of culture but exist beside each other. Not surprisingly, my first book was an experiment, the life-story told by a local fisherman written in his own dialect (Städeli).

Another formative experience was acting and directing in an amateur theatre company. There I learnt how entering the stage, crossing that magic threshold, can transform one’s personality, also how the botched ending of a performance, when the curtain did not come down, could make the transition from stage to everyday reality painful.

My most formative theatrical experience was as a member of the audience. I attended the same production of *The Merchant of Venice* at the London Old Vic on successive nights, New Year’s Eve and the day before that. The performances were quite different from each other. On New Year’s Eve it was much funnier: An audience getting ready for partying was in a jolly mood, ready to laugh, and the actors reacted to this, by playing accordingly. It taught me to take seriously the shaping role of the audience in a theatrical event. This eventually led to an article that I still cherish (Engler, “Else My Project Fails: Applause and the Authority of Shakespeare’s Texts”)

As a young man I had literary aspirations, wrote plays, and published poetry. On one of the rare occasions when I was invited to read a poem—they were always short—to a fairly large audience, the M. C. asked me to read it a second time. I was stunned how the poem became something quite different from what it had been before.⁶

These experiences strengthened my interest in how poems are embedded in a non-verbal context. I dealt with the issue

⁶ This experience was the basis of “There She Stands as if Alive’: A Reading of Robert Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’”. in Engler (*Reading and listening* 67–74).

in *Reading and listening: The modes of communicating poetry and their influence on the texts*. As the full title indicates I approached the issues in a conventional manner, collecting all the evidence from the texts themselves.

I was then offered the opportunity to edit the *Othello* volume of a critical English-German Shakespeare edition, which involved a close study of the various extant texts and their origins. This drew my attention to the history of performance and publication, and led me to question Shakespeare, the genius, as the sole authority of the texts we have.

During a year-long research grant at an American university, for which I had proposed a project on Vachel Lindsay, well-known, even famous, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, but since forgotten, I gained new perspectives well beyond this individual poet. Lindsay's son Nick, himself a poet, introduced me to *ethnopoetics*, and thus to anthropological approaches. and the poetry of people like Jerome Rothenberg and Gary Snyder.⁷

The result was my book *Poetry and Community*, half of which is devoted to poetics in general, drawing on cultural anthropology (Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, Mary Douglas), relevance theory (Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson), philosophy of science (Jean-François Lyotard, Thomas S. Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend), orality and history studies (Walter J. Ong, Terence Hawkes) and other sources. The second half is about Vachel Lindsay's practice as a performance poet who was well ahead of his times.

The essays collected here mostly date back decades and were often published in obscure places. I have revised them sparingly where this seemed necessary and removed passages that would have been too repetitive. Only the last one comes from one of my books; I hope it will put the essays into the context they belong.

I have, however, checked how the issues discussed in them are looked at today, in 2025, and I have come to the conclusion, both troubling and gratifying, that things have not changed that much: troubling, because not much seems

⁷ I gave my inaugural lecture as a professor on the topic: "Die Rückkehr der Sänger: Neuere Entwicklungen in der amerikanischen Literaturwissenschaft," University of Basel, 20 April 1982. An English version, "The Return of the Bards," is included here, in chapter 6.

to have changed in the area I am interested in, and gratifying because it means that my argument still stands.

Literary studies continue to be mostly interested in semantics, which is not surprising considering its social function as a successor to theology. They largely seem to content themselves with a notion of *text*, often enriched by verbal and social context, which is based on a watered-down formalist definition or variations of the source-message-addressee model, the so-called conduit model of communication.

Literary studies and linguistics have for long parted their ways and attempts to bring them together again, have led, as so often when fields of study try to re-combine, to a lively new specialism rather than a reform. The Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA)⁸ was founded in 1983 and publishes its own journal *Language and Literature*.⁹ Publications often appear under the label of *stylistics*. Where pragmatics, one of a wealth of approaches represented, is concerned, there is the pioneering collection *Literary Pragmatics*, edited by Roger D. Sell, published in 1991 and again in 2015. My contribution to that volume, “Textualization,” unlike so many essays in stylistics, does not take the notion of *text* for granted but historicizes it.¹⁰

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⁸ <<https://www.pala.ac.uk/>>.

⁹ I was myself a member of PALA for several years and took part in its conferences. I do not remember why this is no longer the case. Perhaps I left because I no longer felt close to a new specialist community.

¹⁰ The absence of *text* as a headword in vocabularies of stylistics is striking.

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