Reading by proxy: A visit to the literary archive

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Abstract: If literature is an archive of cognitive constellations, then readers can revisit these experiences from different periods and ages. How familiar, however, does a reader have to be with a particular historical context in order to browse the literary archive freely? This article will develop a cognitive perspective on intertextual references, arguing that texts often provide the necessary context knowledge themselves. Readers can read “by proxy”, so to speak. Narrators might explain the intertextual reference or enact its salient features in pastiches. Characters might learn about the texts mentioned and discuss their implications in conversation with other characters. A range of strategies for reading by proxy will be introduced on the example of Christoph Martin Wieland’s novel Don Sylvio von Rosalva. Even though few readers today will be familiar with the chivalric romance, the French fairy tale and the picaresque, all genres on which Wieland draws, they can easily follow the structure of references in the novel through reading by proxy. In this sense, literary texts carry their own archive and remain accessible across periods. Reading by proxy is then linked to precision expectations in predictive processing. Its strategies do not provide an exact prediction of what is likely to happen next but rather guide readers’ attention and enable them to trace larger configurations. Wieland’s use of reading by proxy, I shall argue, also marks a moment in the development of the German novel and, thereby, tracing these strategies can contribute to literary history.

Subjects: Literary History; 18th Century Literature; Critical Concepts; Novel

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Literature seems to demand a lot of its readers. It takes a long time to read a novel, it requires our full and deep attention and quite a lot of knowledge about other books. Literature, however, does not leave readers alone with these demands. As this article shows, literary texts have strategies that allow for “reading by proxy”. For example, the readers of eighteenth-century novels do not need to know about all the knights and fairies, and their literary pedigrees, which the novels refer to, because the novels themselves supply that knowledge. Characters read these texts, comment on them or present hilarious parodies and pastiches, or narrators might tell readers how and why these earlier stories are relevant. Long before hyperlinking in Wikipedia, “reading by proxy” in the literature provided an enjoyable mode of surfing the tides of unfamiliar narrative realms and going deep into literary history.
Literary texts from different periods, we are told, unfold in exchange with very different horizons of expectation (see Jauss, 1970) that are not available in the same way to readers today. Specialists in particular historical periods will read book after book in order to get an approximate sense of the historical context that is not their own any more. Such expertise is indispensable for work in literary history. However, even readers who do not know much about nineteenth-century French melodramatic fiction get a sense of what kinds of novels Madame Bovary is reading. It is not necessary to know the texts Flaubert refers to, because the novel itself provides enough information through the kinds of thoughts and imaginations which they kindle in the mind of the protagonists. Readers of Madame Bovary read these novels by proxy. In this article, I will investigate the dynamics of such “reading by proxy” and ask what new perspectives this notion might open for the role of cognitive approaches to literary history. 1

I choose to discuss “reading by proxy” here together with a novel which only very few contemporary readers will have read: Christoph Martin Wieland’s Die Abenteuer des Don Sylvio von Rosalba (1764/2008). “Reading by proxy” can be conceptualised as a strategy that follows the logic of the text itself as it links into the intertextual web of contemporary texts and as it generates its own horizon of expectations.

Don Sylvio tells the tale of a young, slightly impoverished nobleman who discovers his passion for French fairy tales. Wieland’s novel uses various means to provide the necessary knowledge of the literary contexts in which the protagonist moves: the narrative discourse which takes up terms and topoi from the texts referenced (such as fairy names), the responses which these novels inspire (such as rarefied delight) and the nature of the characters who recommend or enjoy them (such as the young Schwärmer Don Sylvio himself). In such ways the novel allows its readers to “read by proxy”, that is, to get a sense of the themes, styles and worldviews the fairy tales. How do novels develop such strategies for reading by proxy, how can these strategies be conceptualised for a cognitive approach to literature and how can they be understood as a means to navigate the archive of literary history? How familiar do readers have to be with a particular historical period in order to browse the literary archive freely? These discussions will lead to a reconsideration of the place of the cognitive in literary history. It appears that, as texts extend the invitation to “read by proxy”, they also situate themselves in the literary archive and therefore turn this archive from a storage place of previous modes of thinking, feeling and imagining to be tapped by cognitive approaches to literature (as Cave, 2017 conceptualises it) into an integral resource for readers across periods.

1. Wieland’s literary archive

Don Sylvio von Rosalva leads a charmed life. First, his aunt Donna Mencia educates him through chivalric romances in the belief that “Don Sylvio, with such noble inclinations and such a heroic mode of thinking, would once play a great role in the world and that he would become similar to the heroes which she admired the most when it comes to fame and fortune, just as he was already similar to them when it comes to beauty and personal agreeableness” (1764/2008, p. 22). The young man’s attention span, however, is more suited to the short fairy tale than to the long-winded, multivolume romances that his aunt prefers. And so he develops his very own delusion. “Ever since his brain had been filled with Florines, Rosettes, Brilliantes, Cristallines and who knows how many other supernatural beauties, he was not seldomly tempted to see his good old aunt as a kind of Carabosse whose tyrannical rule over him became more unbearable by the day” (p. 29). Most readers of this article will probably not have read Wieland’s novel and are most likely not particularly acquainted with “Carabosse”. Even though these texts were a common cultural reference point when Wieland wrote his novel, chivalric romances and the fairy tales of Madame d’Aulnoy, referenced by the names listed in the quotation above, are no longer well-known today. Nevertheless, I assume, there are no particular difficulties in getting a sense of what kinds of texts Don Sylvio favours.
Wieland builds intertextual references to a range of texts. First, there is the template of the Quixotic reader who gets so immersed in a narrative that they can no longer distinguish between fiction and reality anymore. Second, Donna Mencia attempts to educate her nephew in the ways of the chivalric romance. And third, Don Sylvio himself follows the narratives of the French fairy tale in the tradition of Madame d’Aulnoy. Wieland provides his readers with a number of notes, and his narrator’s numerous comments in Don Sylvio von Rosalba allow us to identify these intertextual references relatively easily. However, in order to make sense of the narrative, it is arguably not necessary to detail exactly which are the texts in question. Don Sylvio reads the fairy tales and his delusion is quite obviously an effect of this reading, as readers can infer without drawing again on the template of the Quixotic reader, since Don Sylvio is actually doing this. The narrator’s description of the values of the chivalric romance and of the character of Donna Mencia, along with his frequent humorous asides, give readers enough information to understand what these romances are like, and the names of the fairies and their activities indicate what kind of alternative model the French fairy tale offers to Don Sylvio. Readers arguably get a good enough sense of the intertextual references from reading by proxy in order to navigate the literary archive.

The literary archive, as I conceptualise it here, takes a perspective different from the familiar archives put forward by Jacques Derrida in Archive Fever (1996) and by Terence Cave in the article “Situated Cognition: The Literary Archive” (2017). Derrida understands the archive in connection with Freudian psychoanalysis as a place of gathering and “consignation” (1996, 78), between the public and the private, between forgetting and maintaining. The archive as a model for thinking about personal memory in cultural contexts enables Derrida to outline parallels between the archive and the psyche (as conceptualised by Freud). The literary archive as it occurs in Don Sylvio does not necessarily imply such a Freudian dynamics, because it is not based on a parallel to the individual mind.

The literary archive, as Cave conceptualises it in turn (2017, pp. 250–251), keeps historically distant modes of thinking, feeling and imagining available to readers (see also Cullhed in this Special Issue). Cave sees texts across literary history as an “archive” of historically different modes of cognition. As readers engage with texts such as Andrew Marvell’s seventeenth-century poetry, the particular conceptual and experiential implications of Marvell’s poem unfold again for today’s readers. Reading Don Sylvio might make aspects of rococo delight and silliness available to today’s readers, too, but reading by proxy offers more than making present the text at hand. Don Sylvio’s literary archive, as it is embedded in the intertextual references, extends the reach of readers further into texts other than Wieland’s novel. Thus, the perspective I propose, even though it is compatible with Cave’s suggestion, is not about making present a past mode of thought, but it is rather interested in unfolding a horizon of references against which the events in the novel can be read.

Wieland negotiates different traditions of the novel, or more generally, narrative in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The reference to Don Quixote takes up the contest between the old mode of chivalric narrative and new modes of prose narrative. These new modes of prose narrative are, in the first instance, the fairy tales of the French salon culture. It is not coincidental, I think, that also d’Aulnoy’s collection of fairy tales featured a frame narrative inspired by Cervantes (see Palmer, 1970). “La chatte blanche”, one of the main fairy tales referenced in Don Sylvio, was originally included in d’Aulnoy’s collection Contes nouveaux (1698). Contes nouveaux features a frame narrative entitled Le nouveau gentilhomme bourgeois, where a young man who calls himself “Monsieur de la Dardinardiere” (1698, p. 5) not only suffers from pretensions of class (like Molière’s Bourgeois gentilhomme) but also from the delusions of the Quixotic reader when he gets immersed in the library that he has bought to develop his cultural capital. On his travels, he encounters female readers who recommend to him “La chatte blanche”, a fairy tale, which would come to be collected separately in later editions (and which is the foundation of d’Aulnoy’s fame as a fairy-tale writer).
René Le Sage’s eighteenth-century bestseller *Gil Blas*, and the picaresque narrative more generally, are also referenced by Wieland, in particular when *Gil Blas* makes an appearance at the end of *Don Sylvio*, as the supposed ancestor of the characters Don Gabriel and Donna Felicia. It has been established that also the setting of *Don Sylvio* ("Lirias") and character names from Donna Mergelina (a hopeful suitress of the hand of Don Sylvio) to Hyacinthe (who turns out to be Don Sylvio’s long lost sister) are taken from *Gil Blas* (Kurrelmeyer, 1919). Besides the fairy tale and the picaresque, a third modern genre negotiated in *Don Sylvio* is the sentimental novel. When Hyacinthe tells her life’s story, we find in her narration traces of Marivaux’ *Marianne*, Prévost’s *Manon Lescout* and in particular Richardson’s *Pamela*. The sentimental modern novel, it has been argued, is presented here with all its contradictions and ambiguities, as Hyacinthe obviously modifies the narrative that she tells in a company featuring a prospective husband, so that “it has very little on the fairy tales when it comes to the credibility of these narratives” (Beck, 2013, p. 123; “die einer Feenerzählung an Glaubwürdigkeit nichts voraus hat”).

Wieland writes *Don Sylvio* at a particular moment in literary history, and this turns the text into a useful example for my purposes, because reading by proxy and its links to the literary archive are so explicit. The novel is negotiating what it means to write a novel. This applies to the development of the novel as a genre, as well as to the writing process of this novel in particular. Indeed, the story of how *Don Sylvio* was conceived is similar to Cervantes’ writing process with *Don Quixote*. While Cervantes was struggling with his romance *Persiles and Sigismonda*, he turned to *Don Quixote*; and while Wieland was struggling with the major project of his bildungsroman *Agathon*, he turned to *Don Sylvio*. It is through the values of post-Romantic times and the notion of “genius” that the originality of *Don Sylvio* has been questioned, because Wieland stays close to d’Aulnoy, Cervantes and Le Sage in the novel. (However, as we shall see, in taking up the pattern of Cervantes and others, Wieland creates something genuinely new and modern with the narrative coherence he develops exactly through such reading by proxy.) The fact that *Don Sylvio* is so explicit in many of its references makes the novel fall afoul of post-Romantic literary values, but it also makes it all the more relevant for our project of tracing reading by proxy, because here the novel enters the archive openly. We can understand Wieland’s narrative practice as a very conscious mode of intertextuality, where the weave of the texts that are referenced is traced *expressis verbis* in his personable (and personalised) narrative discourse.

Reading by proxy brings out the literary archive from the text. Narratology’s detailed categorisations of different kinds of references and relationships between texts (see Genette, 1997) and literary theory’s interest in the echoes of social discourses and formations (see Kukkonen, forthcoming, p. 108 for a discussion) offer important complements to my project here. Genette already underlines that the category of texts he calls “hypertexts” can be read independent of the texts they refer to (1997, p. 397). The notion of “reading by proxy” draws particular attention to how the archive becomes active in the reading process as part of an overall design of the literary text. In “The Death of the Author” (1977), Roland Barthes observes famously that intertextuality makes the notion of the author superfluous, because it is not the person of the author where the text comes from but the deep weave of other texts. The intertextuality in Wieland, however, establishes these connections of intertextuality through the person-like instances of the literary text. The author can remain in his grave; it is through narrators and characters that the intertextual links in *Don Sylvio* are established and then enable reading by proxy. Hyacinthe is modelled on Pamela, while other characters belong to *Gil Blas*, etc. Also in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, the reading habits of the protagonists serve the purpose of characterising Catherine Morland, Isabel Thornpe and others, and Madame Bovary’s reading matter reflects a vision of escape from the bourgeois world which had created them in the first place. Also, the less explicit references in *Northanger Abbey* and *Madame Bovary* are tied to the protagonists of the text. In Wieland, as well as in Austen and in Flaubert, readers get a sense of the texts that characters read, embody and enact and that narrators comment. The intertextuality of reading by proxy is established through the protagonists of the text, that is, narrators and characters, and it enables readers’ access to the literary archive within which the novel is situated. This literary archive is arguably enriched when
readers have also read, say, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (and can compare the old knight of La Mancha with the young nobleman in Wieland) or d'Aulnoy's *Contes nouveaux* (and can compare the strategies used to heal de la Dardinadiere and to match him to one the beautiful but similarly deluded Virginie with the strategies of Don Gabriel and Donna Felicia). Through a more precise context knowledge, these texts can enter into a dialogue that unfolds in *Don Sylvio* itself only through the extent through which the links are verbalised in the (many) conversations of the characters themselves. In principle, however, readers can follow Wieland’s narrator and characters in what they say about these novels without having read them.

2. Precision expectations and the books we have not read

Pierre Bayard has written charmingly about *How to Talk about Books You Haven’t Read* (2007). We can quite reasonably speak about books whose pages we have never even skimmed, if they are tightly enough inscribed in our cultural conversations. We have heard enough about Proust (a very long novel about Marcel remembering things while lying in bed), Joyce (also rather long, but more difficult to understand on a linguistic level) and Knutgaard (so long and formless that it seems really real) to be able to catch references to these books and, perhaps, to even make comparisons and references to them ourselves. Bayard takes his observations into the direction of personal and cultural memory, as well as psychoanalysis, but the facility with which we can talk about books we have not read also has a cognitive dimension, and this is at the centre of what I call “reading by proxy”.

Reading by proxy can unfold through several textual strategies that depend on precision expectations: (1) Authors and narrators can simply say that the narrative draws on other books. When Henry Fielding states that *Tom Jones* is written “in the manner of Cervantes”, we have an example of this explicit strategy of creating precision expectations. (2) Characters can read books or refer to books as a model for their behaviour. Donna Mencia’s plan to model the education of her nephew on the “noble Neigungen” and “heroische Denkart” of chivalric romance would be an example of this implicit strategy. Wieland does not mention the titles of any of these texts recounting knightly exploits, but the narrator’s characterisation of these texts suffices to evoke the necessary precision expectations. (3) Narrators (and, less commonly, characters) can provide a pastiche of the style of the text and outline the predictions that tend to apply in their fictional worlds. Wieland’s narrator provides an (ironic) account of the values of the chivalric romance and the style of the French fairy tale. For example, he illustrates the surplus of splendour in the fairy tales when he speaks of Don Sylvio’s brain as filled with “Florinen, Rosetten, Brillanten, Cristallinen, and who knows how many other supernatural beauties.” When later in the narrative Don Gabriel recounts the fairy tale of “Prinz Biribinker” in order to heal Don Sylvio from his delusions, it is so filled with delicate fairies, rich materials, etc., that it might overload even the capacity of the French fairy tale to sustain the principle of its fiction. Wieland’s repeated pastiches of the style and informing principle of the genre teach readers to pay attention to this aspect in “Prinz Biribinker”, too. The “proxy” of reading by proxy, then, can take different guises and the ones I detail here for *Don Sylvio* certainly do not exhaust the possibilities. Precision expectations might emerge from characters and narrators, as well as their actions and their manner of speaking.

As we have seen, Wieland starts his novel *Don Sylvio* with Donna Mencia’s plan to educate her nephew through chivalric romances. The setting in Spain, the observation that Donna Mencia is regarded as an educated woman because of her “astonishing learnedness in chronicles and knightly books” (“erstaunliche Belesenheit in Chronicken und Ritterbüchern”; p. 20) and her brother’s plan to have Don Sylvio educated through this wisdom signal the genre of the Quixotic narrative. *Don Quixote* is certainly another novel that qualifies as one of those texts that many are happy to talk about without having actually read (and this arguably applied in the eighteenth century just as much as it applies now). Wieland provides readers with a rough parameter of what kind of narrative readers can expect with the reference to *Don Quixote*. The reference is not enough to predict that *Don Sylvio* will leave the chivalric romances for the fairy tale, but it is enough to know that when the protagonist gets immersed in fictional texts he is likely going to change his life according to the principles of these texts.
How can we relate these “parameters” and “predictions” to cognitive processes? Predictive processing is an approach that understands cognition, emotion and imagination to work through the tension between predictions and prediction errors (see Clark, 2015; Hohwy, 2013). We can navigate the world on the basis of predictions, but when the sensory flow contradicts these predictions, we get a prediction error and have to revise our predictions. What I have referred to as “parameters” and “expectations” in my discussion of Don Sylvio’s reference to Don Quixote are termed “precision expectations” in predictive processing. Precision expectations are not predictions in the sense that they would give readers a good guess as to what will happen next in the narrative. What precision expectations give readers is a sense of where and when they are likely to get reliable predictions in the designed sensory flow of the text (see Kukkonen, forthcoming; see also Polvinen and Sklar in this volume). Since predictive processing thinks of precision as equivalent to attention (Friston & Feldman, 2010), precision expectations lead to the moments when readers have the sense that it is worth paying attention. In the case of Don Sylvio, the moment when the protagonist gets immersed in a book leads to readers knowing that now significant events (linked to the delusion of the protagonist) are likely to ensue. Indeed, the description of Donna Mencia’s own deluded reading of the chivalric novels models such directed attention explicitly.

Wieland himself was aware that he could use these intertextual references without relying on readers actually having read the text in question. When discussing Seladon (Celadon) in his comic poem Der neue Amadis, he writes that this is “undoubtedly one of these generally known names of the poetic world. One says, soft like Celadon, just as one says beautiful as Adonis or brave and courtly like Don Quixote. Everyone knows what one wants to say with it, even though in these days one won’t find three persons in the whole of Europe who have read the Astrea of the Marquis d’Urfé” (1. Gesang; Anm. 6; see Bickenbach, 1999, p. 198). More than just naming other books (strategy 1), Wieland deploys here a kind of reading by proxy, where we can understand the proxy as an exemplary (strategy 2). Celadon is the exemplary of softness (Zärtlichkeit). Wieland, however, also deploys a great number of other strategies where the proxy becomes something else.

“Reading leads to delusion” would be enough knowledge to bring Don Quixote to bear as a precision expectation on Wieland’s novel. Don Sylvio’s idealistic delusion and the more down-to-earth desires of his servant Pedrillo establish another similarity to Cervantes’ knight of La Mancha and his servant Sancho Panza. Should readers spot such similarities, then their precision expectations will be more specific, and they can arguably fine-tune where they pay attention in the narrative further. However, for the fundamental process of guiding readers’ attention through precision expectation, very little knowledge is sufficient. In Don Sylvio, we have for example the protagonist as proxy, when he himself is a reader and learns about the themes and likely plots of the fairy tale as he reads it (strategy 2). Readers of Don Sylvio can, together with the protagonist, learn about these unfamiliar texts insofar as they need it to follow the main narrative of the novel. Other characters might also tell the protagonist about literary points of reference, as, for example Don Gabriel when he brings in new aspects of the fairy tale with the tale of Prince Biribinker, a bravura pastiche of the genre (strategy 3). When Hyacinthe tells her life’s story, a number of parallels with Richardson’s Pamela emerge. It is not necessary, however, to know the reference to Pamela for the reader to get a sense of the kind of character that Pamela is (in the view of Wieland, who was obviously informed by Fielding’s Shamela), because the actions and speeches of Hyacinthe herself tell readers enough.

Don Sylvio further deploys a historically specific narrative device to bring precision expectations to the fore, namely, characters’ conversations about the narratives they read and hear. Conversations can combine mentions of references (strategy 1), reading these takes and taking them as exemplary (strategy 2), and telling narratives that mimic the reference narratives (strategy 3). In some cases, these can be fictional narratives; in other cases, they can be the life narratives of the characters themselves. In the second half of Wieland’s novel, for example, the main protagonists have all assembled in Don Gabriel’s palace in Lirias and start telling each other how they got there. Don Sylvio had been brought by Don Gabriel’s sister Donna Felicia (who is in
love with him), and also Hyacinthe has arrived. Such conversations between characters, where stories are not only told but also discussed and evaluated are particularly associated with texts emerging from French salon culture, such as Madeleine de Scudéry’s romances, but also d’Aulnoy’s fairy tales. Already in Don Quixote, some protagonists sit down with the knight of La Mancha to discuss the story of the “Curious Impertinent” and to assess whether it is vraisemblable (that is, credible as a narrative; see Kukkonen, 2017). Don Sylvio takes up this convention in the conversations between his characters, and Wieland turns this into a systematic exploration of different modes of vraisemblance as they were available in the first half of the eighteenth century. The conversation itself can be understood through the actions of the characters, while finer implications of the particular historically situated contexts lies with readers more well-versed in seventeenth and eighteenth century literature.

It is in the conversation, for example, that the relative unreliability of Hyacinthe is addressed, when Don Sylvio remarks that the lucky escapes and happy coincidences of her life story seem incredible without the intervention of fairies (p. 318). Relative notions of vraisemblance are discussed between Hyacinthe and Don Sylvio, until Don Sylvio gets the idea that Hyacinthe’s story fits the story of his long-lost sister, with the only difference that Hyacinthe says that she was robbed by a gipsy, whereas Don Sylvio thinks that she was abducted by fairies. The commensurability of the character types of Hyacinthe’s and Don Sylvio’s narratives is stressed throughout these chapters, so that the solution that the gipsy is the fairy and that the two stories are in fact the same comes to be accepted easily. “What stops us from believing that the gypsy who abducted Hyacinthe is also the fairy who made his sister invisible?” (p. 322). Here, precision expectations prepare the overall plot event of the recognition that Hyacinthe is in fact Don Sylvio’s sister. The observations about the similarities of the two narratives leads readers to pay attention to their structural similarities, and it makes the prediction that the two are siblings more salient (until it is confirmed by a deus ex machina appearance of Donna Mencia at the end of the narrative).

Precision expectations, then, guide readers’ attention along the narrative. As the narrative develops, however, they also trace the ways in which different narrative traditions are conceptually related to each other in the new narrative. A large range of such “principles of configuration” are conceivable for literary narratives and these will be configured depending on the probability design proper to the text, rather than predetermined frames (see Kukkonen, forthcoming).

Reading by proxy offers perhaps the clearest indication for how the precision expectations from predictive processing are different from the traditional model of schema theory. Schemata are the conventional way for thinking about how readers’ expectations are included in the literary narrative (see Emmott & Alexander, 2014). An element of a literary text, say, Don Sylvio riding out, presupposes a number of inferences that go without saying. Don Sylvio will need to have his horse saddled, he needs to wear riding gear, the horse needs to be fed, etc. These schemata are in readers’ minds and they refer to the context knowledge with which they come to the text. Clearly, also readers of Don Sylvio will come to that text with a certain kind of context knowledge. The precision expectations that we have detailed here, however, do not need to be in readers’ minds. They are furnished by the text itself in reading by proxy.

Precision expectations do not programme readers to fill in the gaps in the text in a particular way, and they do not relate to a schema that exists independently of the text. As the text unfolds, precision expectations are called upon, either by explicit references to other texts or by the more implicit strategies of reading by proxy. These precision expectations then shape readers’ attention, rather than provide the backdrop from which to fill in gaps in the narrative. In this sense, we can distinguish between two different kinds of context knowledge at play in reading narrative. First, there are the schemata that provide the necessary context knowledge about protocols of human actions, etc., that are necessary to make the narrative make sense. Second, there are precision expectations about where there are going to be likely narratively significant events and how the
structural similarities between narrative strands are likely to configure. Arguably, it is possible to provide the necessary knowledge in both cases in the text itself. In the case of precision expectations, this can take the shape of characters as readers or narrators’ pastiches, etc., and the process can be relatively easily integrated in the action structure of the narrative. However, if a narrative were to supply all its schematic context knowledge in detail, then it would be weighed down with an excess of description, since schemata allow for the gaps that make the narrative flow swiftly.

Indeed, precision expectations are developed very slowly across the course of a narrative, as they are built up through these strategies of “reading by proxy” (“Prinz Birbincker” appears almost 400 pages after the first introduction of the French fairy tales in my edition of Don Sylvio). While precision expectations can work on relatively limited amounts of information, most narratives tend to develop the precision expectations signalled so explicitly in Don Sylvio through more implicit strategies, giving readers a more detailed, accumulating sense of these texts they haven’t read but that still inform the overall logic of the narrative they are reading now.

3. Don Sylvio, reading by proxy and literary history

As indicated by the different conceptualisations of the literary archive in the first section of this paper, more than one cognitive approach to literary history is possible. Cave (2017) moves in the direction of a broad repertoire of cognitive modes coming available through the historical variation in literary texts. My suggestion of reading by proxy understands the archive as embedded in the literary text itself. From there, a particular historical horizon comes to be reconstructed through the texts and the design of their precision expectations.

Since Wieland’s precision expectations are closely tied to the ways in which the characters read and how they comment on each other’s stories in the conversations, they can serve to trace a history of the novel through its reader models. Wieland’s literary archive presents today’s readers not only with earlier contexts of reference, but also with the ways in which texts were read differently in earlier times. It is certainly a matter of controversies whether eighteenth-century German readers actually read like Wieland’s protagonists. They probably did not start running after imaginary fairies in the woods. However, certain ideal types of readers can be discerned in Don Sylvio, and from these, something like the range of available reader models can certainly be reconstructed.

The notion that changing reader models can inform literary history has been put forward already. Dorothee Birke’s Writing the Reader (2016), for example, traces such a history of reader models for the English context, beginning with Charlotte Lennox’s The Female Quixote. On this basis, a literary history embedded in media practices around reading and their cultural prestige can be traced by paying attention to the intertextual moments we have linked to precision expectations. Birke, however, is more interested in larger discourses about reading and social configurations rather than the intertextual references themselves that shape my understanding of the literary archive. Matthias Bickenbach (1999), in turn, explicitly argues that Don Sylvio devises an “inner history” of reading for the eighteenth century. Through the very negotiation of perspectives in Don Sylvio, Bickenbach argues, a new model reader is developed. This is a reader who has learnt to reflect on his own reading practices and choices in reading matter. The reader in Don Sylvio does not take the perspective of any one of the characters, but rather reflects on the responses and readings of the protagonists within the novel and comes to understand a narrative that depends on a functional narrative structure (where elements make sense in relationship to one another, rather than in relationship to a real-world referent). The notion that literary vraisemblance is rooted in intersubjectivity moves across the conversations into the multiple perspectives held by these characters (see also Heinz 2003; Nitschke, 2017) and multiple, translated textual traditions (Ventarola, 2018). Wieland, as Bickenbach shows (1999, p. 197), draws here on the long tradition of satire as an educational genre but develops it in tandem with new modes of narrative in his novel. Reading by proxy arguably also has a role to play in the
development of intersubjectively grounded narratives, but also here particular intertextual references are of secondary interest.

The design of probabilities that entails the precision expectations that we have introduced in the previous section, however, also reflects other developments in literary history. Wieland’s *Don Sylvio* emerges from the fairy tale, the chivalric novel and the picaresque. However, it also points forward to the coherent plotting of the modern novel that emerges in the eighteenth century. This drive to coherence is certainly to do with the re-evaluation of Aristotelean plot in drama, but also opera seria and, eventually, the novel (Kukkonen, 2017). Don Sylvio arguably moves from a looser, more episodic seventeenth-century plot to a tighter, more Aristotelean plot, and the precision expectations that lead to reading by proxy allow Wieland to signal this coherence to his readers.

A comparison to d’Aulnoy’s *Contes nouveaux* (1698) is instructive here (and it might, should this be necessary, underline how innovative Wieland’s novel is). In d’Aulnoy, the two fairy tales that de la Dardinadiere reads, “La chatte blanche” and “Belle-belle”, are embedded in the frame narrative and marked off by chapter headings. We first read about the young man and his pretensions. Then, he asks to be read the story of “La chatte blanche”, which is followed by a discussion of the story, and eventually, the second fairy tale “Belle-belle”, which de la Dardinadiere (co-)writes in order to convince the *precieuse* Virginie of his spirit and culturedness (“pour convaincre Virginie que je n’ay guere moins d’esprit qu’elle” p. 220). D’Aulnoy’s volume ends with this second fairy tale, which arguably works as a display of “esprit”; but it does not tell readers what happens between Virginie and de la Dardinadiere afterwards. The very final words of the volume are a *moralité* in verse:

Heaven has always fought for innocence;
After having punished vice
It knows how to crown virtue.  

The *moralité* offers an allegorical reading not only of “Belle-belle”, but also of the narrative of the young man, but it is not at all clear what exact relationship between them d’Aulnoy intends. “Belle-belle” tells the narrative of a young woman who dresses up as a knight and gets into a Phèdre-like situation when the queen falls in love with her. The young woman also dresses above her station, but different from de la Dardinadiere or the *precieuses* in the frame narrative, this is neither presumptuous nor ridiculous. Thus, the precision expectations in the probability design of d’Aulnoy’s narrative is structured through the possible allegorical similarities between the separate narratives that are told in embedded structures, but her narrative leaves this open to the interpretation of readers (potentially in polite conversation) and provides no more than the very loose allegorical parallel of innocence rewarded. The stories of “La chatte blanche” and “Belle-belle” are narrated in great detail, and they guide attention through precision expectations, but they provide none of the drive to narrative coherence that emerges from Wieland’s reading by proxy.

*Don Sylvio* sets new standards in coherence, and we can trace this through the novel’s treatment of the fairy tale in its reading by proxy. Wieland begins with the narrator’s statements in the pastiche 1 cited earlier, as well as several statements about what kinds of narratives these fairy tales are, as *Don Sylvio* starts running after butterflies he believes to be princesses. Then, *Don Sylvio* starts to explain the world to Pedrillo in terms of the fairy tales with an embedded narrative that sets them on their way (see p. 53). As the narrative progresses, also Pedrillo uses the fairies as an explanatory principle (see, for example “I also thought that, if she is a fairy, then she would know this already anyway”; p. 190), and the author himself draws prestige from his choices in separating his own narrative from the principles of the fairy tale and developing the double scheme of the marvellous and the probable (“this strange difference which can be found between the story of *Don Sylvio* and the other fairy tales will provoke a rather beneficial judgement for the historical truth and sincerity of the authors” p. 230). In the conversation with Hyacinthe, then, the fairy tale enters as an alternative source of experience (as we have already discussed), before Don Gabriel attempts to overcharge this epistemic model with the
outrageous fairy tale of “Prince Biribinker,” which brings all the fairy tale conventions that were introduced individually before to their excessive conclusion. Don Gabriel’s hope is that the story is so over-the-top that it will heal Don Sylvio’s delusion. While the delusion of the Quixote is not healed immediately, the fairy-tale references themselves increase in detail and specificity, so that readers themselves gain a clearer and clearer understanding of these narratives, leading arguably to a perception of coherence. In the conclusion to the narrative, then, Don Sylvio realises the actual role of the fairy tales in this novel. Even though the fairies do not really exist, they have led to the very real happy ending to his story. “If the fairies are only creatures of our imagination, he said, then I will nevertheless consider them my greatest benefactresses, because without them I would still be pining in the loneliness of Rosalva and I might perhaps have lacked the bliss of finding her whom my desiring heart, ever since it could feel, appeared to look for” (p. 437).9 Reading by proxy develops from following characters in their delusion to the realisation of the generic principles themselves, first, in the embedded narrative of “Prince Biribinker” and then in Don Sylvio’s retelling of his own narrative to Donna Felicia that concludes with new reflections on the role of the fairy tale.

While the references to the fairy tale offer precision expectations around the epistemic progress that would, in later novels, develop into the full-blown bildungsroman, the precision expectations around the picaresque favour a more dramatic template of coherence. In the picaresque, the narrative is split into individual episodes that follow each other, but that are mostly kept together by the fact that it traces the ramblings of the main character; namely, picares such as Gil Blas. In Wieland’s novel, the genre of the picaresque is constantly read by proxy, as Don Sylvio leaves home and travels through the world through chance encounters. Some of these chance encounters, however, turn out to have been engineered by Donna Felicia in her own effort to educate Don Sylvio so that she can marry him. The open coincidental nature of the picaresque is thereby counteracted by the planning of Donna Felicia that leads to Don Sylvio’s moment of recognition at the end of the novel. Donna Felicia, we have noted, is a descendant of Gil Blas, Le Sage’s quintessential picaresque hero, and it is this descendant who gives the picaresque a conclusion with the Aristotelian recognition. Gil Blas himself directly causes the appearance of Donna Mencia at the end of the narrative, and the recognition that Hyacinthe is in fact Donna Seraphina, Don Sylvio’s sister. Gil Blas, readers learn, had found out from Don Sylvio’s servant Pedrillo about what is going on at Lirias and, true to his nature in Le Sage’s novel, begins to spread the news immediately until it reaches the ears of Donna Mencia, who sets out to Lirias to set things right (pp. 440–441). On the final pages of his novel, the Aristotelian recognition and reversal of Hyacinthe’s fate is then brought about by the qualities of the picaresco, as Wieland reveals the precision expectations proper to Gil Blas.

In this novel, reading by proxy sets up a flexible and complex model of narrative coherence through the consistent intertextual references to two generic templates that do not share such coherence, namely, the fairy tale and the picaresque. The intertextual references to d’Aulnoy in particular establish different epistemic roles for the fairy tale in relationship to the main narrative, from Don Sylvio’s delusion to his recognition that it has lead him in the end to the woman he loves. The flexible and complex re-evaluations in precision expectations trace the conceptual frame but also the narrative coherence of Don Sylvio. This is arguably supported by the personal narrator (see Honold, 2010, p. 195) who is also central to the reading by proxy strategy deployed by Wieland. Indeed, Wolfgang Kaysre has argued that Don Sylvio suddenly emerges as the first novel in German that is “modern” (1954, p.13), because of Wieland’s personalised narrator. As W. Daniel Wilson shows (1981, pp. 140–144), however, it is exactly the references to Cervantes’ Don Quixote, d’Aulnoy’s fairy tales and verse narratives of the rococo that lead to these “modern” narrative devices in Wieland’s Don Sylvio. From the point of view of precision expectations, it is the personalised voice of the narrator, very different from d’Aulnoy and Le Sage, that enables Wieland to foreground reading by proxy consistently throughout his narrative.
Wieland’s novel draws itself on a rich literary archive in order to develop the devices that turn it into the marker of a new phase in the history of the German novel. The intertextual web and its precision expectations are shaped differently in Don Sylvio and start to get geared towards reading by proxy as a mechanism of coherence. Intertextuality in reading by proxy in the modern novel, and here we can continue with Northanger Abbey and Madame Bovary, does not refer to a random range of texts in the literary archive. Wieland realises that reading by proxy can shape the coherence of his narrative, as he links precision expectations to the protagonists of the narrative, be they characters or personalised narrators. The analysis of precision expectations (and not schemata) could enable literary history to move towards an account of how different models of coherence and contingency develop in the wide but not random net of intertextual references.

“I will also attempt to articulate a genuine theory of reading—one that dispenses with our image of it as a simple, seamless process and, instead, embraces all its fault lines, deficiencies and approximations” (Bayard, 2007, p. xvii). Fault-lines, deficiencies and approximations are at the heart of reading by proxy. Cognitive approaches to literature have often been accused of an overly optimistic take on how much readers “get” and how easily they deploy the necessary cognitive operations to make sense of the narrative. Wieland’s Don Sylvio, a novel about failed reading that nevertheless ends as a successful bildungsroman, has served as my case in point for how literary texts foresee their readers’ lack of context knowledge and how they turn it into a productive literary strategy through reading by proxy. Reading by proxy, I have argued, can then also lead to a perspective on literary history as a history of reader models and “inner reading”. Arguably, this extends well beyond the eighteenth century and the days of the Quixotes into today’s narratives (see also Birke, 2016). Besides a literary history through reader models, strategies for establishing the precision expectations that are linked to reading by proxy also allow us to trace moves in the history of the novel (in this case) as a literary form. Precision expectations, however, also enable other configurations than the coherence we have observed for Don Sylvio. Together with traditional studies of how one text has influenced another, and how intertextual links run, their configurations in precision expectations could complement recent moves towards literary history in translation, pseudo-translation and world literature.

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Notes
1. This article complements chapter III, 3 in my Probability Designs, forthcoming from OUP. While I introduce “reading by proxy” in the predictive processing framework in the book, here I discuss its relevance for a cognitive approach to literary history.
2. “Don Sylvio mit so edlen Neigungen und einer so heroischen Denkungsart dereinst eine grosse Rolle in der Welt spielen und den Helden, welche sie am meisten bewunderte, an Ruhm und Glück ähnlich werden müsse, als er es ihnen an Schönheit und personlichen Annehmlichkeiten war.” This and the following translations from Wieland are mine.
3. “Seit dem sein Gehim mit Florinen, Rossetten, Brillanten, Cristallinen, und wer weiss, wie vielen anderen überirdischen (und unnatürlich schönen) Schönheiten angefüllt war, so wurde er nicht selten versucht, die gute alte Tante für eine Art von Carabosse anzusehen, deren tyrannische Ober-Herrschaft ihm von Tag zu Tag unerträglicher wurde.”
4. „Unstreitig einer von diesen allgemein bekannten Nahmen in der poetischen Welt, man sagt zärtlich wie Seladon, wie man zu sagen pflegt, schön wie Adonis, oder, tapfer und höflich wie Don Quichotte; jedermann versteht, was man damit sagen will, wie wohl in unsern Tagen in ganz Europa nicht drey Personen leben, welche sich rühmen können, die Astrao des Marquis von Urfje gelesen zu haben.“
5. “Was hindert uns zu glauben, dass die Zigaunerin, die Hyacinthen raubte, die Fee gewesen sey, die ihre Schwester unsichtbar gemacht hat?“
6. Le Ciel pour l’innocence a toujours combattu; Après avoir puny le vice Il sçait couronner la vertu.
7. “Zudem dacht ich, wenn sie eine Fee ist, so weißt sie das alles ohnehin.”
8. „diese merkbliche Verschiedenheit, die sich zwischen der Geschichte des Don Sylvio und anderen Feen-Märchen findet, ein überaus günstiges Vorurtheil für die historische Treue und Wahrhaftigkeit des Autors erwecken müsse.”
9. “Wenn die Fee auch nur Geschöpfe unserer Einbildungskraft sind, sagte er; so werde ich sie doch
immer als meine größte Wohltäterinnen ansehen, da ich ohne sie noch immer in der Einsamkeit von Rosalva schmachtete und vielleicht auf ewig der Glückseligkeit entbehrt hätte, diejenige zu finden, die mein verlangendes Herz, seit dem es sich selbst fühlt, zu suchen schien.”

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