Croatian Journal of Philosophy
Vol. XXVI, No. 77, 2026
https://doi.org/10.52685/cjp.26.77.2
Received: September 29, 2025
Accepted: April 16, 2026

Repeatable Experiences of Music and Texts[1]

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In The Performance of Reading *(2006), Peter Kivy argues that reading literary texts is performative in nature, like musical performance, where both require active interpretive engagement. This analogy highlights that both activities involve interpretive decisions and can be silently performed, involving an auditory imagery experience of the inner voice. Nevertheless, Kivy argues that, unlike music, reading is not an intrinsic repeatable activity, mainly because the primary motivation for reading novels is to uncover the plot, and once known, the aesthetic pleasure decreases. In the present paper, we challenge Kivy's view with both theoretical and empirical evidence. First, literature, like music, involves cultural traditions of repetition and contains multiple layers of interpretation, similar to how repeated musical performances reveal new insights. Second, existing empirical data show that rereading literary texts, including novels, improves appreciation and comprehension, much like repeated listening to music enhances liking and understanding. Overall, we believe that these considerations suggest that both reading and music allow for repeatable experiences that deepen with each engagement.*

Keywords: Peter Kivy; music; literary texts; repetition.

[1] Although the paper has been conceived and discussed together, Carola Barbero has written section 2 and Fabrizio Calzavarini has written section 3. Section 1 has been jointly written by the two authors. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference *Beauty and Change 2025*. We thank the audience of this conference, and in particular Jacopo Frascaroli, Pietro Kobau, Elizabeth Schellekens, and Alberto Voltolini, for their useful comments.

1. Peter Kivy on music and literary texts

1.1 Analogies

The philosophical literature offers several extensive explorations of the analogy between music and language. For instance, Kivy defends the view that music is linguistic because it possesses a syntactic component similar to language, although in an analogical sense: "musical 'syntax' may not be syntax in the literal sense, but syntax-like, as music is language-like, but not language" (Kivy 2007: 216). Music lacks a semantic component – that is, meaning in the literal sense – but can evoke emotive properties that listeners can interpret based on their familiarity with musical structures, thereby forming an emotive "vocabulary" (for discussion, see Di Bona 2019). In the *Performance of Reading* (2006), Kivy further explores the analogy between music and language, specifically focusing on literature. He introduces the claim that the act of reading is performative in nature and that performance is a crucial aspect of understanding the aesthetics of literature. He emphasizes that, just as a musical performance involves an interpreter (the musician), so too does the reading of literature involve the reader's interpretive engagement with the text (for discussion, see Feagin 2008; Ribeiro 2009; Morais 2010, 2017).

Kivy's analogy between reading texts and musical scores highlights several key points. Both activities require individuals to make interpretative decisions, necessitating active engagement to bring the written material to life (Kivy 2006: 67-74). Additionally, both reading and music unfold over time and can be performed silently, critically involving auditory mental imagery (the "inner voice"). Indeed, when reading music silently, skilled musicians "hear" the performance in their heads. Similarly, when reading literature, both expert and ordinary readers can imagine the narrative being spoken, hearing voices, whether the narrator's or the characters' (Kivy 2006: 114–126). In this sense, according to Kivy, "we hear stories in the head, the way Beethoven, when he read the scores of Handel, heard musical performances in the head" (Kivy 2006: 63). An immediate implication of Kivy's view is that congenitally deaf individuals may lack a full aesthetic experience. Since Kivy links the appreciation of literature to auditory mental imagery – such as "hearing" dialogue internally – he concludes that deaf individuals may have a "defective" aesthetic engagement with literary works (Kivy 2006: 68–69).

Interestingly, it has been recently shown that Kivy's phenomenological observations on the analogies between music and texts are at least partially confirmed by empirical data from cognitive neuroscience (for discussion, see Barbero and Calzavarini 2024). Despite being functionally and anatomically dissociated at the cognitive level, as suggested by patient (e.g., Cappelletti et al. 2001; Mendez 2001), eye-tracking (e.g., Cara and Gomez-Vera 2016), and neuroimaging (Mengelli et al.

2017) studies, the two reading experiences involve an auditory simulation of the content, similar to having a performance in the mind's ear. A series of fMRI studies, for example, have demonstrated that regions in the primary and secondary auditory cortices involved in music and voice processing are also activated when both novices and experts are silently reading musical notation and texts (e.g., Yao et al. 2011; Mongelli et al. 2017). This auditory imagery experience seems to be critical for a deep understanding and appreciation of musical scores and literary texts, as suggested by studies on reading abilities in deaf subjects. This reinforces Kivy's analogy between the experiences of music and literary texts.

1.2 Structural disanalogies

Kivy's analogy between music and texts reaches a point of divergence when it comes to the role of repetition. Already in the *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, Kivy argued that absolute music – i.e., instrumental music without propositional content – is structurally distinct from literary texts (Kivy 2002: 153–154). According to Kivy, "[…] music, to put it bluntly, is very repetitious. Repetition is an integral part of musical form, both internally and externally" (Kivy 2002: 153). Internally, within the movements of a symphony, musical entities are structured around recurring patterns: "Just as your wallpaper or your rug repeats small designs to make the larger ones, so too, in the movement of a symphony, the internal structure is a structure or repeated […] melodies, melody fragments, or smaller musical motives" (Kivy 2002: 153). Externally, classical musical pieces involve large-scale repetitions, often signalled by musical notations indicating to the performer to play the earlier section again. Kivy observed that these structural repetitions are not incidental but "essential building blocks of most musical forms, during the past 300 years. Musical form, as we now know it, would be impossible without them" (Kivy 2002: 153–154).

In contrast, Kivy argues that literary texts such as stage plays or novels are structurally linear or progressive, avoiding repetition to maintain coherence and forward movement. Kivy highlights the absurdity of imposing repetition into the structure of narrative forms, both internally and externally: "Suppose Hamlet were constructed that way. Then, instead of saying 'To be, or not to be...' once, and then getting on with his life, Hamlet would repeat, every few minutes, 'To be, or not to be...'. Not only that, but each act of Hamlet – it has five! – would be performed twice, the first act being repeated before the second act could be presented, and so on. The absurdity of this procedure hardly needs further comment" (Kivy 2002: 154). Based on these observations, Kivy concludes that music, as "the fine art of repetition", fundamentally diverges from the non-repetitive nature of literary or dramatic texts: "Were narrative fiction as repetitive as absolute music, it would not be the art of narrative fiction as we now have and understand it. And

were absolute music as unrepetitive as narrative fiction is, it would not be the art of absolute music as we now have and understand it" (Kivy 2002: 154).

1.3 Experiential disanalogies

The strongest disanalogy between music and texts regarding repetition, according to Kivy, is not structural but experiential: whilst musical pieces can be repeatedly enjoyed and experienced in fresh ways, the same cannot be said for literary texts, especially novels. In *The Performance of Reading,* Kivy argues that the phenomenon of re-experiencing music in the everyday life cannot be entirely explained by the novelty of performance: "For many people have only one recording of each work of music in their record collections, yet they listen to their favourite works over and over again, even when it is the same performance each time" (Kivy 2006: 88). Instead, the phenomenon has deeper roots in the nature of musical experience itself, where aesthetic pleasure does not diminish but instead increases with repeated listening and familiarity. In music, a listener can always derive new interpretations or emotional responses from repeated exposure, even when she is entirely familiar with the piece. Each performance or listening session allows for new insights and pleasures by revealing subtleties in phrasing, openings, dynamics, or structure that were not apparent on first hearing.

On the contrary, Kivy posits that reading, particularly the reading of novels, lacks this same potential for repeated enjoyment as musical pieces once the plot is uncovered. Kivy contends that the primary motivation for reading a novel is to discover its plot, and once that discovery is made, the motivation for rereading diminishes significantly: "To put it crassly, once you know the story – once you know how things come out – the major source of artistic satisfaction has been exhausted. So if, indeed, the normal reader reads a novel a second time, it will be after a period of time long enough for the general outline as well as the details of the plot to have faded from memory, in effect making it as if he or she were experiencing the work for the first time" (Kivy 2006: 84). This is also reflected in our common reading practices, where we are not inclined to revisit novels with the same frequency or enthusiasm as musical works: "There is nothing at all odd in declining to read a novel one has already read, even if it is a masterpiece like *Pride and Prejudice*. Normally, one tends to read a novel but once" (Kivy 2006: 87).

Granted, as observed by Kivy in *Paraphrasing Poetry (for Leasure and Profit),* in case of difficult literary works such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or *The Divine Comedy*, or the *Odyssey,* rereading is perfectly possible and legitimate: "A serious, complex poem like *Paradise Lost* has so much going on in it that a reader, even a highly sophisticated one like C. S. Lewis, cannot possibly 'get it all' with one, shall I say, 'readerly' attitude" (Kivy 2011: 373). This is not merely due to the length of such poems, because the same can be said for "many of the sonnets of

Shakespeare, or Donne's notoriously dense and difficult 'metaphysical' and religious poems, brief though they may be in comparison" (Kivy 2011: 373). The critical point is that, according to Kivy, rereading in these cases has little to do with aesthetic pleasure. Rather, the act of rereading is driven by the need to focus on specific aspects for study or intellectual engagement: "In reading such poetry, it is not only perfectly proper but absolutely necessary to read it now for the philosophical, religious, or moral content, or whatever, another time concentrating on this or that aspect of the linguistic or formal structure" (Kivy 2011: 373).

1.4 Kivy vs Nabokov

Kivy's argument stands in contrast to scholars like Vladimir Nabokov, who advocated the art of rereading as the true mark of engagement with literature in its highest sense (the one capable of causing the famous "shiver on the back"). Nabokov famously argued that "one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader" (Nabokov 1980: 3). In this view, the aesthetic pleasure of reading does not lie merely in discovering the story but in revisiting the text to disclose deeper layers of interpretation. In Nabokov's view, rereading removes the cognitive barriers due to the physical and psychological effort to understand the text, allowing the reader to engage more deeply with the artistic features of the work and to reach a fuller aesthetic appreciation:

> When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eye from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation […]. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it […]. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting. (Nabokov 1980: 4)

Yet, Kivy remains sceptical of this argument, asserting that while some readers may indeed find pleasure in rereading, this is not the norm for most literary engagement: "Now it is surely no intent of mine to deny that such novel-reading as Nabokov describes is appropriate and rewarding. But it is not the way most readers enjoy novels, who do enjoy them, including the serious ones, the great ones, the works of genius. And so the above argument is of no avail to me" (Kivy 2006: 89). Accepting Nabokov's argument, according to Kivy, risks overintellectualizing the novel-reading experience:

> The kind of reader [Nabokov] describes is certainly not the normal reader, nor is it the reader or kind of reading for which many if not most of the great as well as the not-so-great novels were written. They were written for a thinking reader, yes. However, they were written to be read and enjoyed and thought about by folks who read for pleasure, read a novel generally only once, and then move on to something else. […] To give the palm only to

> the Nabokov-style reader is, it appears to me, to succumb to a very unpleasant form of intellectual snobbery. The non-repeatability of the novel, then, is, Nabokov's reader to the contrary notwithstanding, the general rule, but, as we have seen, is no argument against silent novel- reading being a kind of performance. (Kivy 2006: 89)

2. On repetition and literary engagement

2.1 Structural analogies

We have seen that Kivy defends a fundamental analogy between music and literary texts, which has also been partially vindicated at the empirical level (for discussion, see Barbero and Calzavarini 2024). Nevertheless, he marked a significant disanalogy when it comes to the role of repetition: unlike music, literature is not inherently a repeatable art form. At the structural level, according to Kivy, literature is not characterized by repetition as an essential feature, whilst repetition is fundamental to the form of music, shaping its patterns and themes. At the experiential level, musical experiences are intrinsically repeatable, for they allow for fresh interpretative engagement each time, whereas literary texts, particularly novels, lose much of their novelty and appeal upon rereading, as the primary motivation of uncovering the plot has already been fulfilled.

In our opinion, however, there are both theoretical and empirical reasons arguing against Kivy's point on the repeatability of music *vs* texts. Let us start with the structural level. Kivy is certainly right in observing that music tends to be a highly repetitive stimulus (for discussion, see Margulis 2013). Interestingly, this is true not only for classical musical pieces, such as symphonies or sonatas, but also for contemporary musical compositions. For instance, a recent study by Yu and Ying (2014) analyses the role of repetitive motifs in Western popular songs from 2000 to 2013, focusing on their frequency, duration, and impact on listening time. The findings reveal that 71.43% of the analysed songs contained at least one repetitive motif, with an average duration of 368.8 centiseconds and an average occurrence of 43.5 times. That said, Kivy fails to observe that repetition is also a critical structural device when it comes to literary texts. As is known, repetition in poetry and in some examples of prose has to do with repeating words, sentences, lines, and stanzas, and can serve to help establish rhyme schemes, meter, and rhythm. These all contribute to the musical quality of poems when they are read aloud.

Clear examples of repetition in poetry include anaphora (repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of lines – e.g., Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech), epistrophe (repetition at the end of lines for emphasis), and refrain (recurring lines or phrases, as in ballads or songs). Repetition in poetry serves a variety of functions, contributing to the semantic, aesthetic, emotional, and structural di-

mensions of the work (for discussion, see, for instance, Ribeiro 2007, 2018; Clarvoe 2009). It is a fundamental poetic device that helps creating rhythm and musicality within the text, reinforces themes and ideas (e.g. in T.S. Eliot's "*The Waste Land*", repetition amplifies themes of desolation and fragmentation), builds emotional intensity (think about Edgar Allan Poe's "*The Raven*", where the repeated word "Nevermore" deepens the speaker's sense of hopelessness), structures the poem, evokes a sense of tradition or ritual, invites participation, explores variation and context, and mirrors natural patterns.

Critically, examples of repetition can also be found in prose, contrary to what Kivy assumes. As observed by Miller, "a long work like a novel is interpreted, by whatever sort of reader, in part through the identification of recurrences and of meanings generated through recurrences" (Miller 1982: 1). Repetition in novels occurs at various levels. On a small scale, verbal elements can be repeated, such as words, figures of speech, or metaphors. On a larger scale, events or scenes might be duplicated within the text. As Miller puts it, "Any novel is a complex tissue of repetitions and of repetitions within repetitions, or of repetitions linked in chain fashion to other repetitions" (Miller 1982: 2).

To make some examples from famous novels, in *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, repetition reflects Benjy's fragmented mental state, with recurring thoughts like "Caddy smelled like trees" evoking his deep attachment and obsession. Similarly, in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, the iconic opening line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," underscores the paradoxes of the era while creating a rhythmic cadence that draws readers into the narrative. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* uses repetition to reinforce themes of memory and trauma, as the repeated reference to "124" anchors the story in its exploration of grief and history. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway mirrors Santiago's persistence through repeated descriptions of his struggles, adding a meditative quality to the narrative. In *The Wings of the Dove*, Henry James employs repetition for emphasis and rhythm, such as in Milly's reflection: "And she was dead, dead, dead" (more generally, James in his novels masterfully employs repetition across various levels; for discussion, see Radetič 2018).

These examples demonstrate that repetition in prose, similar to the repetition of refrains, patterns, and motifs in music, is a common feature of literary texts, and interpreting a novel is done in part through noticing such recurrences (Miller 1982).

Indeed, a reader sympathetic with Kivy might object that repetition is an obligatory and architectural feature of musical pieces, whereas in literature, although common, repetition is often local and optional, reflecting a stylistic or rhetorical choice of the author.[2] We believe, however, that this contrast is overstated. First, it should be noted that some musical traditions, such as free improvisation or certain atonal

[2] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

practices, do not rely on, or at least minimize the use of, architectural repetition. As observed by Gartman, for instance, "[t]he ban on repetition is one of the most important dogmas of free improvisation. This taboo can be explained with the paradox that improvisation means inventing something in the moment, and you can invent something only once" (Gartman 2021: 392). Secondly, even when repetition is structurally critical in music, the apparent difference with literature might be more a question of perceptual immediacy and temporal granularity rather than genuine structural presence. Typically, repetitions in music are easy to individuate for they are compressed in time, differently to literary pieces, where they tend to be more disperse. The patterns of repetition in novels, for instance, such as motifs or thematic and narrative parallels, are often more distributed in time, operating across extended sketches of text. In fact, when repetition in literary pieces is more concentrated, such as in poetry, it is immediately perceived as structural, as we have seen above.

2.2 Experiential analogies

What about the experience of music and texts, which is the main focus of the present paper? Granted, from an intuitive point of view, reading literature is cognitively more demanding than listening to music, given the complexity of language processing, memory load, and interpretative effort. This may help explain why people, in general, tend to relisten to music more easily than re-read novels (perhaps because life is too short to squander such labours). Nevertheless, in our opinion, Kivy's disanalogy, which suggests that repeated encounters with literature are somehow less compelling or fruitful than repeated encounters with music, is challenged by several pieces of philosophical evidence.

First, Kivy's disanalogy overlooks cultural elements of repetition. As observed by Kendall Walton in *Mimesis as Make Believe,* clear examples of cultural text repetition include children's rereading of familiar stories: "it is a notable commonplace that children, far from being bored by familiar stories, frequently beg to hear the same ones over and over again" (Walton 1990: 260). This establishes a parallel with music, where it has been demonstrated that relistening familiar songs has a calming effect on both normal and neurodivergent children (Kim et al. 2024). As again observed by Walton, adult literary culture also supports the value of repetition by explicitly encouraging rereading: "Some adult traditions – ancient Greek theater, Javanese Wayang Kulit – have a relatively fixed repertoire of standard, well-known plots, which nevertheless remain alive and exciting for the audiences" (Walton 1990: 260). This parallels the phenomenon of cultural repetition in musical tradition, where the same compositions were performed and reinterpreted repeatedly, not only in Western classical music (for discussion, see Margulis 2013), but also in Eastern traditions such as Indian music (for discussion, see Jairazbhoy 1971).

Second, Kivy's conviction that our primary motivation for reading a novel is to discover its plot neglects the point that, as Peter Lamarque argues in *The Opacity of Narrative*, literary works are not transparent windows onto their content but are characterized by *opacity*: "Rather than supposing that narrative descriptions are a window through which an independently existing (fictional) world is observed […], we must accept that there is no such transparent glass – only an opaque glass, painted, as it were, with figures seen not through it but in it" (Lamarque 2014: 3). This means that literature can be appreciated for its intrinsic qualities such as its aesthetic, thematic, and imaginative aspects. And this is, of course, what drives our interest when we engage in rereading texts: we do not repeat the experience of reading for uncovering again a story that we already know, but to appreciate the intrinsic artistic features of the text, such as its narrative techniques, style, and the particular way it creates meaning within its literary world. Furthermore, far from being a way of overintellectualizing the experience of reading literature, this is what usually happens in everyday life (Lamarque 2014)[3].

Third, Kivy's disanalogy between literature and music also misses the dynamic, layered nature of literary engagement. Contrary to what Kivy argues, the "meaning" of a literary text, such as a poem, is not "the sum total of the various propositions or 'meanings' the poet intended to convey with his poem" (Kivy 2011: 368). As famously observed by Iser, literature often allows for multiple layers of semantic interpretation, which can be uncovered and appreciated more fully only through repeated readings:

> A second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first. The reasons for this may lie in the reader's own change of circumstances, but all the same, the text must be such as to permit this variation […]. The increased information that now overshadows the text provides possibilities of combination that were obscured in the first reading. Familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem to be at times corrected, at times enriched. But for all that, nothing is formulated in the text itself; rather, the reader himself produces these innovative readings. (Iser 1984: 10)

This is particularly true when it comes to complex literary texts that include several artistic elements that are not immediately apparent. On a first reading, a reader might grasp the story or basic emotional arc, but on subsequent readings, it is possible to interact with the narrative structure of a text in diverse ways, for instance, by noticing a subtext, a particular character's trait, or a narrative device

[3] Think about poetry: we reread our favourite poems over and over again without feeling bored or tired even if we already know what they are about, and we are eager to repeat that experience. Curiously enough, Kivy's disanalogy is specifically focused on novels and does not take into consideration poetry, which sounds odd because both poems and novels are included in the more general category of literary works as Kivy's admits (Kivy 2006: 101).

(like unreliable narration) that went unnoticed before. For example, modernist literature like the works of James Joyce or Virginia Woolf invites rereading precisely because its narrative style – stream of consciousness and non-linear storytelling – demands active participation and multiple attentive readings. As Joseph Frank convincingly states, "Joyce cannot be read – he can only be reread" (Frank 1968: 19).

Fourth, the active process of uncovering meaning is ongoing and evolves with each rereading. Readers bring their own experiences, knowledge, and evolving interpretations to each new encounter with the text, which allows them to appreciate different aspects over time. As Bence Nanay explains, "We have a different experience [when rereading] because reading heavily relies on the use of mental imagery, and the mental imagery reading conjures up can be very different on two different occasions" (Nanay 2022). When we read, we generate mental images that, by producing internal, perceptual-like experiences involving not only visual images but also sounds, textures, and other sensory details through a multisensory process, bring the text to life, allowing us to "see" and "feel" the characters, settings, and events as if we were witnessing them directly (Nanay 2009, 2016). This imaginative engagement is crucial for shaping our understanding and interpretation of the story while connecting with its emotional content. But mental imagery, as Nanay stresses, is highly variable. It can change based on our mood, prior experiences, or even the specific context in which we are reading. That is why when we reread a novel, the mental images we conjure can differ, leading to a unique reading experience each time. Thus, mental imagery is not a static reproduction of a text but an active, dynamic process, making each reading encounter distinct.

Therefore, the activity of reading, as again observed by Iser, is a "kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections" (Iser 1984: 84), where each sentence creates expectations for the next while also reshaping what has been read:

> Every sentence contains a preview of the next and forms a kind of viewfinder for what is to come: and this in turn changes the "preview" and so becomes a "viewfinder" for what has been read. This whole process represents the fulfillment of the potential, unexpressed reality of the text, but it is to be seen only as a framework for a great variety of means by which the virtual dimension may be brought into being. The process of anticipation and retrospection itself does not by any means develop in a smooth flow. (Iser 1984: 54)

Critically, this explains why, contrary to what Kivy assumes, readers can experience a narrative text differently upon each reading, even if they are already aware of the story, much like how musicians interpret a score differently with each performance.

Indeed, a reader sympathetic with Kivy might still object that there exists a clear asymmetry between music and literature as regards repeated experiences: whilst in music re-exposure typically involves rel-

istening to the entire piece, literary rediscovery is often selective and assisted by memory, since readers usually return to specific key fragments (e.g., openings, lyric highlights), rather than fully rereading. We believe, however, that this asymmetry should not be overstated. First, even in music, repetition does not always amount to full re-exposure: particularly with long and articulated pieces, listeners frequently rely on partial reply, such as relistening the overture of a classical piece (Margulis 2013). Second, the asymmetry might be explained in part by the affordances of the medium: musical experience typically unfolds as a continuous temporal stream, making precise navigation more demanding from a practical point of view and discouraging selective repetition, whilst written texts can be easily navigated non-sequentially, making selective rereading more natural. Critically, the asymmetry does not seem to be stable across reading modalities: audiobooks, in fact, render literary experiences more similar to music in terms of temporal continuity and difficulty of navigation (Rubery 2014). Therefore, the contrast in question seems to reflect more a difference in access conditions rather than a structural distinction in repeatability.

3. The empirical data

3.1 Repeated experiences of music

In the previous section, we have provided several philosophical observations against Kivy's disanalogy between music and literary texts when repetition is at stake. As we have seen, repetition in literature, similar to music, operates as a key structural and experiential device. Critically, in our opinion, Kivy's disanalogy is also disconfirmed by existing experimental research. In fact, empirical studies indicate that rereading literary texts, as it happens with music, leads to increased appreciation and comprehension.

Let us start by considering the case of music, where Kivy's observations appear to be robustly supported by experimental data. A long tradition of behavioural studies in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as more recent research, has established that the relationship between repetition and pleasure follows an inverted U-shaped curve, or *Wundt curve* (e.g., Jakobovits 1966; Davies 1978; for a critical review, see Margulis 2013). This means that initially, as listeners become familiar with a musical piece, their aesthetic appreciation increases. However, after a certain number of repetitions, appreciation begins to decline, leading to overexposure and, eventually, dislike. One explanation for the initial rise in enjoyment is the *perceptual fluency model* (Bornstein and D'Agostino 1994). According to this model, repeated exposure to a musical piece progressively makes its cognitive processing easier, and the listener tends to mistake this ease of processing for the quality of the music itself, determining an increment of pleasure. Furthermore, as shown in the statistical learning literature (for a review, see Pearce

2018), repeated listening in children and adults can induce implicit internalization of musical patterns and transitions without the need for deliberate analysis.

While this general pattern holds, it has been shown that various factors, including the listening context (Wong et al. 2011), personal history with music (Wong et al. 2012), and psychological characteristics of the individuals (Hunter and Schellenberg 2011), influence the experience of repeated listening (for discussion, see Margulis 2013). For instance, Szpunar and colleagues (2004) demonstrated that the more complex a musical stimulus is, such as orchestral music, the richer the opportunity for enjoyment through repeated exposure. This is because complexity allows listeners to derive more from the music as they become more familiar with its structure. At the neuroscience level, studies using fMRI have also shown that hearing familiar music activates emotion-related brain areas, such as the limbic and paralimbic regions (Pereira et al. 2011), further supporting Kivy's conjecture about the pleasure of repeated listening. Interestingly, recent EEG experiments using the inter-subject correlation technique further illuminate this phenomenon by demonstrating that repeated listening to complex music increases synchronization of neural activity across listeners, particularly in emotion-processing regions like the anterior insula and prefrontal cortex (Madseon et al. 2019). Neural synchronization is, in turn, supposed to be a reliable proxy for aesthetic engagement.

3.2 Repeated experiences of literature

What about repeated experiences of literary texts? Admittedly, empirical research in this area is less developed than in music. Nevertheless, the existing studies seem to directly disconfirm Kivy's hypothesis. For instance, Dixon et al.'s seminal 1998 study aimed to explore the "depth of appreciation" that emerges through rereading (measured on a Likert scale from 0 to 7). The authors' hypothesis was that literary texts, such as Borges' novels, would determine greater appreciation due to rereading as compared to simpler texts like detective stories. Their methodology involved a paradigm in which subjects were asked to read the same text twice (excerpts from Borges' novel *Emma Zunz*) and aesthetically evaluate it after each reading. Results of the study show a significant increase in appreciation for Borges' novel after the second reading.[4]

[4] Note that this does not mean, however, that rereading simpler novels such as detective stories is not correlated to increased aesthetic pleasure. In Dixon et al.'s study, the author used *Death was her Dowry* as control text and found that rereading this novel shows a positive, although modest, increase in evaluation from the first to the second reading (total depth of appreciation = 0.61). For instance, ratings of whether the story was "good literature" increase from 3.87 to 4.13, and recommendations from 3.74 to 4.09, while enjoyment remains stable (4.65 to 4.65). On the other hand, the more complex literary text, i.e., *Emma Zunz*, shows a significantly larger increase in depth of appreciation (= 2.54). This suggests that the relevant difference, therefore, might concern not the presence or absence of

Interestingly, it appears that the critical factor contributing to deeper engagement during the second reading is the increased attention to literary devices like complexity and ambiguity of the narrator. This is suggested by the observation that appreciation rates changed little between the first and second readings when a manipulated version of Borges' novel was used, in which literary effects (i.e., cues to narratorial ambiguity) were removed.

These results were partially supported by a subsequent 2004 study by Hakemulder, which used a similar rereading paradigm. The author used selected excerpts from Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (Pilot, Experiment 1), a baroque novel full of complex metaphor, and Nabokov's *The Old Bridge* (64 words, Experiment 1), a shorter and much simpler poem (Experiment 2). In general, as in the 1998 study by Dixon and colleagues, scores on aesthetic appreciation significantly increased after the second reading among individuals with literary training (Experiments 1 and 2), although they remained more or less the same for non-expert readers (Pilot). For *The Old Bridge*, participants were asked a number of questions after both the first and second readings to assess perceived complexity. In this case, readers indicated that "they had enjoyed rereading the poem, that they became aware of aspects in the poem they had not seen the first time, and that they expected to discover even more after reading the text once more" (Hakemulder 2004: 214). Again, increased attention to literary effects during the second reading (i.e., *foregrounding* and deviations from standard language use) appears to be a critical factor: rereading manipulated versions of the same excerpts did not significantly increase appreciation.

In 2018, Kuijpers and Hakemulder conducted three experiments trying to replicate the results of Dixon and colleagues. Participants read either original or manipulated versions of three well-known literary works – i.e., Borges' *Emma Zunz* (Experiment 1), Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (Experiment 2), Bierce's *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (Experiment 3) – and measured their appreciation and perceived comprehension across multiple readings. In the modified versions, complex, ambiguous, or stylistically distinctive features of the narratives were removed, making the texts easier to process and less literary in nature. Self-report measures to test perceived comprehension were used, asking participants to rate how well they understood the literary texts they read. Results confirmed that, contrary to Kivy's supposition, appreciation increased after rereading. However, contrary to previous studies (Dixon et al. 1998; Hakelmuder 2004), this increase was mainly linked to a rise in perceived comprehension, rather than the presence of literary features. Additionally, readers' prior print exposure (reading experience) played a minor role, suggesting that rereading is rewarding for all readers when it increases comprehension, independently of a text's literary complexity.

aesthetic pleasure related to rereading simpler vs more complex literary texts, but the magnitude and nature of the relevant increase.

A final study by Xue and colleagues (2022) examined the effects of rereading on comprehension, fluency, and appreciation using the eye-tracking methodology and testing two of Shakespeare's sonnets, Sonnet 27 ("*Weary with toil*") and Sonnet 66 ("*Tired with all these*"). Eye movements were tracked during both an initial reading and a rereading session to assess real-time cognitive processes. Participants were English speakers with no special literary training. In line with previous studies (Hakelmuder 2004; Kuijpers and Hakemulder 2018), actual comprehension of both sonnets increases significantly, as evidenced by individuals' responses to questionnaires about the main topic of the sonnets. Analysis of objective eye-tracking measures, such as faster total reading times, fewer fixations, and reduced regression times (e.g., the number of fixations of a certain word after the first passage), further confirms that rereading improved subjects' comprehension of the literary works. Surprisingly, rereading did not significantly enhance their appreciation of the sonnets when results were analysed in a combined way. Nevertheless, when the results were analysed separately for each sonnet, there was a slight increase in appreciation of Sonnet 66 after rereading, though not for Sonnet 27.

3.3 Open issues and future research

To summarize, the existing experiments on rereading suggest, contrary to Kivy's disanalogy, that repeated engagements with literary texts can, in a similar way to what happens with music, deepen appreciation and/or uncover new layers of meaning, challenging Kivy's notion that literature lacks the potential for renewed aesthetic pleasure. As we have seen, this seems to be true across literary genres, such as different types of novels (Dixon et al. 1998; Hakelmuder 2004; Kuijpers and Hakemulder 2018) and sonnets (Xue et al. 2022), and not only for experienced readers (but also for readers with no special training (Dixon et al. 1998; Kuijpers and Hakemulder 2018; Xue et al. 2022). Only the 2004 study by Hakemulder found a null effect of rereading on appreciation among non-expert readers, but this result was obtained in the context of a pilot study and using a highly complex and metaphorical text (*The Satanic Verses*), which might necessitate a higher level of literary competence to be fully appreciated. Overall, these findings suggest that the benefits of rereading are not restricted to a niche audience (the "Nabokov-style" reader, in Kivy's words) but extend to a broader readership, suggesting that literature, like music, has a universal capacity to allow for repeatable experiences.

Indeed, we do not want to suggest that Kivy's disanalogy between music and texts has been conclusively falsified by experimental research. Much more research is needed in this field, for instance, by incorporating more ecologically valid stimuli and experimental designs. Traditional experiments on rereading literary texts often use short, isolated texts or excerpts in controlled laboratory settings (e.g., Dixon

et al. 1998; Hakelmuder 2004). This methodological procedure may not fully capture the complexities of real-world reading experiences. Using longer texts, such as complete novels, and testing subjects after longer intervals, such as days or weeks, would offer a more authentic view of how rereading unfolds over time and in more natural contexts. In music, this has been done recently by Madson and Schiolde (2018), whose design emphasised ecological validity by allowing participants to repeatedly listen to musical pieces in natural settings, such as at home or during daily activities, over an extended period of time (4 weeks).

Furthermore, potential experiments might directly contrast the willingness to reexperience literary texts and musical pieces that are somehow balanced in cognitive costs, since, as we have seen, reading literature seems to be intrinsically more demanding than listening to music. Future research could also explore how rereading affects appreciation and comprehension across a variety of literary genres, such as formalism, postmodernism, and realism.[5] This establishes a parallel with the domain of music, where some studies have tested the impact of repeated listening on the appreciation of pieces from different genres, like jazz and blues (Orr and Ohlsson 2001). Individual differences also play a crucial role in how rereading affects comprehension and appreciation. Further research might investigate how factors such as prior reading experience, familiarity with literary techniques, cognitive style, or cultural background may shape how a reader engages with a text during subsequent encounters. Through such expanded experimental investigation, we may further support the hypothesis that, like music, literature has a rich potential for repeated aesthetic enjoyment, further challenging Kivy's idea that texts are primarily appreciated for their plot and lose value once the story is known.

As a conclusive observation, it should be noted that an important limitation of current research on rereading is that it is exclusively behavioural. Studies in neuroscience could further substantiate the claim that rereading literary texts and relistening music share cognitive underpinnings. For instance, studies using techniques such as fMRI or EEG might assess whether rereading familiar stories increases activation in emotion-related brain regions, such as the limbic and paralimbic systems, as it happens with music (Pereira et al. 2011; Madseon et al. 2019). Further experiments might investigate inner auditory imagery, a common phenomenon in both reading and music (for discussion, see Barbero and Calzavarini 2024). Researchers might examine whether

[5] For instance, we have seen that, in the 1998 study by Dixon et al., rereading detective stories increases appreciation significantly less than rereading more complex novels such as *Emma Zunz*, suggesting that complexity modulates repeating effects across different literary genres. This, in turn, suggests a potential disanalogy with music, where often simple musical pieces sustain relistening more readily than complex works. Whilst this apparent asymmetry might reflect a difference in modes of engagement rather than a fundamental divergence in repeatability, further empirical work is certainly needed on this issue.

repetition strengthens the vividness and stability of inner auditory imagery in both music and literature, and how individual variability in auditory imagery affects repetition effects across both domains.[6] Finally, experiments could also focus on neural responses to structural repetition, which is a highly underinvestigated phenomenon. For instance, studies could investigate whether repeated encounters with poetic refrains or narrative motifs elicit neural activation patterns similar to those elicited by repeated musical motifs.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, in *The Performance of Reading* (2006) as well as in other works (2002, 2011), Peter Kivy draws a firm distinction between music and literature, suggesting that the intrinsically repetitive nature of musical pieces makes them better suited for repeated enjoyment than literary texts. Nevertheless, we argue that several strands of theoretical and empirical evidence challenge this disanalogy. At the theoretical level, both music and literature employ repetition as a structural and experiential device that increases appreciation over time. As we have argued, repetition is grounded in cultural traditions, both in the form of recurring motifs in music and in that of refrains and cycles in literature. At the empirical level, extant experiments on rereading reveal that literary texts, much like music, allow for deeper aesthetic and cognitive experiences due to repeated exposure. Although more experimental research is certainly needed in this field, the existing empirical evidence suggests that Kivy's disanalogy underestimates the potential of literary texts to offer repeatable aesthetic experiences similar to those raised by music.

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[6] It is known, for instance, that defects in auditory imagery due to hearing limitations or loss affect not only musical but also literary appreciation (for discussion, see Barbero and Calzavarini 2025).

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