

Ana Margarida Abrantes

## **Culture, Text, and Mind: Bridging the Gap between Cognition and History in the Study of Literature**

- Mark J. Bruhn/Donald R. Wehrs (ed.), *Cognition, Literature, and History*. New York/London: Routledge 2014. 284 p. [Price: \$ 145,00]. ISBN: 978-0-415-72209-4.

Literature flanked by cognition and history. With this programmatic approach co-editors Mark J. Bruhn and Donald R. Wehrs present the shared aim of the twelve essays in this volume, namely »to investigate the complex intersections of the three domains specified in the title – *Cognition, Literature and History* – in order to advance the interdisciplinary discussion and research in poetics, literary history, and cognitive science.« (1) Taking literature as the point of departure and the focus of the analysis, the authors and editors seek to combine the concepts and models of cognitive science with historical methods in literary studies to provide an account of literature that bridges the divide between form or stylistics and history or context. This chasm of poetics and hermeneutics has marked the history of literary criticism, from structuralism to post-structuralism and new historicism, and has equally influenced the more recent field of cognitive literary studies. Since its early days in the 1990s, with the seminal work on the correlation of textual patterns and reading effects (Tsur 1992), and on shared structures of language and thought as products of a cognitively modern human mind (Turner 1991, 1996), two decades of intense work have followed, marked by multiple directions, as the christening of this new interdisciplinary field demonstrates: *Cognitive Poetics* (Tsur 1992; Stockwell 2002; Gavis/Steen 2003), *Cognitive Stylistics* (Semino/Culpeper 2002), *Cognitive Narratology* (Jahn 1997, Herman 2003), *Evolutionary Literary Theory* (Eibl 2004). The branching of the epistemological union of cognitive science and literary studies reflects the advance in the related fields of cognitive linguistics, neuroaesthetics and evolutionary psychology. With its new agenda, the cognitive approach to literature has focused primarily on the cognitive conditions that enable the production and fruition of literary texts, often pushing to the background the historical embedding and contextual reception of literary works. However, it is an established fact that cognition is more than a matter of the single brain, and rather takes place much in and out of our heads (Noë 2009), in an environment that for human beings is naturally cultural. Social cognition and intersubjectivity are key features of the way we make sense of the world and of experience. In fact, most literature is about the unfolding of social, contextual interactions.

Thus the study of literature needs to include a historical dimension that for the most part has remained unaddressed in the cognitive approach. The human mind is the result of a long and slow evolutionary process, but it is also situated and manifested in a historical dimension that changes at a much faster pace. If literature is an infant in the evolutionary scale, it is also a venerable constant through places and times of change. A cognitive dimension in the study of literature allows us to relate this cultural product with mental phenomena and to understand how literature changes minds (Kidd/Castano 2013, Nünning 2014). A historical dimension helps overcome the fallacy of applying cognitive concepts to literary texts often providing »painfully obvious« interpretations (Jackson 2005, 258) by contextualizing the texts in their historical significance.

With its programmatic intersection of cognition, literature and history, Bruhn and Wehrs' volume sets the agenda for a cognitive historicism that addresses the text, unveils the mind and

provides historical significance. The four parts of the volume address issues of genre, affect, theory of mind and criticism, recruiting the three fields for a more comprehensive understanding of these overarching problems.

Part I brings together »Cognitive Genre Theory and History«, in an exploration of »Kinds of (Literary) Cognition«. Genre is a category that lends itself to a cognitive approach, when viewed as schemata (as proposed by Hanenberg/Brandt 2010). The question that permeates this first part is how genres, as cognitive structures or ways of framing experience, correlate with historical time; in other words, how genres as schematic representation of experience evolve through time and context. Opening this section, David Duff traces the study of the ode to the contributions of Enlightenment and Romantic criticism. Based on these early insights he suggests the concept of lyric transport to account for the effect engendered by this genre. Involving a double attention shift, from the pragmatic to the aesthetic use of language, and from regular thinking and feeling to intensified emotional involvement, lyric transport helps explain how the reader is accelerated to high feelings and slowed down to the perception of the form, a process that can be described and modulated, therefore lending itself to a cognitive oriented study of attention, emotion and how language drives the two.

Using blending theory, Michael Sinding traces the evolution of epistolarity, from ordinary forms of language and exchange, through progressive differentiation based on a diversification of functions: from factual to fictional settings, from actual to imagined addressees. This evolution, in which later epistolary genres integrate forms and functions of previous primary genres in new blended formats, bears witness to the development of the mind in historical time: understanding genre formation implies understanding the imaginative processes by which primary genres are integrated and transformed into secondary genres under specific contextual conditions.

The consideration of literary genres brings with it the issue of canonicity, which Nancy Easterlin approaches in combination with novelty. Easterlin analyses novelty in narrative thought, as a pattern for organizing information, events and agents in a coherent structure. If on the one hand narrative is a way of repeating action sequences, which in evolutionary terms are essential for survival, it is also an organizing frame the human mind uses to deal with novelty and with the change of those patterns. Applying this idea to literary narrative, and taking the literary romance as her case in point, Easterlin claims that narrative provides a safe haven for experimenting with and challenging patterns, so as to enhance and broaden knowledge, which otherwise would be limited to routine narrativizing. Once habituation is created to respond to what is familiar, attention is drawn to what is unusual and new. The propensity for literary novelty is a cultural manifestation of this evolved capacity to attend to the unexpected. In this context, the preference for certain kinds of novelty is framed by the cultural environment in which it occurs. Easterlin's idea resonates the sociocultural view of creativity, namely that a (cultural) product is creative when it is judged to be both novel and valuable (see, for instance, Sawyer 2012). Assessing and praising something as creative requires a cultural context, which renders such evaluation meaningful.

The idea of novelty recurs in Katja Mellmann's text, in which she explores how cultural products influence conceptualizations of the world, often taking a central role when segments of reality are experientially unfamiliar. This is often the case with ideologies. In a similar line to Easterlin, Mellmann claims that the mind is most attracted to scenarios that combine recurrence of features with novel variations, and draws a parallel between this feature of cognition and the modes of production of cultural industry, in line with Adorno and Horkheimer. The representations (mediatic, artistic) of realities using high degrees of experientiality award viewers a tacit knowledge (as described by Hanenberg 2011) of such realities that does not

drive from the subject's own experience or explicit beliefs. Mellmann addresses the high degree of immersion (or transportation, as mentioned by Duff) in the reception of cultural products, often bypassing reflection and distance, and traces this reception mode to two features of evolved experiential learning: induction or the capacity to form general norms from single instances of experience, and the emotional adaptation for admiration, a development of imitation, either actual or through intense attention to a pattern. The power of cultural products, a well-researched topic in cultural studies, acquires a new dimension when the reception of cultural and literary products is analyzed not just in the context of social forces, but when these »ideology transfers« are viewed in the broader perspective of evolved learning mechanisms.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to »Affective Narratology«. Focusing on twelfth-century narrative literature, Donald Wehrs draws on the evolved capacity for empathy to distinguish between in-group identification as an adaptation mechanism with obvious advantages for the subject, and the opposite unlikely identification with out-groups as expression of ethical concern. Sociocultural forces may modulate the capacity of co-experiencing the emotional state of another and to format this experience according to the interests of social groups and norms. Yet a primary form of empathy prevails through this social modulation: a deep form of humanism, built in the mirroring circuitry of human cognition. This differentiation in affective response is expressed in the literary text analyzed by Wehrs as a dilemma, a blend between shared, deeply ingrained humanity, and the historical and political constraints of a social order based on the exploitation of others. By enunciating such impasses, the literary text invites one to run the blend and with it the possibility of reflection of a new sociality from within the narrative worlds.

Thomas Blake takes the case of two literary works whose protagonists are two matriarchic figures that either represent or demonize the foundations of Andalusian society: Galso's *Doña Perfecta* and Lorca's *Bernarda Alba*. The puzzle addressed by Blake is the high receptivity to such contradictory characters. Drawing on the conceptual metaphor of a nation as a family, and aware of the different material conditions underlying the production of the two works, Blake traces the textual processes by which the metaphor is explored and empathy is generated, as means for challenging the conceptualization of morality. This, in turn, underlies the authorial intentions of transforming the political future, in one case, and denouncing the reality of the political present, in the other.

In his text, Patrick Colm Hogan discusses the metaphorical conceptualization of nation and the narrative genres involved in the affective representation of nationalism. Cross-cultural prototypes, such as the prototype of family separation and reunion, are deployed in nationalism emplotment, triggering a revision of the concept of national identity, as is the case of the work he analyses, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. Hogan demonstrates how the concept of nationalism is both cognitively and emotionally construed, and how the structures employed in this process are relevant across cultures and times.

Part three of the volume is devoted to one of the key subjects of a cognitively motivated study of literature, namely *Theory of Mind* (ToM), the ability to infer from observed behavior of others their unobservable mental states. Initially developed in primatology (Premack/Woodruff 1978) to denote chimpanzees' capacity for deception, a feature of social cognition, the concept has proven to be productive in literary studies (Zunshine 2006), as literature is a symbolic representation of counterfactual realities and inferred states of mind. Yet the concept is also controversial, and has been elaborated in two strands: theory theory, the understanding of ToM as a tacit theory of how the mind works, either viewed as an innate capacity or acquired through ecological experience; and simulation theory, which claims that we activate our inner resources

involved in experience to represent or simulate the inner states of others, as they undergo similar experiences (for a closer account of simulation, see Gallese 2007).

In the first text of this section, Joel Krueger proposes an alternative phenomenological approach to the minds of others, based on a view of bodily actions as part of mental phenomena and not only their expression. Viewing cognition as something that goes beyond one's head has been a well-explored idea in cognitive science, in relation with concepts of social and extended cognition (Clark/Chalmers 1998), and sustained by experimental research. Krueger's idea of a phenomenological theory of mind based on »direct perception« (153) offers an interesting alternative to established models and creates expectations as to how literature, a rather indirect mode of representation, bypasses this symbolic contingency to allow this direct perception of the minds of others.

As Howard Mancing writes in the next paper »In reading a work of literature there is no direct visual perception of bodily movements and gestures« (183). He reviews the two main conceptions of ToM to focus on the »interaction approach« (175), a view that rejects the concept of theory altogether, rather claiming that embodied experience and sociocultural practice are the sources of knowledge needed to infer the mental states of others. Mancing illustrates this with the composition structure of a picaresque novel from the Spanish 16<sup>th</sup> century, making the case for the consideration of culture and social experience as key for a mind to develop the representation of other minds. After all, humans »have been reading each other's minds for eons.« (184) Moreover, construing the novel with a relevant theory of mind, reveals more than the genre concedes: the picaresque is rather understood as a narrative representation of a unified mind and its workings.

Marina Grishakova takes a step back in theory of mind, by attending to the concept of selfhood that precedes and is involved in the representation of the Other. Focusing on postmodern fiction, she explores the phenomenology of nonstandard selves, and the role of the Other in construing the self, noting that literary representations bear witness to an approximation of art and psychology that may open a path for understanding alternate ways of perceiving reality. This article is in line with an area of research in cognitive science that explores a possible link between psychosis and certain forms of art representation (see, for instance, Burns 2007; Demjen/Semino 2015).

The final section of the book on »Theory and History of Cognitive (Literary) Studies« starts with a methodological problem, namely introspection and subjective report as possible paths for accessing subjective experience. This is indeed a much needed debate, after a long period of behavioristic dominance in the study of the mind, and especially in the present moment, where ever more sophisticated technology holds the promise of total cognitive transparency. Opening this section, Mark J. Bruhn proposes a cultural history of introspection, presenting Romantic precursors in the debate of many contemporary cognitive topics. Bruhn claims a place for literature as a report of cognitive experiences and a means for cultivating articulate introspection in a science of the mind that draws not only from experimental observational methods, but acknowledges as well the historical legacy of introspection.

Mark Collier addresses the concepts of taste and aesthetic value challenging the view of a cultural-historical bias and asking whether taste might be grounded in human nature. The issue is close to research on the science of art (see the leading work by Ramachandran/Hirstein 1999) and on neuroaesthetics, which seeks to find the neural correlates for the experience of perceived beauty (as proposed by Zeki 2009, a leading researcher in the field). Collier however takes a different, philosophical approach and draws on David Hume's account of aesthetic evaluation as based on human nature: though conceding for variability driven by education and contextual

environment, such variability was seen as grounded in human nature. Focusing on literary studies, Collier ends by inquiring about the correlation between unity of action and aesthetic values of narrative. One could further ask whether empathy, which has been correlated with narrative (see Breithaupt 2009), mediates in this aesthetic appraisal, and, further, whether empathy is a precondition for aesthetic value or indeed the two are to be kept apart.

In the epilogue, Donald Wehrs addresses anew the core issue of this volume., namely whether »cognitive readings undermine historicizing modes of analysis« (243). In a cognitive perspective the historicity of the subject is related to its situatedness, which itself is the result of evolutionary history that allows for transcultural constraints and conditions, rather than a discursive and linguistic construction. In that sense, one of the directions for this cognitive historicism is to trace transcultural processes that operate on meaning, such as conceptual metaphor based on bodily experience, or transcultural patterns of affective involvement that allow for similar emotional responses to literary texts across space and time. The role of language in this process is constitutive. Arguing on the theoretical and philosophical implications of a historically informed cognitive literary enterprise, Wehrs acknowledges that while »we cannot just change the way we think«, the neurophysiological conditions of our embodied experience are not simply deterministic constraints to our creativity, but instead »condition its possibility and contextualize its significance« (249).

Taken together, the twelve essays in *Cognition, Literature and History* make a strong case for an integration of an evolutionary view of the human mind and cognition and a historical consideration of the mind's elaborate products such as literary texts. The chapters in this volume contribute to the bridging of the gap between cognitive criticism and historicism, and do so in two main ways: by reviewing concepts from cognitive science, proposing new ones and applying them to the analysis of historically contextualized texts (Duff, Sinding, Easterlin, Blake, Mancing, Collier), or by exploring how literary and cultural products, situated in their historical context, may produce and enhance cognitive effects (Mellmann, Wehrs, Hogan, Krueger, Grishakova, Bruhn). The systematic reflection of the relation between cognition and history in the analysis of literature departs in each article from the consideration of a case study, but extends beyond it to the view shared by the papers that understanding literature involves considering the mental operations underlying the text, relating these operations to cognition at large, and situating both the text and its cognitive underpinnings in the historical context and cultural significance. This combination overcomes cultural and historical relativism in literary criticism, and bypasses the conundrum of seeing the literary text as a mere illustration for cognitive processes at large. The theoretical view of cognitive historicism proposed in this volume is an important direction for the research of literature as a cultural product that reflects a shared cognitive view of reality.

In this perspective, literary analysis has a double scope: on the one hand, it considers the historic situatedness of the text, the constraints of its production and reception, the specificity of its cultural references; on the other hand, it focuses on the traces of human experience that extends beyond the particularities of the story, deriving from historical interpretations human, existential ones. This might, for instance, explain why certain texts are awarded the status of canonical works: rather than their submission to sociopolitical construction, the timelessness of these historically situated works might be their resonance of long-term evolved cognitive propensity, which is the basis upon which transcultural experientiality is founded.

Matching textual strategies, devices and correlating them with reading effects, from emotional involvement to heightened attention, and how this resonates the spirit of a time, or instead challenges it, is the task ahead. *Cognition, Literature, and History* is an important step in this direction.

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