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## The place of the cognitive in literary studies

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## INTRODUCTION

# The place of the cognitive in literary studies

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Additional information is available at  
the end of the article

The so-called “cognitive turn” lies almost two decades behind us, and a cognitive approach to literary texts, interested in the processes of thought, feeling and imagination evoked and developed by literature, has been established through multiple handbooks (see e.g. Zunshine, 2017), the conference series “Cognitive Futures in the Arts and Humanities” (since 2013) and book series such as the Poetics and Cognition series at Oxford University Press. And yet, it would be difficult to say that cognitive approaches to literature have found “their place” within literary studies. The approaches that come under the label “cognitive” are very diverse, drawing on cognitive linguistics and evolutionary perspectives, philosophy of mind and reading sciences, to name but a few perspectives involved. Cognitive approaches to literature have proposed formulations of their interdisciplinary engagements (for example, as a kind of “cognitive literary science”, see Burke & Troscianko, 2017) and their ambitions about covering historical range (see Herman, 2011; Zunshine 2008), but much remains to be said about cognitive approaches in relation to literary history, the methods and objects of study, and the perennial discussions around the purpose of literature. Similarly, the relations between cognitive and earlier approaches to literature and reading have rarely been explored in significant depth.

In the project “The Place of the Cognitive in Literary Studies”, we had the opportunity to establish an open forum for literary scholars from the Nordic countries to develop an exchange about these issues. Financed by the NOS-HS programme for “exploratory workshops” (grant number 327086), colleagues from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden gathered at three workshops devoted to the topics of “History and Traditions” (Oslo), “Methods” (Stockholm) and “Purpose” (Helsinki) in 2018–2019. We involved both experts in cognitive approaches to literature and scholars at home in other areas of literary studies in order to map out the place that cognitive approaches take in our discipline.

The contributions to this volume were presented as papers at the workshops, and they are shaped by the ongoing discussions around “history”, “object and method” and “purpose” that were pursued in our meetings.

In the first workshop at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in May 2018, we addressed the role of **literary history** in relation to cognitive approaches to literature. Across time, literature has found different ways of engaging the human mind, its feelings and imaginative capacities. How can cognitive approaches to literature think about these historical traditions? And how can we integrate a historical dimension into cognitive approaches to literature? Terence Cave’s (Oxford) keynote proposed that literature offers a kind of “cognitive archive”, where texts situate thinking, feeling and imagining. A session where we discussed poems from the eighteenth century through different cognitive perspectives put our theoretical observations into practice, suggesting that cognitive perspectives open up further avenues of study in historical traditions.

The second workshop in the series, organised jointly with the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm in November 2018, explored the place of the cognitive in literary studies through the prism of research **method**. The core project members were joined by

special guests from the research fields of empirical literary studies on the one hand and philosophy of science and philosophical aesthetics on the other. On this occasion, the particular perspectives enriching our long-standing debate between theoretical and empirical literary study spanned a wide spectrum of methods from psychophysiological measures and brain imaging (represented by keynote speaker Winfried Menninghaus, Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics) to paper-and-pen reader response studies and ethnographic observations. A dialogue emerged between traditional aesthetics and empirical observations.

The final workshop organised at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in May 2019 turned our attention to the questions of **purpose**: What role does literature play in human lives, and what purposes are implied by the archives and methods chosen by cognitive literary studies? Does literature develop cognitive skills such as empathy, perspective taking and self-awareness? And how can literary scholars best reach out to policy makers and the public on these issues? Our keynote speaker for the workshop was Teresa Cremin (Open University), one of the central figures in the study and promotion of childhood fiction reading in the UK, and through the presentations given by her and the other participants we developed further ideas on how cognitive literary studies can take part in debates concerning literature in the wider world. With this theme in mind, our seminar series concluded with a public lecture by Teresa Cremin, given in the new Helsinki City Library Oodi, on how to support reading for pleasure in children.

The papers that emerged from these workshops were written in response to the challenges which “history”, “object and methods”, as well as “purpose”, pose for formulating the role that cognitive literary studies can take within literature as a field of research.

The article by Eric **Cullhed** addresses a seemingly paradoxical aspect of the representation of death in the *Iliad*. When the Greek and Trojan heroes are mangled and dismembered on the battlefield, the poem seems to take an almost dispassionate voice, known as “epic objectivity” (as argued by Justin Griffin). What is at stake here, Cullhed argues, is more than “noble restraint”. Cullhed draws on recent research in emotions to show how the *Iliad* calls attention not only to loss, suffering and vulnerability in connection to these deaths, but also to the “deariness” of the heroes and the ideals they embody. More important than the lack of sentimental effusions of the narrator, Cullhed argues, is the way in which this deariness is presented as existing in opposition to other kinds of affective motivations that equally endow heroic life with meaning.

Karin **Kukkonen’s** contribution continues to query the literary archive, and takes up the challenge presented by that archive to the ways in which cognitive literary theory models readers. Focusing on Christoph Martin Wieland’s 18<sup>th</sup>-century novel *Die Abenteurer des Don Sylvio von Rosalba*, Kukkonen sets out to explore how cognitive literary studies can engage the phenomenon of historically contextualised intertextuality, and the knowledge of the worlds and texts of the relevant historical periods that such intertextuality seems to require. Through the concept of “reading by proxy”, the article describes how intertextual references may not, in fact, require readers to be familiar with the texts referred to. “Reading by proxy” builds on Kukkonen’s earlier work, and details here the strategies that can be used to guide the readers’ expectations and allow them access to the novel’s literary archive even without such previous familiarity (e.g. explicit reference to and description of other works by the narrator, or having characters read, describe and refer to other works as models of their behaviour). Wieland’s novel, Kukkonen argues, also forms an important step in the history of the novel, as it uses the processes of reading by proxy to move towards the aesthetic values of the modern novel by increasing the internal coherence of its narrative.

A very different kind of text is taken up by Steen Ledet **Christiansen**, who discusses a contemporary graphic novel in order to explore the concept of “atmosphere” in literature. Christiansen sets out to identify how narratives affect their readers through moods and more diffuse feelings than those associated with, e.g., character empathy. Building on the work of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in literary and cultural theory, Robert Sinnerbrink in aesthetics and film theory, and Peter Stockwell in cognitive

poetics, Christiansen argues that focusing on the atmospheric background of narratives is the necessary counterpart of understanding the eruptions of feeling that arise from that background. If affordances of a text are what allows readers sense-making actions within the text, Christiansen suggests, atmosphere is a quality of the fictional world that primes readers' affective responses and makes their immersion in that world possible. It is the interplay of these two aspects of the text that form the affective structure of narratives. The second aim of Christiansen's article is to examine how the concept of atmosphere is useful in clarifying the genre-specific qualities of weird science fiction. This question is approached through the analysis of the comic book series *Injection* (2015-), where the disruptions between a recognisable reality and its fantastical counterparts create an atmosphere of breaks and discontinuities typical of the weird genre.

Another kind of weirdness is addressed in "Making Mythopoeic Meaning out of Plants", a piece that speaks to an oft-neglected issue: is cognition purely human? While working with human artefacts (literary works) about plants, Erik **van Ooijen** argues that such plant fictions may still provide insight into plant cognition, possibly even what it feels like to be a plant. Van Ooijen makes this argument by focusing on embodied relations with the world, a relation that is shared amongst humans and plants. Van Ooijen's argument is that such relations suspend any distance between human and world in favor of a playful, vertiginous experience that Roger Caillois calls *ilinx*. Van Ooijen's article might serve as an example of how cognitive theories are able to open up new ways of understanding literary fiction and the world of which we are a part. Literature always invites readers into something that is other than themselves and so fosters a reflection on the situation of others and an empathic relation to those others.

Such empathetic invitations are investigated in Merja **Polvinen** and Howard **Sklar's** contribution, where they discuss how, and with what possible consequences, cognition is ascribed (by readers) to fictional humans. Polvinen and Sklar review the different and philosophically distinct approaches to literary characters that currently circulate in literary theory and public discourse. Building on a distinction introduced by Phelan (2007), they show how most scholars' approaches fall either within a "mimetic" or a "synthetic" way of thinking about characters. Polvinen and Sklar argue that one's strict allegiance to either, as theorist and/or educator, can have a real and potentially reductive impact on how literature is perceived in society. The discussion is grounded in astute theoretical argument, but also paralleled by the presentation, categorization and interpretation of empirical data from a previously unpublished reader response study conducted by Sklar. The data is used to show the large variety of responses, in a relatively homogeneous sample of readers, to one and the same literary character. It further nuances and reshapes the discussed conceptualization of character in its mimetic and synthetic guises, as well as in the authors' preferred understanding which combines elements of both approaches.

The contribution by Thor Magnus **Tangerås** and Kjell Ivar **Skjerdingsstad** goes a step further into the experiences of readers, and explores the affordances of Shared Reading, a communal reading practice first introduced in the UK but readily adopted in the Nordic region. Shared Reading creates a safe physical environment for readers, regardless of professional background, to read together and talk freely about poems and snippets of prose literature. As such it provides a window for researchers into the cognitive-affective makeup of texts, readers, but also social groups. Previous research, however, has mainly studied Shared Reading in terms of its post-reading psychological or medical outcomes in individuals. Drawing on Cave's (2016) work, in particular his notions of "kinesic reading" and "affordance structure," Tangerås and Skjerdingsstad, in turn, seize the unique potential of Shared Reading for qualitative observations *in situ*. Importantly, their attentive analysis of a case study points to social-cognitive phenomena that have currency beyond the specific Shared Reading environment and will be familiar to most scholars who teach literature (e.g. the collective construal of meaning from text; the place of silence in interpretation).

Olivia **Fialho's** contribution also focuses on the ways in which readers find value and meaning in literature. Fialho introduces "Transformative Reading" (TR) in the context of cognitive literary studies—a term that refers to the study of exceptional reading experiences that seem to change readers' lives profoundly and speak to the power and purpose of literature. Fialho discusses different

conceptualisations of “purpose” in order to establish the foundation of her interest in the transformative nature of literature in the history of literary studies. Transformative reading, she argues, draws on reading experiences that have moments of “dehabituation” and thereby translate formalist notions of defamiliarisation in literary texts into an element that informs results in the empirical study of literature. “Dehabituation”, Fialho comes to show, can be linked to particular linguistic regularities in the ways in which readers report on their transformative reading experiences, and she introduces the range of research that has been done in this connection. In the concluding part of the article, she illustrates how the theoretical work and empirical research in TR have been applied in the context of education and the workplace, thereby concretely realising the more general discussions of the “purpose” of literature that preface the article.

Although cognitive literary studies, in general and also in this special issue, vary greatly as to theory and method, they all share a serious interest in the workings of the mind. This entails a commitment to two-way intellectual exchange (Burke & Troscianko, 2017) with realms of research where the object of study is live human beings rather than “isolated” text. In this special issue, however, such commitment is not manifested through research topic alone. It also transpires in the emergence of novel genres of academic writing. Represented by Polvinen and Sklar, Tangerås and Skjerdingsstad, and Fialho, these genres combine the close attention to data familiar from empirical (in these particular cases: behavioural) sciences with the theoretical depth and complexity of more traditional humanities writing.

Here, either the data itself (Fialho; Tangerås and Skjerdingsstad) or the analysis and discussion thereof (Polvinen and Sklar; Tangerås and Skjerdingsstad) is the product of a collaborative effort. While Fialho adopts a meta-perspective where her empirical research is reviewed alongside that of many others, Polvinen and Sklar and Tangerås and Skjerdingsstad share with us smaller data sets each obtained in one particular study. Their sharing is qualitatively different from traditional data reports insofar as it is explicitly self-reflective and less bound by academic genre conventions. In Tangerås and Skjerdingsstad’s case, this self-reflectivity is linked to the ethos of action research (Kemmis, 2009). Meanwhile, Polvinen and Sklar partly write in an open dialogue with one another. In all three cases, the ambition has been to find a way of evidence-driven writing that speaks to audiences across disciplinary boundaries.

The motivation of the articles by Cullhed, Kukkonen, Christiansen and van Ooijen, on the other hand, lies in the tension between literary texts and psychological, philosophical theory as complementary sources of evidence about thought processes. It might be the case that Ovid’s myths of transformation know more about the lives of plants, and contribute more to our understanding of them, than biology itself, van Ooijen suggests. Theories of the emotions abound, but perhaps Homer’s *Iliad* might invite us to reconsider the role of “dearness”, and the links between emotions and “core values”, as Cullhed highlights. And Kukkonen argues that literary texts can build their own contexts from within themselves, thereby establishing the literary text as an exceptional technology for the human mind in culture. These articles draw on the skill of literary scholars in the analysis of complex textual forms, and bring them into dialogue with evidence won through other methods in the cognitive sciences and philosophy.

“The Place of the Cognitive in Literary Studies” will remain contested, but the conversation which has been started between scholars in the Nordic countries through this project and this special issue might point towards new ways of framing the debate itself, as well as the contribution that literary studies makes across the boundaries of the disciplines and into the wider world.

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