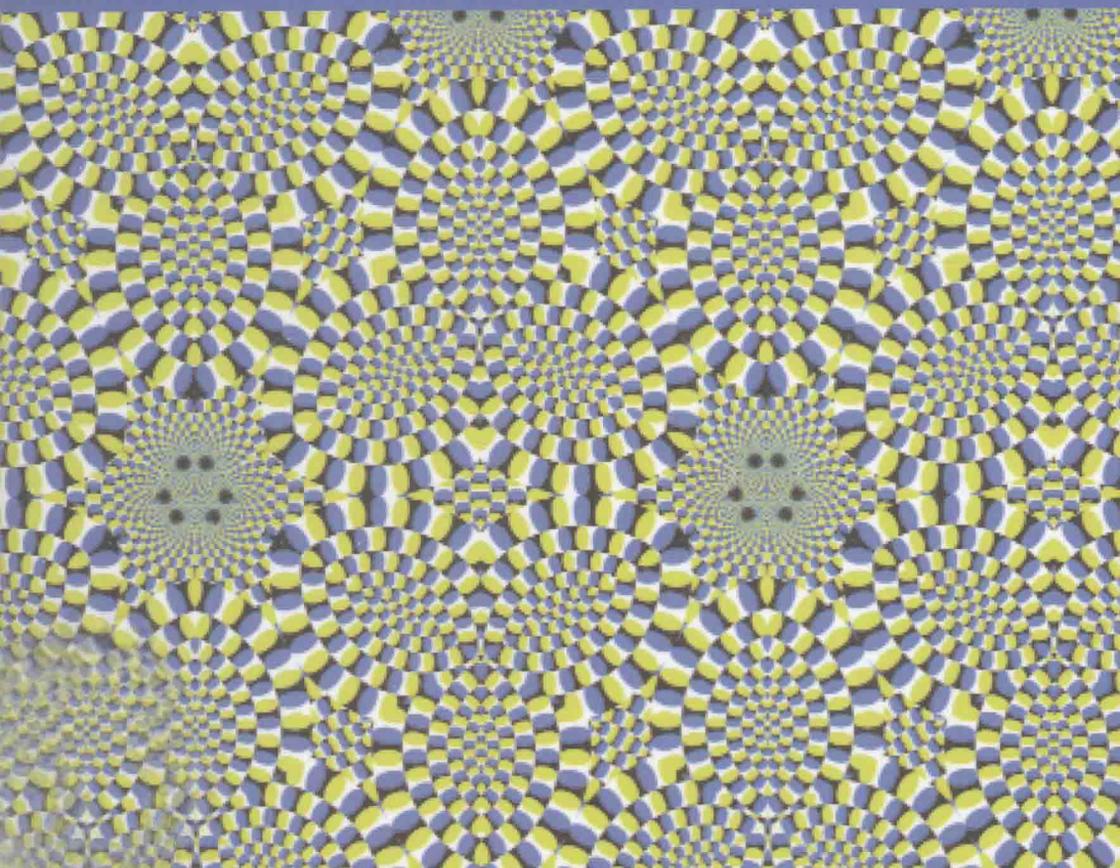


# texture

a cognitive aesthetics of reading

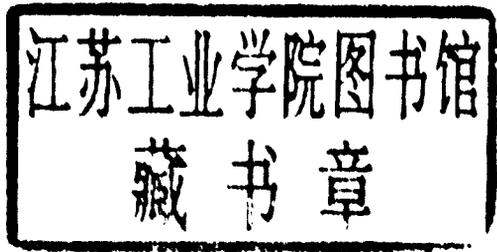
Peter Stockwell



# Texture

*A Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading*

PETER STOCKWELL



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PJS  
Nottingham

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# 1 Text, Textuality and Texture

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This is a work of literary criticism, and literature is defined by its texture.

The proper business of literary criticism is the description of readings. Readings consist of the interaction of texts and humans. Humans are comprised of minds, bodies and shared experiences. Texts are the objects produced by people drawing on these resources. Textuality is the outcome of the workings of shared cognitive mechanics, evident in texts and readings. Texture is the experienced quality of textuality.

Literary criticism has settled recently into a paradigm which is improper and marginalising. Across most of the higher education institutions of the world, and in the pages of the scholarly and quality press, literary scholarship has become an arid landscape of cultural history. Contexts and biographies, influences and allusions, multiple edited textual variants of literary works and their place in social history have become the focus of concern. Interpretation is offered to illuminate critical theory, or to validate a historiography. Aside from a few oases of enlightenment, engagement with text, textuality and texture has largely disappeared from the profession. There are those who call themselves literary scholars who have lost the skills of textual analysis, and who know little or nothing of their basic crafts: linguistics, psychology, sociology, and their inter-disciplines. While cultural and social and political history has its place in literary criticism, the mass migration of thinkers away from the heart of their discipline has rendered the field vacuous. Rational thought, discipline, systematicity, clarity of expression, transparency of argument, evidentiality and analytical knowledge have become the preserve of the few. Meanwhile, discussions of literature become ever more abstruse, further distant from the works themselves, divorced from the concerns of natural readers outside the academy, self-aggrandising, pretentious, ill-disciplined and, in the precise sense, illiterate.

There is of course another way, with origins in the practices of ancient rhetoric – a tradition that has never abandoned the core concern with texts and textuality. Under evolving names and projects, there has always been a thread of literary scholarship which has tried to understand systematically and in principle how language – the essence of literary art – works. Over

time, insights and innovations in philosophy and science have fed into this tradition, allowing thinkers to adjust and improve their ideas about literature in general and literary works in particular. The revolution of linguistics in the last century offered a series of insights into literary texts and literary readings. The most recent advances in human knowledge about ourselves are currently in the process of revivifying the discipline once again. The application of progress in cognitive science to questions in literary reading has produced a cognitive poetics that stands intellectually at the heart of literary scholarship. This book is a modest contribution to that enterprise.

### **Principles of cognitive poetics**

Cognitive poetics takes many of its models, methods, assumptions and validity from the various branches of cognitive science, but it is important to realise that the application to literary reading changes the status of several aspects of the source disciplines in the transplanted context. Certain assumptions need to be recast, and certain conclusions need to be hedged and complicated under literary analysis. This makes cognitive poetics a discipline in its own right, as well as an applied form of cognitive science. Furthermore, cognitive science – and cognitivism – are not single projects but encompass a range of activities and approaches that share some general principles and interests. Cognitive science is usually taken to comprise cognitive linguistics, cognitive psychology, the philosophy of mind, and some aspects of neurology. Other disciplines with a current or historical attachment to the field include artificial intelligence research, computer modelling, evolutionary biology, and medical research on the brain-body relationship.

### **Experientialism**

Though there are significant theoretical variations in the assumptions on which all these disciplines are based, to qualify as cognitivist approaches they all fundamentally share a commitment to *experiential realism*. This is the view that there is a world outside the body that exists objectively (realism), but our only access to it is through our perceptual and cognitive experience of it. Cognitivists thus do not deny that there are objects and relationships in the world that are available to be discovered and understood, but those phenomena can only be accessed, conceptualised and discussed within the constraints that our human condition has bequeathed to us.

### **Generalisation**

This leads to perhaps the most important principle in cognitive science which is that there are common aspects of humanity so that claims made about one

group of people and their cognitive capacities must also be true of all people. Of course, this is not to deny cultural, ethnic, racial, gendered, geographical, historical, ideological or other myriad differences across humanity, but the broad window of human possibilities is constrained by the common way in which our minds work and our bodies interact with reality. This generalisation arguing for a single view of human capability (though not a monolithic view of human performance) corresponds with a view of language that is also holistic and unified. Cognitivists regard language as a key manifestation of the mechanics of the mind, with the same principles operating throughout the system. There are continuities, for example, between how you understand phonemes and how you understand syntax, between the way you learn to manipulate physical objects in spaces and the way you learn to use language to have effects on other people, between finding your way around a room and finding your way round a text, between how you imagine a friend of a friend and how you imagine a character, and so on. In other words, language is not modular, language and cognition are not separate, literature and natural conversation are on a continuum with each other.

### **Stylistics**

This generalisation commitment (Lakoff 1990) in cognitive science sometimes looks like a search for idealised universals – and it is true that some work in cognition is primarily concerned with mind rather than with the singularities of the example in hand. This idealisation is a particular problem in literary applications, since the danger in some unthinking deployment of cognitive science to reading is that all literary texts are reduced to a processing mechanism, and the singularities (Attridge 2004) that make literature literary are downgraded. It seems to me that this particular risk is greatest in those studies that make the most direct link between brain activity and literary effect. Though there are doubtless valuable insights for neurology and psychology in mapping MRI scans and literary forms, it seems to me that the value for literary criticism is relatively small. The necessary antidote to this reductionism, in my view, is to insist on the detailed attention to textuality and its textural effects in the reader. Cognitive poetics, for me, is best when it is in the stylistic tradition, rather than being treated as another critical theory (see Stockwell 2008b).

### **Continuity**

Another principle of cognitive poetics, mentioned above, is the continuity between the language of literature and natural language. There is no special literariness module in the brain or as a phenomenon of mind that is activated when we ‘do’ literature. Instead, our natural language capacities are exploited by writers and activated in literary reading. Certainly there are peculiar and

amazing things that literature can do, but none of it is transcendent of our human capacity – it is just that our human potential is extraordinarily adaptable. The strong sense, however, that literature is special (Miall 2005) does not contradict this principle. The feeling that literature is the highest form of language art to the extent that it appears disjunctive with everyday talk is a matter of the value with which it is framed, the intensity with which it is read, and the disposition to find and accept aspects in a literary work that would not even be sought out in ordinary language. This framing renders literariness as a powerful felt effect, but the framing capacity itself is an aspect easily accountable within cognitive poetics.

Miall (2005) also points out that most early work in cognitive poetics has concerned itself with meaningfulness and informativity. This is a proper criticism, and Miall's work over recent years serves as the best example that aims to remedy it. My *Cognitive Poetics* introduction (Stockwell 2002a) is almost entirely concerned with meaning and significance, and the same is generally true of the two key collections of work that appeared around that time (Semino and Culpeper 2002; Gavins and Steen 2003). The importance and excitement of being able to discuss interpretation systematically was a large part of the attraction of the cognitive turn in literary studies, but with hindsight it is surprising that emotion, feeling and aesthetics were not so prominent despite the discipline drawing on detailed stylistic analysis and cognitive psychology. This book is my attempt to contribute some redress.

However, it is important not to fall victim to the sort of extremist swings of mood that characterise the faddism of literary theory. A cognitive poetic concern for aesthetics does not entail an abandonment of informativity; feeling does not appear at the expense of interpretation. This is not simply a progressive desire to escape a pendulum effect in the evolution of the discipline, but is a core principled consequence of accepting the cognitive basis of both feeling and meaning, and the continuities between them.

### **Embodiment**

The mind, in cognitive science, is an embodied mind (Johnson 1987, 2007; Turner 1991, 1996). We are products of our evolution, and our human size, shape and configuration, in relation to the world, provides the framework within which our brains understand the world, and ourselves. The mind is not limited to the brain, in this conceptualisation, but is a combined notion made up of what brains and bodies together do in the world (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999). There are two important consequences of this principle. Firstly, the physical material and sensible world and the abstract idealised and conceptual world are intimately bound together: mind/body dualism is rejected, and along with it, other false discontinuities such as rationalism and emotion, form and function, literal and metaphorical, real and fictional, and so on. Where these divisions seem to have any everyday value, the motivation

to make the distinctions must be accountable according to cognitive principles. Secondly, the distinction between nature and artifice is not tenable. Humans are natural beings, and the things we do, even in the name of high art, are natural things that all cultures do. Creating literature is natural; reading is a natural process – both draw on our natural cognitive capacities even as they create a sense of transcendence. This is a holistic and ecological view of human activity that does not place humans in opposition to other species or even other parts of our environment. In a world that has recently come to realise how closely human activity is bound up with the nature of the planet, an ecology of language is a necessary principle and one which cognitive poetics shares.

### Ecology

Again, the connection between the physical and the conceptual does not reduce intellect to a simply material correlate. As thinking beings we are not bound by our immediate environment or the physical objects we can move in it. Fundamental to our extraordinary adaptability as a species and feats of soaring creativity, imagination and invention is the capacity for metaphorical projection that allows immediate objects to become transformed into ideas, speculations, rationalisations, hypotheses, and rich imaginary worlds. The business of cognitive poetics is not to reduce any of this to structural types or labels, but to understand its intricate workings and marvel at the new adaptations that our capacities continue to allow. This leads me to a consequence of cognitive poetics in the stylistic tradition that sounds very old-fashioned for literary criticism: it is *appreciation*. One of the beauties of detailed and principled cognitive poetic exploration is the extent to which it enables you to appreciate the writerly skill or the readerly sensitivity, or simply the brilliance of the literary work itself as an object of art in the world.

All of these principles of connection and continuity, a holistic and ecological sense of our place in the world and our literary articulations, entail a key new form of analysis. It is not possible to talk about a literary text as if it were a thing, other than in very elementary and uninteresting terms as paper or screen and print. It is equally not possible to talk about a reader in isolation, without a sense of the whole person and viewpoint of which that reader is a partial avatar. Crucially, we must get used to talking about literary works that are the combined products of texts and readers in particular configurations (texts are autonomous objects, but literature is a heteronomous object, in Ingarden's 1973a, 1973b terms). It is not a question of focusing on either texts or readers, but recognising that the object of analysis is *texture* – the sense of textuality. This requires a new form of calibration and explanation, which draws on both traditional linguistic description and cognitive scientific accounts, and tries to combine them. In this book, it may look from time to time as if I am switching eclectically between textual description and readerly

sense, but the aim, if you step back from this close grain and view the book as a whole, is to offer an integration of what literary reading is.

## Models and methods

In the course of this book, I draw on a large body of work across most of the cognitive science disciplines, as well as on other related fields such as sociology, anthropology and philosophy, wherever the local requirement of the discussion leads. I thought it more readable if I delineated the analytical models as I use them, rather than having a separate preliminary chapter that sets out the complete toolkit. This is largely how the book is arranged. However, there are certain key models and methods that have become paradigmatic in cognitive poetics and which feature prominently in this book, and so a quick sketch in this section will be useful.

When I look back at the areas I chose to explain in *Cognitive Poetics* (Stockwell 2002a), especially with a view to adapting my teaching from that book, it became apparent that applications in the field fall into two broad areas: close cognitive stylistic analysis, and more general schematic or world-level analysis. Approaches that have proven very fruitful in cognitive poetics include applications of the notions of frames, schemas, scenarios, domains, possible worlds, and text worlds. These are all different theoretical frameworks for accounting for more or less the same phenomenon: that is, how general knowledge and experience are deployed as a central factor in the particularities of a literary reading. The differences between each of these approaches (see Stockwell 2002a for detailed references to the history of this work) lie mainly in how they account for the fact that not all of a reader's knowledge is brought to bear in any one reading. The nature and outcome of the selection of knowledge as appropriate to the literary work in hand is the focus of each model. In schema theory, for example, context-dependent headers instantiate a certain schema, so certain keywords or apposite register cue up an area of familiar knowledge that is then ready to contextualise the text in hand and bring rich meaning to it. Text world theory relies on the notion of text-drivenness to specify which parts of readers' experiential knowledge are most likely required in any given situation.

## Text worlds

I make quite extensive use of text world theory in this book (Werth 1999, Gavins 2007). One reason for this is that, of all the world-type models available, it seems to me that it best accounts for the connections between areas of knowledge and stylistic specification. It should be obvious how this is crucial for an account of texture. The detail of the text world approach is provided where it is used in the book, but a very brief preparatory sketch here is in order.

Text world theory is a cognitive discourse grammar which regards interlocutors as occupying a discourse world. Together, utterers and receivers (writers and readers, in literary terms here) create a text world on the basis of perceived common ground knowledge that they seem to share. The text world is a readerly mental representation of the alternate world – disjunctive from their own – in which there might be other characters, objects, history or location. Readers' text worlds are rich worlds, filled in from their own past experiences. The status of the text world shifts as new elements are added to it (as world-builders) or as events move on within it (as function-advancers). Certain further disjunctions create further sub-worlds that are switched from the text world, embedded in them. World-switch triggers include flashbacks, flashforwards, hypotheticals and speculation, representation of beliefs, wishes, or obligations through modalisation, metaphors, negations, and direct speech. These switched worlds have the same structure as the text world (world-builders and function-advancers), and multiple worlds can be embedded within worlds. The verifiability of aspects of each world level is an ontological matter either of character accessibility or participant accessibility.

Louwerse and van Peer (2009) observe the surprising fact that cognitive poetics, in spite of its ancestry in stylistics, has tended to draw its models more from cognitive psychology than cognitive linguistics. In an effort to redress this imbalance, I have adapted cognitive psychological work always with a focus on stylistic texture, even where I use world-level models. I have also consciously drawn more heavily on cognitive linguistic frameworks than either I or most other writers in cognitive poetics have done in the past (for an exception, see Hamilton 2003, 2007). This deliberate cognitive linguistic focus has enabled me to engage more precisely with the stylistic side of texture, while not losing the connections with psychological plausibility overall.

I draw on text world theory particularly towards the end of Chapter 3 where I discuss the worlds that are generated in empathetic readings of lamentation poems, and also in Chapters 4 and 5 in developing a cognitive poetic approach to characterisation and viewpoint. Text worlds are an especially useful way of understanding ethical positioning, which is explored at the end of Chapter 5.

### **Prototypicality**

A key concept which appears several times in this book is the cognitive linguistic notion of prototypicality (Lakoff 1987; Evans and Green 2006: 248–83). This formed the basis of cognitive linguistics and is an insight into language patterning that informs several aspects of cognitive science in general. Human categorisation, which is key to our conceptual system, does not in fact seem to operate on the basis of discrete membership classes, as has traditionally been imagined. Instead, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that categorisation is very much more fluid, provisional, adaptable

and contingent than this. To give the most simple example, here is a set of concepts referred to by ‘grass, trees, herb bed, bench, barbecue grill, children’s slide, railwayman’s lamp, gas cooker, scaffolding poles, industrial guttering’. Given the category of ‘things in a garden’, I imagine most people would include the first five or six objects, would exclude the final three, and there would be some disagreement about the railwayman’s lamp. In fact, these are all objects I can see in my garden right now out of the window; they have a variety of uses in my garden, including waiting to be recycled.

This illustrates several aspects of how categorisation works. There are central, best examples of the category, more peripheral examples, and very poor examples. From central examples of prototypicality, the less and less good examples can be regarded as being placed outwards on a radial structure. The most decentred examples are in fact better examples of other categories whose radial structures might be seen as impinging on the category in hand. We can even say that there is no such thing as an out-of-category item, just items that are very very bad examples of the category. For example, a Challenger tank, the remnants of a Blue Streak rocket, llamas, clothes mannequins set in threatening poses, over 100 rotting VW camper vans, and a linguistics study centre are all unlikely garden features but are in fact in gardens that I know (not all in the same garden, though!). The category of ‘garden’ itself displays prototype effects, and each person’s arrangement of these is dependent on experience: the garden behind my house here is very different from the Duke of Devonshire’s estate over the hills, and these are very different from a tea garden in Kyoto, a roof garden in Athens, the botanical garden in Helsinki, and the beer-garden behind the pub down the road. Category membership alters depending on the situation (my car-keys are not usually tools but they become a type of screwdriver when they are the only thing to hand that will do the job).

In cognitive linguistics, prototypicality is a key pervasive notion, operating at all levels. The examples given above have implications for how we understand lexical semantics and meaning relationships. The sense that there is a socially-shared and embodied normative pattern in a typical set of circumstances allows us to understand why variations from that pattern generate certain effects. In this book, the notion of prototypicality appears throughout much of the discussion, but it proves particularly useful in exploring types of character relationships in chapter 4.

### **Projection**

Alongside prototypicality is the importance of how figure and ground relationships are conceptualised in cognitive linguistics (see Ungerer and Schmid 2003). On the principle of continuity from physical to embodied to conceptual space, the visual field is partitioned as it is perceived into foregrounded and backgrounded features, with the former in focus and the latter in

secondary focus or regarded as an undifferentiated non-focused setting. (Clearly prototypicality gradation applies to this scale as well.) Figure and ground cognition is the key to attention, whether the object being attended to is a moving physical object or a virtual fictional one.

Complex advanced abstract thinking rests ultimately on extensions of the basic sense we have of figural objects, grounded objects and backgrounded spaces, which we begin to develop even before birth. These physical experiences are generalised as schematised knowledge, and the abstraction is then easy to apply in later life to many other examples, both concrete and also abstract. These abstractions are known as image-schemas, and they form the basis of prepositional positioning, our understanding of physical and conceptual relationships, and syntactic ordering in the clause.

The importance of figure and ground and image-schemas relies on the human capacity for projection: taking one domain and mapping it onto another in order to gain access of understanding of the new domain. This is fundamentally a metaphorical process, and research into conceptual metaphor has been one of the most longstanding threads within cognitive linguistics. Our capacity for projection is what enables our intellectual life to be developed on the basis of our physical bodies and environment. We can abstract general principles and reapply them in different circumstances (the basis of prototypicality). We can imagine alternative scenarios, recall past events and call up future events, cast ourselves into the imagined minds of others, sympathise, empathise, perceive differences and resist them (the basis of world theories). We can understand that one phenomenon can be symbolic, emblematic or iconic of another, and we can build abstract relationships between idealised objects.

The complex consequence of the cognitive linguistic understanding of figure and ground forms the basis of the discussion of resonance and intensity in Chapter 2. It also appears as a key notion in Chapter 4, and it underlies the discussion of image schemas. Image schemas are drawn on throughout the early chapters of the book, but are particularly useful in the discussion of motion and vectors in Chapter 4, and as part of the application of cognitive grammar in Chapter 6. Conceptual metaphor underlies the discussions of models of reading in Chapter 3.

### **Cognitive grammar**

As part of my focus on the detailed workings of literary works and their texture, a close stylistic analysis forms the main method of this book. Though the models of analysis that I use draw on various linguistic traditions, the main source in this book is cognitive grammar, developed mainly by Langacker (1987, 1991, 2008). As this is the main grammatical approach within cognitive linguistics, there are obvious reasons for drawing on this model. Cognitive grammar builds on the notions set out above of prototypicality, figure/ground

relations, image-schemas and metaphorical projection, in order to offer a linguistic description that is psychologically founded. There are, of course, other models of language that fall broadly within the cognitivist field – they are mostly classified as construction grammars – but the features of Langacker’s cognitive grammar suitable for our purposes in this book are roughly common to all of them.

Very briefly, cognitive grammar explains how clauses are construed on the basis of a windowing of attention of different parts of the clause, a process called profiling. Langacker draws continuities between grammatical realisations and visualisation in terms of focus, focal adjustment, viewing position, and so on. The clause is conceived of as an action chain, with an energetic force transmitted along it from agent to patient. This approach rests on a basic force-dynamic image-schema. Different construal effects are generated as different parts of the action chain are profiled, and the reader is encouraged to profile certain parts rather than others by the stylistic realisation (the grammaticalisation) of the event or state being presented.

I rely on cognitive grammatical terms throughout the book, but especially in Chapter 6, where I develop the literary analysis across stretches of extended discourse.

### **The value of cognitive poetics**

In arranging the discussions in this book, I have organised them by the effects of literary reading rather than by cognitive linguistic models. So instead of chapters called ‘deixis’, or ‘grammar’, or ‘attention’, and so on, I am more concerned to deploy insights from cognitive science to illuminate phenomena such as literary resonance, intensity, sensation, empathy, voice, resistance, and so on. Notions like these are difficult to specify, though they are experientially real and, it seems to me they form the core of what literature is as a feature of our lives.

It is easy to anticipate negative criticisms of the sort of procedure I adopt here. The most simple to reject are those based on conservatism and tradition. Readerly matters of feeling, taste, preference, relationships with characters, sense of action, and so on, have not generally been regarded as part of the remit of serious scholarship. There are two explanations for this. Firstly, as literary criticism has emerged as a university and college discipline over the last century, it has embraced complexity and abstraction as the trappings of seriousness; difficulty and abstruseness have been elevated into a virtue. Secondly, it has not until recently been apparent how these vague readerly senses could be explored systematically or in a principled way. The consequence of these two factors has been that academic literary discourse has diverged from the discourse of natural readers to an untraversable extent.

In response to my argument that cognitive poetics in a stylistic tradition