

A PREHISTORY OF

COGNITIVE

POETICS

Neoclassicism and the Novel

KARIN KUKKONEN

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A Prehistory of Cognitive Poetics

COGNITION AND POETICS

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A Prehistory of Cognitive Poetics: Neoclassicism and the Novel

Karin Kukkonen

PREFACE

As I wrote this study, two voices started materializing on the backbench. One of them urged me to consider the richness of the eighteenth-century literary scene, with its crisscrossing influences among French neoclassical criticism, its responses and continuations in Britain, and the genre of the novel. The other voice called my attention to insights from across the spectrum of the cognitive sciences that promise a new perspective on literature and the ways in which it engages the human mind. In my very personal psychomachia, the researcher working on the eighteenth century and the researcher working on cognitive approaches to literature were in constant debate, both of them taking turns playing the angel and the devil and neither of them establishing dominion over the entire study.

On the one hand, the present study makes an argument for the sustained influence of the neoclassical rules of poetics on the developing narrative form of the novel. By "neoclassicism," I refer here not to the artistic style popular at the end of the eighteenth century, but to an earlier recourse to the classical heritage in seventeenth and eighteenth century literary criticism that also goes by this name. Neoclassicism, the key critical discourse at the time, approached literature through devising and debating "rules" for writing good fiction, partly from classical authors such as Aristotle and Horace and partly from arguments about readers' and audiences' responses to specific narrative and stylistic features. Its thinking and terminology live on in the eighteenth-century novel. The rules of neoclassicism, derived from Aristotle and Horace, shaped the ways in which novelists thought about plot, storyworlds, and probabilities and the ways in which they discussed and defended their choices. Numerous references in authors' asides, prefaces, footnotes, and other paratextual materials bear testimony to the rules' continuing influence on the eighteenth-century novel. I argue that the reason why novelists maintained the principles of the neoclassical rules in their narratives might have to do not only with the rules' claims to authority (which had long since been challenged, especially

in Britain) but also with the ways in which they address the interaction between literature and the mind. Considering the rules as templates for engaging readers' cognition (in the introductory sections to the parts of this study) then allows me to trace how the neoclassical debates made their way into the plots and storyworlds of the eighteenth-century novel (in the case studies of the individual chapters).

On the other hand, the present study also makes the argument that current cognitive approaches to literature should not forget the neoclassical rules. Emerging at the time of the scientific revolution, neoclassical poetics takes a methodical approach to literary criticism, and drawing on the Aristotelian tradition, it always considers literature through the ways in which it engages the human mind. Science, of course, has changed time and again since the seventeenth century, but the neoclassical perspective seems to be akin to the outlook and ambitions of current cognitive poetics in terms of its interest in the connection between mind and literature. This study hence does not aim to reconstruct the scientific understanding of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even though that would be a legitimate and timely undertaking in the field of study that calls itself "literature and science." Instead, it proposes that the neoclassical rules offer precise templates for the study of the cognitive engagements of literature from which current cognitive poetics might profit.

These arguments are mutually supportive, and they find their place here in a framework of the "situational logic" of a literary text. Karl Popper's "logic of situations" ([1957] 2002, 138), from which I take the term, considers how the parts and the whole of a particular historical, social situation interact. From this situational logic (in other words, the interplay between world, characters, and actions), then, arises the designed mimesis of *vraisemblance*. The neoclassical rules outline different dimensions along which the parts of a literary narrative create a whole in this textual ecology of situational logic. Poetic justice connects readers' emotional engagements to the outcome of the plot. The dramatic unities negotiate how coherence in a fictional world might be established. Decorum invites the discernment of readers as to whether a fitting match between the characters and their likely way of acting has been achieved. Situational logic, then, is not the same as what cognitive theory calls "situated cognition" (see Robbins and Aydede 2009). The textual environment shaped by *vraisemblance* stands one step removed from reality, even though texts of course draw on the rich texture of situated, embodied cognition (we will see an example in chapter 8). *Vraisemblance* indicates a designed mimesis within which situated cognition becomes meaningful for the reader.

It seems quite likely that eighteenth-century novelists took up the neoclassical rules because these were the most readily available discourse for talking about literary and narrative strategies of composition. Neoclassicism forms a context for the exchange between the rival forms of the theater (for which the rules were first developed) and the novel. Novelists might even have fallen back on the rules because these principles provided successful solutions to the challenges of writing a fictional narrative. Bringing the cognitive predilections of readers to the fore, the neoclassical rules offered a framework within which novelists developed their form.

As we shall see, neoclassical debates usually argued from assumptions of how audiences and readers would respond, cognitively and emotionally, to the narratives they encounter. They remind cognitive literary scholars that the literary criticism of earlier periods shared their interest in how the human mind engages with literary texts and urge them to take seriously the long prehistory of cognitive poetics. I consider the neoclassical critics as important precursors in the theory-building of cognitive poetics, constructing intersections of different mental and literary phenomena, such as emotions, characterization, and plot; defining their joint workings; and finding names for them (such as poetic justice). The neoclassical project offered a holistic account of cognitive engagements, driven by an interest in literature, while paying attention to individual aspects of the text. Such a perspective on literature is one that cognitive approaches are only slowly reconstructing, and it seems to me that a reconsideration of neoclassical poetics as precursors of the current cognitive approaches would be very helpful in this endeavor.

Indeed, this study is most easily classified as “cognitive poetics,” that is, a critical attempt at relating how the cognitive processes in mind and body and the biases of human thinking come to the fore in literary texts and how insights into those processes and biases from the cognitive sciences can contribute to the analysis of literary texts. It understands itself as a contribution to the field and its prehistory. A history of cognitive poetics, to take the familiar view, would take its readers back to the 1980s, when some quarters in cognitive linguistics arrived at the insight that the human mind is “literary”—that its thinking is profoundly shaped by forms such as metaphor and metonymy, which have traditionally been considered the domain of literature (see Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003; Turner 1996)—and when stylisticians began to draw on cognitive linguistics to analyze literary texts (see Tsur 1992; D. Freeman 1970). By the turn of the twenty-first century, cognitive poetics had consolidated enough as a field to see three introductory volumes outlining the purview of its inquiries (Stockwell

2002; Gavins and Steen 2003; Semino and Culpeper 2002; for more recent overviews of the field, see Brône and Vandaele 2009; M. H. Freeman 2010).

Cognitive poetics forms part of the larger family of cognitive approaches to literature, which also includes cognitive narratology, cognitive cultural studies, neuroaesthetics, and evolutionary approaches. The sense in which I have used the term “cognitive poetics” here includes all features of literary texts (narrative, stylistic, and aesthetic) and therefore draws on all these approaches which feed separately into the enterprise of understanding literature cognitively. Neoclassical poetics similarly seeks to cover all aspects of literary narrative through distinguishable rules aimed at creating the *vraisemblable*. The range of cognitive issues in the case studies underlines further that literary texts engage the human mind in a variety of fashions and that cognitive poetics therefore needs to be developed as an inclusive endeavor drawing on the entire wealth of the cognitive sciences to do justice to these multiple engagements (see Cave 2014 for a similar argument).

If cognitive poetics “suggest[s] that readings may be explained with reference to general human principles of linguistic and cognitive processing, which ties the study of literature in with linguistics, psychology and cognitive science in general” (Gavins and Steen 2003, 2), then the question arises whether explanation through the “general human principles of linguistic and cognitive processing” is tied to the insights of today’s sciences exclusively. Aristotle’s *Poetics* already draws on these “general human principles” in its treatment of literary features from plot to prosody. We enter the realm of the prehistory of cognitive poetics as soon as we start considering how different epochs of poetics have conceptualized the workings of the human mind in literature. In the time before poetics draws explicitly on the cognitive sciences, its interest in the human mind in conversation with literature takes different psychological and philosophical inflections. Alan Richardson’s (2001, 2010) work on Romantic aesthetics and science and Margaret H. Freeman’s (2011) discussion of emotions and iconicity through Croce’s poetics are notable contributions that bring this prehistory of cognitive poetics to light, but much of the story still remains to be told.

The neoclassical debates, with their direct reference to Aristotle and their explicitly cognitive interests, are the chapter from the prehistory of cognitive poetics which this book intends to cover. In the two introductory chapters, I outline the overarching neoclassical principle of *vraisemblance* and reconceptualize it for cognitive poetics. Within my suggested framework of situational logic, the neoclassical rules become elements of a cognitive poetics that are relevant beyond the early modern period.

They are conceived as patterns that novelists can use and modify in their narratives to achieve different effects, and my case studies demonstrate in particular how eighteenth-century novelists have explored and expanded poetic justice, the dramatic unities, and decorum. Indeed, the case studies consider not only the novels themselves but also alternative versions of their narratives that we can find in different editions, the authors' correspondence, paratextual statements, and continuations by other writers. If the neoclassical rules of poetics provided a set of principles and guidelines for how literature engages the human mind, then the holistic conception of their parameters also allowed for experimentation as the alternative versions around these narratives began to proliferate (for example, around Richardson's *Pamela* and around Johnson's *Rasselas*). As successful solutions, they give writers indications of how to solve storytelling problems. They also provide—and this is just as important for the argument of this study—an invitation to explore their very constitution and limit cases.

To tell a prehistory of cognitive poetics is to parse the constellation of science, literary theory, and literary history in a particular way. Previous discussions of interdisciplinarity in cognitive approaches to literature have moved between importing scientific methods and insights into literary theory and proposing that, in turn, literary theory should inform scientific questions. They have also taken positions of either “strong” interdisciplinarity or “weak” interdiscursivity, the latter exchanging concepts rather than methods (see Bruhn 2011 for this distinction and a comprehensive overview of recent developments). The historical situatedness of cognitive processes and literary texts is often relegated to the background in this interdisciplinarity debate or moved into the distant evolutionary past (see Collins 2013), but a growing body of work in cognitive cultural studies (see Zunshine 2010 and the work of Mary Crane, Alan Richardson, and Ellen Spolsky) and second-generation cognitive approaches to narrative (see the collection edited by Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2014), among other approaches, is attending to the interface between culture and cognition.

A prehistory of cognitive approaches to literature, as I attempt in this study, considers how the cognitive engagement with literary texts was conceptualized at the time, how this relates to insights and ideas of today's cognitive sciences (which form the common reference point of cognitive poetics), and, finally, what this comparison contributes to our understanding of these texts more generally.

The neoclassical critics could not go beyond the concepts of cognition available in their day, but they worked toward a principled, multifaceted account of how literature entangles and delights the mind. The discussions

around the dramatic unities, for example, demonstrate that the spatial and temporal coordinates of a literary narrative are closely related to its imaginative potency and the vicarious experience of fiction. The accounts of poetic justice show that plot and emotional assessment of narratives are closely entwined, and the statements on probability and decorum detail how readers' expectations can be managed through curiosity, suspense, and surprise. In the exchange with today's cognitive sciences, the cognitive poetics of the neoclassical era can guide our analysis and indicate which cognitive processes might be important for particular effects in literary narrative, and how those processes can be related to their corresponding effects. In other words, the historical model can provide cognitive poetics more generally with templates for conceptualizing the literary implications of particular cognitive processes. In turn, this study will argue, the cognitive approach offers a new perspective on the neoclassical project and its importance for the eighteenth-century novel. Taking cognitive poetics back into history, I propose, not only sheds light on the cognitive interests of an earlier poetics but also contributes to the further development of cognitive poetics.

Out of the debate between the eighteenth-century and the cognitive voices, then, comes a study that, on the one hand, participates in the discussion about the rise of the novel and, on the other hand, outlines a prehistory of cognitive poetics. My focus on the cognitive implications of neoclassical poetics lets me trace a new genealogical line of influence that contributed to the shaping of the novel form and consider cognitive and historical concerns of literary study together.

Two introductory chapters conceptualize *vraisemblance* and its relation to situational logic in the eighteenth-century, neoclassical and the contemporary, cognitive critical landscapes. The case studies then revolve around three rules of neoclassical poetics: poetic justice, the dramatic unities, and decorum. In each part of the book, I shall outline key features of these rules as described by French critics and their reception in Britain and relate them to the cognitive phenomena which they describe. For each of the three rules, I take three sets of texts as my case studies. Poetic justice is explored through Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) and Radcliffe's Gothic novels; the dramatic unities lead to discussions of Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1770), and Madden's *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* (1733), as well as Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764); the importance of decorum will be brought to the fore with the help of Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), and Cleland's *The Woman of Honor* (1768). The case studies thus stretch from the middle to the end

of the eighteenth century, demonstrating the continuing relevance of neo-classical poetics across a rather varied set of writers. I have chosen these novels for the different aspects of the situational logic of narrative which they illustrate rather than to achieve complete coverage of novel-writing in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹

As far as “rise of the novel” studies go, two names are strikingly missing from the case studies. The first name is Laurence Sterne, whose *Tristram Shandy* stresses that “I care not what Aristotle, or Pacuvius, or Bossu or Ricaboni say” ([1759–67] 2009, 165).² Sterne ridicules any critical authority, and, unlike some novelists we discuss here, he meant it. The second name is that of Daniel Defoe, who seems to be in this, as in so many other respects, exceptional. What separates Defoe from the authors studied here is his lack of engagement with the critical discourse of neoclassicism. Defoe in particular is a salutary reminder that by no means does neoclassical poetics explain everything about the rise of the novel. Neoclassical poetics constitutes one line of genealogy, concerning in particular the development of narrative and formal features of the novel, which I intend to place next to earlier arguments about changes in morals and episteme (McKeon 1987; I. Watt [1957] 1974), the public sphere and the “news/novel” discourse (Habermas 1989; Davis 1983), and publication formats at the time (L. Price 2000; Barchas 2003), among other debates (see Seager 2012 and London 2012 for recent overviews).

The three key rules of neoclassical poetics give us a fairly comprehensive survey of the various cognitive engagements of literature, from emotional responses, characterization, and happy endings (poetic justice) to the formation and coherence of fictional worlds (dramatic unities) to the development of plot through curiosity, surprise, and suspense (decorum). In the final chapter, we shall see how historicizing cognitive poetics through the neoclassical tradition not only offers ways for talking about these different aspects of literary texts cognitively but also leads to a more general view of the cognitive function of literature through *vraisemblance*. Such neoclassical “verisimilitude” does not involve itself much with realism and reality effects (which would concern the nineteenth century). The neoclassical framework, as we shall see, is by far not as coherent as its detractors

1. Mercier’s *L’An 2440* has been included for the instructive difference with Madden and because it saw some success in Britain as well. The English Short Title Catalogue lists two translations (1772, 1797) and several editions in French and in English.

2. Apart from Aristotle, *Tristram* refers to the ancient Roman tragedian Pacuvius, the modern French playwright Luigi Riccoboni, and René Le Bossu, whose treatise on the epic will play a central role in chapter 9, on Fielding.

would have it. However, most neoclassical critics tend to argue that writers achieve *vraisemblance* through a modeling of the fictional world which highlights particular aspects (and makes its readers think about them). If a text is *vraisemblable*, it can delight and instruct its readers (as Horace demanded), and it achieves this feat through constructing a fiction which is not exactly truthful but which reconfigures the truth.

The neoclassical rules and their cognitive correlates are not faithful representations of everyday cognition. *Vraisemblance* is rather a construct made to fit our cognitive needs and leverage observations about them. Of course, when the neoclassical critic Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux writes that “le vrai peut quelquefois n’être pas vraisemblable” (in *L’art poétique* III, l.48; [1674] 1972, 72),³ he does not pursue a Brechtian agenda of *Verfremdungseffekte*. On the contrary, the neoclassical critics require authors to shape mimesis itself in line with the rules. However, this shaping of mimesis also offers the potential for social debate, thought experiments, and limit cases, all the while acknowledging the need to keep readers cognitively engaged. In *Reflections on Aristotle’s “Treatise of Poesie,”* published the same year as Boileau’s *Art poétique* and almost as influential, the Jesuit critic René Rapin notes that literature employs impressive language, stirs the passions, and takes readers on an adventure “to *heighten* Truth by Fiction” ([1674] 1979, 10; my emphasis).⁴ When considered from a cognitive perspective, as I propose to do in the conclusion to this study, neoclassical *vraisemblance* leads cognitive poetics to the larger questions of literary anthropology, because *vraisemblance* not only forms the target of the rules but also supplies a theory of the place of literature in the world.

The basic tenet that I hope has kept this study on the middle of the road, despite the debating voices on the backbench, is that ever since Aristotle, poetics has been cognitive. By cognitive, I mean here *profoundly interested in the literary engagements of the human mind* rather than beholden to a particular strand of cognitive science. Clearly, this study would not have been written without the new perspectives on the workings of the human mind in embodied cognition, social cognition, and the probability-based approach of predictive processing, and it uses these perspectives to shed new light on neoclassical criticism. In many instances, the current sciences bear out the neoclassical critics’ shrewd understanding of literature’s

3. Soames and Dryden translate this line as “Som Truths may be too strong to be believ’d” (Boileau-Despréaux [1674] 1683, 32).

4. In the original French, Rapin writes, “à relever la vérité par la fiction” ([1674] 1970, 21).

cognitive appeals. Even more frequently, I found, the critical conceptions and templates of neoclassical criticism help in understanding what the results of the cognitive sciences could mean for the study of literature. As I hope to substantiate through this study, my psychomachia between cognitive and eighteenth-century voices leads to discussions of more general interest in the prehistory of cognitive poetics, the rise of the novel, and the cognitive engagements of literature.

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Since the end of the Balzan Interdisciplinary Seminar at Oxford, *A Prehistory of Cognitive Poetics* has traveled with me to the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Turku in Finland and the section of Comparative Literature at the University of Oslo in Norway, where my thinking about neoclassicism and the novel has prospered in conversations with my Nordic colleagues.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

Since many of the French neoclassical treatises were translated very quickly after their publication in France, I have used English translations from the period wherever feasible. Unless otherwise indicated, the remaining translations are my own.

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