



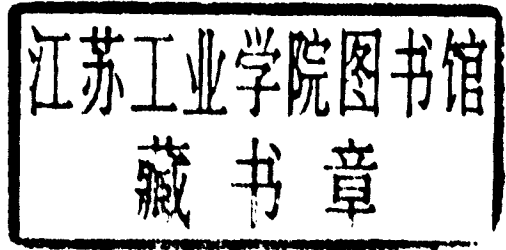
cognitive
an introduction poetics

Peter Stockwell

Cognitive Poetics

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1 Introduction

Body, mind and literature

Cognitive poetics is all about reading literature. That sentence looks simple to the point of seeming trivial. It could even be seen simply as a close repetition, since *cognition* is to do with the mental processes involved in reading, and *poetics* concerns the craft of literature. But in fact such a plain statement is really where we need to start. In order to understand exactly what this book is about, we will first need to be clear what we mean by ‘reading’ and what we mean by ‘literature’. The answers to these questions will take us to the heart of the most important issues facing us as individual, conscious, intelligent, critical people, sharing with each other a facility for language and perception. In the course of exploring these ideas, we will not be satisfied with asking important and difficult questions; we will also try to provide either answers or at least directions towards solutions.

In order to consider what happens in literary reading, we need at least an object that is a literary text, and a process of reading, which of course requires a reader. Here is part of a literary text:

We that had loved him so, followed him, honoured him,
Lived in his mild and magnificent eye,
Learned his great language, caught his clear accents,
Made him our pattern to live and to die!

Since you have just read these four lines, we also have a reading, which is what is in your mind right now. Our first option is just to leave what you think of this passage in your mind without any further discussion. In truth, this is what mainly happens when the vast majority of people read the vast majority of literary texts: they read them for themselves, and are happy neither to discuss them, nor work out the craft in their construction, nor intellectualise them, nor fit their understanding into a theoretical framework out loud for other people to read or hear. This is ‘reading’ as it happens most of the time, ‘reading’ as an object in the world. This is reading as an entirely natural phenomenon.

We are all readers like this. But this book is *about* reading literature. We can read literature any time we want to, but when we want to *think about*

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what we are doing when we read, when we want to reflect on it and understand it, then we are not simply reading; we are engaged in a science of reading. The object of investigation of this science is not the artifice of the literary text alone, or the reader alone, but the more natural process of reading when one is engaged with the other. This is a different thing altogether from the simple and primary activity of reading. Literary texts are artefacts, but ‘readings’ are natural objects.

In scientific terms, readings are the data through which we can generalise patterns and principles across readers and texts. However, understanding what we do when we engage in reading literature need not be an abstract or highly and purely theoretical exercise. Though a clear and precise understanding is the aim of any scientific exploration, the means of discovery involves considering a great deal of messy and perhaps contradictory data. We need, then, to attend to the detail and quality of many different readings. Particular readings are important for us; they are not simply the means to an abstract end. Indeed, it is in the detail of readings that all the interest and fascination lies.

So what did you make of those four lines of literature above? What are they about? What do they mean? What do they mean for you? What do you understand by them? Of course, these questions are all the same question, asked from slightly different perspectives. Perhaps you have read the lines before, and are wondering why they have been reproduced here? You might know the author, or the source, or the historical background. You might recognise the lines as being in a particular form that you can give a name to, or you might be able to describe the pattern in the sounds of the lines when read aloud using a technical term that you know.

All of these questions are to do with *context*, and this is a crucial notion for cognitive poetics. The questions in the context of this book are different from what they would mean if I were to ask you while we were sitting together on a bench in a park, or standing as tourists in front of them written on a gravestone somewhere, or even if we were in a university or college seminar. In the last case, we would both understand that some of the questions and their answers would be appropriate in the situation, and some would not. For example, if you were to tell me that the lines sounded to you like a eulogy for a dead hero, that would be something I would probably develop in a seminar discussion. If you told me, honestly, that the lines reminded you of a much-loved family cat that had recently died, both you and I and probably the rest of the people in the seminar would regard that as irrelevant and a bit eccentric. But why is it? The four lines might mean exactly that to you, and you could certainly make a case for that reading based on the textual evidence given here. Why are some responses appropriate and acceptable, while others are regarded as personal and therefore irrelevant in a seminar context? Why does it seem so easy for me to equate personal responses with irrelevance here?

What you do with the lines depends very much on the context in which you find yourself with the text. There is nothing universal or unchanging about the meaning of these lines: indeed, there are as many meanings as there

are different contexts for different readings. But the status that is attached to each reading also depends on context and the assumptions that underlie the question being asked. It is usual when discussing literature within an institutional setting to apply assumptions that belong to the discipline of literary study. One of these assumptions is that idiosyncratic and personal meanings are not worth discussing with anyone else. However, at your cat's shoebox funeral in your garden, you might feel it appropriate to read these lines at a small ceremony attended by your like-minded friends and family.

These decisions of appropriateness and status apply within all the different branches of literary studies. For example, if we take a view of literary reading in which history is foremost, then I could assert that your opinion that the lines are a eulogy for a dead hero is simply wrong. In the historical moment of the poem's construction, the lines belong to a poem called 'The Lost Leader', written by Robert Browning in 1845, about Wordsworth's shift with age from revolutionary radical to arch-conservative. Though the poem draws on elegy and eulogy, Wordsworth is still alive to be accused of betrayal by Browning:

Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a riband to stick in his coat.

And Wordsworth's change of heart means that there will be

Never glad confident morning again!

In this approach from literary history, readings are acceptable or not depending on their conformity to these accepted historical 'facts'. A reading that claimed the poem was about Milton, or Coleridge, would simply be wrong. It would be as wrong as claiming that the poem was about a twentieth-century politician.

Alternatively, the poem, and these lines in particular, can be used within a purely textual approach as an example of a particular pattern in metrics. The lines create a 'dactylic tetrameter' (four repetitions of one accented and two unaccented syllables) in the first line – go back and read it out loud to hear this. Then the subsequent lines introduce minor irregularities to disrupt the pattern: omitting the last two unaccented syllables at the end of lines two and four in order to place heavy emphasis on 'eye' and 'die'; or twice omitting one of the unaccented syllables in the third line to create a heavy pause in the middle of the line. The emphases of the word-meaning can be created and confirmed by these metrical patterns, and illustrate the expert craftsmanship in the poem.

The textual and historical approaches can even be brought together, if you recognise that hexameter (called 'Alexandrine') was a prominent pattern in heroic Greek verse such as the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. Then you might read Browning's disruptions of the dactyl and reduction of the repetitions from six to four in the line as offering a debasement of the heroic that parallels the fall of Wordsworth as a hero-figure.

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What about a personal and idiosyncratic reading? I must admit that I only learnt about the historical construction of the poem several years after I first read it. My first contact was when I heard these lines quoted, out of context, in a political analysis programme on the BBC after the 1992 British election. At that time, the Labour Party had been widely expected to win, rejuvenated and modernised by its leader, Neil Kinnock, after three election defeats. They lost, and Kinnock immediately resigned. The lines from 'The Lost Leader', quoted in a new context, took on a different and poignant meaning for a Labour supporter like me. In this selective reading, Kinnock was the lost leader not, like Wordsworth, out of choosing betrayal, but because of electoral misfortune. 'Never glad confident morning again' was to apply to the next five years of Tory government. From this angle, the poem *can* be about a twentieth-century politician.

From a historical perspective, one that privileges the context of production, my reading of these lines is a misquotation, a selective use that is just plain wrong. However, it is one of the many uses to which this poem must have been put over the years. It seems to me that it is important to reconnect the different readings of literary texts between the academic and the everyday, and to recognise that readings have status not objectively but relative to their circumstances. When I ask what does the poem mean, I am really asking what the poem does, which is another way of asking what is it being used for. Meaning, then, is what literature does. Meaning is use.

The key to understanding issues of literary value and status and meaning lies in being able to have a clear view of text and context, circumstances and uses, knowledge and beliefs. Cognitive poetics offers us a means of achieving this. It has a linguistic dimension which means we can engage in detailed and precise textual analysis of style and literary craft. It offers a means of describing and delineating different types of knowledge and belief in a systematic way, and a model of how to connect these matters of circumstance and use to the language of the literature. It also demonstrates the continuities between creative literary language and creative language in everyday use. In short, cognitive poetics takes context seriously. Furthermore, it has a broad view of context that encompasses both social and personal circumstances.

The foundations of cognitive poetics obviously lie most directly in cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, together forming a large part of the field of cognitive science. We need to understand the basic premise that behind these innovative disciplines all forms of expression and forms of conscious perception are bound, more closely than was previously realised, in our biological circumstances. Most simply, we think in the forms that we do and we say things in the ways that we do because we are all roughly human-sized containers of air and liquid with our main receptors at the top of our bodies. Our minds are 'embodied' not just literally but also figuratively, finally clearing away the mind-body distinction of much philosophy most famously expressed by Descartes. To give a simple example (suggested by my colleague Tony Bex), one possible cognitive reason why we chop trees *down* but we

chop wood *up* is that trees are bigger than us but are on the ground below us once they have been felled. Another cognitive solution sees these directional features as deriving from an underlying metaphor in which 'good is up' and 'bad is down'. Trees are unified 'good' wholes when they are upright, and firewood is more usefully 'good' when it is chopped from fallen trees.

This example is a neat one because it indicates that even the complete particles of phrasal verbs ('down' and 'up') are essentially bound up in our cognitive condition. The notion of embodiment affects every part of language. It means that all of our experiences, knowledge, beliefs and wishes are involved in and expressible only through patterns of language that have their roots in our material existence. The fact that we share most of the factors of existence (requiring food, having a heat-regulation system, seeing in the visible spectrum, living in three dimensions under a sun that transits in a day, and so on) accounts for many of the similarities in language across humanity. The fact that some communities have different factors of existence (such as men's and women's different reproductive functions, for example, or different levels of technology, environment or lifestyle around the world) can also account for habitual differences in expression. Cognitive poetics has the potential to offer a unified explanation of both individual interpretations as well as interpretations that are shared by a group, community or culture.

Whether through oral or documentary 'literature', most cultures hold verbal expression as a high status form of art. The relevance of patterns emerging from cognitive psychology and especially cognitive linguistics is obvious for the field of literary study. Cognitive poetics, then, is clearly related also to the field of literary criticism. Within that discipline, the focus of attention has shifted around the triangle of 'author-text-reader', with different traditions placing more or less emphasis on each of these three nodes. Cognitive poetics can be overlaid onto this scheme, in the sense that it is not restricted to one or other of the points. Concerned with literary reading, and with both a psychological and a linguistic dimension, cognitive poetics offers a means of discussing interpretation whether it is an authorly version of the world or a readerly account, and how those interpretations are made manifest in textuality. In this sense, cognitive poetics is not simply a shift in emphasis but is a radical re-evaluation of the whole process of literary activity.

A trivial way of doing cognitive poetics would be simply to take some of the insights from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics, and treat literature as just another piece of data. In effect, we would then set aside impressionistic reading and imprecise intuition and conduct a precise and systematic analysis of what happens when a reader reads a literary text. Given this methodological perspective, we would probably be mainly interested in the continuities and connections between literary readings and readings of non-literary encounters. We would not really have much to say about literary value or status, other than to note that it exists. We would regard the main concerns of literary criticism, for example, as irrelevant to our concerns, as part of a different set of disciplines that just happened to be focusing

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on the same area of interest, but that were at best unimportant to us and at worst an irritating and wrong-headed opposition. In our different disciplines, it would be as if we were surfers, fishermen, wind-turbine builders and watercolour artists all looking at the same bit of beach.

In my view, treating literature only as another piece of data would not be cognitive poetics at all. This is simply cognitive linguistics. Insights from that discipline might be very useful for cognitive poetics, but for us the literary context must be primary. That means we have to know about critical theory and literary philosophy as well as the science of cognition. It means we have to start by aiming to answer the big questions and issues that have concerned literary study for generations. I think that cognitive poetics offers us a means of doing exactly that. This entire book will try to answer the question of what cognitive poetics is by showing you examples of it.

As I said, taking ‘the cognitive turn’ seriously means more than simply being interested in the psychology of reading. It means a thorough re-evaluation of all of the categories with which we understand literary reading and analysis. In doing this, however, we do not have to throw away all of the insights from literary criticism and linguistic analysis that have been drawn out in the past. Many of those patterns of understanding form very useful starting points for cognitive poetic investigation. Some of them require only a little reorientation to offer a new way of looking at literary reading. Occasionally, this might seem to be no more than recasting old ideas with new labels. I would argue (along cognitive linguistic lines) that new labels force us to conceptualise things differently.

In any case, this is a textbook, and such schematising is essential in order to present complex ideas in a way that is accessible and usable. In undertaking this ‘operationalising’ of terms, I have tried to simplify the presentation without simplifying the concepts, though of course it is a delicate balancing act. To help you with new terms, there is a glossarial index at the back of the book that directs you to a definition in context. I thought this would be more useful than a set of definitions out of context. It is important, though, to recognise that descriptive terminology is a starting point for your thinking and a way of arranging your thoughts systematically, rather than simply being a set of labels. Throughout this book, I encourage you to move the terms around, redefine them, argue with them and handle them until they are comfortable. Though there are many different frameworks from cognitive science, cognitive poetics is essentially a *way of thinking* about literature rather than a framework in itself.

Within the different sub-disciplines of literary criticism, cognitive poetics is most closely connected with stylistics (sometimes called ‘literary linguistics’), and you might even see it called ‘cognitive stylistics’ in some places. The common impression of stylistics is that it is concerned with giving a descriptive account of the language features of a text in a rather mechanistic and non-evaluative way. However, most good stylisticians have always recognised the importance of the context of literature in exploring the

literary effect and value of a particular text. The problem for them up until twenty-five years or so ago was that linguistics was mainly focused on providing analytical frameworks for phonology, syntax and semantics. This meant that it was mainly (shorter) poetry that got analysed, and then the analysis tended to be rather decontextualised and somewhat pedestrian. As linguistics developed frameworks for understanding the contextual effect on meaning (in the form of pragmatics, text- and discourse-analysis, and conversation analysis) so stylistics was able to produce more complex and richer discussions of extended prose fiction and non-fiction, and drama. In recent years, stylistics has seized on developments in cognitive linguistics in order again to reassess its exploration of the workings of literary language.

There is some debate in stylistics at the moment over the status of a stylistic analysis of a piece of literature. Like the uses of cognitive linguistics, stylistics has its linguistic and its literary sides. Linguistic stylistics is often concerned not just with literary texts, but sees itself as a branch of language study with literature as one among many sets of language data. Literary stylistics arises out of literary analysis, but uses approaches and frameworks developed by linguistics in non-literary contexts. Since it has been demonstrated many times that there is nothing inherently different in the form of literary language, it is reasonable and safe to investigate the language of literature using approaches generated in the language system in general.

More debatable is the status of the findings of cognitive poetic and stylistic exploration. On the one hand you could argue that readers reach a primary interpretation before any analytical sense is made apparent. The purpose of a cognitive poetic analysis would then be to rationalise and explain how that reader reached that understanding on that occasion. In this perspective, cognitive poetics has no predictive power, and cannot in itself produce interpretations. The advantage of this view is that the readings themselves, if held honestly, can only be argued against by reference to the common currency of the cognitive poetic framework and its terminology: it means the discussion can continue systematically on the basis of a common language.

An alternative view would suggest that the process of engaging in cognitive poetic analysis offers a raised awareness of certain patterns that might have been subconscious or not even noticed at all. Cognitive poetics in this view has a productive power in at least suggesting a new interpretation. This perspective is more attractively radical but its challenge is that it seems to suggest that some interpretations are only available to analysts who have a knowledge of cognitive poetics. This has the unfortunate consequence of implying that prior interpretations were faulty, and only cognitively aware analyses are valid.

These two positions leave cognitive poetics either as a highly limiting and deterministic approach which closes off many interpretations as being invalid, or as an infinitely open and non-predictive framework which, in allowing any interpretation at all, ends up being a model of nothing very substantial. A way of resolving this problem is to notice a distinction

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between the terms ‘reading’ and ‘interpretation’. Interpretation is what readers do as soon as (perhaps even partly before) they begin to move through a text. Their general sense of the impact of the experience could range over many different impressions and senses, some of which are refined or rejected. It is this later, more analytical process that produces a reading. Some interpretations (especially those rejected early) can be simply wrong: mistakes, errors, miscues that are demonstrably not supported by any textual evidence at all. Readings, however, are the process of arriving at a sense of the text that is personally acceptable. These are likely to combine individual factors as well as features that are common to the reader’s interpretative community. Cognitive poetics – in having the power to combine both the individual and communal effects of language and experience – offers a means of squaring this circle. Cognitive poetics models the process by which intuitive interpretations are formed into expressible meanings, and it presents the same framework as a means of describing and accounting for those readings.

Unlike literary criticism, cognitive poetics does not have to focus exclusively on minute differences between readings. Most readers even from vaguely similar interpretative communities tend to agree on readings of literature far more than they disagree. Literary criticism has focused on the minutiae of disagreement because deviance is more interesting, but an unfortunate consequence of this is that literary criticism has emphasised difference, ambiguity, ambivalence and irresolution to a disproportionate extent. Cognitive poetics can encompass matters of readerly difference, but these are set into a general context of the various and varying cultural, experiential and textual constraints around real readers reading literature in the real world.

Cognitive poetics is still relatively new as a discipline, though it makes clear reconnections back to much older forms of analysis such as classical rhetoric. The phrase ‘cognitive rhetoric’ was briefly used recently, and in fact the discipline combines the classical scholarly trivium of rhetoric, grammar and logic. Again I must emphasise, however, that the major consequence of taking ‘the cognitive turn’ seriously involves a radical re-evaluation of all of these terms. Choice of words, forms of textual structures, and patterns of reasoning are all three intimately inter-related to each other when viewed through a science of cognition. ‘Poetics’ in modern literary theory has come to mean a ‘theory’ or ‘system’, but I also like the associations with the related word ‘poetry’ that the term suggests, implying the practical creativity inherent in the thinking in this area.

As with all new fields, different traditions have already begun to emerge within cognitive poetics. The phrase itself was used in a very precise and particular sense by Reuven Tsur in his theory of poetry and perception. It has also been more broadly applied to any approaches to literary craft that take models from cognitive science as their descriptive frameworks. This textbook necessarily takes the broad view of the discipline, and even so cannot of course claim to be exhaustive. For example, though there are illustrative analyses of poetry in this book, a thorough account of cognitive poetics in