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Cognition, Literature, and History

Edited by
Mark J. Bruhn and Donald R. Wehrs



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M. J. B.

D. R. W.

Cognition, Literature, and History

Cognition, Literature, and History models the ways in which cognitive and literary studies may collaborate and thereby mutually advance. It shows how understanding of underlying structures of mind can productively inform literary analysis and historical inquiry, and how formal and historical analysis of distinctive literary works can reciprocally enrich our understanding of those underlying structures. Applying the cognitive neuroscience of categorization, emotion, figurative thinking, narrativity, self-awareness, theory of mind, and wayfinding to the study of literary works and genres from diverse historical periods and cultures, the authors argue that literary experience proceeds from, qualitatively heightens, and selectively informs and even reforms our evolved and embodied capacities for thought and feeling. This volume investigates and locates the complex intersections of cognition, literature, and history in order to advance interdisciplinary discussion and research in poetics, literary history, and cognitive science.

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Maria Beville
- 22 Cognition, Literature, and History**
Edited by Mark J. Bruhn and Donald R. Wehrs

Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction: Integrating the Study of Cognition, Literature,
and History 1
MARK J. BRUHN

PART I

Kinds of (Literary) Cognition: Cognitive Genre Theory and History

- 1 Melodies of Mind: Poetic Forms as Cognitive Structures 17
DAVID DUFF
- 2 Toward a Cognitive Sociology of Genres 39
MICHAEL SINDING
- 3 Novelty, Canonicity, and Competing Simulations in
Childe Harold's Pilgrimage 59
NANCY EASTERLIN
- 4 Reassessing the Concept of "Ideology Transfer": On Evolved
Cognitive Tendencies in the Literary Reception Process 80
KATJA MELLMANN

PART II

The Moral of the Story: Affective Narratology

- 5 Conceptual Blending, Embodied Well-Being, and the Making of
Twelfth-Century Narrative Literature 97
DONALD R. WEHRS

x	<i>Contents</i>	
6	Maternity, Morality, and Metaphor: Galdos's <i>Doña Perfecta</i> , Lorca's <i>The House of Bernarda Alba</i> , and Andalusian Culture THOMAS BLAKE	115
7	National Identity, Narrative Universals, and Guilt: Margaret Atwood's <i>Surfacing</i> PATRICK COLM HOGAN	134
PART III		
Perceiving Others and Narrating Selves: Theories of Mind and Literature		
8	The Phenomenology of Person Perception JOEL KRUEGER	153
9	The Mind of a Pícaro: Lázaro de Tormes HOWARD MANCING	174
10	Fiction as a Cognitive Challenge: Explorations into Alternative Forms of Selfhood and Experience MARINA GRISHAKOVA	190
PART IV		
A Culture of Science and a Science of Culture: Theory and History of Cognitive (Literary) Studies		
11	Romantic Reflections: Toward a Cultural History of Introspection in Mind Science MARK J. BRUHN	209
12	Toward a Science of Criticism: Aesthetic Values, Human Nature, and the Standard of Taste MARK COLLIER	229
	Epilogue: Literary Theory and Cognitive Studies DONALD R. WEHRS	243
	<i>Contributors</i>	253
	<i>Index</i>	257

Introduction

Integrating the Study of Cognition, Literature, and History

Mark J. Bruhn

The integration of philosophy and literature has defined, for almost half a century now, the “theoretical turn” in literary criticism, but within the past two decades cognitive literary studies has added, with increasing prominence and promise, a third interlocutor to what ought to be, and at its best has been, a vitalizing interdisciplinary dialogue.¹ “Cognitive literary studies” denotes a heterogeneous network of interpretative and empirical projects drawing upon developmental and social psychology, evolutionary biology, emotion theory, cognitive linguistics, comparative anthropology, narratology, neuroscience, and research on categorization, conceptualization, and memory. In the chapters that follow, cognitive theories and models developed in these fields are adapted to, and in the process tested and extended by, the disciplinary objects and formal and historical methods of literary studies. The overarching aim, in each chapter and across the volume as a whole, is to investigate the complex intersections of the three domains specified in the title—*Cognition, Literature, and History*—in order to advance interdisciplinary discussion and research in poetics, literary history, and cognitive science.

This interdisciplinary objective needs to be stressed, for the fields of poetics, literary history, and cognitive science have remained for too long more or less aloof from one another, despite the integrative appeal of the new field of cognitive literary studies (Sternberg). Even within traditional literary studies, poetics and history are typically pursued independently with different methodologies, with subfields like narratology and stylistics proposing formal definitions and distinctions to characterize the literary system, as it were, from the *inside*, and new historicism and other post-structuralist approaches, by contrast, uncovering broader discourse patterns and cultural transactions that inform the literary system from the *outside* (Fowler). What ought to be complementary procedures of investigation have in practice more often been mutually exclusive, so that certain foundational questions have remained more or less out of view. Where, after all, do the “internal” forms of literature and the “external” patterns of cultural discourse come from, and to what do they (or semiosis in general) conform? What urges and constrains their persistence and change over

time? What are the effective sources of their powerful meanings and meaningful powers, and to what extent are these malleable or *reformable*?

These general questions can be instructively specified with reference to Susan Wolfson's important yet ultimately incomplete deconstruction of the formalist-historicist opposition in literary theory and practice. Introducing her "frankly" formalist studies of canonical Romantic poetry in 1997's *Formal Charges*, Wolfson sets about at once to counter an anticipated charge of belatedness—"Why care about poetic form and its intricacies, other than nostalgia for a bygone era of criticism?"—by insisting on the possibility and necessity of "an historically informed" and responsibly "contextualized" formalist criticism (2, 3). Wolfson hereby acknowledges the seismic shift in literary studies through the second half of the twentieth century, when disciplinary attention that had been resolved upon textual analysis and interpretation was increasingly redirected, in pedagogy as well as publication, to approaches emphasizing contextual relations in contemporary history and culture. In Romantic studies, for example, the past quarter century witnessed "the proliferation of 'contexts' for Romantic texts—the French Revolution; the feminist controversy; popular radicalism; colonial slavery and the slave trade; imperial crisis and resurgence, agrarian reform and early industrialism; religious revival and innovation; and profound changes in education and literacy, in book production and periodicals, and in institutions ranging from the poorhouse to the post office" (Richardson, *Neural Sublime* 10–11). Concomitantly, critics such as "[Jerome] McGann, David Simpson, and Marjorie Levinson were [. . .] pointedly casting the lexicon of formalism into a syntax of ideological analysis" and "arguing that the literary form masks 'the contradictions inherent in contemporary social structures and the relations they support'" (Wolfson 14, quoting McGann; see also Richardson, "Reimagining"). These critics sought to undermine Romantic (and subsequently, New Critical) idealizations of poetic form as "organic," "unified," "achieved," and "stable" by reading Romantic poems themselves as "factitious, contradictory, and unstable" reflexes of social discourse and power (14). However, in Wolfson's view, too many of the new historicist and cultural-materialist re-readings of Romanticism entail "limited, even reductive, accounts of how poetic texts perform," in particular of their formal capacity to "reveal and rupture" and not only "reproduce" the historical and ideological relations in which they necessarily participate (2, 18). In other words, the historicist "critique of literary form as part of an ideological totality was typically conducted at the expense of closer reading for how such form might produce local lines of resistance; literary form, at best, was seen as unwittingly betraying the contradictions of its intention to resolve" (9). Wolfson therefore urges a more "cogent historicist criticism" built upon "a better account of how the designs of unity in these and many other canonical poems reflect on rather than conceal their constructedness (not only aesthetic, but social

and ideological); of how sometimes the textual forms of reconciliation are visibly factitious (not magical); and of how even the theoretical idealizing of inherent organic form [. . .] contends with the values of will and voluntary purpose" (14).

Wolfson's case studies of a wide range of poems by the major Romantic poets do indeed reveal ingenious formal means at work to expose, destabilize, question, and even subvert the ideological ends to which they would appear (and might nevertheless be) committed, but Wolfson does not explain how the poets came upon these means or the epistemological independence to recognize and wield them. From whence does such formal innovation, exposing and reconfiguring the cultural-historical conditions of its own production, come? The crux of Wolfson's argument is that "the articulation of form" is "not merely [. . .] a production of social evaluations, but [is] a social evaluation itself, one of the texts in which culture is written" (30). The passive construction, however, sidesteps and obscures critical issues of subjectivity and agency: "written" by whom? More specifically, what processes in these writers enabled their articulation of new and potentially transformative social evaluations? What's missing from Wolfson's historicized formalism is the individual author, conceived of as something more than an otherwise empty and powerless conduit of competing cultural forces. As Wolfson herself recognizes, such forces might explain the availability of alternate subject positions and the likelihood of contradiction, but they do not account for the creative and critical activity that innovates upon such differences and thereby newly evaluates them. For example, the French revolutionary milieu may well have stimulated Wordsworth's "commitments to confront and reform certain codes in the institution of literature, and to challenge, thereby, implied class claims and associations," but no analysis of the milieu will illuminate the specific processes that led him to do so by, for instance, redeploying the blank-verse "measure that conveyed the lofty meditations of *Tintern Abbey* [. . .] for the humble tales of *Michael* and *the Brothers*" (24).

The third term of cognition presents itself here as an explanatorily indispensable addition to Wolfson's two-term syntax of form and history. To effect his democratizing redeployment of blank verse, Wordsworth would have required, minimally, independent powers of relational analogy (to perceive a structural similarity between the hierarchy of class and the hierarchy of literary kinds), categorical abstraction (to decompose the higher literary kinds—for example, Miltonic epic, Shakespearean drama, and his own ode-like meditative lyric—into component categorical features in order to isolate the shared feature of blank verse), and metaphoric projection and blending (first to formulate, and then to discover the formal means to *realize*, the inspiration of conveying a "low" matter in a "high" meter, thereby reevaluating both and, by implication, the social networks of power they were—until Wordsworth's and others' interventions—constrained to reflect and express). In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as well

as the 1815 preface to his collected *Poems* that is expressly concerned with “the powers requisite for the production of poetry,” Wordsworth himself emphasizes exactly “these processes of imagination,” which he specifies in terms of “the perception of similitude in dissimilitude” (analogical thinking) and “the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers of Imagination, immediately and mediately acting” (categorical and metaphorical thinking) (*Poetical Works* 740, 752, 754; see Bruhn, “Cognition”). Ever finer analyses of these several powers “requisite” for poetic production and formal innovation have become available over the last forty years in the allied fields of the cognitive sciences; as Ellen Spolsky argued in her pioneering *Gaps in Nature: Literary Interpretation and the Modular Mind* (1993), these cognitive analyses can profitably be recruited by literary theorists to help explain both the fact and the nature of *development* in the literary system over time, which is to say, literary history. That history has crucially involved not just competing discourses mediated by social systems of production and distribution but also individual human minds whose cognitive processes contributed in systematic and therefore specifiable ways to the perpetual *reevaluation* and *reformation* of those discourses and systems.

For example, in Spolsky’s cognitive view, genre recognition and transformation can be understood as literary instantiations of one of the most basic and productive capacities of human cognition, the ability to form and modify conceptual categories (e.g., *animal*, *dog*; *tree*, *elm*; *human*, *poet*; *literature*, *lyric*). From a cognitive point of view, particular categories are neither given in the world nor inborn in the mind; they are functional generalizations derived from ongoing perceptual and communicative experience and therefore subject to constant updating. Because categories are organized as flexible prototype schemas involving radially organized componential features, a particular thing will be judged to be a more or less good instance of its category, depending not just on the number of category features it expresses but also on the distribution of these features with respect to the radial organization of the prototype. The more central or focal the feature (e.g., wings, feathers, beak, as opposed to egg-laying or insect-eating), the more instantaneous and certain the category judgment (e.g., “bird”). Given that a) different members of a given category will necessarily express different quantities and qualities of that category’s prototypical features (e.g., robin versus cassowary), and b) individuals over the course of their development will acquire both more, and more finely articulated, prototypes, and c) individual differences in perceptual and communicative experience will necessarily result in more or less idiosyncratic prototype schemas and category judgments, it follows that d) *recategorization* by *transformation* is to be expected, especially in highly complex and therefore more malleable categories such as those that structure and mediate our social interactions and evaluations, including literary ones. In Spolsky’s words,

the cognitive approach “describes not only how new categories”—for example, *Lyrical Ballads*, or a humble tale in blank verse—

are responses to changed social awareness, but also how readers [and equally writers] decompose complex texts, weigh separately the conditions that make up the set, make gradient distinctions among conditions, and distinguish between conditions necessary to the success of the categorization and those which are typical of, but not necessary to, such a categorization [e.g., the conventionally antithetical evaluations attaching to the categories “blank verse” and “humble” in pre-Wordsworthian literary and social theory] [. . .] The genre system, including the possibility of renaming, conceived of in this way, is not a handy oversimplification, but rather a reflection of the complexity of the readers’ [and writers’] construal of the world and the ease with which that understanding can learn and change. (*Gaps* 79)

Spolsky’s cognitive account of recategorization demystifies a process that is required for but remains almost wholly untheorized in Wolfson’s otherwise compelling attempt to integrate and advance formalist and historicist modes of criticism. Cognitive literary theory can thus contribute a plausible (nonidealized) and increasingly nuanced explanation of individual agency in literary and social change. At the same time, it can help to clarify how, in turn, the evolving literary system may shape and change the individuals who encounter it. For instance, Spolsky argues that category judgments may be based on more and more central or, conversely, fewer and more peripheral features of the categorical prototype, and that this gradient may help to describe a continuum between comparatively conventional and creative or transformational ways of thinking:

There is a crucial difference, however, between the match [of the “new” percept with the “stored” schema] that accomplishes a categorization and the match that is a transformation. In a categorization the number of conditions shared between the new unit and the stored meaning is very high. In a transformation, however, there may be very few matching conditions, perhaps only one. The creative power of a transformation is precisely that it posits a connection on the basis of a very partial, indeed minimal match [cf. metaphorical extensions such as *pedigree*]. (Spolsky, *Gaps* 104–105)

Literary discourse genres, “where reference is not valued as highly as the proposal and exploration of original connections” (105), are especially likely to promote transformation through the decomposition and reanalysis of existing prototypes. In this way, literature can literally change minds—not only *what* an individual thinks but also, over time, *how* he or she thinks. Sufficient exposure to literary discourse, for example, may increase

one's facility and pleasure in decomposing and transforming categorical prototypes, thereby "heightening one's responsiveness and flexibility in orientation" (Tsur 20).

Patrick Colm Hogan makes a similar point, and extends it in terms of emotion prototypes to propose an argument for the oft-alleged "ethical quality of literature" (*The Mind* 53). Echoing Spolsky, Hogan observes that "creativity may be associated with the generation of remote as well as proximate associations" and suggests that on this differential basis we may distinguish "minimal novelty, which is merely unique specification of a schema, from the nonminimal, but still 'basic' creativity that involves altering prototypical and exemplary structures. As this indicates, the movement away from minimal creativity toward greater creativity is equally a movement away from prototypes. [...] Proximate associations are, again, precisely the properties that make up prototypes. Remote associations are precisely properties that are related, but nonprototypical" (*Cognitive Science* 65, 75). By cultivating a disposition to appreciate and formulate more fugitive and proportionately more novel categorical "associations," literary experience may contribute to cognitive and affective flexibility, which should in turn have social and ethical consequence. In particular, Hogan speculates that literature may alter our prototypical schemas for affections by demoting the proximal feature "self" or "self-interest" and promoting more remote features, such as specific phenomenal qualities and consequences. Literature thus invokes and evokes emotions that "are systematically related to one's everyday emotions of happiness, sorrow, anger, fear, disgust, but that are also to be distinguished from such everyday emotions, and precisely on the basis of egocentricity": "through literature, we experience a version of the affect removed from its direct link with any particular (egocentric) representation in memory, and thus at least partially removed from self-interest" (*The Mind* 52, 53). "Isolated from such self-interest" (54), the emotion prototype may itself be reconfigured in ways that make it more informative in a semantic sense and more readily extensible in a social sense.

Such reformatory effect upon his reader's emotions was Wordsworth's avowed aim: he intended his poems "to a certain degree to rectify men's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things" (*Letters* 355). Reconsidered in light of Spolsky's and Hogan's cognitive analyses, Wordsworth's reformatory aspirations, well documented by Wolfson and like-minded critics such as David Simpson, may appear both better grounded and more certain of attainment than even the most sympathetic of his readers have been prepared to argue.

Though poised from the start to contribute to the long overdue rapprochement between formalist and historicist approaches to literature that Wolfson advocates, cognitive literary studies has on balance tended to

replicate rather than remedy the inherited intradisciplinary divide. Mapping the emerging field, we find *cognitive poetics*, *cognitive narratology*, *cognitive rhetoric*, and the like, on the one hand, which redeploy the analytical methods and insights of formalist criticism to understand literary expression in terms of the *cognitive architecture* of the embodied mind. On the other hand, we have *cognitive cultural studies*, *evolutionary literary studies*, *biopoetics*, and the like, which (theoretically at least) redeploy the comparative methods and insights of cultural and historical studies to understand literature and other kinds of cultural expression in terms of the *natural and cultural histories* of the embodied mind. I qualify my characterization of the second, theoretically historicist group only because, as Alan Richardson has recently observed, “Most scholarship and research in cognitive literary studies to date has concerned the synchronic aspect of literature, approaching literature and literary language in a systematic manner without any overriding regard to matters of time, place, and social context. [...] Much less attention, however, has been paid to the diachronic aspect of literary studies, to issues in literary history, and to the analysis of specific authors, works, issues, or motifs in terms of their historical, social, and cultural contexts” (*Neural Sublime* 2).

Indeed, some theorists of the new field make a virtue of the ahistoricism that Richardson, along with many critics of cognitive literary studies whom he would counter on other grounds, has always decried. In her 2008 introduction to the fields of cognitive poetics and cognitive semiotics, for example, Line Brandt writes,

In my view, the most innovative aspects of cognitive-poetic methodology are an interest in empirical research that goes beyond the study of textual meanings in a *particular* text; and, more specifically, the orientation toward universal features of human cognition—both in terms of adopting ideas and theoretical frameworks developed in cognitive science, and in terms of shaping a notion of textuality which perceives the literary text as a manifestation of expressive mentation, shaped and constrained by patterns of reasoning, by memory, categorization, image formation, force-dynamic schematization, narrative sequencing, and other cognitive processes which serve ordinary purposes, but which can be recruited for the purpose of creating the sophisticated representational artifacts. (37)

This reversal of emphasis, from the cultural particular to the cognitive universal, is for Brandt the distinguishing characteristic of cognitive poetics “as a field of study that seeks to uncover the workings of the literary mind, focusing on *the* mind rather than particular mindsets, and basing observations of particulars, such as authorial style and culturally specific conceptualizations, on empirically based theories of representational cognition” (31). Though Brandt acknowledges in conclusion that literary scholars’ well-developed