

Ralf Haekel

**Cognitive Literary Studies, Historicism, and
the History of the Imagination
(Abstract)**

- Full-length article in: JLT 11/2 (2017), 183–203.

For the past two decades, the scholarly discussion about the merits of neuroscience and cognitive science for literary studies has been, in Germany at least, a rather heated affair. This debate, however, has been much less interdisciplinary than the subject matter would suggest and has mainly taken place *within* literary and cultural studies, often merely adapting scientific theories of the mind, the nervous system, and the brain, in order to make statements about either empathy within literary texts or the processes underlying their reception. The debate is, moreover, closely linked to a crisis of literary theory in general, especially regarding the demise of the postmodern deconstructionist paradigm and the call for a more scientific and factual approach to the object of study – literature. Since the 1990s at least, deconstruction has frequently been dismissed as a mere stance of scepticism and relativism verging on randomness. Ever since, Cognitive Literary Studies (CLS) has promised to provide a way out of the impasse by offering a more objective approach to literary artefacts based on scientific knowledge and therefore on hard scientific facts. In this paper I will argue that it is necessary not only to rely on present-day cognitive science but to historicise the relationship between literature and science as well.

The need to historicise this relationship is part of a more encompassing claim. I believe it is necessary to focus on theory not as something external to, but as a self-reflexive aspect of, literature itself. This implies the need to investigate the mind and cognition only if it is part of the literary work's self-reflexive scope within a given historical context. Historically, this reflexion presupposes a network in which scientific theories of the mind play a key role. My main example is the imagination. In this context, I will also focus on the rejection of dualism, or rather: the way that René Descartes's philosophy, especially his distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, has been treated. One key argument in favour of CLS has been the stern denunciation of Cartesian Dualism – most famously described as *Descartes' Error* by Antonio Damasio in his influential 1994 book. Diametrically opposed to this traditional dualist approach is embodied cognition, which Gerhard Lauer describes as the bedrock of the new interdisciplinary approach: »To put it bluntly, cognitive literary studies are ›against Cartesian interpretation‹« (Lauer 2009, 150). CLS is therefore constructed in strict opposition to a mind-and-body dualism dominant in Western thought ever since the first half of the seventeenth century – a dualism first of soul and body, and then, since the middle of the nineteenth century, of mind or cognition, on the one hand, and the brain on the other. Taking these developments into account, this paper takes its cue from another stance, however: the need to historicise the scientific and philosophical approaches to cognition instead. Recognising the historical importance of a dualist position, I argue, is essential for an understanding of the impact of scientific insights on literary artefacts at the time they were developed.

One key problem within CLS has been the focus on the *reception* of literature to achieve universally valid insights into its nature. This universalising approach mainly has the aim »to release literary studies from its bourgeois conventions« (ibid., 152) in order to focus on ordinary reading experiences. The downside of this approach has been the prioritisation of rather simple

fiction instead of more challenging works of literature – arguably representative of a more bourgeois tradition. A way out of this bias is to focus less on the reception – the reading process – rather than on the *production* of the text – and the way it is reflected within the text itself. This is only possible by means of an historicist agenda, as literature, consciously or not, always echoes and negotiates scientific insights of the day. An historicist approach also involves a focus on more demanding works of literature – poetry or avant-garde works of art –, as they challenge the boundaries of what literature is and can be. In essence, I put forward the conviction that this historicising approach to cognition within literature also implies a return to theory – as a self-reflexive part of literature itself and not something to be applied to it from without.

This historicist approach to cognition as a self-reflexive aspect of literature, on the one hand, and a reflection on science, on the other, necessarily implies a rejection of any universalising approach to literary works of art. The theoretical historicism proposed in this paper presupposes a turn towards the time-bound and the particular, and respective conceptualisations of authorship, literary production, and the text itself. In order to make my point, I will focus on one key concept and cognitive faculty in the history of the humanities: the creative imagination. A historical approach to the imagination in the light of cognitive science – such as championed by Alan Richardson and Mark J. Bruhn in the field of Romantic Studies – thus serves as my starting point. To make my argument, I will focus on three historically crucial phases as they are periods of transition both within literary history and the history of science: the early seventeenth century as the beginning of the scientific revolution, the Romantic period as a second scientific revolution, and literary Modernism as the formative phase of our contemporary scientific worldview. All three literary examples – Shakespeare, Coleridge, Joyce – can and must be seen as paradigmatic of their age as well as instrumental in bringing about literary change. At the same time, these examples will serve as flashlights to highlight a general trend.

References

- Bruhn, Mark J., Romanticism and the Cognitive Science of Imagination, *Studies in Romanticism* 48 (2009), 543–564.
- Bruhn, Mark J., Introduction. Integrating the Study of Cognition, Literature, and History, in: M.J.B./Donald R. Wehrs (eds.), *Cognition, Literature, and History*, London/New York 2014, 1–14.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, Dejection. An Ode, in: S.T.C., *Poetical Works*, Vol. 1.1, ed. by J.C.C. Mays, Princeton 2001, 695–702.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Biographia Literaria, or: Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. by James Engell/Walter Jackson Bate, 2 Vols., Princeton 1983.
- Crane, Mary Thomas, *Shakespeare's Brain. Reading With Cognitive Theory*, Oxford/Princeton 2001.
- Damasio, Antonio, *Descartes' Error. Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, New York 1995.
- Descartes, René, *The Philosophical Writings*, ed. by John Cottingham/Robert Stoothoff/Dugald Murdoch/Anthony Kenny, 3 Vols., Cambridge 1984–1985.
- Du Bois-Reymond, Emil, Über die Grenzen des Naturerkennens, in: E. du B.–R., *Reden von Emil du Bois-Reymond in zwei Bänden*, Bd. 1, ed. by Estelle du Bois-Reymond, Leipzig 1912, 441–473.
- Fludernik, Monika, *Towards a ›Natural‹ Narratology*, London 2002.

- Gabler, Hans Walter, On Textual Criticism and Editing. The Case of Joyce's *Ulysses*, in: George Bornstein/Ralph G. Williams (eds.), *Palimpsest. Editorial Theory in the Humanities*, Ann Arbor 1993, 195–224.
- Haekel, Ralf, *The Soul in British Romanticism. Negotiating Human Nature in Philosophy, Science and Poetry*, Trier 2014.
- Hühn, Peter, William Shakespeare: Sonnet 107, in: P.H./Jens Kiefer, *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry. Studies in English Poetry from the 16th to the 20th Century*, transl. by Alastair Matthews, Berlin/New York 2005, 23–34.
- Hühn, Peter/Jörg Schönert, Introduction: The Theory and Methodology of the Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry, in: P.H./Jens Kiefer, *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry. Studies in English Poetry from the 16th to the 20th Century*, transl. by Alastair Matthews, Berlin/New York 2005, 1–14.
- Joyce, James, *Ulysses*, ed. by Hans-Walter Gabler, New York 1984.
- Kelleter, Frank, A Tale of Two Natures. Worried Reflections on the Study of Literature and Culture in an Age of Neuroscience and Neo-Darwinism, *Journal of Literary Theory* 1:1 (2007), 153–189.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe/Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute. The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, New York 1988.
- Lakoff, George/Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago/London 1989.
- Lauer, Gerhard, Going Empirical. Why We Need Cognitive Literary Studies, *Journal of Literary Theory* 3:1 (2009), 145–154.
- MacDonald, Paul S., *History of the Concept of Mind. Speculations About Soul, Mind and Spirit from Homer to Hume*, Aldershot 2003.
- McGann, Jerome, *The Romantic Ideology. A Critical Investigation*, Chicago 1983.
- Richardson, Alan, *British Romanticism and the Science of Mind*, Cambridge 2001.
- Richardson, Alan, *The Neural Sublime. Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts*, Baltimore 2010.
- Richardson, Alan, Reimagining the Romantic Imagination, *European Romantic Review* 24 (2013), 385–402.
- Richardson, Alan, Imagination. Literary and Cognitive Intersections, in: Lisa Zunshine (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, Oxford 2015, 225–245.
- Sedlmayr, Gerold, *The Discourse of Madness in Britain, 1790–1815. Medicine, Politics, Literature*, Trier 2011.
- Semino, Elena, *Language and World Creation in Poetry and Other Texts*, London/New York 1997.
- Sha, Richard C., Toward a Physiology of the Romantic Imagination, *Configurations* 17 (2009), 197–226.
- Sha, Richard C., Romantic Physiology and the Work of Romantic Imagination. Hypothesis and Speculation in Science and Coleridge, *European Romantic Review* 24 (2013), 403–419.
- Shakespeare, William, *The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series: Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan Jones, Walton-on-Thames 1997.
- Singer, Wolf, *Der Beobachter im Gehirn. Essays zur Hirnforschung*, Frankfurt a.M. 2002.
- Spolsky, Ellen, *Gaps in Nature. Literary Interpretation and the Modular Mind*, New York 1993.
- Stockwell, Peter, *Texture. A Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading*, Edinburgh 2009.
- Strasen, Sven, The Disappearance of Literary Reception Theories and their Revival as a Part of a Cognitive Theory of Culture, *Anglistik* 24 (2013), 31–48.
- Tabbi, Joseph, Cognitive Science, in: Bruce Clarke/Manuela Rossini (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*, Abingdon 2010, 77–88.

Zunshine, Lisa, Introduction to Cognitive Literary Studies, in: L.Z. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, Oxford 2015, 1–9.

2017-09-22

JLToonline ISSN 1862-8990

Copyright © by the author. All rights reserved.

This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and JLToonline.

For other permission, please contact [JLToonline](#).

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Ralf Hækel, Cognitive Literary Studies, Historicism, and the History of the Imagination.

In: JLToonline (22.09.2017)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-003676

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-003676>