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Cognitive Literary Studies:
On Persistent Problems and Plausible Solutions
(Abstract)

The present article addresses the question whether the wide and disparate field of Cognitive Literary Studies (CLS) has met the goal set by its representatives: to provide more authentic, intelligible and meaningful work than the traditional literary scholarship against which it positions itself. When »cognition« entered literary studies in around the 1990s, this was seen to announce the dawning of a new era, characterised by a rejuvenation of the field with the aid of interdisciplinary input, which simultaneously promised a return to its fundamental interest in literary texts. These objectives were accompanied by a growing disaffection with dominant theoretical paradigms (e.g. post-structuralism) and a forthright commitment to bridging the Cartesian dualism purportedly dominating the humanities. From the outset, however, CLS was greeted with criticism both regarding the reliability of its methodological basis and the usefulness of its results. These weaknesses have on the whole not been remedied and their continuing presence is highlighted by the field's location at the margins of literary scholarship a quarter of a century after the »cognitive turn«. My taking up the longstanding debate surrounding CLS and returning to issues that may appear dated to some is not only indicated *per se*, but especially with view to its projected revitalisation of the fields on which it has had a bearing, which – all ambitious self-promotion by representatives of CLS notwithstanding – has not taken place.

I begin by considering the methodological flaws that critics of CLS identified already at its inception, focusing on the one hand on the unsubstantiated foundations of its claims and on the other on its resistance to providing a precise definition of its key concept »embodiment«. As many other critics have already pointed out, the field's most problematic assertion is that the products of the human mind, be they mental schemata or figurative language (especially metaphors), are indicative of how human cognition works generally. While this naturalisation of literary form as the structuring principle of human cognition may entail a reassuring revaluation of literary scholarship, it is based on rather simplistic and often unsupported assumptions about the nature of cognitive processes. At the same time, this conflation of literary language and cognitive structure has prevented scholars from asking questions of genuinely literary import. Instead, CLS tends to take literature as a repository of natural language to be scanned for evidence of whatever cognitive phenomena are at stake.

Furthermore, CLS's attention to the text is also indicative of insufficient attention within the field to all that literature does *not* say in so many words and, by implication, of a general indifference to readers' cognitive and affective contribution to the construction of textual meaning – something of a paradox given that reader reception and emotion are avowed areas of interest of the field. This manifests itself not least in the unswerving hermeneutic impulse that underpins much cognitive literary scholarship, suggesting that many of its representatives may be less committed to understanding the cognitive abilities of readers *in general*, than to pursuing their own expert interpretations. Ultimately, the focus on the text in CLS, and the concomitant avoidance of the reader are coupled with the insufficiently substantiated claim that persists throughout CLS that cognition is »bound« to the body and our biological realities. This

argument is made to distinguish the field both from traditional literary scholarship and (increasingly) earlier forms of cognitive science; in practice, however, the biological underpinnings of cognition are rarely specified and defined, in fact they seem to be taken for granted.

The unease surrounding biological matters in CLS persists in recent reconceptualisations of its premises developed with the aim of responding to these criticisms, to which I then turn. Rather than resolving its questionable claims, CLS has branched out into ever new areas, for instance by contextualising cognitive processes, investigating larger, more complex textual phenomena (blends) and studying social or extended cognition rather than individual minds. These reconceptualisations, productive though they may have been within the field of CLS, have merely replicated its fundamental problems and are thus subject to the same charges as earlier forms of cognitive literary scholarship.

In conclusion, I argue that to comprehend the embodied responses that CLS currently mainly assumes as givens these would have to be identified and pried apart from the multifarious manifestations by which literary art appeals to the human mind. For that, however, scholars would have to accept the existence of a certain cognitive »norm«, i.e. a »human nature«, without which the most radical theory of embodiment leads to the very impressionism against which CLS initially positioned itself. This would require, above all, that cognitive literary scholars establish clarity about their key term »embodiment« and, in order to do so, embrace research from disciplines they typically eschew: notably the »hard« neurosciences and psychology (both cognitive and evolutionary); furthermore, it would require them to limit their expectations about the explanatory scope of CLS and its innovative force within traditional scholarship.

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How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Anja Müller-Wood, Cognitive Literary Studies: On Persistent Problems and Plausible Solutions.
In: JLTonline (22.09.2017)
Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-003695
Link: http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-003695