

Stephan Freißmann

How Does Cognitive Science Further Literary Interpretation? A Collaborative Volume of Longstanding Validity but not without Weaknesses

- Harri Veivo/Bo Pettersson/Merja Polvinen (eds.), *Cognition and Literary Interpretation in Practice*. Helsinki: Yliopistopaino/Helsinki University Press 2005. 339 S. [Preis: EUR 32,00]. ISBN: 951-570-598-3.

The edited volume is the result of the conference held under the same name at the University of Helsinki in August 2004. The declared aim of the conference as well as the resulting volume was, as **Harri Veivo** writes in his introduction, to discuss »in what ways [...] cognitive studies revise[s] the principles and practices used in the interpretation of literary texts« (11). The volume intends to cover this question in different realms of literary studies and from different angles. Consequently, the chapters of the collaborative volume are arranged in three sections that represent three different foci of this broad field of enquiry. The four contributions to the first section, »Cognition and Interpretation«, intend to make use of cognitive studies for concrete instances of literary interpretation, thus directly illustrating the surplus value of cognitive approaches to literary criticism. In the second section, »Practices of Reading«, several aspects of reading literature are discussed with respect to their cognitive significance in five contributions. The final section, »Cognition and Literary Theory«, unites four contributions that are mostly concerned with theoretical and metatheoretical discussions.

The first group of contributions »explore different ways of grounding the interpretation of literary texts in theories of cognition.« (18) The section opens with **Margaret H. Freeman's** paper »Poetry as Power: The Dynamics of Cognitive Poetics as a Scientific and Literary Paradigm«. Against a background of the division of scholarly life into what C.P. Snow has termed the Two Cultures, Freeman develops a broad account of the central questions addressed by cognitive poetics. What one would expect from such an enumeration are the first four items on her list, namely questions for human universals in literary understanding, for the mental and neural processes underlying the production of literary creativity, for mental and neural processes underlying the reception of literary creativity, and for the threshold between culturally and naturally determined cognitive strategies unmasked by the cognitive study of literature (33-34). What is more surprising is that Freeman attempts to employ cognitive poetics for determining the aesthetic value of a literary work of art. Thus, the central question of her essay is to determine why certain wordings just sound right to their authors and are, consequently, preferred over others (34). Using Emily Dickinson's poetry as material for some highly erudite case studies, Freeman then goes on to discuss the genesis of some of Dickinson's phrasings, postulating certain mental processes in the poet's mind as the driving forces for the actual shape that the respective passages have finally taken. A case in point is the scrutiny to which Freeman submits Dickinson's choice of the word »enabled« out of the considered alternatives »*learned, Religious, enabled, accomplished, discerning, accoutred, established, conclusive*« (38; emphasis orig.) in the final line of her poem "He preached upon 'Breadth' till it argued him narrow". Freeman's conclusion on this matter is that, »[b]y choosing *enabled*, Dickinson has allowed all the other meanings in. Because of its open-endedness, it suggests an enabling to do ›anything‹ this preacher does.« (39; emphasis orig.) In this case, as in the remainder of her interpretations of Dickinson's poetry, it is hard to see why, short of postulating hypothetical mental processes going on in the poet's mind, this conclusion has

much to do with employing cognitive literary studies. In large parts, Freeman's argument seems to be made on the basis of textual criticism that does not necessitate cognitive approaches to literary studies in order to be successful.

Bo Pettersson makes a more convincing attempt to include cognitive approaches into the interpretive framework of his paper »The Many Faces of Unreliable Narration: A Cognitive Narratological Reorientation«. In it, Pettersson touches upon one of the narratological classics, unreliable narration, and on the renewed interest this topic has encountered due to the deployment of cognitive approaches, exemplified in Nünning (1999).¹ Consequently, Pettersson's discussion takes its point of origin in Nünning's highly prominent account of unreliable narration that regards »[t]he construction of an unreliable narrator [...] as an interpretive strategy by which the reader naturalizes textual inconsistencies that might otherwise remain unassimilable.« (66; Nünning 1999: 69) Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of Nünning's approach, Pettersson goes on to introduce the distinction between factual and fictional narration, suggesting »that the realist and mimetic premise of assessing fictional reliability should be rethought. [...] The point I am making is that unreliability cannot simply be measured against a narrow mimetic or realist view of literature, but on what Fludernik (1996: 43) calls the »parameters of real-life experience« (71; 72)² Pettersson lists veracity, existential presuppositions, referential familiarity, morality, intentionality and consistency as those real-life parameters that can be usefully employed for determining unreliable narration (74-76). In the latter part of his essay he applies his theory in a case study of Michael Frayn's novel *Spies* (2000), convincingly arguing that the use of real-life parameters is one of the bases for diagnosing the presence of unreliable narration.

Joanna Gavins takes Paul Werth's Text World Theory as the point of departure for her paper »Text World Theory in Literary Practice«. Text World Theory's ambitious aim was to »provide an accurate account of human communication processes in all their cognitive and psychological complexity« (90). In Gavins' treatment, the relevance of Text World Theory for literary communication is immediately visible and well illustrated by appropriate examples from Alexander McCall Smith's *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (2003). To reach the goal of embedding literary communication in its real-world context, Werth broke up the whole of communication into three levels, discourse worlds (the world in which the communicative discourse takes place), text worlds (the »static conceptual background against which certain events and activities may be played out« [93]) and sub-worlds (denoting departures from the initially constructed text world). However, it is hard to comprehend for the reader in how far cognitive approaches are relevant to the enterprise of Text World Theory. Apart from several rather global claims that Text World Theory provided »a fully cognitive, context-sensitive approach to discourse study« (102), a detailed account of the cognitive processes that enable discourse understanding in a rich situated context is largely missing from Gavins' account.

The fact that diagrammatic structures can be regarded as »cognitive tools for organising, developing and expressing our understanding of a literary work« (105) is the basic premise of **Christina Ljungberg's** paper »Models of Reading: Diagrammatic Aspects of Literary Texts«. She convincingly argues that, »[i]n the process of reading, [...] diagrams function as sets of (text-)building instructions for the production of the fictional world in the reader's mind« (111), and connects the contemporary notion of the image schema to Peirce's notion of the diagram. Instead of focusing on the use that readers might make of diagrammatic structures in the construction of mental models, however, Ljungberg then concentrates on diagrammatic patterns that are present in the discourse of literary texts, such as the spatial arrangements in Margaret Atwood's poem *This Is a Photograph of Me* or palindromic patterns

in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*. Rather than the mental micro-processes of understanding, her paper focuses on textual macro-structures and discusses diagrammatic structures as a way of organising a work of fiction.

As the above remarks have shown, the four papers united in the first section of the volume suffer, to various degrees, from a disconnection between their theoretical considerations and premises on the one hand, and the actual, hands-on analysis of literary works on the other hand. While all these papers do provide sophisticated readings of the poems and narratives in question, this disconnection makes it difficult for the reader to identify the surplus value brought to literary interpretation by cognitively inspired theoretical apparatuses.

The second section of this volume is concerned with practices of reading, that is, with the role of cognitive processes in reading as well as with the role of reading in cognitive processes. It opens with **David S. Miall's** paper »Beyond Interpretation: The Cognitive Significance of Reading«. In a refreshingly candid way, Miall takes his point of departure in the crisis of reading and the ensuing crisis of literary studies, once again observed by philological organisations since the year 2000, and interrogates the power of »cognitive approaches to literature [...] to remedy some of the problems we now face in literary scholarship.« (132) He suggests the three aspects empiricism, evolution and emotion as central to solving the problem of an increasing marginalisation of literary studies. In his argument for empirical approaches to literary studies, Miall calls for a new appreciation of experiencing literature, accounting for the cognitive processes involved, in contrast to interpreting literature as a process aiming at establishing a text's meaning. Drawing on his and Don Kuiken's empirical research into subjects' reading experiences that effected the finding that only a fraction of readers read literature for interpretation, Miall argues that »[t]he cognitive processes that underlie reading, analysed by Stockwell and others, should not, therefore, be considered to lead necessarily to readers' interpretations.« (138) Furthermore, Miall touches a sore spot when he asks why »cognitive poetics [would] take no steps to examine its hypotheses empirically«, »[g]iven the origin of its cognitive models and processes in an empirical science« (139). Miall's paper contains a plethora of thought-provoking statements, inspiringly questioning the central assumptions of cognitive approaches to literature. His closing statement seems to be worth quoting in full, since it sums up the state of cognitive approaches even today: »The choice facing cognitive poetics now is whether to continue with a limited and perhaps limiting focus on interpretation, or seek to situate literary study within an explanatory scientific framework in which the phenomena of interpretation form only one corner of a much larger field.« (151)

A completely different angle on the cultural technique of reading is opened by **Howard Sklar's** contribution »Believable Fictions: The Moral Implications of Story-Based Emotions«. He combines the question for the generation of a reality illusion with the question for the moral implications inherent in works of fiction. Sklar puts into perspective the presumed difference between conceiving of fictional characters and knowing people in the real world, arguing that, »like our experience of fictional characters, our knowledge and impressions of real people in our daily lives [...] is fragmentary, incomplete.« (159) The fact that in real life the data of sense perception are supplemented with world knowledge – similarly to the textual data involved in the reading process that are equally supplemented with world knowledge – makes it possible for the reader to »have the fictionality at the back of his mind, but the front of his mind, so to speak, is occupied by the *sensation of realism* that the work produces.« (160; emphasis orig.) In a close reading of Sherwood Anderson's short story *Hands*, published as a part of his short story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Sklar clearly demonstrates the way in which readers' emotional and ethical responses are structured by a combination of »plot structure, character focalisation, and other narratorial effects« (166). He concludes that

reacting to fictional characters can indeed trigger moral and ethical responses in readers. While his argument is convincing, a closer look at the cognitive processes involved in readers' moral responses would have been desirable.

A different view on the willing suspension of disbelief is opened by **Margarete Rubik** in her paper »Navigating through Fantasy Worlds: Cognition and the Intricacies of Reading Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair*«. While Sklar was concerned with realistic literary characters, Rubik focuses on »the strategies with which [Fforde's] novel pilots its audience through a radically defamiliarised text world and [...] the mental representations readers create when processing such an unusual literary text.« (183) In her case study, Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* (2001), not only time is reversible, allowing for the well-known quirks of plot such as meetings of various versions of the self or changing the course of history, but also classics of English literature are interlaced with the novel's plot and, thus, rewritten. While Rubik's considerations on this novel are highly erudite and sophisticated, contrary to her assertion in the beginning of her paper, she largely fails to deliver a description of cognitive processes that enable readers' minds to naturalise these completely inconsistent bits and pieces into a coherent story world.

Olga Vorobyova, in her paper »The Mark on the Wall« and Literary Fancy: A Cognitive Sketch« undertakes a fruitful confrontation of cognitive approaches to literature with artistic creativity. Her account centres on conceptual metaphors and the way in which literary artists manipulate these largely unconsciously operating mechanisms of everyday understanding. According to Vorobyova, artists can rework conventional conceptual metaphors by extension, elaboration, combination, and questioning, or they can create new conceptual metaphors through the use of central rich images or »megametaphors«. ³ Thus, she fruitfully employs the theory of conceptual metaphor for elucidating an important aspect of literary imagination, namely artistic innovation through the creative manipulation of metaphors, and, moreover, successfully illustrates her claims with passages from Virginia Woolf's short story *The Mark on the Wall* (1917).

In correspondence with its opening paper, the second section of this volume also closes with a paper that focuses on empirical approaches to the reading experience. In their dense and programmatic paper »From Hard Poetics to Situated Reading: A Cognitive-Empirical Study of Imagery and Graded Figurative Language«, **Liza Das** and **Braj Bhushan** present the results of an empirical study they have undertaken, focusing on »the ascription of meaning to incoming information, a view that does not readily accept a neat distinction between experience and interpretation. Meaning, we believe, is inextricably related to interpretation« (220). Their experiment focused on readers' understanding of poetical expressions below the threshold of metaphor and their influence on subjects' meaning-making. While their discussion of the results suffers from an account of the statistical analysis rather incomprehensible to the non-expert and too little inter-cultural explanation – their source text is Jayanta Mahapatra's poem *Dawn at Puri* (1989) which draws to a great extent on the cultural heritage of Hinduism – their conclusion is worth noting, since it »may provisionally support David Miall's distinction between meaning-centered interpretation and cognition-centered experience« (231). ⁴

As these remarks might illustrate, the essays gathered in the second section of the volume open a rich vista of the cognitive significance of reading as well as of the importance of cognitive processes for reading. As is the case in the first section, however, weak points can be found in the application of the theoretical considerations to actual readings of literature.

The third section of papers is concerned less with questions of interpretation than with the theoretical premises of cognitive approaches to literature. **Jørgen Dines Johansen**, in his paper »Theory and/vs. Interpretation in Literary Studies«, takes the topic of the conference head-on, opening his contribution with the provocative question: »Indeed, what do cognitive studies have to offer to the interpretation of literature?« (241) Johansen sharply discriminates between theorising in literary studies and interpreting literature before he goes on to make a case study of a piece of cognitive interpretation, »namely Lakoff and Turner's analysis of William Carlos Williams's poem ›To a Solitary Disciple‹ from their book *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (1989).« (252)⁵ In the course of this case study of a case study, Johansen offers some very poignant criticism of Lakoff and Turner's interpretation, arguing in his alternative account that Williams' arrangements of metaphors and metonymies rather indicates criticism of the church than stressing its role as servant and protector of the divine. Building on this misunderstanding, Johansen then reproaches Lakoff and Turner for their mistake, arguing that they isolate the literary work from its cultural-historical background, a process that, in his view, makes it impossible to understand a literary artefact fully. His conclusion is that theoretical reflection and literary interpretation are not so separate activities in literary studies as he has first suggested, but that they rather go along with each other. While this conclusion may not be very surprising – after all, Popper has already stated that all observation is driven by more or less explicit theoretical assumptions – Johansen finally offers a reason for why one might be tempted to prefer the cognitive theory of metaphor over other theories, namely its »claim to generality« (262).

Peter Stockwell starts his contribution »On Cognitive Poetics and Stylistics« with an account of the unease created by these theoretical movements among hermeneutically oriented critics, agreeing with some of them »that some of the cognitive terminology is not necessary, and merely serves to obscure features that a plain stylistic analysis has an adequate name for already.« (271) In order to counteract this criticism, Stockwell then sets out to demonstrate »what an existing cognitive poetic analysis and a new stylistic analysis would offer together« (273), using Ted Hughes' poem *Hill-Stone was Content* as a case study. Through the combination of stylistic and cognitive poetic analyses, Stockwell manages to ground the claims to the effects of the poet's stylistic choices in cognitive processes, for instance when he argues that the personification of the hill-stone undertaken in the poem »can be understood as a reversal of the usual figure/ground relationship.« (276) Thus, Stockwell demonstrates that »the stylistic analysis and the cognitive poetic analysis [...] offer complementary features for study.« (279)

The scholarly practice of modelling with its premises and effects serves as a point of origin for **Harri Veivo** and **Tarja Knuuttila**'s paper »Modelling, Theorising and Interpretation in Cognitive Literary Studies«. They stress the importance of modelling for »mediat[ing] between theories and texts.« (283) However, philosophy of science has unduly neglected the scientific practice of modelling, which might be one reason for the blind spots discernible in modelling in cognitive studies. A case in point is Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980),⁶ whose modelling practice Veivo and Knuuttila criticise as too abstract, decontextualised and preferring the domain of written language over all other domains of human life, while all these points that are critical to the enquiry remain concealed from the readers. All in all, they argue that »Lakoff, Johnson and Turner downplay[...] distinctions between language, literature, the mind and the world in their modelling practices and their rhetoric of argumentation, and reducing the literary to the mental.« (293) What is more, Veivo and Knuuttila find, to a certain extent, a disconnection of cognitive literary studies from literary interpretation: »In emphasising the mental, in decontextualising the text and cutting it off from agency, cognitive studies departs considerably from these central aspects of literary interpretation.« (297)

Instead, they argue in favour of »understanding the mind as artefactual, as importantly formed by cultural artefacts, including language.« (300) That is, they call for a reversal in argumentation, from understanding culture as mentally determined to understanding the mind as culturally determined. The only problematic point with their paper is that they do not offer concrete statements as to how this demand can be transacted in literary interpretation.

The final paper of the collection, **Bo Pettersson's** afterword »Cognitive Literary Studies: Where to Go from Here«, not only sums up the aims of the conference as well as of the collective volume, but it also assesses cognitive literary studies on the whole in a highly perceptive way, making several claims that are still valid today. As to the first point, Pettersson characterises the approach taken by the conference as »not to accept uncritically exaggerated claims for this fledgling area of research but rather to scrutinise the use literary-critical praxis might make of contemporary cognitive research.« (307) If this objective has been reached only in a limited fashion in the single contributions, this problem might be due to the very nature of the enterprise, for Pettersson then argues that one should bridge the gap between cognitive research in the life sciences and in the humanities, conceding that, »despite some building material and reader-response experiments of various sorts, we are still rather far from being able to see what the structure of a bridge between cognition and literary interpretation might look like.« (309) Pettersson goes on to make some very insightful observations, for instance when he structures the field of cognitive literary research in accordance with Bruner's (1986)⁷ dichotomy between the paradigmatic and the narrative mode of thought. While the first mode of thought has brought forth insights in the »study of figures and tropes« (310), the second mode of thought has effectuated claims to the all-encompassing importance of narrative for human cognition. In a concluding fashion, Pettersson calls for a »rapprochement between the two« (311), arguing that figures and tropes are not so categorically different from narrative as one might think at first sight and, moreover, observing that scholars working in one direction have always also produced valuable insights about the other direction.

Conclusion

While the collaborative volume under review here offers a discussion of a broad range of issues connected to the cognitively inspired study of literature, some of the papers can be accused of missing the point of the whole enterprise, particularly in cases that concern the application of cognitively inspired theories to certain works of literature. Thus, most of the contributions to the first section of the volume offer erudite and sophisticated interpretations of literary works, but largely fail to answer the question for the surplus value that the critic's knowledge and application of cognitive approaches adds to literary interpretation. This problem is partly due to the pioneering nature of the research undertaken in these papers. As is the case with most pioneering work, it does open a new path for investigation, but cannot follow this path to perfection. Notwithstanding this problem, especially the more theoretical parts of the papers united in this volume touch on many points crucial to the cognitively inspired study of literature and make many claims that are still valid today, five years after its original appearance. Thus, the contributions to the third section offer relevant and valid discussions of decisive theoretical issues, as well as poignant criticism of established approaches in the realm of cognitive literary studies. All in all, thus, the reviewed volume presents its readers with many thought-provoking ideas on a level of reflection that no scholar interested in this area of research should fall behind.

Notes

¹ Ansgar Nünning, *Unreliable, Compared to What? Towards a Cognitive Theory of Unreliable Narration: Prolegomena and Hypotheses*, in: Walter Grünzweig/Andreas Solbach (eds.), *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext / Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context*, Tübingen 1999, 53-73.

² Monika Fludernik, *Towards a ›Natural‹ Narratology*, London 1996.

³ Paul Werth, in his *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* (New York 1999: 319), defines megametaphors as »sustained metaphorical undercurrents [...] which bring together the metaphors in a text into an overarching structure« (210).

⁴ Miall makes this distinction in his contribution to the present volume.

⁵ George Lakoff/Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago 1989.

⁶ George Lakoff/Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago 1980.

⁷ Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Cambridge, Mass./London 1986.

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