

Marcus Hartner

»[...] The Lingering After-Effects in the Reader's Mind« – An Investigation into the Affective Dimension of Literary Reading

- Michael Burke, *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion. An Exploration of the Oceanic Mind*. New York/London: Routledge 2011. 283 p. [Price EUR 31,99]. ISBN: 978-0415520683.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote in a letter to Earnest Hemmingway that »the purpose of a work of fiction is to appeal to the lingering after-effects in the reader's mind«. ¹ By referring to this quotation in its opening passage, Michael Burke's *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion* programmatically draws attention to the fact that the reading of literary texts does not merely constitute an emotionally ›neutral‹ act of information processing; rather it often possesses a highly emotive quality that frequently continues to reverberate long after the book has been put down. While many recent cognitive approaches to literature still make the mistake of neglecting this affective dimension, Burke's investigation is principally concerned with the question of what makes literary reading so intense and emotive. Instead of solely focusing on the semantic and conceptual aspects of literary comprehension, he attempts to shed some light on the intriguing and still scientifically elusive act of reading by specifically directing his attention to the interplay of cognition and emotion. His study tries to understand »what happens in the minds and bodies of readers« (254f.) and what makes intense or heightened emotional responses to literature, such as Fitzgerald's »lingering after-effects«, possible.

For this purpose Michael Burke draws on an impressive body of neurobiological and psychological theories, his own considerable scholarly expertise in linguistic and literary analysis, and data from a number of reader-response questionnaires. The result is a highly recommendable book which persuasively argues that conceptual and emotional aspects of reading are inextricably interwoven and cannot be understood separately from one another. Its main tenet is that the processes underlying the reading mind should not be conceived as purely rational or computational. According to Burke, they have to be seen as fundamentally »dynamic, fluvial and fluctuating« (1): textual data and different affective inputs interact with a variety of cognitive mechanisms such as implicit and explicit memory in a highly flexible and free-flowing way and simultaneously involve active and interconnecting mental processes and representations. In order to describe this cross-cortical and wide-ranging nature of literary processing, he coins the metaphorical expression »oceanic cognition«.

1. The Oceanic Mind

The idea to employ a »hydrolic metaphor« for the literary mind is inspired by Kosslyn and Koenig's influential work on »the new cognitive neuroscience«. They argue that such imagery »stresses the complex, interactive nature of the brain's computation, and [...] encourages us to think about how emotion and motivation can alter information processing«. ² From their work Burke takes up the idea that mental processes can be best conceived in the form of »wave interaction[s]« (cf. 54). In order to argue this claim his study first turns to the fundamental elements of the cognitive and neurological framework that underlies the act of reading. The first two chapters of the book, »The Secret Lives of Reading and Remembering« (ch.1) and »Seeing, Thinking and Feeling« (ch.2), provide a thorough and extensive survey of important

theories and scientific findings on basic relevant mechanisms and dispositions of the mind. Among the many issues and concepts discussed are, for example, the interplay of bottom-up and top-down processing, the idea of mirror neurons, the distinction between different types of memory, the role of readers' goals, and the distinction between emotion, affect and feeling. By outlining such basic aspects of text processing, memory functions, and the emotion system the two initial chapters present the conceptual background against which the ensuing investigation of the literary reading experience is set.

In the chapters following this introductory survey Burke identifies and discusses »five affective inputs« that play a major role in producing »that unique and cherished emotive feeling of reading« (55). In this context, he first turns to the intricate question of the nature of »Literary Reading-Induced Mental Imagery« (ch.3), i.e. »the mental images that are being produced in the minds of people when they read literature« (57). Such images and particularly their emotive content, he argues, are only partially the product of the semantics of the text and largely rely on pre-existing images of events, locations and people from the reader's personal memory. Chapter Four (»Reading Moods and Reading Places«) goes on to discuss two further affective inputs that potentially influence the individual reading process: the mood of the reader when opening the book, and the location in which the reading takes place. Though these aspects are highly idiosyncratic Burke holds that they constitute »affective cognitive pre-reading input [...] that can influence meaning-making and the reception process as a whole« (101). In chapter five (»The Affective Nature of Literary Themes«) he then turns to the emotive potential of the text's themes and subject matter and discusses the emotional quality of literary themes such as death, home, nostalgia, and feelings of distance and incommunicability. In this context he speculates that the reading experience is influenced by an unconscious »affective maelstrom of the subconscious mind« (104) in which particularly childhood experiences play a central role. Chapter six then argues that another crucial candidate for triggering emotion in the reader in addition to literary themes is style. Again Burke suggests that it is not only the words on the page that count, but the way they resonate with the memorized fragments of stylistic features of previous reading experiences. Style, he argues, is obviously a technique that has to do with the skilful arrangement of text, »but for an engaged literary reader it is about memory too; the distant subconscious memory of half-forgotten rhythms, half-remembered lines and half-felt syntactic structures« (146).

Having identified and discussed the five affective inputs of mental imagery, mood, place, themes, and style in chapters three to six, the book turns to the interaction of those inputs. In chapter seven (»Towards a Model of Emotion in Literary Reading«), which forms the conceptual core of the study, Burke develops a tentative model of emotion in literary reading by pulling all previous discussions together. Central to this model is the idea that reading neither starts when you open a book nor ends when you close it (cf. 149). As the preceding discussion of affective inputs tries to illustrate, literary reading is not a purely sign-fed process but draws on the memorized residues of images, themes and styles of prior reading events and experiences. Thus, literary reading, according to Burke, can be understood as an on-going circular process in which »pre-reading«, »reading« and »post-reading« form a continual »literary reading loop« (153). This circular process, i.e. the (un)conscious impact of different reading experiences on each other, has to do with literature's capacity to prime our memories and emotions – a process in turn will influence subsequent reception processes:

As our emotional response to a work develops out of a particular set of primed personal memories, those memories begin to guide our realization or concretization of that work. As a result of this concretization, the memories themselves are reprimed and thus our emotional response is reinforced or enhanced.³

Drawing on this account of priming by Patrick Colm Hogan, Burke underlines the crucial role of memory in the context of affective responses to literature (cf. 48). During the reading experience fragments from both explicit and implicit memory are activated and feed into our emotional response to the text. Most importantly, however, oceanic cognition according to Burke is marked by the fact that all its components and processes are linked and continually interact: »[P]rocesses in the brain do not work computer-like in distinct stages, rather the brain is continually awash with processing activities« (53). The different affective inputs (mental imagery, mood, place, theme, and style) are not processed separately but often overlap. They are not determined solely by the text but largely draw on the reader's explicit and implicit memory structures, thus triggering both conceptual and somatic kinds of emotive response, which Burke labels »cognitive emotion« and »affective cognition« (cf. 155ff.). The interactive and »fluvial« combination of these elements constitute what Burke calls the »the oceanic mind«.

2. Reader Epiphanies

After chapter seven has provided a provisional account of the workings of emotion in literary reading, the final chapters of the book attempt to test the explanatory potential of oceanic cognition by examining particularly intense emotive moments during the reading experience. Investigating the neuro-cognitive basis of such »reader epiphanies«, Burke's particular focus is on literary closure. In order to study the phenomenon he takes the closing lines of Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* as a test case and conducts both a reader response survey with thirty-six undergraduate students (ch.9) and an in-depth stylistic analysis (ch. 10). Particularly the latter chapter combines cognitive stylistic methods of analysis with more traditional stylistic approaches and thus illustrates Burke's conviction that cognitive studies should add to literary analysis, not replace it (cf. 210).

Although introducing a number of new aspects and findings, the final section of the book nevertheless essentially attempts to endorse the basic claims put forth in chapter seven. It continues to emphasize the role of »intertextual and autobiographical memory-based inputs« for affective responses to literature and engages in a number of speculations based on this premise (226). Contemplating highly emotive reading experiences such as a phenomenon he calls »disportation« (ch. 11), Burke suggests that by triggering past affective responses, literature can make the reader tap emotionally into his or her own past. He conjectures that there are instances when »[e]ngaged and committed literary readers can enjoy a momentary window in time, plausibly sending those individuals back to their indistinct locations of their remembered, or pseudo-remembered childhood« (253). More specifically, Burke is convinced of the unconscious influence of childhood and parents on our responses to art. He proposes that there is a kind of »familiar childhood space« (254) floating somewhere deep in our memory, that literature might enable us connect to.

3. Approach and Method

Any investigation into literary reader response from a scientifically informed perspective is confronted with at least two difficulties: the inconclusive nature of the available empirical data on higher cognitive functions like reading, and the question of the kind of reader being examined. Traditional scholarly works on reader response usually tackle the second problem by employing some form of reader model, i.e. an abstract and idealized, hypothetical reader construct. Such model readers are a heuristic means of thinking about the effects of a literary

text without having to deal with the erratic responses of individual »real« readers. In contrast, researchers in the field of discourse processing, for example, collect empirical data by conducting carefully designed experiments with real readers. Both methods have well-known advantages and drawbacks. While reading experiments in principle can provide scientifically reliable evidence, they have to be meticulously planned and require a large pool of test subjects. For epistemological reasons they also usually need to be restricted to small fragments of text and conceptually narrow research questions in order to reduce the number of confounding variables and yield methodologically sound data.⁴ They are therefore generally less suited to tackle many of the complex (aesthetic) questions of literary scholarship. Model readers, on the other hand, allow for more encompassing reader response analyses. However, they have frequently been accused of merely functioning as a disguise for the author of the respective study, who is actually only talking about his or her own reading process and experiences. The concept of the model reader, in other words, has often served to veil the hermeneutic and subjective nature of traditional forms of scholarly investigation and give it a seemingly more objective air.

Michael Burke responds to these problems in an interesting way. Instead of choosing one approach, he employs several reader concepts: he illustrates and analyses his own reading experiences, conducts a series of reader response surveys with students, and develops an abstract and generalized reader concept by drawing general conclusions about »engaged and committed readers« (253). Although this strategy might seem inconsistent, Michael Burke is well aware of what he is doing. Having realized that the complex questions he is asking cannot (yet) be sufficiently answered by empirical testing or neurological and psychological research, he openly admits to the tentative and provisional nature of his investigation. Instead of making a pretence of objectivity, he acknowledges that his study, though informed by an impressive range of scientific knowledge, is ultimately based on subjective »theoretical conjecture« (2). Similarly the reader response surveys he conducts do not aim to be proper empirical studies. Many chapters of the book include written surveys which directly connect to the chapter's topic in which Burke asks students questions about their reading experiences. The function of these questionnaires is not to yield conclusive data, but to provide illustration and to balance Burke's own theoretical account. His method of investigating the role of emotion during reading, in other words, is to approach the subject from several angles at the same time, thus providing a more encompassing view on the questions and problems involved.

Some scholars might, of course, criticise this approach on methodological grounds. The book's attempt to argue complex issues necessarily affects the reader response questionnaires and complicates their design. As a consequence some of the questions indeed seem somewhat problematic: while a few are dangerously vague, others implicitly invite a certain response, and in this way run the risk of tainting the results. In addition, the data from those surveys often remains inconclusive; this may further call into question the overall value of the insight they provide, particularly as the surveys and discussion of them take up a substantial portion of the book. Then again, the qualitative feedback from his students reflects Burke's genuine interest in real readers. Unlike literary scholars who write about reader response from the conceptual ivory tower of their own model, he actually listens to empirical reading accounts of other people in order to seek inspiration and further insight that he can incorporate into his own thinking.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, Michael Burke's *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion* is an original and exciting exploration of the affective dimension of reading and literature's capacity to trigger powerful emotive responses. It provides a »state-of-the-art« survey of cognitive theories about reading and emotion and contextualizes recent research with earlier theories from the long traditions of literary- and linguistic scholarship and the study of rhetoric. By combining this wealth of concepts with careful stylistic analysis, feedback from reader response surveys, and theoretical conjecture, Burke manages to provide a captivating account of some of the basic aspects of literary reading. He does not present a comprehensive model of »emotive poetics« (255), but puts forth a number of stimulating hypotheses, such as the »oceanic mind«, the »literary reading loop« or the five »affective inputs«, which certainly merit further research and testing. Though the reader of the book might not necessarily want to follow or accept all of its assumptions and suppositions, the study is certainly a remarkable piece of scholarship; it is also a highly interesting and thought provoking read and will hopefully leave a »lingering after-effect« in many of its readers' minds.

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Notes

¹ Cf. Andrew Turnbull (ed.), *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, London 1964, 309.

² Stephen M. Kosslyn/Olivier Koenig (ed.), *The Wet Mind. The New Cognitive Neuroscience*, New York 1995, 447f. [qtd. in Burke, *Literary Reading*, 54].

³ Patrick Colm Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature and the Arts*, New York/London 2003, 161.

⁴ Cf. Marisa Bortolussi/Peter Dixon, *Psychonarratology. Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literary Response*, Cambridge 2003, 53ff.

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