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Cognitive poetics and practice.

A review of (Eds.) Joanna Gavins & Gerard Steen 2003, Cognitive poetics in practice, London and New York: Routledge (188 pp.)

This anthology of papers dedicated to exploring the perspectives of applying cognitive research to literature follows Peter Stockwell's programmatic (2000) Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction, London: Routledge, and also includes a new essay by Stockwell. His book was in its turn an updating of Reuven Tsur (1992), Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics, Amsterdam: Elsevier; and Tsur is a contributor to this volume as well; now the time has come for practical analysis.

The general impression you get from this anthology is one of a group of English teachers turning away from softheaded hermeneutics, post-this-and-that and deconstruction, in short: the relativistic 'cultural studies' style of Humanities that was so efficiently ridiculed by Alan Sokal, in order to find more solid ground in psychology, linguistics, classical formalist literary criticism, and a new possible paradigm of more scientific, cognitive studies creating collaborations across disciplines in order to explore the human mind and make this enterprise a common denominator of human and social sciences – here thus the study and teaching of literary texts. This idea of a cognitive poetics is a recent – Mark Turner's groundbreaking Reading Minds. The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science was published in 1991 – but rapidly growing and spreading initiative. There surely is a generally felt need for better ways of treating literature than those offered by 'cultural studies', and this volume reflects the enthusiasm with which some literary scholars now embrace these 'cognitive studies' in the hope of finding new foundations.

The book under review presents a series of rather independent articles, tied together by initial editorial comments, introductions, and a concluding list of pedagogical exercices following each text, the general introduction and the ten core chapters. Psychologist and novelist Keith Oatley is the author of a final chapter outlining some topics for future elaboration.

In their introduction, Steen and Gavins explain that meaning is based on our thinking, which in turn is based on our 'dealing with the world', and I have to quote the passage explaining what this is supposed to mean (p. 9):

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"Experience explains conceptual structure, and conceptual structure explains linguistic structure. For instance, our use of expressions for happy and sad moods like 'I feel *high*' 'I feel *depressed*' or '*low*' are not accidental. They are explained by a conceptual metaphor, or metaphorical concept, HAPPY IS UP. And this conceptual metaphor is conventional because it is taken to reflect our basic attitudes when we are happy or sad: 'Physical basis: Drooping posture typically goes along with sadness and depression, erect posture with a positive emotional state' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 15)."

This is about the level of cognizing exposed here. The up-down dimension manifested by high-low are expressions of bodily posture; then, I would say, we should perhaps expect: "I feel erect" and "I feel drooping" instead; but since our concepts of moods are thought to be concepts of bodily experience in terms of posture – a good old behavioristic principle apparently still going strong – and bodily posture is further identified with the cognitive organization of space, the linguistic expression of these bodily experiences can refer to spatial verticality in general, and its meaning will be clear. Space is body. I would doubt that things are quite that simple; high might refer to the absence or minimization of gravitational force and low to its maximization, both referring to flying objects, birds for instance; so that "flying high" would mean to be dynamically set up as free, whereas a "very low flight" would mean a bound condition. The vertical dynamics would then express concepts and degrees of freedom and therefore also sometimes concepts and degrees of happiness, besides concepts of intelligence, by the way (Cf. the French: "Cela ne vole pas haut."). But HAPPY IS UP is still, after 24 years of metaphors-we-live-by, sufficient explanation for the present purpose, it seems. And so, cognitive realism still comes very close to classical empiricism.

However, the contributions can hardly be called classical, and they often shed light on specific aspects of literary texts.

Stockwell's paper explores the role of attention and the attractors that guide it through surrealistic texts exemplified by Sykes Davies, Picasso, Breton, Roditi, and a comment by Magritte. The changing figure-ground relations set up by the semantic process in such texts are seen as due to a strategy of dynamic figural manipulation, achieving a displacement of attractors that may be characteristic of surrealism.

Raymond Gibbs, psychologist and author of The Poetics of Mind (1994), refers in his chapter to two paragraphs of narrative prose by Dilland and Nin, respectively, illustrating the feeling of 'being at one with all things in the world'. He

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explains that the reader's poetic understanding of these texts is creative, plastic, and embodied (versus prototypical), and that the choice of conceptual metaphor and particular categorial concepts depends on the reader's

"simulating how the objects and actions depicted in language relate to embodied possibilities. Thus, people use their embodied experiences to 'soft-assemble' meaning, rather than merely activate preexisting abstract, prototypical conceptual representations." (P. 37).

Gibbs discovers that readers adopt the perspective of persons in a story, and that this is what constitutes the poetic experience as such. So embodiment is poetic.

This stance surprises me as overgeneralizing. If embodied and contextual understandings of communicated meaning are poetic, it would be interesting to study non-poetic construals of meaning in ordinary pragmatics: are they instead abstract, disembodied, preestablished – or is it that cognition is poetic all over, since embodiment is all over the place?

Reuven Tsur is interested in the opposition of <u>diffuse versus compact</u> qualities in experience, and is particularly attentive to poetic accounts of time in terms of this variation. Poetic experiences of time seem to consist in phenomena rendered by forms of diffuse deixis. Abstraction, which occurs in all of Tsur's examples, mainly from Shakespeare, Marvell, Wordsworth, appears to primarily yield diffusion. The phenomenological study of this dimension in semantics and grammar (not in phonology) really contributes, I think, to the improvement of literary reading.

Craig Hamilton presents an analysis of a poem by Owen, and mainly studies the resource of modifying the semantic organization called <u>profiling</u> (profile vesus base). It coincides with the notion of <u>figure</u> (versus ground) and also with the notion of <u>trajector</u> (versus landmark). So, in a quoted French poem:

>*N'est-ce pas plutôt le jardin*
>
>*qui traverse doucement*
>
>*le chat ?*

|Isn't it rather the garden / that quietly crosses / the cat?|
– the reversal of cat and garden is doing the poetic job. A cat running through a garden is a scenario with a trivial profile over a trivial base. "A garden crossing a cat, however, is poetic and worth contemplating." (P. 57). Profiling pervades poetry. Every detail in a text that attention picks up can be called profiled, and since literary reading is attentive, profiles abound, and they are all "poetic". Owen's sonnet

'Hospital Barge' manifests profile work everywhere. The problem is, I think, that the attention thus paid to attention as such does not lead anywhere else – than to the predicate: " ... is poetic".

Gerard Steen discusses love scenarios as flowcharts: wanting -> getting -> keeping (yes/no?; because ... ; resulting in ...). He comments on short poetic texts or fragments by Crabbe, Wotton, Housman, Graves, Blake, Walsh, and distinguishes four discourse types: narrative, descriptive, argumentative, and expository. Narratives are mainly semantically causal; by contrast, Steen says, arguments are mainly pragmatically causal. Descriptions are semantically additive (describing this + that...), whereas expositions are pragmatically additive. In love poems, all types are found.

Elena Semino approaches narrative semantics through Marie-Laure Ryan's work (Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory, 1991) and explores the possibility of seeing fictional worlds as entities in the logical sense of possible worlds, and then in terms of mental spaces as described by Gilles Fauconnier (Mental Spaces, 1994). A short story by Hemingway – A very short story – is then translated into a network of nine spaces. A Base space (the Narrator's) is followed by a Reality space (the Reality of the story has two protagonists meeting in Italy during the war, dating, planning their shared future in the U.S. after the war). This planning opens a Speech domain, comprising first three spaces containing what the male protagonist is supposed to do (go home: one space; then find a job: one space; then finally marry the other protagonist: one space). Second, the Speech domain opens, in parallel to the former sequence, a space series containing what the female protagonist is supposed to do in the future (come home: one space; check the man's job: one space; check that the man comes to NY to meet her: one space; then meet him: one space). – In Hemingway's story, all of these plans fail, because she stays with another man in Italy, who eventually leaves her; and he stays in Chicago, where he contracts gonorrhea from a sales girl while riding in a taxicab. Full stop. So there ought to be an Italian Lover space and a Gonorrhea space as well, at least. But the network of spaces forgets entirely to register the latter circumstances, which are decisive for the (deceptive) human meaning of the story. In this sense, the narrative content is ignored or discarded by this technique, which instead focusses on conditional relations (if he does this ..., she promises to do that ...). The analysis stays uncommitted to literary interpretation (apart from the way in which it does stress her conditions, not his). It

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does not seem to matter to the analysis what the text emotionally means. This may be – and I think it is – due to the way in which Turner and Fauconnier's mental space theory, as it stands, conceives of meaning: in the study of relations between spaces it is sensitive to logic-like epistemic aspects only, such as temporality, conditionality, and counterfactuality, but neither to narrative event structure as such nor to causal dynamics, intentional relations, emotion, intersubjective states or events (what happens to love in this story? – this issue could be compared to the topic of Steen's chapter). The problem is interesting, because mental spaces are clearly involved in the cognitive organization of narrative, argumentative, descriptive contents and conceptualizations; yet the theory as it stands is too simple to grasp the semantic facts in a one page story! Even so, Semino finally adds: "It is important to note that the text I have just analysed is much more complex than the texts normally used as examples by mental space theorists." (P. 97).

Peter Crisp discusses conceptual metaphor theory and applies it to a poem by D. H. Lawrence and to another by Keats. Metaphor enables (abstract) thought, he again claims. Then he goes on to explain that mental space and blending theory is about 'online' conceptual processing, that conceptual metaphor is blending between domains, and that the Butcher metaphor (Grady, Oakley, Coulson in the Journal of Cognitive Linguistics 1999) in which a surgeon is called a butcher supposedly to state that the agent is incompetent, lets incompetence emerge from a blended butcher-surgeon. Blending "operates within the framework already defined by CMT [conceptual metaphor theory]." (P. 111). Now this is not clear at all. It would be possible to claim the contrary, making CMT a part of blending theory, since blending is not even possible in terms of CMT. But then we would have to elaborate explicit models of what happens cognitively when an author "combines" metaphors (p. 110) in texts: by addition, integration, embedding, what? There is simply nothing written in cognitive literature to clarify this intuitive 'combination'. Here, Crisp simply wants his students to detect metaphors instead of ignoring them, certainly a respectable enterprise, but theoretically nothing is achieved.

Michael Burke presents Turner's idea of parable seen as a basic tool of the human Literary Mind (cf. Turner's 1996 book thus entitled). So what is a parable? A minimal story. Examples: "'liquids entering a container', 'a plastic bag being carried by a gust of wind' or 'the ebbing and flowing of the tide'." (P. 117). Blending theory

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should further allow us to explain how parable works in human cognition: one story is experienced online in terms of another story. So parable blending, taking place in our short-term memory, is doing the same thing as metaphor, taking place in long-term memory, Burke speculates. (So metaphor is not blending; the former is long-term based, the latter short-term based). Maybe Burke and Crisp should have conspired before writing and made a decision corcerning the chaotic theoretical situation. In a sonnet by Shakespeare, we are told that the list of CMs includes PROCREATION IS ETERNAL LIFE, LIFE IS A BATTLE, LIFE IS A TRIAL, LIFE IS A VENTURE, and that these metaphors could make the reader think of The Merchant of Venice, a parable from the Bible, or what else comes to her mind – the manifested text is only 'the tip of an almost immeasurable cognitive iceberg' (p. 126). Indeed, if everything that comes to mind is part of the show, we might as well give up analyzing any text. Meaning is 'constantly mobile', and the human mind is 'fluvial'. This begins to be worse than deconstruction: here it is really the case that anything goes.

Joanna Gavins is involved in the very recent – P. N. Werth, Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse, 1999 – development of a Text World Theory (TWTT), and here she applies it to a paragraph of Donald Barthelme's Snow White story, a transposition of the fairytale. There is a discourse world, containing the people who participate in some 'language event', such as writing or reading a text. Then there are the text worlds that the participants each construct, and finally there are the sub-worlds of the latter. Snow White is the protagonist of a text world (I would like to know how many Snow Whites there are, since each participant is supposed to construct one of them). In that world, she performs a speech act and thereby builds, in the example, illustrated by a box diagram, four embedded sub-worlds, the first of which is hypothetical ('I could fly a kite ...'), the second is 'boulomaic' [i.e. volitional] ('That seems desirable ...'), the third is just epistemic and embedded in the second ('flying a kite is desirable'); the fourth is a belief world ('This motif is a very ancient one, I [Snow White] believe'). Other characters in the narrative react to Snow White's speech, and this gives rise to similar box diagrams of worlds. Maybe Gavins should have compared this analysis to Semino's possible worlds and mental spaces. It is clearly the same phenomena these approaches try to characterize, each within a separate 'theory', terminology and graphic modelling style. At a more general level of theory and thinking, I am surprised by the ambiguity

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of this and Burke's chapter (and in fact, most of the other contributions as well) concerning the core question: <u>is there a text or not?</u> If there is a 'text world' there has to be something separable from particular readers' idiosyncratic psychology and their particular associations; there has to be a text equipped with a semantic content that can be analyzed. But this principle is swiftly denied by the authors' 'empirical' reference to the specificity of readers. My point is that a cognitive approach should more firmly express the view that cognition is a shared condition of writers and readers, and that textual meaning can therefore be considered to exist objectively. Empiricism is not the best ontology of a cognitive semantics, I think.

Catherine Emmott's work focuses on <u>frames</u> in narrative plots, or rather 'frame assumptions' that readers are supposed to make in order to be able to understand narratives. These concern the implicit situational setups we automatically supply. A basic assumption is that <u>ceteris paribus</u> the physical, perceptual and behavioral standard circumstances of acts and events will be relevant in our imaginary construction of situations; second, there is an assumption that explicit knowledge about non-standard circumstances will be active until further notice; third, that textual genres can vary our standard assumptions (cf. magic in fantastic narrative) drawn from everyday life; and fourth, that new and unexpected things can still happen, even against the legitimate assumptions. Then characters are either bound to specific frames (e.g. waiters in restaurants) or travelling from frame to frame (protagonists). And characters can change their status in this respect within the same text.

A short story, Roald Dahl's 'Dip in the pool', illustrates the contrast between a character's expectations and the fatal, contingent circumstances that the character faces during the execution of a rather dangerous plan. Another text by Dahl illustrates the possibility that a fraudulous act can be disclosed – an epistemic circumstance that always changes the frames involved. A story by Ian Rankin illustrates the fact that the identity of a character can be disclosed during a drama, so that people believed to be distinct turn out to be the same – or inversely, are believed to be the same but are distinct, as in Emmott's last example by Deborah Moggach. None of this is very novel in itself but it is useful to have it foregrounded, and it would be even better to have frame considerations connected with space-or-world analysis and thus to make these elements constitute at least part of the basic building blocks of a real <u>text architecture</u>. The latter claim is of course solely my own.

Finally Keith Oatley points, among other things, to the study of <u>emotions</u> as a field of particular importance to cognitive poetics, or as one that could allow literary scholars to enrich cognitive science with insights gained from descriptions in literature, which may refer to 'literary emotions' (real life: laughter, literary correspondence: the comic; real life: sorrow, lit. corr.: the tragic; Real life: wonder, lit. corr.: the marvellous; etc.). He does not refer to P. Ekman's work on basic emotions and the new studies of face expressions, but his remark is surely worth taking very seriously. I am astonished by the lack of cognitive work done on the semantics of moods, emotions, passions, and other clearly distinct forms of affective meaning manifested in all sorts of media and apparently relevant to almost all human sciences, not least to linguistics and the study of discourse and communication. This is truly a major field to save from the current chaos and to compare to the 'psychological' insights classical literary scholars often have but seldom theorize. Remember Aristotle's account of emotions in his Rhetoric – still a good read and a worthy starting point for people interested in emotional semantics.

Most readers of this book may be mainly interested in English literature and methods for teaching it. These readers are often professional literary scholars and know about close reading and new criticism, they have tried ideological criticism, biographical methods, etc. I think this volume will interest them and that they will find it – as I do myself – thought-provoking but problematically unsystematic and unsuccessful as a guide to literary reading proper, while testifying to a refreshing new take on poetics and its relation to cognitive aspects of the human mind.

Maybe what cognitive poetics currently needs most is literary sensitivity. We should not let all these methodological quandaries make us forget that the critical activity still simply presupposes <u>talent</u>. Without a good intuitive feeling for texts and aesthetic meaning no student or reader can be helped by any ever so cognitive theoretical school. Nevertheless I must recall the theoretical weaknesses laid bare in this book.

Literary sensitivity and theoretical elaboration, clarification, reflection. <u>Encore un effort</u>, as Marquis de Sade said.

The day a really authoritative literary criticism based on consistent cognitive science emerges, the Humanities will have won a glorious battle over the currently reigning confusion in reading and interpretation.

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