Narratology in the Twenty-First Century: The Cognitive Approach to Narrative

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LITERARY THEORY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY WAS HEAVILY INFLUENCED BY LINGUISTICS. THE STRUCTURALIST MODEL THAT SET THE WAVES of literary theories in motion originated in Saussurean linguistics and its Jakobsonian elaborations. One could argue that until the 1980s all literary theory, and all linguistics for that matter, was based on an analysis of *langue*, or the system of language or literature or text, to the detriment of *parole*, the practices, contexts, and negotiations of speakers, writers, and readers. The structuralist model, with its theoretical expansion of close-reading practices, already entrenched in the wake of the New Criticism, generalized the frame of mind that was soon to become the bogeyman of poststructuralist and cultural studies attacks. The formula could be summarized as *No history, no ethics, no themes, no aesthetics, and no context—period*.

Under the combined impact of deconstruction and linguistic pragmatics, this ideological consensus began to crumble. It was a construct that took little account of Mikhail Bakhtin, traditional Marxism, and the early work of reader-response critics, as well as ignoring numerous European scholars who went on doing traditional historical, philological, and interpretative work. After delivering some initial groundbreaking insights, Noam Chomsky's transformational grammar refined the structuralist model beyond practical usefulness in everyday linguistic practice. The countermodel of pragmatics temporalized and modified the idea of a universal static *langue*. At the same time, feminist and culturalist agendas began to insert themselves into the gaps of indeterminacy and deferment opened by deconstruction.

Since then, all the items shut up in structuralism's Pandora's box have escaped, with a vengeance. From reader-response theory to Foucauldian discourse analysis to cultural studies; from feminism to gender theory to queer studies; from ethnic studies to multiculturalism, postcolonial criticism, and critical race theory: the trend has been to infuse theory with the trinity of race, gender, and class. This has brought back context in a variety of manifestations. Specifically,

it has resulted in a series of (re)turns—for instance, a return to history (e.g., in new historicism); a thematic turn (Bremond; Trommler); an ethical turn;[1] a recent aesthetic turn (Attridge; Carroll; Davies; Elliott; Loesberg); and a "new philology" (Gleßgen and Lebsanft). More to the point from my narratological perspective, this process of (re)turns, with its associated reawakening of traditional literary issues, has triggered the narrative turn (Kreiswirth) in the social sciences (Nash). The revived concern for narrative in history, legal studies, and economics may indicate the incipient or ongoing rehumanization of the social sciences. Profiting from these trends, narratology finds itself again flourishing.

Similar developments occurred in language study. For instance, diachrony has returned to the center of linguistic attention, whether in terms of grammaticalization (Hopper and Traugott), historical pragmatics (Jucker),[2] or the revived interest in studying the history of English (Nevalainen; Tieken-Boon van Ostade). At the same time, access to corpora of language use has enabled linguists to revise traditional lexicographical work, to study processes of language change under way (Mair, Leech, Hundt, and Smith), and to map out dialects in more extensive detail (Kortmann, Herrmann, Pietsch, and Wagner; Kortmann and Upton).

In the 1990s, the prevailing impression was that literary research would remain subject to external influences like a buoy in rough sea—tossed to and fro by each new wave of fashion. However, I think that now one can begin to see consolidation and confluence. Having in its structuralist phase expelled a number of key concerns of nineteenth-century literary study, literary criticism is now gathering these rejects and incorporating them into a new synthesis of theory and practice. This synthesis does not operate on the basis of a top-down structuralist model but is more contextualist and dynamic, working like an open system that reacts to local

concerns. Approaches are applied eclectically and strategically to specific research questions, and no immediate superordinate framework is imposed.

In contrast to this Feyerabendian theoretical bricolage in literary studies,[3] in linguistics the recent cognitive turn has resulted in streamlining diverse approaches under the cognitive umbrella. Instead of seeing language as a system (Saussure's *langue*) or as an act of communication (as did speech-act theory and pragmatics), cognitive linguistics focuses on the concepts that underlie linguistic forms. Language arises from our conceptualizations of the world, and analysis of language and language use is therefore crucially linked to our minds and how they interact with our nonmental environment. Though culturally modifiable, basic concepts are often treated as universal in linguistics. In this framework, the study of language processes both synchronic and diachronic is now being aligned with observable or reconstructed mental frameworks and with cognitive categories and processes supposed to motivate, influence, and control language use. Instead of constructing universal features of language or discovering rules of syntactic combination in the abstract realm of theory, cognitive linguistics now tries to submit such laws or rules to a cognitive explanation, showing how they are functionally efficient, evolve in ways that maximize their semantic effect, and combine to achieve optimal communication.

Cognitive linguistics and literary studies have been linked most forcefully by Mark Turner in his work on blending,[4] some of it conducted in cooperation with Gilles Fauconnier. The titles of Turner's books document the direction in which this research has proceeded, from *Reading Minds* to *The Literary Mind* and on to *The Way We Think*. Whereas in his earlier work Turner was most concerned with metaphor, elaborating cognitive metaphor theory (Lakoff) in ways that made it more attractive to literary scholars, his

more recent research is geared toward testing the model empirically.[5] Turner and Fauconnier see metaphors as only one subtype of the cognitive strategy they call *blending*. Blending consists in fusing two scenarios together and thus creating new meaning effects. For instance, in a call for donations three children are depicted as doctors, with the caption "Joey, Katie and Todd will be performing your bypass" (Fauconnier and Turner, *Way* 67). The illustration blends the present, in which the children are at school, with the imagined future, in which they will be doctors, and thus cries out to donors to give these kids a proper medical education by helping to finance the program responsible for the ad. Blending, as Turner and Fauconnier argue, is responsible for the specifically human development of imagination and creativity. In particular, their blending theory aims at combining metaphor and narrative under one cognitive umbrella. Metaphor and narrative have been regarded as constitutive nonscientific modes of human cognition. Turner and Fauconnier depict them as two sides of the same coin, like Saussure's signifier and signified: through blending, narrative approaches a situation in which one scenario merges with another, while in metaphor (generally acknowledged as a case of blending) the superimposition of two scenarios evokes narrative sequences.

The cognitive turn has meanwhile arrived in literary departments. Its impact has been strongest in narratology and stylistics, where cognitive concepts and terminology were already familiar. Concepts such as Jonathan Culler's *naturalization* (131–60) or Menakhem Perry's *primacy effect* antedate the self-styled cognitive turn by at least twenty-five years. (Naturalization relates to the reader's ability to find explanations that neutralize inconsistencies in the text; the primacy effect suggests that what we encounter first in a text will decisively shape our subsequent conceptualizations of the textual world.) One could even see Derrida's analysis of the supplement or graft

as an acknowledgment of Ernst Gombrich's figure-ground modeling and as a revisiting of the Czech structuralists' notion of markedness (Andrews) or the linguistic theme-rheme distinction (Daneš). Prototype theory in literary studies was anticipated by F. K. Stanzel's 1955 narrative typology, in which Stanzel proposed three prototypical "narrative situations" (*Narrative Situations* and *Theory*). These trends, in conjunction with linguistic pragmatics, resulted in emphatically constructivist positions in narratology (Fludernik; Jahn), which were soon labeled "cognitivist" by other scholars (Eder; Sternberg; Zerweck). Cognitive narratology demonstrates that readers do not see texts as *having* narrative features but read texts *as narrative* by imposing cognitive narrative frames on them—for instance, by interpreting animals as quasi-human protagonists in fables.

Meanwhile, the cognitive paradigm has become a master trope for narratologists and literary scholars more generally. Joanna Gavins notes the rapid expansion of the cognitive approach to literary linguistics, which seems to "secur[e]" and "augmen[t]" more traditional stylistics (367). One can, moreover, diagnose an emotive turn in the humanities, which has given rise to numerous studies on the emotions and on empathy in literature.[6] In conjunction with this renewed emphasis on consciousness, interdisciplinary transfers from the cognitive sciences (citing especially studies such as Dennett; Damasio; and Robinson) have reinvigorated the cognitive analysis of literature and facilitated more empirically based studies of literary texts (Bortolussi and Dixon; Schmidt; Tsur). For instance, Gerard Steen (e.g., *Understanding*, "Metaphor," *Metaphor*, and *Finding*) and Chanita Goodblatt have been conducting several experiments on metaphor comprehension. What seems to be slowly developing here is a grand coalescence of narratology, the empirical study of literature, stylistics, possible-worlds theory, and metaphor studies. Most important of all, this

conjunction of formerly disparate approaches under the cognitive label allows one to envisage a paradigm shift that may allow many traditional concepts and methodologies to be embraced within one overarching, perhaps empirically validatable theory linked to cognitive studies. Second, and perhaps even more striking, such a coming together of all language- and consciousness-related areas of literary studies promises fair to provide convincing explanations for the aesthetic status of the literary or of art. For instance, many traditional concepts like proportion, balance, foregrounding, and saliency could be subsumed under perhaps even empirically testable cognitive parameters and constraints that combine affect and cognition or conceptualization in one scientific paradigm. If successful, it could, therefore, take over as a theoretical framework that subsumes much of the humanities, though perhaps not as wide a field as Turner and Fauconnier embrace in their blending theory.

Having outlined this prospect for the cognitive approach, one must, however, be cautious in treating as a prognosis what may well be a utopia engendered by formerly structuralist desires for universality and for semiological imperialism that have survived the culture wars. Cultural studies will extend their sway and will be a salutary counterpoint to cognitive bids for power. Cultural specificity and deep analysis are the foremost assets of cultural studies, in contrast to the drive for general cognitive frameworks, which are abstract and often not contextualized. Caution in estimating the fertility of the cognitive paradigm should also be exercised for another reason: the lack of a unitary cognitive framework for the analysis of literary texts. Cognitive science is a diverse field of research that includes neurology, on the one hand, and sociological and psychological work, on the other, resulting in a galaxy of models, concepts, and insights. Moreover, the transfer of these models, concepts, and insights into literary study has

been eclectic, focusing to a large extent on the processes that have already proved useful to cognitive linguistics (the original source of inspiration for literary scholars). Current introductions to cognitive literary studies document the existence of a variegated set of approaches, methods, concepts, and theories that are often either application-oriented (taking one element or insight from cognitive studies in order to read one text or genre from that perspective) or theoretical and resistant to general application.[7] The field at the moment resembles a group of construction sites, as some scholars concentrate on metaphor and blending theory (e.g., Gavins and Steen), others on cognitive reflexivity (Zunshine), still others on deixis (Stockwell) or space perception (Tsur). The different cognitive approaches show no sign of coalescing. Though in linguistics the cognitive approach looks conclusive since it consists in prototype theory imposed on the levels and categories of standard linguistics, thus explaining prototype effects on various levels and in relation to numerous phenomena (deixis, pronouns, syntax, grammaticalization, etc.), this consistency gets lost in the transfer to literature. It may take breakthroughs in the interdisciplinary field of cognitive studies to achieve a modicum of consensus and develop a theory and paradigm that are suited to literary implementation.

My prognosis for twenty-first-century literary criticism from the vantage point of narratology and cognitive studies is therefore both optimistic and cautious. A huge consolidation and expansion may be in the making, but only if current centrifugal tendencies in the cognitive approach to literature can be harnessed to a larger framework. Recent narratology and cognitive studies have drawn together various fields that have employed concepts of cognitive origin, thus initiating an explosion of innovative research that has produced the current cornucopia of cognitive approaches and applications. Perhaps when we have sampled all these items, we may propel

the discipline to its crisis and see the birth of a new paradigm in fifteen or twenty years.

Notes

1. Davis; Lubkoll. A few of the most important studies in this area are Booth; Gibson; Hadfield, Rainsford, and Woods; Miller, *Ethics* and "Is There"; Newton; and Siebers.

2. See also the *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, edited by Andreas H. Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen.

3. Paul Feyerabend's phrase "Anything goes" epitomizes his theoretical stance in *Against Method*.

4. For a good basic introduction to blending, see Fauconnier and Turner, "Mechanism." More generally on Turner's recent work, see Turner, "Cognitive Study," *Literary Mind*, "Mind," *Reading Minds*, and "Way"; Fauconnier and Turner, "Rethinking" and *Way*.

5. Turner established a research center on cognitive studies at Case Western Reserve University in 2004.

6. Let me note here the *Journal of Narrative Theory* 34.3 (2004) and the *Journal of Literary Theory* 1.2 (2007), as well as a few of the numerous books on the emotions and empathy: Benedict; Roberts; Kövecses; Terada; Hogan, *Mind*; and Keen.

7. For introductions see, e.g., Coulson and Oakley, *Conceptual Blending* and *Conceptual Blending Theory*; Richardson and Steen; Semino and Culpeper; Stockwell; Gavins and Steen; Herman; Hogan, *Cognitive Science*; Zunshine, *Why We Read* and *Strange Concepts*; and Tsur. Discussion of these problems is provided in, among others, Gibbs; Adler and Gross; and Sternberg.

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