

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Terence Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 2016)

Of late, Professor Terence Cave has shown a growing interest in Cognitive Literary Studies: he co-edited with Karin Kukkonen, and Olivia Smith *Reading Literature Cognitively* (2014), a special issue of *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* and has had a chapter entitled 'Penser la littérature' (Thinking with Literature) published in *Interprétation littéraire et sciences cognitives* (2016), a collection of scholarly articles edited by Françoise Lavocat. *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* is a further attempt to chart the territory of cognitive literary theory. An interdisciplinary approach, no consonance of paradigms, an inspiration from cognitive science research, a concern for issues in literary studies, and the use of multiple prisms, seem to be the chief characteristics defining this ever-broadening category.

Perception, language, memory, consciousness, emotions and motivity have, in turn, taken centre-stage in the cognitive science debates over the last 50 years. Today, the sheer diversity of mental processes (multiple intelligences, distinct memories, multifaceted perception, attention subcategories, etc.) whose complexity is gradually being acknowledged and investigated, begs for more research in the field of cognitive science while prompting other disciplines, like literary studies, to re-examine their long-held assumptions in the light of recent discoveries.

Yet, according to Terence Cave, 'cognitive methodologies and explanatory frameworks have not yet begun to inflect the common language of literary study; indeed they often meet with resistance both from those who remain attached to traditional modes of literary history and criticism and from those who pursue variants of the literary theory that characterized the late twentieth-century scene' (15). A challenge to this resistance, *Thinking with Literature* aims at redefining literature (both understood as a practice and as an archive) as a rich cognitive artefact, some aspects of which are being reassessed through the use of neurobabble with words such as implicatures, salience, emergence theory, affordance, motor resonance, cognitive mimesis, to name a few.

Retrofitting literary criticism with scientifically approved concepts enables Cave to afford (that is, to provide) 'openings' – the title of chapter 1 – and turn literary studies into a cognitive discipline. This craving for openings is a tacit acknowledgement that literary studies is suffering from intellectual asphyxia and is therefore in need of a strong wind of change. By expanding the content of the cognitive literary scholar's toolbox, Terence Cave is also contributing to bridging the 'gulf of mutual incomprehension' between literary intellectuals and scientists which C.P. Snow notoriously identified in the wake of World War II.¹

¹ C. P. Snow, 'The Rede Lecture, 1959,' in C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: And a Second Look* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1959, 1964, 1-21.

Book reviews: *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* by Terence Cave. Jean-François Vernay.

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Cognitive Literary Studies is strikingly reminiscent of countless methods of critical analysis which more or less involve a desire to establish a literary science.² While Terence Cave is adamant that ‘Literary study is not an *exact* science, and is not likely to become one in the foreseeable future’ – his conception of academic criticism almost comes across as a scientific one when he qualifies his initial statement: ‘Yet it aims at precision, whether in its way of accounting for the detail of literary works, in its procedures for establishing those texts as objects of understanding, or in its recourse to historical and cultural contexts of all kinds. It aims at rigour of argument based on verifiable textual and other evidence, and if its arguments are probabilistic rather than apodeictic, that feature distinguishes it only in relative terms from the procedures of other disciplines’ (21). However, one might counter-argue that the rigorous approach is chiefly confined to its methodology: professional readers³ would indeed try to avoid the pitfalls of misquoting, of misrepresenting the book, of over-interpreting, of giving a slant to theories and ideologies, *inter alia*.

As the reflection unfolds, a sharper focus is placed on ‘the instrumentality of literature’ (55), on the idea that fiction would have a value, if not a function, perhaps even an adaptive one in keeping with the theory of evolution. Such revamping of the intrinsic value of literature (which could be defined as a larger category comprising any written or oral text proposed as an end product which possesses a certain degree of fictionality, ambiguity and aesthetics, *bereft of pragmatic function*) may hold the key to discarding blue-sky conceptions of it while giving teachers and book professionals a cogent argument for literature’s much coveted usefulness. As Cave elegantly argues,

The aesthetic imagination is in principle insulated from the pressures of utility and functionality, but that doesn’t mean that it has no uses or functions beyond itself.

Similarly, the fact that pleasure (in a broad sense) is a constituent feature of the aesthetic domain doesn’t mean that reading literature or looking at paintings or listening to music is just ‘fun’. (149)

This insistence on the usefulness of literature peaks in the last chapter with a detailed list of the variegated values of literature and an assessment of its evolutionary role which the author sees as ‘overdetermined and underspecified’ (142). For Cave,

literature, in the broadest sense, participates fully in a *spectrum* of counterfactual imaginings and arises from the same fundamental cognitive capacity, namely the capacity to entertain mental representations (simulations, projections) that are not mapped onto

² I have recapitulated these literary approaches elsewhere. See *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation* (New York: Palgrave, 2016) 3-4.

³ The professional reader is not a reader who makes a job out of reading books, but a reader on a mission, with a set purpose. See my distinction between professional and nonprofessional readers in the opening chapter of *The Seduction of Fiction*.

immediate perceptual contexts and uses, and to multiply and compare those representations. (144)

Literature ends up being repackaged as a ‘cognitive affordance’, ‘an *instrument* of thought, while acknowledging that it may also be (or be read as) a *vehicle* of thought or even of knowledge’ (150).

Overall, with *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism*, Cave defies the resistance to the culture of cognitive science both by colouring the language of literary criticism with cognitive methodology or explanatory frameworks and by affording a shift of angle which reconfigures the whole field of literary studies.

Jean-François Vernay