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INTRODUCTION TO COGNITIVE LITERARY STUDIES

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THE best definition of cognitive literary studies was offered by Alan Richardson in 2004. Richardson starts by pointing out that “cognitive” is a broad term, referring to “an overriding interest in the active (and largely unconscious) mental processing that makes behavior understandable.” Given the tremendous variety of research programs that investigate mental processing, “cognitive science,” too, is a broad umbrella term. It signifies an interdisciplinary venture, “rather like ‘feminist studies’ or ‘cultural studies,’” that is “loosely held together by a set of common interests, allegiances, and reference points rather than a coherent discipline unified by shared paradigms and methodologies.” It is fitting then that the definition of cognitive literary studies should focus not on the boundaries, goals, or methods of the field but on its dynamic, relational nature. Richardson sees it as “the work of literary critics and theorists vitally interested in cognitive science. . . , and therefore with a good deal to say to one another, whatever their differences.”¹

This dialogic, decentralized view has shaped the trajectory of cognitive approaches to literature over the last decade. On the one hand, cognitive literary scholars actively seek professional venues for talking to one another (for instance, the membership in the Modern Language Association official discussion group on cognitive approaches to literature has grown from 250 in 1999, the year it was organized, to 700 in 2009, and to 2,000 in 2013).² On the other hand, because they don’t see themselves as working on a puzzle whose pieces must fit neatly together, they feel no need to iron out differences³ among their “potentially conflicting aims and methodologies.”⁴ Indeed, given what a messy proposition the human mind/brain is and how little we still know about it, striving toward a grand unified theory of cognition and literature is to engage in mythmaking.⁵

Resistance to unified theories informs cognitive literary studies in yet another way. Though “vitaly interested” in cognitive science, cognitive literary critics work not toward consilience with science but toward a richer engagement with a variety of theoretical paradigms in literary and cultural studies.⁶ For all it takes is to attend a couple of talks—however wonderfully exciting—in cognitive science to realize that there is a reason that literature departments are distinct from departments of psychology and neuroscience. There is a reason, as Laura Otis, professor of English and recipient of a MacArthur fellowship for creativity, writes in this volume, that twenty-nine years ago, she had to either “withdraw [from a PhD program in neuroscience] or die.” The division between the sciences and the humanities, far from ideal in many ways, reflects meaningful differences in ways of thinking about the world. Consilience with science, moreover, though an attractive ideal theoretically, in practice often comes down, as Nancy Easterlin has observed, to “assimilating literature to [the] epistemic prerogatives” of science,⁷ while “the very nature and diversity of literary artifacts, which are themselves only fully constituted via a complex cognitive process of production and consumption, a process itself inherently interpretive, militate against a programmatically scientific approach to literature.”⁸

So while cognitive literary scholars draw on insights from cognitive science, they approach them critically and pragmatically, thinking through them on the terms of their own discipline. In doing so, they differ from “Literary Darwinists”—a small but vocal group of critics who practice scientism in the name of “scientific” literary analysis,⁹ believing that science today can already explain literature better than the benighted and fraudulent English studies. To quote one of their leading players, Brian Boyd, without consilience with sciences, “English and related disciplines will continue to be the laughingstock of the academic world.”¹⁰

The distinction between cognitive literary critics and Literary Darwinists is worth emphasizing because, while both draw on some of the same research in cognitive science (e.g., evolutionary theory), their views on the role of this research for literary studies are diametrically opposite. As Ellen Spolsky, a cognitive literary critic whose work integrates the evolutionary perspective and cultural studies, puts it,

The Literary Darwinists’ view of the adaptive powers of evolution is seriously compromised. . . by their rejection of cultural construction. By failing to recognize the power of symbolic communications to influence behavior—to influence even the genome¹¹—they overlook the subject of literary study itself. Their failure to notice that conclusions drawn from the empirical data are never *prima facie* facts, but are always the result of interpretation, as well as their relative lack of interest in the specifics of individual literary texts, encourages me to distance myself from those literary scholars who have taken up the Darwinian argument precisely to separate themselves from the traditions behind the last fifty years of literary theory.¹²

In contrast to the Literary Darwinists, who turn to science to “separate themselves from the traditions behind the last fifty years of literary theory,” cognitive literary critics are committed to issues animating literary and cultural studies. This commitment means that, more than ever before, cognitive approaches to literature today flourish at

unexpected intersections, drawing into their orbit fields that used to be perceived as irrelevant or even inimical to a cognitivist inquiry. For instance, ten years ago, it was difficult to imagine the emergence of the new field of cognitive disability studies, represented by Ralph James Savarese’s “neurocosmopolitan” studies of poetry (this volume) and novels,¹³ or of the work in the “neuro-divergent aesthetic,” spearheaded by Nicola Shaughnessy’s studies of autism and theater.¹⁴ Today, their groundbreaking research makes us realize not only how untenable the currently prevalent (even within the cognitive sciences themselves) view of autism as “mind-blindness” is¹⁵ but also how radically open to revision our assumptions about the “neurotypical” engagement with poetry, prose, and drama may yet turn out to be. Perspectives opening at the intersection of disability studies and cognitive approaches are truly breathtaking, and there is no predicting today where this research will take us in the next decade.

The same openness and unpredictability characterizes other areas of cognitive literary criticism, be they cognitive queer studies, cognitive postcolonial studies, cognitive historicism,¹⁶ cognitive narratology,¹⁷ or studies of the new unconscious, as well as cognitive ecocriticism¹⁸ and cognitive approaches to poststructuralism¹⁹ and feminism.²⁰ When one draws on two fields that are already heavily interdisciplinary (i.e., literary criticism and cognitive science), the outcome will be inevitably represented by a broad variety of paradigms and approaches.²¹

The latter point cannot be stressed enough. Several contributors to this volume have had the experience of being asked, by friendly interlocutors wishing to learn more, for just one key publication in cognitive approaches to literature (and, along the same lines, for one publication in cognitive science that serves as a “master” text for everyone doing cognitive approaches). To come up with a title or two in response to this question is to misrepresent the field, for its practitioners “hold different views about such fundamental matters [as] the utility of specific interpretive and theoretical models for literary studies [and] the areas of psychology most fruitfully explored in interdisciplinary research.”²²

For instance, neuroaesthetics,²³ cognitive narratology, and the new unconscious have little in common, either in terms of areas of research in cognitive science that they draw on, or in terms of theoretical paradigms that they develop. To focus on what they *do* have in common and to present that as an “essential” feature of cognitive approaches to literature would be reductive. Just so, the essays in Part V of this volume (“Cognitive Theory and Literary Experience”), while grappling with such difficult issues as self-reflexivity of literature (Joshua Landy), its referentiality (Elaine Auyoung), its embodied temporality (Mark Bruhn), and its ambivalent relationship with novelty (Nancy Easterlin), approach them from very different theoretical angles, none of which are reducible to others.

Or consider the volume’s selection on emotions and empathy (Part II). While the nine essays that make up this part reflect the centrality of the study of emotions to a cognitivist inquiry, their authors work with a widely diverse set of paradigms, ranging from the role of intertemporal bargaining (the concept used in decision theory) in fiction (William Flesch), and the difference between moral emotions in television series and in real life (Margrethe Bruun Vaage), to the relationship between narrative empathy and human rights discourse (Suzanne Keen).

What shall then one say in response to a query about just one “key” text in cognitive approaches? The best answer is to turn the question around and ask the interlocutor what area of literary studies she works in and then suggest the research that correspond to her interests. At this point, cognitive literary studies have something to offer to a scholar of almost any theoretical persuasion; the entry point into the field can be as individualized as one wishes. (Just so, can be a culture under consideration. Literary traditions represented by this volume alone include South Asian, postcolonial anglophone and francophone, Chinese, Japanese, English, Iranian, Russian, Italian, French, German, and Spanish.)

Like other volumes in this series, this *Handbook* offers “a representative rather than exhaustive coverage of the field.”²⁴ For instance, although it features a selection of exciting essays about visual arts, theater, film, and television, the reader would do well to use them as starting points for learning more about the thriving fields of cognitive approaches to visual arts,²⁵ to drama/performance,²⁶ and to film. (The Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image alone has 150 members, annual international conferences, and an award-winning journal.)²⁷ Similarly, the respective essays by Monika Fludernik and Mark Bruhn, engaging, in very different ways, the theory of blending and conceptual integration, introduce the reader to the influential school of thought arising at the intersection of literary criticism and cognitive linguistics;²⁸ while the essays by Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon (an interdisciplinary team of researchers, hailing, respectively, from Spanish literary/cultural studies and cognitive psychology) are meant to whet the reader’s appetite for the work coming out of the rich discipline of empirical studies of literature.²⁹ It is the ambition of this volume that its readers will delve deeper into these fields while looking for new points of intersection that reach beyond already established areas of inquiry. We hope that diversity and dialogue will continue to define cognitive literary studies in the next decade.

NOTES

1. Alan Richardson, “Studies in Literature and Cognition: A Field Map,” *The Work of Fiction: Cognition, Culture, and Complexity*, eds. Alan Richardson and Ellen Spolsky (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 2.
2. In December 2012, the discussion group was promoted to a division within the MLA, a promotion spearheaded by Michael Sinding, the chair of the discussion group executive committee for 2010–11. Other important venues include the international research network “Cognitive Futures in the Humanities” (<http://coghumanities.com/>), convened by Peter Garratt, Vyv Evans, and Matt Hayler, and “Cognitive Theory and the Arts” seminar, convened at Harvard University by Anna Henschman, Alan Richardson, and Elaine Scarry (<http://mahindrahumanities.fas.harvard.edu/content/cognitive-theory-and-arts>).
3. Nor do they feel a pressing need to give their differences sharper definition. For an important discussion of the advantages accruing to cognitive literary studies due to their “lack of a rationally articulated model or set of directives” and a “subsequent subdivision into various schools, each with its own mission statement and paradigm for interpretation,” see

- Nancy Easterlin, “Voyages in the Verbal Universe: The Role of Speculation in Darwinian Literary Criticism?” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 2.2 (2001), 64.
4. Ellen Spolsky, “Preface,” *The Work of Fiction: Cognition, Culture, and Complexity*, eds. Alan Richardson and Ellen Spolsky (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), vii. Other important edited collections published in the last five years include *Theory of Mind and Literature*, ed. Paula Leverage, Howard Mancing, Richard Schweickert, and Jennifer Marston (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2010), *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), *The Emergence of Mind: Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English*, ed. David Herman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), *Cognitive Literary Studies: Current Themes and New Directions*, eds. Isabel Jaén and Julien Jacques Simon (University of Texas Press, 2012), Mark J. Bruhn and Donald R. Wehrs, *Cognition, Literature, and History* (New York: Routledge, 2013), and *Stories and Minds: Cognitive Approaches to Literary Narrative*, eds. Lars Bernaerts, Dirk De Geest, Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).
 5. To witness one such myth in the making—the argument about the “adaptive function” of literature—see the work of “Literary Darwinists.” As Jonathan Kramnick observes in his important recent rejoinder to Literary Darwinism, its “major players assert, in the words of Brian Boyd, that ‘every part of our brain’s design’ must have ‘served an adaptive function’ of some sort or other. . . . The presiding assumption is therefore a kind of holdover [in light of the critique of a strong adaptationist position by evolutionary theorists themselves], and yet at the same time it is wildly more ambitious, as it aims to include the creation or enjoyment of literary works among the many adaptations of the mind” (“Against Literary Darwinism,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 [Winter 2011] 319–320).
 6. See Lisa Zunshine, “What Is Cognitive Cultural Studies,” in *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010): 1–33.
 7. Easterlin, “Voyages in the Verbal Universe,” 62. See also Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), especially 11–20 (“What is Consilience?”).
 8. Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach*, 6.
 9. Richardson, “Studies in Literature and Cognition,” 12.
 10. Brian Boyd, “Getting It All Wrong,” *The American Scholar*, 2006. Commenting on Literary Darwinists’ stringent rejection of literary theory in favor of science—which is at odds with their own purported stance on creativity—Michael Bérubé observes that, “Boyd never stops to consider that maybe, just maybe, the clever human minds responsible for literature are the same clever human minds responsible for literary theory” (“The Play is the Thing,” *American Scientist*, 98.1 [January–February 2010]: 70–73). For an example of the difference between the Literary Darwinist and cognitive literary takes on literary theory, see one of Patrick Colm Hogan’s essays in this volume: Literary Darwinists dismiss “postcolonial theory as one of the ‘minor’ components of postmodernism, an encompassing movement fated to ‘crumble from within,’” while cognitive literary critics, such as Frederick Luis Aldama and Suzanne Keen, “have considered the important questions raised by mainstream postcolonial theories and sought to formulate answers to those questions that are better grounded in our current understanding of human cognition and emotion” (Hogan, “The Psychology of Colonialism and Postcolonialism,” this volume).
 11. See Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb, *Evolutions in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life*—Cambridge, MA: MIT

- Press, 2005; Peter Hammerstein, ed. *Genetic and Cultural Evolution of Cooperation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); and Peter J. Richerson, Robert Boyd, and Joseph Henrich, “Gene-Culture Coevolution in the Age of Genomics,” *PNAS* 107, suppl. 2 (2010): 8985–8992.
12. Spolsky, *The Contracts of Fiction: Culture and Cognition* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2015).
 13. Ralph James Savarese, “River of Words, Raft of Our Conjoined Neurologies,” *Fourth Genre* 14.1 (2012): 43–52; “Toward a Postcolonial Neurology: Autism, Tito Mukhopadhyay, and a New Geo-poetics of the Body,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4.3 (2010): 273–289; and *You Travel in Your Chair: Autism and the Literary Imagination. Reading Six Classic Novels with Six Classical Autistics*, in progress.
 14. See Nicola Shaughnessy, “Perceiving Differently: The Neuro-Divergent Aesthetic and Contemporary Performance,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* Special Edition: Experiments in Theatre: New Directions in Science and Performance 38.4 (December 2013): 321–334, and *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), especially 233–255. See also Melissa Trimmingham, “Touched by Meaning: Haptic Effect in Autism,” in *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science: Body, Brain and Being*, ed. Nicola Shaughnessy (Methuen, 2013): 229–240. For more information on “Imagining Autism,” a collaborative project “between the disciplines of drama and psychology,” led by Shaughnessy, “that seeks to remediate the difficulties that autistic children have with communication, social interaction and imagination,” see <http://www.imaginingautism.org/>
 15. See Ralph James Savarese and Lisa Zunshine, “The Critic as Neurocosmopolite; Or, What Cognitive Approaches to Literature Can Learn from Disability Studies.” *Narrative* 22.1 (January 2014): 17–44.
 16. Other researchers working in cognitive historicism, besides those represented in this volume, include Anna Henchman (*The Starry Sky Within: Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in the Victorian Literature* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2014]); Isabel Jaén Portillo (e.g., “Cervantes on Human Development: Don Quixote and Renaissance Cognitive Psychology,” *Don Quixote: Interdisciplinary Connections*, eds. Matthew D. Warshawsky and James A. Parr [Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2013]: 35–57), Vanessa Ryan (*Thinking Without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012]), and Tony E. Jackson (*The Technology of the Novel: Writing and Narrative in British Fiction* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009]).
 17. Other researchers working in cognitive narratology, besides those represented in this volume, include David Herman (e.g., *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* [Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013]; *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004]); Marco Bernini (e.g., “Supersizing Narrative Theory: On Intention, Material Agency and Extended Mind-Workers,” *Style*, forthcoming); Karin Kukkonen (e.g., “Navigating Infinite Earths: Readers, Mental Models, and the Multiverse of Superhero Comics,” *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 2 [2010]: 35–58; Marco Caracciolo (e.g., “The Reader’s Virtual Body: Narrative Space and Its Reconstruction,” *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 3.1 [2011]: 117–138); and Merja Polvinen, “Affect and Artifice in Cognitive Literary Theory,” *Journal of Literary Semantics* 42:2 [2013]: 165–180).
 18. See Nancy Easterlin, “Cognitive Ecocriticism: Human Wayfinding, Sociality, and Literary Interpretation,” in Lisa Zunshine ed., *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010): 257–274.

19. See Ellen Spolsky, “Darwin and Derrida: Cognitive Literary Theory as a Species of Post-structuralism,” *Poetics Today* 23.1 (2002): 43–62.
20. See Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation*, especially 217–272 (“Endangered Daughters”).
21. Among fields outside the purview of the present volume, but nevertheless important to the project of cognitive literary studies, are cognitive approaches to composition studies. See particularly the work of Joseph Bizup, e.g., “The Uses of Toulmin in Composition Studies,” *College Composition and Communication* 61.1 (Sep 2009): W1–W23.
22. Easterlin, *A Biocultural Approach*, 11.
23. Other researchers working in neuroaesthetics, besides those represented in this volume, include Elaine Scarry (e.g., *Dreaming by the Book* [Princeton University Press, 2001]), Kay Young (e.g., *Imagining Minds: The Neuro-Aesthetics of Austen, Eliot, and Hardy* [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010]), and Ellen J. Esrock (e.g., *The Reader’s Eye: Visual Imaging as Reader Response* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994]).
24. John T. Cacioppo and Jean Decety, “An Introduction to Social Neuroscience.” In Jean Decety and John T. Cacioppo, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Social Neuroscience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.
25. See Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1993), Arthur P. Shimamura, Stephen E. Palmer, eds. *Aesthetic Science: Connecting Minds, Brains, and Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), and Irving Massey, *The Neural Imagination: Aesthetic and Neuroscientific Approaches to the Arts* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).
26. See Rhonda Blair, *The Actor, Image, and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience* (Routledge, 2007); Amy Cook, *Shakespearean Neuroplay: Reinvigorating the Study of Dramatic Texts and Performance through Cognitive Science* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Angus Fletcher, *Evolving Hamlet: Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy and the Ethics of Natural Selection* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Laurie Johnson, John Sutton, and Evelyn Tribble (editors), *Embodied Cognition and Shakespeare’s Theatre: The Early Modern Body-Mind* (Routledge, 2014); Rick Kemp, *Embodied Acting: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Performance* (Routledge, 2012); John Lutterbie, *Toward a General Theory of Acting: Cognitive Science and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Raphael Lyne, *Shakespeare, Rhetoric, and Cognition* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) and “Shakespeare, Perception and Theory of Mind,” *Paragraph* 37 (March 2014): 79–95; Bruce McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *Theatre and Mind* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), and, co-edited with F. Elizabeth Hart, *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn* (Routledge, 2007); Naomi Rokotnitz, *Trusting Performance: A Cognitive Approach to Embodiment in Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Evelyn B. Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe: Attention and Memory in Shakespeare’s Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
27. *Projections*, published jointly by SCSMI and the Forum for Movies and Mind, won the 2008 AAP/PSP Professional and Scholarly Excellence award for the best new journal in the social sciences and humanities.

28. For the foundational work on blending and conceptual integration, see Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending And The Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). See also, Mark Turner, ed., *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Barbara Dancygier, *The Language of Stories: A Cognitive Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Michael Sinding, *Body of Vision: Northrop Frye and the Poetics of Mind* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); and Margaret H. Freeman, "Poetry and the scope of metaphor: Toward a cognitive theory of literature," in *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads: A Cognitive Perspective*, ed. Antonio Barcelona (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000): 253–281.
29. See, for instance, Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon, *Psychonarratology: Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literary Response* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Anthony J. Sanford and Catherine Emmott, *Mind, Brain and Narrative* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013); David S. Miall, *Literary Reading: Empirical and Theoretical Studies* (Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2006); Willie van Peer, Frank Hakemulder, and Sonia Zyngier, *Muses and Measures: Empirical Research Methods for the Humanities* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing (October 1, 2007); Max Louwerse and Don Kuiken, eds., *The Effects of Personal Involvement in Narrative Discourse*, special issue of *Discourse Processes*, 38.2 (2004); and Yeshayahu Shen and Efrat Biberman "A Story told by a picture," *Image & Narrative*, 11.2 (2010): 177–197. For more information on IGEL (International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature and Media), see <http://www.psych.ualberta.ca/IGEL/>

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