

## **6. Beyond Interpretation: The Cognitive Significance of Reading**

**David S. Miall**

### **Introduction**

The 2004 Helsinki conference on cognition and literature<sup>1</sup> was the hallmark of a new way of thinking about literature. It represented, for the first time in some years, a substantially new mode of understanding based on detailed models of cognitive processes. At the same time it signalled a major turn away from accounts of literature based on those historicist and political ideologies that place the literary text under suspicion while telling us little about what it means to read literature. This is a significant advance. The new discipline is still a young one, though, and has not yet, I think, worked out a framework for considering the literary field as a whole, and by this I mean in particular reception issues: what does it mean to read a literary text? I will devote most of my chapter to these issues. My aim will be to point out some other perspectives for research in cognitive approaches to literature, and to suggest as I do so that interpretation (which even worked its way into the title of the conference) may have some drawbacks as

the principal approach to literature. We must frame the cognitive significance of reading more widely than that.

First, though, I want to situate the position of literature more generally and the aims of literary study in particular. It has become a cliché to say that literary studies is in crisis: it has been for almost as long as some of us have been in the profession. A particularly poignant phase in the crisis was recently described by the President of the MLA (the Modern Language Association of America), Stephen Greenblatt. Commenting on a survey conducted by the MLA about the public's perception of literature and language teachers, the findings were distressing: 'most Americans' he said, 'do not begin to recognize the absolute centrality of literature and language in their lives'; yet, speaking of literary scholars like himself, 'in the public perception, it is as if we were cut off from the rest of the world, locked in our own special, self-regarding realm' (Greenblatt 2003: 8). In other words, the rest of the world thinks it has no use for the texts we hold dear; and it disregards the work we do in accounting for those texts.

This would help explain what has been called 'the precipitous decline in "literature majors"' in the United States (Fitts and Lalicker 2004: 427). Evidently fewer students are seeing the relevance of a degree in literary studies. The decline may also be due to the problematic question of what is an appropriate approach to literature nowadays, given the decline and fall of deconstruction and the failure of any other paradigm to significantly determine the field. The title of a review article by John Rouse in a recent issue of *College English* helps to frame the issue: 'After Theory, the Next New Thing'. Rouse reviews three new books, each of which, it emerges, recommends a turn to the scholarship of teaching: this, it seems, will be the next 'new thing' (Rouse 2004: 452). 'As the dark of night slowly descends on literary studies' (465), says Rouse, what will come to dominate teaching is the pedagogy of composition, the teaching of

writing, which is to say, that literature as an academic study is fated to disappear.

As the review by Rouse indicates, several books about the decline and fall of literary studies have been published recently, leaving us in no doubt that the crisis is a real one, although by no means everyone agrees on the causes. But one witness, Daniel Green, also writing in *College English*, puts his finger on a central problem. As he entered the profession he found that the very idea of literature as an academic discipline 'seemed a contrivance designed expressly to destroy all interest in the actual writing that brought the subject into being in the first place' (Green 2001: 273). Green is not advocating a return to older methods of teaching, as though these had been quite unproblematic before the new theories took over, as if teaching had been 'an entirely transparent affair, simply a matter of making available the intrinsically valuable qualities of literary works through the methods appropriate to the task' (274). He suggests that the academic study of literature has not enlarged its audience, rather 'it has instead done the opposite, discouraging more potential readers than it has encouraged' (286). Moreover, he argues that no change in teaching methods will rescue literature: 'its intrinsic usefulness cannot be served by the practices of the academy', because 'its benefits are ultimately and unavoidably personal' (287). In the light of such a comment, I would ask: Has the classroom practice of insisting on interpretation in one form or another finally alienated student readers, driving them away from literary studies into other disciplines?

Thus we might attribute blame for the present crisis to literature faculty themselves – the turn to various types of post-modern theory, the arguments over political correctness, the loss of commitment to literature as a distinctive form of art. As Robert De Beaugrande put it in 1989, such professional readers with their 'magisterial assertions' are too distant from 'ordinary'

readers. 'Only empirical studies', he adds, 'can resolve this state of affairs by freeing these claims from their absolute dependence on the personal eloquence or effrontery of the individual theorists and by providing progressively more reliable and intersubjective grounds for preferring any set of claims over any other' (De Beaugrande 1989: 10).

We may connect this problem with a wider, social one. Surveys of literary reading in the United States by the National Endowment for the Arts over the last two decades have shown a steady decline in the numbers of people even reading literature. According to their report *Reading at Risk* (released in July, 2004), over the two decades from 1982 to 2002 literary readership at all ages has declined by 10%, with the steepest drop in the younger ages (18–24) of 28%; and the rate of decline has been accelerating. In gender terms, the decline has been steeper for men than for women (figures from a recent European survey are broadly similar). NEA Chairman Dana Gioia, introducing the report, said: 'The decline in reading among every segment of the adult population reflects a general collapse in advanced literacy. To lose this human capacity – and all the diverse benefits it fosters – impoverishes both cultural and civic life'. Predictably, he attributes the decline to 'our society's massive shift toward electronic media for entertainment and information' (*Reading* 2004: vii), although the survey itself provides no specific support for this presumption.

If the public at large is turning away from reading, if literary scholarship has lost public support, if it is losing its students, and if literary studies has lost a sense of what its aims are as a discipline – then we may well ask what is next. All this leads to the main point: there is another 'next new thing' on the horizon; this is cognitive poetics. I want to ask whether cognitive approaches to literature are, indeed, likely to remedy some of the problems we now face in literary scholarship. This is the claim of

Peter Stockwell, for example, in his recent book, *Cognitive Poetics*. He argues that cognitive poetics 'has the potential to make the discipline and the institution of literature more accessible and more connected with the world outside university and college life'; he emphasises repeatedly throughout the book that the focus of cognitive poetics is on the reader: 'It is all about reading literature' (Stockwell 2002: 11). To this, Gerard Steen and Joanna Gavins add that cognitive poetics 'sees literature not just as a matter for the happy few, but as a specific form of everyday human experience' (Steen and Gavins 2003: 1), which would place us back in the world from which Greenblatt feels excluded.

Given the current state of literary studies, then, is cognitive poetics the way forward? I admire much of the new work that has emerged from cognitive poetics, including that of Stockwell, but as I have already suggested, I find the focus on *interpreting* literary texts to be unfortunate, and a liability that opens it to becoming simply another orthodoxy as a literary school. Second, it often isn't really about the *reader* as a real entity, just as earlier reader response theories only made suppositions about the processes thought to be engaged in by readers. Third, it has adopted a model of cognition that, surprisingly in the present stage of psychological research, is restricted almost entirely to information processing issues: in other words, the role of *emotion* has been neglected. I will consider these issues at various points in what follows, but my main purpose will be to put forward three perspectives which I believe cognitive critics should now consider if the new discipline is to flourish, as I believe it deserves to do.

The perspectives in question can be summarised in three words, all of which, as it happens, begin with the letter E: *Empiricism*; *Evolution*; *Emotion*. And I can add a fourth word, since the main approach to literature I will emphasise focuses on *experiencing* literature rather than interpreting it. But first, in questioning the place of interpretation, I will turn to the empirical perspec-

tive, and ask what readers are doing when they read. This, I hope, will invite you to rethink the significance of interpretation.

### **Beyond interpretation: The empirical turn**

Cognitive poetics claims to draw on our understanding of cognitive processes to examine what occurs during literary reading. The question here, then, is what role interpretation of texts might play. While the introduction to the companion book, *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, endorses the marginalising of interpretation proposed by Jonathan Culler in 1975 (Steen and Gavins 2003: 5), and repeats Mark Turner's objection in 1991 to interpretation (7), interpretation does keep creeping back in. The issue is posed clearly by Peter Stockwell's book *Cognitive Poetics*. The opening pages illustrate the problem, as almost from the beginning we find a slippage in the key term 'reading'.

Stockwell cites four lines from Browning's poem about Wordsworth, 'The Lost Leader'. He then urges that we need to reflect on what happens when we are reading it. He refers to 'understanding what we do when we engage in reading literature'; a couple of sentences later he says that we need 'many different readings', and that '[p]articular readings are important for us'. This could be an introduction to a study of actual readers' responses to the poem. But this is not what concerns Stockwell, since his discussion turns next into a question about Browning's lines: 'What they are about? What do they mean?' (Stockwell 2002: 2). We have moved from the experience of reading the lines to interpreting them. I want to argue that these are rather different activities. 'Reading' a poem considered as a cognitive process is not the same as 'reading' of the poem that accounts for its meaning (Stockwell slips from the verb to the noun form of the word).

The question I am raising about interpretation can be illuminated by considering some early work by my Canadian colleagues Russell Hunt and Doug Vipond. Following well-known theoretical discussion by Louise Rosenblatt on different kinds of readings, they set out to show that there were three basic kinds of literary readings in the case of fiction, which they termed information-driven, story-driven, and point-driven. Following the work of Labov, they suggest that listeners of oral narratives generally need to infer their 'point', that is, what the narrator is 'getting at'. Point-driven understanding involves evaluation. They suggest that this is the preferred, perhaps the essential, strategy for reading literary narratives, in contrast to reading for information or for the story. In addition, they explain points as arising from a reader's relation to an author: we impute intentionality to a text, they suggest; we expect it to be coherent, to view gaps as opportunities to supply meaning – that is, apparently non-functional details or parts should not merely be ignored. Thus the principal sign of literary reading is engagement (Vipond, Hunt, and Wheeler 1987: 152). In this context they argue that point-driven reading is the attempt to 'make contact' with the narrator or author; a similar claim is made in *Psychonarratology* by Bortolussi and Dixon (2003: 126), that 'readers attempt to identify the point that the narrator is making'. Point-driven reading is thus a social process, one shaped by the reader's motives and the situation in which the text is encountered (Vipond and Hunt, 1987). In their empirical work, though, it proved quite difficult to detect point-driven reading. In their main study of the issue, a questionnaire survey of over 150 student readers of John Updike's story 'A and P', only about 5% were found to be engaged in a point-driven form of reading (most found the story incomplete and without point); readers were more likely to adopt a story-driven approach, that is, to read for plot. In another study, the reading of a short story took place either with or without a 'frame'; the frame

was a supposed letter from an East German reader who reports finding the story very relevant to his own situation (Vipond and Hunt 1989). Only among those readers who had the frame prior to reading the story was point-driven reading common. In comparing student readers with expert readers (members of the faculty), point-driven reading was more typically found among experts – who are, of course, by their training more likely to mention what they think a text is about.

While Vipond and Hunt note that a point is not an interpretation, it is clear that it represents a step towards interpretation. So it is important to bear in mind that student readers, who are likely to be closer to the ordinary reader outside the academy, do not usually derive points from their reading when reading normally. It is likely (as Labov's work showed) in the case of oral narratives, of the kind we hear on the street, in the pub, or over dinner, that a hearer will infer that a story that is being told has a point (e.g. how I managed to get a raise from my boss; what you should not say to the police when stopped for speeding). But in these circumstances points add to the stock of world or local knowledge that we frequently exchange through stories, such as news about a change in social conditions, or the special abilities of a friend. I suggest we do not typically read literary stories with the same end in mind. While we might aim to form a relation with the author, as Vipond and Hunt suggest, this is not because we expect the author to make a point but because we expect a literary author to offer a certain kind of experience.

What are readers doing during their reading, then? This is not easy to establish, and will, of course, vary according to the particular reader, the text being read, and the situation in which it is read. But we can suggest a preliminary answer to the question, based on studies we have carried out with readers who were asked to think aloud while reading a literary short story. I will mention the statistics we presented (Miall and Kuiken 1999) in

a paper we published in *Discourse Processes* in 1999. Thirty readers were asked to think aloud after reading each segment of a story that we had divided into 84 segments (the story was 'The Trout' by Sean O'Faolain). The comments readers made were analysed in detail, and for the present discussion were grouped into 14 types. Among these, the most frequent type of comments (33.6%) related to explaining a character ('Julia will do it again for the excitement'); next came quotations from the text (21.5%), which we found to correlate highly with the presence of foregrounding in the quoted passages, suggesting that readers were savouring the quality of the writing and mulling over how to understand such passages; next were queries about local meanings in the text (10.1%), ('I wonder if Julia is afraid'); other types of commentary referred to style, expressions of surprise, or to the reader's emotions. One of the smallest categories, a mere 2.1% of all comments, was what we called *thematizing* – e.g. 'Again we have the symbolism of the trout in a prison'. It is these comments that come the closest to what Vipond and Hunt mean by 'point': they represent the moments when a reader is beginning to work out an interpretation of the story. In this example, the reader is elaborating her sense that the trout is like the main character, Julia, who is trapped in the prison of her parents' expectations; both will have broken free by the end of the story. But this analysis shows that during the course of reading such reader comments are quite rare. Readers appear to be engaged in a rather different set of activities: contemplating what characters are doing, experiencing the stylistic qualities of the writing, reflecting on the feelings that the story has evoked. As our questionnaire studies have often shown (I refer here to the Literary Response Questionnaire: Miall and Kuiken 1995), many literary readers read for what we term *Leisure/Escape* – that is, most are reading for pleasure, for the immersive experience of being lost in a book (Victor Nell called this ludic reading: Nell

1988), and few appear to spend much time thinking about how to interpret the texts that they read — while they remain outside a classroom, that is.

In this particular study we also asked readers to make comments about their responses to the story as a whole after they had read it. Here, as might be expected, there were more comments consisting of points. Interestingly, though, these comments tended to refer to the personal meaning of the story for the reader, such as insights into aspects of the reader's childhood, or their enjoyment of the character. One reader, for example, says: 'I can really respond to how the little girl must have felt [...] I think it's neat that she can show that kind of compassion'. Almost no readers began to offer interpretations of the story for its own sake, apart from any personal interest they might have in it.

The cognitive processes that underlie reading, analysed by Stockwell and others, should not, therefore, be considered to lead necessarily to readers' interpretations. This, in fact, is a question for empirical study. At the same time, I should point out that some empirical studies of literary reading have biased their findings by assuming that readers read for meaning, that is, that readers are point-driven. The instructions they give readers may in this way deselect those features that are most characteristic of literary reading. For example, the readers studied by Olson, Mack, and Duffy (1981: 299) were told before reading that 'later we would explore how well they understood each story'. Imagine hearing this as a reader: consider how it would change your approach to reading a literary text, making it into a kind of classroom exercise. But this, of course, has been one of the overt aims of cognitive poetics: to provide new, alternative methods for classroom discussion of texts. As Elena Semino (1997: 225) puts it, for instance, in a chapter entitled 'Suggestions for further analysis': consider a particular poem by Seamus Heaney. 'What main schemata need to be activated in order to interpret the

text?' It still seems to be the case, as Stanley Fish insisted (1980: 355), that 'interpretation is the only game in town'. What Susan Sontag told us a long time ago is that what we need is not more interpretations of literary texts but an erotics of art, an attention first and foremost to its sensuous, formal qualities. In Sontag's challenging words (1964/1983: 98), 'interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art'.

Thus the promotion of cognitive poetics for classroom use that we are now seeing strikes me as anomalous and perhaps premature. Given the origin of its cognitive models and processes in an empirical science, why would cognitive poetics take no steps to examine its hypotheses empirically? The models are, after all, not uncontentious. As far as literary reading is concerned, for example, as long ago as 1982 Rand Spiro (1982) called into question the adequacy of schema theory to literary reading. And in the paper of ours in *Discourse Processes* I referred to earlier (Miall and Kuiken 1999), we examined the cognitive proposal known as the situation model. After reanalysing some published data (Zwaan, Magliano, and Graesser 1995) we were able to show that the reading of a literary story could be better explained as a response to the foregrounding in the story. We found that the theoretical variables for the situation model and perspective (a measure of point of view in the story) accounted for 35 percent of the significant variance in the data, whereas foregrounding accounted for 65 percent.

This is an example of the testing of alternative hypotheses to account for literary reading. The dependent measure in this case was reading times per segment of a story. Of the two models applied to explaining the variance in reading times, the independent measure we derived from assessing foregrounding in each segment of the story accounted for the data better than did the situation model. This is just one example of many possible research designs that could be adopted to examine the premises

of cognitive poetics. In fact, the great strength of books such as those of Stockwell or Semino is that they specify in considerable detail the supposed contribution of a particular cognitive process to reading, which should make it possible to devise empirical studies of their role during reading. Do readers interpret a text in terms of figure/ground relationships? Does cognitive deixis position a reader in relation to the points of view on offer in a narrative? In this context, we might consider the finding of Seilman and Larsen (1989) that during reading of a literary text compared with an expository text, the memories prompted by the literary text contained twice as many actor–perspective memories as the expository text, which mainly prompted observer memories. This suggests that the deictic indicators function differently in a literary text, inviting the reader to cast herself as an agent, as (in their words) ‘a responsible subject interacting with one’s environment’ (Seilman and Larsen 1989: 174). Deictic indicators, in other words, may be taken up differently according to the genre of the text being read.

Such research, whether or not it develops an empirical dimension, is based on a hypothesis drawn from cognitive science: the proposal that reading is shaped by figure/ground contrasts, or by the instantiation of schemata. In this sense it can be seen as a top–down strategy. Much empirical research is of this kind. Our earlier work on foregrounding (Miall and Kuiken 1994) provides another example, in which we made the assumption that literary texts are characterised by variations in density of foregrounding (an idea that we adapted from an earlier study by Willie van Peer 1986), and then set out to test this using such indicators as reading times per segment of a short story, and reader’s ratings of the same segments. But research on literary reading should also be conducted using bottom–up methods, where we do not set out to test a previously developed hypothesis. Here our approach is ‘To find, not to impose’, as Wallace Stevens puts it in

‘Notes toward a Supreme Fiction’. We have conducted several such studies (e.g. Kuiken and Miall 2001): as I mentioned earlier, they involve asking readers to think aloud while reading a literary text, to mention any thoughts or feelings that they have. The analysis we conduct on this material is a content analysis, but of a rather unusual kind: we allow the protocols themselves to suggest the categories. Wherever three or more readers say something similar about a story segment, we create a constituent incorporating what they say. At the highest level of generalisation, this is how we arrived at the 14 categories of response I described earlier. On the basis of our analysis of such think aloud protocols we not only gain insight into classes of response and their relationship to the features of the text being read, but we can also follow individual responses through the story, tracing the emergence and development of readers’ feelings, their imagery, empathy with a main character, queries about story meaning, and many other features. And in this way we position ourselves to discover features of response which have not yet been described, and are not predicted by cognitive poetics. A recent example in our own research is our finding of a distinction between two types of empathic identification that we have termed similes of identification and metaphors of identification (Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora 2004). On the basis of such research, we may be in a position to formulate a specific hypothesis that we can then set out to test using more familiar experimental methods.

### **Evolution: The adaptive functions of literary reading**

But to understand the role of empathy better, the feelings involved in literary response must also be placed within an evolutionary framework. Central to the outlook of evolutionary psychology is the claim that whatever psychological mechanisms the human race exhibits now were developed in response to our

prehistorical existence as hunter-gatherers in the Pleistocene epoch. Our adaptedness as a species is a reflection of our environment across some one or two million years, a context that must be considered in attempting to understand any significant human capacity – including that for literature. 'It is improbable', note Cosmides, Tooby, and Barkow (1992: 5), 'that our species evolved complex adaptations even to agriculture, let alone to postindustrial society'. Thus literature as a response process cannot primarily be understood in terms of recent cultural developments, let alone as something entirely new, as some postmodern theorists have suggested. As John Bowlby remarks (1974: 64), we must be attentive to 'the fact that not a single feature of a species' morphology, physiology, or behaviour can be understood or even discussed intelligently except in relation to that species' environment of evolutionary adaptedness'. In this perspective, literary reading or its ancestral equivalent, must be understood as a response to the ancestral environment and the cognitive, emotional, and social challenges that it posed.

Also in contrast to the current theoretical outlook, to understand the role of literature we must also consider the psychological and neurophysiological mechanisms that support literary reading. The human brain represents a development that is continuous with our primate and more remote mammalian relatives: for example, while the frontal cortex is largely a new feature distinctive to the primate brain, especially well developed in *homo sapiens*, it is intimately connected with evolutionarily much older mid-brain structures, such as the hypothalamus and amygdala, that support memory and emotion. The continuity is so marked, indeed, that it has led the neuropsychologist Jaak Panksepp (1991) to argue that animal and human emotion systems are virtually identical, and to propose research strategies based on this assumption. Such brain architecture indicates that the emotions have been the primary agent in our evolutionary

adaptedness (Tooby and Cosmides 1990): human behaviour, in other words, is managed and directed by a richly developed set of emotion algorithms. It is in this context that we should seek to place literature and understand its workings.

Evolutionary psychology also provides evidence that the mind is constituted by functionally specialised, content-dependent mechanisms, or 'adaptive specializations' (Tooby and Cosmides 1992: 94). It is unlikely that literary response represents an exception: response to literature, in other words, either depends on an array of domain-specific modules in the mind, or constitutes in itself a domain-specific module with its own determining mechanisms that underlie its many cultural and historical variations. This does not imply that literature is a closed or fixed system: biological determination does not mean constraint or inflexibility. On the contrary, the domain-specificity of literature is the ground on which has flowered the extraordinary range of literary phenomena apparent across history, while giving literary response a set of core functions that has ensured its central place in human society up to the present era.

The task of evolutionary psychology is to take a characteristic phenomenon, such as literary culture, and to ask what adaptive function it has. More specifically, we ask whether 'it is well designed for solving a specific adaptive problem', or whether its features cannot be 'more parsimoniously explained as a by-product of a design that evolved to solve some other adaptive problem' (Cosmides, Tooby, and Barkow 1992: 10). Typically, psychologists have sought to understand literature as a branch of discourse (e.g. van Dijk 1979); postmodern theorists have usually seen it as a structure determined by the properties of language. In both cases, the main paradigms currently available to explain literature see it as a by-product of another system, subject to shifting definitions according to historical context. Thus, a part of our task is to examine what may be specific and distinctive



about the literary system, not reducible to either discourse or language. Our psychological system, argue Tooby and Cosmides (1992: 34), has evolved to contain 'content-specialized representational formats, procedures, cues, and so on. These richly content-sensitive evolved mechanisms tend to impose certain types of content and conceptual organization on human mental life and, hence, strongly shape the nature of human social life and what is culturally transmitted across generations'. Literary response appears to be built on some specific procedures and cues that can be identified at several levels of response, such as the sound patterns of language, the processes of feeling, or our knowledge of other people. This constellation of features may be distinctive enough to be considered an adaptation, one with the kind of 'modularity' that has been identified in numerous other psychological mechanisms.

Literary criticism often tends to emphasise the unique, thus developing ever-varying interpretations of a given text or writer. But from a different perspective the enormous variability in literary form can be seen as the outgrowth of underlying regularities in literary phenomena: the surface data of response may be highly variable, yet derive from common evolved mechanisms distinctive to the literary system. But to place literary studies in this framework is to hypothesise that literary experience has adaptive significance. This is not to claim that those who engage in it are thereby enabled to increase their 'fitness' or adaptedness. It is possible for a psychological mechanism to have evolved in the Pleistocene that is no longer relevant or desirable in our current post-industrial culture (such as aggression or patriarchy or our liking for sugar). The appropriate question to ask of literary response is how far it represents a functional solution to the adaptive predicaments that faced our ancestors in the Pleistocene. The problem of modern research becomes that of 'reverse engineering': 'We have working exemplars of the design in front

of us, but we need to organize our sea of observations about these exemplars into a map of the causal structure that accounts for the behavior of the system' (Tooby and Cosmides 1992: 55). For this task Tooby and Cosmides offer four analytic principles: the complexity of a given adaptive problem, the appearance of a well-engineered solution to it, the presence of a mechanism specialised to the nature of the problem, and some content-specific or 'innate' knowledge about the problem domain (Tooby and Cosmides 1992: 59). Taking the literary problem domain we can begin to hypothesise about what its features as an adaptation might be.

The 'innate' knowledge on which response depends, for instance, appears to include invariants at the level of language, such as phonetic foregrounding; our studies point to a near-universal sensitivity to this feature during literary reading. Its complexity is apparent in that it depends on a range of effects such as vowel length, consonant obstruency, alliteration, or rhythm. Literary texts have commonly been analysed for such effects, and our empirical studies demonstrate their influence on reading in various combinations depending on the distinctive style of the text and the ear of the reader (see e.g. Miall and Kuiken 1994). This suggests that readers 'hear' phonemic properties as though they come encoded with relevant meaning. Other candidate features of the special literary adaptation include foregrounded features at the syntactic and semantic levels, and a set of narrative features. The process common to each of these constituents is that of dehabitation, which could be explained in evolutionary terms as the agent we deploy through literary texts to 'tune' or modify our cognitive frames; in more familiar terms, it enables us to overcome our customary, economical habits of feeling or perception. The truth-value of perception is obviously of central importance to survival: it perhaps constitutes 'those first-born affinities that fit / Our new existence to existing things', in Words-

worth's terms (*The Prelude* (1805), I, 583–584; Wordsworth 1979). Neuropsychological research has identified a number of finely tuned mechanisms for solving the computational problems of vision, for example, and we are now aware of others that address the problem of hearing, including specific modules for language, such as phonetic decoding, and modules for the other senses. Similarly, we appear to have a well-developed facility for reading our social environment, enabling us rapidly to understand and respond to the signals emitted by others. At the same time, these very mechanisms may also 'lock' us into a stereotyped set of perceptions: literary response, I would suggest, has evolved in particular as a way of unsettling the stereotypical. In particular, by defamiliarising, literature enables us to 'recalibrate' our emotional responses. As Dissanayake has shown (1992: 50), every culture appears to promote what we might call a 'defamiliarising' mode of organising and participating in an unusual experience: developed at first, perhaps, for encountering the sacred and the rituals that developed around it, literary experience may subsequently have incorporated linguistic and narrative cues to alert the hearer to adopt a special mode of attention. Dissanayake notes that many cultures make use of specific devices to signal poetic utterance, such as a special tone of voice (113–116). Internalised in the texture of language as foregrounding it is these cues, in part, that we now recognise as giving literature its distinctiveness as a medium.

Is literature then unique? As I suggested earlier, literature functions by exhibiting to us the limitations and inadequacy of our representations. It is thus not primarily a representational medium, but one for modifying or transforming representations, in particular by altering the feelings we typically experience. The aesthetic qualities of literature, then, are its principal vehicle for achieving such effects.

### Emotion: The neglect of feeling

Given that literary reading is so often imbued with feeling, it is surprising that feeling has still received so little attention from cognitive poetics. Of the major scholars in this field, only Reuven Tsur and Keith Oatley have made significant contributions. Tsur's work has largely been at the level of sound structures and metre in poetry (e.g. Tsur 1997). Peter Stockwell gives less than two pages to the topic of emotion in his book, and mainly summarises Oatley's earlier work (see e.g. Oatley and Johnson-Laird 1987). Oatley's view of emotion can be classed with several other influential views of the time as an interrupt theory. Emotions are situated within a story grammar approach, explained in relation to plans and goals; as Stockwell puts it, 'emotions follow upon the maintenance of plans, the achievement of goals, their frustration or failure'. Emotions arise 'when there are variations in plans or goals which are being monitored' (Stockwell 2002: 172). In other words, emotion occurs primarily when the functioning of a plan is interrupted. This makes emotions secondary, after-effects of a cognitive appraisal (which may remind you of a longstanding debate in psychology over whether emotions had 'primacy' or not, begun by a paper of Robert Zajonc in 1980).

While these approaches to emotion are of value, more recent work on emotion, especially on the neuropsychology of feeling (notably Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux), suggests the need for a more comprehensive framework for understanding the role of feeling in literary response. This would suggest a more balanced approach to feeling, in which it might at times take precedence in response, at other times follow upon some prior cognitive processing. In our own theoretical work on feeling (Miall and Kuiken 2002) we have proposed a four-part framework for the feelings involved in literary response. First, *evaluative* feelings such as enjoyment, pleasure, frustration, or satisfaction

in reading are reactions to a text, and provide an incentive to sustain reading or consider it afterwards. Second, *narrative feelings* such as suspense, curiosity, and empathy with an author, narrator, or narrative figure are involved in the processes by which a representation of the fictional world is developed and sustained. Third, *aesthetic feelings* (called 'artefact emotions' by Kneepen and Zwaan 1994) of fascination, interest, or intrigue may constitute the initial moment in a reader's response to the formal components of literary texts (narrative, stylistic, or genre-based). While serving to capture and hold readers' attention (Miall and Kuiken 1994), these aesthetic reactions may anticipate a fourth level of feeling: the *modifying* powers of feeling. We have found that, at times, aesthetic and narrative feelings interact to produce metaphors of *personal* identification that modify self-understanding. We have suggested (Miall and Kuiken 2002) that the concept of catharsis (the conflict of tragic feelings identified by Aristotle) identifies one particular form of a more general pattern in which aesthetic and narrative feelings evoked during reading interact to modify the reader's sense of self.

Cognitive poetics has touched at various times on each of these levels of feeling: for instance, Tsur's primary interest has been in the realm of aesthetic feelings prompted by the sound textures of poetry; Bortolussi and Dixon (2003), whose theoretical framework involves the reader's representation of the narrator in fiction, discuss the various possible feelings that may occur when identifying with a narrator; Semino (1997) implies self-modifying feelings when considering the more radical processes involved in schema-refreshment (that is, the creation of a schema), although she gives little space to considering the reader as such; similarly, Oatley in a more recent paper tells us that 'the reader may reach an insight, and build a new piece of his or her model of the self and its relations. In other words, some cognitive transformation may result' (Oatley 2002: 54). What is missing

from these accounts is an overall theory of the role that feeling plays in the process of literary reading: feeling is largely treated as a subsidiary effect, an epiphenomenon occurring in the interspace of the cognitive processes being described.

In attempting to go beyond this in our account of feeling, we have also postulated three properties of feeling that are independent of the kind of processes described by cognitive poetics (Miall 1989). In brief, we suggest that feeling facilitates border-crossing, that is, feelings enable us to relate concepts in unrelated fields. Second, feeling prompts us to take a certain stance towards events, preparing us to interpret incoming evidence in a specific way; anticipation of this kind seems to be one of the fundamental properties of feeling. Third, a more common claim, feeling is generally self-implicating; it occurs when some issue of our self-concept is in question. As I describe these processes inherent to feeling, you may readily see how such processes may not only cut across cognitive processes, reshaping them in ways not allowed for by cognitive accounts, but even take over the primary role in literary understanding, perhaps detailing such processes (at least for a while). In several papers we have pointed to this possibility and provided empirical examples showing the crucial role of feeling during literary response (see e.g. Miall 1989; Miall and Kuiken 2002; Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora 2004). But this work is only at a preliminary stage and needs developing and elaborating in a number of ways. What is required, in part, is a more focused attempt to integrate feeling into the structures of response already laid out in cognitive terms by cognitive poetics, and to do so in a way that allows for the priority of feeling where appropriate; then to develop hypotheses that are amenable to empirical testing, so that the theoretical claims we make can be arbitrated in the light of responses from actual readers.

### Conclusions: Literariness?

To review these three aspects of literature, empiricism, evolution, and emotion, is to suggest that the cognitive significance of reading is wider than the interpretive issues that cognitive poetics has so far studied. In particular, I have tried to suggest that there are a number of other processes involved in literary reading that need not, and in the case of the ordinary reader outside the classroom, probably do not eventuate in an interpretation. The perspectives I have suggested would also, I believe, bring coherence to the research questions involved in the cognitive study of literature. One feature of cognitive poetics as it now stands is the impression of a mosaic of various processes, among which it would be hard to say why a particular process should determine reading in a given situation. For example, even in the case of Bortolussi and Dixon (2003), whose overall thesis proposes that the relation of reader to narrator determines the reading process, this breaks down into a number of sub-processes whose relative significance cannot be decided on the evidence they provide (that is, how would we decide between the different claims of plot structures, character construction, or different discourse styles, or the relation between them).

Given the pre-eminence of feeling when we are thoroughly engaged in literary reading, perhaps we should look here for the overall determining process during reading – if there is one overall process waiting to be found. This is what I would be inclined to claim, based on our own empirical research. But we do not yet know enough to be sure. Let me put this in focus by returning to the issue I raised earlier, that of literariness and its now questionable status. Bortolussi and Dixon (2003: 29) indicate their acceptance of 'the assumption [of discourse analysis] that literary language is not distinct from, but rather an instance of, ordinary language, and that consequently it is processed as

such by readers'. This assumption, that the methods of literary analysis drawn from cognition will be adequate for all tasks, forecloses the possibility of establishing what may be distinctive to the experience of literature. Similarly, while Peter Stockwell (2002: 92), in a discussion of discourse worlds, suggests on one page that good literature is able to seem universal, reinstating a context that is not closely tied to particular historical conditions, two pages later he also argues: 'It is a principle of cognitive poetics that the same cognitive mechanisms apply to literary reading as to all other interaction' (94). Here, I would reply, feeling may make all the difference, showing us what is unique in the literary interaction. If so, then the case for interweaving our understanding of feeling into the claims of cognitive poetics is an urgent and important one.

This is to argue that while cognitive poetics fails to take feelings seriously under consideration, to conduct empirical studies of the experience of reading, and to place the literary experience in an evolutionary framework, it may also be missing what makes literary reading distinctive. I say *may*, because this too is an empirical question. Until cognitive poetics is grounded upon a body of research with real readers, we will have only ambiguity on this important question, or we will dispute over the contentions of rival theories, which – come to think of it – is to reproduce in a new form the inconclusive debates of the last thirty or forty years. The choice facing cognitive poetics now is whether to continue with a limited and perhaps limiting focus on interpretation, or seek to situate literary study within an explanatory scientific framework in which the phenomena of interpretation form only one corner of a much larger field.

## Notes

1. 'Cognition and Literary Interpretation in Practice', University of Helsinki, Finland, 27–29 August 2004. See Preface.

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## 7. Believable Fictions: The Moral Implications of Story-Based Emotions

Howard Sklar

Sherwood Anderson (1996: 15) once claimed that, in writing *Winesburg, Ohio*, he was 'at home among [his] own people'. Elsewhere, however, he (1941: 70) insisted that the characters in *Winesburg* were inspired by the residents of the Chicago tenement district where he was living at the time. At the heart of both claims is Anderson's belief in the imaginative reality of his characters. Although Anderson disavowed any suggestion that his writing was a form of realism, as the term is conventionally understood, it seems clear that he imagined his characters as real individuals with distinct identities, and he intensifies our sense of his characters' reality by attempting to enlist our sympathy for them. This essay centres on the question of a reader's belief in the reality of characters in fictional narratives, and the ways in which s/he might respond as a result of that belief. I will attempt to show that, to the extent that readers, acting on such beliefs, come to sympathise with or feel compassion for fictional characters, these emotions possess moral implications beyond the experience of reading itself. Indeed, I will demonstrate that, although

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Edited by  
Harri Veivo,  
Bo Pettersson  
and  
Merja Polvinen

