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Meaning and Mind

A Cognitive Approach
to Peter Weiss' Prose Work

p a s s a g e m

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Introduction

Literature happens in the mind. Literary texts are both the product of the author's creative thought and the trigger that leads the reader to setting up alternative realities in imagination. Literature emerges in these acts of individual cognition. Studying literature from a cognitive stand thus implies to look at what happens in the mind of readers and authors while they read and write. How this can be done is a question with multiple answers, each one capable of triggering a different research focus: one can study what goes on in the brain of the reader, watch the brain at work while it performs and thus learn about the physiological interface of the processes of imagination. This is what neuroaesthetics seeks to do. Or one can test the reader as to what particular text structures trigger specific psychological effects, very often emotional reactions, something that is done, for example, by comparing the reader's response to fiction and to non-fiction, or by analyzing the associations prompted by certain textual strategies. This is a field of study for cognitive psychology. In both cases the cognitive approach yields more knowledge about the individual reader, which might then be generalized to the community of readers, than it does about the literary text itself. These are experiential approaches to the literary text and in general what they intend is to provide knowledge about the human brain or the human mind. The experience of literature is then regarded as one among several cognitive experiences that can be studied, like visual cognition, attention or emotion, for example. As for the texts themselves, they are considered for the literary strategies they represent in the way these relate to readers' reactions.

Another possible way to bring literature and cognition together is by studying what mediates the content of imagination of the author and the content of the imagination of the reader: the text. The constitutive element of the literary text is language, and from a cognitive perspective, language is the product of the human mind, so that it reflects the processes and structures of human thought. Therefore, by studying the language of the texts, one can gain insight into how we think. In this view, an important claim is that what makes readers understand literary texts, no matter how elaborate they may be, is that the language that constitutes them results from the same cognitive processes that structure any other use of language. Literature, in this sense, is fundamentally cognitive, and this is what ensures that the alternative world that emerged in the mind of the author is reconstructed by the reader in the act of reading: language does this mediation,

because it mirrors the way we think. A study of literature in this perspective is informative about the cognitive foundations of language, in that it provides a further field of research in addition to the study of other linguistic uses. In this view, language expresses conceptualizations, and literature further elaborates on this expression potential, exploring it for aesthetic purposes.

Yet, one needs to go further in order to understand the aesthetic purpose and function of literature. In fact, literary texts are more than just enhanced uses of language. Their aesthetic nature does not derive exclusively from an unusual or more sophisticated use of language: there is something about literary texts that differentiates them from elaborate judicial language or from the inventions of good advertisement. This difference raises the problem of the purpose of this aesthetic form and triggers the question of how and why literature emerged in the first place, i.e. in how far the experience of literature is the result of cognitive adaptations. Studying literature in the context of evolution may seem farfetched, insofar as literature itself is a very recent realization of the human mind to be significant in evolutionary terms. Indeed the question needs some reframing: the point is not to see how literature in general (or a specific literary work) might have had any impact in phylogenesis; the point is rather to see how literature (and for that matter art in general) ever came to be. In evolutionary terms, highly influenced by the Darwinian paradigm of “teeth and claws” selection, the emergence of art is peculiar enough to deserve some attention, the more so as it is hard to recognize what might have been the advantage of engaging in such seemingly random activities under conditions of selective pressure.

It is easy to see that either one of these perspectives over literature and cognition has its own agenda, that lies elsewhere than in the analysis of the literary text itself: the study of the brain, the examination of mental and behavioral processes, the study of the cognitive foundations of language, or the research of human evolution. These are several possible dimensions that the association of literature and cognition can produce in research, each one aiming at a specific outcome, but all engaged in a better understanding of the same phenomenon: the genesis and effect of aesthetic experience in the mind.

Yet the present work carries none of these headings: it is not an experimental study in psychology, nor is it a neurologically based survey, or a study in cognitive linguistics, and even less a study in the evolution of human cognition. Nonetheless, it draws on the findings of these fields, even if with differentiated emphasis.

In the present work, literature and cognition are brought together in the analysis of a selection of prose texts by Peter Weiss. The framework for the study is that of cognitive semiotics, which combines the assumptions that meanings are constructions of the mind and that the process of meaning formation is constrained by the conditions pertaining to a symbolic exchange, namely that it is intended

by the author, who is aware of the model reader, and it is intended by the reader, who is also aware that the text emerged from an authorial intention for conveying a certain view of the world. The text itself is thus our primary source of information, language the primary focus of the analysis. The language of the literary text is informative with respect to the contents of reference and the way they are presented, and moreover it reveals the presence of the participants in the discursive interaction that unfolds in the experience of reading the literary text. In this cognitive semiotic approach, concepts from structuralism, both with regard to classical semiotics and literary analysis, are combined with insights about the mind and cognitive processes, aiming at an explanation for how meaning emerges in the mind, i.e. how we read and interpret literary texts (more precisely these texts) and how this process is constrained by the rhetorical and semantic construction of the text and determined by the way our mind works. In this view, literary reading and interpretation is viewed not in the frame of any particular school of literary criticism; instead, it is assumed to emerge from the integration of contents presented in the text and the experience of human life-world, conceptualized around a stable set of domains of experience. This cognitive based view of meaning distances itself from a culturally constrained interpretation of the texts, as it became established in the post-structuralist tradition. Instead it is phenomenologically oriented, in the sense that meaning is regarded as being related to meaningful human experience. Human experience is not arbitrary or infinite, but is structured by schematic patterns which emerge from the fact that our mind is integrated in a body that interacts in the world. A warning is due at this point: this view of mind and meaning is not deterministic in an ontological sense. Our mind is not our body; instead, the stable structures of our thought emerge from the experience of (bodily) interaction with the world and with others, in the form of schematic representations. It is also our view that literary texts are meaningful in that they actualize those stable structures of thought. In so far, the meaning of a literary text is itself stable. Literary texts, as forms of human interaction, are relevant with respect to a particular segment of the human life world. This is what constitutes their existential significance, which attracts and engages readers beyond borders and across time. It is this relevance, based on the universal mechanisms of human cognition that we seek to analyze in the chosen texts by Peter Weiss.

Our study is structured in four chapters, which unfold as follows:

In the first chapter we start by presenting cognitive poetics, the cognitive based branch of literary studies. We overview the recent history of this discipline and present some of the cross-disciplinary influences that it updates, namely in the intersection of literature, cognitive science and cognitive linguistics. We review some of the critical voices and provide some responses in favor of this paradigm for an enhanced approach of literary texts that aims not at replacing existing ap-

proaches, but complementing them by relating literature to other human cognitive realizations, and framing literary studies in a holistic view of the human sciences, i.e. the sciences of the human being. After this introduction to the field, we then present the object of our study, which we view as a case study in the application of the cognitive poetic methodology, as well as the general structuring questions the study intends to answer and the methodology applied. We include a brief presentation of Peter Weiss' biography and work, and expose the reasons that underlie the choice of both this writer and the selected works.

Chapters 2 through 4 constitute the core of the study. Although structured in such a way that they respect the individual features of each text, all three chapters start with a contextualization of the text, which reviews its main contents and the context of production and edition, and then follow an underlying method of analysis, which develops around three main aspects: the *enunciation structure* of the text, which concerns the determination of the narrative voice and perspective, as well as its relation with addressee and content of reference, the determination of the *semantic content* and *rhetorical structures* used to present it in the text, and finally the *interpretation* of the text, attained through the integration of the first reading of the text, which emerges from the integration of enunciation, content and presentation, with a segment of human life world. The intertextual and biographical account of the text further contribute to the aesthetic interpretation of the text, i.e. its relevance not as just a representation, but an aesthetically significant representation and conveyance of a significant segment of experience. Chapter 2 is devoted to the experimental "micro novel" *Der Schatten des Körpers des Kutschers*; chapter 3 concerns the autobiographical novels *Abschied von den Eltern* and *Fluchtpunkt*; finally, chapter 4 focuses on the historical novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*.

In the last section of the work, we review the main outcomes of the analysis of the three text genres and draw our conclusions from the cognitive approach to these texts, with respect to the texts themselves, and their relation to each other as the products of the work by the same author, who reflects in them his own cognitive style. Finally we review the outcomes of this project for the study of cognition and literature, in the perspective of a cognitive poetics.