The oceanic mind: a study of emotion in literary reading
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Introduction

The purpose of a work of fiction is to appeal to the lingering after-effects in the reader’s mind.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

What happens in the minds and bodies of readers when they make the conscious decision to sit down and read literature? Despite the recent stylistic, linguistic and cognitive advances that have been made in text processing methodology and practice, very little is still known about this and especially about the role that emotion plays in this process. The aim of this Ph.D. thesis is to make a contribution towards shedding light on affective literary reading. My focus here will be on just three issues. The first pertains to what role emotion plays in a core cognitive event like literary text processing. I will deal with this primarily in Part I of this work, where I will introduce the notion of affective cognition. However, it will also return in later analytic sections. The second issue involves discovering which kinds of bottom-up and top-down inputs are most prominently involved in the literary reading process and, more importantly, how they interact in the aesthetic, meaning-making maelstrom of literary comprehension. This will constitute my main theoretical contribution. Pushing the idea of emotion and literary reading to its limits, the third issue tries to get closer to knowing what might be happening in the minds and bodies of certain engaged readers when they experience intense or heightened emotions — a phenomenon sometimes labelled ‘reader epiphany’ — and how, and why, such intense emotions can appear to overwhelm cognition during such a cognitive process as reading. This will be the content of Part III, which will constitute a case study as well. It is here that I will introduce and discuss my developing notion of ‘disportation’.

These then are the three main points that I will address. Of course, these are all major questions in text processing research, while this thesis is but an essentially theory-driven work written in the humanities, not the social sciences. As a result, several of my claims and conclusions may appear to remain incomplete from a social science perspective. However, I believe that the questions I am posing are relevant in the field in which I work, as well as perhaps beyond it, and that as a result some of the insights of my research will be useful for further investigation either by myself or others. My main claim, which will primarily come to the fore in Part II, is that during the affective cognitive act of reading literature, comprehension often takes place within the theatre of what I call ‘oceanic cognition’. I postulate that there is a dynamic, free-flow of bottom-up and top-down affective cognitive inputs during the engaged act of literary reading and that reading may not necessarily begin or end when our eyes apprehend the words on the page, but long before that and indeed long after it. In light of the dynamic ebb and flow of affective mind processes, especially during engaged acts of literary reading. I conclude that during reading the human mind might best be considered both figuratively and literally, not as computational or even mechanical, but as oceanic.

Some preliminaries: Methodology and definitions

My attempt to fathom certain aspects of the mind is broadly stylistic. However, it is also cross-disciplinary, as it draws on cognitive linguistics, philosophy and literary criticism from the humanities; cognitive psychology and discourse psychology from the social sciences and neurobiology from the natural sciences. I will now describe how I am going to go about this and explain the rationale behind my procedural choices. My methodology is primarily theoretical in that it rests on three things: textual analysis, expert third-party testimony and self-reflection as an avid reader and an experienced lecturer in stylistics and rhetoric. However, there is an empirical

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1 In the last ten years I have taught many courses including ones on stylistics, rhetoric, creative writing and discourse analysis at five different universities.
aspect to it as well. This finds form in the fact that most of that expert testimony, especially from
the sciences and social sciences, is grounded in solid quantitative experimentation. Moreover, I
conducted some of my own reader-response tests with a small group of thirty-six students. These
simple experiments were based on a questionnaire I devised, called the Novel Reading
Questionnaire or simply the NRQ (see appendix). The questionnaire consisted of fifteen questions
that required open responses. It was distributed to more than 150 individuals to be completed on a
voluntary basis over a period of three months in the summer of 2004. All of the subjects were
university students rather than experienced readers of literature and no payment was made for
their reader-response services. Only thirty-six completed questionnaires were returned. This
questionnaire sought to elicit frank and open responses to a number of literary reading-related
phenomena including the roles of mood, location, themes and style in literary discourse
processing; the influence of literary reading-induced mental imagery; a person’s reading speed at
closure; the types and effects of heightened emotions felt while reading, etc. I hope that the NRQ
might prove to be a useful tool for later analysis. In sum, although this testing has an important,
open-response, qualitative aspect to it, it cannot be seen as statistically relevant owing to its lack
of methodological rigour. However, having real readers upon whom I could test my own
intuitions has proved rewarding both for confirming, and, more importantly, challenging some of
my assumptions.

Two critical methodological questions may emerge here: why, as a humanities scholar,
have I not opted to go for an approach involving pure theoretical conjecture, or conversely, why,
have I not opted for a more social-science approach that would have entailed a more rigorous,
statistically-grounded, quantitative approach to my empirical testing. To answer the first, a purely
theoretical approach would have excluded real readers. This was something I wanted to avoid. Of
course, literary analysts are real readers too, and their analyses can, and do, provide significant
insights as to how readers read, experience and process texts. Indeed the solid, replicable work
done in the field of literary stylistics stands as a testimony to individual analysis. However, I
believe that intersubjective support for the literary analyst from other readers can sometimes
provide persuasive arguments that test the hunches of the analyst and so support theoretical
conjecture or indeed challenge it. Moreover, responses from other real readers can make the
analyst see things in a new light or notice something that he or she might have overlooked. In
short, the detail of responses can produce ideas for better methodologies and hence improved
studies. In response to the second question, I am aware that an all too rigorous approach to testing
the emotive aspects of responses to literature would not be advisable at this stage, as I fear the
quality of responses would be affected to such a level that the very thing I wish to observe and
analyse would be distorted. In short, aesthetic responses and empirical rigour make for uneasy
bedfellows. All this will be explained in greater detail in the second part of this work where I
discuss the challenges facing all empirical literary response scholars by means of what I term ‘the
lab liability’. I have chosen to adopt a variety of approaches that leads to a methodology that is
neither classically theoretical nor rigorously empirical. Such compromises that avoid the
traditionally accepted ‘either-or’ frameworks incur methodological risks. However, I am
following the methodological advice of applied psychologist Keith Oatley, who says in his work
on emotion and cognition in literature that studies of this nature should be founded on four things:
(i) a description of events (including our own experiences), (ii) appropriate measurement, (iii)
theory (“by which we can make inferences that go beyond phenomena and measurement”) and,
finally, (iv) what he terms verstehen, i.e. ‘imaginative reliving’ (414-5). This well-balanced
advice will be my methodological guide.

In addition to methodology a number of definition-based arguments should be kept in
mind when reading this study. The first pertains to the notion of ‘readers’. When I speak of
literary ‘readers’, I am not suggesting that there is just one kind of reader and hence one reading.
There are many socio-cultural and historical factors that determine how readers read, including
age, culture, gender, etc, as well as past readers and indeed the unique personal past of each
current reader. There are also readers with brain disorders who are compelled to read differently.
These idiosyncrasies make such all-encompassing terms as ‘the reader’ or ‘readers’ at best awkward and at worst simply erroneous. In effect, ‘the’ reader does not exist. Individual readers are essentially social-constructs, since they read according to their background and education, as well as the influence their teachers, friends and parents have and had on them. If certain readers have the same education and experience in reading, they may produce similar responses to questions about literary reading. Indeed, empirical testing is largely grounded on the premise that patterns of similarity in readers are recognisable. From a non-empirical angle, the existence of such readers is acknowledged by Wolfgang Iser’s term ‘intersubjective’ from his influential work The Act of Reading (1978). This seems to be a useful and workable definition for this study too. Hence, when I use the terms ‘the reader’ or ‘readers’ I am using it in the sense of ‘intersubjective’ readers.  

The term ‘literature’ is problematic too. A question like ‘what is literature?’ is something to which one could devote a whole book or even several volumes. When I use the terms ‘literature’ or ‘literary texts’ in this study I am referring primarily to highly wrought, rhetorically constructed texts that were crafted, either consciously or unconsciously, with the aim of eliciting a variety of emotions in readers across time and space. My choice of texts, and the one I devote most attention to in Part III, come from the literary canon, i.e. those texts that society, for whatever reason, deems to value. This study could quite easily have been conducted using non-canonical texts.  

Other important concepts for this work like oceanic cognition, disportation, affect, emotion, feelings, mood, location, theme, etc. will be defined in the forthcoming chapters where and when they arise. A final point in this section is that although I acknowledge that aesthetic responses to works of art vary from culture to culture, I realise too that like emotional responses they exhibit aspects of universality.

**Why literature and why emotion?**

As stated, I seek to explore emotive responses to literary texts within a framework of what I describe as oceanic cognition. This presupposes three things: (i) that affect plays a role in cognition in literary reading, (ii) that studying literary reading processes can tell us something worthwhile about cognition, emotion and the human mind, and, (iii) that literary emotion can be studied soundly outside of laboratory conditions. In case this task sounds improbable or even impossible let me put forward some expert testimony from the social sciences at this early stage. With regard to the first premise the literary empirical scholar David Miall has argued in his 1988 article “Affect and Narrative” that “affect plays a primary role in understanding literary stories, governing the cognitive processes of comprehension” (260). As to the second premise, several scholars have asserted its legitimacy. For example, the cognitive scientist Mark Turner has claimed in Death is the Mother of Beauty that “one of the principal reasons that we study literature is to understand the workings of the human mind” adding “there are certain things about the human mind that we can see best by looking at literature” (9). The main sentiments of this are echoed by cognitive psychologist Ray W. Gibbs Jr., who suggests in Poetics of Mind that the

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2 In the 1970s Iser also introduced his theoretically constructed notion of an ‘implied reader’. In that same period it found competition from similar theoretical constructs including Jonathan Culler’s ideal reader, Michael Riffaterre’s super reader, Stanley Fish’s informed reader and Umberto Eco’s model reader. None of these primarily involved real readers or real respondents.

3 The novel I will focus on in Part III is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (1925).

4 Other works that have looked at the combination of emotion and literature include the fine studies by Susan L. Feagin (1996) and Keith Opdahl (2002). One of Feagin’s main claims is that to appreciate a work of fiction is to get emotional value out of it (1), while Opdahl argues in his work that emotion is not just expressive but depictive (11). Given the essentially philosophical-aesthetic nature of such discussions I have chosen not to draw on them further in this work.
poetic imagination does not simply matter, but is in fact fundamental to cognitive science (1). A third psychologist, the aforementioned Oatley, concurs with this with his own claim in Best Laid Schemes that all literature is in one way or another about human emotion (7). If these experts are to be believed, as I think they should, then studying literature and the literary reading process should be central to the study of the emotive human mind. With reference to my third premise, social scientist Jon Elster has suggested in Alchemies of the Mind that “the most important sources for our understanding of the emotions lie outside the laboratory” (405). The cultural domains that he goes on to name where emotions might best be studied are history, anthropology, philosophy, and, to my mind most importantly, fiction. It is in light of such learned views that literature shows itself as a fruitful research site for cognitive scientists and conversely perhaps a suitable site for literary scholars to learn more about cognitive science. Admittedly, a cognitive study of literary reading processes will not tell us anything as fundamental as neural imaging techniques can, but it may produce insights and conjectures that can influence or even alter investigative trajectories currently pursued in the sciences and social sciences. Literary scholar Alberto Manguel has claimed in A History of Reading that “we know that reading is not a process that can be explained through a mechanical model” (39). I agree. It is for this reason that I propose in the body of this thesis the beginnings of an oceanic theory to account for the affective-cognitive processes that come into play when an engaged and committed real reader sits down to read literature. In doing so I am responding in part to the ‘challenge to future stylistics researchers and practitioners’ set out by Jean-Jacques Weber in the introduction to his Stylistics Reader (1996) to “work towards a greater synthesis of social and cognitive approaches” (7).