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

In chapter four I quoted Harold Brodkey, who thought that the act of reading literature as it really occurs is obscure. He was right. It has been the aim of my work to shed some light on that fascinating and elusive process, to explore what may be occurring in what Brodkey termed “the altered tempos of reading”. In this dissertation I set out to discover what happens in the minds and bodies of readers when they make the conscious decision to sit down and engage with literature. My aim was to make a small theoretical contribution with my humanities experience towards shedding some light on this. I chose to narrow this huge research question and focus on just three issues, which in themselves, in hindsight, were still vast: (i) what role does emotion play in a cognitive event like literary text processing; (ii) which kinds of bottom-up and top-down inputs are most prominently involved in literary reading, and how do they interact in meaning-making, and (iii) what happens in the minds and bodies of readers when they experience intense or heightened emotions at literary closure. I devoted to each of these questions a separate part of this thesis. My main claim was that during the affective cognitive act of reading literature, comprehension often takes place within the theatre of what I called ‘oceanic cognition’. My idea of oceanic cognition suggested that there is a dynamic, free-flow of bottom-up and top-down affective-cognitive inputs during literary reading, and that reading does not begin or end when 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 during engaged acts of literary reading, I concluded that the human mind might best be considered not as mechanical or computational, but as oceanic. I believe that I have gone some way towards finding and producing support for this claim, even if I have left many questions unanswered. One respondent from an experiment in chapter seven said that he/she “would love to believe that the mind is like an ocean”. At some level, I think, many of us would. Will the low-tech biological simplicity of the mind/brain-ocean model be able to withstand the high-tech complexity of the mind/brain-computer model? Probably only cognitive neuroscientists can answer this question. What seems certain is that my developing theory of the oceanic mind provides neuroscientists like Kosslyn and Koenig with the hydraulic metaphor they sought, as it stresses exactly what they believed it should: “the complex, interactive nature of brain processes”.

My work has been an oceanic project, both in its aims as well as in its content. Not surprisingly, over-ambition has led to the recognition of limitations. Much of that limitation lies in my method. As I said in my introduction, I hoped to follow Keith Oatley’s framework of (i) describing events, including my own experiences, (ii) measuring appropriately, (iii) using theory “by which we can make inferences that go beyond phenomena and measurement” and, finally, (iv) employing verstehen, i.e. ‘imaginative reliving’ (414-5). Upon reflection, I can see that Part II was not robust enough. Several of my predicted hypotheses remained unconfirmed. This in itself is not a problem. However, it points to flaws in my initial methodological choices, including a lack of experimental control, and a somewhat naïvely-worded Novel Reading Questionnaire with too many conflicting variables. One positive point is the volume and variety of the actual data that I have received. Where responses conflicted with my predictions, they will help lead me towards creating far sounder and far more relevant questions for an improved future questionnaire. A further drawback was that the analytic image-schematic tools I employed in chapter ten and the steps that I took in my affective cognitive stylistic analysis may not be as replicable as I anticipated they would be. There is still a lack of lucidity in my method. An immediate task for me is to work on this analytic framework and improve its clarity, making it more rigorous and retrievable. Many of my theoretical claims, especially those on affective cognition and disportation, are beyond the technological scope of verifiable testing. However, eye-tracking research, using real, natural texts like literary discourse, is something I must seriously consider in future experiments. Advances in the cognitive and neurobiological sciences
should further facilitate suitable environments for empirical testing to underpin these ideas. Of course, the potential methodological challenges that lie in wait, as described in chapter four, will continue to confront researchers with significant experimental dilemmas. Another serious methodological drawback was that I focused only on one text in my case study. Analytic depth is important, but here it has come at the price of scientific norms and procedures. One swallow has never made a summer and never will. In future projects, I need to look at more texts, across a wider cultural, chronological and thematic range. Taking all these limitations into consideration, this study should be viewed as a partial heuristic tool. It is in no sense a complete theory of emotive poetics. My notions of the oceanic mind, the disportation hypothesis, affective cognition, the somatic cushion, the literary reading loop and my five affective inputs are still very much ‘in the making’. They are hypotheses and theories that need to be tested, where necessary reconsidered, refined and restructured. This study constitutes the very beginning of my own thinking on affective inputs in the oceanic, literary reading mind — not the end.

I have suggested that cognition works in an oceanic fashion in contexts of emotive literary reading. But is it just limited to literary reading situations? Perhaps oceanic cognition could be the modus operandi behind the processing of many ordinary mental events, like daydreaming, recollecting, planning and thinking. Perhaps too, the fragmentary childhood locations that I believe are evoked while reading literature may very well be visualised in all kinds of everyday thinking procedures. Might the flow of thought be “like the waves in an ocean”, as one respondent claimed? Although the hard proof is still missing, and may continue to be so for some time yet, the mounting neurobiological, psychological, linguistic and literary evidence seems to be pointing increasingly in that general direction.

David Miall, whom I cited in the introduction, claimed that “affect plays a primary role in understanding literary stories, governing the cognitive processes of comprehension”. I hope to have gone some way towards showing how astute his claim is and to exhibiting what that ‘governing’ can sometimes entail. In doing so, I also hope to have risen to Jean-Jacques Weber’s challenge to all stylisticians to work towards a greater synthesis of social and cognitive approaches in the field of stylistics. One thing I have discovered is that future literary reception work should blend reception and anticipation. Only this way can the full affective cognitive spectrum of sign and mind-fed elements be accounted for. In sum, I have tried to search for those “lingering after-effects in the reader’s mind” to which a work of fiction appeals, according to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Have I managed to do that? And further, have I been successful in proposing the beginnings of an oceanic theory to account for the affective cognitive processes that come into play when an engaged and committed reader sits down to read literature? Only time and tide will tell.

So we read on — books against the current— born back ceaselessly — into our pasts.