

New Stories, New Explanations: Cognitive Literary Studies at Work

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David Ciccoricco, *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. x + 317 pp.

It may be said that Karl Marx deserves credit for inaugurating what has turned out to be one of the major occurrences in the history of ideas. To oversimplify, Marx established the theory and methodology of explaining the ways in which manifest forms of consciousness are determined by latent, unconscious causes. So for instance, the latent operations of capitalist ideology produce the manifest identities of capitalist citizens. As many of my readers will know, I have taken “manifest” and “latent” from psychoanalysis. This is because Sigmund Freud is the next major figure to give force to this kind of thinking. In literary studies, Marxism and psychoanalysis remained the primary examples of this kind of thinking until well after WWII. But since the 1960s most successful literary “theory” has operated in the same general ways. Manifest or conscious notions of race, class, and gender, for instance, are not simply naturally occurring elements of the world or of psychology. They are determined systematically by unconscious causes. Over time, “ideology” has become a general term for such unconscious causes. I will henceforth refer to all of these approaches—deconstruction, psychoanalysis, various versions of feminism, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, etc.—as canonical theory. Typically, the canonical theorist’s tactical goal (so to speak) is to reveal how ideology of whatever kind does its work in specific texts, and the tactic nearly always serves some larger strategic, ethical goal of changing

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minds and cultures. This kind of analysis has become all but universal, at least in the humanities.

Since the 1990s at least two other related versions of this kind of analysis have emerged; one based in cognitive science, especially cognitive psychology, and the other based in evolutionary psychology. Like canonical literary theory, cognitive and evolutionary-psychological approaches present a theory of the unconscious determinants of conscious belief and behavior, and then use the theory in order to explain specific elements of texts. But unlike the canonical theories, the two new entries import their unconscious determinants from the empirical sciences. This is truer of cognitive theory than of evolutionary-psychological theory, if only because evolutionary psychology is necessarily more speculative than cognitive psychology. But both depend on claims from empirical-scientific disciplines. Cognitive theory will be my main concern here.

The theoretical grounding in empirical science rather strongly separates cognitive theory from the established theories, no matter the methodological similarities shared by all. For various reasons, many literary scholars do not want the sciences to gain power in their discipline, and so tend not to welcome cognitive-psychological analyses. Given the nature of the academy and the relative insecurity of humanities disciplines in relation to STEM disciplines, this is not so surprising. But still, in the past three decades the various empirical studies of the mind—such as cognitive psychology, social psychology, cognitive neuroscience, social neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology—have exploded with explanations of how the cognitive unconscious produces the conscious mind, and so, identity. Canonical literary “theory” is nearly always explaining one way or the other the unconscious causes of the conscious mind, and so, identity. The question must arise: should the humanities take into account what the cognitive sciences have to say? Apart from issues of disciplinary power, we can say no to this; if only because literary explanations are just not expected to account for scientific knowledge (or else to do so only in the most broad and general ways). Cognitive theory brings in specific ideas from the sciences, and for that reason can just be ignored as a different kind of intellectual endeavor. And yet, if a literary scholar feels the necessity to go outside the discipline in order to study theories of history, or of economics or, especially, of psychoanalysis in order to explain literature and its effects, then why wouldn’t they feel the necessity to study empirical-psychological theories of mind in order to explain literature and its effects? Whatever the response to this question, cognitive-psychological knowledge will always be hovering over the disciplinary atmosphere.

Some literary scholars have welcomed cognitive studies into the interpretive fold, and David Ciccoricco’s *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media* is a current

example of what this kind of theory can do. Ciccoricco's book is an entry in the University of Nebraska's *Frontiers of Narrative* series, which has in the past decade become an important venue for interdisciplinary studies of narrative. Described most generally, the book makes the case that we have new kinds of storytelling whose relationships to and implications for the human mind are not obvious. We may profitably turn to cognitive-psychological explanations of the mind in order to give us new ways of approaching these new kinds of stories. To Ciccoricco's credit, he does not present the new approach in polemical fashion, as the revolutionary salvation of literary studies. It is all too common for a new theory to establish itself by vilifying and even trying to exterminate canonical theory, but this is not the best way to bring those who disagree over to your side. If the ideas are strong, they should stand on their own. Ciccoricco does not try to revolutionize the already established scholarly study of narrative. Rather, he intends to revise and reinvigorate it.

At this stage of disciplinary history cognitive literary studies tend to be more oriented toward the poetics, rather than toward the hermeneutical, or interpretive, side of explanation. But Ciccoricco's book tries to do both. In the mode of a poetics, he brings in various cognitive-psychological and social-psychological concepts in order to explain how contemporary forms of narrative media—specifically print novels, digital fiction, and story-driven video games—produce their storytelling effects. In the interpretive mode, he explains what his readings mean for our understanding of “actual minds in an increasingly media-saturated culture” (5). In other words, he not only explains how the texts cause effects in readers, but also what it means that they cause the effects in the ways that they do.

Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media is comprised of an introduction followed by two parts divided into three chapters each, and then a coda and appendix. Each of the two parts deals with two large cognitive-psychological categories. Part one is entitled “Attention and Perception,” and part two “Memory and Emotion.”

The introduction clearly situates cognitive literary study in the current scholarly context, and shows a sharp awareness of the kinds of objections that might be made against it. Aware, for instance, of objections that cognitive literary studies tend to be much more cognitive than literary, Ciccoricco constantly tries to “strike a balance between what constitutes delimited research topics in the cognitive sciences and what can be considered compelling and enduring concerns (aesthetic, thematic, narratological) in literary studies” (11). He remains calm and judicious even when he takes issue with some of the most important figures and concepts in the history of literary theory. Of Freud for instance, he admits that there exists “a healthy reverence and respect for what [he] got right,” but nonetheless the “psychology of

the twenty-first century has moved on from [psychoanalysis's] mistaken mechanisms and flawed foundations . . . and it is time for literary theory . . . to do the same" (16). Similarly, Ciccoricco understands the poststructuralist critiques of the basic distinction between literal and figurative language, and does not "deny that so-called literary language pervades everyday language." But this fact does not "empty out the value of the term [the literary] in indexing a body of aesthetic production that has a special relationship to human creativity and imagination" (21). If, as a relatively new kid on the theoretical block, one goal of cognitive studies is to expand its influence, rhetorical staging of this kind is a good means to that end. Ciccoricco does this masterfully.

Chapter one, "Tragic Misperceptions in a Novel of Twin Consciousness," takes as its sample text Patrick White's novel *The Solid Mandala* (1966). Ciccoricco's analysis brings together "longstanding narrative-theoretical concerns of perspective and focalization" with "newer and more complete cognitive theoretical explanations of how we see and attend to our surroundings and ourselves" (33). This is his method all along, and it automatically heads off another possible problem with cognitive literary studies. If a scholar brings empirical-scientific ideas to the humanistic study of literature of whatever kind, he needs to show at least some solid evidence of a familiarity with the best literary thinking on that kind of literature: in this case, narrative. Otherwise, the primary audience—literary scholars—will likely conclude that in a very real way, the writer does not know what he is talking about. That problem does not happen here.

Here, as in later chapters, Ciccoricco also remembers the importance of literature itself. In other words he heads off the objection—common since the emergence of "theory"—that all of this theorizing drowns the power of the very thing it studies: literary art. After a detailed close reading through the combined lenses of cognitive and narrative theory he explains that while "the language of contemporary cognitive science helps reframe" certain key elements of the text, "it is ultimately White's" storytelling skills that offer "a unique and artful view of fictional minds" (36). A major element of textual analysis in this chapter involves a form of diagnosis of the mental conditions of the novel's two principle characters. This kind of reading can be risky, as the history of Freudian interpretation shows. But Ciccoricco acknowledges this risk upfront, and, judicious as always, argues that "there is much to be gained from informed assessments of the state of fictional minds based on responsible appropriations by scholars working at the intersection of literary narrative and cognition" (50). With this justification in place he performs a very detailed analysis of the novel's main characters, based on such concepts as the Theory of Mind, attribution theory, the adaptive unconscious, and con-

fabulation. To wrap up his reading, he makes sure to explain in meta-fictional terms the effects the text has on the reader's mind.

Chapter two, "Digital Fiction and Your Divided Attention," provides a close reading of "The Last Day of Betty Nkomo," a web-based narrative. Once again, Ciccoricco shows the ways in which "cognitive-scientific understandings of attention and perception mutually inform narrative theories of focalization and perspective" (72). And he uses these mutually-informative theories as a means to reveal how the story (and digital fiction more generally) "exploits the digital environment for rich representations of consciousness" (*ibid.*). In this chapter we get much more about the "reader"—in fact, a kind of phenomenology of the experience of digital fiction. Ciccoricco shows in detail how this text "recapitulates the experimental conditions utilized to measure attentional mechanisms in experimental psychology" (90). In other words, this kind of fiction performs a literary experiment on its "reader," testing our cognitive abilities in much the same way as cognitive psychology research itself. Concepts such as scanning saccade, attentional blink, and Rapid Serial Visual Presentation are brought in to show how this occurs.

Chapter three is entitled: "Game Worlds and Sharing Attention in Mythic Proportions." Because of the nature of narrative-based online gaming, the "reader" necessarily interacts with the "text" in historically unprecedented ways. The cognitive concepts of attention and perception give us new ways to explore how attention and perception "are aestheticized and enacted in game worlds" (93). The Sony Playstation game *Journey* is the target case. Ciccoricco chooses this particular game because it involves a cooperative, rather than competitive-combative enactment of story (rather like Ciccoricco's book itself), which means that it "offers insight into the way social cognition plays out" in fictional game worlds (96). More specifically, *Journey* does this because of the way the game structure "exploits and interrogates familiar perceptual, cognitive, and narrative universals that shape storyworlds across media" (*ibid.*). In the process of an extended close reading, Ciccoricco brings in research on figure and ground visual processing, conceptual metaphor, joint attention, literary-mythic universals, and neuroscientific and evolutionary-psychological theories of music. And he sums things up by making a pitch for the cognitive and intellectual value of at least some video games. Given the way games such as *Journey* operate, they can hardly be considered "mindless play" (124).

Part two, focusing on memory and emotion, begins with chapter four: "Great Escalations in the Novel of the Everyday." Nicholson Baker's novel, *The Mezzanine* (1988), is an ambitious stream of consciousness rendering of one man's interiority over the short time of a lunch break from work. This kind of story carries an obvious appeal for cognitive literary studies since, as

Ciccoricco says, “new research on the mind can inform richer readings of any cerebrally natured narrative agent” (128). In this case the richer reading will come from cognitive-psychological explanations of memory and emotion. The main character’s running introspection is much involved both with memories and with thinking about the nature of memory. In order to illuminate this element of the novel, Ciccoricco draws on the work of, among others, Antonio Damasio, Joseph Ledoux, and especially Gerald Edelman. The latter part of the chapter brings in the cognitive-psychological concept of cognitive consonance in order to explore the emotional loading of memory in the form of nostalgia, both in the main character and in the cognitive experience of the reader.

The next chapter, “Digital Fiction and Memory’s Playground,” focuses on the digital fiction *Nightingale’s Playground* which takes off from “a profound memory malfunction by an emotionally distraught protagonist” (164). This kind of story is ripe for analysis using cognitive scientific ideas, especially with respect to “imagination inflation”: our tendency to inflate certain memories over time, even false memories. Ciccoricco also uses this story to spur a broader investigation of memory and emotion in human psychology, beginning with ancient explanations of (and training for) memory and running through Freud to concepts of data storage and “the computational theory of mind” (185). Because literary studies have long depended on Freud and psychoanalysis for explanations of memory, Ciccoricco spends a lot of time explaining how the Freudian explanations do not really stand up to scrutiny in light of what we now know from cognitive psychology. To some readers this could seem overdone, especially since he has made the point briefly in his introduction. And yet of all the various versions of canonical theory it is very hard to see how psychoanalysis in particular can simply ignore cognitive psychology, so extra time is well-spent here.

Chapter six, “Playing with Memory and a Graphophilic *God of War*,” uses “a cognitive literary toolkit” to explore emotion and memory in, among other games, the Sony Playstation game *God of War*. The close reading in this chapter has the larger goal of showing how “video games, like other narrative media, can represent the machinations of memory” as well as how video games differ in this respect from other media (206). More specifically, the interactivity of such games can be illuminated by, and can provide insight into “enactivist theories of cognition” (196). After a careful narratological analysis of the interactive narrative structure of *God of War*, Ciccoricco turns to the “more political and ethical consequences of [the player’s] interaction” with such games. To assess these consequences, we move through a detailed discussion of the paradoxical effects of empathy and identification in this kind of narrative. Schema theory becomes a primary cognitive import by which to

explain how all this bridges “the literary and the ludic in artful ways” (222). In sum, this chapter presents a very sophisticated exploration of the way “the game’s literary self-consciousness is transferred to the player” (220).

The coda offers some ideas for further research, especially the basic role that patterns and coherence play in cognition, which Ciccoricco explores in some detail. This is an entirely well-done chapter, worth reading, but in terms of the way the rest of the book has been composed it seems stuck on to the work already done. Finally, we get an appendix written by research assistant Lisa Marr, who summarizes current findings on mirror neuron systems. This too is well written and informative, but seems stuck on.

In conclusion, to my mind any project that brings empirical-scientific ideas into the study of literature needs to do certain things well if it is going to succeed in the contested field of approaches to literature. Its imported main ideas need to be made clear in themselves; they need to be supported by adequately strong, cited support from the actual scientific research; and they need to be situated clearly in relation to the surrounding context of humanistic scholarly ideas. Close reading of the words of the text(s) needs to be at least as important, both qualitatively and quantitatively, as anything else. Ciccoricco’s *Refiguring Minds* does all of these things quite well. I find it to be a strong entry in the growing area of cognitive literary studies.

