Why We Read Fiction

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rightful province of a literary critic. Still, as Phelan points out, the study “of the embedded intentionalities has implications for every one of [these discourses] if only because it provides a clearer ground from which to proceed.”

WOOLF, PINKER, AND THE PROJECT OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Challenging as it may be, Woolf’s prose is so fundamentally rooted in our cognitive capacities that I am compelled to qualify an argument advanced recently by Steven Pinker in his remarkable and provocative Blank Slate. Pinker sees Woolf as having inaugurated an aesthetic movement whose “philosophy did not acknowledge the ways in which it was appealing to human pleasure.” Although he admits that “modernism comprises many styles and artists, . . . not [all of which] rejected beauty and other human sensibilities” and that modernist “fiction and poetry offered invigorating intellectual workouts,” here is what he has to say about modernism as a whole and Woolf in particular:

The giveaway [explanation for the current crisis in the arts and humanities] may be found in a famous statement from Virginia Woolf: “[On] or about December 1910, human [character] changed.” She was referring to the new philosophy of modernism that would dominate the elite arts and criticism for much of the twentieth century, and whose denial of human nature was carried over with a vengeance to postmodernism, which seized control in its later decades. . . . Modernism certainly proceeded as if human nature had changed. All the tricks that artists had used for millennia to please the human palate were cast aside. . . . In literature, omniscient narration, structured plots, the orderly introduction of characters, and general readability were replaced by a stream of consciousness, events presented out of order, baffling characters and causal sequences, subjective and disjointed narration, and difficult prose.

As literary critics, we have several ways of responding to Pinker’s claims about Woolf. We can hope, together with a representative of The
Publications of the Modern Language Association, that not “many students, teachers, theorists, and critics of literature will take [him] seriously as an authority on literature or the aesthetics more generally, especially since he misrepresents both Woolf and modernism.” At first sight, this is a comfortable stance. It assumes a certain cultural detachment of literary studies and implies that cognitive scientists should just leave literature alone, acknowledging it as an exclusive playing field for properly trained professionals—us. The problem with this view is that it disregards two facts: first, that more people read Pinker (who “misrepresents” Woolf) rather than, say, PMLA (which could set the matter straight); and, second, that as a very special, richly concentrated cognitive artifact, literature already is fair game for scientists, including Pinker, Daniel Dennett, Paul Harris, Robin Dunbar, and others, and it will become even more so as the cognitive inquiry spreads further across cultural domains.

Thus, instead of simply ignoring Pinker’s assertion that modernist writers have, by and large, cast aside “the tricks that artists had used for millennia to please the human palate,” we should engage his argument, incorporating both insights from our own field and those offered by cognitive scientists. For me, the idea that our cognitive evolutionary heritage structures the ways in which we make sense of fictional narrative is profoundly appealing precisely because it begins to explain why the impulse to cast aside the tried-and-true “tricks” of representation is not at all limited to modernists. Writers, after all, have always experimented with the palates of their readers. Press a literary critic for an example of a novel featuring “stream of consciousness, events presented out of order, baffling characters and causal sequences, subjective and disjointed narration,” and it is possible that she will come up not with one of the early-twentieth-century novels but with an eighteenth-century one, such as Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy (1759–67), or a nineteenth-century one, such as E. T. A. Hoffman’s Kater Murr (1820–22). Press me for such an example, and I will say Heliodorus’s An Ethiopian Romance, a novel written sometime between A.D. 250 and 380. Profoundly experimental in its handling of causal sequences and stories embedded within other stories, An Ethiopian Romance can be quite baffling to its readers; my students regularly find it so in spite of its accessible language (they read it in a contemporary translation) and its largely conventional set of adventures. Yet Romance has survived for seventeen centuries and has been enormously influential in the European literary tradition.

In fact, the history of such books’ reception contains a warning for both a cognitive scientist and a literary critic who are compiling a list of
“tricks” that had been reliably delighting readers “for millennia” and were then cast aside by the elitist modernists. Dr. Johnson’s confident (and so far wrong) observation that “nothing odd will do long,” just like “Tristram Shandy did not last” should give pause to any attempt to designate some complex features of the literary narrative as broadly pleasing and thus likely to endure through millennia and other features as odd, elitist, and, thus, most likely, transient. A text can be perceived by some readers as unusual and difficult (and indeed it can be genuinely difficult, given, for example, its intensified demands on our ToM adaptations). However, that difficulty may actually heighten its appeal for other readers and—given a conjunction of particular historical circumstances and particular means of textual reproduction—eventually contribute to its lasting popularity.

Moreover, to draw on the respective arguments of Alan Palmer and Monika Fludernik, narratives that challenge their readers’ ToM by their unusual and difficult representations of fictional consciousness may offer valuable insights into the workings of our consciousness which is anything but predictable, orderly, and simple. As Palmer puts it,

[fictional texts are] complex in their portrayal of the fictional mind acting in the context of other minds because fictional thought and real thought are like that. Fictional life and real life are like that. Most of our lives are not spent in thoughtful self-communings. Narrators know this, [even if we may not] have yet developed a vocabulary for studying the relationships between fictional minds and the social situations within which they function.

And furthermore, as Fludernik reminds us, modernists saw themselves not as denying human nature and assaulting the human palate but, on the contrary, as getting closer to capturing the complexity of the real:

[If] the consciousness novel is being discussed here in its relation to novelistic realism, and surprisingly so for some readers I should think it reflects the very rhetoric of Modernist fiction, which claimed to be truer to life than the realist and naturalist novel could ever hope to be: truer, that is, to the very experientiality of people’s subjective involvement with their environment. . . . I propose to treat the consciousness novel as the culmination point in the development of narrative realism rather than its first regrettable lapse into idiosyncratic preoccupations with the nontypical and no-longer-verisimilar of human subjectivity.
Ostensibly experimental texts, such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Tristram Shandy*, are thus a boon for an interdisciplinary analysis drawing on cognitive science and literary studies (I say ostensibly because my later chapters will expand significantly our concept of literary experimentation.) The moment cognitive scientists succeed in isolating yet another plausible cognitive regularity (e.g., as Dunbar and his colleagues have done), we can start looking for the ways in which fictional narratives (e.g., *Mrs. Dalloway*) have been burrowing into and working around that regularity, testing and reconfiguring its limits.

By thus paying attention to the elite, to the exceptional, to the cognitively challenging, such as Woolf’s play with the levels of intentional embedment, we can develop, for instance, a more sophisticated perspective on the workings of our Theory of Mind.9 And, as Phelan observes, would not Pinker himself and “those in his audience who view modernist literature as he does be more likely to be persuaded to change their dismissive view of it, if literary critics show that [Woolf’s] representations of consciousness, though initially challenging to a reader, are highly intelligible because they capture in their own ways insights that Pinker and other cognitive scientists have been offering (and popularizing)?”10

But if it makes sense to use as a starting point the cognitive psychologists’ insight into certain regularities of our information processing and apply it to the literary narrative, then the opposite conceptual move can be equally productive. Our intuitive impression (bolstered by Dr. John- son’s pronouncement) that Sterne was indeed doing something odd in his *Tristram Shandy* can prompt both cognitive scientists and literary scholars to inquire into other, not yet formulated, cognitive regularities underlying our interaction with fictional narrative. If Sterne was going against some cognitive grain, we need to understand that grain in terms incommensurably more specific than the ones evoking “structured plots, the orderly introduction of characters, and general readability.”

I have returned again to the quote from *The Blank Slate* not to criticize Pinker’s endeavor to view literary history from a cognitive perspective but rather to stress our own relative interdisciplinary timidity. Responding to the revolutionary advances made in the last two decades in cognitive psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and the philosophy of mind, Pinker and his colleagues in cognitive sciences grapple with difficult questions about literary narrative that we should be grappling with to a much larger extent than we currently do. Pinker may or may not be immediately aware
of *Tristram Shandy* or *Kater Murr* when he positions far-reaching experimentation with established forms as a literary development unique to the twentieth century, but his awareness of them is almost beside the point. What is important is that he is venturing into the murky interdisciplinary waters and engaging a larger audience with important questions about literature and cognition, whereas we, though beginning to address such questions among ourselves, are hardly reaching out to readers outside of literature departments.

I wonder, then, what exactly are the epistemological and ethical grounds on which we stand when we mock Pinker’s claim to being an “authority on literature” if we have not yet made any good-faith effort to meet Pinker halfway and offer our literary-historical expertise to develop a more sophisticated and yet accessible cognitive perspective on modernist representations of fictional consciousness? Paradoxically, it is only while we refuse to “take seriously” the research of cognitive scientists who dare to pronounce “on literature or . . . aesthetics more generally” that we could be made to feel that our contribution to this interdisciplinary exchange would represent little or nothing of value. Once we enter the conversation and engage with respect the arguments of Dunbar, Pinker, Dennett, and others, we realize that because of their ever-increasing—and well-warranted—interest in how the human mind processes literary narratives, our expertise could make a crucial difference for the future shape of the ever-expanding field of cognitive science.