Why We Read Fiction

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A “COGNITIVE” ANALYSIS OF MRS. DALLOWAY AND THE LARGER FIELD OF LITERARY STUDIES

return to this point again in Part III, Section 2, entitled “Why Is Reading a Detective Story a Lot like Lifting Weights at the Gym?”

It is now time to return to the imaginary conversation that opened this book. Some versions of that exchange did take place at several scholarly forums, where I have presented my research on ToM and literature. Once, for instance, after I had described the immediate pedagogical payoffs of counting, in one of my undergraduate seminars, the levels of intentionality in *Mrs. Dalloway*, I was asked if I could foresee the time when such a cognitive reading would supersede and render redundant the majority of other, more traditional approaches to Woolf. My immediate answer was no, but since then, I have had the opportunity to consider several implications of that question important for those of us wishing cognitive approaches to literature to thrive.

First of all, counting the levels of intentionality in *Mrs. Dalloway* does not constitute the cognitive approach to Woolf. It merely begins to explore one particular way—among numerous others—in which Woolf builds on and experiments with our ToM, and—to cast the net more broadly—in which fiction builds on and experiments with our other cognitive propensities. Many of these propensities, I feel safe in saying, still remain unknown to us despite remarkable advances in the cognitive sciences during the last two decades.

However, the current state of the field of cognitive approaches to literature already testifies to the spectacular diversity of venues offered by the parent fields of cognitive neuroscience, artificial intelligence, philosophy of mind, cognitive linguistics, cognitive psychology, and cognitive evolutionary anthropology. Literary scholars have begun to investigate the ways in which recent research in these areas opens new avenues in gender studies (F. Elizabeth Hart); feminism (Elizabeth Grosz); cultural historicism (Mary Thomas Crane, Alan Richardson, Blakey Vermeule); narrative theory

36
Alan Palmer, David Herman, Uri Margolin, Monika Fludernik, Porter Abbott; ecocriticism (Nancy Easterlin); literary aesthetics (Elaine Scarry, Gabrielle Starr); deconstruction (Ellen Spolsky); and postcolonial studies (Patrick Colm Hogan, Frederick Luis Aldama). What their publications show is that far from displacing or rendering the traditional approaches redundant, a cognitive approach can build on, strengthen, and develop their insights.

Second, the ongoing dialogue with, for instance, cultural historicism or feminism is not simply a matter of choice for scholars of literature interested in cognitive approaches. There is no such thing as a cognitive ability, such as ToM, free-floating “out there” in isolation from its human embodiment and historically and culturally concrete expression. Evolved cognitive predispositions, to borrow Patrick Colm Hogan’s characterization of literary universals, “are instantiated variously, particularized in specific circumstances.” Everything that we learn about Woolf’s life and about the literary, cultural, and sociohistorical contexts of Mrs. Dalloway is thus potentially crucial for understanding why this particular woman, at this particular historical juncture, seeing herself as working both within and against a particular set of literary traditions, began to push beyond the boundaries of her readers’ cognitive “zone of comfort” (that is, beyond the fourth level of intentionality).

At the same time, to paraphrase David Herman, the particular combination of these personal, literary, and historical contexts, in all their untold complexity, is a “necessary though not a sufficient condition” for understanding why Woolf wrote the way she did. No matter how much we learn about the writer herself and her multiple environments, and no matter how much we find out about the cognitive endowments of our species that, “particularized in specific circumstances,” make fictional narratives possible, we can go only so far in our cause-and-effect analysis. As George Butte puts it, “[A]ccounts of material circumstances can describe changes in gender systems and economic privileges, but they cannot explain why this bankrupt merchant wrote Moll Flanders, or why this genteelly-impoverished clergyman’s daughter wrote Jane Eyre.” There will always remain a gap between our ever-increasing store of knowledge and the phenomenon of Woolf’s prose—or, for that matter, Defoe’s, Austen’s, Bronte’s, and Hemingway’s prose.

Yet to consider just one example of how crucial our “other” knowledges are for our cognitive inquiry into Mrs. Dalloway, let us situate Woolf’s experimentation with multiple levels of intentionality within the history of the evolution of the means of textual reproduction. It appears
that a written culture is, on the whole, more able than is an oral culture to support the elaborately nested intentionality simply because a paragraph with eight levels of intentional embedment does not yield itself easily to memorization and subsequent oral transmission. It is thus highly unlikely that we would find many (or any) passages that require us to go beyond the fourth level of intentionality in oral epics, such as *Gilgamesh* or *The Iliad*. Walter Benjamin captured the broad point of this difference when he observed that the “listener’s naïve relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what he is told. The cardinal point for the unaffected listener is to assure himself of the possibility of reproducing the story.”\(^8\) The availability of the means of written transmission, such as print, enables the writer “to carry the incommensurable to extremes in representations of human life”\(^9\) and, by so doing, explore (or shall we actually say “develop,” thus drawing upon Paul Hernadi’s recent argument about the evolutionary origins of literature?\(^{10}\)) the hitherto-quiescent cognitive spaces.

Of course, for a variety of aesthetic, personal, and financial reasons, not every author writing under the conditions of print will venture into such cognitive unknown. Even a cursory look through the best-selling mainstream fiction, from Belva Plain to Danielle Steel, confirms the continuous broad popular appeal of narratives sticking to the fourth level of intentional embedment. It is, then, the personal histories of individuals (here, individual writers and their audiences) that ensure that, as Alan Richardson and Francis Steen have observed, the history of cognitive structures “is neither identical to nor separate from the culture they make possible.”\(^{11}\)

In the case of Woolf, scholars agree that severing ties with the Duckworth—the press that had brought forth her first two novels and was geared toward an audience that was “Victorian, conventional, anti-experimentation” (*Diary* 1, 261)—“liberated [her] experimentalism.”\(^{12}\) Having her own publishing house, the Hogarth Press, meant that she was “able to do what” she “like[d]”—no editors, or publishers, and only people to read who more or less like that sort of thing (*Letters*, 167). Another factor possibly informing the cognitive extremes of *Mrs. Dalloway* was Woolf’s acute awareness of the passing of time: “my theory is that at 40 one either increases the pace or slows down” (*Diary* 2, 259). Woolf wanted to *increase* the pace of her explorations, to be able to “embody, at last” as she would write several years later, “the exact shapes my brain holds” (*Diary* 4, 53). Having struggled in her previous novels with the narrator “chocked with observations” (*Jacob’s Room*, 67), she has discovered in the process of working on *Mrs. Dalloway* how to “dig out beautiful caves
behind [her] characters; . . . The idea is that the caves shall connect, and each comes to daylight at the present moment” (Diary 2, 263). Embodying the “exact shapes” of Woolf’s brain thus meant, among other things, shifting “the focus from the mind of the narrator to the minds of the characters” and “from the external world to the minds of the characters perceiving it.” 13 a technique that would eventually prompt Auerbach to inquire in exasperation, “Who is speaking in this paragraph?” 14

Woolf’s meditations on her writing remind us of yet another reason that simply counting levels of intentionality in Mrs. Dalloway will never supersede other forms of critical inquiry into the novel. When Woolf explains that she wants to construct a “present moment” as a delicate “connection” among the “caves” dug behind each character, the emerging image overlaps suggestively with Dennett’s image of the infinitely recursive levels of intentionality. (“Aha,” concludes the delighted cognitive literary critic, “Woolf had some sort of proto-theory of recursive mind-reading!”) But with her vivid description of the catacomb-like subjectivity of the shared present moment, 15 Woolf also manages to do something else—and that “something else” proceeds to quietly burrow into our (and her) cognitive theorizing.

This brings us to a seemingly counterintuitive but important point underlying cognitive literary analysis. Even as I map the passage featuring Richard Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread at Lady Bruton’s as a linear series of embedded intentionalities, I expect that something else present in that passage will complicate that linearity and re-pose Auerbach’s question, albeit with a difference: Will it be the phallic overtones of the description of Hugh’s pen? Or the intrusion of rhetoric of economic exchange—“credit,” “makers,” “produce,” “capital,” “margin”? Or the vexed gender contexts of the “ventriloquism” 16 implied by the image of Millicent Bruton spouting political platitudes in Hugh’s voice? Or the equally vexed social class contexts of the “seating arrangements” that hierarchize the mind-reading that goes on in the passage? (After all, Woolf must have “seated” Lady Bruton’s secretary, Miss Brush, too far from the desk to be able to see the shape of Hugh’s letters so as not to add yet another level of mental embedment by having Miss Brush watch Richard watching Lady Bruton watching Hugh.)

Cognitive literature analysis thus continues beyond the line drawn by cognitive scientists—with the reintroduction of something else, a “noise,” if you will, that is usually carefully controlled for and excised, whenever possible, from the laboratory settings. The exciting noisy scene—with all its overlapping and competing discourses of class and gender—is the
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