

Mark J. Bruhn and Donald R. Wehrs, eds., *Cognition, Literature, and History*. New York and London: Routledge, 2014. Pp. 271. £90. ISBN 9780415722094.

Introducing this collection, Mark J. Bruhn calls cognition the ‘third term’ supplementing Susan Wolfson’s supersession of ‘the formalist-historicist opposition in literary theory and practice’ (2–3). If Wolfson accounts for formal and material facets of literary texts simultaneously, this provision still cannot explain why it was Wordsworth who wrote Wordsworth’s poetry. Cognitive literary theory, however, can account for both ‘individual agency in literary and social change’ and ‘how, in turn, the evolving literary system may shape and change the individuals who encounter it’ (5). Bruhn’s essay, accordingly, considers similarities between Romantic mind science and cognitivism, especially their shared interest in introspection, and also nicely argues for the utility of theoretical introspection – of foregrounding the institutional history of the theory being applied in equal measure to that being examined. This claim is furthered in Donald R. Wehrs’s ‘Epilogue’, which argues that only cognitivism might contest the residual Platonism of the post-’68 French philosophy which was the main paradigm for critical theory across the last four decades. Recognizing that ‘literature addresses a materially embodied humanity’ (248) can correct the return to ‘autarky’ (246) intimated by a putatively antiessentialist trend ranging from Nietzsche to Derrida. Although Wehrs does not mention it, cognitive materialism’s critique of ‘poststructuralism’ shares much with that of speculative materialism; the salient difference is that the former considers evolution to be a fact, whereas for speculative materialism any facticity is temporally contingent. However interesting this project is, though, the claims for cognitivism bracketing this collection are rarely addressed, or substantiated, in its essays.

In many chapters, the material from cognitive research appears appended, and does not much develop the argument. This is the case, for example, in the contributions by Nancy Easterlin and Patrick Colm Hogan. Easterlin argues that *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* mobilizes a readerly drama of ‘evolved psychological priorities’ versus ‘generic cultural conventions’ (72), and that the destabilization of this distinction occurs in its abiding demonstration (justifying its ‘specialness [...] and enduring canonical status’) of ‘culture’s potentially disintegrative effect on wayfinding cognition’ (76–77); however, this only puts into a new idiom a familiar reading of the poem vis-à-vis the frustrated-expectation topos. Hogan, reading Atwood’s *Surfacing* via the ‘narrative prototype’ of ‘familial separation and reunion’, construes the text as a ‘re-emplotment’ (134) of Canadian non- or anti-national identity – a reading so familiar that it is unclear what is contributed by Hogan’s cognitive lexicon.

Throughout the volume, it is assumed that ‘narratives and character prototypes are critical tools to help us understand others’ (166), when one might argue that this begs so many questions as to justify examination here – an examination nowhere undertaken. Howard Mancing’s essay, on the ‘theory of mind’ represented by the narrator of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, is exemplarily presuppositional, insisting that ‘We should look at the text of [Lázaro, the narrator’s] work as a deceptive document designed to exculpate its morally bankrupt narrator’ because ‘This reading is, I believe, consistent with human nature, modern neuroscience and cognitive psychology, and the realities of the time and place in which the work was written’ (183). Again, an old reading returns in a new vocabulary; the assumptions underlying the claim for the vocabulary’s rectitude are not investigated. The essay’s edicts pertaining to what ‘We’ do when ‘We’ read ‘a work of literature’ (nowhere interrogating any of this critical vulgate), culminates with the claim that, ‘Like *Don Quixote* or the Bible, *Lazarillo de Tormes* is a complex, polysemic, and ambiguous work that lends itself to a wide variety of

interpretations. All truly great works of literature are like that' (185). This, and other similar generalizations, do not do what its editors envisaged for the volume.

The most persuasive essay here is Marina Grishakova's 'Fiction as a Cognitive Challenge', which rebuts the allegation that applying cognitivism in criticism 'fosters reductionist approaches and supports a naively mimetic model of reading' (190), an allegation which, ironically, much of this volume unwittingly supports. Grishakova sets philosophical claims from cognitivism alongside their 'continental' counterparts; her theme is the alterity 'integral to self-constitution' (194), the multifaceted reflexivity undergirding the apprehension and articulation of the 'I' (and the translation from one to the other). Grishakova focalizes 'experimental' literature, because it is considered most starkly to acknowledge 'the gap between mimesis and representation, and between a preconceptual self-awareness and a conceptualized self' (202). Similarly, Joel Krueger illustrates an historical and theoretical consilience between phenomenology and cognitivism, via the Direct Perception approach to social cognition. Whereas the competing approach, the Theory of Mind, stipulates, in either of its subdivisions ('Theory Theory' and 'Simulation Theory'), a basically monadic conceptualization of each mind, Direct Perception argues that actions or practices frequently seen as manifestations of already realized mental processes, such as list-making or smiling, are instead evidence that the mind is 'hybrid', incipiently operative both intracranially and socially. This challenges the residual Cartesianism of Theory of Mind approaches, raising the same critique of the former as phenomenology does. Although Krueger's generalization of 'phenomenologists' is obfuscatory, his essay is successful, partly because it refrains from the didacticism elsewhere prevalent. Yet it ultimately resorts to the construal of literature as straightforwardly representational, which typifies the collection at large, despite Grishakova's objections.

The material here which takes seriously the shared philosophical concerns of cognitivism and (post-)phenomenology is stimulating; the many essays which simply try to advertise a new, cognitive framework for literary study are less so.

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