

Grzegorz Konecniak

Department of English,
Nicolaus Copernicus University
gregorex@umk.pl

The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies: An Exploration of Arguments

Abstract. In the review, I examine the *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, a volume edited by Lisa Zunshine (2015), from the perspective of selected arguments found in the essays.

Keywords: *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*; Zunshine, Lisa; argument; cognitive science; literary studies.

The title of the volume edited by Lisa Zunshine, the *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies* (2015), suggests a combination of cognitive science and literary research, in which the former, used in its adjectival form, reads as an approach, methodology or perspective applied to analysis and interpretation of literary works.

The volume does not contain a typically organised introduction in which each of the essays is summarised. Instead, Zunshine contributes “Introduction to Cognitive Literary Studies,” which gives the reader essential information on how the meaning of “cognitive literary studies” can or cannot be determined. Referring to various approaches to the term, Zunshine states that “[i]t is fitting then that the definition of cognitive literary studies should focus not on the boundaries, goals, or methods of the field but on its dynamic, relational nature” (Zunshine 2015: 1). “Openness and unpredictability” are two features which shape the manner in which cognitive literary studies are

developing (Zunshine 2015: 3). Zunshine mentions the experiment to which some of the authors were subject:

[s]everal contributors to this volume have had the experience of being asked [...] for just one key publication in cognitive approaches to literature and, along the same lines, for one publication in cognitive science that serves as a ‘master’ text for everyone doing cognitive approaches. (Zunshine 2015: 3)

As may be predicted, Zunshine immediately undermines the possibility of naming such titles: [t]o come up with a title or two in response to this question is to misrepresent the field” (Zunshine 2015: 3). To demonstrate her point, the editor refers to selected subjects addressed in the volume and the ontologically divergent fields which they represent, specifically in the second and fifth parts entitled “Emotions and Empathy” and “Cognitive Theory and Literary Experience” respectively (Zunshine 2015: vi, 3).

The massiveness of the volume may give the impression of its all-inclusive nature. However, Zunshine makes it clear that such a way of thinking is wrong. She quotes the words which feature in the introduction to another volume published within the series of *Oxford Handbooks* (the *Oxford Handbook of Social Neuroscience*, Introduction by John T. Cacioppo and Jean Decety 2001; note in Zunshine 2015: 7) and concludes that, “[l]ike other volumes in this series, this *Handbook* offers ‘a representative rather than exhaustive coverage of the field’” (Zunshine 2015: 4). She then gives example of the introductory and orientation treatment of “visual arts, theatre, film, and television” (Zunshine 2015: 4). The penultimate sentence in the introduction expresses the idea of “openness” even more cogently: “[i]t is the ambition of this volume that its readers will delve deeper into these [“interdisciplinary”] fields while looking for new points of intersection that reach beyond already established areas of inquiry” (Zunshine 2015: 4).

The first part is titled “Narrative, History, Imagination,” which does not imply any cognitive aspect. However, the titles of minor parts do, for example “Cognitive Historicism.” In the first article, Mary Thomas Crane realises the difficulty involved in “the attempt to meld cognitive science with historical and cultural studies” (Crane 2015: 15) and “would argue that a cognitive approach to texts is more problematic in practice than in theory, if by practice we mean a hermeneutic practice” (Crane 2015: 18). She expresses her awareness that “[w]ork on the nature of fiction and narrative has produced many compelling theoretical arguments about why and how we process fictional narratives” (Crane 2015: 18). Nevertheless, “examples

of compelling cognitive-historicist readings of texts are more difficult to come by, if by ‘reading’ we mean an extended interpretive engagement with a text rather than relatively brief examples produced to illustrate a theoretical point” (Crane 2015: 18). An argument of different nature is postulated by Ellen Spolsky: “[t]he argument here is that only an onslaught of similar works has a chance of breaking through cultural defenses that denigrate works of imagination as inert” (Spolsky 2015: 35). She demonstrates her point on the basis of 16th- and 17th-century English revenge tragedies (Spolsky 2015: 35). The section is concluded with the chapter by Natalia M. Phillips, who describes the process of an experiment: her text addresses

an interdisciplinary experiment in neuroscience that emerged alongside [her] historical research. [It] used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), a technology for acquiring brain images of neural activity, to explore the cognitive patterns that emerge when we read a literary work with different kinds of focus. (Phillips 2015: 56)

As regards the argument, it is conveyed in the “suggestion” that

the style and degree of focus we bring to a work of art [...] can radically change our engagement with it, not only at the level of subjective aesthetic experience, but at the level of cognition, expressed through unique patterns of neural activation. (Phillips 2015: 56)

The next section of the first part is called “Cognitive Narratology.” Peter J. Rabinowitz’s essay provides “two interlocking suggestions” (2015: 86): the first one is that “sequence” is not the only quality which makes narratives worth reading, and “favorite spots” are significant too; and the second one is that “there may be types of sequence that are not widely recognized—types of sequence that are, in fact, tied to those special spots” (Rabinowitz 2015: 86). The second point is linked to Rabinowitz’s argument: “as I argue at the end of my chapter, attention to favorite moments can reveal previously unrecognized alternative structures that exist in contestatory counterpoint with the more familiar structures we usually see in our favorite texts” (Rabinowitz 2015: 86). H. Porter Abbott opens his essay with quoting divergent opinions on the textual absences within stories, as expressed by Henry James and Lubomír Doležel. Then he comes up with his own argument: “[n]arrative gaps [...] open on a vast arena of virtual events that are never realized but rather exist like a kind of dark, weightless

energy, hidden under the words and images that actualize a story” (Abbott 2015: 104). James Phelan’s argument is that, notwithstanding the much “emphasised differences” between “rhetorical theorists and cognitive theorists,” “the two approaches can effectively collaborate,” as validated on the basis of “Recitatif” by Toni Morrison (Abbott 2015: 120). Alan Palmer’s argument is set in a different context. As he states,

[m]y purpose here is to adopt a cognitive and narratological perspective on some of the stories told in three country songs and a traditional ballad, paying particular attention to the minds of their narrators and what we learn of them from their very different forms of self-attribution of mental states. (Palmer 2015: 136)

The argument is rephrased at the beginning of the first part of his article, in which he refers back to his earlier book publications and the “theory for the study of the novel” found there: he seeks “to argue that the ideas contained in that theory are equally applicable to the narratives contained in country songs” (Palmer 2015: 137). Monika Fludernik addresses a different form of artistic and cultural expression. Her essay “explores the concept of blending in the visual medium of the cartoon and discusses whether and, if so, how humor is generated by the process of blending incongruous scenarios” (2015: 155). As far as the argument is concerned, Fludernik

argue[s] that although blending constitutively underwrites the semiosis in cartoons of types (those that are merely visual and those that also have textual elements), humor in cartoons relies more on the clash between, than on the overlap or blending of, incompatible frames or scenarios. (2015: 155)

Such argumentation is reiterated in the last paragraph of the article: “Cartoons, one can [...] argue, are a very happy hunting ground for an analysis of blending, humor, and narrative” (Fludernik 2015: 170). Chapter nine, the last one in the section, is contributed by Lisa Zunshine, who opens her discussion with a reference to her own personal experience of “a mental state within a mental state within a mental state—three nested mental states” (Zunshine 2015: 176). Then she moves on to the example of one of traditional Chinese novels, *The Story of the Stone* by Cao Xueqin, and expresses her argument: “I focus on *nested* mental states as units of meaning in fiction, including situations when these nested mental states are implied rather than described” (Zunshine 2015: 177; italics in the original; cf. 179).

Section three of Part II is called “Cognitive Queer Theory.” The argument of the first and the only article in the section, authored by J. Keith Vincent, is presented in the very first sentence: “I want to explore some ways in which the cognitive approach to literature may enter into a productive dialogue with queer theory” (Vincent 2015: 199). In other words, he “argue[s] that cognitive theory and queer theory share a concern with overcoming mind-body dualism and with the strict divide between self and other” (2015: 200).

The last section in Part I is given the title of “Neuroaesthetics,” and it opens with Alan Richardson’s text on “imagination” (2015: 225). The clearest statement of the argument is comprised in the concluding part of the essay:

[j]ust as the imagery debate within cognitive science has helped revive literary theoretical interest in the work of imaging performed by readers and guided by writers, and work in conceptual metaphor and blending has revitalized literary studies of metaphor, so neuroscientific investigation of the default mode network can now open up literary perspectives on an extensive, multifaceted, and functionally dynamic imagination system. (Richardson 2015: 239)

The concept of “imagery” is subject to discussion in the article by G. Gabrielle Starr, who

argue[s] that by exploring how imagery may function in aesthetic responses, we may learn how aesthetic experience more broadly—experience that reaches past (or altogether eschews) images in favor of, say, appreciation of epic form or the beauty of argument—may move us. (Starr 2015: 247)

Her more specific “argument” is “that aesthetic experience involves a special instance of a bidirectional state—one that blends internally and externally focused modes of cognition” (Starr 2015: 247).

Part II, as already stated, is titled “Emotions and Empathy” and its first section bears the name “Emotions in Literature, Film, and Theater.” The article by Patrick Colm Hogan begins with a reference to Semir Zeki’s ideas of the connections between neurobiology and literary studies:

[h]e refers what is represented in literature, along with the effects it has, and the activity of its production—in short, the complex of products and processes that comprise a work of literature. This complex, he maintains, tells us something directly about the nature

of cognition—prominently, perception and emotion. (in Hogan 2015: 273)

And Hogan’s essay “makes an extended argument for this point, specifically in connection with emotion” (Hogan 2015: 273). In the next article, written in the context of “cognitive cultural approach” (Plantinga 2015: 306), Carl Plantinga

argue[s] that studies of conventional uses and effects of faces in narrative film will be most fruitful when film and media studies incorporate what psychology, neuroscience, and other disciplines show about the role of the human face in social life. (Plantinga 2015: 293)

Plantinga’s chapter is followed by Noël Carroll’s essay titled “Theater and the Emotions,” in which the connection between the stage and emotional response is tracked across ages, and the overriding argument is “that if anything provides a general account of the way in which theater engages the emotions, it is not the notion of identification that will get the job done, but rather that of criterial prefocusing” (Carroll 2015: 324).

The next section, “Cognitive Postcolonial Studies,” opens with yet another contribution by Hogan, and his argument concerns the stance that “cognitive postcolonialism offers a critique of mainstream postcolonial theory, with its basis in psychoanalysis. Specifically, cognitive postcolonial theory stresses the embodied and situated nature of the human mind, as well as its constrained structures and processes” (Hogan 2015: 343). In the next article, authored by Suzanne Keen, a similar argument is expressed: “the literary cognitivism” implies “a potential relationship between human rights discourse and literary cognitivism as an alternative to postcolonial theory and discourse” (Keen 2015: 347).

In the “Decision Theory and Fiction” section, there is one essay only. William Flesch admits that his proposition is “a complex argument,” which involve “decision theory” and “evolutionary game theory” (Flesch 2015: 371). The section is followed by “Cognitive Disability Studies,” in which Ralph James Savarese’s essay addresses the question of the connection between “poetry and *autism*” (2015: 393). Within his argument, Savarese “explore[s] the neurocosmopolitan character of poetry, focusing in particular on how the art form purposefully calls attention to the sensuous materiality of its signifiers” (2015: 395). A further argument reads “that we conceive of poetry as a paradoxical language of illiteracy or autism—one disproportionately

engaging the sensing body,” and such thinking stems from the treatment of “poets,” “young children,” and “preliterate people” by Julie Kane, who finds a similarity in “the role of the nondominant right hemisphere in the production of poetic language” (Savarese 2015: 400). Savarese argues that the “group” should also include “autistics” (Savarese 2015: 400).

The next section is “Moral Emotions,” and is opened by Margrethe Bruun Vaage’s chapter, in which one can find the following argument:

[i]n relation to fiction, we seem to accept that the main character is a murderer—but not a rapist. Focusing on the attitude of moral disgust towards the rapist, I suggest there is an asymmetry between fiction and real life in this issue. (Vaage 2015: 421)

The author continues that “[r]ape is typically used to mark a character as clearly villainous in fiction—and more villainous than a murderer—while legally, in real life, rape is not in the same way clearly marked as being worse than murder” (Vaage 2015: 421). The justification that Vaage gives is that “that the explanation for this asymmetry between fiction and real-life morality is that we rely more heavily on moral emotions when engaging in fiction, and that rape is emotionally disturbing in a way that murder need not be” (Vaage 2015: 421). The chapter is followed by Fritz Breithaupt’s contribution on “emphatic sadism,” as the main part of the title reads (2015: 440). The author is aware of some “paradoxical” implication behind the argument: “because readers empathize with a character who is suffering, they can feel good themselves” (Breithaupt 2015: 440). He argues “that the paradoxical emotions involved in empathic sadism are not rare for readers of literary texts, and are moreover a key motivation for reading many literary texts, including certain canonical ones” (2015: 441).

Part III, “The New Unconscious,” is not divided into sections. In the first essay, Blakey Vermeule’s argument is related to “some tentative steps towards opening up the new unconscious to literary study” (2015: 466). The article is followed by Jeff Smith’s treatment of “filmmakers as folk psychologists,” which is stated in the first part of the title. On the basis of an episode from the series *Boardwalk Empire*, Smith argues that “filmmakers sometimes act as folk psychologists, anticipating the kinds of responses that viewers are likely to have to their work” (2015: 484). He then adds that “Filmmakers design their products to produce particular kinds of cognitive and emotional responses from spectators, and in doing so, they assume that audiences will employ certain types of inferential routines when they engage with the film’s characters and situation” (Smith 2015: 484).

Part IV is titled “Empirical and Qualitative Studies of Literature” and, similar to Part III, does not have separate sections. It opens with the chapter by Laura Otis, in which the argument is linked to the “larger, qualitative study examining how people’s conscious experiences of thought vary” (Otis 2015: 506). Otis continues that “[o]ne aim of this project has been to learn how people differ in the visual mental images they form in response to spoken and written words” (2015: 506). And in the conclusion she states that “[r]egardless of readers’ cognitive styles, all reading experiences depend on the language of literary texts” (Otis 2015: 519). The next contribution is a collaborative effort by Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon. Their argument is thus stated: “Although we are willing to grant that the transport metaphor captures important aspects of a prototypical reading experience, we conclude that the metaphor by itself is insufficiently precise to serve as a basis for theoretical advances” (2015: 525–526). As restated in the conclusion, they “argue that it is much more appropriate to consider each of the features that might be attributed to the prototypical transport experience and consider when and why that feature occurs” (Bortolussi and Dixon 2015: 537). The same authors contributed the consecutive chapter, in which the thematic scope of research and the argument postulated are different. As presented at the very beginning,

[their] premise in this chapter is a simple, well-established fact: What the mind does varies over time. Because reading is a complex activity, this means that any account of literary reading must consider how the multiple components of comprehension and interpretation dynamically interact over the course of a text. (Bortolussi and Dixon 2015: 541)

The concluding part, “Cognitive Theory and Literary Experience” opens with Joshua Landy’s chapter “Mental Calisthenics and Self-Reflexive Fiction,” in which the author argues that selected “works of fiction” (Landy 2015: 559)

have a very specific intention: namely, to give us the opportunity to flex a vital mental muscle. By periodically interrupting the action to remind us that what we are seeing is not real, they are deliberately giving us practice in stepping back from our own beliefs. (Landy 2015: 560)

The next chapter, by Elaine Auyoung, the argument concerns the role of “cognitive approach to the reality effect” in “changing the way we

think about the work that novelistic details perform” and “complicat[ing] our fundamental conception of literary experience” (Auyoung 2015: 589). The penultimate chapter is authored by Mark J. Bruhn and it considers “time as space in the structure of (literary) experience” on the basis of *Prelude* by William Wordsworth, as the title reads (Bruhn 2015: 593; cf. 606–607). The last chapter, “Thick Context: Novelty in Cognition in Literature,” was contributed by Nancy Easterlin, whose aim is to “demonstrate how cultural and biopsychological factors together constitute lasting features of literary originality” (2015: 613), and whose argument is that “cognitive-evolutionary explanation in combination with cultural understanding establishes a thick context, so to speak, for the analysis of cultural phenomena” (Easterlin 2015: 613).

Zunshine’s volume is almost 700 pages long and it is particularly praiseworthy because of the variety of arguments explored in the 30 essays: on the one hand, and in accordance with Zunshine’s point expressed in the introduction, they are centripetal in terms of the directions in which they evolve; on the other hand, they are linked through multiple references to the authors’ texts, and both inside and outside the volume. Such referential and collaborative practices are also visible on the “Acknowledgements” page, which indicates that the selection of authors is not haphazard. The “editor has had many occasions to appreciate the creativity and patience of its contributors” (Zunshine 2015: ix), which implies that the volume is not a compilation of unrelated articles sent as a result of general call-for-papers policy. The authors could cooperate with each other on account of “the website that enabled the authors to read each other’s drafts” (2015: ix). The volume should thus be treated as a thematically concise and coherent monograph whose authors could genuinely participate in the development of the book. And such authentic and synchronic participation is visible in the way in which the authors refer to each other’s texts (see, for example, Crane 2015: 15; Rabinowitz 2015: 86; Abbott 2015: 111; Vincent 2015: 215) and in the separate acknowledgments placed at the end of most of the chapters.

The research background and experience of the contributors should also be commented on. Information on the authors (2015: xi–xv) precedes the introduction. Most of the contributors are academic scholars who represent universities in the United States. Yet, there are also authors affiliated with British, Canadian, German, French, and Israeli teaching and research centres. In most cases they are Professors of English, of other languages, and of literatures. Alan Palmer is an exception, as he “is an independent scholar living in Weardale, County Durham” (2015: xiii). Some of the authors are described as combining cognitive science and literature in their research:

Elaine Auyoung (the University of Minnesota), Marisa Bortolussi (the University of Alberta), Nancy Easterlin (the University of New Orleans), Patrick Colm Hogan (the University of Connecticut), Suzanne Keen (Washington and Lee University), Natalie M. Phillips (Michigan State University), Alan Richardson (Boston College), and Ellen Spolsky (Bar-Ilan University, Israel) (2015: xi–xv). Thus the edited *Handbook* is not their first encounter with the possibility of applying cognitive science within literary research, and the reader can expect valid interpretations, supported by frequent references to previous texts and research. As regards the editor, in her biographical note, her book titled *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* is enumerated (2015: xv), which proves that her research extends beyond cognitive literary studies and moves into cognitive discussions of other artefacts of culture. The list of contributors also includes experts in philosophy and psychology, the fields linked to cognitive science, and popular culture. Such eclectic academic backgrounds demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of cognitive research and its plentiful possibilities for literary studies, as demonstrated in the arguments explored and as postulated by Zunshine in the introduction to the *Handbook*.

Reference

Zunshine, L. (Ed.) (2015). *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.