

CONCLUSION

Abstract To conclude this plea for putting emotions back into literary interpretation, Vernay hopes that research will open new pathways to literary analysis, to which Anglo-Saxon cognitive criticism is already contributing. The French Ministry of Education has produced new curriculum outlines, acknowledging the role of the emotions. Despite an equal focus on cognition and emotions, one can point to the paradox of criticizing too-scientific literary theories while drawing on scientific advances. Yet the psycholiterary approach has the goal of shining new light on literature, especially the novel. In summary, this approach will value the unconscious, acknowledge the subjectivity of literary interpretation, examine aesthetic pleasure, and draw parallels with operational concepts of the psyche, seeking to determine the impact of the effects on both writer and reader.

Keywords Literary interpretation, Emotions, Cognitive criticism, Curriculum, Psycholiterary approach, Aesthetic pleasure

Like philosophy and the humanities, literature is thought and knowledge of the social and psychic worlds in which we live. The reality that literature tries to comprehend is quite simply (but at the same time, nothing is more complex) human experience.

—Tzvetan Todorov

Concluding his book on the history of ideas, *Theory after theory* (2010), Nicholas Birns invites us to realize how important it is to offer fresh perspectives on the literary tradition, and in the same breath, he heralds the swan song of the age of theory. I hope to be more optimistic in wagering that French or international research will open up new pathways to literary analysis. Anglo-Saxon cognitive criticism contributes to this new impetus, having soared at the start of the twenty-first century with publications valuing the contribution of the emotions.¹ With this group of theorists, which include Sianne Ngai, Jane Thrailkill, Lisa Zunshine, Suzanne Keen, Patricia Ticineto Clough, and Jean O'Malley Halley, one could almost believe that only women are showing an interest in emotions!

Meanwhile, the French Ministry of Education, not to be left behind, finally acknowledged the impact of *pathos*, following its earlier endorsements of the technical complexity that underlies the art of fiction, and the singularity that constitutes the literary work. The latest benchmark statements defining the new curricula in French senior high schools from 30 September 2010 fully agreed with this development. Advocating a heightened sense of aesthetic awareness, the new benchmark statement does not disregard the crucial role of the emotions: "When dealing with the fictional world, one must not forget that the discovery of meaning occurs not only through the methodical analysis of the different identifiable aspects of the story (narrative and descriptive techniques in particular) but also by way of a personal relation to the text in which a reader's experience of emotion, pleasure or admiration plays a crucial role."

I would say it is all the more logical to focus equally on cognition and emotions since language and rhetoric, which constitute the core of the literary material, are able to convey either thoughts or feelings, if not both simultaneously. But if emotions are unique to each individual, can they be shared or passed on in the same way as knowledge? In other words, if a teacher enjoys reading the novels of, say, Henry James, is she nevertheless going to be able to share her love for a particular book? Nothing is less certain. The most that will happen is that the teacher's enthusiasm and personal style will ensure that the students enjoy the subject.

There is perhaps something paradoxical or ironic in, on the one hand, exposing the scientificity of certain literary theories and, on the other, in urging professional readers to take scientific advances into account in order to conceive new critical approaches. But the recognition of the plasticity and subjectivity of literary interpretation should act as an effective

safeguard against treating literature as a science. Because to include science does not mean to mimic science. We must with good reason put an end to this literary culture in which literary erudition obscures feelings and the pleasure of reading. With psycholiterary analysis, I hope to be able to shine new light on the literary sphere as well as on the poetics of the novel.

To conclude this plea for a renewal of emotion in literature, I propose to summarize the defining features of psycholiterary analysis which, I hope, will win over a large audience. This approach—which aims at reconciling the professional reader with the non-professional, literature with the sciences, reason with emotions—will fulfill the following: It will value the notion of the unconscious, acknowledge the plasticity and subjectivity of literary interpretation, and examine aesthetic pleasure and the myth-making function of fiction (taking into account the roles played by the neocortex, the imagination, and cognitive processes); it will draw parallels with certain models and operational concepts of the psyche, and try to determine the impact of the affects (from the limbic system) in the inner workings of the creator (writer/reader) while making a clear distinction between the representation and the stirring of affects (i.e., emotional description versus emotional involvement); it will then merge the philosophical approach with scientific advances about our brain capacity, all this in order to understand the dynamics of the mind at the heart of writing which coalesces in a mirror-like desire—that of the writer reflecting that of the reader.

NOTE

1. See S. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); S. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); P. Clough & J. Halley, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); J. Thraillkill, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); L. Zunshine, *Strange Concepts and the Stories They Make Possible: Cognition, Culture, Narrative* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), among others.

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