

COGNITION IN THE GLOBE

Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance

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Cognition in the Globe

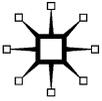
Evelyn B. Tribble

Cognition in the Globe

Attention and Memory in Shakespeare's Theatre

Evelyn B. Tribble

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To Timothy Ruggles Mixter and Emelia Hillis Mixter

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Series Editors' Preface

Noam Chomsky started a revolution in human self-understanding and reshaped the intellectual landscape to this day by showing how all languages have deep features in common. Gone or at least retreating is the idea that the mind is a blank slate. In its wake, fierce debates have broken out about what the mind is and how it works. At stake are some of the most urgent questions facing researchers today: questions about the relationship between brain, mind, and culture; about how human universals express themselves in individual minds and lives; about reason, consciousness, and the emotion; about where cultures get their values and how those values fit our underlying predispositions.

It is no secret that most humanists have held fast to the idea that the mind is a blank slate. Not only has this metaphor been an article of intellectual faith, it has also underwritten a passionate moral agenda. If human beings have no inherent qualities, our political and social systems are contingent rather than fixed. Intellectuals might be able to play an important role in exposing the byways of power and bringing about a fairer world. But evidence is rapidly piling up that humans are born with an elaborate cognitive architecture. The number of our innate qualities is staggering; human cognition is heavily constrained by genes and by our evolutionary past. It is now known that we are born with several core concepts and a capacity for developing a much larger number of cognitive capabilities under ecological pressure.

Beyond that bold headline, however, the story gets murkier. Each of the mind sciences is filled with dissonant debates of

their own. In her magisterial investigation into the origin of concepts, Susan Carey writes that her goal "is to demonstrate that the disciplines of cognitive science now have the empirical and theoretical tools to turn age-old philosophical dilemmas into relatively straightforward problems."¹ Notice her sense of being on the verge rather than on some well-marked path. The terrain ahead is still unmapped. But notice, too, her sense that scientific methods will eventually transform fuzzy questions into testable ones.

How brave, then, are language and performance scholars who, driven by their passion to understand how the mind works, seek to explore this new terrain? Brave, but increasingly in good company. The Modern Language Association discussion group on cognitive approaches to literature has grown exponentially in the last decade.² And the working session in cognition and performance at the American Society for Theatre Research is flourishing. Many scholars are fascinated by what cognitive approaches might have to say about the arts. They recognize that this orientation to literature and performance promises more than just another "ism." Unlike the theories of the last century, the mind sciences offer no central authority, no revered group of texts that disclose a pathway to the authorized truth. Indeed, cognitive approaches to the arts barely fit under one broad tent. Language-processing, reader and spectator-response, pragmatics, embodiment, conceptual blending, discourse analysis, empathy, performativity, and narrative theory, not to mention the energetic field of literary Darwinism, are all fields with lively cognitive debates.

Cognitive approaches are unified by two ideas. The first is that to understand the arts we need to understand psychology. Humanists have uncontroversially embraced this idea for decades, as their ongoing fascination with the now largely discredited theory of psychoanalysis suggests. Now that psychology has undergone its empiricist revolution, literary and performance scholars should rejoice in the fact that our psychological claims are on firmer footing. Second is the idea that scholarship in this field should be generally empirical, falsifiable, and open to correction by new evidence and better

theories—as are the sciences themselves. Of course this epistemological admission means that many of the truth claims of the books in our series will eventually be destabilized and perhaps proven false. But this is as it should be. As we broaden our understanding of cognition and the arts, better science should produce more rigorous ideas and insights about literature and performance. In this spirit, we celebrate the earlier books in our series that have cut a path for our emerging field and look forward to new explorations in the future.

BLAKEY VERMEULE AND BRUCE MCCONACHIE

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