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Cognitive Poetics and Ancient Texts

The problems facing us in the study of antiquity are manifold. For a start, our written sources are often preserved in languages that are no longer in use, such as classical Greek, Latin or Coptic. Furthermore, the societies that produced them differed significantly from our own and are far removed from us in time. This causes all manner of interpretive problems, for it means that a significant number of the concepts and categories that are referred to or simply presupposed by the ancient authors, are foreign to us. In addition, like modern literature, ancient literary sources are often highly allusive, and frequently directed to an audience of insiders – people in the know who would be able to understand both subtle and not-so-subtle references to, e.g. the literature, politics and religious life of the day. While the intended recipients' knowledge of these matters was taken for granted, such references are often far from obvious for us as modern readers. For in relation to us, *all* ancient texts may in a sense be regarded as directed to an audience of insiders. Moreover, the lack of contextual information, such as a certain date and provenance for the texts, often contributes to making the task of interpretation even more difficult.

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Since we do not have access to the heads of the ancient authors or readers, and have at best only limited access to the ancient context(s), we need of analytical tools to help us map out, and become aware of, the various interpretive possibilities of the ancient texts. We also need them to help us outline potential patterns of interpretation, taking into account the presence of various hypothetical allusions and references, both subtle and not so subtle, in our delineation of the meaning potential of the ancient sources.

A cognitive turn

While the study of ancient texts may seem far removed from modern-day theories of mind, the former enterprise may in fact benefit substantially from insights gained within the latter field of study. Although the ancient societies and the sources we have at our disposal are indeed far removed from our own day, these ancient societies were populated with people possessing, from a biological and evolutionary point of view, essentially the same brains and bodies as we do. A new approach to tackling the above-mentioned problems is thus to take into account recent theories of the workings of the human mind in categorization, conceptualization, creativity, and even emotion – in thinking and feeling – developed within the cognitive sciences – disciplines that deal with human and artificial

minds, focusing especially on the conscious and unconscious representation, organization and use of knowledge. This brings us to *cognitive poetics*, a term that covers all applications of the cognitive sciences to the study of literature. This is a relatively new, but rapidly expanding, interdisciplinary and multi-methodological field of study that has its main roots in linguistics, psychology and literary theory, and draws broadly on research within the cognitive sciences (see Stockwell 2002; Gavins and Steen 2003; Kövecses 2006, 5). It thereby constitutes an attempt to ground the study of literature in the study of human cognition (cf. Turner 1991, viii).

Construction of meaning

It is a major presupposition of cognitive poetics that meaning is not something that resides *in* a text, but is rather something that is constructed by the recipient in his or her encounter with the text. From this perspective, meaning is not a property of words, sentences, or texts, or of their relation to some kind of objectively defined state of affairs, or truth conditions, but rather something that "arises from a dynamic process of meaning construction" (Evans and Green 2006, 396). "Expressions do not mean; they are prompts for us to construct meanings by working with processes we already know", as Mark Turner puts it (Turner 1991, 206). This also implies that words, sentences, and texts cannot meaningfully be analyzed apart from discourse context, nor can semantic meaning meaningfully be separated from pragmatic meaning. Words, sentences and texts certainly guide the production of meaning, but they do not determine it (cf. Fauconnier 1994, xxii–xxiii; Turner 1991, 206). The process of making sense of a text, then, is not to be regarded as a matter of *decoding* meaning that is *inherent in* the text, but rather as a process of *constructing* meaning *on the basis of* it. Now, how can such mental processes of meaning construction be modelled to help us analyze texts?

Mental spaces and blending

One of the most promising recent developments in the cognitive study of literature is constituted by the emergence of Blending Theory. This theory deals with how the selective combination of two or more mental spaces create new mental 'blended spaces' that also contain new elements not derived from any one of the contributing input spaces, but which emerge from the combination itself (see Turner 2002, 10; the most comprehensive formulation of Blending Theory is found in Fauconnier and Turner 2002, but see also esp. Fauconnier and Turner 1998; Coulson and Oakley 2000; Grady 2000; Kövecses 2002, 227–238; Kövecses 2006, 271–293; Evans and Green 2006, 400–444). We may use the framework of Blending Theory to model any kind of interpretation, including the interpretation of texts, ancient and modern alike. From this point of view, interpretation is understood as a process of meaning production involving the construction and combination of mental spaces cued in the experience of reading and structured by context, understood in a broad sense, and the reader's prior knowledge and memories.

The 'mental spaces' referred to here can be described as 'small conceptual packets' that are continually being constructed mentally while thinking, "for purposes of local understanding and action" (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 137; Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 40, 102). Since the composition of mental spaces is fundamentally tied to the process

of memory recall, important insights of memory research should be taken into account, not least the realization of the fundamentally interpretive of *any* memory recall. The recall of memories is not analogous to simply taking an object out of a container or playing back a video clip, but involves rather the construction of mental representations that are "attempts at replication of patterns that were once experienced" (Damasio 1994, 100–101; cf. also Schacter 1996). It is not only the process of blending itself, then, that has a constructive and interpretive quality to it, but also the very process of calling up and assembling the basic mental spaces that are the constitutive parts of that process. This recall and construction of memories is also crucially dependent on the way in which the recalled memory fragments have been encoded in the first place (see, e.g., Schacter 1996), and on mechanisms such as 'priming,' which may be described as the process by which the activation of one memory partially, and often unconsciously, activates – primes – related memories for easier subsequent recall (Snyder 2000, 262; on priming, see also Hogan 2003; Tulving and Schacter 1990; Knowlton 1997, 222–228). This helps us understand the way in which mental spaces are constructed and called up to the blending processes taking place in working memory and not least the function of context and memory encoding in this regard.

These theories provide us with general models for the description and analysis of "interconnections between parts of complex conceptual structures" (Sweetser 1999, 134–135), and the creative production of new and complex structures of meaning on the basis of simple constituents in processes that follow a limited number of general principles. Cognitive poetics, then, provides us with tools that enable us to "describe the systems that allow specific examples of human representational complexity and creativity to emerge" (Spolsky 2004, ix–x).

Conclusion

If we want to get to grips with, say, how the idea of bodily resurrection was understood by various individuals and groups in Christian antiquity, we need to have some ideas as to the categories and concepts that are operative in the literary sources they produced. Using methods based on current theories of how the human mind works in categorizing and conceptualizing the world, and in producing meaning on the basis of literary texts, may help us in two distinct ways. It may help us understand how we, as modern readers, make sense of, i.e. produce meaning on the basis of, the ancient texts, and thus to be aware of what goes into our own understanding of the material aspects of terms of our own categories and concepts, and those we attribute, consciously or unconsciously, to the ancient authors. Secondly, it may help make us aware of additional interpretive possibilities – interpretive possibilities that may have been intuitively apparent to the intended ancient readers, but which are obscure to modern scholars.

An awareness of how the mind works in creating, making connections between, and blending mental spaces should help us in analyzing the various possibilities of meaning construction available also in antiquity. While it should make us painfully aware of the impossibility of gaining any kind of firm knowledge concerning the interpretation of ancient readers, not to mention the intentions of the ancient authors, the application of the above outlined analytical tools may help us map out various

possible readings of the ancient texts and to discover possible webs of meaning that are not immediately available to us as modern readers. Using Blending Theory, for instance, we can more easily experiment with different readings by adding and subtracting different input spaces, frames and cognitive models to try out various hypothetical interpretive possibilities.

The use of cognitive poetics in the analysis of ancient texts does not solve our interpretive problems, but it does furnish us with theoretical frameworks that should heighten our awareness of the problems while helping us cope with them in a systematic and methodologically sound manner, grounded in multi-disciplinary research on human cognition.

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