MINDFUL AESTHETICS EDITED BY CHRIS DANTA AND HELEN GROTH

Mindful Aesthetics: Literature and the Science of Mind, Chris Danta and Helen Groth (eds). London: Bloomsbury, 2014. £34.54. ISBN: 9781441181916.

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This collection of essays addresses what its editors describe as 'the ongoing and vital importance of shifting concepts of mind to both literary and critical practice' (2), and aims to contribute 'to the forging of a "new interdisciplinarity" […] that is more concerned with addressing how, rather than why, we should navigate the increasingly narrow gap between the humanities and the sciences' (2). It is divided into three parts – 'Theoria', 'Minds in History' and 'Contemporary Literary Minds' – and focuses on a range of predominantly Anglophone texts, though Diderot is also considered in the 'History' section, and a range of continental theorists underpin some of the 'Theoria' chapters. This smorgasbord of topics and approaches is aptly termed 'eclectic' (207) by Paul Giles in his Afterword and has all the advantages and disadvantages that such conference-originated eclecticism normally draws. Looked at positively, we get a representatively varied sampling of approaches to a varied and mobile topic. Looked at more negatively, the juxtapositions throw up potential clashes and contrasts that remain frustratingly unrealised, separated though they are by only a handful of pages. I sometimes found myself wondering whether individual essays would have been better off accompanied by others closer to themselves, either in approach or subject matter. That such a disparate set of alternative collections can be envisaged at all testifies to the multitudinous ways in which cognitive neuroscience mixes with literary practice – to the extent that one also wonders whether the editors' stated intention to help in 'the forging of a "new interdisciplinarity"' (20) isn't doomed to be Quixotic, part of a potentially endless multiplying of 'multiple variations on […] potentially transformative possibilities.'

However, on its own terms, as an attempt to be 'reflective and speculative', the volume certainly succeeds and will be necessary reading for anyone interested in the rapidly shifting terrain that is literary criticism's meeting with cognitive neuroscience. The first essay in the 'Theoria' section sees Brian Boyd replaying many of the promises and problems familiar to readers of his seminal *On the Origin of Stories* (2009). Boyd's readings of Nabokov aim to 'show just how much psychological work the play of fiction can involve, or how much Nabokov's swift shifts *make* it involve' (19). This he does with some success, especially when his readings are at their most traditional: as when a short passage from *Ada* is compared with Tolstoy. But it is unclear how the accounts Boyd then gives of the cognitive mechanics underpinning these passages add either to his readings of them or to our understanding of those mechanics. The two sit side by side but do not seem to need each other, and do not seem to be much altered by being in each other's presence. While a knowledge of how a reading of a particular episode 'fits with neuroscience's recent understanding of brain plasticity' (25) might offer a minor empirical validation of that reading, it does not actually add to our understanding of either the science or the text – and even that validation depends on our first finding Boyd's literary reading effective, i.e. on our readerly activity and not on the scientific underpinning.

What can seem like the superfluity or banality of cognitive science's contribution to the actual reading of literature remains perhaps the most glaringly obvious problem with the 'cognitive turn' in literary studies, and it glimmers into view in a couple of other articles in this collection, for all their individual strengths. For instance, John Sutton and Evelyn B.

Tribble's jointly-authored reading of a novel about the 1905 New Zealand rugby team's tour of Britain is intriguing in its description of how little we know about so powerful and observable a human behaviour as expert action in groups, though doesn't entirely escape the problem it itself identifies of 'simply […] apply[ing] research in the cognitive sciences to a literary text' (156). The novel supplies a body of examples with which to think about the topic; but it is not clear why this body couldn't have been provided by a set of interviews, say, or a newspaper article, or the authors' unaided speculation, which we sense as having been already there, informed by that scientific research. The novel's literariness – whatever *that* is – remains incidental.

The problem takes another guise in Hannah Courtney's attentive reading of Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. While she provides an effective analysis of McEwan's writing of what she calls 'the slow scene' (185), it is unclear why there should be a *necessary* connection between McEwan's interest in cognitive science and this means of 'getting more thoroughly into his characters' heads in their traumatic moments' (186), even if McEwan would claim there was one; any more than the 'thought exploration found within the novels of Austen, James and Flaubert' (180), which Courtney reads as different for not occurring 'in the *moving, timed* moment' (180), required their authors to be interested in a different branch of cognitive research. As Courtney notes, the experience of things happening in a kind of slow motion is widely and 'anecdotally accepted' (179), and one can easily imagine both reader and writer needing nothing more than that Thus, while the literary work might illustrate aspects of cognitive research (and speculation), the two lose very little from being separated from each other. In a later essay by Julian Murphet the nature of the literary causes problems in a slightly different fashion, as the novel becomes something of a straw man in relation to the cognitive potential of film, in what is an otherwise rich account of cinema's relationship to the "lived brain" (195). But Murphet's account of the 'scandal' of the 'residually humanist' novel's inability to speak to our 'innermost multiplicity' (192) relies on too limited a conception both of literary narrative form, and of how a single consciousness might be – has been – represented across it, from Bunyan to Borges and beyond.

Accompanying Boyd in the 'Theoria' section is Claire Colebrook, who explores the split between aesthetics as 'a way of thinking about a specifically subjective capacity for *form*' and thus 'distant from the world' (30), as it was for Kant, and more recent scientifically inspired approaches which indicate 'our emergence from the world' (30). Colebrook proposes an aesthetics 'at odds with mindfulness or the commitment to the dynamic interconnectedness of the world and life' (33), one that would reassert a separation between thinking and the world. This is followed by a short essay from Paul Sheehan arguing that the 'tensions' between Cognitive Literary Studies and theory 'are too deeply embedded, and too unyielding, for there to be any *rapprochement'* between them (49); and that 'a "cognitive-based poststructuralism" *in its current form* is inherently unworkable' (52). The willingness of the volume to place 'cognitive turn' sceptics alongside enthusiasts is a welcome one, and in this sense the collection makes a useful companion to Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie's *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology* (2011), which juxtaposes proponents and sceptics of neuropsychological approaches to similarly good effect.

The final essay in the 'Theoria' section displays another of the volume's strengths, its detailed engagements with individual authors, as Anthony Uhlmann explores how Coetzee's work underlines 'how the kind of thinking in novels cannot be reduced to human consciousness […] how novels make use of relations that include but go beyond metaphorical relations […] and finally, how the kinds of relations represented in fiction are concerned with questions of meaning and the generation of feeling and meaning rather than

with real action' (63-4). However, I'm not sure what it says about the current value of cognitive science's cohabitation with literary studies, that I can imagine Uhlmann's work packing more of a punch in a collection oriented solely around Coetzee's work, regardless of whether all the essays were cognitively informed or not. Similar strengths of particularity can be found in Stephen Muecke's exploration later in the volume of how a literary work such as a Seamus Heaney poem 'does not exist *primarily* in relation to human subjectivities (phenomenology), nor *primarily* in relation to objects (materialism)' (169) but in a 'complex ecology' with both. However, it would be fascinating to see how Muecke's claim about what separates a poem from a critical text – its 'reproducible generic form […] conjoin[ing] language to being to create an event' (169) – would fare when faced by one of Heidegger's readings of Hölderlin, to name just one of the thinkers who cropped up in the book's first section. This is an intriguing topic that deserves more exploration. What does cognitive science have to say about the genre(s) of writing we call criticism, writing that battens on to another writing whose power and appeal are more traditionally self-evident (whatever the reasons for it)? What is it, cognitively, to read a reading?

Other detailed engagements with individual authors feature in the second part of the collection, in essays not yet mentioned: in Charles T. Wolfe's excellent tracing of materialist accounts of the brain in relation to the works of Diderot; in Penelope Hone's comparison of George Eliot and James Sully's psychological '"metaphorics of noise"; in Helen Groth's investigation of Sully's work on dreaming with relation to his work on aesthetics; and Mark Steven on William Carlos Williams's poetry's disjunctive but mutually transfiguring relationship with the 'axiomatics of science' (126). As Paul Giles notes in his afterword, at their best such historicist accounts remind us of how crises in the relationship between science and literary practice and theory are not unique but part of a history that 'loops and spirals', part of a 'perennial struggle' (211); though one could speculate that as our body of neuroscientific knowledge expands, so the prospect of jumping forward to a different loop than that which preoccupied the late nineteenth century, say, becomes conceivable.

Finally, a brief note on one curious feature of this volume: the way lines of poetry have been centred throughout, rather than aligned left. A minor production error or some sophisticated textual-cognitive test whose import I've yet to make out? Let each reader decide for themselves.