Cognitive Approaches to Early Modern Spanish Literature

COGNITION AND POETICS

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Cognitive Approaches to Early Modern Spanish Literature

Isabel Jaén and Julien Jacques Simon

COGNITIVE APPROACHES TO EARLY MODERN SPANISH LITERATURE

Edited by Isabel Jaén and Julien Jacques Simon

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2016

First Edition published in 2016

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[Insert Cataloguing Data]

978-0-19-025655-5

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed by Sheridan Books, USA

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Introduction

ISABEL JAÉN AND JULIEN J. SIMON

We are in the midst of an exciting moment in cognitive literary studies, a moment of consolidation and growth. It is also a moment of contemplation, of turning our eyes to our current state and the steps that led us here. We have come a long way since literary critics began in the late 1980s to look for new ways of exploring fiction in relation to the mind. These pioneering cognitive literary scholars¹ paved the way for our current understanding of verbal art as created and received by embodied minds in their physical-social environment. The acknowledgment that literature is as much a biological as a cultural phenomenon led to a willingness to engage with a variety of fields beyond literary criticism, such as psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, among others. In reaching out, cognitive literary scholars found that researchers in some of those disciplines were also beginning to show a strong interest in their work² and increasingly understood the importance of storytelling as a resource for their own fields.³ This was the beginning

1. Groundbreaking studies in cognitive approaches to literature included Mark Turner's *Death Is the Mother of Beauty* (1987) and Norman Holland's *The Brain of Robert Frost* (1988). See also, among others, Reuven Tsur's *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (1992), Ellen Spolsky's *Gaps in Nature* (1993), Ellen Esrock's *The Reader's Eye* (1994), and Mark Turner's *The Literary Mind* (1996). Howard Mancing's landmark graduate seminar on Cognition and Literary Theory at Purdue University was created in 1994. The MLA Discussion group on Cognitive Approaches to Literature was founded in 1998 (it reached the status of Division in 2011 with almost 2,000 members).

2. This interest of scholars outside of literary criticism was evidenced at the first major cognitive literary studies conference held at the University of Connecticut, Storrs in 2006.

3. On how literature can inform the cognitive sciences, see Gerrig, Mishara; and Ródenas and Valenzuela (in this volume), among others.

of an integrative and dialogic effort that was not exempt from challenges. Limited by the institutional separation of disciplines within the sciences and the humanities, researchers would often become discouraged at what seemed to be an epistemological tower of Babel. Lost in the translation of diverse methods, philosophies, and ways of knowledge making, they would become frustrated with one another. Scientists would denounce the lack of empirical rigor of humanists, while humanists would lament the inability of scientists to deal with cultural complexity. Permeating these complaints was the unjustified and prevalent assumption that the sciences were a superior entity or some sort of knight-errant, armed with empiricism, coming to the rescue of the humanities in distress. This is a belief that, sadly, still biases the public view of cultural and literary studies, whose role and contribution are often misconstrued and underestimated in this era of STEM hegemony.

Although there are certainly significant differences in how the humanities and the sciences think about the world, these differences can and should be maintained, negotiated, and incorporated into an inclusive convergent approach to human biology and culture, a consilience approach. The notion of consilience has often borne the stigma of science dominance.⁴ However, striving for consilience in cognitive literary studies does not imply—and should not be understood and practiced in this manner—the subjugation of the humanities to the sciences and its “exact and infallible” empirical methods. In fact, the cognitive approach does not depend on importing ideas and methodologies in a unidirectional fashion but on sharing and co-constructing knowledge; it is a multidirectional endeavor.⁵ Thus, a consilience, integrative, or convergent approach (whichever term one prefers to name these efforts towards inclusiveness), as it should be viewed and practiced, is premised on multidisciplinary dialogue and collaboration among researchers. Regardless of the particular discipline in which we are rooted, we all have much to gain from exchanging ideas and methods as we contribute to widening our understanding of the relationship between literature and cognition. As we have written elsewhere, in the multidisciplinary environment promoted and inhabited by cognitive literary studies, consilience “implies cooperation among disciplines. Rather than conceiving our particular fields as isolated tiles that constitute a local pattern, we

4. For a recent discussion on the relationship between the sciences and the humanities and the way in which the notion of consilience has been associated with science dominance, see Zunshine.

5. On how cognitive literary studies engage other disciplines, see Jaén and Simon; Bernaerts et al.; Herman; Shaughnessy; Bruhn; Danta and Groth; Johnson, Sutton, and Tribble; and Zunshine, among others.

must consider their role in the whole epistemological mosaic” (Jaén and Simon 3). It is important to note that a mosaic is not a puzzle; it is not a problem that needs to be solved, nor a static pattern whose pieces must fit neatly together to eventually show us the face of human nature. Rather, this mosaic resembles a heterogeneous and dynamic landscape, a system, or even an organism—to focus on a sense of the term that is relevant for us here—formed by a community of disciplines, in which both centrifugal and centripetal forces operate. It is decentralized by its diversity and held together by the common interests among the many fields that integrate it, interests that gravitate around a central objective: making sense of our human selves and our environments. The diversity of perspectives and ideas that emerge during this quest generates in turn new themes and paths of inquiry. Indeed, “cognitive approaches today flourish at unexpected intersections” (Zunshine 2–3), which include fruitful emerging areas such as cognitive disability studies, cognitive queer theory, or cognitive postcolonial studies, among others.

Another connotation often ascribed to the consilience, convergent, or integrative approach is that it aims at creating a comprehensive theory of everything, a “unified theory of knowledge.”⁶ Apropos of this belief, it is important to remain aware of the fact that, in the same manner that we cannot think of cognitive literary studies as an all-encompassing “theory” to explain mind and fiction, we cannot subscribe to the myth of unified knowledge, for it, despite its quality of attractive utopia, remains precisely that: a myth. However, the fact that unified knowledge is realistically unattainable does not and should not stop us from looking for new connections and wider perspectives to contemplate the biological and cultural complexity of our species. Aiming to establish those new connections entails traveling outside of our disciplinary lands into unfamiliar territory. Thus, the cognitive literary scholar must behave like the goat-like wits described by sixteenth-century mind theorist Juan Huarte de San Juan: always looking for new pastures and delivering “contemplaciones, nunca oídas, en que ejercitarse. Porque de esta manera van creciendo las artes, y los hombres saben más cada día” (346) [“contemplations not heard of wherein they may exercise themselves, for after this manner, arts take increase and men daily know more and more” (132)].⁷

This book represents a milestone in the consolidation and diversification of cognitive literary studies. It is the child of our current understanding of

6. On the myth of unified knowledge, see Zunshine 1–2, Crane 14.

7. All citations from Huarte’s *Examen de ingenios* are from the recent edition by Rocío Sumillera of the early modern translation by Richard Carew.

cognitive approaches to literature as a heterogeneous, dynamic, inclusive interface whose strength resides in integrating or blending diverse perspectives and methodologies—without surrendering to disciplinary prejudices and resulting hierarchies—as well as in considering the biological-universal aspects of human nature and human cognition in relation to cultural-specific contexts.⁸

By bringing together and exploring early modern representations of consciousness articulated through a diversity of genres (e.g., novels, plays, medical treatises, psychological treatises, philosophical works, testimonies, manuals of conduct), this volume seeks to exemplify the permeability that existed in early modernity between different epistemological realms that we today tend to separate and label as “scientific” or “literary.”⁹ When exploring the relationship between fiction and the mind in the context of the Spanish Renaissance, it is tempting to talk about the “influence” of science on literature—for instance, that of the medical-psychological theories of Huarte on Cervantes’ work—an approach that reinforces the superior status that science enjoys over literary creation today and can easily fall into anachronistic interpretations, but yet is useful in certain ways to frame our discussions.¹⁰ What we find in early modern Spain is a multiplicity of discourses and ideas about human consciousness and human nature that form a colorful epistemological pattern. These ideas are not imported from a particular domain and imposed on another in a top-down fashion; rather, they are parallel and dynamically co-constructed by all the embodied minds that participate in early modern culture. In this sense, we may think of the early modern mind as “a dynamic interplay between embodied intelligent agents and their broader environments for action and interaction” (Herman 47), or as a collective mind¹¹ that both inhabits and shapes its environment.

In its emphasis on the discursive diversity and permeability as well as the enactive aspects (dynamic interaction of agents with their environment) that relate to the study of mind and literature in early modern

8. On the importance of considering literature in relation to its historical, social, and cultural contexts and the idea of historicizing the study of mind and literature, see Spolsky, “Cognitive”; Richardson, chapter 1 (“Introduction: Cognitive Historicism”); and Bruhn, among others.

9. See Simon (in this volume).

10. In the words of Mary Thomas Crane, “Of course, as many scholars have argued, early modern philosophical, religious, and even literary discourse cannot be definitively separated from something anachronistically called ‘science,’ and the disciplines into which knowledge was divided were not as discrete as they are today. Still certain kinds of discrimination can and should be made” (14).

11. See Palmer.

Spain, this volume also contributes a novel perspective to the field of early modern studies. Especially useful to scholars outside the Spanish literary tradition will be the discussion of ideas by early modern Spanish thinkers who, in many respects, can be considered pioneers of the so-called cognitive revolution in Europe and who are precursors to René Descartes and Francis Bacon, among other important figures.¹²

Two major orientations converge in this book: how early modern thinkers and writers understood the mind in early modernity and how we understand it today. These two orientations are blended into a methodology that we could denominate contemporaneous-contemporary. This methodology constitutes a powerful tool to examine how early modern subjects viewed and portrayed consciousness as well as to address some wider-scope questions that are relevant to the study of early modern culture and are explored throughout the book from a variety of angles: How did early modern subjects engage in fictional worlds? How can the cross-examination of early modern discourses from different epistemological realms provide us with a clearer picture of the early modern mind? How can a cognitive approach that blends contemporaneous and contemporary cognitive theories facilitate our understanding of the relationship between the mind and the arts in this period? How does the historicist component of such an approach help us trace the Iberian contribution to models of mind that circulate in early modern and modern Europe? Finally, and more broadly, how can cognitive literary studies shed light on how humans create and engage with fiction and on how the study of fiction and the arts is fundamental to explore and understand human cognition?

The book is divided into five sections. Section I offers an overview of the field of cognitive approaches to early modern Spanish literature by Julien Simon.¹³ This chapter acts as a grand organizer, introducing readers to the history of the field and its main themes and directions. The essays in Section II focus on Cervantes' *Don Quixote* to trace the creation of self in the context of the novel. Howard Mancing demonstrates how autopoiesis (a notion introduced by Chilean scientists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to discuss how a living organism generates itself within its physical, historical, social, and linguistic context) can shed light not only on Cervantes' metafictional novel of self-creation but also on how fiction mirrors the biological and cultural process of

12. See Bullón y Fernández; Martín-Araguz and Bustamante-Martínez; and Watson, among others.

13. See Simon's previous overviews of the field, "Introduction" and "Intersection."

inventing ourselves in the act of living. Both autopoiesis and the related concept of structural coupling (the dynamical interaction of body and context) are important notions from biology that can help literary scholars explore literary representations of consciousness. Following up on the concept of autopoiesis in relation to *Don Quixote*, Catherine Connor discusses how, from a microcosmic, cellular level each human genetically and biologically self-organizes and remembers herself in the process of becoming her own complex macrocosmic systems. She proposes that Cervantes' self-conscious chapters on arms, letters, and Morisco relations elucidate his autopoietic development, while challenging readers to mirror and develop greater awareness of self and others. In this way, *Don Quixote* teaches individual biocultural awareness and the complementarity of science and art. Finally, Julia Domínguez discusses how Cervantes portrays, through the character of Don Quixote, the process of self-creation as based on the faculties of memory and imagination. She argues that Cervantes understood how memory is not separate from present or future creative processes and thus represented Don Quixote's problem as embedded in imagination and its relation to memories that are rooted in the past but available for future recall. For Domínguez, Don Quixote embodies the characteristics of the Janus face, a visual representation of one who looks at the past and the future simultaneously, thereby intertwining seemingly dissimilar timeframes into a continuum. Sections III and IV deal with how early modern Spanish subjects perceive and react to their physical and social environment. In Section III, Bruce Burningham and Elizabeth Cruz Petersen show how the concept of embodiment is especially pertinent to delve into the mechanics of the interaction between actors and audience both in the jongleuresque (Burningham) and the *comedia* (Cruz Petersen) traditions. Burningham reminds us that, as performers have always known, theater begins and ends in the imagination and that, ultimately, the work of actors is to make audiences see precisely that which does not exist. Through an analysis of the work of two contemporary performers (Pedro Elis and Benjamin Bagby) he discusses the genesis of early modern drama as unembellished performance rooted in the jongleuresque tradition, as opposed to in play scripts. By doing so, he re-evaluates the contribution of the performative aspects of theater, *vis-à-vis* the textual/literary in the historiography of the Renaissance Spanish drama, while shedding new light on the origins of the early modern stage. In her essay, Cruz Petersen contends that a somaesthetics approach (which stresses the role of the body as a living, feeling, and intentional entity) is particularly useful to explore the dynamic interactions that occur among the embodied minds in the physical and social environment

of the *corral* (the Spanish theatrical space), as well as how individuals of certain social groups push, as audience members, the limits of prescribed behavior. She argues that, motivated by a need to move freely from “object” to “subject” to establish their subjectivity, many women and men of seventeenth-century Madrid interpreted their role in society not by mirroring the reflection presented to them in literature or books of manners or by Church or government authorities, but instead in relation to their own theatrical experience. In Section IV, Judith Caballero discusses how cognitive theories of perception can shed light on cross-dressing and gender identification in the Spanish *comedia*. Other characters’ acceptance of the cross-dresser as a member of the opposite sex is typically dismissed as a mere theatrical device to advance the storyline. Yet, in the mindset of early modern Spanish people, sexual distinction was not solely defined on a biological basis; it was defined by personality traits, behaviors, and sartorial conventions. To distinguish between male and female in everyday life, people relied heavily on socially contrived signifiers, such as clothing, gender roles, and engendered spaces. Caballero argues that in Ángela de Azevedo’s *El muerto disimulado* [The Feign Death] the characters’ inability to determine correctly the sex of the cross-dresser is a manifestation of an attentional set that assigns sex according to gendered behaviors. In this same section, Domingo Ródenas and José Valenzuela focus on the Maese Pedro’s puppet show episode in *Don Quixote* in connection to the metaphor of transportation to fictional worlds. They show how the episode illustrates and also enriches this metaphor by directing our attention to discursive and behavioral aspects of the transportation phenomenon. In doing so, they propose an alternative view of Don Quixote’s inability to distinguish reality from fiction. Don Quixote, who is *not* a madman but a transported reader unable to construct disbelief, represents both the power and effect of fiction over the human mind. These first two essays, which illustrate how misperception is often related to our inability to understand social situations, pave the way for the third and last essay of the section, centered on the human ability to understand others. In his essay, Ryan Schmitz analyzes the key concepts of early modern courtly conduct manuals, such as dissimulation, discretion, prudence, and impression management. By bringing together mind models of the period and modern-day notions of intentionality, he shows how an integrated contemporaneous-contemporary approach sheds light on the astute physiological and psychological insights that court writers made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He focuses on Damasio de Frías’ *Diálogo de la discreción* [Dialogue of Discretion] and Baltasar Gracián’s *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia* [The Art of Worldly Wisdom], works

that advise their readers on how to prosper at court, including the themes of self-observation, control of emotions, and obfuscation of one's interior and exterior, as well as the ability to perceive and understand a rival's interior (thoughts, intentions, and emotions). Perceiving and understanding others leads us to the notion of empathy or feeling with others. In Section V, Cory Reed demonstrates how cognitive approaches to live performance may allow us to approximate the emotional and intellectual dimensions of audience–performer interactions in the shared space of the theatrical *corrales*. He shows how Cervantes' early play, *El trato de Argel* [The Trade of Algiers], which may have been part of a campaign to raise public awareness of the plight of enslaved Spaniards in Algerian prisons, lends itself to a cognitive analysis of the role of empathy in creating audience sympathy that might ultimately lead to an early modern form of proto-activism. Finally, Barbara Simerka looks at how cognitive theories of empathy can help us to assess the original impact and subsequent legacy of activist Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, who wrote *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* [A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies] and was known as “the protector of the Indians” during the Spanish colonization of America. She suggests that an alternative perspective on the role of emotion and empathy in the literature classroom can inform new approaches to presenting the Las Casas corpus in human rights and postcolonial contexts. Simerka's pedagogical discussion takes us to the last essay in the volume, the afterword, in which Isabel Jaén, drawing on her experience teaching with a cognitive focus,¹⁴ offers strategies to design a course on mind and literature in early modernity.

Cognitive Approaches to Early Modern Spanish Literature is the first anthology exploring human cognition and literature in the context of early modern Spanish culture. It represents the culmination of the cognitive literary studies research that has been taking place over the last fifteen years within early modern Spanish studies and includes the leading voices in the field, along with the main themes and directions that this important area of study has been producing. We are confident that it will be an invaluable resource for early modern scholars both inside and outside of Spanish studies. Regardless of their theoretical orientation, they will find in this book new and original perspectives as well as paths for innovative research. Indeed, as Zunshine reminds us, “at this point, cognitive literary studies have something to offer to a scholar of any theoretical persuasion; the entry point into the field can be as individualized as one wishes” (4).

14. See Jaén.

The contributors to this volume are providing readers with their own individualized points of entry to explore the early modern mind and its cultural offspring. With this compass, they hope to guide them on a journey of discovery, as they in turn beget new ideas and avenues for future scholarship.

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