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Cognitive Poetics and Creative Practice: Beginning the Conversation

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Cognitive Poetics and Creative Practice: Beginning the Conversation

ABSTRACT: This article sits on the critical-creative boundary and draws upon aspects of the field of cognitive poetics—the principled study of what happens in the mind as readers read—to explore how an understanding of these processes might benefit the creative writer. The paper is pioneering in that it considers the implications of cognitive poetic approaches to the ‘mechanics’ of prose fiction explicitly in terms of creative practice rather than from the perspective of the stylistician or literary critic. It is in providing a principled and rigorous account of the way readers read that cognitive poetics has much to offer the writer. Indeed, the paper will argue that writing and reading, rather than being separate activities, should be seen as interrelated positions along a cline.

Keywords: narratology, creative writing, cognitive poetics, empathy, theory as practice

If it can be agreed that creative practice benefits from engagement with theoretical perspectives, then one potential candidate for that perspective is literary stylistics (Scott 2014ⁱ). To broaden this argument, it will be suggested here that the discipline’s relatively recent ‘cognitive turn’ (cognitive stylistics, or **cognitive poetics**) and the resulting focus on processes of linguistic world-building and the mechanics of ‘actualizing’ readings provides invaluable insights into what happens when readers read. This assertion will be grounded first by a discussion of the inter-relatedness of writing and reading processes from the cognitive perspective. Subsequently, **schema theory** and the concept of **deixis** will be used as examples of just two of the many potential intersections between cognitive poetics and creative practice. Finally, some suggestions will be provided for practical exploration of these intersections.

The cognitive linguist Keith Oatley (2003, 161-174) has coined a useful neologism which allows the critical and creative orientations of the act of writing to be viewed as interchangeable and conceptually identical. Oatley uses the term

writingandreading to describe the way in which two activities, traditionally considered separate, are often intimately and inextricably bound together.

‘Writingandreading’ is not an English word. It should be. We tend to think of the two parts as separate. Pure writing is possible. One may just write an email, careless of syntax and spelling, then press a key, and off it goes into the ether. Pure reading is also possible: one can absorb, if that is an apt metaphor, the information in a newspaper article with almost no thought except what the writer has supplied. More usually we writeandread. As I write this chapter, I am also reading it, and I will read it again, and re-write and re-read. Even in my first draft I have made four or five changes to the previous sentence, though only two (so far) to this one. ... A text is not autonomous. That is to say it does not stand alone: responsibility is distributed between writer and reader. (2003, 161)

There is more to this notion, though, than simply reading, editing and redrafting. Oatley refers here to an essential dichotomy which lies at the heart of creative writing and the worlds that it builds: between that which is **autonomous** and that which is **heteronomous** (Howarth 2012). If the former term can be used to categorize something that can be demonstrated to exist independently of perception, then the latter refers to that which is brought into existence and validated only by the presence of an observing consciousness (responsibility is distributed between writer and reader).

Oatley’s term ‘writingandreading’ highlights the essential interconnectedness of the sentences and the imaginary worlds that they build, in essence by treating the heteronomous worlds formed in the act of reading and the autonomous texts which give birth to them as equivalent and interchangeable. Creative writing as artefact, as typed or printed words on a page or screen, is autonomous. It has a physical, sensory presence as the reader turns its pages or, indeed, scrolls through it with a mouse or a fingertip. The worlds that it builds in the imagination are — at least intuitively — heteronomous. To put this as simply as possible, and at the risk of glibness: our thoughts do not just shape

our world, they *are* our world. As cognitive poetics can demonstrate, this proposal is analogous to the ways in which imaginary worlds are built from linguistic prompts as well as the ways in which such worlds take on a powerful, resonant and affective existence in the imagination. It also raises various philosophical and ontological questions. In what sense is the felt experience of a story world different from the felt experience derived from the actual world? How is it that story worlds can take on an existence of their own? Most readers will have had the experience of being truly gripped, moved, gladdened or saddened by a poem or story; if the worlds that these texts create are ‘unreal’, then how do they both stimulate and simulate real emotional responses? (See Stockwell 2002, 171-3 and Oatley 1992, 18-20 for further discussion, of this as well as some theoretical propositions in response to the question).

So, creative practice at its most invigorating should involve becoming both writer and reader at the same time, through the processes of writing and reading, and an awareness of the needs and responsibilities of both agencies should be foregrounded. At the risk of stating the obvious: it is impossible to write without reading. Indeed, the interchangeability of writing and reading could be seen as part of a definition of *creative* writing, as opposed to what Oatley (2003, 161) characterizes as ‘pure’ writing: when writing happens without any particular attention to style and structure, without revision, as would often (but not always) be the case in an informal and instrumental, information-imparting email. The act of creative writing is characterized, then, by the two activities being more integrated, or part and parcel of the same process. This assertion is given further strength by viewing the act of reading in terms of performance, as formulated by, among others, Iser (1980) through reception theory. Any text constructed from language is not, of course, simply ‘received’ in a passive sense by its reader (Jauss 1982), but is interpreted according to individual cultural

contexts and lived experience. By including the element of performativity, the hybridity of the writing and reading process can be taken a step further. The heteronomous and autonomous aspects of the text come together and merge in the act of creative writing and reading, resulting in a hybrid account of creative practice that makes the heteronomous cognition of the created worlds inseparable from their creation through autonomous language.

One of the principal ways in which this element of performativity (on the 'reading' side of the cline) can be explained is through **schema theory**. Briefly: a schema (Bartlett 1932, Shank and Abelson 1977) is a cognitive framework that helps the participant in the discourse world (in the case of creative writing, the reader) to sort, organize and interpret incoming linguistic information by activating pre-existing 'mental baggage', often dependent on cultural context and background. For example, British and Irish readers will have a particular 'pub' schema which will be activated when processing that noun, calling to mind mental representations of a bar area, beer taps, glasses, customers, the smell of food, the hum of conversation and so on. Schemas allow shortcuts to be taken when interpreting the, often complex, linguistic information provided by the text. It is this facility in the mind of the reader that writers exploit through the use of linguistic cues from which readers subsequently build worlds; thus, from minimal linguistic input, a rich and complex text-world can be constructed cognitively through a combination of the 'top down' information stored in the relevant schema (say, the pub schema mentioned above) with 'bottom up' linguistic information from the text itself (which might impart more specific information, building on the initial schema: the pub has a thatched roof and is next to a pond, for example). The reader's perception of the world built by a text is dependent upon the ways in which that

reader's package of schema are reinforced or challenged during the act of reading (Semino 1997, 119).

The ways in which a reader builds worlds in response to a piece of creative writing is also related to deictic function: that aspect of language which indicates the position of and relationships between objects (e.g. 'here', 'there', 'yesterday', 'now', 'up', 'down'). Cognitive approaches to discourse are based on the idea that mind and body are inextricably connected, and that the centre of perception in cognitive terms equates more or less neatly with the deictic centre, or **origo**. Evidence for this comes from language used to position the user in relation to the surrounding world, giving rise to a — often inescapable — sense of subjectivity. However, deixis is not limited to spatial descriptives, but can also refer to the position of objects and entities, and to perception, time and relation. It is the deictic aspect of language that allows readers to identify with the characters of a text, or, more specifically, to experience **empathy**. Stockwell (2002, 43) refers to this process as 'deictic projection'. In everyday discourse, language users are able to 'throw' their deictic centre (in a similar way to the way a ventriloquist throws his or her voice) to occupy an external position by saying, for example, 'Look behind you!' or 'It's to your right.' It is obviously desirable to shy away from making too many hard-and-fast pronouncements about what constitutes 'good' writing, but the creation (or simulation) of empathetic engagement might be a starting point for discussionⁱⁱ (see Keen 2010 for a principled account of its significance in the study of the novel). Obviously enough, readers are more likely to empathize with autonomous objects (such as fellow human beings) rather than heteronomous notions or concepts. Through its proposal that readers conceptually project to the contextual locus of the speaker of deictic cues in order to comprehend them, Deictic Shift Theory (e.g. Gilbraith 1995) offers a model of how the deictic references determining contextual

coordinates are processed by readers, how they render the deictic centre of the text autonomous (making 'concrete' the simulated actions, perceptions, experiences etc. of the narrator or character), and how this contributes to readers' conceptualization of the world of the story. Deictic Shift Theory accounts for the psychological and physical processes whereby the reader's own deictic centre (both spatial and ontological) can be transposed to form an imaginative structure that is constructed both conceptually and orientationally. The reader's deictic centre, or *origo*, is then used within this imaginative structure for the purposes of orientation. Merleau-Ponty (1962, 112) called this process 'a summoning of the body's freedom from immediacy'. In creative practice, the writer should be mindful of levels of engagement, or freedom from intimacy, and where on the scale of empathetic engagement the reader will situate him- or herself in relation to the text through deictic shifting.

It is hoped, then, that this article might point the way towards a principled and rigorous reflection on creative practice based on some aspects of cognitive poetics. Given the myriad ways in which that discipline has shed revealing light on the imaginative processes involved in reading, it would be an insular writer indeed who refused to engage with critical theory that has so much to say about the target of their work. To reiterate: what is writing without reading? The summary and suggestions that follow, then, are intended to prompt further research, exploration and debate.

- A. Generally, and as an overarching ambition: setting the notion of writing and reading at the centre of the creative process (indeed, as a definition of *creative writing*), with a focus on the ways in which the autonomous features of language can transform into the heteronomous story worlds that inhabit readers' imaginations and the fact that the acts of writing and reading can be viewed as

interchangeable. In short, awareness of what happens when readers read should be a prominent factor in creative practice.

- B. Being mindful of the insights of schema theory, and the ways in which creative writing can reinforce, disrupt or modify schemas.
- C. Considering how Deictic Shift Theory and deictic projection (Stockwell 2002: 43) might account for the extent to which a reader empathises with characters and their situations. The appropriateness of the term ‘empathy’ in this context is also in need of more detailed consideration.
- D. Using schema theory to monitor the merits and contextual appropriateness of diegetically- versus mimetically-oriented narrative discourse (‘showing’ versus ‘telling’), bearing in mind that the disruption and modification of schemas is one of the key processes that lends dynamism and momentum to narrative fiction.

This article could be read as an appeal to creative writers, particularly those who work in an academic context, to consider engaging with these principled critical approaches to linguistic world-building and the relationship between writing and reading. Even if the relevance of this framework is rejected, then it is hoped that some energy can be found in the disagreement. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this short article to go into sufficient depth and detail on the myriad concrete, practical applications of these concepts; in any case, as the title of this piece suggests, it is hoped that other writers and scholars will wish to formulate their own responses. However, for some more detailed discussion of these principles and suggestions for their application in the context of creative practice ‘at the coalface’, see Scott 2014 and 2016.

To summarise the notion as far as possible, I would like to turn to Bertrand Russell:

We have a number of experiences which we call ‘seeing the sun’; there is also, according to astronomy, a large lump of hot matter which is the sun. What is the relation of this lump to one of the occurrences called ‘seeing the sun’? (2011: 117)

The ‘lump of hot matter’ is the artefact; ‘seeing the sun’ is its writing and reading.

Both should sit firmly at the heart of the practice and meta-discourses of creative writing.

Practice

These suggestions for practice aim to stimulate creative exploration of cognitive approaches to the text, and to make awareness of these approaches an integral part of the practice, rather than simply a tool to put to use in ‘post-event’ textual analysis. The first exercise explores the interconnectedness of writing and reading, whilst the second and third demonstrate the significance of schema theory and deixis.

- Write a one-paragraph descriptive passage of prose based on one of the following prompts: a farm; a market square; a city coming to life in the morning; the take-off of a jumbo jet. Now rewrite the passage, removing *all* adjectives. What effect does this have in terms of mimesis versus diegesis? When you have considered this, take **one** (only one) of the adjectives previously removed, and put it back in. What changes about your piece? Why?
- Select a piece of creative work that describes something (either physical, like a landscape, or abstract, a mental state perhaps, or simply a point in time). Now identify the particular linguistic features that activate and/or rely upon particular schema in the reader’s mind. If possible, exchange the work with other readers and carry out the same approach, comparing and contrasting observations in order to highlight how different individual readings can be. In detail: which part

of the individual reader's schema have been used to create different readings and interpretations? Which aspects of the text lead to different readings, and which to similar ones?

- Is it possible to conceive of a piece of creative writing which contains no deictic language? Try to write such a text. What is its status as fiction? What kinds of imaginary worlds does it build in the imagination?

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ⁱ See also Boulter 2007.

ⁱⁱ And yet: it is of course possible to envisage creative writing that draws its efficacy from a sense of *dis*-engagement and alienation.