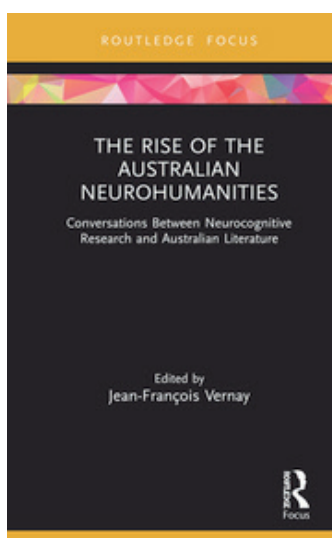


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The Rise of the Australian Neurohumanities

Jean-François Vernay (ed.). 2021. The Rise of the Australian Neurohumanities. New York: Routledge, 142 pp., £ 44.99, ISBN 9780367751944



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At a time when in Australia the humanities are becoming less important to the benefit of STEM education, the cognitive approach to the study of literature is acquiring symbolic and political significance. It could be seen as a promising area of reconciliation of the sciences with the humanities, in which literature is redefined as a rich cognitive artefact and a kind of ever-expanding archive which, among other things, embodies the extension of the cognitive capacities of our brain. All of this probably helps to explain why Australian cognitive and neurohumanist literary studies seem to be multiplying and gaining more and more visibility in the global academic scene, with a growing number of theoretical works mixing scientific approaches and literary critical practice. A survey of such emerging research field was attempted in the volume *The Rise of Australian Neurohumanities* edited by Jean-François Vernay (2021).

After opening the volume by stating that “The brain-based economy, in which the fast-moving field of neuro-science is playing an important part, is gradually making its mark on academia and is likely to supersede the idea of a knowledge-based economy” (p. XV) the editor, focusing on cognitive literary studies (which he discusses as one of the main areas of neurosciences – and the most successful in Australian Humanities), states that they could be summarized “as a cluster of various literary criticism-related disciplines forming a broad-based trend which draws on the findings of cognitive science to sharpen their psychological understanding of literature by exploring the mental processes at work in the creative minds of writers and readers” (2).

The editor then lists the five main epistemologically related strains that contribute to this area of research: cognitive literary history; evolutionary literary criticism; “neuro lit crit” (a neurologizing approach to literature, tied to neuroesthetics); cognitively informed preexisting theories (which in Vernay’s definition encompass cognitive poetics, cognitive rhetoric, cognitive narratology, cognitive stylistics, cognitive ecocriticism, cognitive queer studies, cognitive postcolonial studies, etc.); and affective literary theory. In Vernay’s opinion, the latter seems to be the most dynamic approach in the Terra Australis (3). Finally, the editor goes on to sketch a historical perspective on cognitive literary studies in Australia.

While the state of Australian literary criticism in general resists easy synthesis, it could be argued that Australian literary cognitive studies somehow share the interdisciplinary and methodological approaches of cultural studies. At the start of the 21st century, within some universities, like Macquarie in Sydney, or Deakin and Swinburne in Melbourne, forms of Australian cognitive literary studies began to emerge, but without establishing a true Center for NeuroHumanities, like the one you will find at Purdue University in the United States. Therefore, it could be argued that due to this lack of a tightly knit academic community, Australian Literary Cognitive Studies is only slowly progressing into a strong and established field (4).

Another important aspect is that in Australia cognitive influences should be sought in criticism rather than in creative writing, because in terms of the so-called ‘neuronovel’ only Sue Woolfe and Colleen McCullough could be considered as equivalent to American writers such as Jonathan Lethem and Richard Powers. So we have a small number of neuroscientists versus a growing number of neurocritics. From this perspective, many contemporary Australian novels, if on the one hand cannot be considered as true neuro-novels, on the other hand are conducive to research in cognitive literary studies.

Vernay maintains that cognitive literary studies are particularly apt to reveal the invisible, that is to say, not so much what is in the subtext, as what is happening in the brain of the reader or the writer. It makes sense, then, that much of the Australian research has focused on how neuroscience can explain creativity, which includes both the writing and reading processes. Unsurprisingly, the biggest contributors to the field are writers engaged in both creative writing and scholarship, such as Maria Takolander, Kevin Brophy, Sue Woolfe, and Julia Prendergast (7).

The chapters of the book seem to follow at least in part the fivefold structure with which the editor frames neurocognitive literary studies in Australia, with a particular

interest in the “affective” articulations of the latter. To begin with, what do they have in common is that they do not seek a neurophenomenological model of narrative that charts the direct correlations between our lived, embodied experiences as tellers and followers of stories, and the neurobiological processes that underlie and constrain these interactions. They rather act on a level which is a few steps further from such basic neurological research. In this book you will not find basic neurological assumptions, or “raw” neurological researches used as a foundation for literary discussion. Rather, in the “neuroscientific” side of research sources, you will find cognitive studies which have already mediated the basic neuroscientific knowledge into cognitivist humanist knowledge, such as that tied to affect theory.

I would like to discuss this by highlighting some of the more interesting themes of the book. In particular, the task of elucidating samples of affective literary theory seems to be up to Victoria Reeve and Francesca Di Blasio. In her chapter (27-40), using critical tools drawn from affect theory, Victoria Reeve reviews Charlotte Wood’s novel *The Weekend*. In doing so, she argues that the mystery of emotion, as a question of involvement, derives from emotion as a form of reasoning, brought within the parameters of thought as an affectual process. Experience is something that recursively moves through bodily apprehensions, affective expressions and the understanding of such in cultural contexts. It is this chemistry that transforms emotion into the recognizable result of a given experience. The main character, Jude, is visiting the place of a dead friend, ahead of sale. The novel also talks about Jude’s “thoughts on her thoughts”. Jude takes a position vis-à-vis herself, which operates shifts in perspective, revealing oscillations between constructions of subjective and objective self-evaluations. Reeve then goes on to discuss the interpretive potentials of emotion as an organizational concept.

In some perspectives of affect theory, emotions are mixed products of biology and culture that are best viewed as variable, internally heterogenous populations, rather than logical categories or universal classes with fixed neuro-biological foundations. From this perspective, language and narrative can be seen as biocultural hybrids, each the product of varying but limited interactions between brain, body and the world; and the non-universal counterparts to the logical structures of the mind. In Reeves’ approach to affect theory, certain “meaning-making” processes may be consistent with *literary genre* theory. Emotions as categories have a specific purpose, organizing these interactions in terms of culturally recognizable emotional states and their associated actions and affects.

Reeve views emotion as a semantic category, rather than something that happens in a specific region of the brain. It is an interpretive position taken vis-à-vis bodily feelings and thoughts, in a given context. Emotions form a semiotic system based on embodied experiences. They are shaped by cultural values and are the means by which we select and organize a range of internal feelings and sensations into states of being, in a range of contexts. In conclusion, Reeve was affected in her reading of *The Weekend*, through the organizing effects of reading and emotion, the latter being caused, or at least exacerbated, by frustrations similar to those expressed by Wood, frustrations which Reeve too experienced in her own life, and which deal mainly with gender inequality.

Francesca Di Blasio's chapter (41-53) deals in particular with Kim Scott's most recent novel, *Taboo* (2017), a text of great intensity that offers a lucid vision of Australian reality. In her original and creative analysis of Scott's work, Di Blasio neither rigidly applies "cognitive theory" nor "affect theory", but these critical orientations will offer interpretive clues, as they are prompted to interact with each other. Like Reeve, Di Blasio focuses on the empathic dimension of literature, viewed in terms of affect theory. She asserts that by representing reality transfigured by imaginative power, literary discourse is able not only to stimulate the critical function, but also to activate an empathic response. Literary worlds may be provisional or "insubstantial", but their composite effects on readers are substantial, in large part because of the empathy they can elicit. Literary, cognitive and emotional worlds at the same time, also trigger ethical, inter-relational and intercultural knowledge. The story revolves around a group of Noongars who travel to the small town of Kepalup in Western Australia, for the opening of Peace Park, a memorial site designed by the local community to commemorate a historic episode in which many Noongar were massacred by white landowners. The area had been considered taboo since the massacre and no Noongar had returned there for a long time. On the occasion of the opening of the park, and throughout the narration, the many characters of the novel gather and visit the territory, thus breaking the taboo, and embarking on a journey of self-discovery and reciprocity. In terms of *genre*, Di Blasio considers this novel to be a mixture, containing a bit of Fairy Tale, a touch of Gothic, some Social Realism and a flavour of Creation Story. *Taboo* combines individual and collective cultural memory with the materiality of space and place, and with the earth and its "objects". In doing so, it activates a dynamic of interaction, at the intra and extra-textual level, of an emotional type. The physicality of places and objects participates in the emotional dimension, and is filled with it. The use of narrative objects and places thus becomes a repository of cultural memory. And from such dynamic point of view, cultural memory is shared, or at least made shareable. Objects and places are therefore not coldly material, or opposed to humans, but become emotional, cognitive and participatory devices. For such an "interactional" approach to affect theory, Di Blasio relies mainly on the understanding of emotions developed by three thinkers: the ethical and collective role of emotions from literature in Martha Nussbaum's vision; emotion as a subjective experience, and at the same time as a relational "motor" in the cognitive perspective of Patrick Hogan; and the "bodily" characteristics of Brian Massumi's theory of affect, which places emotional responses in the space of a relationship, in the physical world rather than in subjective consciousness.

Hogan in particular focuses on the role of storytelling and plot in triggering emotional responses. Massumi's perspective draws on Deleuze and Guattari to propose a model of emotional interaction in which "affect" is opposed to "emotion", the latter being consistent with individual interiority. Affect, on the other hand, is placed in the physical space of interaction, and can be seen as a "zone of indistinction" between thought and action. Drawing on such influences, Di Blasio in her analysis claims the central role of emotional interaction (a relational approach). In accordance with the revolutionary intuition of affect theory, she turns the traditional individualistic explanation of human behavior on its head, emphasizing the relational rather than the atomistic basis of all things. But this interconnection should

not be understood as hierarchical. In this sense, the Deleuzian “rhizomatic” approach is non-hierarchical, multiple, heterogeneous, creative and planar. As such, it is the perfect theoretical counterpart to the hierarchical idea of interacting subjectivities. Nussbaum’s perspective brings us back to the importance of stories and the fact that emotions, unlike many of our beliefs, are not taught to us directly through propositional statements about the world. They are taught, above all, through stories.

From Di Blasio’s point of view, this seems to be the case with Scott’s novel, which preserves and transmits individual memory (understood as the cultural memory of a certain subject, but also of a certain moment), but in doing so, the novel contributes to the creation of a collective memory and, ultimately, an emotional sense of collective identity, which is based on interaction.

The study of embodied relationships is also central to Dorothee Klein’s contribution (94-107) on Aboriginal writing and its attention to the connection between body, mind and environment. This connection, argues the author, is also central in second-generation cognitive science. The author draws on recent approaches to embodiment to explore the different ways in which contemporary Aboriginal narratives convey the idea of feeling the land through embodied simulation. Using different textual cues to evoke bodily reactions, these works shape an understanding of the earth into which the boundary between the body and the physical world becomes indistinct.

Several recent studies, Klein Claims, show how knowledge from cognitive science provides a better understanding of the different forms of environmental imagination that stories convey, discuss and construct. A careful analysis of textual strategies through the lens of 4E cognition (*embodied, embedded, extended and enactive*) helps explain how reading can constitute what Erin James, in her ecocritical cognitive analysis of postcolonial narratives, defines as a virtual form of environmental experience.

By paying attention to the literary forms used to encode the environmental sense, the author seeks to show how Aboriginal fiction involves the reader’s body to convey the vitality of the land and possibly provoke moments of physical inter-connection. Klein first gives a brief description of the significance of embodiment as an approach to understand narrative. She then examines the poetics and politics of relationships embodied in indigenous fiction, using two sets of examples that illustrate different textual strategies to stimulate a sense of embodied participation. While Scott’s *Benang* (1999) and Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006) mention visceral functions such as breathing and heartbeats, the other two examples, Scott’s *Taboo* (already analyzed by Di Blasio) and June Winch’s *The Yield* (2019), discuss the bodily dimension of indigenous languages. Finally, the author explains how indigenous fiction, emphasizing the feeling of the land, contrasts with recent discourses on the relationship between mankind and the natural environment, and emphasizes the need to recognize our interdependence.

The survey presented in the book suggests that in today’s Australia instead of “NeuroHumanities” we should talk of “Cognitive Humanities”. In fact, studies on human neural architecture and functions are not directly used to deconstruct traditional literary knowledge, but rather the new trends in neurosciences are applied to literary studies in

forms mediated by humanist theories such as affect theory and various applied cognitive theories. Furthermore, the editor himself seems to admit that the cognitive approach to literary studies in Australia is still more a project than a historical fact. However, he insists on the need to develop such studies and highlights the potential benefits that such development could bring. First, under the influence of cognitivism, Australian literary criticism would show a new direction to encourage Australianists to use scientific concepts and an extensive knowledge of human anatomy and physiology in their work. All this would also open new perspectives on Australian literature, intended both as an archive and as a practice. Second main advantage: the continuing pressure from Australian universities on the need for interdisciplinarity, could find an important asset in NeuroHumanities, as it could enlarge student cohorts and expand audiences, giving graduates greater versatility in their profiles. What could quickly be dismissed as yet another interdisciplinary approach could also be key to helping Australian critics to stay at the forefront of their research field. There is no doubt that adapting literary criticism to scientific concepts would open unexpected approaches and renew the arsenal of critical tools, which would in its turn reinvigorate Australian literary studies.

Australian cognitive literary studies, (similarly to cultural studies, which also emerged at a time of crisis in the humanities and was later disparaged), could be lauded as a fertile extension of Australian criticism, bringing in more leeway and flexibility. Finally, neurocognitive readings of Australian literature could enable researchers to create new heuristic constellations, by discussing overlooked aspects of literature, (such as the effects of narrative on the reader) that classic literary readings can only speculate about.

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