Mental Imagery in the Experience of Literary Narrative
Views from Embodied Cognition

Anezka Kuzmicova

Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Literature at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Thursday 31 October 2013 at 13:00 in Auditorium 215, Humanistvillan, Frescativägen 24.

Abstract
Defined as vicarious sensorimotor experiencing, mental imagery is a powerful source of aesthetic enjoyment in everyday life and, reportedly, one of the commonest things readers remember about literary narratives in the long term. Furthermore, it is positively correlated with other dimensions of reader response, most notably with emotion. Until recent decades, however, the phenomenon of mental imagery has been largely overlooked by modern literary scholarship.

As an attempt to strengthen the status of mental imagery within the literary and, more generally, aesthetic discipline, this dissertation proposes an analysis positioned at a confluence of literary theory and the cognitive sciences, especially the emergent research framework of embodied cognition.

Questions asked throughout the dissertation include the following:

a) What are the basic varieties of mental imagery in the reading of literary narrative?
b) By what contents or narrative strategies are they most likely to be prompted?
c) What is it like to experience a mental image of a particular variety?
d) What are its psychophysiological underpinnings?
e) How does a mental image of a particular variety relate to perception?
f) How does it relate to higher-order meaning-making?

Four prototypical imagery varieties are distinguished on the basis of two variables with two values each (referential vs. verbal domain; inner vs. outer stance). Gradual transitions and in-between imagery varieties are acknowledged. The imagery typology and related hypotheses are grounded in introspection but carefully supported with indirect empirical evidence and, whenever possible, formulated so as to facilitate direct validation.

Keywords: literary narrative, mental imagery, embodiment, embodied cognition, imagination, reading, reader response, sensorimotor simulation, interpretation, aesthetics, narrative theory.

Stockholm 2013
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-89821


Department of Literature and History of Ideas

Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm