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Studia Humanitatis: Promises and Challenges

Abstract. In the Tower of Babel of today's academe not so much languages as metaphors have been mixed. Although the division of knowledge into the humanities and the sciences is being increasingly contested in the wake of the failed attempt to bridge the gap by postmodernist scholars, the dividing line still lingers in popular imagination. In this context cognitive studies pursued by representatives of both parties and numerous disciplines within each arise as the real third space where the new *lingua franca* (in fact, *lingua anglica*) may allow scholars from various fields and cultural backgrounds to compare their understanding of metaphors and synergize their activities to achieve shared aims.

Keywords: cognitive studies; humanities; sciences; postmodernism; discipline; interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies; metaphor; mind; emotion.

1. Facts

The division of academic pursuits (both research and teaching) into the humanities and the sciences is a done deal. The respective merits of the two (reflected in college enrollment and research funding) have often been a matter of debate, which in recent years moved from the ivory towers of universities to the virtual and egalitarian space of the internet and became (as a result of the relocation) more and more subjective, though often pretending to offer verifiable knowledge (buttressed by examples, questionnaires, and statistics). Numerous bloggers keep themselves busy posing and answering practical questions of which degree is harder, which develops skills appreciated by employers, and which is more marketable.

The news about the constructedness of knowledge (the internet itself is a prime example of constructedness that has got out of hand), seems to have spread unevenly, which only proves the reality of the Great Divide. Whereas the humanities (and the arts in particular) allowed themselves to be shaken by the wave of postmodernism, embracing deconstruction like a life saver (quite literally, the new mode of thinking made new publications and brilliant careers not only possible but also desirable) and readily giving up on objective reality in the open (and enjoyable) sea of doubt, the sciences seemed less willing to give up on certainties and turn away from their usual pursuits. The exception perhaps are theoreticians, whose task it is anyway and in any discipline to be on the lookout for new ideas, unencumbered by the pressure to turn them into marketable goods right away. The scientific obsession with nonlinearity, chaos and complexity in the last decades of the 20th-century, was no doubt an analogy to pomo symptoms in the humanities.

2. Emotions

Pondering on intellectual ferment (was it really just a fad?) of that time, Michael Shermer recalls both the arrogance of humanist deconstructionists dismissing the 19th-century ideas of progress and the scientists' reaction to it: haughty disregard or sly retaliation. He refers in particular to the physicist Alan D. Sokal's bold spoof of what he saw as sheer postmodern nonsense and exposed as such by means of derisive imitation. In 1996 Sokal, who had just turned forty, published in the leftist New York journal *Social Text* his

article entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity”, which he soon announced to be a hoax¹. The text must have been convincing as a piece of scientific writing because of its denotative clarity that was rather uncommon in deconstructionist texts that proliferated at that time in various imitations of truly inspiring and ground-breaking thoughts of Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida or J. Hillis Miller. Respected editors of the respectably provocative journal sensed in Sobol a neophyte who was publicly admitting intellectual guidance, and they held out their hands to welcome him.

One way of looking at the deconstructionist turn is to view it as an attempt on the part of the humanities to match the intricacy and painstaking documentation of both theory and experiment of the scientific method. The approval of and cooperation with scientists was devoutly sought. Extensive quotations and copious footnotes in Sokal’s “article” mercilessly expose the superficiality of the “scientific method” of humanists. That, however, was not the end of Sokal’s grievances against postmodernism. The numerous and lengthy footnotes along with the overlong list of works cited in his “contribution” were meant to expose the unspoken and yet widely known rules of the publishing game, which included quoting all the right names and pandering to current sensibilities (such as ethnicity, gender, politics, and frankophilia). In the late 1990s, when Sokal decided to ridicule postmodernism, it was anyway already in decline (though still sweeping through the provinces) and the desperate question was already becoming audible: What next?

As for Sokal, he became famous enough to place with Oxford University Press a book patched up from reprints and chuck-full of cracker-barrel wisdom. It was published in 2008 under the title *Beyond the Hoax*, but it inevitably includes his main claim to fame, the notorious article, which in view of his later comments on philosophy and culture appears sad, as Jacques Derrida put it in response to the hoax², rather than courageous. Sokal’s crotchety invasion of the territory of humanist thought in his essay collection of 2008

¹ Copies of the issue are still in stock, but irretrievable from the journal’s website (<https://www.dukeupress.edu/science-wars?viewby=title&sort=>).

² “This is all rather sad, don’t you think? For poor Sokal, to begin with. His name remains linked to a hoax—‘the Sokal hoax,’ as they say in the United States—and not to scientific work. Sad too because the chance of serious reflection seems to have been ruined, at least in a broad public forum that deserves better.” *Read Derrida’s Response to the Sokal Affair*. Posted by Eugene Wolters on: <http://www.critical-theory.com/read-derridas-response-sokal-affair/>.

testifies to his deep-rooted conviction that the scientist is equipped to deal with issues from beyond his field of research, and the humanist is not.

He is wrong, as Michael Bérubé proves in his *Rhetorical Occasions: Essays on Humans and the Humanities* (2006) and more recently Rens Bod shows in his *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (2013). The humanities are not (founded on) humbug. In his impeccably argued book, Bérubé separates the wheat from the chaff in Sokal-hoax and deplures in particular the inadequacy and the dead ends of the post-Sokal debate among humanists (2006: 57–58). Like Bérubé, though employing a different strategy, Bod erases the dividing line between the humanities and the sciences, showing that the habits (or virtues) usually attributed to the scientific mind, such as drawing hypotheses, abstract thinking, empiricism, rationality or skepticism have not only been used but were first of all invented centuries ago by the humanities. Bod's book is what it promises to be – a history, meticulously assembling and cogently explicating not only the development of linguistics, historiography, philology, musicology, art history, logic, rhetoric and poetics, but also their transdisciplinary impact.

While changing the name of the humanities to “human sciences” or “scientia humanitatis” is hardly a consummation devoutly to be wished (such a wish would only prove the inferiority complex), it is crucial to remember that the humanities have an age-old tradition of intellectual rigor that need not shy comparison with the sciences. Dividing lines as such are not harmful unless they encourage oppositions, prejudice and derision, just as names are not harmful unless they are used to call people names.

The division into the humanities and the sciences is replicated within the humanities themselves, leading to a comparable array of problems: isolationism, disdainful glances above the fence and lack of communication between various disciplines. Interdisciplinary research has been promoted in a variety of ways and become a fact especially in the sciences and those disciplines within the humanities that view themselves as scientific, most notably all subdisciplines of linguistics. The other humanists, if they choose to cooperate across disciplines and language/culture boundaries usually call such studies “comparative.” Indeed, they are still at the stage of comparing fields of research, tools and methodologies. Genuine cooperation between historians, philosophers, literature and culture scholars is still burdened with doubt and reluctance, even though individual scholars evince the magpie habit of picking a phrase here and a reference there to embellish their own nest.

3. Metaphors

The idea of nesting is indeed useful to illustrate tenuous relations between disciplines and their representatives. The biological instinct among animals to build a nest especially if they expect progeny may be seen as an archetype of the scholars, pregnant with ideas conceived by their minds, who construct mental homes for these ideas to incubate and hatch. The concept of “nesting” means something entirely different in computing, which disregards the connotations of breeding and focuses instead on the structure of the metaphorical nest, its layers and loops. Theoreticians of international relations also refer to “nesting” theories constructed with the aid of cognitive psychology with the aim of solving major global problems, but their understanding of the concept disregards the structure of the nest or the emotional aspect of individual breeding activities, stressing instead the function of the nest as the space of shared interests.

Quite significantly, while explicating the ideas of Robert Jervis, Jack Snyder points to the animal world as a source of useful metaphors. He repeatedly refers to the example of “foxes who know many little things” and “are better at forecasting future events than are hedgehogs who know one big thing” (2013: 13). Not only in the context of international relations, though there in particular because the stakes are high, is it advisable, as he argues, to acquire and unite the habits of both fox and hedgehog (2013: 22–23). On a self-reflexive note, he remarks that “[i]t is the job of academics to be hedgehogs, yet we know that this risks making us more cartoonish in our judgments than less theory-bound experts” (13).

A biologist would hardly recommend that golden eagles, which build large nests, and bee hummingbirds, which are the smallest living birds, make a joint effort to construct homes for their progeny. A computer scientist, however, would probably consider technical feasibility of such a plan, whereas a theoretician of international relations might embrace the idea wholeheartedly, arguing that such cooperation would not only be possible but very welcome. Although we may be living by the same set of metaphors (including nest / nesting), our understanding of them varies considerably across the range of disciplines. The simplification resulting from metaphorical usage of polysemous words across disciplines inevitably leads to misunderstandings, or else – assuming at least some degree of good will – calls for discussion and negotiation. Another phenomenon – at once a promise and a challenge – is the rise to power of the unquestioned *lingua franca*, the English language, which is now used for scholarly purposes

worldwide. Its native, near-native or non-native use produces new dividing lines within disciplines, new hierarchies and new prejudices.

The global polysemy and the classifying craze account for what in a famous essay entitled “Two Cultures”, C. P. Snow called “a gulf of mutual incomprehension – sometimes [...] hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding” between the humanists and the scientists (1961: 4). These words were as valid in the 1950s and the 1960s, when Snow observed a deepening polarization of the Western discourse, as they are now. Whereas Snow envisioned a possibility of the third culture uniting the two opponents, John Brockman argues that the third culture (which is the title of the volume he edited in 1995) is not a bridge between the humanities and the sciences, but a promontory built by scientists to popularize their research among general public, including no doubt also humanists. In his recent book, co-edited with Stanisław Krajewski, Michał Heller raises objections to Brockman’s understanding of the third culture, and posits that physics practiced as art (rather than craft) belongs to the humanities (2014: 29). He claims that the mathematical-empirical method of exploring the world is arguably the science’s greatest discovery ever. It was romanticism that brought a wave of protest against the mechanistic view of the world embraced by modern physics (2014: 25). One may conclude that the division into scientists and humanists goes back to that time. It is quite telling that such luminaries of early romanticism as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe took an intense interest in science. However, the harsh criticism of his *Farbenlehre* (1810) in scientific circles testifies to the widening of the gulf in the early 19th century. Heller points out, however, that today’s physics distances itself from a mechanistic view of the world, and has reached, in its own way and on its own terms, at least two aims proposed by romanticism: it created an image of the world as a whole and fulfilled the dream of universal language. Heller suggests, in other words, that the prerequisites for the genuine third culture uniting the humanities and the sciences do exist.

Voices calling for a change – any change, in fact – started to appear in the first decade of the 21st century. This concerned the humanities in general, but took a particularly dramatic, manifesto-like shape in the case of literary criticism. For instance, Louis Menand proffered “a bargain with the devil”: a marriage of his home field of study to evolutionary sciences as a way out of the crisis.

In a 2009 interview, Joseph Carroll, the founding father of Darwinian Literary Studies, one of the seeds of that pact, stated that there are two ways for literary study to go: it “could continue to insist on disconnecting itself from empirically discernible facts about human nature and human cognition,

or it could realize that science is not a threat and a competitor but an ally in the quest for human understanding” (Carroll in DiSalvo 2009). The bargain with the devil seems promising; not only do the sciences offer a morale boost, but also a whole vast body of research on humans that has not so far been integrated into the humanities, though it has influenced some negotiations within them.

Importantly, one should not be misled to think that it is only the humanities that turn to the sciences for a helpful hand. In fact, the interest is reciprocal. Mathematicians are analysing narratives, searching for regularities and formulas (see e.g. Drożdż *et al.* 2016, a quantitative study of canonical literature that revealed multifractal mathematical patterns in its narrative structures); computer scientists are using big data stories corpora and algorithm programming to create screenplays that should appeal to the global public (see e.g. *House of Cards* Netflix TV series, which was created in this very way). This boom in interdisciplinary research initiatives yields new branches of disciplines, such as cognitive studies, a breakpoint seed of philosophy of mind complemented with biology.

The synthesis of the two cultures starts specifically with accepting the central cognitivist idea: a definite disallowance of the Cartesian dualism of the body and the reason. Instead, with milestones such as Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) or Johnson’s *The Body in the Mind* (1987), the mind has been anew anchored in the somatic sphere. The experience humans share, be it culturally transmitted through historiography or retold in literature, is always embodied, no matter how metaphysical it seems. Thus, of all the sciences, it is cognitive science that seems a most natural ally for the humanities in the times of crisis.

With this turn, humans lose something of their speciality that has been at the very core of the rise of the humanities. This trend of decentralisation is a pivotal point in the posthumanist turn in culture. Though cognitive studies as such do not share the assumptions of meta-, post-, or trans-humanist thought, by embodying human mind and, thus, human nature, they do, at least to a certain extent, augment the post-anthropocentric perspective. Human supremacy, now demystified by ethological observation, gene mapping, or neuroimaging, is not hereby replaced by a primacy of another type of beings, such as machines. But, still, it is degraded to an evolutionary “stroke of luck”. Such a re-positioning of a human being in contemporary culture is clearly evident, for example, in the case of a growing dissatisfaction with speciesism: the assumption that humans, solely on the basis of being *Homo sapiens*, are better than any other animals. In cognitively-oriented studies, *Homo sapiens* are not granted privileges; rather, they are deprived of them,

for instance when they are referred to not as ‘humans’, but ‘human animals’ (as opposed to ‘non-human animals’), classified according to their domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species, while their actions are conceived more in terms of their biological and cognitive make-up than divine or idealistic inspirations. This results for instance in a tendency of the humanities to advert to the biological, the empirical, or the physical conceptual domains, which can be exemplified say with the animal metaphors used throughout this text. The very metaphor of a hedgehog and a fox, already alluded to above with the words of Jack Snyder, has been borrowed from Isaiah Berlin’s essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox. An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History” (1953). It has in fact long been in use to designate two opposing strategies, in turns ascribed to artists, philosophers, politicians and scholars: persistence and cunningness. The story of the metaphor itself is old and complicated, but it comes down to the proverb, supposedly thought up by a Greek soldier (and a poet), Archilochus, who lived in the 7th century B. C., later cited by Erasmus: “*Multa novit vulpes, verum echinus unum magnum* (or, roughly, ‘The fox devises many strategies; the hedgehog knows one great and effective strategy’)” (Gould 2011: 2). Perhaps the biggest promise that the cognitivist paradigm offers is the wedding of the two.

4. Promises

The actual alliances between the humanities and the cognitivist paradigm diverge and take different forms; in the case of, for instance, literary studies, some attempts at integrating the two cultures commenced as early as in the 1970s with the efforts of story grammarians (such as David Rumelhart). Concurrently, a number of literary scholars began to develop interest in memory studies, psychology or psychoaesthetics, combining them with literary criticism so as to analyse poetic devices or symbolic structures of texts in a new light, when in 1983 Reuven Tsur for the first time gave their efforts a name: cognitive poetics. Then, already in the 21st century, the interest stretched out from the issues of stylistics and reader response onto narrativity in various media (cognitive narratology), and later onto the issues of onto- and phylogenetic development of the cognitive capacities necessary for composing narratives in our species (a later version of Literary Darwinism).

The potentiality of cognitive reading of culture is clearly evident in each of the following texts, beginning with the study of human behaviour and its evolutionary aspects: the evolved and culturally transmitted stereotype and

prejudice cognition in the article by Marta Maj and Małgorzata Kossowska, and phylogenetic origins of literature in animal play explored in Marta Sibierska's contribution. The cognitivist paradigm permeates into both pedagogy and historiographic research. A deepened focus on the mental processes is a case in point in Mirosław Pawlak's text on teaching foreign language to adults and in Christopher Korten's use of cognitive narratology in archival studies.

The cognitive aspect is also crucial when analysing any cultural constructs and their transmission, as is the case in the comparative study of popular heroes in the past and today by Liliana Sikorska's. Modernist writings, due to their authors' interest in the workings of the mind and streams of consciousness, seem to be particularly well-suited to analyses from a cognitivist standpoint: whereas Ioana Zirra offers a re-reading of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, focusing on inter- and intra-consciousness communication, cultural transmission, and memory studies, Verita Sriratana explores the issues of defamiliarisation and utopian mental spaces as constructed in Virginia Woolf's playful biography *Orlando*. Mirosława Buchholtz discusses Caroline Levander's book on current conceptualizations of American literature and its location in transcultural space. Grzegorz Konecniak comments on the link between the cognitivist methodological apparatus and literary studies in Polish higher education units offering BA and MA programmes in cognitive studies.

As the thematic scope of the texts included in this volume as well as the above outline of the cognitive approach show, it is not just the case that the interdisciplinary research is now giving rise to a new branch of sciences, such as cognitive literary studies, cognitive pedagogy, cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, experimental semiotics, and so on. It is, in fact, a manifestation of a much more expansive trend: "a little tale of victory for a particular fox and hedgehog" (Gould 2011: 262), a hybridisation of human complex composition with empirical verification and computable quantitative data. The question of what happens once the theses made so far by the humanist scholars are rigorously tested in a scientific regime remains open.

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