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The Oceanic Literary Reading Mind: An Impression

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The mind and brain processes of the literary reading mind are most accurately defined as oceanic: the mind is an ocean. This is the essential premise that I put forward in my book *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion: An Exploration of the Oceanic Mind* (Routledge, 2011).¹ The statement is of course a metaphor. It follows in a long line of metaphorical apprehensions of the human mind, from Plato's notion of the mind as a wax tablet to the more modern – some might say reductive – ideas of the human mind as a machine or a computer.

The theory of the oceanic literary reading mind maintains that there is a dynamic, free flow of approximately five bottom-up and top-down affective inputs that are active during engaged acts of reading by avid readers of prose fiction. It contends that literary reading does not begin when eyes apprehend the words on the page or end when they leave off, rather, the mind, brain and body are actively reading both before and after the physical act of literary text processing starts and finishes. It promotes the significance of unconscious *affective cognition* and implicit memory during acts of engaged reading alongside the more conscious cognitive emotion and explicit memory. It taps into the idea of cross-cortical and cross-modal processing in the brain and it models these ever-shifting, dynamic brain processes as oceanic cognition: the flotsam and jetsam of feeling and thought.

In many ways, the oceanic mind is a rhetorical mind, a mind 'on the move', caressed softly by the ever-shifting framework of *kairos*: the ancient Greek notion of time, place, manner, content and participants of varied textual and discursive acts. It is a mind that is capricious, dynamic and brimming with original potentials. It floats confidently on the credible narrative of embodied cognition. Conversely, the notion of a computational mind can be said to be a logical mind: bits and bytes, zeros and ones, binary: predictable, repetitious; insistent in its purported exactitude, wilfully disembodied, fallaciously incorporeal.

When I was writing *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion: An Exploration of the Oceanic Mind* (henceforth 'LRCE') I was interested in one simple question: what happens in the brains and bodies of avid, engaged readers when they sit down to read a work of fiction. In my methodology I applied theory, existing empirical

experiments from cognitive neuroscience and my own, primarily qualitative testing on 36 student readers from two different academic institutions. My main question led to others. These included (i) what role does emotion play in a cognitive event like literary text processing? and (ii) which kinds of bottom-up and top-down inputs are most prominently involved in literary reading – and how do they interact in meaning-making?

In this chapter I will give a concise summary of the main aspects of my theory of the oceanic literary reading mind. I will briefly sketch out my notions of (i) the affective (sign-fed and mind-fed) inputs, (ii) the literary reading loop, and (iii) the key roles that memory and emotion play in engaged acts of literary reading. For fuller explanations of all these concepts, please consult *LRCE*.²

Engaged, emotive acts of literary reading by avid readers are made up of a number of basic elements. I identify five such elements which I term *affective inputs* that are active during reading. I initially distribute these into two categories. These are (a) bottom up ‘sign-fed’ prompts, such as literary style and literary themes on the one hand, and (b) top-down ‘mind-fed’ inputs, such as pre-reading mood, the location of the literary reading event and literary reading induced mental imagery (shortened in Figure 14.1 for the sake of convenience to ‘LRI’) that a reader generates during literary engagement.³

I coined the terms *sign-fed* and *mind-fed* in *LRCE* not only to differentiate between bottom-up and top-down inputs but also, with regard to my use of the word ‘sign’, to differentiate between the general perceptual incoming data

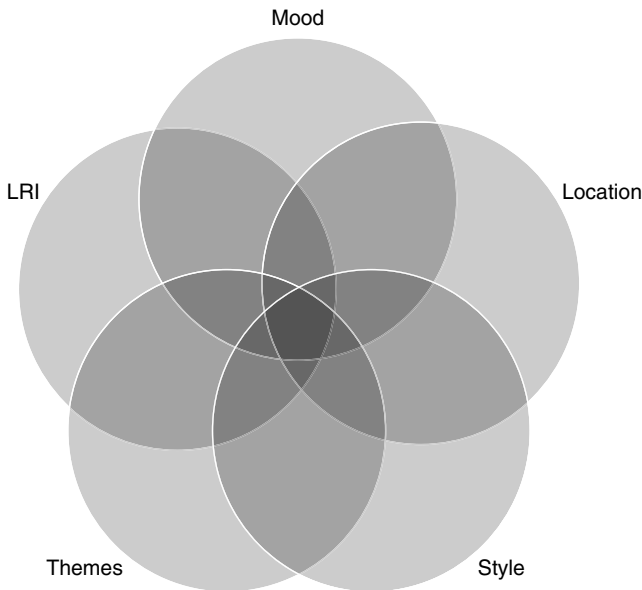


Figure 14.1 The five *sign-fed* and *mind-fed* categories active during engaged acts of literary reading that make up the *affective inputs*

Source: From Burke, *Literary Reading*, 155.

of objects in the world on the one hand and language/sign based input on the other. I realised, however, that this *mind-fed* / *sign-fed* dichotomy was probably overstated, as the division between what goes 'up' as it were and what comes 'down' becomes fluid once a reading event is underway.⁴ This requires a unifying concept that facilitates a blending of the *mind-fed* and *sign-fed*. The phrase I settled on, given the emotional weight of literary reading, was *affective inputs*.

One of these inputs, *pre-reading mood*, seemed more significant than the rest for an engaged affective reading experience to take place; or at least this is what the qualitative data from the experiments appeared to be suggesting. A logical step was to explore this category further. Based on my reading and my data, I conjectured that reading as we know it does not only take place when a reader's eyes are on the page or screen, as one might logically think. Rather, some form of 'reading' must also be taking place prior to, just after and even long after eyes-page or eyes-screen interfaces have started or ended. Following from this, the four stages that I proposed were: (i) pre-reading, (ii) (actual) reading, (iii) post-reading and (iv) non-reading. Pre-reading is that window of time just before eyes meet the page/screen. Post-reading is that period just after eyes have left the page/screen. Non-reading is the time in between reading events where a reader could be out for a walk, eating dinner at home or driving to work. As was the case for the five *affective inputs*, I concluded that these are not detached stages. The act of reading is not monolithic, rather these four phases are interconnected, dynamic, and fluid. They are the four fluvial phases of reading/discourse processing that go to make up what I termed *the literary reading loop* (Figure 14.2).

The *literary reading loop* and the inherent memory and emotion that reside in those four integrated phases led to the realisation that engaged acts of literary reading by avid readers rely profoundly on memory and emotion; but what kind of memory and what kind of emotion? In psychology, memory is usually divided into short-term (working) memory and long-term memory.⁵ Long-term memory is then further divided into explicit and implicit memory. Explicit memory is the most acknowledged in cognitive psychology and in reading studies. This declarative, conscious kind of memory is further divided into 'episodic' (i.e. largely autobiographical) memory and 'semantic' memory. The former pertains to a memory of specific places and events while the latter is more concerned with facts and world knowledge. Implicit memory is non-declarative and unconscious. Instinctively, one might think that it has no place in reading, but it does. In fact, I contend that it plays a crucial role, especially with regard to reading prose fiction. Implicit memory is divided into the two categories of 'priming' and 'procedural memory'. Priming is essentially about non-conscious prompts that nudge you into a certain direction. Priming is persuasion. Within the framework of the *affective inputs* of literary reading (a) time and place, (b) LRI, and (c) pre-reading mood all have exceptional non-conscious priming potential, as they draw on previously enjoyed (and now unconscious) past reading experiences. Arguably, procedural learning has even more of an effect on engaged acts of literary reading by avid readers. Procedural memory is about habit; about those things that you have done so often that they become almost automatic. Things like brushing your teeth,

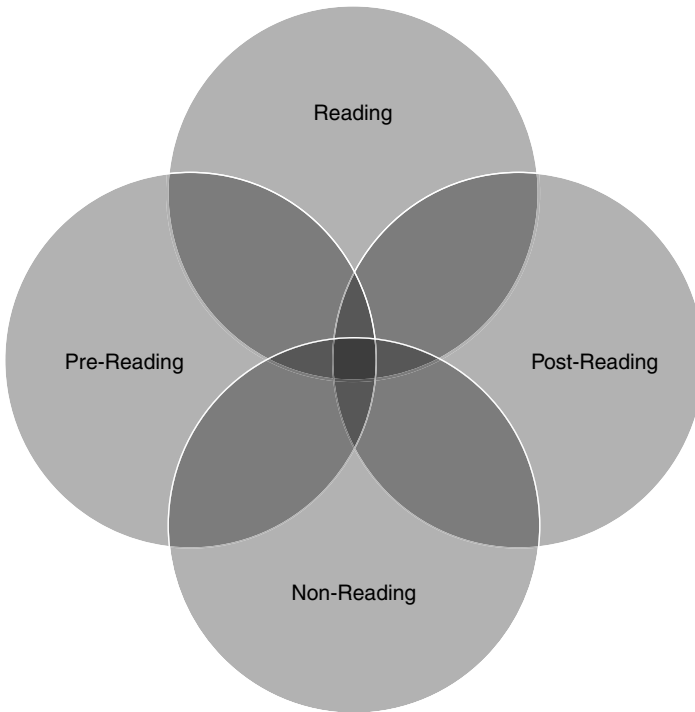


Figure 14.2 The four fluvial stages of the literary reading loop
 Source: From Burke, *Literary Reading*, 153.

combing your hair, locking your front door when you leave the house. But for avid readers it must also be about interfacing with prose fiction in engaged acts of reading. In light of this, engaged acts of literary reading by avid readers are likely to involve a vast amount of implicit memory. Foregrounding theory appears to support this idea. An avid reader, reading in an engaged manner in full flow, generally reads at ease, at speed and largely unconsciously. It is only when he/she is struck by a foregrounded lexical or syntactic item, that he/she is stirred to attention, to realisation and to conscious, explicit cognition. In most literary texts this is an infrequent occurrence. If everything is foregrounded, then nothing is foregrounded. It is also such rhetorical/stylistic devices that can prompt episodes of reader disportation, channelling a person from an immersive, non-conscious state to an attentive, conscious one (Burke 2011).

The dominant attitude with regard to emotion in mainstream psychology is that it occurs after a cognitive appraisal has taken place. The emotional response comes at the end of a list of conscious, cognitive, higher-cortical activity, along the lines of (a) 'something has just happened', (b) 'that makes me feel good', (c) 'I am now experiencing a positive emotion about it', (d) 'I'm happy' . . . 'And I know it'.⁶ I call this *cognitive emotion*: emotive responses at the behest of rational higher cortical processing: the mind first, followed by the body. Conversely, what

I term *affective cognition* is the opposite. In *affective cognition*, emotive effects are immediate and a sense of what caused the emotion comes afterwards: embodied mind first, rational brain later. What is happening here during such *affective cognitive* events is that some higher cortical regions are being initially bypassed, resulting in a more direct inclusion of emotive processing areas of the brain such as the amygdala. Such instant emotive gratification is grounded in psychologist Joseph LeDoux's 'quick and dirty' route to emotion that is set out in his book *The Emotional Brain* (1998). It is his 'low road' to emotion, as opposed to the high (cortical) road. This idea is not new: more than 100 years ago the founding father of psychology, William James, was asking himself questions that were similar. For instance, he would reflect 'am I crying because I am sad or am I sad because I am crying?'⁷ In a nutshell, the question at hand was, might physiological arousal be able to instigate felt emotion? That is, might the body be *before* the brain? This, in essence, is my notion of *affective cognition* (Figure 14.3).

In many ways *affective cognition* works in conjunction with implicit memory. These are two phenomena that one would not necessarily expect to be playing prominent roles in text processing events, but when it comes to engaged acts of literary processing/reading by avid readers, both *affective cognition* and implicit memory are central. Their non-conscious, non-linear, dynamic nature also gives rise to oceanic cognition.

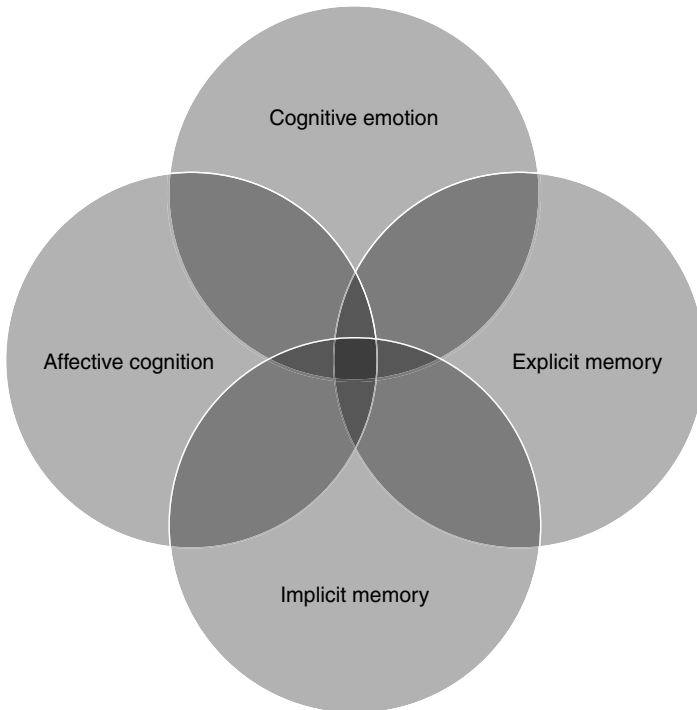


Figure 14.3 The oceanic processing nature of the literary reading mind
Source: From Burke, *Literary Reading*, 159.

It is here with this thought that this short impression of the oceanic literary reading mind has to conclude. In the past we have seen metaphorical claims about mind and brain processes ranging from wax tablets in classical antiquity to machines and most recently computers. All of these are less than adequate. Indeed, no metaphor can ever fully encompass the complex, cross-modal, dynamic processes of the human mind and brain. There is, however, one comparison that arguably comes close: “the mind is an ocean”, which embodies the empirically tested ideas in contemporary neuroscience of cross-modal neural operations and processing, as well as cross-modal, culture and experience-driven brain plasticity. The concepts that underpin this claim are located in the theory of the oceanic literary reading mind. The notion of fluvial mind processes is not mere creative fancy. Leading perception scholar Stephen M. Kosslyn (together with his colleague Olivier Koenig) has suggested in *The Wet Mind* (1985) that a hydraulic metaphor is what is needed to account for mind and brain processes as this ‘stresses the complex, interactive nature of the brain’s computation, and it encourages us to think about how emotion and motivation can alter information processing’.⁸ In the succeeding 20 years since 1995 their call has largely fallen on deaf ears as the push goes on in cognitive neuropsychology to find explicit, conscious and computational solutions to encompass and represent how the mind and brain work. This propositional route is misguided. It is an ocean away from what will eventually be recognised as a practicable, metaphorical model to help define mind and brain processes, as only time and tide will tell.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Routledge/Taylor and Francis for allowing me to reproduce a number of my Venn diagrams from my book in this present chapter.
2. Two further phenomena that play a central role in *LRCE* are (a) the ‘somatic cushion’ that operates in working memory as a somatic buffer region/rehearsal zone for experiences such as ‘felt movement’, and (b) the embodied notion of reader ‘disportation’ that can occur during heightened emotive states of reading. Owing to space constraints neither of these will be discussed here (see *LRCE* for detailed descriptions).
3. At the end of *LRCE* I reflect that there should probably be a sixth input, namely, ‘time’, as the time of a reading event – in a similar way to the location of it – is important for stimulating emotive effects during the act of reading literature. Is a book read in the morning, in the afternoon or in the evening? Is it read in spring, summer, autumn or winter? Is it read on Christmas Day, New Year’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Hallowe’en or on the anniversary of your dead mother or father? Many of these time-related periods will be important for many avid, engaged readers in attempting to match what they read and when they read it in order to facilitate the greatest emotive engagement potential.
4. For more on how the schematic aspects of certain style figures (like, for example, the rhetorical scheme ‘chiasmus’) can be initially in the mind rather than always initially on the page during specific episodes of engaged literary reading, see Burke 2013.
5. A humanities approach to memory, not explored in my model – but with great potential – is cultural memory.
6. See Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) for more on this cognitive appraisal approach.
7. See also James’s famous article ‘What Is an Emotion?’ (1884).
8. Stephen M. Kosslyn and Olivier Koenig, *The Wet Mind: The New Cognitive Neuroscience* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 447–448.