

The role of *Vorstellung* in literary semantics

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Abstract

In spite of the current panoply of approaches to literary semantics, this paper argues that the discipline suffers from one scandalous absence: the theorization of Vorstellung, or 'perceptual modification.' The paper traces the trajectory of the elimination of Vorstellung in language semantics from Frege to Saussure and to the demise of the signified in the post-Saussurean tradition. Alternative perspectives are introduced that promise the rehabilitation of the perceptual ingredients of language, such as cognitive linguistics (Lakoff) and corporeal pragmatics (Ruthrof), approaches that could be used to revive literary semantics by granting Vorstellung its proper role in the theorization of literary meaning.

1. Introduction

There is no such thing as *literary semantics*, at least not if we understand semantics as a systematized set of rules abstracted from the practice of reading literary works. What we have instead is a loosely related body of writings largely dedicated to the application to literary works of various approaches to the theorization of natural language and logic. Such writings range from the exploration of analytic language philosophy, to features of Saussurean structuralist accounts, Hallidayan functional linguistics, a variety of theories of metaphor, phenomenological investigations, semiotic approaches both in the Peircean and Saussurean modes, possible world theories, and applications of modal and other forms of logic. A case in point is the *Journal of Literary Semantics* whose publications, since its foundation in 1972 by Trevor Eaton, have covered a broad spectrum of applications of theorizations of natural language and other sign systems to literary texts.

As the current editor of the journal, Michael Toolan writes in his editorial blurb ‘the aim of the *Journal of Literary Semantics* is to concentrate the endeavours of theoretical linguistics upon those texts traditionally classed as literary.’ And indeed, as long as we conceive of ‘theoretical linguistics’ in a generous sense, the majority of contributions can be regarded as applications of a broad spectrum of semiotic theorisations to literary texts, from perspectives such as systems theory (Sadowski 2002; Rogers 1982), information processing (Droste 2003), computing (Louwerse 1999), possible worlds theory (Charles 1993; Doležel 1976, 1979, 1984–1985; Bailin 2004), relevance theory (Green 1993), psycholinguistics (R. Eaton 1988), and other disciplines. This collection, as well as a substantive corpus of books which we could adduce as evidence for the existence of a semantics of literature (such as Dowling 1999; Toolan 1998; Doležel 1998; Ruthrof 1992; Sell 1991; Pavel 1986; Kurzweil and Phillips 1983; and Kurrik 1979), suggests that it is indeed this applicatory paradigm that constitutes *literary semantics*.

Given such diversity, it should perhaps not be surprising that, even among some prominent scholars in *literary semantics*, there is no general agreement as to the status of the discipline. In 1996, Trevor Eaton, building on his earlier work *The Semantics of Literature* (1966), made a forceful attempt at establishing the discipline as a ‘science’ in a paper echoed in a debate that has continued to today. In the same issue, Denis E. B. Pollard added some cautionary remarks, pointing to two main dangers: One, that *literary semantics* ‘can become prematurely appropriated by the conceptual framework of another discipline, its own concerns obliterated by reduction to a “proprietary” vocabulary conceived with rather different objectives in mind’; the other, ‘that its subject matter and problems might become dissipated and lost in a welter of diverse schemes and intellectual dialects which, in a Kuhnian sense, are likely to be incommensurable.’ (Pollard 1996: 78). In light of the many paradigms brought to bear on the literary (whatever its contested status), one could rephrase these concerns a little more sharply. It looks as if a set of literary texts functioned as the ground zero for different combat units testing their critical ammunition with no real interest in the landscape but only in the effectiveness of their weaponry. From this perspective, incommensurability would be a bonus rather than a flaw. Pollard, it seems to me, is quite right in raising the question of ‘subject matter’: Is the subject matter the application of a variety of linguistic theorizations or ways of ‘literary meaning making’? Perhaps this opposition is contrived and should be reconciled by showing how non-literary theorizations clarify and open up new avenues for the construction of meaning in literary readings. If so, then all such applications take on the status of *auxiliary* tools in the service of *literary semantics*.

In two papers, Dieter Freundlieb entered the debate by first attempting to delimit *literary semantics* as a discipline by stipulating that it ‘must be based . . . on the idea that (a) there is a reasonably well-defined set of objects called literary texts; (b) there either is or can be a systematic study of the meaning of such texts; (c) the construction of meaning in literary texts is sufficiently different from that found in non-literary texts; and (d) the systematic study of meaning of literary texts is something that differs from, and is perhaps superior to, or at least equally important as, other more hermeneutical approaches to the study of literary texts’ (Freundlieb 1998: 61). Referring especially to Freundlieb’s criteria, Trevor Eaton proposed a description of *literary semantics* at once more modest and more ambitious than Freundlieb’s by regarding it as a ‘branch of linguistics which studies (a) those texts (in relation to their readership) which are from time to time deemed “literary” and (b) draws from this study meta-theoretical implications for linguistics as a whole’ (Eaton 1999: 134f.). Crucial in Freundlieb’s definition seems to me his insistence that literary meaning construction needs to be recognizably different from semantic questions in general, a point omitted in Eaton’s point (a) but curiously implied in point (b), which argues for *literary semantics* to act as a master discipline for language study as a whole. There are good reasons for such an argument, as I have tried to show in some detail in *Pandora and Occam: On the Limits of Language and Literature* (Ruthrof 1992). After all, literature in both oral and written forms constitutes the most comprehensive language laboratory of cultures around the world.

Perhaps because of the largely ‘applicatory’ character of the practice of *literary semantics*, employing forever more extraneous tools to its subject matter, or perhaps because of insufficient theorization within the field itself, Freundlieb’s more recent contribution to the debate ends on a sobering note. ‘I still want to be convinced,’ he writes, ‘that literary semantics can either be a real cognitive science or that it can do better than traditional literary criticism’ (Freundlieb 2000: 140). The ‘applicatory approach’ to literary meaning making could be viewed as Heidegger regarded the placing of a power station in the river Rhine: it makes unreasonable demands on nature by treating it as a mere energy resource, which however gets us nowhere near understanding the river Rhine (Heidegger 1978). In his 1935 ‘Vienna Lecture’ Husserl issued a similar warning against a falsely applied ‘objectivism’ (Husserl 1970: 292, 297). In defense of the scanning of literary texts by a variety of semiotic theorizations, one could say that by testing scientific tools on complex phenomena such as literary texts, we learn a good deal about the explanatory power of those approaches. *Literary semantics* then would be a discipline of sharpening non-literary intellectual enterprises by using literature as a test case.

If we were to accept the *de facto* applicatory conception of *literary semantics*, we could also have no objections to the description of natural language semantics in general, from whatever perspective, be it from the principles of formal logic or the domain of AI. After all, in all such investigations, disciplines from outside the *definiendum*, meaning in natural language and meaning in literary uses of language, have been imported as means of the *definiens*. And if there were no alternatives to such extraneous forms of description, there would be no point in deploring that there is no such thing as *literary semantics* in any strict sense. Furthermore, what would such a 'strict sense' look like? Perhaps the most promising opening for a semantics evolving out of literary phenomena rather than generally linguistics was Roman Ingarden's work initiated in the 1930s. Not surprisingly, Ingarden's profound theorization about the nature of the epistemic constitution of complex objects, of which he regarded the literary work to be a prime example, spawned a long list of writings foregrounding the reader, whose authors in many cases were quite oblivious to their phenomenological debts and on the whole have lost sight of the core issues the Polish philosopher had put on the agenda. The main difference between applications of theoretical models of language and other sign systems and Ingarden's effort seems to me to lie in the way he tried to show the minimal conditions without which we cannot perform a literary text in a literary manner. Certainly, a strong case can be made to argue that *The Literary Work of Art* (1973 [1930]) and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1973 [1957]), in addressing aspects of literary performance absent from much of theoretical linguistics and related approaches, pointed to a viable alternative to the applicatory tradition I have sketched, an alternative that foregrounds a non-linguistic, though semiotic, feature common to all literary performance.

2. Enter *Vorstellung*

There is one aspect of meaning making so central to reading literary texts and yet so scandalously absent from the dominant theorizations of natural language that it deserves special mention: *Vorstellung*, or as I propose to render the signifier in English 'perceptual modification' or 'perceptual variation.' *Vorstellung* has been translated as 'imagination,' 'mental representation,' 'representation,' or 'mental projection.' Pluhar proposes 'presentation' in translating Kant's '*Vorstellung*' in the *Critique of Judgment*, which comes closest to the German original, yet fails to capture the act of placing something in front of us, as the act of *sich etwas vor-*

stellen (to present something in front of oneself; to imagine something) suggests (Kant 1987). In Frege's writings, the term *Vorstellung* is typically translated as 'idea,' which introduces an ambiguity via abstraction that should be avoided. What gets lost here is the emphasis on a projecting act, the re-creative activity of the imagination. But while the English word 'imagination' captures a good deal of what is meant by *Vorstellung*, it fails to account well for two important features of *Vorstellung*. Expressions such as 'imagination' and 'imaginative response' collapse general non-linguistic grasp into the domain of the visual and, even more importantly, lack the realist polarity of the spectrum of meanings that we associate with *Vorstellung*. These differences are all important, for the semantic scope of *Vorstellung* covers a range of meanings from the most realist 'imagination' of an actual situation, as the witness reports of an accident, my description of a room after closing my eyes, or the recall of a taste or olfactory experience, to the constructions of the wildest fantasy scenarios. Part of this side of *Vorstellung* is also present in the English verb 'imagine,' as in such expressions as 'imagine a situation in which' or 'imagine a sentence with two sub-clauses' or 'imagine a car approaching from the left,' while the noun 'imagination' somehow undermines the realist emphasis. In translating Wittgenstein, who often employs phrases like 'Imagine a situation in which ...,' the German is well translated by 'imagine,' while his use of *Vorstellung* causes difficulties (Wittgenstein 1986 [1953]: paragraphs 2, 3, 6, 14, 19, 21, 23n., 31, 86, etc.). To pursue the philosophical consequences of the various renderings of *Vorstellung* in translations from German to English would in itself be a fertile topic. Suffice it to say here that *Vorstellung* has been chosen for this paper in preference over 'imagination' because of its extensive semantic scope from highly realist to fantasy variations of human perception. It is this breadth of coverage that makes it uniquely suitable to the description of what goes on in the performance of literary texts. While *Vorstellung* is an embarrassment to post-Saussurean linguists and post-Fregean philosophers alike, consider the prominence of *Vorstellung* in the following, typical mental activities: in perception as the *Vorstellung* of the actual (what we actually taste, smell, touch); realist representation as the *Vorstellung* of the absent; memory as the *Vorstellung* of the past (e.g., a painful emotion); prediction as the *Vorstellung* of the future; suggestion as the *Vorstellung* of the tentative; certitude as the *Vorstellung* of what seems compelling; hope as the *Vorstellung* of what we wish will be the case; fantasy as the *Vorstellung* of the possible and impossible; dream as the *Vorstellung* of the unconscious; hallucination as the *Vorstellung* of the counterfactual; utopia as the *Vorstellung* of a desirable world; or dystopia as the *Vorstellung* of a catastrophic world.

If *Vorstellung* in itself strikes the reader as too amorphous a concept, an alternative way of rendering the term is by the intersemiotic Peircean route, employing the notion of *iconicity* and the iconic sign, broadly conceived. If we subtract perceptual iconicity from Peirce's general concept, what is left is the iconicity of *Vorstellung*, the multiple forms of *perceptual variation* or *perceptual modification*. We could also call this domain the 'fictive,' with the proviso that, here too, highly realist projections play an important role. Nor is *Vorstellung* a mere adjunct to reading, something we could do without, or something we can add at a later stage to color the basic meanings we have already established. Quite the contrary, without *Vorstellung* we could not even begin to constitute meanings. For, in order to make sense of the words in their specific poetic order, we need to imagine a 'world' that gives coherence to individual semantic values. In other words, *Vorstellung* is the indispensable tool for achieving a *fictive iconic construal*. Let me illustrate this point by the arbitrary choice of a poem. Take Wilfred Owen's 'Futility' as example.

Move him into the sun —
 Gently its touch awoke him once,
 At home, whispering of fields unsown.
 Always it woke him, even in France,
 Until this morning and this snow.
 If anything might rouse him now
 The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds, —
 Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
 Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
 Full-nerved — still warm — too hard to stir?
 Was it for this the clay grew tall?
 — O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
 To break earth's sleep at all?

As we are reading, Owen's words *come into existence as a poem*. This phenomenological insight is crucial to *literary semantics*. Word by word, Owen's verbally coded image chains are activated by *Vorstellung*, as are a series of interpretive abstractions sharable by a community of readers. As Roman Ingarden cogently demonstrated, the poem's virtual artistic structure requires acts of reading for the realization, which he called *concretizations*, of its potential as an *ontically heteronomous object*, an intentionally constituted entity straddling a number of ontological domains: materiality (sound, print), ideality (sentence meanings, high-level interpretive abstractions), and fantasy or pure intentionality. These grounding

principles of phenomenology have since given rise to a rich tradition of reader-oriented theories. Here we are interested only in using them to shore up the claim of the primacy of *Vorstellung*.

Whenever we read the poem, we enact a number of implied as well as stated instructions. First there is the concealed speech act of all literature: 'Imagine the following situation.' This implicit imperative is generically coded for all poems. When we read texts in a non-literary manner, as for instance a DNA analysis, we are performing language in a somewhat different manner. In reading a poem, we engage in a specified, community-sanctioned set of acts by granting our projective powers, our *Vorstellung*, a leading role: we are ready to imagine a 'world.' The second speech act we encounter is explicit, but by no means unambiguous: 'Move him into the sun —.' The imperative is polysemous because it could refer to the poetic speaker's thoughts at the time ('We should move him into the sun'), to an actual statement (a command by an officer or a suggestion made by a fellow soldier), or to the reader's task of creating imagined contrasts between the slain soldier and the life-generating, gentle power of the sun. This contrast provides the frame within which the reader's *Vorstellung* is charged to explore what can be typically projected from the two stanzas.

The opening of the second stanza 'Think how it wakes the seeds,' is another direct instruction to the readers to unfold their powers of *perceptual variation*. The imperative 'Think' is not so much a directive to engage in any sort of thinking, such as doing calculus, engaging in verbal analysis, or thinking as sorting, deduction, induction or logical inference, all legitimate forms of 'thinking.' Rather, the poetic speaker here challenges the reader to explore a vast nonverbal scenario from the lifeless limbs of the soldier's body to the evolutionary history of the earth and so recreate an all-embracing sense of pity and the kind of human compassion that gave rise to the composition of the poem itself. Contrary to the popular idea that language in poetry is self-referential, which is the case to a certain but limited extent, language here and in all literary texts is primarily a conduit for imaginative experimentation, for the exploration of the *perceptual variation* of our world, whereby 'perceptual' refers to our entire complex of nonverbal realizations and not just the those related to seeing. In other words, the poem invites us to use language as a medium through which we contemplate a world created by our *Vorstellung* as indispensable faculty. This is what is missing or marginalized in our standard accounts of language. *Vorstellung* has no room in either the post-Fregean or the post-Saussurean traditions. Worse, *literary semantics* has on the whole not been able to establish itself in the face of the anti-*Vorstellung* orientation of the dominant philosophical and linguistic paradigms.

If we accept the idea that *Vorstellung* is essential to sense-making, at least in reading literary texts, not merely as an additional, pleasurable activity but as a *conditio sine qua non*, then we must argue that its role in *literary semantics* needs to be fully acknowledged. But how can it be if, as observed at the beginning of the paper, the discipline has largely borrowed its methods from non-literary theories? In the following summaries of a number of typical approaches found in *literary semantics*, the paper now asks the question of what position of value *Vorstellung* has been allocated in each approach.

3. Fregean sense, Saussurean syntax and the demise of the signified

From Frege to Davidson and beyond, analytical language philosophy has remained within the confines of geometrical assumptions. Sense is definitionally ruled, as in Frege's 'pure' thought of geometrical 'intersection,' and so, up to this day, analytical philosophers believe in the definitional sanctity of 'sentence meanings,' even where 'utterance meanings' are admitted. They contain meaning within their propositional confines, and it is a mistake to assume that speech act theory in the analytical mould (Austin, Searle) has altered this basic credo. Austin is still able to isolate a pure 'locution' from its enveloping 'illocution' and 'perlocution.' Perhaps the upshot of this tradition is Davidson's radical denial of metaphorical meaning, an argument that is as compelling in its consistency with the analytical definition of sentence meanings inherited from Frege as it is blind to the actual workings of metaphors and hence the necessity to radically critique his own credo in the literality of sentence meaning. As I have argued in detail elsewhere, this situation is the consequence of Frege's *illegitimate* conflation of two kinds of sense, the formal sense of geometry and the 'sense' of natural language expressions. (Ruthrof 1997: 59–76) Given the purity of meaning that Frege was aiming for in order to create an unambiguous *Begriffsschrift*, it is not surprising that he found *Vorstellung* an inconvenient by-product of natural languages. This is why he strictly eliminated *Vorstellung* from meaning as merely subjective and a hindrance to his objectivist view of language. Thus exterminated, *Vorstellung* plays no role in analytical language philosophy to this day, a phenomenon that is as much celebrated by those who approach language from the perspective of logic as it is deadly to *literary semantics*.

The second fundamental influence on contemporary conceptions of natural language is that of Saussure, whose achievement of providing linguistics with a scientific basis remains undisputed. From the perspective of *Vorstellung*, Saussure proposed a conception of the linguistic signs

that allowed at least minimally for a retention of the link between language and perception. In his notion of the signified as 'concept' or 'image' the founding father of structuralist linguistics acknowledged that signifiers alone, unlike in formal sign systems, cannot account for the way in which natural language works. 'The linguistic entity exists only through the association of the signifier with the signified. Whenever only one element is retained, the entity vanishes . . . A succession of sounds is linguistic only if it supports an idea.' The same applies to 'the signified as soon as it is separated from its signifier.' Crucially, 'in language, a concept is a quality of its phonic substance just as a particular slice of sound is a quality of the concept' (Saussure 1974: 102f.). However, there are two features in structuralist linguistics that have undermined the connection between language and world. One is Saussure's strong emphasis on the syntactic constitution of meaning, the other, the post-Saussurean neglect and, more recently, abolition of the signified (Lamaire 1977: 41; Laclau 1996: 36; Hayles 1993: 76). Now the work of meaning is done by syntactically organized signifiers by themselves. While this is a perfect description of such formal languages as chess, FORTRAN, PASCAL, and other definitional sign systems, natural language is like chess only at the syntactic but not at the semantic level. As a consequence, the reduction of linguistics to syntactically ordered signifiers fails to capture what is most important in natural language: intersubjective, socioculturally saturated meanings. Not surprisingly, *Vorstellung*, an important ingredient in the constitution of such meanings, has no room in a linguistics in which signifieds are either relegated to the too hard basket or eliminated altogether. When such forms of linguistics are imported into *literary semantics*, as they regularly are, the results are predictable. Foregrounded are syntactic relations, while the creative, exploratory, imaginative activities that constitute the main purpose of literary reading, the projection of culturally rich fictive worlds, are either taken for granted or assumed to be no more than spurious by-products of signifiers in their discursive formations. Exit *Vorstellung*.

It is a curious situation that the post-structuralist intervention by Jacques Derrida has not greatly improved this situation, although he has confessed to being in sympathy with Peircean semiotics, which includes iconicity in all its forms. Importantly, unlike many of his less cautious popularizers, Derrida never abolished either the signified, or meaning intentions, but merely critiqued any claims of presence and origin that we might wish to associate with them (Derrida 1977). For Derrida, the linguistic sign remains constituted by the reciprocity of signifier and signified. The signifier cannot be thought without the signified and vice versa. And yet, Derrida's critique of phenomenological presence, of Husserl's

‘now,’ and the assumed stability of signifieds has given rise to a verbocentric emphasis that cannot celebrate *Vorstellung* either. At the end of post-structuralism, we have not been able to halt the demise of the signified. Worse was to come with the postmodernist claim of the fatality of meaning, exemplified in the writings of Baudrillard where, paradoxically, *Vorstellung* is demanded as a strategy of resistance, while it is denied in the very premises of his theorizing (Baudrillard 1990: 178). No signifieds, no *Vorstellung*, no meaning, no conception, let alone resistance. For *literary semantics*, this means the reduction of the literary text to mere or empty signifiers, a position that is not only infertile as far as the imaginative exploration of texts is concerned but theoretically self-contradictory.

4. The Heideggerian route

Even if Heidegger did not favor the term *Vorstellung* in his writings, as did Kant for example, it plays an important role in his remarks on interpretation. The three components of the necessary fore-structure of all interpretation, fore-sight, fore-grasp, and fore-having, all rely heavily on the playful employment of *perceptual variation*. Without these, says Heidegger, we could not even begin to interpret. This triple ‘fore-structure’ suggests that we are in a position to interpret only if we have at our disposal at least a minimal understanding of what is then elaborated in the process of interpreting (Heidegger 1962: 188–213). Here, *Vorstellung* is precisely the activity of imaginatively projecting directional possibilities of interpretation. Importantly, the Heideggerian picture of interpretation would make little sense if the triple fore-structure were to be restricted to merely linguistic or perhaps even logical projections, merely more words or propositions. Quite the contrary, all three aspects of the fore-structure draw on the rich speculative, imaginative resources of *Vorstellung*, again from its most realist realizations to its most imaginative fantasy distortions. Crucially for literary interpretation, a special case of Heidegger’s general theorization, *Vorstellung* here comprises our total perceptual awareness of the world as well as the totality of our imaginative *perceptual variations*.

When Heidegger describes interpretation as an elaboration of understanding — which activates what we already know in a certain way, as well as what we already feel and desire as ingredients of a ‘hermeneutic circle’ (Heidegger 1962: 195) — he isolates its foundational principle in the ‘as-structure’: something is understood as something else. This is, of course, also the founding principle of the sign of semiotics, the *aliquid pro aliquo*, reformulated by Peirce to include human agents. Again,

it would be quite misleading to reduce either Peirce's or Heidegger's formula to linguistic or logical operations, a proviso that applies specifically to approaches to *literary semantics*. To regard something in terms of something else cannot be restricted to associations of linguistic expressions in a lexicon any more than to the alignment of compatible propositions. To choose an example from Heidegger's 'fundamental ontology,' truth as *aletheia*, the pre-Socratic unconcealment of what is, unlike the Aristotelian propositional truth, always transcends the boundaries of the merely linguistic or merely propositional. What is being compared in the interpretive 'as-structure' is neither words nor logical terms but what they stand for. This means that linguistic and logical signifiers are indeed transparent to their signifieds, albeit not in any transcendently secured form. Rather, language in interpretation is transparent to negotiatory and so contestable signifieds, which require a great deal of *Vorstellung* for their imaginative projection.

Beyond such technicalities, literature and especially poetry play an important role, especially in Heidegger's later work. Here poetry and its thoughtful contemplation are argued to belong to the few remaining truly human activities able to render existence in technological modernity meaningful. This is so, Heidegger says, because poetry uniquely exemplifies that language is never merely a tool of communication; rather, the essence of language, as demonstrated by poetry, is always a form of *aletheia*, a mode of revealing, an *Entbergen*, beyond the surface of habitual meaning construction. For Heidegger, therefore, the Being of the being of poetry is *aletheia*. And what is so revealed is not more language, less just indicative sentences or propositional contents, but through language a potential for being thoughtful about human existence and its potential destiny. Such thoughtfulness, especially in the case of poetry, relies profoundly on the imaginative, philosophically oriented work of *Vorstellung*.

5. Neurolinguistics and cognitive linguistics

An unexpected boost for *Vorstellung* has recently come from two sides: from certain remarks by Noam Chomsky, critical of the behaviorist and definitional, and so entirely public, determination of meaning in analytical philosophy; and from a field whose scientific origins would appear to undermine the very concept of *Vorstellung*, from neurolinguistics, and especially the recent work in cognitive linguistics by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999). Chomsky, viewing language from the position of what he calls a 'methodological naturalism' compares it to 'organs of the body' and so language, including its most complex mental elaborations,

is regarded as ‘a product of biological evolution’ (Chomsky 2002: 4). Accordingly, any expression should ultimately be traced back to the ‘computational-representational (C-R) system’ of the brain (Chomsky 2002: 24). Insisting that what goes on in the brain cannot be eliminated as irrelevant when we try to understand language, Chomsky rightly rejects both the analytical notion of a publicly defined meaning (Davidson, Putnam), as well as Quine’s behaviorist description (2002: 41–46). His main reason for this opposition is that he believes that cognitive research has so far established that a spoken statement *S* is ‘related to inner states of speakers and hearers, which enter into the ways they interpret it.’ Given this scenario, ‘communication depends on similarity among these states.’ At the same time, it is in such a manner, says Chomsky, that ‘language engages the world’ (2002: 164). What I take from this is the prominence of ‘inner states,’ which I suggest are, to a large measure, what we can call *Vorstellung*.

The other major encouragement for looking at *Vorstellung* as a serious component of meaning and especially *literary semantics* comes from cognitive linguistics based on neurological research. In *Philosophy in the Flesh: A Challenge to Western Thought* Lakoff and Johnston propose a neurologically founded explanation of the metaphoricity of much of natural language as rooted in the sensorimotor activities of the brain. Barring a certain anti-philosophical hype, their approach allows for the role of perceptual grasp and its fantasy extensions as sources of the richness of human thought. The fundamental principles of Lakoff and Johnson’s approach can be encapsulated as follows: Starting from findings in the neurosciences, the authors argue that ‘the peculiar nature of our bodies shapes our very possibilities for conceptualization and categorization’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 19). In turn, concepts are defined as ‘neural structures that allow us to mentally characterize our categories and reason about them. Human categories are typically conceptualized in more than one way, in terms of what are called *prototypes*, neural structures responsible for the kind of ‘inferential or imaginative’ work typically associated with specific categories (1999: 19). Much of our thinking is characterized, they say, by ‘embodied concepts,’ neural structures which are functionally related to ‘the sensorimotor system of our brains.’ Consequently, the authors argue, ‘much of conceptual inference is, therefore, sensorimotor inference’ (1999: 20). While Chomsky links the sensorimotor activities mainly with the generation of signifiers, the sounds of linguistic expressions, leaving meaning to the brain’s conceptualizing faculties, Lakoff and Johnson go further, suggesting that ‘the locus of reason (conceptual inference) would be the same as the locus of perception and motor control, which are bodily functions’ (1999: 20). From the perspec-

tive adopted in this paper, this suggests that *perceptual variation* or *Vorstellung* could likewise be argued to be intimately associated with literary forms of conceptualization, a legitimate focus of *literary semantics*.

What is missing in Lakoff and Johnson's book is a satisfactory account of cultural difference and a greater acknowledgement of the role of the social. This weakness is repaired to a large extent in the writings of Gilles Fauconnier (1985, 1997; Fauconnier and Turner 2002) and especially Mark Turner, whose emphasis on the implications of cognitive linguistics for literary analysis must be regarded as a major contribution to *literary semantics* (Turner 1987, 1991, 1994). Modifying the Protagorean thesis of 'man as the measure of all things' by a neurobiological emphasis, Turner regards meaning as a unified and 'necessary neurobiological endowment' (Turner 1994: 95). This allows him to reject referential, formalist, and syntactic definitions of meaning. He boldly declares that 'culture cannot be distinguished from neurobiology,' (1994: 99) laying to rest a number of orthodox dichotomies: objective versus subjective meaning, mind versus body, biology versus culture, innate versus acquired, genetics versus experience. All that matters, according to Turner, is that evolution has equipped the human organism with an 'imaginative mind' (1994: 104). Here, as in his earlier work, Turner makes room for *Vorstellung* as an indispensable ingredient of semantics, a feature he foregrounds when he interprets literary texts (Turner 1987, 1991). Now *Vorstellung* can be said to have reentered the theorization of natural language.

6. Corporeal pragmatics

Vorstellung is at the heart of corporeal semantics (Ruthrof 1997, 2000) whose principles relevant to *literary semantics* can be summed up as follows: If the basic assumptions and preliminary findings of cognitive linguistics are right, and there is no evidence to date that they are wrong, then the theorization of natural language must seriously review its presuppositions, definitions and conclusions. Another consequence of the insights of cognitive linguistics is, contrary to Lakoff and Johnson's anti-philosophical claims, that many of the traditional views on language from Locke to Kant, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty to Heidegger and Schutz, as well as some recent feminist positions become relevant once more in certain respects. In the most general terms, the neurocognitive approach to language offers an avenue for repairing the rift between language and perception that has characterized linguistic theorization for over a century.

Corporeal semantics is an attempt at an axiomatic delineation of the kind of principles required for arguments in favor of such a connection.

At the heart of such a program is the notion of meaning as the event of linguistic signifiers being activated by nonverbal signs, such as olfactory, gustatory, tactile, haptic, emotional, kinetic, or visual realizations. Natural language as a syntactic sequence of signifiers is an empty grid in need of ‘concretization’ by our nonverbal, quasi-perceptual readings of the world. We could say, then, that language is parasitic on nonverbal iconicity, in the broad sense of Peirce’s term. In this scenario, only signifiers are arbitrary, while ‘at the level of the signified we are iconic beings’ (Ruthrof 2000: 152). To avoid mentalist or subjectivist charges being made against corporeal semantics, cultural communities are argued to provide the framing conditions and monitoring mechanisms for language practice as the largely habitual association of verbal and nonverbal signification. Lastly, in corporeal semantics, meaning is dissociated from truth-conditions, which are replaced by what I have termed ‘sufficient semiosis’ (2000: 152). In light of such an axiomatic frame, corporeal semantics demands the redefinition of the Saussurean linguistic sign as consisting of a largely unmotivated (arbitrary) signifier (Sr) and, contrary to Saussure, a *motivated signified* (Sd) made up of nonverbal signification. In agreement with Saussure, however, the linguistic sign only exists as a combination of the two. The *motivated signified* which permits perception and *Vorstellung* to enter into language and the secondary role of syntax are the main stays of corporeal semantics.

Corporeal semantics differs from cognitive linguistics methodologically and in some important details, such as inevitable interpretive *opacities* (Ruthrof 2000: 53). While cognitive linguistics is a bottom-up, scientifically grounded enterprise, corporeal semantics takes a speculative, top-down perspective, asking what kinds of conditions we must stipulate to explain what appears to be happening in social language use. Here cognitive linguistics acts as a supporting discipline. The most significant difference between the two approaches, as far as details are concerned, is the almost exclusive focus on visual schematization and spatial mapping in cognitive linguistics. This inclination appears to be driven by the neural research paradigm rather than by what happens in natural language use. Corporeal semantics, in contrast, highlights the broad spread of nonverbal significations that make up our overall perceptual grasp of our world, including its most extravagant modifications in *Vorstellung*.

If we accept the traditional distinction between semantics and pragmatics as one between a schema of abstracted linguistic rules on the one hand and, on the other, a schematization of language in use, including speakers and cultural speech situations, then corporeal semantics can never be a semantics in any purist sense. *Corporeal semantics is always already a pragmatics*. The main reason is that on the side of the signified,

the nonverbal mental material required for the activation of signifiers, speakers and sociocultural speech situation are always already part of the description (Ruthrof 1997: 131–136). This is particularly obvious when we approach literary texts and *literary semantics* from the perspective of *corporeal semantics*. Without our constructions in *Vorstellung* of possible speech and reading situations, with all the generic, historical, psychological, cultural, sociological, and political ingredients that typically bring to bear on the signifiers in question, meaning making would be an impoverished activity; and a *literary semantics* unable to cope with such complexities would hardly be worth the effort.

7. Conclusion: The sting in the tail

Vorstellung, then, is at the heart not only of *corporeal pragmatics*, but also of *literary semantics* as a pragmatics. Every interpretive act involving the projection of a literary ‘world’ is of necessity the performance of a social, cultural event. What appears to single out literary performance from ordinary speech events, apart from generic markers indicating a certain degree of Kantian practical ‘purposelessness,’ is perhaps no more than an emphasis on *Vorstellung* over perceptual grasp. Greater emphasis on *Vorstellung* means that *sufficient semiosis* can be disregarded and our imaginative exploration given full rein. Put differently, once we have decided to read a text in a literary fashion, the activation of the signifiers by nonverbal signification is maximized rather than constrained by the actual, that is, the realist function of *Vorstellung* is largely suspended. Our activity of cashing in the linguistic signifiers by nonverbal, quasi-perceptual iconic forms is open-ended and forever expanding. In this picture of *literary semantics*, Derrida’s endless chain of signifiers is matched by an ‘equally’ endless chain of nonverbal signifieds.

I have argued elsewhere for a rewriting of the agenda of theorizations of language by a procedure *in reverse*, starting with the most complex forms of language, exemplified in literary formations, our global language laboratory, in order to show what kind of reductions are required to climb down the ladder of discourse towards technical language, formal logic, and the binary-digital code (Ruthrof 1992: 1–13, 133–164). What emerged was the two-fold reduction of reference to speakers and speech situations and reference to the ‘world.’ In literary reading, we are guided to construe the most elaborate scenarios for both forms of referential projections; as we approach the domain of formal semiosis, both shrink to zero. This suggests that *literary semantics* cannot fruitfully choose a Fregean or post-Saussurean, merely syntactic starting point where sequences

of signifiers have taken center stage. And if this argument goes through, we need to concede two serious consequences, one for *literary semantics* and one for the study of natural languages. For in both, *Vorstellung* plays a pivotal role.

For *literary semantics*, this means a turning to the complexities that characterize literary reading, permitting the emergence of the force and richness of the deictic, explicit and implicit, and referential potential of language. Such a *literary semantics*, rather than heavily leaning on approaches extraneous if not hostile to its *definiendum*, would mould or at least inform its *definiens* out of its own resources. This would require any application of tools to literary readings to respond to and foreground those features that make literary readings what they are: the richest possible activation of signifiers by the signifieds of *Vorstellung*.

The sting in the tail is this. Because the corpus of literary texts (however contested in both directions, as a minimal set or as a certain manner of reading any kind of text) constitutes the storehouse of the resources of what can be done with language, and because *Vorstellung* plays such a crucial role in their activation, it should be considered as a central ingredient of all natural language use. In this respect and in a methodological sense, Derrida can be said to have made a major contribution to *literary semantics*, by having turned literature from an ‘object of study’ into a ‘tool of analysis’ (Rajagopalan 1998: 92). Yet to achieve such a reversal on a broad front, the theorization of language must once more reconcile two domains kept artificially apart: linguistics and perceptual grasp, including *Vorstellung*. This at least seems to me to be one of the legitimate consequences of Trevor Eaton’s demand for *literary semantics* to provide ‘meta-theoretical implications for linguistics as a whole’ (Eaton 1999: 135).

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