

24. Cognitivism and poetry

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Between Perception and the Act of Thinking : Forms of Attention in Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop

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Lyric Between Time and Consciousness

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The notion of attention offers new possibilities for the analysis of lyric poetry. If the study of attention has a long genealogy in the history of philosophy and psychology, at the end of the twentieth century it imposed itself as the key concept in multidisciplinary approaches to consciousness and the mind among disciplines such as phenomenology, philosophy of mind, psychology and cognitive sciences. As far as literature is concerned, the Romantics had already perceived the importance of attention in trying to understand the new demands that modernity presents to both perception and thought, but it is with the acceleration of the development of information technologies during the twentieth century that the preoccupation with attention has become a central feature of contemporary literature in general, and of contemporary poetry and poetics in particular. A few recent studies have started to investigate the notion from a literary perspective, questioning for example its link to the poetics of description or to the interest for the everyday in contemporary poetry, but much remains to be done to see what literary criticism can contribute to the understanding of attention.

This paper argues that tracing various forms of attention opens up new possibilities for rereading some of the most discussed poems of Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop. In particular, it shows how the notion of 'joint attention,' the idea that a subject's relation to objects and to the world is always incorporated in a social context, or shared attentional space, helps to shed some light on the plurality at stake in the heart of the lyric. In doing so, it offers an entry into the sociality of the lyric, joining other recent studies for example focusing on the lyric 'we.' Both Stevens and Bishop used the first person plural in a large variety of ways, and even their lyric 'I' can be shown to be inserted in complex and layered attentional spaces, forcing us not only to question the traditional understanding of the lyric as the domain of the 'I' but also to go beyond what has been done in recent decades in terms of apostrophe and lyric address.

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Lyric Between Time and Consciousness

If Aristotle's hoary triune model of epic, drama, and lyric has over centuries prioritized text, genre, tradition, or relationship of text to speaker, I would like to shift our perspective from a view of the lyric as a *kind* of discourse, toward a view of the lyric as one *cognitive dimension* of discourse: one dimension coexisting alongside, and in dynamic relation with, others. This paper attempts to define narrative, dramatic, and lyric 'cognitive dimensions' of discourse in poetry, with the aim of establishing correlations between discursive and mental phenomena. Might such an articulation advance our understanding of literary discourse in general, and of the lyric in particular? In this paper, I will focus on two dimensions, the lyric and the narrative. Provisionally, the lyric dimension refers to the instantaneous, qualitative aspect of cognition or discourse; the narrative dimension—to the sequential articulation of experiential or discursive events in time. Reading several lyrics through this lens and emphasizing the text's location at the intersection of these dimensions, I illuminate two particular lyric 'impulses': the Edenic urge to capture in language the phenomenal immediacy of experience; and the aim of 'making conscious' those aspects of mind that usually remain unconscious.