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October 21, 2013

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POST BOOKS

Jane Austen Weekly: The Brain and Mind

Posted: 10/05/2012 2:11 pm

Since I wrote about Jane Austen and sex organs last week, it's only fair that I give the brain and mind equal time. (Plus, it's a good excuse to avoid the presidential debate.)

No problem here. Among her countless accomplishments, Austen is making news in the field of neuroscience. The Stanford Center for Cognitive and Neurobiological Imaging (CNI) has been tracking the blood flow patterns in the brains of Austen readers. How? By having literature graduate students read the second chapter of *Mansfield Park* while getting brain images using fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging). The subjects were asked to alternate styles, reading some passages for pleasure and others with the kind of close critical attention required in literature courses like my own. The preliminary results surprised the researchers. Not only does close reading create a distinctly different blood flow pattern in the brain, but it also activates diverse regions that stretch far beyond those associated with attention, in one example, even reaching into areas generally dedicated to physical activity. You may think you are sitting still with a book. Your brain does not.

Natalie Phillips, an Assistant Professor of English at Michigan State University, is a co-director of the study. More importantly, I know her. So, after articles like "This is your brain on Jane Austen," and "Your brain loves Jane Austen," started popping up on the internet, I called her.

"Natalie," I said, "the study is fascinating, but why is Jane Austen relevant? I know the subjects were reading her in the MRI machine. But couldn't they have been reading any author?"

Not really, Natalie said. The researchers needed an author that ordinary people read for pleasure *and* that professors assigned in English class -- a book you could get lost in *and* a book you could write an essay on. "Imagine your syllabus. How many of your assigned novels might someone buy for vacation reading?" Point taken.

I told Natalie I wanted to write about Austen's representation of the mind and thought. She told me that many of the study's participants commented on the characters' consciousness in the essays they wrote after exiting from the MRI.

I found this positively dizzying. Picture the scene. The MRI represents the Austen reader's consciousness as the reader thinks about Austen's representation of the character's consciousness.

As it happens, Austen has a particularly effective technique for representing a character's consciousness (or for creating the *fiction* that such a thing exists). Known as free indirect discourse, or FID, the technique allows the narrator to enter a character's mind and adopt the language of her thoughts while retaining the objectivity of a third-person point of view. It is like a special lens that can simultaneously zoom inside consciousness and zoom out and see it from a distance. An MRI machine records activation in parts of the brain the subject isn't even aware of. FID represents aspects of a character's thoughts that the character herself does not know.

Consider the moment in *Sense and Sensibility* when Elinor realizes that despite having courted her affection, Edward Ferrars is secretly engaged to another woman. My class and I reviewed it carefully a few days ago. At first Elinor is angry. "Her resentment of such behaviour, her indignation at having been its dupe, for a short time made her feel only for herself." From here, the passage slides into free indirect discourse. But "had Edward been intentionally deceiving her? Had he feigned a regard for her which he did not feel?" This is Elinor's mind talking. We know it from the questions, which are the kind of things people say to themselves. Elinor's conclusion -- "No... He certainly loved her" -- is a form of self-soothing.

Then her mind takes a more suspicious turn. Elinor starts to pity Edward. "But if he had injured her, how much more had he injured himself; if her case were pitiable, his was hopeless... She might in time regain tranquillity; but *he*, what had he to look forward to?" When I asked my students about this passage they suggested that Elinor's sympathy offers her the illusion of power. Instead of being hurt and victimized by Edward, she feels sorry for him and turns him into the hopeless victim. By the end of the passage, when Elinor weeps for Edward "more than for herself" we suspect that she is far more humiliated, angry and vengeful than she knows. Little wonder that Austen is a darling among scholars like Alan Richardson, Blakey Vermeule, and Lisa Zunshine, who, like Natalie Phillips, are literary practitioners in the growing field of Cognitive Cultural Studies.

FID passages also offer students extraordinary opportunities for close reading. Just imagine what it would look like if our analysis of Elinor's thoughts took place in an MRI scanner. See the diverse patterns in blood flow for the student's brain as she

maps Elinor's flow from anger to sympathy to superiority to self-deception. And critics talk about the death of the humanities! The wasteful expense on "products" like English majors! If the Stanford study is right, close reading is literally fuel for thought, a crucial mechanism of neurological development and expansion.

As always, my Fordham students taught me something in the process. I picked the passage about Elinor and got the conversation going. But they saw how she pitied Edward to retain self-respect and the illusion of power. They empathized with her need for self-protection, but were critical of her self-serving rationalization. They saw Elinor as a real person they might know.

Such immersion in a character is one version of what Natalie Phillips describes as reading for pleasure. When she and her colleagues were first designing their experiment, they ran a pilot that put literature professors in the MRI. As Natalie explained to Laura Miller from *Salon*, "One thing we realized immediately... is that professors are terrible subjects!" On the phone with me she added, "We don't know how to read for pleasure anymore."

"And we definitely do not know how to do it in an MRI scanner!"

(Tune in next week for *Pride and Prejudice* -- at last!)

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