

Hermeneutics, Practical Wisdom, and Cognitive Poetics

Do We Know More Than We Can Tell in Literary Interpretation?

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Abstract It may seem trivial to stress that our background knowledge is essential for literary interpretation, but what about practical wisdom, the *inarticulable* background knowledge? Can we articulate all the things that we know and are able to do in literary interpretation? Are we fully aware of all the assumptions behind our literary arguments? Instead of generally reflecting the status of hermeneutics at a macro-level, this essay argues that one way for hermeneutics to remain meaningful today is not to be tried as a theoretical whole, but as a source of sporadic inspiring arguments. To show that, at a micro-level, we can evaluate the strength of these arguments case by case without generalizing, we analyze from a cognitive perspective Gadamer's argument that practical wisdom is crucial for literary interpretation. Using cognitive science to provide insights for literary study does not make the latter subservient to the former. Rather, cognitive poetics is a two-way street where each field complements the other by providing hypotheses and functioning as a testing ground. By demonstrating that we know more than we can tell in literary interpretation and that the three features Aristotle and Gadamer attribute to practical wisdom (contingent, inarticulable, and only learnable through experience) are at least tentatively empirically justified, this essay argues that hermeneutics has offered a noteworthy example for the two-way street of cognitive poetics.

Keywords Hermeneutics · Practical Wisdom · Gadamer · Tacit Knowledge · Implicit Memory · Literary Interpretation

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Hermeneutik, praktische Weisheit und kognitive Poetik

Wissen wir in der Literaturinterpretation mehr, als wir sagen können?

Zusammenfassung Es ist trivial, dass unser Hintergrundwissen für die Literaturinterpretation wesentlich ist, aber was ist mit der praktischen Weisheit, dem *unartikulierbaren* Hintergrundwissen? Können wir alles artikulieren, was wir bei der Literaturinterpretation wissen und können? Können wir uns immer aller Annahmen, die hinter unseren literarischen Argumenten stehen, voll bewusst sein? Anstatt allgemein den Status von Hermeneutik auf einer Makroebene zu reflektieren, argumentiert dieser Aufsatz, dass eine Möglichkeit für Hermeneutik heute sinnvoll zu bleiben darin besteht, nicht als ein theoretisches Ganzes geprüft zu werden, sondern als eine Quelle von sporadisch inspirierenden Argumenten. Um zu zeigen, dass wir auf einer Mikroebene die Stärke dieser Argumente von Fall zu Fall bewerten können, ohne zu verallgemeinern, analysieren wir aus einer kognitiven Perspektive Gadamer's Argument, dass praktische Weisheit für die literarische Interpretation entscheidend ist. Die Einbeziehung der Kognitionswissenschaft in die Literaturwissenschaft bedeutet nicht, dass letztere der ersteren untergeordnet wird. Vielmehr ist die kognitive Poetik eine Zweibahnstraße, in der jede die andere ergänzt, indem sie Hypothesen liefert und als Testfeld fungiert. Dieser Aufsatz argumentiert, dass die Hermeneutik ein bemerkenswertes Beispiel für die Zweibahnstraße der kognitiven Poetik geboten hat, indem er zeigt, dass wir in der Literaturinterpretation mehr wissen, als wir sagen können, und dass die drei Eigenschaften, die Aristoteles und Gadamer der praktischen Weisheit zuschreiben (kontingent, unartikulierbar und nur durch Erfahrung erlernbar), zumindest versuchsweise empirisch gerechtfertigt sind.

Schlüsselwörter Hermeneutik · Praktische Weisheit · Gadamer · Implizites Wissen · Implizites Gedächtnis · Literarische Interpretation

1 Hermeneutics and practical wisdom

There is an enduring need to reflect on the status of hermeneutics. As early as 1987, Henrik Birus's article »Hermeneutics Today. Some Skeptical Remarks« indicates this need. The recent »Hermeneutics Today? – A Call of the *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* on the Crisis of Textual Understanding« echoes Birus's concerns (Birus 1987; Bleumer et al. 2021). Rather than regarding hermeneutics as a theoretical conglomerate, this essay takes the approach that it is also possible to isolate one argument from the field and evaluate its strength. The argument to be evaluated is Gadamer's belief that practical wisdom plays an important role in literary interpretation.

In the preface of his *Ästhetik und Poetik I. Kunst als Aussage (Aesthetics and Poetics I. Art as Statement)*, Gadamer depicts the goal of his philosophical hermeneutics as follows:

»My hermeneutic studies set me the task of detaching the concept of knowledge and the method of philosophical epistemology from the one-sided overestima-

tion of the basic concepts of the modern empirical sciences and the task of asserting the experience of understanding alongside it. [...] This allowed me to follow up on Aristotelian practical philosophy and its central concept, *phronesis*. It is repeatedly and emphatically referred to as *allo eidos gnoseos* [another mode of knowing]« (Gadamer 1999, p. V; my translation).

What does *phronesis* (practical wisdom) mean? Why is it applicable here? Aristotle defines practical wisdom as a reasoned state of capacity to act regarding the things that are good or bad for man, having its aim in the action itself. He emphasizes three interconnected features of practical wisdom: (1) Practical wisdom is about particulars, while *episteme* (science) is about universals (Aristotle 2009, pp. 1140b31, 1141b14, 1142a23, 1143a26, 1180b15). In science, it is possible to find out what is common to many particulars and formulate general rules, but because what is ethically appropriate is determined case by case, practical wisdom cannot be formulated in exceptionless generalizations (Aristotle 2009, pp. 1104a6–10, 1109b20, 1126b2–4; Taylor 1990, p. 136). (2) Because it draws on variable particulars, practical wisdom cannot be fully demonstrated. By contrast, science can be demonstrated because it is based on invariable first principles (Aristotle 2009, p. 1140a23; Höffe 2005, p. 453). Despite this, Aristotle believes that »we ought to attend to the undemonstrated sayings and opinions of experienced and older people or of people of practical wisdom not less than to demonstrations; for because experience has given them an eye they see aright« (Aristotle 2009, p. 1143b12). This metaphoric »eye« is the ability to respond appropriately according to different relevant particulars. (3) Because practical wisdom cannot be fully demonstrated, it can only be learned through experience. Aristotle observes that as geometry and math are not directly connected with experience, it is possible for young men without experience to master them. By contrast, practical wisdom is about particulars and cannot be proved clearly, therefore it cannot be taught traditionally by passing on general rules but can only be acquired with age and experience (Aristotle 2009, pp. 1142a12, 1143a26–b9).

Gadamer accepts these three features of practical wisdom (Gadamer 2010, p. 318; 2013, p. 323; 1993, p. 22), but he diverges from Aristotle in two ways. First, Gadamer unequivocally states that he gives special importance to practical wisdom because it »provides the only viable model for an adequate self-understanding of the humanities« (Gadamer 1993, p. 319; my translation). This is new because the division between the humanities and science does not exist at Aristotle's time. Gadamer suggests that Aristotle's practical philosophy can determine the status of the humanities in contrast to science because he agrees with Aristotle's distinction between the domain of ethos and that of physics. Since human beings can choose what to do, the ethical domain is determined by their instability in contrast to the stable laws of the natural domain (Gadamer 1975, p. 30). Second, Gadamer diverges from Aristotle in that he relates practical wisdom to literary interpretation. We recall that Aristotle's definition of practical wisdom is one's ability »to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself« (Aristotle 2009, p. 1140a26), which is not directly relevant to understanding a text. Declaring his second divergence (»It is true that Aristotle is not concerned with the hermeneutical problem and certainly



not with its historical dimension, but with the right estimation of the role that reason has to play in moral action«) (Gadamer 2010, p. 317; 2013, p. 322, my translation), Gadamer explains the relation between practical wisdom and literary interpretation in two steps. First, he reaffirms his first divergence that because the object of human sciences is man as an acting being who can take his own initiative, human sciences stand closer to moral knowledge than to »theoretical« knowledge and thus are »moral sciences«. An active being is concerned with what is not always the same but can be otherwise. Only in such things can he intervene and the purpose of his moral knowledge is to govern such actions (Gadamer 2010, p. 319; 2013, p. 325; 1975, p. 32). Then, Gadamer links practical wisdom to hermeneutics arguing that they are both about applying universals to particulars. The case with practical wisdom is easily understandable because it determines if a moral rule applies in a concrete situation. The case with hermeneutics is a little more complicated. Gadamer argues that because the most important hermeneutical question is how to understand the same text differently, hermeneutics naturally concerns the relationship between the universal and the particular (Gadamer 2010, p. 317; 2013, p. 322). However, this does not mean that the text is given to the reader as something universal that he first understands and then uses for particular applications. Rather, when the reader tries to understand this »universal«, the text, he already must take himself and his particular hermeneutical situation into consideration: »He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all«. In this way, Aristotle's practical wisdom offers »a kind of model of the problems of hermeneutics« (Gadamer 2010, p. 329; 2013, p. 333).

2 Practical wisdom from a cognitive perspective

Having examined the features of practical wisdom, we might note its similarity to several other concepts: knowledge-how/know-how, procedural knowledge, implicit knowledge, Michael Polanyi's »tacit knowledge« (»We know more than we can tell«) (Polanyi 2009, p. 4), Lorraine Daston's »trained judgment«, which »relies on unconscious processes that cannot even be introspected, much less recorded« (Daston/Galison 2007, p. 370), etc. Many of them indeed more or less describe an ability that is (1) always dependent on the individual situation, (2) not reducible to explicit rules, and (3) only learnable via experience, as practical wisdom does. These concepts and practical wisdom are treated in this essay as synonyms. The usages of these concepts that do not include or go much beyond the three features of Aristotle and Gadamer's definition are not in our consideration. The reason for emphasizing these features instead of how we name the ability with these features is that, as we shall see, they are the ones consistent with cognitive science research. Philosophers, psychologists, and linguists have all argued for an overall assessment of these concepts (Sahdra/Thagard 2003; Zappavigna 2013, p. 15) while admitting that they could have slightly different connotations in different contexts and different disciplines might have different interests in studying practical wisdom and its related terms. For example, sociologists are more concerned with the tacit knowledge of natural scientists, while economists and management scientists want to know how



to hire talent with practical wisdom (for overviews see Zappavigna 2013, pp. 15–42; Collins 2010, pp. 141–155). Kristján Kristjánsson notices that practical wisdom has recently become a buzzword in one specific field: professional ethics, particularly in relation to professionalism in medicine, nursing, social work, and teaching. Focusing on the inarticulable practical wisdom of professionals is seen by many as a useful way to save professional ethics from obsessing with explicit rules, but most literature in these fields is content to understand *phronesis* as some kind of mysterious intuition, without exploring the possibility of an empirical scientific study (Kristjánsson 2014, p. 154).

Similarly, Gadamer does not consider such a possibility because he often regards science as threatening hegemony over the humanities, as if the humanities would lose their legitimacy when considered from the scientific perspective. However, cognitive science, especially the psychology of wisdom that has emerged since the 1970s, supports Gadamer's claim that our knowledge and understanding are not always reducible to explicit language. Although the exact definition of wisdom is still contested, psychologists generally recognize that it is »experience-driven«, difficult or impossible to articulate, and cannot be learned simply by memorizing rules, consistent with the three mentioned features of practical wisdom (Meeks/Jeste 2009; Jeste et al. 2010; Jeste/Lee 2019; Schwartz/Sharpe 2006; Sternberg et al. 1995; Sternberg 1998; Glück 2018; Staudinger/Glück 2011). In particular, by defining wisdom »as the application of tacit knowledge as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good« and attributing this view to Polanyi, Robert Sternberg emphasizes its features of always being connected to particular uses in particular situations and that practical wisdom can only be acquired through learning from one's own experience, not through reading books or following others' instruction (Sternberg 1998, pp. 347, 351; Kunzmann/Baltes 2005, p. 115). Through studies of the well-known amnesia patient H. M., who could neither learn new facts nor remember old facts but was still able to acquire new skills, neurologists have also revealed that there is a fundamental difference between declarative (explicit) and non-declarative (implicit) memory (Scoville/Milner 1957; Cohen/Squire 1980; Cohen/Eichenbaum 1993; Nissen/Willingham/Hartman 1989; Reber/Knowlton/Squire 1996).

Practical wisdom, then, does have an empirical basis and, contrary to Gadamer's belief, even if the imagined arrogant natural scientists who want to annex the territory of the humanities exist, scientific findings do not support their ambition. To study practical wisdom or hermeneutics in general from a cognitive perspective is neither to ignore the elements of culture and history nor to replace literary criticism. Instead, cognitive poetics acknowledges the »unimaginable complexity of literary interpretation« that resists simple reduction (Nordlund 2002, p. 312; see also Zunshine 2015, p. 2; Richardson 2018, p. 218). Literary scholars such as Mary Crane and Raphael Lyne clarify that there is no reason to be concerned about cognitive science's deterministic or positivistic tendencies, as the discipline is also open to the fuzzy and should not be stereotyped as the scientific resolution of literary ambiguity (Crane 2001, p. 16; Lyne 2016, pp. 9, 12). As a result, cognitive science does not set out to take over but »to modify, nuance, refine, and extend things literary criticism has typically done« and »endorses them and argues ultimately for their indispensability« (Lyne 2016, p. 241).



Scholars of cognitive poetics also widely agree that the relationship between literary study and cognitive science should not be limited to literary scholars applying cognitive science findings to literary texts. Rather, it should be a two-way street: each discipline learning from and challenging the other by proposing hypotheses and serving as a testing ground (Willemsen/Kraglund/Troscianko 2018, p. 604; Bracher 2012, p. 111; Caracciolo 2016, p. 188; Hogan 2003; Zunshine 2006; for two-way street examples see Burke 2015; Burke/Troscianko 2013; Hogan 2013; Armstrong 2014; Starr 2013). In our case, the studies on the conceptual history of judgment offered by Paul Thiele and Frank Low-Beer indicate that humanities scholars since Aristotle have had a rather consistent understanding of the features of judgment/practical wisdom, especially that it cannot be formalized into rules (Thiele 2006, p. 17–69; Low-Beer 1995, p. 15–89), and this consistent understanding is indeed the starting point of the empirical research on practical wisdom.

To clear away another barrier against the cognitive approach: Cognitive science has not claimed that what is known now is the ultimate truth and will never be disproved in the future, as it is just the best we can do at the moment. As Tony Jackson points out, at the initial stage of the field, the pioneers of cognitive poetics often fail to deliver what they have promised due to the complexity of the issues involved (Jackson 2000; Carroll 1995; Storey 1996), which is probably why the cognitive approach is not yet part of the mainstream of literary criticism. However, when we follow up the latest cognitive research, we find that it has advanced to the point where many complex issues once seen as impossibly obscure (such as wisdom, or, once upon a time, consciousness) can now be empirically studied, at least tentatively. Some of these recent studies are introduced in the next section.

3 Practical wisdom in literary interpretation

An appropriate way of thinking about cognitive poetics should be problem-specific: avoiding generalizations about whether science is an authority or a social construct and concentrating on laying out arguments from both literary studies and cognitive science for the same specific problem to see which ones are more plausible. Andrew Elfenbein insightfully observes that while literary scholars often assume that psychologists all support biological reductionism, believing that every cognitive process, literary reading included, can be and should be explained at the biological level in terms of genes and neurons, psychologists generally avoid such claims. They do not prove their hypothesis through general reductionism but through convergent evidence: If the same experiment results can be reproduced using different methodologies and randomly selected samples from many different populations, then such findings are less influenced by social and cultural forces than literary scholars might like to believe (Elfenbein 2018, p. 4). In the same spirit, Shaun Gallagher argues that although hermeneutics is often contrasted with cognitive science, they correspond on several points (such as that our knowledge does not consist of disconnected pieces of information but is organized into patterns and these patterns are inherently ambiguous) and they can complement each other. Specifically, Gallagher suggests that, via practical wisdom, hermeneutics provides a suitable model for understand-



ing what Gadamer calls »hermeneutical situations« that are ill-defined, ambiguous, and not open to rule-following solutions (Gallagher 2004, pp. 162–164, 168).

Gallagher's suggestion is worth examining. One of the major findings of cognitive science is that most of our mental processes are unconscious (Kihlstrom 1987). In a conversation, for example, cognitive scientists have demonstrated that to understand even the simplest utterance, automatic processes such as retrieving memory, recognizing words, making semantic sense of the sentences, framing the relevant situation, drawing inferences, and constructing mental images are all prerequisites. It is not just that we do not always detect these processes; they cannot be detected or controlled even if we want to. Below the level of consciousness are not only most of these cognitive operations but also our implicit memory storing information that we do not know that we know, which will be explored later. Together they constitute the cognitive unconscious that makes conscious thought possible (Lakoff/Johnson 1999, pp. 5–13).

Because literary interpretation is also largely unconscious, it cannot be fully investigated solely by self-reflection, it calls for external empirical study, another reason why cognitive poetics is required. However, it is widely recognized that very little is known about what exactly happens in the brain when we interpret literary texts (O'Brien/Cook/Lorch 2015, p. xvi; Goldman/McCarthy/Burkett 2015, p. 386; McCarthy 2015, p. 99; Jacobs 2015a, p. 135; 2015b, p. 1) and most of the few existing empirical studies on literary interpretation employ a »think-aloud« method, asking participants to say everything that they are thinking out loud (McCarthy 2015; Burkett/Goldman 2016; Wilder/Wolfe 2009; Warren 2006; Miall 2009). Such a method obviously cannot explore the inarticulable unconscious. Nevertheless, the unconscious part of literary interpretation is not unresearchable and there is circumstantial evidence pointing to the role of practical wisdom.

Why do we interpret the same text differently? A straightforward explanation is that people have different memories (memory in the broadest sense, including the memory of different »theories«). This sounds like stating the obvious, but if we consider our implicit memory, this trivial fact is noteworthy. First, notice that the direct object of literary interpretation is technically not the text, but the reader's mental representation of the text, which is not always realized by literary scholars (Bortolussi/Dixon 2015, pp. 32, 46; Babuts 2009, pp. 1–78; Elfenbein 2006, p. 487). Such representation is usually a reconstruction because the reader typically cannot memorize the whole text verbatim for interpretation and to interpret a text literally means to look for deeper, nonliteral meaning by constructing inferences that go beyond the text itself, inevitably retrieving the reader's memory of things other than the text (McCarthy 2015, p. 100; McCarthy/Goldman 2019, p. 245). Second, acknowledging that memory is crucial practically means acknowledging that we know more than we can tell in literary interpretation because memory can be implicit. Implicit memory is memory expressed through performance, independently of consciousness, an example of which is H. M.'s tacit skill learning mentioned earlier. Another example is priming: a change in the processing of a stimulus due to a previous encounter with the same or a related stimulus. For instance, reading the word »doctor« first will make it easier to recognize the word »nurse« afterward, even if people do not recall that they have read the word »doctor«. People also pro-



cess »bear—cave« faster after reading »bird—nest« (same relation) as opposed to »bird—desert« (unrelated). Psychologists believe that this kind of relational priming very likely plays a role in understanding metaphors, an indispensable part of literary interpretation (Purves 2013, pp. 243–252; Holyoak 2019, p. 63).

Although different theories of text processing and literary reading disagree with respect to the percentage of the conscious and the unconscious process involved (Gerrig 2011; Burke 2010, pp. 3–12; McKoon/Ratcliff 1992; Graesser/Singer/Trabasso 1994), the tacit premise shared by many literary scholars that we can tell all that we know in literary interpretation is unanimously challenged by cognitive scientists. By far the most comprehensive neurocognitive poetics model proposed by Arthur Jacobs, for example, hypothesizes a fast, automatic route of literary reading that facilitates immersive processes (transportation, absorption) through effortless word recognition, sentence comprehension, activation of familiar situation models, and the experiencing of non-aesthetic emotions, such as sympathy or suspense (Jacobs 2015a, p. 142). Taking Gadamer's argument that practical wisdom is crucial for literary interpretation into account seems therefore unavoidable for literary study, especially in cases, which should not be unfamiliar to literary scholars, where even if someone presents all the reasons why he interprets a text in specific ways and we agree with all of these, we still do not necessarily reach the same conclusion, indirectly showing that something implicit might be missing.

We recall that besides associating practical wisdom with literary interpretation, Gadamer also believes that it distinguishes the humanities from science. However, both scientists and philosophers of science have generally come to realize that science has a hermeneutical dimension too because scientists also *interpret* data and graphs, which is one of the reasons why logical positivism has faded away since the 1960s (Kuhn 1996, p. 192; Dreyfus 1980; Daston/Galison 2007; Richardson 2007, p. 347; Rosenberg 2016, p. 16; Friedman 1999). While it can still be argued that practical wisdom plays a more important role in the humanities than in science, this debate is too general to be relevant here because this essay only tries to prove that one possibility for hermeneutics to still be meaningful today is not to be tried as a theoretical whole, but as a source of sporadic inspiring arguments. The argument to be reconsidered does not have to be practical wisdom, and the approach to evaluating the argument not necessarily cognitive. Notice that analyzing arguments case by case and avoiding talking in generalities does not automatically run the risk of digressing from the hermeneutic framework. If we put Gadamer's understanding of practical wisdom into the broader context of his philosophy, including the much-discussed hermeneutical concepts that stress the historical situatedness of literary interpretation, such as *Vorurteil* (pre-judgment), *Horizontverschmelzung* (fusion of horizons), aesthetic differentiation, and hermeneutical circle, we can see that they all come down in one continuous train of thought. Only by stressing the historical context of the text and the reader can the process of interpretation be understood as the application of universals to particulars, the job of practical wisdom.

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