

Ellen Spolsky. *Word vs Image: Cognitive Hunger in Shakespeare's England*. New York: Palgrave/St. Martin's Press, 2007. xiv + 240 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$69.95. ISBN: 978-0-230-00631-7.

This is an imaginative, learned, difficult, largely unconvincing, but important and fully recommended book in what it seeks to do. Ellen Spolsky is on the cutting edge of a new and challenging perspective: that culture is the product of the phylogenetic, evolutionarily adaptive, modular, multidraft, messily efficient human orientation machine, the brain; and that cultural production not only addresses the competencies of the organ, such as it is constituted, but that the organ, itself, given its epistemic demands and curiosity, generates culture in its

own image. The challenge is to profile this data-processing instrument in accordance with the latest findings among cognitive philosophers while, at the same time, projecting its needs into the cultural production of the Renaissance. The result is a series of juxtaposed cultural happenings, often brilliantly anatomized, ranging from specific Renaissance paintings to Shakespeare's later mixed-genre, tragicomic — and hence “grotesque” — plays that thereby comfort viewers in visualizing things otherwise beyond empirical demonstration. These include the acts of the gods and the chastity of women, two sources of human cognitive anxiety now categorized as a single craving. This alignment along the visual leads the author into causal affiliations between Michelangelo's grotesque representation of the risen Christ as Apollo and Shakespeare's transformation of Hermione from statue to faithful wife, because both satisfy the need to materialize and visualize hidden mysteries. This (for me) unconvincing set of analogies is made possible through assessments of the brain's plasticity in homogenizing conflicting forms of perception for the purposes of survival efficiency: the “grotesque” brain.

In other ways, the book is a selection of problems often driven by leftover New Historicist objectives, such as Greenblatt's cultural negotiations, and the persistent rewriting of stories, which Spolsky takes as evidence of the compulsive needs of the brain epitomized as “cognitive hunger.” This metaphor, however, may be at the root of the study's shortcomings as a law of culture or the brain. As an extension of the craving brain, hunger is generalized throughout sixteenth-century England as the legacy of the iconoclasts through stripping the churches of their images, now deemed idols, in order to meet God through the Word alone, thereby depriving the faithful of all visual contact with their God. That this hunger remained unmet before the rise of the Puritan-assaulted English theater becomes her principal thesis. It is an attempt, in fact, to recreate the Shakespearean moment as a response to an English epistemic crisis, felt particularly acutely by those ill-equipped to meet their God through the read or spoken word. Much of the book is taken up with debating the primitive and vital orientation of the visual versus the neoteric demands of reading and literacy, and the cognitive starvation the iconoclasts imposed ultimately upon all of Europe. It is a multilayered, highly speculative, and often enlightening debate. But the iconoclasts did not blind Christians; only the saints were no longer visible. In any case, apart from the standard-issue icons in the English Catholic Church, the English do not seem to have been a very iconotropic race. Peasant Christians of the 1530s and '40s were not the patrons of Shakespeare's theater, and Spolsky does not suggest that the traveling players arose to meet their frustrations. The theater itself begins in text, and only then builds pictures out of words. There is doubt that the visual orientations of the species in a hostile environment as assessed by neuroscientists can be made as culture-specific as Spolsky's thesis necessitates.

Culture represents the many contrasting choices of a single kind of brain. The problem, then, is how to prioritize certain productions over others as natural to, or right for, that brain in ethical terms. I don't think we can. The Southern countries had a disposition for an iconographic culture that was emblematic, associative, and

rich in analogies and Ficinian kinds of progressions along chains of stratification from the material to the dematerialized, all of which clearly entails one elective kind of cognitive processing. The Northern countries seem to have had less tolerance for these categorical overlays, and, hence, by predisposition, sought to eliminate the messy transitional analogies whereby God might be himself while occupying a piece of wood or plaster. The magic spiritualizing of the word-image was simply a cleaner, more literal, categorical way of keeping God in the realms of spirit and truth. This too was a product of cognition, mind habits, logic. But, paradoxically, Karlstadt and Raphael shared the same phylogenetic brain: how does that work in terms of hunger? Spolsky's bias is clearly in favor of the analogy-making, emblemizing, visualizing, multimedia capacities ostensibly addressed by the high culture of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, brought into relief by villainizing those dour, sense-depriving Reformers: more New Historicist leftovers? The book is at its best dealing with such matters as building the literate mind: the rise of literacy and its cognitive costs. The chapters on Shakespeare, for me, are less convincing concerning the theater as the answer to the spiritual crises of the species and as a manifestation of Italianate aesthetics. But the analysis of the social implications of romance-tradition plotting and the orientation of humans in competitive and cross-purposed social groups is superb, as are many other readings.

The underlying project of aligning the properties of the human brain with its cultural artefacts as addressed to its own uniquely adaptive traits promises to be the greatest and most urgent challenge confronting the next generation of critics. It will be met only by a great deal of trial and error and very hard analytical thinking, shucking as it goes those analogies and causal assumptions that do not meet both a rigorous definition of mind and a rigorous employment of cultural history. This book is an important exercise in that direction and thus unreservedly recommended for that reason alone.

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