

Book Reviews

Cefalu, Paul. *Tragic Cognition in Shakespeare's Othello: Beyond the Neural Sublime.* London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. viii + 124. ISBN: 978-1-4725-2346-4.

Reviewed by **Baisali Hui***

Critics down the line have always attempted to untangle the complex web of intentionality, disembodied cerebration, discontent and desire in the cognitive-psychological workings of Iago's mind. Psychoanalysis has further opened up possibilities to analyze the intractable urges of the unconscious disguised in, yet manifested through the words and behavior of characters. Detachment and involvement, intellectual ideation and sadistic gratification seem to coexist in the character of Iago or, to be more specific, in that part of his unfathomable mind that he/his creator lets us a glimpse of through dialogues, asides and strategic silences. A.L. Rowse attempts to address the ambivalent aspects of Iago's character:

There is always something to be said for what Iago says; nothing for what he does. On the pros and cons of morality he is an able and plausible reasoner—notably in the remarkable scene with Othello in which he sows suspicion against Desdemona. One might suppose that Iago was more rational than other men, as certainly he considered himself, besides being much less of a fool. But such is Shakespeare's intuitive, as well as conscious knowledge of human nature that Iago, too, is as much in the clutch of his complex as Othello is in his. Othello is driven mad by suspicion and jealousy; perhaps Iago is already mad—he is certainly not sane—with envy, hatred and contempt. (269-71)

In *Tragic Cognition in Shakespeare's Othello*, Paul Cefalu attempts a cognitive study of the characters of Iago and Othello and interestingly intersperses his reading with insights from Senecan stoicism (2009), Freudian psychoanalysis (1962) and Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) (Robertson 2010). Cognitive sciences postulates that human behaviour is an external manifestation of human

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thought process and the subpersonal workings of the brain—with its privileges and limitations, obsessions, insights and blind spots. Our sense of reality and the world around us are ‘creations’ of our individual perceptions and sensory assumptions encoded as well as decoded by cognitive understanding. Thus in our relationship with and assessment of others, cognition plays a significant role guiding, understanding and developing a ‘Theory of Mind’(Cefalu 11-12) to handle the wide orbit of experiential and experimental materials available to us.

Cefalu analyses the character of Iago from the cognitive point-of-view as one having an exceptional capability of mind-reading, as one who in practicing his Theory of Mind (ToM) becomes a victim of its limitations, one who in tracking the thought process of others and predicting their behaviour is carried away by his own theorization. The apparently “motiveless malignity” (262), as Coleridge would have it, of Iago is traced back not just to his unfulfilled social ambitions but to the complex workings of his brain. The author shows how Iago evinces an exceptional ability of mind-reading and thus manipulates the future course of events to his own will. His hypotheses about the other characters, their expected reactions in given situations or specific circumstances hold him enthralled. But ironically enough, he himself gets enmeshed in the trap he had laid carefully for others. Iago’s mind-reading when presented side by side with the mindblindness of Othello gives him an extra edge in the combat of wit.

The cognitivist theory places Iago at an extreme end of the autistic scale as an individual who is not hypo but hyperattuned to the ToM with regard to the other characters. Cefalu analyses the play by Shakespeare as a site for the enactment of the “other play” as mentalised, scripted and materialized by Iago’s exertions, testing the possibilities of cognitive transference (30). This play-within-a-play aims at disturbing the peaceful social balance of a well-protected nation state, introducing fear and suspicion as markers of wartime disquiet. It allows us a glimpse of Iago the playwright—a God-like creator exulting in his ability to philosophize on life and situations, manipulate people and determine outcome. Whereas embedded and embodied cognition theorizes on the relation between cognition and environment, body and mind at various levels, enactivist cognitivism taking its cue from phenomenology and pragmatism suggests that the “enacted mind acts within and on the world through the means of an intimate coupling of sensorimotor capacities and proprioception” (52). The limits of this cognitive exercise rebound upon Iago with the failure of his plot and an unforeseen rebellion from Emilia. Is it not interesting to note that the same cautious Iago who sent Roderigo to kill Cassio in spite of being directly employed by Othello should give himself away by killing Roderigo and Emilia? This book is a serious study concerned with the possibility of analyzing Shakespearean plays as studies into the cognitive workings of the human brain in characters like Hamlet, Macbeth or Iago. For

Iago, his inclination towards evil-doing is not merely a trait in his nature, it is his means of coming to terms with his compulsive mindreading, his obsessive preoccupation not with the end but the process of disintegration, of breaking down of the social framework of faith in general and of Othello's contentment in particular. And all these stem from his pathological discontent that contaminates his whole perception about love and happiness.

Cefalu's analysis focuses on the ToM of Iago not only because he reads the play as an exposition of the mental/psychological challenges Iago proposes himself but because Iago and Othello are cognitive doubles. Iago extends his mind through the other characters he subjugates by his mentalist maneuverings including that of Othello. But in doing so there is an unavoidable link forged between Othello and Iago. The substrate of Othello's conscious subjectivity—his fears, anxieties and emotional vulnerability—extends involuntarily to subsume Iago's self-destructive experimentations. Othello's mindblindness turns him into an easy plaything in the cognitive game of Iago. They complement each other, echo the same line of thought, further each other's intentions knowingly or otherwise and are intrinsically (almost cognitively) linked together:

Othello: Why of thy thought, Iago?
Iago: I did not think he had been acquainted with her.
Othello: O, yes; and went between us very oft.
Iago: Indeed!
Othello: Indeed! Ay, indeed: discern'st thou aught in that?
Is he not honest?
Iago: Honest, My Lord!
Othello: Honest! ay, honest.
Iago: My Lord, for aught I know.
Othello: What dost thou think?
Iago: Think, my lord!
Othello: Think, my lord! By heaven he echoes me,
As if there were some monster in his thought
Too hideous to be shown. (3.3. 98-108)

The play on the word "think" and its varied cognates signify Iago's subjective agency in manipulating the thought process of the other characters. And the tragic proportion of the play depends to a large extent on Iago's attempt to move beyond the constrictive limits of the neural sublime once he overcomes the 'hard problem' of consciousness. Iago's intolerance of Othello exemplifies his fear of the cognitive unconscious and the drive to fathom and master it. As opposed to the psychological unconscious, the cognitive unconscious has a material and concrete subpersonal existence which remains shrouded in our illusory perception of the world and its affairs. One reaches the "neural sublime," as Richardson (2010) puts it in his discussion on Romantic texts, when the human

brain bereft of its possessive egotistic orientation and illusory simulacra suddenly catches glimpses of the actual workings of the brain, of the thought process (37).

The nature of tragic catharsis reached through this play has also been analyzed cognitively. It differs in degree and orientation from Aristotelian catharsis which has a three-fold interpretation of purification, purgation and education. The notion of the sublime as proposed by Kant or Burke does not apply here as no transcendental ideal (reason or beauty) is visualized. It combines purification (in the Aristotelian sense of the purging of the soul of its excess) with the therapeutic use of masochism as a means of release from Iago's obsessive mindfulness of others. Iago disrupts the normal expected course of our usual cognitive assessment of character and situation not because he is essentially diabolical or evil but because cognitively speaking, that is the only course available to him to attain catharsis of his psycho-pathological condition. He continuously subdues his bodily desires to the workings of the mind: "our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners ... supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many ... why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills" (1.3.323-30). What Othello does in the play is an enactment of Iago's foregone conclusion about the fate of an uneven marital alliance and his preconceived assessment that the love of Othello and Desdemona is bound to fail. He tells Roderigo:

It cannot be that Desdemona should long continue her love to the Moor—put money in thy purse—nor he his to her: it was a violent commencement, and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration:—put but money in thy purse. These Moors are changeable in their wills ... she must change for youth: when she is sated with his body she will find the error of her choice: she must have change, she must. (1.3.349-61)

Broadly speaking, Cefalu arranges his arguments around the character and complex cognitive processes of Iago. The chapter division of the book too focuses on tracing the mindscape of Iago and his evolving strategies to discharge his hypermindedness through the characters of Roderigo (who becomes a tool in his scheming), Cassio and Othello, who act out his diabolical plotting. The first chapter in this way problematizes the phenomenological opposition between cognition and consciousness. This section weighs the philosophical problem of the explanatory gap between the subpersonal workings of the mind and active consciousness. Iago appears to be able to bridge the gap with his accurate cognitive intuition to judge, predict, preempt and control the behavioural patterns of Roderigo, Cassio, Othello and Desdemona, and even theorize on them. Cefalu's stance, therefore, consolidates the traditional critical position (established by the critics of the Romantic school and A.C. Bradley (1969), G. Wilson Knight (1964) etc.) that discerned exceptional intellectual alacrity in

Iago. And the question “What is it like to be Iago?” supersedes in depth and singularity the more commonplace “What is it like to think like Iago?”

The first three chapters of the book discuss the various problematic aspects of Iago’s Theory of Mind (ToM). Chapter 2 especially relates the mental state of proactive cognitive attunement as in the case of Iago with reference to stoic theorization, Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy and psychoanalysis. This chapter shows, how the sadomasochism of Iago leads not only to Desdemona’s death and Othello’s destruction; in reality, it is a therapeutic release for Iago which transposes his death-drive to Othello and accepts symbolic annihilation by refusing to speak (“Demand me nothing, what you know you know” 5.2.303) after his capture. Nevertheless, tragedy, as Schopenhauer points out, lies in the ultimate resignation of the individual, and tragic pleasure “belongs not to the feeling of the beautiful, but to that of the sublime” (433)—a will to turn away from life that Iago embodies by the end of the play. It shows a resigned approach to life though an unrepentant one. If the sublime for Burke, Kant and the like has been an encounter with the vast and the expansive, for Iago, overpowered by his encompassing ego and excessive thinking, the world is contracted and burdened with a watchful consciousness. Death alone can release him from this obsessive hypermentalism.

The tragic resolution of the play follows directly from the cognitive empathy between the two central characters. It consists as much of the unearthing of Iago’s filthy plotting as of the shocking revelation of the vengeful possibilities of Othello’s character (Chapter 3). There is an extension of the intentions of Iago through Othello and an easy flow of subjectivity that makes their separate identities difficult to discern. Iago’s voyeuristic half-references, echoes of Othello’s own words, Desdemona’s handkerchief as a fetish, all catch the imagination of Othello to such an extent that he suddenly becomes aware of their further cognitive implications in a new way. The emphasis on Iago’s honesty and integrity of character keeps his intentionality unquestionably transparent to the other characters. In the mind game he defeats his fellow players by bringing their intentionality to question (as with Cassio and Desdemona) or manipulating and mutilating their intentions (as with Othello, Emilia or Roderigo). Cefalu’s analysis would have been enriched with a fuller account of the cognitive workings in the minds of the female characters of the play, especially that of Emilia as counterbalancing Iago’s hypermindedness.

Cefalu’s analysis is commendable in that he tries to bridge the gap between varied philosophical insights and their practical application in studying literary characters. Though certain theoretical positions such as formalism-structuralism or psychoanalysis lend themselves amenable to extensive analysis of literary texts, cognitivist approaches have so far been applicable to the realm of language learning and use alone. Cefalu’s study, from that perspective, draws up an important link that needs to be strengthened with time and further introspection. If the process of cognitive offloading for Iago lies in his long

contrivances with Roderigo or ‘dutiful’ counsels to Cassio and Othello, the anxiety of hyperminded scheming and situated thinking weighs heavy on his mind. The embodied as well as enactivist cognitive empathy apparent through his dealings with his accomplices and victims shows the limitations of these theorizations. He philosophizes, warns and even takes up the role of a pedagogue as he stalks and fathoms the course of thought of his interlocutor. He derives sadistic pleasure in tormenting the mind of Othello with the imagined picture of Desdemona’s infidelity; he instigates Roderigo’s anger by inferences of Othello’s partial treatment to Cassio and his love for Desdemona. But ironically enough, the agitation that he creates in the minds of others, instead of becalming his mind increases his disquiet. His empathic engagement with other characters, especially Othello, leads to a systematic self-destruction, a destruction of and freedom from the preoccupied, diseased mind that has glimpsed the “*neuroreductive sublime*” (Cefalu 75); but moves from it to a “consciousness devoid of brain” (Cefalu 75). The readers’ pleasure in identification with Iago ends with this movement towards stasis where, spent and exhausted, he prepares for social/legal punishment (which follows no moral/psychological transformation) and negates the use of speech to comment on, ruminate over, or justify his action, drawing the last curtain on our inquisitive watch over his hyperactive brain.

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Ryan, Kiernan. *Shakespeare's Universality. Here's Fine Revolution*. Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. xvi, 141. ISBN: PB-978-1-4081-8349-6. Price not stated.

Reviewed by *Dhrubajyoti Sarkar**

This new volume in the Bloomsbury Arden Series entitled 'Shakespeare Now', "sets out to reclaim the concept of Shakespeare's universality from the *reactionary misconstructions* that have been placed on it by conservative and radical critics alike" (emphasis added). Even to 'set out' to achieve that—that too in a slim volume of less than one hundred fifty pages—is a formidable task. In particular, since at least from the late 1980s, the radical critics, who in spite of their mutual differences, have consistently debunked the idea of Shakespeare's universality. For that matter the concept of 'universality' in literature in general is quite justifiably a beleaguered idea in the present critical scenario.

In the very first section of the first chapter (which has four sections for a 26-page long chapter), Ryan lists some of his major critical antagonists. As expected, apart from Dennis Kennedy, Leah Marcus and David Scott Kastan—all proponents of contextualizing Shakespeare's 'universal' reception—though Franco Moretti's denouncement is duly noted. This chapter along with the Preface, however, explicitly contextualizes this particular claim of universality with its ambition to distance itself from all historicizing claims. Even such a critic like Jonathan Bate whose position may be considered to be positively reconciliatory in this extremely partisan debate between the textual and contextual approaches is considered as a critical antagonist in this schema. The Preface goes on to call Bate's conclusion that "Shakespeare was supremely attuned to his own historical moment, but never wholly constrained by it" rather conventional and disagrees with Bate that Shakespeare's plays gained their enduring appeal "because they are so various and so open to interpretation, so lacking in dogma" (xiii). Instead, Ryan proposes a positive thesis that may account for the "true source and significance of Shakespeare's universality" by understanding "the perspective from which they [Shakespeare's plays] are depicted and from which we are invited to view them" that may also help us to "understand the power that Shakespeare's dramatic art possesses to keep the dream of revolutionary transformation alive" (xiv).

Most of the rest of the three chapters are devoted to make this perspective clear with specific textual evidences. A fine balance between close reading of the passages and a clear contextual emphasis makes reading such an analysis an illuminating pleasure. Generally speaking it is also a welcome break

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from the unfortunate jargon-laden contemporary arcana that often at best adumbrate their stated critical thesis. The wide range of Shakespearean texts that are chosen for close reading includes approximately one-third of Shakespearean canon with all usual suspects in place.

The binding argument that dictates the choice and reference to Shakespearean plays in this volume is strictly ordered by two guiding principles: Shakespeare's poetry and play show an extraordinary capacity of subversion of the prevailing order of things and they do that with a supreme assertion of authorial agency. Obviously as the first principle is demonstrated with remarkable success it contradicts the guiding methodology of the volume to underplay the 'contextual' criticism of the new historicist mode. This volume's wonderful application on Shakespeare criticism of the Renaissance ideal of 'kind-ness' as a byword for universality may be considered one of its most significant contribution (124 *ad passim*). However, since it depends on the understanding of a specific 'contextual' usage of the term, it only highlights the importance of such awareness in critical domain. Nevertheless, that is quite different from Shakespeare's popularity among readers, directors and dramatic audience.

Since none of the above three categories has any 'universal' meaning, the reasons for their like or dislike are not only diverse but also contradictory to each other. Among these possibilities certainly the possibility of the utopian realism leading to "revolutionary universalism" (9), which this volume takes great pain to present in contradistinction from "reactionary" concept of universalism (x), may be a significant one. But just as all other definitive universalistic claims are usually exclusionary by implication, this singular insistence on this possibility as the sole reason for Shakespeare's enduring capacity to inspire people is illogically exclusive in nature. For example, the false binary of exclusive choices that this volume posits between the universal and the historically located is a rather unnecessary intrusion into the central thesis. For example, the sustained critique of the established order that this volume highlights in such diverse passages like the Fool's prophecy in *King Lear* or in a disaffected foot soldier's declamation in *Henry V* are only understandable as 'out of time' if we are aware of the troubled times they are trying to look beyond as distinct artistic and social possibilities. Even discovery of misogynist traits, racism and Eurocentric elision of Europe as the 'universe' are only possible in the specific temporal vantage points. As a specific example how this volume repeats the errors of the universalist claims of an earlier generation is how in 'reading' Lady Macbeth's speech as adducing to universal emotions, this volume glosses over the particular contexts of references to "a naked new-born babe" and "heaven's cherubim" (1.7.21-22); neither of them can ever have a fixed universal meaning which will have a logical necessity in all cultures of all times.

The book's thorough engagement with Shakespearean texts (stability of which the new historicist reading has successfully challenged in absence of a single Shakespearean manuscript or authorial presence in the Shakespeareana during his lifetime) brings back our interest in them with renewed vigour. Regarding its other ambition to rescue the plays from 'misconstructions' it cannot even start to do that. To conclude, without an intentional snide to the author of this volume, two of the major conclusions for which this reviewer invariably returns to the New Historicists are only confirmed by the examples of this volume. These are Greenblatt's reading of Shakespearean plays as the interaction between the 'total artist' and the 'totalizing society' and Orgel's demonstration of how people variously 'imagined' Shakespeare for various reasons, across the ages.

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