

As a historical survey, the book expertly traces the developments in this field of inquiry, while also establishing connections to sources seemingly unrelated that, in turn, serve to enrich and expand the relevance of narrative study. Punday's knowledge is so extensive that he is able to seamlessly weave ideas from various sources in support of his own—or perhaps at the expense of his own, for at times it is in those very gaps that originality flourishes and can be more fully appreciated. The conclusion, “Redefining Narrative,” is certainly Punday in his more natural voice, almost as engaging as he was in “Narrative's Lost Body,” the introduction to *Narrative Bodies*. It is true that the nature of the text as a survey must of course require a degree of depersonalization, but the ease and humor with which the introduction is written, makes their absence felt within the main body of the text. Given the qualifying subtitle *Toward a Corporeal Narratology*, Punday has certainly laid the groundwork for anyone seeking a new idea to expand upon in narrative theory. Thus, *Narrative Bodies* is a text that begs for a “sequel” (unencumbered by the historically informed survey) to follow up on the many intriguing points presented by Punday. In the meantime, narratologists now have a book that ensures its own value by plotting reference points toward potentially new and divergent paths.

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Reuven Tsur. *On the Shore of Nothingness: A Study in Cognitive Poetics*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003. 380 pp. \$49.90 cloth.

Cognitive poetics is a diverse and developing field in which Reuven Tsur's work stands as one of the earliest attempts to explicitly relate the principles of cognitive processing to literary interpretation. Two recent collections to which Tsur has contributed—Elena Semino and Jonathan Culpepper's *Cognitive Stylistics* and Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen's *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*—demonstrate the heterogeneity of current approaches to this essentially interdisciplinary research area, in which some contributions are inspired by cognitive linguistics, some by cognitive psychology, and others, like Tsur's, by cognition in a more general sense. Readers coming to *On the Shore of Nothingness* with any expectation of seeing the kind of cognitive poetics that draws on the theories of, for example, Mark Turner (e.g., *Reading Minds, The Literary Mind*), or Gilles Fauconnier and Turner (e.g., *The Way We Think*) might be surprised to find no mention of them here, and only passing acknowledgement of George Lakoff's theory of conceptual metaphor, which Tsur considers “only a small part of the whole story” (318). His comment is indicative of the enormous scope of this undertaking, which draws on an extensive range of cognitive (and other) sources to support his perception-oriented theories. A fuller explanation of Tsur's cognitive-poetic mission can be found in his earlier work, *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (1992).

On the Shore of Nothingness gathers together and consolidates Tsur's explora-

tions over the last thirty years into the language and style of religious, mystic, and meditative poetry (veteran readers of this journal may recognize chapter 2, “Poem, Prayer and Meditation,” which first appeared in *Style* in 1974). Working from the central assumption that there exist distinctive religious or mystic experiences, Tsur sets out to account, in a principled manner, for how such experiences are expressed by the poet and perceived by the reader. His study “explores how stylistic resources are exploited for turning ideas and religious attitudes into poetry, into the verbal imitation of some religious experience” (19). It will be appreciated that Tsur has set himself a considerable task here: his stated objective is to account for the ways in which “conceptual language can convey non-conceptual experiences such as meditation, ecstasy or mystic insights” (33). He isolates four conditions the presence of which may induce a reader to discern “some perceptual quality that may be perceived as equivalent to a meditative or mystic experience” (8). These he summarizes thus:

- the most salient features of the source phenomenon are represented
- a relatively large number of distinguishing characteristics of the source phenomenon are sampled for representation
- the target system is sufficiently fine-grained to capture the most salient features of the source phenomenon
- the nearest options of the target system are chosen to represent features of a source phenomenon.

These four conditions are rigorously tested, applied, and analyzed within Tsur’s interdisciplinary approach, which employs a range of theoretical models from linguistics, theology, psychology, and neuroscience, as well as primary accounts of religious and mystic experience, to explore “how the poet, by using words, can express the ‘ineffable’” (33).

The book is divided into thirteen chapters, and while each deals with a different aspect of religious or mystic poetry, there is a great deal of overlap between them. Following the introductory chapter, which outlines some important parameters, subsequent chapters consistently provide a detailed, transhistorical overview of the relevant field(s), a thorough exposition of the pertinent disciplinary frameworks, and meticulous analyses of poetry from various eras and several languages. The influence of formalism and structuralism is clear throughout the work but is extended into a cognitive framework, as in chapter 2, where Roman Jakobson’s model of communication is used to demonstrate the distinctions between poem, prayer, and meditation. In a poem, Tsur suggests, the poetic function is dominant, whereas it is the conative function that dominates in prayer; in meditation, the emotive function is dominant. However, he also demonstrates how Donne’s Holy Sonnet 14 may be read as either poem, prayer, or meditation depending on changing perceptual conditions, thus introducing a cognitive thread that will be developed in succeeding chapters. Although this kind of interchapter recapitulation of previously mentioned concepts usually invites dipping into the volume rather than cover-to-cover reading, the accretion of complex hypotheses based on refined or redefined terminology best repays a careful and comprehensive reading. For example, to fully appreciate

chapter 6, “The Sublime and the Absolute Limit,” a reader must have grasped a number of concepts from previous chapters: from chapter 2, the *emotive crescendo*; from chapter 3, *transcendence* (both the *interpersonal* and the *teleological* models), *appresentation*, the notion of the *ultimate limit*, and God as a *limiting concept*; and from chapter 4, the *Composition of Place*. Only having assimilated these principles can one appreciate Tsur’s hypothesis about how the sublime in biblical poetry may represent the poets’ attempts to communicate the “unspeakable experiences” of the ultimate limit and the numinous (164).

The foregoing example of the range of concepts employed to discuss just one aspect of religious experience as poetic structure is expressive of the remarkable breadth of this project. Tsur’s uncompromising analytical probing of intuitions and impressions ranges across cultures, across languages, and across time. He analyzes poetry from medieval to symbolist, mostly from English and Hebrew, but also from French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Armenian. His use of supporting texts is similarly extensive as he leaps with apparent conceptual and temporal ease (and often within the compass of a single paragraph) from, for example, Rudolph Otto’s phenomenological analysis of the “holy,” first published in 1917, to the 2001 study by Andrew Newberg and others, using camera brain-imaging, of Franciscan and Tibetan monks at prayer (260). The range of works cited in support of Tsur’s contentions is eclectic, yet it is a mark of the singularity of his mission that his central cognitive-poetic hypotheses are supported chiefly by reference to his own body of work. A conspicuous instance of this occurs with reference to “the cognitive structure of the poetry of altered states of consciousness,” which is followed by a string of five references to his own publications in the field (88).

The originality and independence of Tsur’s approach make this work potentially as relevant to scholars in fields outside the interface between cognitive science and literary studies as to those within: theologians, philosophers, and anthropologists, among others, could gain insights from Tsur’s conclusions. However, the multidisciplinary nature of the concepts examined here make the book challenging reading for those unfamiliar with the various sources of reference. While the same is doubtless true of any crossdisciplinary undertaking, and should not deter the purposeful reader, the obtrusive deficiency of careful proofreading might discourage—or at least irritate—even the most determined. Erratic mechanical flaws—typos, repetitions, words running together—mar the presentation, but these are minor annoyances compared to the inconsistencies that might have been corrected by judicious copyediting. The generic pronoun for “the reader” is *he* for considerable stretches of text before unaccountably switching to *s/he* for a while, only to reappear as *he* later (see 49, 90, 291). Similarly, phrases from other languages are italicized in some places while appearing in plain text in others. Ironically, *mutatis mutandis* (Latin: “the necessary changes having been made”) is one such example (see 14, 28).

Discrepant presentation notwithstanding, this book accomplishes its aim, which Tsur describes as “mak[ing a] humble contribution to establishing a more or less systematic relationship between poetic techniques and perceived qualities” (36). In so doing he explicitly correlates the structures of poems with their presumed

or observed psychological effects on the reader. This makes this book worthwhile reading not just for scholars of religious poetry but for all those interested in how—and more specifically, via what cognitive processes—the language of poetry can “speak the unspeakable” (164).

Other Works Cited

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Peter Erickson and Maurice Hunt, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare's Othello*. *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* 88. New York: Modern Language Association, 2005. xiii + 244 pp. \$37.50 cloth; \$19.75 paper.

In November 1604, *Othello* was first performed at the court of James I. In September 1660 *Othello* became the first Shakespeare play staged for a Restoration audience. And in November of the same year the part of Desdemona was the first to be played by a woman on a public English stage. In the centuries between then and now this play has never ceased to intrigue, anger, provoke, and bewilder its audiences. Classroom teachers and students, motivated by *Othello*, have argued endlessly about villainous motivation, the power of jealousy, interracial marriage, spousal abuse, gender depictions, and race relations in Shakespeare's plays. It's a play provocative in many ways, and one that has drawn viewer and reader attention for centuries. Peter Erickson and Maurice Hunt have assembled in their *Approaches* text a fine and distinguished array of essays that attest to *Othello*'s continuing attraction for modern classrooms. Like the other books in this invaluable MLA series, this one collects different points of view on teaching the titular work and is a sourcebook of good suggestions for those presenting the play to students.