

Víctor Bermúdez

Emotion and Matter in *Corps corrosifs* by Lorand Gaspar

Abstract: This chapter articulates an interdisciplinary approach to studying abstraction in poetic language. Grounded on the perspective and methodologies of Cognitive Literary Theory, this study addresses the emotional basis of conceptualization of matter and space in poetry, providing an analysis of the work *Corps corrosifs* by French poet Lorand Gaspar. The poetological hypothesis of this essay concerns the emergence of embodied meaning in a poetic corpus characterized by its “affective abstraction” of space and its scientific treatment of matter. The chapter examines the idea that emotions are involved in our abstract comprehension of external materiality, and that literature manifests such an emotional comprehension, allowing us to discern several aspects of the nature of such abstraction. Poems being structures of thought with a profound cognitive value, the theoretical and analytical contribution of this study motivates the claim that abstract thought is ultimately rooted in the perception, movement and feeling of the human body. Additionally, it fosters an insight into literary texts that underlines the relevance of affective cognition as a relevant process of human imagination, which has a potential for further research in cognitive poetics.

1 Introduction

The matter of poetry is the body. One of the procedures of the creative mind consists in abstracting physical reality through an artistic use of language. Hence, embodied understanding of the external world is at the basis of poetic imagination. This theoretical affirmation meets with general approval in the current cognitive sciences concerned with the creative mind, although it requires literary evidence. Therefore, literary analysis should provide evidence for such a statement in order to build an account of the cognition *of* poetics with a hermeneutical methodology. Thus, both philosophical (Robinson 2005) and scientific (De Gelder 2016) research on emotion, along with its outstanding results based on patterns of neural activity in the brain, must be compared and correlated with what can be found in literary texts in more attentive readings.

This chapter addresses the emotional basis of the abstraction and conceptualization of matter in poetry by relying on the methodologies of the discipline of Cognitive Poetics or Cognitive Literary Studies, increasingly widespread in En-

English and German Studies, but still very incipient in Romance literatures. This interdisciplinary field employs theoretical tools from Phenomenology, Semiotics and Philosophy of Mind just as much as from Linguistics, Cognitive Psychology and certain branches of Neurobiology. The term *Cognitive Poetics* (Tsur 2008) refers to a set of significantly diverse approaches to literary phenomena. Understood in a broad way, literary phenomena involve both the writer and the reader of a given literary work; the studies conducted from the perspective of cognitive poetics are deployed in both directions, addressing the experience of reading and textual hermeneutics.¹ As for the reader's experience, several theoretical works and empirical experiments are currently aiming to track the activity of emotional patterns for numerous readers in order to develop hypotheses of literary reception.² Specific objects of study and methodologies arise from both perspectives, approaching both the emotional stimuli that are evoked in literary texts and the structure of the emotional experience of the reader, in order to pursue the understanding of the internal mechanisms of poetic language and literary thought. This paper's approach is in the line of the latter, aiming to disclose the procedures of abstract thought in literary texts and how they are linked to emotional structures.³

The literary analysis developed in the following essay ponders the perceptual decoding and the emotional responses that are articulated by literary language. Here, the priority is to track the ways in which literary texts inscribe meaning by means of the verbal codification of emotional experience, and to infer what the cognitive correlate of such a codification is. It is therefore necessary to consider the hypothesis that emotions are involved in our abstract comprehension of matter and space, and that literature manifests such an emotional comprehension, allowing us to discern several aspects of such abstraction. Poetic writing configures scenarios that are affectively coherent with the perceptions to which a

1 Hogan offers a synthetic scheme of the standard organization of narrative analysis, which is summarized under the question "where is literary emotion?", as follows: real author – implied author – narrator – plot and verbalization – storyworld and story – narratee – implied reader – real reader (Hogan 2017, 4–5).

2 For detailed accounts of empirical aesthetics, see Kraxenberger and Menninghaus (2017). For the neurocognitive poetics approach, see Arthur Jacobs (2015).

3 In this regard, Hogan underlines that: "Of course, real people are the only vehicles for real emotion. However, we imagine emotions elsewhere and respond emotionally to such imaginations. Such imagination, or "simulation," as it is called in cognitive science, underlies and animates the remaining components. The implied author and implied reader are complex and widely debated constructs. The simplest way of understanding the implied author is as a set of norms for the work. The implied author is related to the real author, but need not be consistent with the real author" (Hogan 2017, 6).

meaning is attributed. Thus, the poem *shows* – that is, it allows perception – just as much as it *moves* – it allows feeling. A cognitive literary perspective is pertinent to the extent that it explores the ways in which literary language is modulated by cognitive mechanisms; such an exploration is pursued by studying perceptual and emotional processes underlying literary reasoning.

Behind this procedure lies the configuration of space on the basis of the nomenclatures describing matter in poetic texts. In this context, it becomes relevant to examine the role that different types of knowledge play in literary texts. The epistemic aspect of the poetic lexicon becomes relevant when portraying nature inasmuch as the representation of matter and space involves different types of knowledge. Therefore, not only is it crucial to observe the conceptual transfers and the semiotic processes that poetry employs by importing several scientific concepts and endowing them with artistic attributes, but the analyses must also examine the procedures of abstraction by considering the cognitive value of literature – that is, to ponder to what extent literature helps us to track the strings of thought by conceiving it as “data” of human mental processes.

As considered in this paper, the cognitive study of literature assumes that some traces of consciousness underlie the hermeneutics of the poetic text.⁴ Nevertheless, the way we translate this assumption into the practice of literary scholars implies facing the challenges entailed by the types of evidence that literary theory can provide by means of its analytical resources. This puts the literary theorist in the position of integrating tools from different disciplines in order to propose hypotheses regarding the human mind’s processes of imagination. However, every interdisciplinary integration has its own limits and advantages when tracing the phenomenological logic of the sensible, and the production of meaning that operates in poetic expression. Consequently, the versatility of literary theory in incor-

⁴ By hermeneutics I refer to the generation of interpretation systems of literary texts revealing perceptual, mnemonic, and/or emotional processes of the human mind. Furthermore, I claim that the association mechanism by which a text fosters simultaneous levels of *semiosis* is indeed susceptible of being described and understood by literary theoretical and analytical methods. In other words, the exegesis principle underlying hermeneutics implies that the meaning of a text can be clarified when it is contrasted with external references derived from the text itself. Hermeneutics is at the foundation of literary theory and comparative literature, as the analysis of the form of a text fosters an interpretation that is itself the basis of further theoretical insights, which may be of a literary nature (e.g. poetological) or another (e.g. philosophical). For a historical retrospective of the idea of hermeneutics, see Hölsle (2012). However, hermeneutics is not only at the foundation of literary studies, it is also the object of current interdisciplinary approaches. In this regard, a relevant recent notion within cognitive literary studies is that of “Neurohermeneutics,” which relates the form of the literary text to its reader’s cognitive processes (see Gambino and Pulvirenti 2019).

porating considerations and reasoning from the cognitive sciences must not be detrimental to the type of knowledge that humanists can provide when proposing reliable systems of interpretation of literature. I conclude this introduction with such a statement, following Hogan, for whom:

[. . .] we may study literature in order to learn something about the human mind, social relations, language, or other worldly phenomena. Most important for our purposes, we may not only study affective science or affective poststructuralism in order to make more sense of literary works and respond to them more fully or more appropriately. We may also study literature in order to learn something about emotion (Hogan 2017, 21).

With Hogan, I believe that literary studies can help not only to provide reliable interpretations of literary works, or historical coherent narratives of movements and artistic influences. When conceived from an interdisciplinary perspective, the relevance of literary research consists of providing other disciplines with ideas and observations about the human mind that can shape their own research topics. This, of course, requires an equally interdisciplinary approach to literature, which underlines both its cultural and biological relevance. Literature then, will not only be enriched by scientific insights but will as well inform the investigation of specific phenomena of the mind taking place in language.

2 Emotion matters

That poetry deals with emotions is not an astonishing statement. Yet, the ways and levels at which this affective language must be examined is not quite as evident. Poetry names, suggests and evokes emotions, just as much as it provides an emotional experience of the spaces that it describes. Following this idea, one can conjecture that poetic language is shaped by the forms of landscape themselves and the enunciation of the specific matter that is the object of this language.⁵ Likewise, emotion seems to play a role in the act of speech that poetry entails in its recreation of meaningful affective experiences, and hence, it seems necessary to briefly summarize some theoretical issues regarding the emotional dimension of meaning.

The relation between emotion and knowledge in literary representations requires some elementary theoretical remarks. Firstly, research on literary emotion is mainly focused on two different areas: the emotion that is experienced by the

⁵ For a theoretical account of the physical grounds of mind, and the material emergence of meaning, feelings and consciousness, see Deacon (2013).

reader of a given literary work, and the emotion that is represented by an author through the verbal codification of a lived or imagined experience. Thus, the first pertinent distinction to establish is that of whose emotions constitute the object of study: the writer's, the reader's or the text's. In his *Thinking about Feeling* (2004) the philosopher Robert C. Solomon claims that “[e]motions are a kind of judgment – or rather, a complex of interlocking judgments, desires and intentions. [. . .] subjective engagements in the world” (2004, 76–77). This idea of emotions as engagements with the world can be relevant for the study of literary emotion because it suggests that traceable “affective data” in textual hermeneutics correlates with both thoughts and feelings. But seeing emotions as conscious evaluations may be restrictive, as a significant part of our affective experience is non-conscious, and, as philosopher Jenefer Robinson points out, “judgement theorists disagree about exactly how to characterize the relation between emotion and judgement. Some think that emotions are identical to judgement, others that judgements are *sufficient* for emotions, and others again that judgements are a necessary condition for emotions but not sufficient” (Robinson 2005, 14). Therefore, for the time being, it may be useful to consider emotions as complex cognitive processes.

The study of literary emotion reveals an intensive debate about the origin, nature and definition of emotions themselves: whether they are an expression of the author's personal experience, from which we could infer biographical data about the writer, or the result of a fictional purpose that functions as a discursive device with no biographical relevance. The relevant remark here is that by investigating the descriptions of emotional processes and their relations to space in poetry, it is possible to better understand our affective experiences in real life, and this is an appropriate task for a literary theorist. However, a brief survey of conceptual distinctions discloses different aspects of affective experience:

Emotion is one type of affect, other types being *mood*, *temperament* and *sensation* (for example, pain). Emotions can be understood as either states or as processes. When understood as a state (like being angry or afraid), an emotion is a type of mental state that interacts with other mental states and causes certain behaviors. Understood as a process, it is useful to divide emotion into two parts. The early part of the emotion process is the interval between the perception of the stimulus and the triggering of the bodily response. The later part of the emotion process is a bodily response, for example, changes in heart rate, skin conductance, and facial expression (G. Johnson 2009).

This definition might be sufficiently broad, but Johnson also points out that: “[t]he early part of the process is typically taken to include an evaluation of the stimulus, which means that the occurrence of an emotion depends on how the individual understands or ‘sees’ the stimulus. Having this evaluative component in

the process means that an emotion is not a simple and direct response to a stimulus” (2009). Similarly, from a neurobiological perspective, emotions are specific mechanisms of response with evolutionary advantages, since they function as bodily reactions, and they operate either consciously or unconsciously. In *Looking for Spinoza* (2003), Antonio Damasio defines them as follows:

Emotions are reactions or movements, many of them public, visible to others as they occur in the face, in the voice, in specific behaviors. To be sure, some components of the emotion process are not visible to the naked eye but can be made “visible” with current scientific probes such as hormonal assays and electrophysiological wave patterns. Feelings, on the other hand, are always hidden, like all mental images necessarily are, unseen to anyone other than their rightful owner, the most private property of the organism in whose brain they occur. Emotions play out in the theater of the body. Feelings play out in the theater of the mind [. . .]. Emotions and related reactions seem to precede feelings in the history of life. Emotions and related phenomena are the foundation for feelings, the mental events that form the bedrock of our minds. (2003, 7)

Likewise, in the field of the philosophy of mind, Mark Johnson highlights the importance of the body in meaning. In contrast with the standard notion that meaning involves the conscious entertaining of concepts and propositions, Johnson focuses on “nonconscious aspects of a person’s ability to meaningfully engage their past, present, and future environments” (2007, 10). In *The Meaning of the Body* (2017), Mark Johnson proposes an Embodied Theory of Meaning, by which he argues that it is a mistake to claim that *real* meaning is cognitive meaning of the conceptual/propositional sort. Instead, he underlines the central role of emotion in the way human beings make sense of the world. He also makes decisive statements claiming that “[b]efore there is abstract thinking, before there is reasoning, before there is speech, there is emotion” (2007, 52) and that “[t]here is no cognition without emotion, even though we are often unaware of the emotional aspects of our thinking” (2007, 9). This turns out to be relevant for literary analysis because it extends to another aspect of the study of the acquisition of knowledge and the process of abstraction. For Johnson, “[e]motion and feeling lie at the heart of our capacity to experience meaning” (2007, 53), and this assertion is crucial in literary interpretation. Likewise, within the field of Cognitive Poetics literary scholar Patrick Hogan has an interdisciplinary vision of literary emotion, and his considerations could lead us towards an emotional organization of space in literary representations. In his work *What Literature Teaches Us about Emotion* (2011), he approaches the issue of representation, and points out that:

The experience of emotions does not in itself constitute an idea of emotions. Experience must be mediated or objectified through an idea or concept. It must be *represented*. Whether we are

engaging in casual conversation or doing neuroscience, we never think through an experience directly. Rather, we consider some representation of the experience. Indeed, experience itself is never “pure” and “direct.” It is mediated by our sensory and cognitive architectures, the innate structures, the acquired processes and contents that shape what occurs in the world into what we think occurs. (Hogan 2011, 14)

Hogan’s idea is at the core of our consideration of poetic language as a data source for the emotional representation of space. As this paper will argue, by means of the analysis of the collection of poems *Corps corrosifs* by Lorand Gaspar, literature constitutes a unique set of representations of emotional experience, and such representation is conjoined with that of matter. Similarly, in an analogous perspective to that of Hogan, French phenomenologist and literary theorist Michel Collet proposes the notion of *la matière-émotion*. The fundamental principle underlying this theoretical concept is that the world’s image, which is elaborated by a subject through language that “verbalizes the matter,” is modulated by his “feeling of space.” *La matière-émotion* (2005) is a phenomenological instrument that aims to explore the ways in which poetic expression codifies the physical relation of a subject with their surrounding world. The codification of the “material world” that poetic language undertakes is affected by the “emotional attributes” that permeate the expression of space and that of the subject itself. Although they manifest in the concrete things of the external world, emotional attributes are likely to be examined in the text as extensions or aspects of human consciousness. *La matière-émotion* is applied in a literary context in order to point out that:

[. . .] l’émotion n’est pas un phénomène purement subjectif. Elle est la réponse affective d’un sujet à la rencontre d’un être ou d’une chose du monde extérieur, qu’il peut tenter d’intérioriser en créant un autre objet, source d’une émotion analogue mais nouvelle: le poème ou l’œuvre d’art. (Collet 2005, 2)⁶

When exploring the transition between the emotional and the poetic experiences, Collet suggests that “l’émotion, loin d’enfermer le poète dans la sphère de la subjectivité, constitue un mode d’ouverture au monde” (2005, 10–11),⁷ which is a noteworthy idea if we consider the communicative function of literary discourse, as its characteristic introspection does not prevent it from achieving identification and empathy effects. Solitude and togetherness are both intrinsic aspects of the

6 “Emotion is not a purely subjective phenomenon. It is the emotional response of a subject to the contact with a being or a thing from the outside world, which he can try to internalize by creating another object, source of a similar but new emotion: the poem or the work of art” (Collet 2005, 2; trans. by VB).

7 “far from enclosing the poet in the sphere of subjectivity, emotion is a way of opening to the world” (2005, 10–11; trans. by VB).

poetic act. It is precisely the subjective use of language that makes it a rich source of human experience, and therefore it is this expression of subjectivity that requires analytic strategies that stress the biological and axiological values of poetic discourse. Hence, I do claim that the epistemocritical and the cognitive perspectives are both involved in the reciprocal relation between mind and matter that takes place in poetic language. On the one hand, the mind is somehow materialized, being a higher form of energy that animates all matter. On the other hand, matter itself becomes abstract, being reduced to flows with multiple paths and combinations no longer accessible to practical experience, but only to inspection by the mind. As Mondrian said: “par l’intériorisation de ce qui est connu comme matière et par extériorisation de ce qui est connu comme esprit – jusqu’ici trop séparés! – matière-esprit devient une unité” (in Collot 2005, 55).⁸

Consequently, abstraction operates with both conceptual and experiential content. Matter is conceptualized but it is also experienced bodily, or as cognitive poetics claims, it is conceptualized through its bodily experience. In this context, the notion of *la matière-émotion* is useful to address poetic thought from the relation established between matter and a specific way of perceiving it, somatizing it and representing it. Here, it is possible to distinguish two levels of literary expression. One level conceptually describes matter, its behaviors and its interactions. Another level refers to the body that emotionally experiences it, re-activates it and *moves* it. Mind, body and matter are then seen as entities in interaction and dialogue that will generate new meanings of emotionally experienced space. Emotions matter because they mediate as acts of understanding, helping the subject to remember their previous experiences, to formulate speculations about the immediate present and to develop projections about the future. As Mark Johnson has underlined: “Emotions are [. . .] an integral part of human understanding and meaning. [. . .] Basically, any thing (object, quality, event, person, idea) has meaning just insofar as it points to some experience, either past, present, or future (projected) that is for us connected with it. Things are meaningful because they afford us various possible experiences” (2015, 5). As will be argued, emotions mediate poetic matters by means of associating the subjective and the physical.

Furthermore, one of the tasks of literary theorist is to describe the relation between the formal characteristics of a text and the cognitive functions – whether they are emotional, perceptual, mnemonic – that it fosters in the reader, or which are in the embodied experience of the creative mind itself. A remarkable example of this is the work *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion: An Exploration of the*

⁸ “by internalizing what is known as matter and externalizing what is known as mind – until now too separate! – matter-mind become one” (Collot 2005, 55; trans by VB).

Oceanic Mind (2012), where Michel Burke proposes a “Model of Emotion in Literary Reading” which underlines different inputs such as mood, location, theme, style, leading to what he denominates *affective cognition*, arguing that those literary phenomena can be considered emotive, because of – for instance – “the preparatory excitement and projection of mood; the somatic pleasures of location, the sentimental, cultural universals of themes and the pleasurable balance and rhythm and the breaking thereof in style.” Burke concludes that “there are implicit links between cognitive emotion and affective cognition at the reading stage and there will therefore be an ebb and flow of emotive information exchange between them” (Burke 2012, 155). Such flow of emotive information shall be addressed in the following pages.

3 Poetry matters

The purpose of literary analysis is to ponder whether emotions operate as a discursive device that articulates meaning in the text. Since poetic language mediates as an abstraction of the material world, the relation between emotion and other cognitive processes such as perception should be observed more closely. Likewise, it is pertinent to discern *if* and *how* the emotions interfere as mediators of the perceptual content in the configuration of literary meanings. In order to explore abstraction processes, the analysis must then stress the presence of *percepts* and *concepts* that the poem operates with. It is within the percepts-concepts relation that the abstraction and the embodiment of the poem’s reality arises. Similarly, observations on the poems should underline the *mental images* that are identifiable in the verses, as if they were embodied in the biological reality of either a reader or an author. The correlation between the poetic representation and the actual lived experience is susceptible of study since, according to Depraz and Varela, the mental image “is not only a recall of a previous perception but can be generated starting from a verbal description. Such language-evoked images are quite comparable to those sensorially induced. In particular, mental scanning and distance comparisons are comparable to those effected on images recalled from previous presentations” (2002, 198).

However, exploring the correlation between the merely perceptual and the conferred emotional meanings within texts allows us to access a reconstruction of space as it is conceived by the lyric subject. In this corpus, the affective processing begins in the very “selection” of a fragment of perceptual reality to which the lyric subject will attribute several poetic values and intensities and new or non-ordinary meanings. Those attributes are rooted in the subject’s abstraction of re-

ality, which constitutes a type of introspective subjectivity while it simultaneously appeals to universality. This means that the acts of speech that take place in poetry communicate on the basis of the subject's introspection – that of the author – and thus the poem does not represent the world itself but a specific experience of it.

These elements are deeply rooted in the writing of the French poet Lorand Gaspar. His poetry thrives on references to disciplines such as geology, botany, zoology, physics, and anatomy, among others, extending the conventional nomenclatures of poetic descriptions. Here, all matter becomes writing and the literary language becomes a kind of flesh. A brief overview of some of his work's titles exemplifies the extent to which the organic is at the core of Gaspar's literary concerns. Published in 1966, *Le quatrième état de la matière* (*The Fourth State of Matter*) leaves behind the solid, the liquid and the gaseous, and refers to a metaphorical state of matter when it is illuminated. This work is composed of four sections entitled: "Connaissance de la lumière" ("Knowledge of light"), "Iconostase" ("Iconostasis"), "Écailles" ("Scales") and "Le jardin de pierres" ("The stone garden"), each of which explores the specificity of this metaphorical phenomena.⁹ Similarly, *Gisements* (*Deposits*) (1968) is composed of the sections "Expansions," "Pléistocène," "Escarpement" and "Érosions." This work is characterized by a language enfolded with matter, not only through a lexical network but also in the geological processes whose descriptions take place in the poems. This is realized through the specificity of the "hyponymic" features of language, that is, by the use of particular hyponyms instead of generic hypernyms. Such hyponymic features are grounded on rich geological, geographical and botanical descriptions, in which the organic is the fundamental basis of the semantic universe. Therefore, when naming nature, poetic expression involves more than scientific observation, since a key aspect of literary language consists in providing new significance to matter. These new meanings are often built from the embodied relation with space that the lyric subject establishes.

An analogous case can be found in the work *Corps corrosifs* (2006 [1972]), where the idea of the human body as corroding matter is not connotative but denotative.¹⁰ In light of its semiotic processes and its conceptual transfers, *Corrosive Body* constitutes a narrative of subjective apprehension of matter. This eleven-page poem is structured in short descriptions of the landscape and its dynamics

9 For a detailed analysis of *Le quatrième état de la matière* from a cognitive-poetic perspective, providing a neuroaesthetic account along with literary analysis, see Bermúdez (2017).

10 The collection of poems *Corps corrosifs* was originally published by Fata Morgana in 1978. For analytical purposes, this paper quotes several extracts translated by Mary Ann Caws and Nancy Kline (Gaspar 2015).

as they are perceived by the lyric subject. Taking into account the biographical fact that Gaspar himself lived many years in Jerusalem, and travelled along the Judean Desert, which he exhaustively photographed and documented, it is plausible to suggest that the poem's descriptions correspond to Moab, the historical name of a mountainous area of modern Jordan, near the Dead Sea and certain zones of the surrounding Arabic desert.¹¹ In *Corrosive Body*, the interaction with matter entails a description of nature and of the relation between the subject and its environment. A vision of specific features of the physical world, which reveal the characteristics of the human relation with space, becomes here a source for literary representations. However, at times, the subjective experience of the landscape appears without a subject, as it fades out the first person of the singular and the lyric I along with it. In such episodes, poetic language describes the interaction between matter and matter. *Corrosive Body* starts as follows:

She would come in the evening's hollow
dispersing the paths
would come unclothed of distances
would come from the non-country
would come bare tune in her flesh
never pronounced. (Gaspar 2015, 217)¹²

The text begins naming an ambiguous, fragmented and intriguing presence that approaches from an indeterminate depth, travelling across the space without inherent consistency. This melody appears with no consciousness along to perceive it, as there is no listener to witness its existence (“in her flesh never pronounced”). However, the poem presents a scenario in which a sonorous percept is described by portraying its *movement* across space, as is indicated by the prevailing verbs (“*dispersing* the paths”; “*would come* unclothed of distances”). The observation of the action that takes place within the poems is indeed a pertinent analytical remark, whether the lyric subject is an observer or an active participant in such acts. As Mark Johnson points out, “[. . .] our very ability to understand our world and other people arises from the nature of our bodily existence (including both our physical body and the structures and processes of our brains) plus the embodied interactions we have with our material and cultural environ-

¹¹ Surgeon, writer, translator and photographer, Lorand Gaspar cultivated many facets, both in solitary and in collaborations with other artists and scientists, which contributed to his development of both a verbal and a visual language of human perception. For an overview of Gaspar's photography see Sacré and Gaspar (2003).

¹² “Au creux du soir elle venait / dispersant les chemins / venait dévêtue de distances / venait du non-pays / venait mélodie nue dans sa chair / imprononcée” (Gaspar 2006, 211).

ments” (M. Johnson 2015, 1). Action, contemplation, and interaction are thus capable of being tracked in the poems.

In summer when the pomegranates split open and rot
 the wells
 between the crickets smashed by the bull-dozer
 the earth held up by
 long transfusions of nights.
 Our hands still discover
 under the solar uproar
 the silent snake.

In the almond of the cry that was never opened
 the weight too dense for the name,
 a sowing set down in the estuary of our tongues.
 In the vulva night
 melted in pleasure
 the work of breath and of blood.
 Witnesses surely, but how to come back
 when the shores of the path shatter
 the song shatters in the fire. (Gaspar 2015, 216–217)¹³

To some extent, *Corrosive Body* recreates a progression of the summer by narrating the impact of the season on the space described and its effects on specific elements of flora and fauna (“the pomegranates split open”). The first stanza describes a landscape in which some trucks (“bull-dozers”) run over insects (“crickets”), flattening and drying the surface. It is precisely the transformations in the surface that the lyric subject will abstract by its patterns through the entire poem. Within the adversity of summer, then, one could riskily hypothesize that in “the earth held up by / long transfusions of night,” “the silent snake” might refer not only to the desert’s fauna but also to the water beneath the desert’s surface, which is found by the lyric I and his companion (“our hands still discover”) “under the solar uproar.”¹⁴ As will be

13 “En été quand les grenades se fendent et pourrissent les / puits / entre les cigales qu’écrasent les bull-dozer / la terre maintenue debout par / de longues transfusions de nuits. / Nos mains trouvent encore / sous le vacarme solaire / le serpent silencieux. // Dans l’amande du cri qu’on n’a jamais ouverte / le poids trop dense pour le nom, / semence déposée dans l’estuaire de nos langues. / Dans la nuit vulvaire / fondée en volupté / l’œuvre de souffle et de sang. / Témoins certes, mais comment revenir / lorsque s’écroulent les rives du sentier, / s’écroule le chant dans le feu” (Gaspar 2006, 211–212).

14 For details on soil formation, geology and geomorphology regarding the desert’s surface structure, see Schaetzl and Anderson (2012). Such a reference may be of literary interest if it is taken into account that Gaspar, a surgeon by profession in Jerusalem and Tunis, spent several summers traveling across different deserts, and as a result, his work *Sol absolu* (*Absolute Earth*,

evident across the different extracts of the poem, the knowledge of landscape will foster different interpretations of the space itself. In this context, the desert will appear as both an austere and a fully-alive space, and as it is conceived by the lyric subject as a “corrosive body,” it is an organic and a degradable surface. The lyric I will witness these phenomena and will react to them.

In the second stanza, the first three verses depict a silent mouth (“that was never opened”); here, the almond does not refer to the shape of the eyes, as the reader would expect (the almond-shaped eye is a common image in literary facial descriptions) but to a mouth containing “a sowing set down in the estuary of our tongues,” which alludes to the impossibility of verbalizing affective expression (“too dense for the name”). However, the excitement of both breath and blood appears as evidence of pleasure, personifying the night as a female who is capable of experiencing sexual arousal (“In the vulva night”). The night is not an element of landscape itself but a period-of-time phenomenon deriving from astronomical movements. In the desert, the night is a period of activity, as it constitutes a truce of weather hostility, particularly in summer. The night makes possible a less adverse experience of the desert, but one in which it is not possible to properly recognize the way traveled, as “the shores of the path shatter,” due to the darkness, and because the wind erases the footprints in the sand. In this context, pleasure appears as a mute “song shatter[ed] in the fire,” emphasizing the constraints of its expression. Finally, as the night ends, a soft sunrise displaces it:

Upon the ardent threshold
 rebellious pilgrim
 I set my insomnia down.
 We precede the day
 with a length of light.

Heaven without beams and without mast
 light maddened by murderous blues
 and beiges, beiges and downy
 bronzes of the slopes where fingers shout
 and you don't understand. (Gaspar 2015, 217)¹⁵

or perhaps more literally *Absolute Soil*) also contains enriched references to the geological composition of those spaces.

15 “Sur le seuil ardent / pèlerin rebelle / je dépose mon insomnie. / Nous devançons le jour / d'une longueur de lumière // Ciel sans poutres et sans mât / lumière foliée de bleus assassins / et des beiges, des beiges et des bronzes / duveteux des pentes où les doigts crient / et tu ne comprends pas” (Gaspar 2006, 212).

The depiction of sunrise is here characterized by a dim glow that is gradually taking the place of the night, as the sun is here a “rebellious pilgrim.” But as the sky clears up (“Heaven without beams and without mast”), the brightness becomes more aggressive and the sun overwhelming and hostile (“light maddened by murderous blues”). The blue sky will then contrast with the tone Gradations of brown in the sand, creating a two-chromatic ambience in which color and temperature (“where fingers shout”) will be the prevailing percepts of the desert.¹⁶ The landscape is characterized by virtue of its hues and oppressive heat as they are subjectively perceived by the lyric I. The enigmatic last verse (“and you don’t understand”) seems to express a feeling of perplexity of the lyric I before this progressively clarifying landscape. Perhaps the notion of biofunctional understanding may be pertinent to reveal the embodied cognition implicit in the poem. As Mark Johnson underlines: “The ‘bio’ component refers to the fact that we are biological organisms evolved both to sustain in our person the conditions of life and to enhance its quality. The ‘functional’ component refers to the fact that our activities as biological organisms give rise to our capacity to perform a wide range of cognitive and affective functions” (2015, 1). Another excerpt from *Corrosive Body* will allow a deeper insight.

Birds that precede the light in your throats
prepare the path of the blind.
Crossing through the anfractuoso rock
with a thin blade of quivering flesh
you break our mirrors still today.

Word clasped under the teguments of black,
at the ebb of the springs.
Path of affluence
where she never came, never went.
Under the porch where the barbarian is welcomed
amid the fire, the arrows and death
I have laid the steppes on your stomach
and with burned tongue I listened
to the deep throb of your waters.

Summer of paths, of dust. Earth without membrane
or lungs.
The slight water of the halt
drunk at the mouths of another burned body.
Under a great tree’s sleep wandering frees us

¹⁶ For further analysis on intermodal perception in Gaspar’s poetry, see the section “Psicología cognitiva en *Patmos et autres poèmes*” in Bermúdez (2017, 101–144).

to a darker flame
without compass and without rod. (Gaspar 2015, 218)¹⁷

The first stanza suggests that the orientation of the lyric subject within the desert is based on the bird's flight ("prepare the path of the blind"), along with the sound that they produce through bird vocalization, while flying over the rocky surface of the desert ("Crossing through the anfractuous rock"). In the fifth line ("you break our mirrors still today") one can find a reference to mirages, the optical illusions originated by the refraction of sunlight by heated air, producing in the observer the illusory perception of a sheet of water on the desert's surface, and over which the birds' flight and their reflection "break[s] our mirrors." Furthermore, at the beginning of the second stanza, the act of speech appears once again to be muted ("clasped word"), this time by the darkness ("téguments of black"). The desert's night is the "Path of affluence" in which the word "never came, never went." This landscape is "the porch where the barbarian is welcomed / amid the fire, the arrows and death," and even though the lyric subject does not seem able to name it, he can perceive it, as the water reappears once again in the depths: "I listened / to the deep throb of your waters." This tension between nature and speech demonstrates that the distance between matter and the subject generates a void that constitutes a relevant literary concern, as poetic language deals with such interstices, assuming different *affective attitudes* across the entire *Corrosive Body*: fascination, perplexity, anxiety, serenity, fear, angst, nostalgia, etc. Finally, the third stanza stresses the nomadic attitude of the lyric subject, who is shown as a walker of the desert who follows itinerant paths of arid land and uneasy breathing. To this passer-by, the landscape appears as a territory to be perceived and to be felt, and hence it prompts ephemeral actions ("Summer of paths, of dust") of contact with matter ("wandering frees us / to a darker flame / without compass and without rod"), one of which is the attempt to verbalize it through the gesture of poetic writing.¹⁸

17 "Oiseaux qui précèdent la lumière dans vos gorges / préparez le chemin de l'aveugle. / Vous qui d'une lame mince de frémissement de chair / traversez la pierre anfractueuse / brisez nos miroirs encore aujourd'hui. // Parole serrée sous les téguments du noir, au reflux des sources. / Chemin d'affluence / où elle ne vint jamais, n'alla jamais. / Sous le porche où l'on accueille le barbare / parmi le feu, les flèches et la mort / j'ai couché la steppe sur ton ventre / et la langue brûlée j'écoutais / le battement profond de tes eaux. // Été de pistes, de poussières. Terre sans séreuse ni / poumons. / L'eau brève de la halte / bue aux bouches d'un autre corps brûlé. / Sous un grand sommeil d'arbre l'errance nous livre / à une flamme plus sombre / sans boussole et sans barre" (Gaspar 2006, 212–213).

18 For a further insight into the nomadism in Gaspar's writing, see Abdeladhim (2010).

The emotional revitalization of space will gradually increase in the subsequent extracts of *Corrosive Body*:

Sweetness of the shadows ambushed under the loins
 drawn by the ten pencils of the groping.
 The barbaric rush curved by the hip,
 narrowed by the arches, and our hands slowly
 laid down in the garden floats of the sea.

Blind cry of the white of the eye
 against the white
 of the walls.
 I love you devastating season, matrix broken with heat,
 your fires blued with winds, your liquid distances
 drying upon my skin.
 I love your thirst and your rigorous oblivion
 stabbing the conqueror. (Gaspar 2015, 220–221)¹⁹

A certain anatomical apprehension of landscape can be found at the beginning of the first stanza as the “sweetness of the shadows,” is indeed in the “kidneys” (*les reins*), an organ that is responsible for the excretion of waste substances through urine and also for the balance of homeostasis, regulating the quantity of extracellular fluids, the osmolarity of blood plasma, the balance of electrolytes and the pH of the body. This embodiment of a soft darkness assimilated by the lyric subject seems to precede the gesture of writing itself, as this obscurity is “drawn by the ten pencils of the groping,” and in the third verse, the body is slightly inclined for the posture of writing (“The barbaric rush curved by the hip, / narrowed by the arches”). Thus, the poem relates the internal regulation of the organism to the night and the body by intensifying the mediation of the sense of touch, which intercedes between consciousness and nature (“and our hands slowly /laid down in the garden floats of the sea”), as the sense of touching, particularly through the hand in contact with water, conveys a profound notion of intimacy.²⁰

Similarly, the second stanza begins by reducing visual perception (“Blind cry of the white of the eye / against the white / of the walls”) and favoring a represen-

19 “Douceur des ombres embusquées sous les reins / que dessinent les dix crayons du tâtonnement. / La ruée barbare courbée par la hanche, / fuselée par les arches, et nos mains couchées / lentement dans les nageoires du jardin de mer. // Cri aveugle du blanc de l’œil / contre le blanc / des murs. Je t’aime saison dévastante, matrice rompue de chaleur, / tes feux bleus par les vents, tes distances liquides / qui sèchent sur ma peau. / J’aime ta soif et ta rigueur d’oubli / qui poignarde le conquérant” (Gaspar 2006, 215–216).

20 For further cognitive and philosophical insights into the sense of touching and its representation, see Radman (2013) and Paterson (2016).

tation of summer (“I love you devastating season”) that fosters the relation between the sense of touching and mental consciousness (“your liquid distances drying upon my skin”). Consequently, summer is portrayed here in virtue of its temperature and color (“matrix broken with heat, / your fires blued with winds”), that are perceivable due to thermoreception of heat and cold in relation to the temperature of the perceiving body. An affective appreciation of the elements of nature takes place in the poetic enunciation, as the lyric subject addresses summer itself in order to claim he loves this “devastating season,” its “thirst” and its “rigorous oblivion.” One more extract from *Corrosive Body* stresses the several percepts of warmth that configure the imaginary of the desert:

I'm always seeking the same blind evening
 whose earth eaten by solar acids
 ferments in its flesh of such heated browns
 that the eyes tremble in the pulse becalmed.
 Chalk path issuing from the dark hollow
 climbing straight up and rethinking space
 irrigated by your center of redness
 pardon the sky the death of the day and of the god –
 invent ceaselessly, tiring yourself,
 the simple, the paltry, the nothing. (Gaspar 2015, 221–222)²¹

Temperature is perceived through the “solar acids” over the skin and its effects in “flesh,” in the trembling eyes, “the redness” in order to create a holistic vision of the emptiness of the landscape (“the simple, the paltry, the nothing”), exemplifying how “emotion and related reactions are aligned with the body, feelings with the mind” (Damasio 2003, 7). By elaborating a representation of the rhythm of the desert’s energies, the poem cannot avoid the task of abstracting the characteristics and interactions of space and matter as objects of experience through concepts and percepts, as literary analysis shows.

This procedure is at the basis of the *embodied meaning* hypothesis, which, as Mark Johnson points out, is rooted ultimately in the neural bases of conceptualization itself:

From a neural perspective, we need to know what concepts are and how they work. The obvious challenge for a theory of embodied meaning is twofold. First, if concepts are not

21 “Je cherche toujours le même soir aveugle / dont la terre mangée par les acides solaires / fermente dans sa chair de bruns si chauds / que les yeux tremblent dans le pouls apaisé. / Chemin de craie issu du creux sombre / qui monte vertical et repense l’espace / irrigué par ton centre de rougeur / pardonne au ciel la mort du jour et du dieu – / invente sans répit en t’effritant / le simple, le peu, le rien” (Gaspar 2006, 215–216).

disembodied symbolic representations, then what are they, from a neural perspective? Second, can *all* concepts be embodied, that is, grounded in sensorimotor aspects of experience? This second question requires an account of both concrete concepts (i.e., concepts of concrete objects, persons, events, and bodily actions) and abstract concepts (e.g., mind, knowledge, ideas, justice, rights, freedom) that are not about concrete, physical entities. First, we must examine evidence that the meaning of concrete concepts is grounded in activations of sensorimotor areas of the brain. Second, we must suggest how abstract concepts (concepts not tied to specific sensory experiences) also rely on sensorimotor areas of the brain and are thus embodied. (2007, 157)

The passage from hermeneutical analysis to the neural basis of cognitive processes such as perceptions and emotions is challenging because (among other reasons) the lived experiences and the verbal literary representation of such experiences differ in intensity. Therefore, the plausible correlation between one and the other can be established in terms of the biological nature of such experiences, and the logic of sensation and the generation of meanings that can be tracked in the prosody of poetic texts, on the assumption that the texts are revealing a coherent narrative of human consciousness. The descriptions that literary language provides about the interactions between space and the subject are evidence of mental functioning as long as this specific type of discourse operates with images and feelings. Therefore, a certain awareness of the lived or imagined experience has preceded verbal encoding. This implied subjectivity is valuable precisely because poetic language provides perceptions and emotions to a subject – that is, an individual pronoun from which all external reality is understood on the basis of its relation to a mind.²²

For under the intractable harshness
 when the sun beats us down face to earth
 under our motions of agony and of joy
 we find once more the floats in the sea. (Gaspar 2015, 222)²³

In this poem, the main effect and purpose of emotion is action. As this episode shows, in the context of the adverse desert (“when the sun beats us down face to earth”), light is associated with both anguish and delight. “The floats in the sea” appear here as part of a body under water, making movement possible (“Our motions of agony and of joy”), but such an action relates to a pronoun (“our”) revealing two

²² A further analytical attempt would consist in conceptualizing the distinction between oneself and non-self in literary texts. Such a task, however, will not be undertaken here, as the principal focus is on the emotional grounds of abstraction and not on the structures of consciousness. For a philosophical insight into subjectivity research, see Zahavi (2014).

²³ “Car sous la dureté intraitable / quand le soleil nous abat face contre terre / sous nos mouvements d’agonie et de joie / nous retrouvons des nageoires de mer” (Gaspar 2006, 216–217).

subjects, and their internal “affective perception” (agony and joy). It is pertinent to remark that the word “emotion” contains an internal “motion,” which ultimately allows the adaptation of the subject in the desert. As Antonio Damasio underlines, at a biological level: “[e]motions are complicated collections of chemical and neural responses, forming a pattern; all emotions have some kind of regulatory role to play, leading in one way or another to the creation of circumstances advantageous to the organism exhibiting the phenomenon; emotions are *about* the life of an organism, its body to be precise, and their role is to assist the organism in maintaining life” (1999, 51). Such phenomena are represented in the mood, location, nomenclature, and style of the poem, leading to an actual affective cognition. Once again, the poem can be read from the cognitive notion of biofunctional understanding, in order to underline the way in which its apprehension of matter is grounded in an embodied experience, a “full-bodied, full-blooded, fully passionate process that reaches down into the visceral depths of our incarnate experience and connects us functionally to our physical-cultural world” (M. Johnson 2017, 2), and this is equally an issue of phenomenological relevance, as the above-mentioned notion of *la matière-émotion* has shown. A last extract from *Corrosive Body* exemplifies the materiality of the subjective experience of space:

Evening, nothing.
 However the black constructs itself, circumspect, careful.
 From near to near, proceeding by gangrene in the massive
 clarity,
 by hemorrhaging.
 Walls and hills beaten down
 daring presences in the distancing.
 Elsewhere
 a chilly underneath of foliage,
 soundless
 rooms placed right at the waiting.
 Patience. Crystals of patience. Lights & shattered gestures.
 Lagunas of air on the loins, under the hand that curves
 them,
 tread of the distance on the familiar threshold, unfolding
 its valves,
 its leavings, its tumults
 and you are seeking how the light breathes
 in so much dark groping. (Gaspar 2015, 226)²⁴

24 “Soir, rien. / Pourtant le noir se construit, circonspect, minutieux. / De proche en proche, procédant par gangrène dans la / massive clarté, / par hémorragie. / Murs et collines abattus / présences téméraires dans l'éloignement. / Ailleurs / dessous frileux de feuilles, / chambres, / sans bruit posées à même l'attente. / Patience. Cristaux de patience. Lumières et gestes brisés. / La-

The poem represents the sunset and the progressive beginning of the night, through the gradation of warm maroon tones. The elements of space interact among themselves (“the black constructs itself”) and the light of the sun “bleeds” as in anatomical hemorrhage, giving a wide color palette of reds, yellows and purples in order to give birth to the night and space to the muteness (“soundless rooms”). The perception of such phenomena is not indifferent to the lyric subject: the life in the desert is slow (“waiting”, “patience”), and such slowness modifies the body (“Lights & shattered gestures”) whose physical posture seems affected, along with its internal organism (“Lagunas of air on the loins”). The last beams of the sun appear alive (“the light breathes”), cohabitating with the density of the night (“in so much dark groping”).

4 Imagination matters: An open discussion

This chapter has carried out the task of describing the relation between the formal characteristics of a text and the cognitive functions – whether they are emotional, perceptual, mnemonic – that it fosters in the reader, or which are in the embodied experience of the creative mind itself. More specifically, the paper has explained the embodiment implied in poetic language when it describes matter and elements of space, arguing that such subjective perceptions and memories have an affective value. As this chapter has underlined, the extensive poem *Corrosive Body* expresses the relation between perception and action, which is of central relevance for current cognitive neurosciences, arguing that perceptive patterns configurating space as well as the perception of actions are crucial for the affective level of literary enunciation. Moreover, they form part of a major process of association of memories, perceptions and emotions that are at the core of poetic imagination itself. The analysis, along with its theoretical supports, motivates the claim that abstract thought is ultimately rooted in the perception, movement and feeling of the human body. Movement is indeed crucial for the categorization and recognition of spaces, as well as for the attribution of affective values. Thus, following the literary data provided by the analysis, it is possible to argue that movement is the basis of poetic meaning. Furthermore, the study has also underlined that an epistemic dimension of human gesture, as it is expressed by poetic language, and conceptual verbalization might be related. If emotions inter-

gunes d’air sur les reins, sous la main qui les cambre, / foulée du large sur le seuil familial, dépliant ses valves, / ses exodes, ses tumultes / et tu cherches comment la lumière respire / dans tant d’obscur tâtonnement” (Gaspar 2006, 220).

cede in the process of abstracting reality, bodily gestures exemplify a physical interaction with the environment as an attempt to understand external reality. Not only is motion substantial to affective cognition, but understanding emotional dynamics in the poem makes it possible to identify and perceive its actions.

Nevertheless, the possibility of further insights into the cognitive value of poetry remains open for future research, as it is still necessary to explore a diversity of methodological strategies that accentuate what cognitive sciences can learn from literary data, and to what extent interdisciplinary research can be enriched in this process. As an example, given the case study of Lorand Gaspar's poetics, one of its characteristics is its quality of synesthesia, and cross-mapping of senses. At a perceptual level, attributes of one sense are constantly associated with others (see Bermúdez 2017). It would be useful to consider how synesthesia might relate to abstraction, subjectivity and the implications of affective cognition, from an interdisciplinary perspective which can provide evidence on how literary language codifies synesthesia. However, the interdisciplinary dialogue between the humanities and cognitive sciences should be encouraged without neglecting the research objectives of each field.²⁵ Literary theorists not only analyze literary texts to provide interpretations of specific corpora, they also develop theoretical insights that have the character of statements regarding the relevance of literary texts in society as structures of thought. Such importance stands at both biological and axiological levels and makes human imagination a fruitful field for innumerable interdisciplinary approaches.

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²⁵ For further discussion on current debates and future perspectives in the field of Cognitive Literary Studies, see Zunshine (2015), Hogan (2011) and Burke and Troscianko (2017).

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