

# Terence Cave

**Emeritus Professor of French Literature at the University of Oxford, Emeritus Research Fellow of St John's College Oxford and a Fellow of the British Academy**

## **2009 Balzan Prize for Literature since 1500**

*For his outstanding contributions to a new understanding of Renaissance literature and of the influence of Aristotelian poetics in modern European literature.*

**Institution Administering Research Funds:** St John's College, Oxford

**Adviser for the Balzan General Prize Committee:** Karlheinz Stierle

## **The Balzan Interdisciplinary Seminar: Literature as an Object of Knowledge**

Terence Cave is using the second half of his Balzan Prize to explore the value of literature as an object of knowledge, and more specifically, the cognitive value of literature in relation to other kinds of discourse. The research project is based at the Research Centre of St John's College, Oxford. The word "seminar" is used in the title to indicate the heuristic nature of the project: the core of the work lies in discussions designed to foster a sharper awareness of the issues that are at stake and to explore new directions in the understanding of literature.

### **Aims and scope of the project**

The title of the project is designed to provide a single overarching frame for an enquiry that addresses the following:

#### **1. The public question**

The project title may be rephrased as a public question in the following form: "What are the nature and value of literature as an object of knowledge in the interdisciplinary spectrum?" Literary study remains one of the core disciplines in the humanities, but its status as an academic subject needs constantly to be reassessed and justified in an era where universities are increasingly being pressed to demonstrate the public utility of their research and teaching. The question necessarily has an interdisciplinary character, both because literary study is institutionally defined as one of a peer group of

studies in the humanities and because it overlaps at many points with adjacent studies within that group (linguistics, philosophy, history, social studies). The phrase “object of knowledge” in the project title thus refers in the first place to the academic pursuit of knowledge, of which literature constitutes one object among others.

## **2. A timely conceptual issue: cognitive methodologies in literary study**

The potential interest of literature as an object of knowledge begins to be apparent when one unpacks and extends the phrase “object of knowledge”. In such a perspective, it is natural to explore the sense in which a literary work may be (or be presented as) a *vehicle* of knowledge or, potentially, an *instrument* of knowledge. It is also evident that, while “knowledge” is the presumed outcome of such an enquiry, the enquiry itself is a process, a particular way of thinking, and that literary works (or groups of works) may themselves be considered as vehicles or instruments of thought. One may thus replace the word “knowledge” in all three instances with “thought” (literature as an object, vehicle and instrument of thought). All of these concerns become salient when literary study is viewed within the perspective of interdisciplinary research on cognition, and it is a primary aim of the project to foster cognitive approaches to literature that are perceived as valid by colleagues in other disciplines (and the public at large), while satisfying the requirements of a proper study of literature in all its modes and forms.

## **3. A double-stranded project: linking the cognitive with the historical**

Since Terence Cave’s personal research career has focused primarily on the Renaissance or, more generally, the early modern period, the project also has a “historical strand”. Most of the core participants within the field of literary studies are specialists in early modern culture, and will seek to relate the historical study of their materials with the cognitive approaches referred to above. A key aim of the project is thus to bind together the historical and the cognitive strands and demonstrate that literary study can and must combine a general explanatory framework with close contextual reading.

### **Organization and activities**

The collective work of the project is carried out for the most part in workshops and discussion groups in which these interdisciplinary issues are explored and debated with the cooperation of colleagues from non-literary disciplines. The twin themes of knowledge and cognition provide a focus for the discussions. The integrity of individual research programmes is respected, but they are also used as test-cases or illustrations of the broader interdisciplinary issues raised by the project.

The programme is based on a core team of individuals under the general guidance of Terence Cave as project director. The project has a Senior Advisory Panel: Elleke Boehmer, Professor of World Literature in English, University of Oxford; Guillemette Bolens, Professor of English Literature and Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Université de Genève; Robyn Carston, Professor of Linguistics, University College London and Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature, Universitetet i Oslo; Gregory Currie, Professor of Philosophy, University of Nottingham; Paul Harris, Professor of Education, Graduate School of Education, Harvard; Marian Hobson, Professorial Research Fellow, Queen Mary, University of London; Michel Jeanneret, Emeritus Professor of French Literature, Université de Genève; Jim Reed, Emeritus Professor of German, University of Oxford; Karlheinz Stierle, Universität Konstanz. The function of the panel, which has an interdisciplinary character, is in the first place to provide advice on the development of the project, but several members are regular participants in its activities and guarantee its interdisciplinary character.

The task of the two Deputy Directors (Dr. Wes Williams and Dr. Raphael Lyne) is to ensure the effective continuation of the project should the Director be absent for a prolonged period for reasons beyond his control.

Two Balzan Postdoctoral Research Fellowships have been established. The Fellowships are tenable for 3 years. The Research Fellows will produce published work of the equivalent of a book-length study over the course of the Fellowship. They also assist in the arrangement of discussion groups, workshops and other collective events. They have not been permitted to take on duties external to the project (for example teaching duties) except with the agreement of the Director. The Research Fellowships are attached to the St John's College Research Centre in Oxford, where the Fellows have offices.

Five Balzan Research Lectureships have been conferred on younger colleagues holding permanent academic positions at five different UK universities, each lasting up to one semester on a "buy-out" basis. The positions carry with them the obligation to produce at least one article-length publication during the period of leave, and (under the guidance of the Director) to arrange a two-day workshop at the end of the period of leave structured around the Lecturer's work. The Research Lecturers are expected to participate as far as their other duties permit in the other collective activities of the project. The workshops are held in the lecturer's home institution; this arrangement helps to guarantee the wider diffusion of the project's aims and intellectual outcomes.

The project has also recruited a number of Associate Researchers. This group consists of individual researchers from various academic contexts whose work is closely related to the aims of the project. They have no specific duties but are expected to attend workshops and discussion groups in their areas of interest.

A discussion group, consisting of core project members and other invited participants from the University of Oxford (academic post-holders, postdoctoral researchers, and a small number of doctoral students) has been established in Oxford and meets about once a month to discuss specific topics and problems arising from the project's aim to develop a cognitive methodology for the study of literature. Visiting speakers with relevant interests are sometimes invited to give presentations to the group. The two Balzan Postdoctoral Fellows will organize one-day workshops of their own in the final year of their tenure (2012-13). In addition, the project provides intellectual support and limited financial support for workshops on relevant topics organized by its Associate Researchers.

A programme of individual visits and exchange visits enables core project participants to establish appropriate contacts in other universities, with the possibility of reciprocation. In addition, the Director gives public lectures both in the UK and abroad and actively seeks to create an interdisciplinary network that will not only support and enhance the work of the project but also ensure that its intellectual energies are propagated beyond the lifetime of the project itself.

A Methodological Colloquium will be held in the later stages of the project with the aim of bringing the various participants together in order to discuss methodological points of convergence between the different disciplines involved. Particular methodological issues will be highlighted to give the discussion coherence, e.g. the value for literary study of methodologies from the experimental sciences, the relation of the historical strand of the project to the cognitive strand, and the ways in which the close reading of literary texts can be integrated within a general explanatory framework for literature.

### **Researchers:**

#### 1. Balzan Research Fellows:

Karin Kukkonen  
Olivia Smith

2. Balzan Research Lecturers:

Kathryn Banks  
Timothy Chesters  
James Helgeson  
Raphael Lyne  
Ita Mac Carthy

3. Associate Researchers:

Miranda Anderson  
Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei  
Patricia Kolaiti  
Sabine Müller  
Kirsti Sellevold  
Emily Troscianko

**Publications:**

The publications that will arise directly from the work of the project and thus acknowledge the support of the Balzan Foundation are as follows:

- A book-length research monograph (or an equivalent body of work), produced by each of the Research Fellows;
- Five substantial article-length studies produced by the Research Lecturers;
- “Reading literature cognitively”: a commissioned special issue of the journal *Paragraph*, to be published in 2014, containing a planned set of essays by core members of the project, with an introduction by the Director and a concluding response by one of the Deputy Directors.
- *Thinking with Literature* (provisional title), a book-length presentation and defence of a broadly-based cognitive approach to literary study, with close readings of texts from two or more national literatures, written by Terence Cave.

All publications produced under the auspices of the project, whatever the source of the author’s funding, will acknowledge the support of the Balzan Foundation.

**Link:**

<http://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/3122/The-Balzan-Project.html>