Entry to guest lecture and seminar with
Emily Troscianko

Guest lecture: "Creative bibliotherapy and mental health: Why we need to assume less and find out more" (Abstract below)
Date: 12 March
Time: 15.15–17.00
Venue: Engelska parken, Eng6-0022

Seminar: "Cognitive science and literary studies" (Abstract below)
Date: 13 March
Time: 13.15–15.00
Venue: Engelska parken, Eng6-0022

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Emily Troscianko has a background in cognitive literary studies, investigating readers' psychological responses to fiction; her first monograph, Kafka's Cognitive Realism (Routledge, 2014) focused on the strange phenomenon of the 'Kafkaesque'. This interest in the effects of literary reading led to a project exploring the relationships between fiction-reading and mental illness: a partnership with the UK eating-disorders charity Beat has generated rich survey data on these connections to form the basis for experimental investigation. As well as coauthoring a textbook on consciousness, Emily also writes a blog about eating disorders, called 'A Hunger Artist', for the US website Psychology Today, and is developing an app to support recovery from anorexia.

All are welcome!
"Creative bibliotherapy and mental health: Why we need to assume less and find out more"

Mental illness is a growing public-health concern, and a perennial lack of resources makes treating people using books an attractive option. In this talk I take eating disorders as a case study for what is known and unknown about whether and how different kinds of reading may be therapeutically effective -- or the reverse. There is growing evidence for the efficacy of 'self-help bibliotherapy' (reading self-help books, with or without therapeutic guidance) as a treatment for eating disorders, but so-called 'creative bibliotherapy' (using fiction, memoir, poetry, or drama), although widely practised, is even more poorly understood than the self-help variety. A range of theoretical models exist, but the healing powers of literature are far more often assumed than tested. I report on the results of a large-scale survey conducted with the UK eating-disorders charity Beat which suggests that literary reading has striking effects, both positive and negative, on a range of physical, cognitive-emotional, and behavioural measures central to eating disorders, with a strong contrast emerging between fiction about eating disorders (which were widely perceived as anti-therapeutic) and other kinds (which were generally seen as positive or neutral). The findings conflict with existing theoretical models, which tend to insist on the therapeutic importance of a close match between the reader's and the protagonist's situations, and suggest new ways of understanding the feedback that operates between minds, bodies, and texts.

"Cognitive science and literary studies"

The early days of cognitive literary studies involved a lot of disciplinary genuflection: taking findings readymade from Science in order to understand literature better. There are now more signs of the exchange flowing both ways, yielding new questions and answers for the study of minds as well as of texts. Mark Bruhn's 2015 article 'A mirror on the mind: Stevens, chiasmus, and autism spectrum disorder' does this reciprocity beautifully: starting from an observation of a parallel between critical responses to Wallace Stevens and language processing in autism, proposing a literary/linguistic feature to explain the similarity (chiasmus), and using detailed close readings to generate both new insights into Wallace's poetics and new empirical methods for investigating open questions in autism research. This session explores Bruhn's article and a poem to be read alongside it.