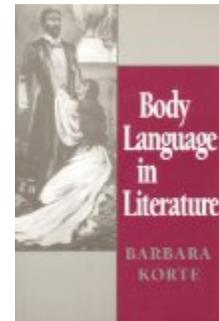


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barbara Korte. *Body Language in Literature*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1997. vii + 329 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-7656-4; \$61.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-0706-3.

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A nod. A touch. A folding of hands. Barbara Korte argues that, in narrative literature, references to body language are never just throwaway lines. Instead, these instances of nonverbal communication create a body semiotics, an “important signifying system in the literary text” that “contributes to the text’s potential significance and effect” (p. 4). Based on a reader’s everyday competence to interpret nonverbal communication as well as an acquired literary one, the interpretation of a text’s body language gives the reader a useful tool to read, or misread, the individual characters and the interactions between characters. In *Body Language in Literature*, Barbara Korte systematically brings nonverbal communication to the fore, adding a new type of language to the study of the body in literary criticism.

This language comes from the fields of expression psychology, social psychology, and sociology. Korte, Professor of English literature at the University of Tübingen in Germany, expands the more traditional literary focus on “gesture” or “posture” in order to incorporate the terminology of nonverbal communication, a field of psychological research coming out of the early sixties. Unlike the field of physiognomy that studies permanent features, the field of nonverbal communication studies the body in motion. (Korte uses “body language,” “nonverbal communication,” and “nonverbal behavior” interchangeably.) Originally published in Germany in 1993 as *Korpersprache in der Literatur: Theorie und Geschichte am Beispiel englischer Erzählprosa*, Korte’s work focuses mainly on English and North American literature, literature heavily influenced by European culture. The texts range from John Bunyan’s 1678 *Pilgrim’s Progress* to W. Somerset Maugham’s 1944 *The Razor’s Edge*, from Geoffrey Chaucer’s fourteenth century *The Canterbury Tales*

to Margaret Atwood’s 1985 *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Careful to emphasize that her work is based on a highly selective sample, Korte rightly makes no claims to completeness or statistical reliability but instead emphasizes her desire to set up a critical framework for an analysis of body language that could be applied to any narrative text. After the introductory section, Part II sets up the critical framework, and Part III gives an historical overview of body language in the novel of the British Isles from the sixteenth century to the present. Korte also provides three useful bibliographies: one for the primary sources she has used; one for secondary sources on body language in literature, theatre, film, and art; and one for secondary sources on nonverbal-communication research.

Much of Part II consists of defining the terms of nonverbal communication and giving examples from literary texts. Korte divides nonverbal communication into two classifications: modal and functional. The modes or types of body language consist of Kinesics (body movements, particularly facial expression and eye behavior); Haptics (touch); and Proxemics (spatial orientation). The function of the body language consists of emotional displays and externalizers, regulators and illustrators, and emblems. For example, a “stooping carriage” is a body posture (kinesic) that can, depending on the literary context, function as an emotional display of mourning (p. 63). Thus, Korte argues, each instance of body language can be coded for what it is and what it does. Korte plots the body language of a text onto a “Modal-Functional Classification System,” a chart with the modal classifications down the side and the functional classifications across the top. She counts the instances of body language, codes them, and fills in the boxes. From this painstaking approach, Korte can give a general profile of what types of

body language are used for what purposes. The drawback to this method, of course, is the rigidity of the chart. Because Korte assumes that nonverbal communication “always plays a particular role within the situation in which it occurs and can thus be assigned to a particular functional class” (p. 36), her readings—at times, forced—often leave little or no room for ambiguity.

After defining her terms, Korte turns to the literary texts. Korte is most successful when her readings of the nonverbal communication contribute to a larger reading of the text. Her readings of Laurence Sterne and Margaret Atwood are particularly good, adding new layers of perspective to the vast criticism on these authors. Here, Korte’s interdisciplinary approach of using existing terminology in a new field is note worthy and useful. Korte is least successful when she moves from one quick example of body language to the next without connections between texts or across literary time periods. While she herself argues that we must know the cultural specifics before assigning a particular meaning to a particular gesture, her own examples tend to dehistoricize her texts. In one such case of literary whiplash, Korte moves from William Golding’s 1955 *The Inheritors* to Anita Brookner’s 1987 *A Friend from England* to J.D. Salinger’s 1950 “For Esme—with Love and Squalor” to Samuel Richardson’s 1747-49 *Clarissa* all in the space of a page and a half (pp. 143-44). Unfortunately, Korte does not stop to analyze why the body language is important in these texts or how the cues differ across the centuries; she only states that the body language is there. Too often, Korte’s readings become laundry lists of here body language, there body language, everywhere body language.

While Part II can be slow going (especially for those of us unfamiliar with expression psychology), it does end with a particularly useful section entitled “Body Language in the Narrative Text: An Open Catalogue of Questions” (pp. 172-73). The questions clearly summarize Korte’s main points, reminding us to ask what the frequency, context, and role of the body language are within

the text.

When Korte turns to the historical perspective at the end of her work, *Body Language in Literature* comes alive. In Part III, Korte concentrates on the historical development of body language in the novels of the British Isles from the sixteenth century to the present. While her sample size of eighty novels is admittedly too small and the bulk of her texts really represent eighteenth century to the present, she reasonably argues that “body language is increasingly gaining ground in the aesthetic of the English novel” (p. 178). In the post-Richardson novel, “Everyday life gains significance as material for the novel; the concreteness and credibility of the world portrayed become important principles” (p. 184). She emphasizes a growing “attention to detail” that creates a need for novels to be “particular” (p. 187). Part of this need for the particular stems from the rise of photography and, in the twentieth century, motion pictures as new ways of seeing the body. In Part III, Korte nicely supplements her close readings with evidence from painting and other visual arts, giving her readings a forcefulness that is often lacking in Part II.

In *Body Language in Literature*, Barbara Korte does set up an interesting framework for bringing the terminology of expression psychology into the realm of literary criticism. I do, however, hope that she pushes her own analysis and follows up with “further research” she suggests at the end of this work. A systematic study of gender or a systematic look at etiquette books (something Karen Halttunen has done very well for American literature in *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*) or a systematic look at body language medical writings would be the needed touch to make Korte’s work truly stand out.

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