

RENE BROSCH

Relational Minds: Reconceptualizing Identity in Theory and Fiction

"Humans are all spontaneous psychologists,” states Dan Sperber in the MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences (2001, 541). This accounts for the enduring attraction of narrative fictions; they exploit our obsession with other human beings (Vermeule 2010, 2). Hence, psychology is arguably the scientific discourse most fundamental to literature. Fictional narratives are often seen as augmenting social skills and training empathy and mindreading: “the historical function of the novel is social and global strategy testing, its vehicle is other minds” (2010, 41). However, how these minds are constituted is a matter of historically determined knowledge and imagination.

No matter whether novels aim to depict consciousness realistically or not, their depictions will use as a starting point the specific assumptions that arise from what is thought to be cognitively realistic at a particular period. Therefore, narrative conventions of representing the self will respect certain givens dominant in cultural knowledge systems. Since literary fictions describe human beings’ thoughts, motivations and mental interactions, they must – at least implicitly – presume some ideas of consciousness. When literary narratives register or prompt such speculation about other minds, they reveal their preconceptions about the way the human mind works. In some cases literature has participated in the revision of concepts of the mind and intermental processes, maybe even anticipated recent concepts of shared and empathetic consciousness. In this engagement with interiority and interpersonal consciousness literature’s discursive interdependence with psychology and philosophy comes into play.

The western philosophical tradition from René Descartes to Kant generally assumed that the human mind is inherently separate in its purposes and experiences. This conception of the self as autonomous, isolated in its consciousness and responsible for its destiny is a residue from the enlightenment that has seen a slow decline and death. In the course of the 20th century, a major shift in the conceptualization of the mind occurred – from the Freudian “ego-psychology” (Metzler 1995, 157) with a conscious-subconscious dichotomy to more interconnected and interdependent models of the mind. In the past, Freud’s main ideas were absorbed rapidly into commonplace discourses and included in folk psychology. It is to be expected that the more recent changes in the psychological and philosophical conceptualization of the mind will also proliferate into the collective imaginary and make their way into literary fictions.

Experimental findings in the neurosciences, especially the discovery of mirror neurons – “one of the most important findings in neuroscience” (Zak 2007, 1158) – have radically altered conceptions of the mind, contradicting in particular enduring popular assumptions about consciousness derived from Freud’s psychology. According to the psychoanalyst Robert Stolorow, “Freudian psychoanalysis […] bifurcates the subjective world into inner and outer regions, reifies the resulting separation between the two and pictures the mind as an objective entity that […] looks out at an outside
from which it is radically estranged” (Stolorow 2001, xi). A notion of the infant’s asocial and egocentric nature dominated the theories of Freud and Jean Piaget in the first quarter of the last century (Bråten 2009, 3). For the abolition of these ideas the landmark work of Colwyn Trevarthen on pre-verbal intersubjectivity was foundational (Trevarthen 1979, 321). Together with others, he demonstrated that “the human individual grows in active engagement with an environment of human factors – organic at first, then psychological or intersubjective,” leading them to posit the infant’s “inherent intersubjectivity” (Trevarthen and Aitken 2001, 3). Given the inevitability of human dependence at the beginning of the life cycle as well as at its end, any idea of an isolated and independent subject is obviously inadequate. This position involved a rejection not only of the Freudian model but also of later ideas of the “computational mind” (Jackendoff 1987) and the “representational mind” (Fodor 1987), i.e. what later cognitivists call “standard cognitive science” (Shapiro 2011, 28). Experimental research has since supported the idea of intersubjectivity as an innate quality in human beings (Trevarthen 1979, 321).

In place of the Freudian unconscious, psychologists now envision a multiply contextualized experiential world, in which the self is constituted through its interconnectedness with its human and non-human environment, through a complex relationality formed in a lifetime of emotional and relational experience and based on ingrained embodied dispositions. This present-day conception of human consciousness perceives interpersonal awareness, cooperative action in society and cultural learning as manifestations of innate motives for sympathy in purposes, interests, and feelings, seeing the human mind as equipped with needs for dialogic, intermental engagement with other minds (Trevarthen 2001, 417). On this view, relationality and connectivity are imprinted into our very cognitive make-up (Rokotnitz 2011, 9). Considerable research over the past decades has garnered support for the notion that the mind is both embodied and relational. These terms imply that the brain, physical attributes of the self, and features of our interpersonal relationships and of the environments in which we live jointly regulate and codetermine how we think, feel, and behave both individually and collectively (Rejeski and Gauvin 2013, 657).

This reconceptualization of the mind no longer understands human beings as fundamentally subjective and individual (the "subjectivity first model") but as primordially connected in their subjectivity (“intersubjectivity first”). A central and crucial constituent of the reconceptualization is embodiment theory, as developed by Shaun Gallagher in How the Body Shapes the Mind. Proponents of the embodiment theory hold that cognition can be explained without recourse to computational processes and representational states, and that it is not located only in the brain but relies on the specifics of the body, so that the body plays a constitutive rather than a causal role in

---

1 In this brief sketch I am leaving out a long period of dominant behaviorist and functionalist views during which the treatment of consciousness was avoided as unscientific. In Gilbert Ryle’s study it was mocked as the “ghost in the machine” (Ryle 2002, 15). Another omission is Lacanian psychology which – though important for postmodern literature and poststructuralist approaches – was never corroborated experimentally and did not influence concepts of the mind the way cognitive science has. The Lacanian split subject with its dialogic representations and “unconscious structured like a language” does, however, surface in postmodern novels.
cognitive processes (Shapiro 2011, 4). An embodied perspective moves us away from both a mentalistic view of cognition and a dualistic view of mind/body (Bolens 2012, 41).

Expanding on Trevarthen’s idea of innate intersubjectivity, later theorists emphasize the role of action and perception in human thought. Instead of focusing solely on an organism’s internal cognitive processes, the ground-breaking work by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch made clear that "cognitive processes depend on experiences interacting with the surrounding world" (Varela, Thomson and Rosch 1993, 82). They argue that humans understand others primarily through interactive relations and through their ability to directly and spontaneously perceive intentions and emotions (Clark and Chalmers 1998, 17). At present, thinking about the mind in state of the art cognitive sciences subscribes to the 4e concept of cognition. 4e cognition characterizes mental processes as (1) embodied, (2) embedded, (3) enacted, and (4) extended (cf. Rowlands 2010, 3). According to Mark Rowlands, embodied means roughly that mental processes are partly constituted by, partly made up of wider […] bodily structures and processes. The idea that mental processes are embedded is, again roughly, the idea that mental processes have been designed to function only in tandem with a certain environment that lies outside the brain of the subject. […] The idea that mental processes are enacted is the idea that they are made up not just of neural processes but also of things that the organism does more generally – that they are constituted in part by the ways in which an organism acts on the world and the ways in which the world, as a result, acts back on that organism. The idea that mental processes are extended is the idea that they are not located exclusively inside an organism's head but extend out, in various ways, into the organism's environment. (Rowlands 2010, 3)

In contrast to the constructivist paradigms that dominate cultural studies, this approach does not perceive socialization in language as the sole cause for intersubjectivity, though cultural learning can certainly promote it. Language and other symbolic conventions enhance intersubjectivity, generating and storing limitless common meaning and strategies of thought, but they do not constitute the basis for interpersonal awareness. Rather, as Wittgenstein perceived, the reverse is the case: "all language develops from experience negotiated in intersubjectivity" (cf. Trevarthen 2001, 416). However, it is easy to see that these ideas of human consciousness as primarily relational conform pretty closely to the rhetoric of cultural studies where it has long been established that the material, physical conditions of life must be taken into account and that an individual is determined by and embedded in context and circumstance. Translated into the disciplinary vocabulary of critical theory, 'extended' expresses the fact that selfhood depends on and feeds off relationships with others; individuals are neither autonomous nor isolated, but able to compassionately and suggestively 'extend' themselves into the minds of others, an ability that is registered in an increasing number of studies of empathy.² Considering the mind as "enactive" has also been approached in cultural studies that reject the idea of an autonomous selfhood and regard identity not as a stable given but as constituted in performance and interaction. Hence all these

---

² The definition follows my understanding of inherent relationality and deviates from the "active externalism" proposed by Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998, 8).

Anglistik, Jahrgang 30 (2019), Ausgabe 1
© 2019 Universitätsverlag WINTER GmbH Heidelberg
aspects of cognitive theory enable us to substantiate claims to a non-essentialist subjectivity, which have been part of critical theory for quite some time.

This wholesale rejection of the Freudian model of consciousness in psychology was anticipated in early 20th-century philosophy. It was the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger which prepared the way for the shift in conceptualizing the individual by launching the recognition that we do not first experience ourselves and then the world but inescapably and inextricably both. It is indeed astonishing how close the phenomenologists who initiated this profound shift in concepts of subjectivity already were to recent positions in the cognitive sciences when they abandoned the epistemological individualism that had hitherto governed mainstream western philosophy.

Husserl understood 'mind' and 'body' as relational. In his view, we are embodied and extended – even distended – into the world by intentional consciousness, which is always consciousness of something that it is not. Merleau-Ponty added the concept of "corporeal intentionality," (Malpas 2007, 8) which stresses the interdependence of body and surrounding world to mutually constitute each other. According to Merleau-Ponty, subjects are constituted in their bodies, human thought and experience are essentially grounded in the corporeal and the concrete, and are therefore also intimately connected with the surrounding world in its particularity and immediacy (ibid., 2007, 8). Merleau-Ponty states: "I cease to be confined by the apparent limits of my physical skin; when I face this speaking other, another private world shows through [...] and for the moment I live in it" (qtd. in Kearney and Semonovitch 2011, 16). This theory already contained a form of inherent reciprocity. Interestingly, he considered the task of literature in this light: "The novelist’s task is not to expound ideas or even analyse characters, but to depict an inter-human event" (Mealeau-Ponty 2002, 175).

It was up to Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy to correct the notion of intentional consciousness and replace it with a more fundamental intersubjectivity, the idea of Mitsein, or "being-with" in Heidegger's terms. This concept constitutes a radical critique of traditional theories of subjectivity in proposing that being with others is part of the existential structure of human existence (Heidegger 1962, 149). Heidegger argues that there is no human self in the absence of the other. The self does not need to 'find' a way to the world and the others who share it, since it is already defined by its worldly commitments, activities and relationships through Dasein (McMullin 2013, 6). Thus Heidegger introduces an idea of social subjectivity that accommodates the other-directed nature of selfhood such that it becomes ontologically defined by its intersubjectivity. His philosophical idea of being-with arises out of "co-disposition", an emotional and affective attunement (Heidegger 1962, 205). Though not foregrounded in his theory, his brief comments on fundamental, shared attunement pointed the way to a new paradigm in conceiving of a relational subject.

Like Heidegger, Levinas and Nancy start from a concept of inherent communality (Kearney and Semonovitch 2011, 10-11). Levinas' ideas of the Other as prior to the self offer the opportunity to augment an intersubjective concept of consciousness by an ethical stance. His thought on human sociality posits that, ethically, people are responsible to one another in the face-to-face encounter and he proposes that we embrace an idea of identity as an intersubjective event (Levinas 1969, 56). Among these philosophers, it is most notably Nancy who advances the critical negotiations of subjectivity, since he is not so
much interested in questions of alterity, or the Other, but in plurality (Watkin 2007, 53). In the words of Christopher Watkin, Nancy is concerned with the "primacy of relation, rather than the primacy of the other" (2007, 52). His ambiguous phrase "being singular plural" (être singulier pluriel) emphasises relation in plurality. This direction of philosophical thought continues into the present time; Nancy's ideas of humanity as community and of being as always already in relation, are currently adopted by philosophers like Andrew Benjamin who insist that plurality and relationality are primary in ontological terms (Benjamin 2015, 2-3).

Together, these philosophies take issue with the way a former western tradition regarded the individual as the indivisible atom and absolute origin, a detached figure of immanence. They make clear that the individual so conceived "not only reflects an impoverished perspective but is ultimately a logical impossibility" (Luszczynska 2012, 44; cf. Nancy 1991, 3), because being human entails being first and foremost communal (Luszczynska 2012, 54). A large body of philosophical and psychological work thus reinforces an imagination of shared universals and of community as irreducibly foundational.

**Embodied Cognition and the Capacity for Empathy**

It is now common parlance that we know through the body. The idea that the human mind must bear the imprint of embodied experience has already permeated knowledge systems beyond philosophy and cognitive science. Grounding subjectivity in the body accounts for both its individuality and its interdependence (McLaren 2013, 213). All the complex functions and dimensions of the body are sites of knowledge and contribute to the kind of mental processing an organism experiences (Colombetti 2014, xv). The insight that cognition is constituted in the body as well as in the brain and contains emotions as well as thoughts makes clear that body language is an important trigger of empathy.

An important aspect resulting from the understanding of subjectivity as embodied and related is that subjectivity so conceived is a most powerful catalyst of emotional affect. Following Antonio Damasio’s influential rehabilitation of the emotions as an aspect of rationality, cognitive science recognizes affective responses and particularly the capacity for empathy as an integral part of subjectivity. The embodied mind is recognized as an instrument of empathic and affective knowledge about an Other. Empathy is defined as "a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person’s psychological status – both cognitive and affective – while maintaining a clear self-other differentiation" (Coplan and Goldie 2011, xxxiv). The mention of observation in this definition points to the centrality of embodiment and perception in the production of empathy.

Neuroscientific experiments detected bodily mimicry in observers of bodily actions; they deduced that perceived stimuli do not only produce cognitive states, but also bodily states (Lindblom 2015, 117). Interestingly, the brain also simulates perceptual and motor

---

3 The idea that subjectivity cannot be thought of without the body is familiar from feminist theories. Gender Studies have been at the forefront of pointing to the role of the body in epistemological relations to its outside, its role in kinship and familiarity and therefore as the source of empathy and hospitality.
actions when they are signified only verbally. Neuroimaging studies have revealed that action comprehension involves the same primary neural structures that are needed for action execution, including the motor cortex and the premotor cortex. Action execution and mental simulation of action share the same neural substrates (Bolens 2012, 11). "Language comprehension appears to be interconnected with the sensorimotor experiences implied by the text one reads or the words one hears spoken" (Beilock and Lyons 2009, 25-26, cf. Bolens 2012, 11). While earlier research thought of word and language processing as a separate process and area in the brain, neuroimaging evidence generally supports the embodied semantics approach according to which readers spontaneously produce dynamic simulations when silently reading texts. Simulation of movement is, at its core, the gateway to human social understanding (Bolens 2012, 41).

Expanding on Coplan's interpersonal definition of empathy quoted above, literary scholar Suzanne Keen notes that the "vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" can be produced not only by witnessing but also by hearing or reading of another's condition, so that it can be experienced through literary fictions as well (Keen 2007, 4). On the basis of experimental studies, she shows that reading includes "experiences of intense identification and emotion-sharing with bodily effects" and hence produces empathy for fictional characters (Keen 2013, 50). It is literature's visceral appeal to the senses that embodied cognition responds to. Gestures and movements are particularly interesting for literary scholars, because they represent a corporeal system of non-verbal communication that appeals at a basic level. Reading these gestures in literary narratives provides a surplus dimension of cultural and psychological information. Gestures in literary fictions describe the cultural and epistemological conventions associated with non-verbal communication and at the same time activate an automatic, anthropologically grounded kinesic knowledge.

Human beings are enormously adept at decoding non-verbal signals, an aptitude which might explain the attention literature pays to the corporeal aspects of intersubjective experiences. That sensory and bodily elements feature prominently in narrative descriptions of intersubjectivity, corresponds to the significance accorded to bodily signals and mimicry in the development of infants (van Gelder 1995, Thelen and Smith 1994). Literary instances of interpersonal understanding invariably contain corporeal aspects, whether in the most common form of visual perception, or other sense experiences, such as movement, gesture and facial expression, which the concepts of embodied cognition and of the extended mind can help to elucidate. In general understanding, the influence of the bodily aspect of awareness and self-awareness currently "continues deservedly to grow" (De Gaynesford 2007, 545).

Most theorists distinguish two kinds of empathy, a lower- and a higher-order empathy (Coplan and Goldie 2011, xxxvi). On the one hand, there is "the capacity to gain a grasp of the contents of other people's minds, to predict and explain what they will think, feel and do" (Coplan and Goldie 2011, ix). On the other, we have the ability to respond to others ethically and in a morally appropriate way. The difference is based on the amount of emotional identification and the degree of participation of mirror neurons. Alvin Goldmann defines low-level empathy as "affective mimicry" or "emotional simulation" based on synchrony between perceiver and target (Coplan and Goldie 2011, xxxvi). High-level empathy, by contrast, is an imaginative process that may involve emotions but relies primarily on rational thought. Empirical evidence for
the lower form of empathy is more robust, grounded in the discovery of mirror neurons. When someone observes the facial expressions and bodily movements of someone else, brain scans show that the same cells are activated in the observer as in the target (Coplan and Goldie 2011, xxxvi). This automatic mirroring response has little connection to subsequent behaviour and judgement. High-level empathy, by contrast, is a more abstract category that possesses a prestigious philosophical history. It is a process requiring effort that takes place in stages and depends on shifting consciously to the perspective of another.

Accordingly, cognitive neuroscientists Liam Rameson and Matthew Lieberman suggest that it is possible to vary empathetic responses by adopting one of two modes of processing information, which they term experiential and propositional respectively. According to this view, experiential processing can be thought of as an automatic, affective, stream-of-consciousness experience that feels like unmediated reality, while propositional processing can be thought of as a controlled cognitive process (Rameson and Lieberman 2009, 101). Both kinds of empathy can be detected in and triggered by literary fictions. It seems highly likely that readers experience both reactions depending on the appeal to a more immersive or a more detached mode of reading. As Naomi Rokotnitz puts it in her cognitive study of drama: "Some experiences are registered in our actively analysing conscious minds, others write themselves into the very fibres of our physical selves" (Rokotnitz 2011, 2).

The empathetic function of literature has recently been emphasized in criticism. Recent debates, not only in literary studies, have elevated empathy into a "desirable human quality causing improved concern for and action on behalf of others" (Keen 2013, 50). The category of empathy has become prominent in a revival of moral sentimentalism and an "ethics of caring" (Coplan and Goldie 2011, ix). Building on the 'empathy-altruism hypothesis' in psychology, writers across many disciplines (Martha Nussbaum, Keith Oatley, Suzanne Keen, Patrick Colm Hogan) look for the benefits of literature in improvement of empathy, mindreading and ultimately pro-social behaviour. These critics perceive an educative effect of reading literature on the ability to compassionately and morally extend ourselves into others. Though these assessments may be overly optimistic in their disregard for human gullibility and self-interest, fictions certainly exert social power and "do public work" by influencing the cultures in which they circulate (Spolsky 2015, xiv).

**Relational Minds in Fiction – Then and Now**

As the brief summaries above aimed to show, both psychology, philosophy and many areas of the humanities have replaced a subjectivity-first model with an intersubjective one, and turned from relatively isolated concepts of the mind towards related, embodied and embedded ones. For the relational mind, empathy is an everyday activity. Becoming
a relational communal subject is, of course, always an unfinished project. However, fiction is a platform for giving shape to needs and desires and what we can already find are novels that "strive to galvanise their readers, to provoke them into purposeful introspection and potentially to interpellate them as more self-conscious, more critical and more broad-minded citizens of the world" (Spencer 2011, 3). This effort is evident in recent fictions that have left narrow conceptions of identity behind and categorically decentre individual human experience without demoting or devaluing it. In the subsequent last section of this article, I am going to discuss various ways in which contemporary fictions are contributing to the promotion of relationality and communality. These ways and means include thematizing relationality through depictions of mindreading and the extension of empathy to others, through certain formal and stylistic techniques and through inviting an embodied, immediate understanding for fictional consciousnesses on the part of readers. These characteristics will lead me to speculate on the capacity of these fictions to aid the formation of temporary imagined reading communities committed to moral or political agendas.

**Mindreading Epiphanies**

In making us aware of the ability to compassionately and morally extend ourselves into others, these concepts of subjectivity relate directly to reading and writing practices. The ability to connect to others and to empathize is the very basis of our enjoyment of the transformative potential of literature: "literature's potential to take possession of the self – to make a zombie of it – and, through exposing the reader to otherness (both the fundamental otherness of him or herself as well as of others), [to] effect transformations within the space of the self that could be called humane, defined here as an ability to imagine oneself as an other” (Takolander 2007, 38). While traditional literary studies believed that it is the exclusive privilege of fiction to give access to hidden inner states of other minds, such a belief in an exceptionality status is now discredited. As David Herman points out, the mind is neither closed off from the world nor limited to its internal states and processes (Herman 2011a, 9). Without an understanding of what people think, what they want and what they believe about the world, it is impossible to operate in any society. Whether the ability is termed Theory of Mind, empathy, mindreading or reciprocal intersubjectivity, it is a necessary activity that we practice so often that we cease to think about what we are actually doing (O'Connell 1998, 2-3).

Imbued in their contemporary psychological discourses, modernist narratives followed the 'subjectivity first' model of the mind and typically concentrated on the inner consciousness of main characters. According to standard critical accounts, modernism was beset by ethical and epistemological uncertainties, increasing the interest in the alienated inner self. Following an enduring legacy of Romanticism, modernist writers

---

4 Hence, Berthold Schoene's thesis of the emergence of a full-scale cosmopolitan novel as a new genre may be a bit overblown. "Since cosmopolitanism is a political condition that is latent but unrealized, it is in fact not possible for literary texts to incarnate cosmopolitanism [fully and] successfully any more than it is possible to incarnate, say, socialism or feminism […] cosmopolitanism cannot be realized in works of art; it can only be pointed to as a possibility” (Spencer 2011, 11-12).
aspired to characterizations of psychological depth. This depth model was promoted by a "consciousness industry" that pervaded discourses of modernity (Henderson 1996, 2). What was considered the special achievement of 'high modernism' may be traced to Freud's well-known verbal and indeed narrative bias, a common denominator of most psychological scholarship at the time (Cohn 1978, 95). As a result of these received ideas, literary critics held that the innovative narration in high modernist novels opens a window on the inner speech of adults; *Ulysses* in particular was thought to capture this interior process via techniques of stream-of-consciousness and free indirect discourse.

High modernist narratives limited their perspective to one protagonist's field of vision at a time so that readers are able to enter their consciousness and are privy to everything the character perceives. In the more strictly focalized narratives there is hardly a word or an image that we can attribute to an even hypothetically imagined omniscient narrator (Levitt 2006, 3). For the modernists, internal perspectives were not just a technical innovation, they constituted an ethical desire: to forego authorial omniscience was to reject authoritative 'grands récits' and hence the notion that an ulterior truth exists outside multiple, relative and subjective ones. Yet, no matter how deeply exploratory these modernists wrote about the mind, it was always the individual mind they were interested in, even in novels like William Faulkner's which aimed to describe a regional culture (Levitt 2006, 115; 165). Thus the narrowing down to a subjective point of view amounts to a paradox. Though the modernist 'tunnel vision' starts from the notion of an isolated and impenetrable consciousness, it allows the reader to fully perceive what was supposed to be entirely hidden and secret (Brosch 2008, 211). It is in this sense that Monika Fludernik calls the consciousness novel as invented by Henry James the "first great instance of the non-natural" in the history of novelistic narrative (Fludernik 1996, 168).

Nevertheless, this rampant individualism is sometimes transcended: it is obvious that relational, intersubjective moments do happen in modernist novels; they are usually highlighted and special. Insights into another consciousness as a sudden revelation gratifying to the fictional characters and their readers alike are not entirely unusual in modernist narratives. They occur as quasi-utopian conclusions to stories of brutally isolated consciousnesses, failed attempts at communication and experiences of intense loneliness. Modernist narrative literature developed a range of set situations or patterns for representing intersubjective insight. Typical examples are Mrs. Dalloway's understanding of Septimus Smith's suicide, Kate's relinquishing of the self in D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*, or Laura's empathy beyond her class-bound world-view in Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party." Descriptions of these revelatory moments typically suggest that there is something ineffable and incommunicable in these experiences. "The Garden Party" is a case in point: Laura's final insight provoked by the sight of the dead body leaves her stammering and inarticulate.

In other words, modernist narratives presuppose a subjectivity first model of cognition in order to present empathetic relationality as a climax to the narrative. It can only work as a 'revelation' if we think of intersubjectivity as a breakthrough from ordinary mental isolation. This is why high modernist texts typically celebrate these moments as transgressions of the limits of the self. The narrative emphasis stands in marked contrast to everyday life on the assumption that ordinarily lack of understanding and failure to
communicate govern human relations. That these assumptions implicit in modernist representations contradict current concepts of cognition, should be abundantly clear at this point. That these insights happen sometimes without volition, or without explicit reasoning, anticipates the contemporary idea of an intersubjectively primed mind.

While such epiphanic moments of intersubjectivity in modernism testify to fictions’ role as mouthpieces for the human desire to transcend what was perceived as the given isolation of the individual self, they may also count as evidence for anticipations of later reconceptualizations of the mind. Though the mental and psychological basis for the capacity of empathetic understanding is by no means uncontroversial, the spontaneous nature of mindreading or consciousness attribution is now widely accepted. It might therefore be expected that literary descriptions of intersubjective moments would grow more frequent as well as more casual and humdrum as current knowledge about the relational mind percolates into the collective imaginary. Indeed, what is notable is the growing prevalence of the phenomenon of mindreading in fictions compared with its rare and highlighted appearance in modernist narratives. In contrast to modernist empathetic epiphanies, more recent narratives tend to represent fictional minds reaching out to other minds, comprehending their feelings and thoughts as part of their everyday life and ordinary mind-set. The prevalence in recent fictions might lead one to assume that knowledge about inherent intersubjectivity has already disseminated into popular culture. Karen Fowler’s We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves even mentions the term ToM and discusses its transfer from the study of chimpanzees to humans. Films and series like The Mentalist depend upon an extreme form of the common capacity.

While postmodern fictions seemed primarily concerned with subverting the idea of a stable and autonomous identity, more recent ones take on board the intersubjective potential of such a loss of core identity. Transitions between separate fictional minds appear to become easier and more frequent, taking place in ordinary communicative situations instead of at heightened ‘moments of being.’ Among recent fictional narratives there are many instances of what Alan Palmer calls "social minds" (Palmer 2010, n.p.). Authors are less concerned with interiority than with the connectedness of

5 The principal opponents are the proponents of Theory of Mind (ToM) and of simulation theory. Whereas ToM involves a certain amount of cognitive detachment, the kind of mindreading assumed by simulation theorists does not. The latter posit that in order to understand the experience of another, there is a way in which one can jump into that situation and experience it as though it were happening to oneself, in a very spontaneous way. The response is automatic, triggered by mirror neurons and it evolved because it was essential to human survival in the distant past. A third now commonly adopted option for explaining intermental processes comes from enactivism, indebted to the philosophy of Alva Noe. According to enactivists like Shaun Gallagher and Daniel Hutto, very little 'mindreading' is required in our day-to-day interactions. Rather than first perceiving another’s actions and then inferring their meaning, the intended meaning is immediately apparent to perception. Hence, Gallagher and Hutto reject both earlier conceptualizations of intermental understanding, i.e. Theory of Mind and simulation theory. Applied to the practice of reading, however, it seems perfectly justified to call the reader's activity ToM, given the intellectual challenge of many fictions.
individual consciousness, they often "spread the mind abroad [...] to show" how it emerges through human's dynamic interdependencies with the social and material environments they seek to navigate" (Herman 2011b, 254). In recent postcolonial novels non-verbal understanding between characters proliferates. The telepathy depicted in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* may have set an example in this regard. In Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* or Arundathi Roy's *The God of Small Things* telepathy between siblings is a magic element of otherwise realistic narratives. This conforms with recent understandings of the mind in cognitivist psychology and philosophy: not as a bracketed-off interior space, but "as a kind of distributional flow interwoven with rather than separated from situations, events, and processes in the world" (Herman 2011b, 255).

Moreover, present-day narratives no longer resort to extensive 'psycho-narration' when they want to inform readers of their characters' thought processes. It seems that many serious literary works now demand a greater amount of mindreading from readers and depend more extensively on their construction of "continuing consciousness" (Palmer 2004, 175). By the same token, it is probably the case that readers enjoy being called upon to complete textual depictions of states of mind and to exercise empathetic thinking. The popularity of a novel like *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel, which makes the comprehension of mental processes extremely difficult, testifies to this development. Unexplained human relations in general challenge the readers' intermental imagination and invite them to speculate on motivation. While modernist fiction and theory assumed that representations of round and unified subjectivities were a measure of literary success, recent narratives tend to deny their readers depth psychology, inviting them not to only perceive, but to exercise the mind as an instrument of interpersonal awareness and social learning. When we encounter figures in fiction who do not possess a fully developed identity, we are required to participate by filling in the gaps.

**Producing Empathy: The Body as Site and Sign**

As current concepts of relational subjectivity permeate general knowledge, fictional moments of intersubjectivity rely less on reports of thought content and more on bodily movements, gestures and facial expressions. Barbara Korte's study confirms this assumption since she discerns an increasing sensitivity to the semantics of the body in the novel's historical development (Korte 1997, 3). Literature has a long tradition of attempting to give readers access to the minds of characters. Gradually, as narrative literature has evolved more and more intricate and subtle ways of thought representation, the body has also regained its space in our attention as a significant means of giving expression to mental life. In her survey of body language in fiction, Korte also notes that bodily experiences elicit emotional responses in readers (Korte 1997, 13).

Body language may be said to be the nexus of psychosomatic and cognitive reader response, the point where memory, semantic interpretation and psycho-somatic simulation intersect, creating a sensory and cognitive bond between novel and reader. Gesturing, especially communicative gestures, are productive of empathy in real world encounters, our sensitivity to them appears to be largely innate. Given that cognition is constituted in the body as well as in the brain and contains emotions as well as thoughts, we can expect body language and gestures in fiction to be powerful tools for eliciting embodied responses.

---

Anglistik, Jahrgang 30 (2019), Ausgabe 1
© 2019 Universitätsverlag WINTER GmbH Heidelberg
Barbara Dancygier sees two new forms of "literature of embodiment:" "On the one hand, bodies are directly used metaphorically as representations of the characters' minds; on the other, there are numerous texts featuring characters with various disorders related to unusual or deficient brain activity" (Dancygier 2012, 168). The latter propensity to write about phenomena such as Asperger's syndrome, Tourette syndrome, autism, Huntington's disease etc. she finds particularly interesting, as it suggests that literary production remains sensitive to the issue of the representation of minds and uses recent knowledge in neuroscience as inspiration (ibid., 2012, 168).

Ellen Spolsky defines kinesic intelligence as our human capacity to discern and interpret body movements, body postures, gestures, and facial expressions in real situations as well as in our reception of cultural artefacts (Spolsky 1996, 159). Her definition thus takes account of the distinction between the adjective "kinetic," designating a kind of movement that may be measured, and "kinesis," pertaining to interpersonal gestures and expressive movements. The latter are particularly interesting for the literary scholar although they can neither be quantified not equated with a specific code, because they represent a corporeal system of non-verbal communication that appeals on a basic level. Reading these gestures in literary narratives provides a whole new dimension of cultural and psychological information. Gestures in literary fictions describe the cultural and epistemological conventions associated with non-verbal communication and at the same time activate an automatic, anthropologically grounded kinesic knowledge.

Gesture analysis in literature entails that we take into account the specific way a narrative thinks of the body: characterization, plot, spatiotemporal framing and perspective represent a degree and kind of embodiment. "Narrative, then, always first and foremost depends upon a corporeal hermeneutics" (Punday 2003, 15). Bodily behaviour and expressions can function as anchors that influence sense-making in readers. These anchors co-opt reader response through motor resonance via unconscious immersion in narrated sense experience. An enactive process of sensorimotor resonance where the reader experiences the phenomenon of motor simulation is triggered by reading of corporeal behaviour and motor actions (Kuzmicova 2012, 29). These 'imaginative' processes are not effortful, but automatic and mostly non-conscious and they often involve affective reactions. Arundathi Roy's novel The God of Small Things is a good example of how empathy and sympathy are mobilized by bodily modes of interaction between the loving twins. The foregrounded physical attunement of the two characters is a trigger of affect that does not require conscious critical attention to manifest itself.

**Formal Features Promoting Relationality**

Literary narratives always involve the reader in what they construe as mental states of fictional characters. It appears 'natural' in the sense of Monika Fludernik (1996), for instance, that we use a "continuing-consciousness cognitive frame" with the default value that it allows the assumption that the character's mind continues between mentions of it (Palmer 2004, 176). In real life "we do not have to be in the presence of others to have them in mind" (Trevarthen 2001, 416). Similarly, in reading narrative fiction,
we do not restrict our insight into a character's consciousness to those passages where focalization or characterization give us direct access to it. Even from very few insights into fictional minds, such as 'camera eye'-narratives allow, we are able to project an idea of these minds as coherent and continuous.

Joshua Ferris's 2014 novel To Rise Again at a Decent Hour develops an interesting and challenging technique for representing the other-directed nature of human interaction by restricting dialogues to the speech of one person and omitting the first person narrator's speech: "Mrs. Convoy […] asked why I felt it necessary to sit in my own waiting room during peak hours. I told her, she said, 'And how is the complete experience?' I told her, she said, 'And do you think the complete experience might be enhanced by a dentist who tends to his patients in a timely manner?' I told her, she said, 'We will not get a reputation.' […]" (Ferris 2014, 90-91). It is astonishing to observe how easily reading deals with these omissions; the missing details cannot prevent an empathetic understanding of these one-sided conversations.

The findings of cognitive science are particularly valuable for coming to terms with what goes on in the reader's mind during the reading experience, even though – surprisingly – reader response is not a frequent preoccupation among cognitivists. Most Cognitive Literary Studies concentrate exclusively on intermental engagement among fictional characters, as Alan Palmer and Lisa Zunshine have done in their work. In my understanding, fictional narratives monitor intersubjectivity by addressing the reader, instructing her to react to it in a preferred way.

A narrative strategy that promotes a participatory mindset on the part of the reader is episodic, serial or cyclical narration. Used in modernism for short story cycles, it is now a preferred form for postcolonial literature (cf. Davis). This kind of narration in episodes is less tightly constructed and closure-oriented than the traditional realist novel. Its popularity has increased with the popularity of serial fictions on screen. It seems to increase the challenges of readers to establish coherence across narrative gaps. In Aboriginal writing of the last decade, short story cycles have become a prominent genre, including works by Tony Birch, Jeanine Leane, Marie Munkara and Ellen van Neerven. Using the figure of thought of relationality as an analytical tool, Dorothee Klein illustrates how the short story cycle through its very form fosters a critical engagement with prevalent political discourses and promotes a sense of communal connectedness (Klein forthcoming, 2). Focusing primarily on Tara June Winch's award-winning debut fiction Swallow the Air (2006), a cycle composed of twenty short stories, Klein traces how the narrator-protagonist overcomes her "crisis of nonrelation" (Gandhi 2006, 148). She shows that Winch foregrounds the importance of relationality on a formal as well as on the content level, arguing that "this inscription and mediation of relationality extends to the reader as well in that the narrative encourages an intersubjective and participatory reading that pays heed to notions of plurality and multiplicity" (Klein forthcoming, 3).

Another common technique for eliciting strong affective engagement with the events and characters in a story is present-tense narration. Its use has become more and more frequent in the last decades. It creates a sense of momentariness that seems natural and genuine (sensu Fludernik) as in the oral concurrent reporting of certain forms of journalism like sports reports. The prevalence of present tense is likely due to its assumed immediacy and its deictic production of a story-time close to the reader's present. While
the narrative preterite (past tense), signals that the narrated events are past and its subject no longer on scene, the present tense is more focused on moments or episodes; "it sacrifices the larger time-field to achieve keen, close focus" (Le Guin 1998, 73). Today, the illusionary quality of a vast temporal-spatial panorama generated by the past tense is exactly the reason why many writers shun the form, as they have rejected the idea of 'grands récits' and wish to make their readers aware that they are partaking in one version of reality only. The present tense can undermine the sense of total access to the world of the past recreated in fictional form, for it disturbs massively the experience of continuity, making narration disjunct, leading from one moment to the next and excluding global temporal reference. The present tense could be called a narrative tense of less authority. Kim Scott's That Deadman Dance uses the present tense as well as adverbials that indicate unbroken presence when talking about the land. By these formal means, That Deadman Dance attests to the unbroken presence of the original inhabitants of the Australian continent.

As Gayatri Spivak notes, "peripheral literature may stage more surprising and unexpected manoeuvres towards collectivity" (Spivak 2003, 55-56). If the most fundamental stumbling block to a sense of communality is the western concept of the individual, it is reasonable to conclude that "cultures less influenced by this European thought could provide some interesting insights into places or events in which community might flourish more easily" (Luszczynska 2012, 67). In Australia this tendency may have benefitted from the influence of Aboriginal literature (Jacobs and Malpas 2011, 9). Aboriginal writings are, after all, frequently preoccupied with subverting the notion of a unified and stable subject, self or identity. They have from the beginning bypassed the individualist and nationalist bias of the European novel tradition. In post-Mabo times these indigenous fictions have decidedly shifted away from seeking to reconstruct identity on White Australian terms (Rodoreda 2018, 208).

As Geoffrey Rodoreda convincingly demonstrates, recent Aboriginal fictions have developed a range of themes and formal devices that create an imagined strong communal connectedness and sovereignty for their Aboriginal protagonists. Alexis Wright's celebrated novel Carpentaria, for instance, creates as its main narrator an Aboriginal speaking in a communal voice directly to his people imagined to be in close proximity (Rodoreda 2018, 185). Rodoreda's analysis of Carpentaria reads the novel by the indigenous author as an embedded narrative by an intradiagnostic narrator who addresses Aboriginal listeners as insiders with special knowledge and privileged position, while never completely excluding the non-Aboriginal reader. The positioning of the white reader as an outsider listening in makes the frame of the embedded narrative porous and ambiguous. Its inclusive technique is reminiscent of oral storytelling in utilizing the permeable boundaries that exist between levels of communicative address in second-person narratives. The "counter narrative to nationhood" (Rodoreda 2016, 9) that is told in Carpentaria renders indigeneity the default mode of humankind, thus opening up a potentially new relationality for its non-indigenous readers.

Australian indigenous narratives present a powerful example of fictional discourse utilizing a range of narrative techniques, such as you- and we-narratives, embedded or framed storylines, forced deictic shifts, episodic structuring, creating a voice for non-human elements, and multiple addressees to create a sense of communality that characterizes the Aboriginal societies in the story world and reaches out to include...
readers as well. What perhaps most needs explanatory comment in this list may be the device of enforced deictic shifts, a technique of unpredictably changing the focalization and perspective from one fictional character to another within short narrative space, sometimes even within one sentence. This shift is a linguistic expression of relationality since it circumvents and expands the egoistic *origo* that traditional linguistics interpreted as the basis for our understanding of deictic verbs and adverbs. It could therefore be called an analogy to the philosophical and psychological idea of essential pluralism discussed above.

The use of *we*-narration is eminently suitable for creating an imagined community since it is already speaking from the standpoint of a collective. Second person narratives, in singular as well as plural form, are radically different from third person ones, because the second person implies and includes an addressee more forcefully than other narrative situations. Because of their "referential indeterminacy", *you*-narratives are apt to blur the boundary between discourse and story (Fludernik 2011, 101). The 'you' functions both as the addressee and as the protagonist, thus breaking down the reader's cognitive distance to the fictional experience. Both strategies feature prominently in recent Aboriginal novels. These narrative techniques encourage readers to envision a progression from an egocentric to an allocentric orientation.

**Conclusion: Temporary Reading Communities**

The recent concept of the mind impinges also on the extratextual intersubjectivities which literary texts inspire. Whereas scientific discourse can only make statements about cognition, literary discourse "has the potential for conveying experience of cognition" (Freißmann 2012, 8). That is why we need to look beyond fictional content at the particular formal techniques and devices that shape the reading experience as well, since it is this reading experience that is capable of eliciting a rethinking and relearning of transindividual ethics.

The power of representations to perform cultural work is due to, on the one hand, a shared body of cultural knowledge and beliefs and, on the other, to its adjusting and revising these beliefs. By first evoking and then interfering with cultural norms and codes, literature can generate shared reading practices. And sharing the experience of reading makes a recognition of common moral and empathetic agendas possible that can lead to the formation of temporary 'interested communities' in readerships.

Reading practices can contribute to a sense of relationality and connectivity by emphasizing the shared components of human experience. It is the very hallmark of successful postcolonial fictions like the Australian examples mentioned above that they are rooted in locality and particularity on the one hand while on the other referencing universal dispositions and embodiments in which all humans participate. On the basis of the discussed change in conceptualizing the mind, reading practices are better equipped to gauge the affective and embodied nature of racial and sexual content. Political and ethical agendas can be created in the performative solidarities enacted in temporary reading communities. To connect as readers is aided by removing the

---

7 An analysis of forced deictic shifts in recent Aboriginal literature is brilliantly delivered in Dorothee Klein's forthcoming study, which I have had the privilege of reading in manuscript.

Anglistik, Jahrgang 30 (2019), Ausgabe 1
© 2019 Universitätsverlag WINTER GmbH Heidelberg
obstacle of self-centred individualism and recognizing the deep relationality of everyday experience and the interconnection between self and others. This makes the role of the reader a responsible one and reveals the necessity of exchanging with other readers concerning political goals and assumptions. In this way the literary field can produce communities and sociabilities of shared interests and values (Kirkpatrick and Dixon 2012, v). It is the role of literature after all to undertake imaginative endeavours that can slowly but surely penetrate culture and consciousness, influence behaviour and perhaps ultimately impact political decision makers. Such a relational practice of reading and writing can become a form of agency that is critical and potentially transformative.

Works Cited


—. Social Minds in the Novel. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University 2010.


© 2019 Universitätsverlag WINTER GmbH Heidelberg