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1700-1775:

Theory of Mind, Social Hierarchy, and the Emergence of Narrative Subjectivity

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A peculiar sideline scenario plays itself out obsessively in one eighteenth-century novel after another: A protagonist responds to an apparently impoverished stranger's plea for assistance, while being closely watched by an interested observer, such as a secret admirer, a parent, or a friend. For example, Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) opens with Yorick in Calais, first rejecting the plea of a Franciscan monk begging on behalf of his convent, then feeling guilty and afraid that the monk has reported his uncharitable behavior to the attractive lady traveling next to Yorick, and finally making it up to the monk under the approving gaze of that increasingly attractive lady. Sarah Fielding's *The History of Ophelia* (1760) features a scene in which the rakish Lord Dorchester helps out the starving half-pay Captain Traverse, while Dorchester's beautiful young protégé, Ophelia, watches them both and describes their feelings. In Oliver Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* (1762), a series of essays written from the point of view of a fictitious Chinese philosopher living in London, the narrator first listens to his acquaintance, Mr. Drybone, inveighing against giving alms to beggars and then observes Mr. Drybone going against his own wise precepts and

surreptitiously helping out several of them. In Anna Maria Bennett's *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* (1797), Colonel Buhanun starts off by berating harshly a "little female mendicant" who begs him for "one halfpenny," but soon reveals his truer, gentler self, gives the girl money, and even fights to hide "an officious fluid, which sprang involuntarily to his eyes" at the sight of her distress (1: 3). The exchange takes place under the attentive gaze of Buhanun's trusty servant—his occasional almoner and another crusty man with a heart of gold.

Similar scenes of observed benefaction occur in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48), Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Tobias Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle* (1751), Eliza Haywood's *Jemmy and Jenny Jessamy* (1753), Frances Burney's *Cecilia* (1782), and Thomas Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives* (1792). In fact, it is difficult to think of an eighteenth-century novel, from *Clarissa* on, which does not contain one or several such scenes. And even before this pattern establishes itself in the novel, it is already present in Addison and Steele's *Spectator* (1711), in which the narrator observes Sir Andrew Freeport giving money to a group of beggars in the street (II:405).

How do we account for the popularity of this scenario in eighteenth-century fiction? Traditional criticism offers two ways of approaching it. First, we can consider such scenes of observed charity in the context of the period's "sentimental" discourse. We can thus speculate that fictional accounts of induced empathy and shared benevolence struck a particular chord for a culture as invested in representation of embodied sentiments as was the culture of the Enlightenment. Second, we can think of socio-historical developments that challenged the established practices of giving alms and thus rendered philanthropy a newly fascinating and controversial topic. After all, Henry Fielding proclaimed charity "the very characteristic virtue [of his] time" (1988: 247), referring to such new forms of philanthropic association as hospitals

(such as the Foundling Hospital, the Magdalene, the Lying-In Hospital, the Lock Hospital, and others) whose number rose from 2 before 1700 to 31 by 1800, a statistic that reflects deeper transformations in the social fabric of early modern England. Eighteenth-century men and women had to deal with such issues as the redefinition of the concept of the "deserving" poor, the secularization of philanthropy, and the changes in the relationship between private and public giving. Any one of these factors, as well as a combination of them, can be used to construct a plausible narrative about the interest that the scenes of observed charity elicited in eighteenth-century readers and writers.

To these explanations, which we could broadly characterize as historical, I want to add another explanation, which could be broadly characterized as cognitive. In what follows, I suggest that the pattern of mental embedment present in such scenes—a triangulation of minds fueled by different degrees of mutual awareness—makes these moments of observed benefaction particularly cognitively rewarding and as such may add to their narrative appeal. The real challenge—and potentially the most interesting part of the model that I develop here—lies in our ability to combine the historical and the cognitive explanations. That is, if we agree that the three-way mind-reading implied by the scenes of observed benefaction feels rewarding to the evolved cognitive architecture which underlies our social functioning *and* that philanthropy was a hot topic in eighteenth-century public discourse, can we articulate a viable cognitive-historicist model (or several models) which can bring together and, by doing so, potentially transform both these explanations?

This is to say that a cognitive approach may eventually sharpen our historicist view: If, as I will argue below, readers are in principle *always* interested in the scenes featuring triangulations of minds, then we must inquire carefully into the specific cultural circumstances

which made this particular pattern of fictional triangulation (the giver, the receiver, and the observer) so strikingly competitive in the eighteenth-century literary marketplace.

And similarly, a historicist approach may eventually focus our cognitive view: If the concern about benefits and pitfalls of private philanthropy assumed such a prominent place in eighteenth-century mentality, then we must inquire into the ways in which the perceived importance of this topic may have enhanced the attractiveness of fictional narratives featuring mental triangulations. This is to say that the readers may have felt that, by engaging in the distinctively structured attribution of mental states sponsored by such narratives, they also learned something about the politics of charitable giving. The perception of social relevance may have fueled the attractiveness of the cognitive "workout" offered by the scenes of observed benefaction.

As you can see, I am anticipating my argument by presenting you with the two speculations that may follow from it. I am doing this on purpose. As you read my discussion of cognitive adaptations possibly underlying the eighteenth-century fascination with fictions of observed charity, I want you to think of the practical ways in which research in cognitive science can be used to further historicist inquiry. Underlying such interdisciplinary explorations is the assumption that specific social contexts engage our cognitive adaptations and by doing so shape the history of cultural representations and our subsequent thinking about this history.

The rest of this essay is divided into four parts. Parts one and two introduce the concept of Theory of Mind to explore the cognitive underpinnings of the interest that scenes of triangulated mind-reading elicit in readers of fictional narratives. Part three presents a cross section of such scenes in eighteenth-century fiction, focusing centrally on those triangulations that engaged the socioeconomic anxieties of contemporary readers. I return here to the

representations of observed benefaction to speculate about the possibilities of an analysis that combines cognitive theory with historicist methods of studying literature. Specifically, I suggest that the fictional hierarchy of mental complexity involving the giver, the receiver, and the observer was co-implicated in eighteenth-century constructions of class boundaries and social mobility. Part four, the conclusion, turns to an eighteenth-century philosophical treatise featuring numerous instances of three-way mind-reading and considers whether contemporary writers might have been aware of the role played by such triangulations in the emergence of narrative subjectivity.

How Many Minds Do We Want to Follow Around?

My main borrowing from cognitive sciences is the concept of Theory of Mind. Theory of Mind and mind-reading are the terms used interchangeably to describe our ability to explain behavior in terms of underlying thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions (Baron-Cohen 1995). We attribute states of mind to ourselves and others all the time; for example, we see somebody reaching for a cup of water, and we assume that she is thirsty. Our attributions are frequently incorrect (the person who reached for the cup of water might have done it for reasons other than being thirsty); still, making them is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment. When Theory of Mind is impaired, as it is in varying degrees in the case of autism and schizophrenia, communication breaks down.

An important assumption underlying my present argument is that our cognitive adaptations for mind-reading are promiscuous, voracious, and proactive; these adaptations require, as a condition for their development and continued use, both direct interactions with

other people and imaginary approximations of such interactions. In other words, so important is the mind-reading ability for our species, and so ready is our Theory of Mind to jump into action and to subject every behavior to "intense sociocognitive scrutiny" (Bering 2002: 12), that at least on some level we do not distinguish between attributing states of mind to real people and attributing them to fictional characters. Figuring out what the attractive lady is thinking as she observes Yorick's interaction with the Franciscan monk feels almost as important as figuring out what a real-life attractive stranger is thinking as she looks us in the eye and holds forth on how she enjoyed reading the book that we currently have in our hands. Hence the pleasure afforded by following various minds in fictional narratives is to a significant degree a *social* pleasure—an illusive but satisfying confirmation that we remain competent players in the social game that is our life.

Which brings us to the question about the *number* of minds that we enjoy following both in real life and in fictional narratives. As a starting point for this discussion, consider the studies of "size and structure of freely formed conversational groups" by R. I. M. Dunbar, N. D. C. Duncan, and Daniel Nettle, which have shown that "in spontaneous interaction, social groups of any size usually fragment into smaller conversational cliques. Such cliques are typically of 4 or fewer individuals, only exceeding this limit in infrequent formal contexts" (Stiller 2004: 401). Thus when four people are talking together at a cocktail party, and the fifth person joins the conversation, the group soon splits into two relatively independent conversational units, consisting of two and three people. This observation implies that we have a difficult time tracking more than four minds (including our own) at the same time, and, if left to our own devices, we try to rearrange the social contexts that require us to go over that limit.

In related studies, Dunbar and his colleagues have demonstrated that when we are faced with short narrative vignettes that force us to process multiply embedded minds (along the lines of, "I believe that you think that he wants you to understand that . . . ," only, of course, appropriately contextualized), our understanding plummets 60 percent when we move beyond the fourth level of embedment. The recursive mental embedment of the fourth level and above thus seems to place high demands on our cognitive processing, both in real-life conversations and in the context of narrative. Cognitive psychology offers a series of fascinating speculations about why this might be so, but for the purpose of this discussion, I focus not on the possible evolutionary origins of this cognitive pattern but on its implications for our study of fictional narrative.

For example, we may want to take a fresh look at the novelistic construction of crowds and ask how writers get around the problem of representing the number of minds—fifty, a hundred, a thousand—that clearly take us outside our zone of cognitive comfort. It seems that authors deal with this challenge in several ways. Sometimes they represent a crowd through three or four distinct personalities—the spokespeople who capture various points of view held by the multitude. Sometimes they depict a crowd as being of "one mind," shouting or grumbling in unison, which, in turn, allows them to have this unified "mob mind"[1] interact with two or three other distinct individuals, who respond to the mob's concerns, so that the cumulative number of minds still stays within the comfortable range of four.

Third-Level Mind-Reading in Fiction

We can now be aware of the special challenges faced by authors who want to pack four or more recursive mental states into one scene[2] (as in, "A was observing B while B was observing C while C was following the interaction between D and E," or "A was thinking about what B was thinking about what A was thinking about what B was thinking," and so forth). To prevent such a representation from appearing odd or unintelligible, a writer has to construct a compelling social context, within which this complicated pattern of mind-reading feels natural and does not draw attention to itself (unless the writer *wants* to draw our attention to it).

Thus it would be wrong to take the research of Dunbar and his colleagues as an indication that fiction writers cannot or should not build frames that embed more than four subjectivities. In fact, the opposite is the case. Fictional narratives endlessly *experiment with* rather than *automatically execute* our evolved cognitive adaptations. When cognitive scientists succeed in isolating a certain regularity of our information processing (such as an apparent constraint on the number of levels of embedded subjectivity that we can process with ease), we can take that constraint and see how it plays itself out in a fictional narrative. What we discover is that where there is a cognitive constraint, there is a "guarantee" that writers will intuitively experiment in the direction of challenging that constraint, probing and poking it and getting around it. The exact forms of such probing and poking will depend on specific cultural circumstances. The culturally enmeshed cognitive "limits" thus present us with creative openings rather than with a promise of stagnation and endless replication of the established forms.

Elsewhere I have discussed examples of such experimentation in Restoration comedy (e.g., in the last scene of Etherege's *The Man of Mode* [Zunshine 2007]), in the eighteenth-century sentimental novel (e.g., in the "Miss Partington" episode of Richardson's *Clarissa* [Zunshine 2005]), in modernist fiction (e.g., in the "Lady Bruton" scene of Woolf's *Mrs.*

Dalloway), and in a handful of narratives that emphasize the comic incomprehensibility of the "I know that you know that she knows that we know" situations (Zunshine 2006]. Here, however, I want to focus on what goes on within our zone of cognitive comfort—on the third level and the cusp of the fourth level of mental embedment—before we cross over to the challenging fifth ("I know that you think that he wants you to believe that she was angry at him") but certainly above the commonsensical second ("I know that she is hungry").

Fascinating things happen on that third (or third-to-fourth) level. This is where the attractive lady observes Yorick's dealings with the Franciscan monk; where the psyche splits into id, ego, and superego[3]; where moments of "deep intersubjectivity" unfold (to use the term from George Butte's study, *I Know That You Know That I Know*); and where eavesdropping and overhearing, so beloved by authors since antiquity, occur. In other words, this is the level at which much of our culture happens, for it seems that the interplay of three subjectivities (however many physical bodies it may actually involve) is the staple of our philosophy, representational art, and fictional narratives.

In fact, according to cognitive literary critic Blakey Vermeule (in press) moments in fiction that engage third-order Theory of Mind are the "moments that we consider especially literary, and that have therefore attracted intense critical scrutiny." You can test this suggestive claim by taking a random sample of your favorite works of literary scholarship and seeing what passages critics typically select for closer analysis, or by going over the passages that you choose for exercises in close reading that you conduct with your students. Moreover, in thinking of our critical and classroom discussions of the moments of triangulated mind-reading, we may also consider the possibility that we like focusing on such moments not just because they embed three

minds but also because when we analyze them we start generating triangulated mind-readings of our own.

Which, in turn, makes one wonder just what is is about generating such moments that may feel so intrinsically rewarding to us. At present, cognitive evolutionary psychology and anthropology are the fields most prepared to address this question, however tentative their answers might be. One possible explanation, which speculates about the social rewards of situations in our evolutionary past in which three-way mind-readings naturally occurred, has been offered by Daniel Nettle. As he puts it,

> [The] natural situation in which we have three-way mind-reading going on is one that might be rewarding for several reasons. First, if we know what person A is thinking about person B but person B does not know this, then we are in a position of privilege and power. Either person A had taken us into their confidence, which would mean we were a valued coalition partner, or we are very clever, and/or we now have some leverage over person B because we know something important that they do not. If we feel well-disposed to B we may want to warn them, and gain their gratitude and reciprocity; if we are ill-disposed to B we may wish to use it against them or withhold it spitefully. In any event, this is a very significant situation in which we, although a spectator, are now part of a social triangle. This would not be so true if we knew what person A thought about B and B also knew this.[4]

One issue that any such explanation—whether emerging from cognitive evolutionary psychology or from cognitive literary criticism—would have to tackle has to do with the relationship between the *ultimate* and *proximate* causes of the cognitive satisfaction that we

apparently experience in encountering and generating the moments of three-way mind-reading. Starting with the ultimate causality, it may be that our present-day preferences can be traced back to our evolutionary past. For example, it is possible that negotiating three-way mind-reading situations was a must for our social survival in the Pleistocene. As a recurrent cognitive challenge it thus impacted the evolution of our mind-reading adaptations, which means that today we may feel particularly good about ourselves whenever we are intuitively aware that we are operating smoothly on the third level of mental embedment (e.g., "I know what he wants her to think!"), even when the social situation in question is completely contrived (e.g., when "he" is the Big Bad Wolf, and she is Red Riding Hood).

If we turn to proximate causes, we may suggest that imaginary representations of three-way mind-reading model a variety of social challenges that we face in our daily lives. As such they may feel particularly attention-worthy, especially because fictional narratives present us with cleaned-up versions of real-life mind-reading instabilities. That is, in a work of fiction, you actually get to know what X thought about Y, whereas in real life you have to settle for your imperfect guesses of other people's mental states (Palmer 2004). But whichever explanation we consider, proximate-level causes will have to be integrated with ultimate-level causes. This is to say that our broader interest in fictional mind-reading—of which our interest in the three-way mind-reading is an important subset—builds both on our evolutionary history and on our everyday exercise of our Theory of Mind adaptations.

Historicizing Fictional Representations of Three-Way Mind-Reading

Given these two factors—the importance of triangulated mind-reading to our social life and the deep engagement of fictional narratives with our Theory of Mind—we must expect scenes featuring three interacting minds to be present in all cultures and historical periods. And so they are. Stories that do not triangulate minds can, of course, also be found in any culture, but they indicate something about their intended audience and genre rather than about that period's overall narrative engagement with three-way mind-reading. For instance, early-twenty-first-century books for toddlers often feature only two interacting minds, but that tells us something interesting about their authors' intuitive perception of their audience's mind-reading capacities rather than about the dominant pattern of mind-reading in our culture.

But if representations of mental triangulation constitute a narrative universal, can we historicize it? Specifically, given this volume's goal of tracing the emergence of the mind in narrative discourse in English from its beginnings to the present day, can we say that eighteenth-century writers developed particular, historically contingent ways of triangulating fictional minds? I submit that the answer is yes, but with the following proviso.

As my example of books for toddlers shows, different narrative patterns of mind-reading triangulation can comfortably coexist. The same historical period can produce fictional stories that contain few or no triangulations, formulaic triangulations, and triangulations that strike a nerve for readers immersed in that particular historical moment but not for those outside it. So when we discuss three-way mind-reading in the fiction of a specific period, we must avoid treating a certain pattern of mental triangulation as dominant simply because it happens to predominate in our present selection of case studies.

Hence in the rest of this section I present a sample of patterns of triangulated mind-reading in eighteenth-century fiction, discussing texts that pointedly do not contain any

triangulations (part a), those that feature conventional, non-period-specific triangulations (part b), and those that construct triangulations responsive to their readers concerns about philanthropic giving (parts c and d). Although I am primarily interested in the latter—given their compelling connection to the specific historical moment—I cannot claim that they represent a dominant pattern of mind-reading triangulations in eighteenth-century fiction. Instead, I advance a more functionally specific argument that fictional narratives frequently use mental triangulations to support or question existing social hierarchies. Hence the scenes of observed benefaction represent one instance of such ongoing literary participation in the cultural construction of the category of social class.

No Connected Story—No Triangulation

One striking example of an eighteenth-century narrative that does not feature triangulated mind-reading is a religious treatise aimed at very young children. Generously illustrated and occasionally catechistic, Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781) consists of fifteen vignettes describing various aspects of God's close involvement with the natural and social world. Approaching this text from the perspective of the cognitive theory of mind-reading, one is struck by how thoroughly Barbauld interdicts the possibility of reading more than two minds into any given passage. The overwhelming majority of the hymns focus on just one mind (e.g., "I will praise God with my voice; for I may praise him, though I am but a little child" [3]); several allow for two minds (e.g., "You may sleep, for He never sleeps" [25]), and none allow for three.[5]

It is difficult to say whether Barbauld intentionally precluded the possibility of reading three interacting consciousnesses into her *Hymns*. We know that she wanted to write a book radically different from the "multitude of books professedly written for children" and yet "not adapted to the comprehension of a young child."[6] In the preface to *Hymns*, she criticizes religious literature for children for the unnecessary artfulness of story lines. As she saw it, a "connected story, however simple, is above [the] capacity . . . of a child from two to three years old"[7] and only interferes with the grand project of impressing upon the child's mind the "full force of the idea of God."[8] As I see it, a "connected story" contains triangulations of minds, so avoiding one allows writers to avoid the other. In other words, in a way that anticipates subsequent research of developmental psychologists, which posits the age of four as an important threshold in the maturation of Theory of Mind, Barbauld refrained from creating story lines that involve cognitive complexity attendant on a three-way mind-reading.

Formulaic Triangulations

The most traditional pattern of mental triangulation found in all national literatures involves a person observing two people who are in love or falling in love. We get access to the mind of the observer and, through it, to the mutually reflecting minds of the two lovers. Eighteenth-century writers heavily rely on this pattern; indeed it seems to constitute the majority of the three-way fictional mind-readings of the period.

As a paradigmatic example of this pattern harkening from the earliest days of the novel, consider a scene from Heliodorus's *An Ethiopian Romance* (third century A.D.), in which an Egyptian priest, Calasiris, tells the story of the first meeting between the protagonists, Chariclea

and Theagenis. In this highly reflexive passage, the account of the young people's subjectivities responding to each other is filtered through Calasiris's perception:

> At first they stood in silent amazement, and then, very slowly, she handed him the torch. He received it, and they fixed each other with a rigid gaze, as if they had sometime known one another or had seen each other before and were now calling each other to mind. Then they gave each other a slight, and furtive smile, marked only by the spreading of the eyes. Then, as if ashamed of what they had done, they blushed, and again, when the passion, as I think, suffused their hearts, they turned pale. In a single moment, in short, their countenances betrayed a thousand shades of feeling; their various changes of color and expression revealed the commotion of their souls. These emotions escaped the crowd and Charicles . . . But I occupied myself with nothing else than observing these young people. (73)

Note the obliviousness of Charicles, Chariclea's adoptive father. His might have been the fourth mind added to this scene. That is, Calasiris could have been aware of Charicles's noticing the young people's reaction to each other, in which case the subsequent story would have been quite different. Charicles, however, remains preoccupied with something else, and so the scene merely hints at the possibility of the four-way mind-reading without committing to it. We encounter exactly the same representational strategy in Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones* (1749), in which the narrator of the novel functions as an observer, reporting on the erotic mutual awareness of Tom Jones and Sophia Western, while Sophia's father, Squire Western, who should have noticed that his only daughter is falling in love (which, again, would have changed the course of the story), remains blind to what is going on.

One important difference between the ways Heliodorus and Fielding treat these scenes is the figure of the observer. Whereas in *An Ethiopian Romance* the observer is a flesh-and-blood character (so to speak), in *Tom Jones* it is the nebulous narrator, omnipresent but invisible to the characters in the story. I will return to this point later, in my discussion of Adam Smith, so let me say now only that using fewer than three physically present characters to construct a mental triangulation is a strategy frequently deployed—though certainly not invented—by eighteenth-century writers. (Think, for example, of Richardson's Lovelace presenting himself as an observer of his and Clarissa's wordless exchange of loving looks in the scene in which he imagines her breastfeeding his illegitimate twins.)

The tradition of constructing mental triangulations by exploring the feelings of two lovers as caught by the watchful eye of a third party continues in later fiction. In Lev Tolstoi *Anna Karenina* (1877), Kitty observes Anna and Vronsky's growing mutual infatuation at the ball. Her own love for Vronsky seems to render her an inordinately astute observer: she can read the couple's emotions in a way that other people around them cannot. Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999) features a similar scene, in which the brokenhearted observer grows strikingly perceptive about the feelings of would-be lovers. As Bridget muses, there "are sometimes those relationships that once you see them starting you just know, click: that's it, it's perfect, it's going to work, they'll go for the long haul - usually the sort of relationships you see starting between your immediate ex, who you were hoping to get back with, and somebody else" (323).

Note that whereas Tolstoi uses physically present characters to construct his scene of three-way mind-reading, Fielding eschews physical bodies and goes for the hypothetical "you," "your ex," and "somebody else." This is not to say that Tolstoi generally prefers to embody his

mental triangulations while Fielding favors disembodied exchanges. *Anna Karenina* and *Bridget Jones* contain generous helpings of both, demonstrating that the combination of embodied and disembodied triangulations constitutes one of the essential features of the novel as a genre, even if some novels feature more triangulations of one kind than another.

I call the mental triangulation involving two lovers and an observer formulaic because it seems not to have changed significantly since *An Ethiopian Romance*. At the same time, even though it is omnipresent in the eighteenth-century novel, from Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) to Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816), I hesitate to call it dominant. Again, the cognitive profile of the eighteenth-century fictional narrative is too variegated to designate any of its mind-reading triangulations as either dominant or essential.

If we insist on making a larger claim about some essential feature of the eighteenth-century pattern of narrative triangulation, perhaps that feature should be precisely this variety—that is, the coexistence of texts that use formulaic triangulations, those that resist triangulations (like Barbauld's *Hymns*), those that build their triangulations around topical issues, such as philanthropy, and those that deploy triangulations to increase the rhetorical appeal of their philosophic, theologic, and aesthetic arguments. Cultural historians have commented extensively on the unprecedented expansion of the market for the print media throughout the eighteenth century (McDowell 1998; Hunter 1990; Warner 1998). What this expansion may have indicated—to translate it into specifically cognitive terms—is that a rapidly developing capitalist economy offers its consumers increasingly diverse ways of engaging their mind-reading adaptations. Topical constructions of fictional representations of mind-reading triangulations emerge all the time, but they do not replace formulaic constructions; instead they engage different aesthetic and ideological concerns and explore different pathways within the same

genre. The legacy of the eighteenth-century literary marketplace is thus the legacy of mind-reading diversity, in which formulaic and topical triangulations codeveloped sometimes in different narratives and sometimes on the pages of the same book.

Topical Triangulations

We can now rethink our initial analysis of the genealogy and effects of eighteenth-century fictional scenes of observed benefaction. First, we may say, quoting Vermeule's work on three-way mind-reading, that such scenes "sponsor the experience of what we think of as literariness—the special buzzing thickness, the strange harmony of the faculties that Kant described when he found himself in the presence of serious art" (in press). Or, to take the same cognitive-evolutionary argument and frame it in social rather than aesthetic terms: The depiction of an observer, who registers the feelings of a benefactor, who, in turn, registers the feelings of a beggar, presents a reader—*any* reader—with an immediately appealing possibility of triangulated mind attribution, appealing, that is, because it arguably makes the reader feel good about her own mind-reading prowess or social acumen.

Second, we may suggest that there was at least one reason the eighteenth-century middle-class reader—in contrast, that is, to just *any* reader—would be particularly interested in following such a three-way exchange. The problem faced by the fictional giver—the need to decide on the spot that an apparently impoverished stranger was not a professional mendicant aiming to impose on her good will—was the problem that the reader herself faced daily. Commenting on the "cataclysmic" growth of the urban population in eighteenth-century London and in "newer industrial centers," historian David Owen points out that, "it would be out of the

question to translate to an urban environment the network of relationships, personal and professional, that made rural England an ordered society. . . . Direct almsgiving and neighborhood charity, which in a village could be carried on without fear of being unduly imposed upon, now served to encourage the professional mendicant. (1964: 91-92)

The problem of telling the deserving poor from the professional mendicant was somewhat palliated for people who could afford to spend time and money on researching and planning out their charitable activities. As Donna T. Andrew (1995) has demonstrated, eighteenth-century philanthropists with substantial resources evolved investigative strategies that allowed them to discriminate between deserving and fraudulent objects of charity, such as sponsoring a network of local agents who could check the claims of people asking for assistance. Those strategies, however, were not available to middle-class men and women—who constituted the majority of contemporary readers—when strangers begging for immediate relief accosted them.

One may thus speculate that for such readers a fictional story featuring a character encountering a claimant to her charity might have provided a pleasant compensatory fantasy. Even if that character herself ended up duped by the crafty stranger, readers still had what felt like privileged access to that stranger's real intentions, an advantage rarely available to them in their everyday social interactions.[9]

Of course, we have no way of proving this; and I, personally, would not press too far the compensatory fantasy argument. However, I would suggest that the obvious topicality of such scenes—their palpable relevance to readers' everyday dilemma—might have further enhanced the appeal created by these scenes' pattern of triangulated mind-reading. The impression of personal/social relevance might have corroborated the impression of personal/social mind-

reading prowess. At present we largely lack a conceptual framework to describe the exact workings of such a process of mutual enhancement. Still, if we are to evolve a cognitive-historicist analysis of literature, we have to find ways of charting this new conceptual territory.

Social Class and Theory of Mind in Scenes of Observed Benefaction

As one example of such a cognitive-historicist analysis of fictional scenes of observed benefaction, consider the novel's treatment of the mentality of the recipient of charity, who is typically presented as having no other narrative function besides putting the protagonist on the spot and forcing her to decide whether this stranger deserves her assistance. In what follows, I demonstrate that this construction of the recipient was implicated both with the pattern of triadic mind-reading and with eighteenth-century views of social class and social mobility.

I start by turning once more to the work of Vermeule, who has brilliantly resituated the traditional literary-critical distinction between flat and round characters in the context of research on mind-reading. As Vermuele (in press) puts it,

> Flat characters may not be especially psychologically realistic but they can be extremely psychologically compelling. When flat characters interact with round characters, they mine a rich vein of Theory of Mind. In literary narratives from ancient to modern times, some version of the following pattern repeats itself over and over again: a flat or minor character provokes a fit of reflection in a round or major character. The fit of reflection enlarges the scene and the minds of the people in it, who engage in elaborate rituals of shared attention and eye contact.

> The scene itself becomes soaked in mindfulness, increasing the sense of self-consciousness all around.

If we look at eighteenth-century scenes of observed benefaction we realize that the people who receive assistance are what we can call flat characters. Typically (though with some interesting exceptions to be discussed shortly) they seem to have no qualities besides embodying extreme need. The suspicion that they may fake that need complicates them somewhat but not so far as to actually render them round. Their function is still exclusively to "provoke a fit of reflection in a round or major character" (Vermeule), that is, to put the protagonist in a quandary, as she is trying to decide whether to assist the apparently needy stranger or to ignore his entreaties. Moreover, to continue quoting Vermeule, the protagonist's "fit of reflection enlarges the scene and the minds of the people in it"—that is, the observers of the charitable action—"who engage in elaborate rituals of shared attention and eye contact." This is how that "special buzzing thickness" is created and the scene increases "the sense of self-consciousness all around."

Note now how the considerations of social class inform this emergent sense of narrative self-consciousness. Cultural historian Matthew O. Grenby has observed that in eighteenth-century fictional representations of charitable encounters, "charity was a process to be understood entirely from the point of view of the donor, not the recipient" (2002: 190). Grenby's argument focuses on children's books, but it seems that the assumption that the psychological processes of the donor are more fascinating than those of the recipient applied to the period's literature for grown-ups as well.

What is important here is that the objects of charity in such stories always belong to a lower, and sometimes significantly lower, social class than their benefactors. Scenes of observed benefaction thus build on, legitimate, and reinforce the existing class hierarchies. People of lower social class are naturalized by these scenes as *less interesting* and *less emotionally complex*—deserving of readers' consideration only so far as they can provoke complex feelings in main characters, who typically come from the upper middle class. The mental processes of the observer can be mapped along the lines of, "I can see that she (i.e., the giver) doesn't know what he (the beggar) is really thinking"; and the mental processes of the donor can be mapped along the lines of, "I don't know what he (the beggar) is really thinking, and I also know that you (the observer) are watching me trying to figure out what he is really thinking." Both of these are rich, multilevel reflections, whereas the mental processes of the recipient are typically limited to the simple: "I need help now," or, "I want her to think that I need help now."

The cognitive informs the social and vice versa. To the extent to which triadic mind-reading calls for a hierarchization of mental complexity, writers have to decide, not necessarily consciously, which characters will carry on complex mind-reading reflections and which will have to settle for simpler ones. This decision could be informed by considerations of social class, of gender or race, or of any other parameter reflecting current ideological investments of the society. (Of course the ability to reflect other people's mental states does not automatically translate into superior ethics: as Vermuele observers, crafty villains can be "masterminds" carrying on triple or even quadruple mental embedments.)

Note too that in the scenes of observed benefaction, some flat characters are slightly rounder than others, and the difference between the two is directly proportionate to their class standing and social aspirations. For example, the impoverished Henrietta Belfield (Burney,

Cecilia)—who nevertheless retains some of her gentility and is destined to marry up at the end of the book—is allowed to actively respond to the perceived mental states of both her benefactress (Cecilia) and the observer (Albany). Miserable about being perceived as an object of charity, she tries to turn down Cecilia's benevolent offering. Similarly, the "Fair Stranger" (Haywood, *Jemmy and Jenny Jessamy*) who is relieved in her distress by Lady Speck and Mr. Lovegrove under the watchful eye of Jenny, is shown "blushing" (2005: 197) as she accepts their money and later trying to turn down Jenny's own offerings. It is important that this young woman, who is thus somewhat capable of seeing herself as reflected in the minds of others, also comes from an impoverished genteel family and at the end of the novel marries the son of the rich Sir Thomas Welby and is established as part of her former benefactors' social circle.

By contrast, the anonymous beggars of Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* seem to barely register the presence of the benefactor much less that of the observer. They occupy the lowest rung of the social hierarchy and their striking flatness or (to put it in cognitive terms) their inability to reflect any state of mind, including, apparently, their own, assures the reader that this is where they "naturally" belong.

Fictional constructions of mental embedment thus actively engage current ideologies. Although at present we are very far from having mapped the rich variety of the emotional and narrative effects of such engagements, it is clear that the combination of historicism with research in Theory of Mind represents one fruitful area of interdisciplinary analysis of fictional consciousness. In seeking to understand how the eighteenth-century novel engaged its readers' mind-reading adaptations, we thus continue to build on the rich tradition of inquiry into the political, economic, and social contexts of the British Enlightenment.

Conclusion: Effects of Triangulation beyond the Novel

I have argued throughout this chapter that a charitable encounter—as observed by an interested third party—presented an eighteenth-century writer with a handy social context for building up a cognitively enjoyable scenario of triangulated mind-reading. Now I want to ask how far we can take this argument. Can we say that writers are always on the lookout—even if they don't think about it this way—for compelling social contexts that would allow them to embroil several minds in action? That a writer may care passionately about philanthropy in her private life (and many eighteenth-century writers did!) yet when it comes to writing about it, philanthropy becomes a means to an end—a "pretext" for constructing a compelling context for a three-way mind-reading?

And if this is so, should we look at a wide range of social contexts with this particular yardstick in mind? Should we ask if certain genres at certain points in their development tend to rely more heavily on specific social dilemmas to get their readers' Theory of Mind racing?[10] And should we ask if some writers are more prone than others to take advantage of such dilemmas? It is already arguable that moments of observed benefaction are a staple of sentimental novels; perhaps we should take a closer look at such novels and see what other cultural contexts they repeatedly conscript to construct their moments of triangulated mind-reading.

Here then are the questions with which we can approach a broad selection of fictional and non-fictional texts. What goes into a given construction of a mind-reading triangulation? What cultural scripts are relied on—or subverted—to bring this triangulation into existence? What historically specific contexts are used to make it more compelling, and, in turn, what historically specific ideological agendas are rendered more compelling because they foster a three-way

mind-reading in their audience? What religious, aesthetic, and philosophical arguments derive at least part of their appeal from mind-reading triangulation?

Does it matter, for example, that Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) is chock-full of vignettes featuring three minds in action? To demonstrate that we cannot empathize with the "contemptible" man who takes insults lightly, Smith conjures up a scene that features the minds of two adversaries and the collective mind of the "mob" (I.II. 23). To specify what constitutes a proper emotional reaction to a trying event, Smith imagines two people, one of whom observes another's behavior and compares the feelings apparently underlying it to those he himself would have on the same occasion. The three mental states here are those of the observer as he watches the man in front of him, of that man as he responds emotionally to something that happened to him, and of the observer as he imagines his own emotional reaction had the same bad or good luck befallen him. [I.I. 28].

In another vignette, dealing with our response to madness, Smith begins with his typical pattern—two bodies and three mental states—and then transforms it into something more interesting. First, the spectator compares the feelings of the person whom he observes to those he himself would feel in his place. Soon after that, however, the spectator alone becomes the source of three mental states:

> Of all the calamities to which the condition of mortality exposes mankind, the loss of reason appears, to those who have the least spark of humanity, by far the most dreadful, and they behold that last stage of human wretchedness with deeper commiseration than any other. But the poor wretch, who is in it, laughs and sings perhaps, and is altogether insensible of his own misery. The anguish which

> humanity feels, therefore, at the sight of such an object, cannot be the reflection of any sentiment of the sufferer. The compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation, and, what perhaps is impossible, was at the same time able to regard it with his present reason and judgment. (I.I.11)

Look at that last sentence again. The spectator feels anguish (that's a representation of one mind) at the sight of a mad person because he imagines himself being mad and feels pity for that mad self (another mind) even more so because that mad self would apparently not feel any pity for himself (third mind).

And so forth. If you are familiar with Smith's oeuvre, you know that the treatise with a somewhat daunting title *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is a surprisingly enjoyable read. Its complex discussion of the psychological foundation of human ethics apparently insinuates itself into the reader's mind by "pretending" to be a bunch of stories built on the pattern of a particularly pleasing social-cognitive complexity.

It thus might be worth our while to look at other non-fictional discourses and see whether their arguments are constructed as a series of triangulated mind-readings. For example, we can safely predict that works of literary criticism will be found triangulating minds all the time. This is not to say that such works are necessarily convincing and well-written but that the degree to which they are considered convincing and well-written may correlate in interesting ways with the degree to which they engage in this kind of triple mind-attribution.

Note, meanwhile, how my view of Smith's "novelistic" rhetorical strategies supports the argument proposed before the advance of cognitive literary studies—by John Bender's

influential study *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England*. (I generally think that it is a sign of a cognitive approach's strength when it turns out to be compatible with—yet offer new insights into—the claims of established literary criticism.) Bender suggests that, "while Smith's metaphor for consciousness is theatrical [that is, it constantly conjures the image of a spectator observing the action] its mode of representation is entirely mental. [Smith] considers spectatordom as the fundamental condition ordering social life, but the state of being he characterizes as theatrical must always be staged in a non-theatrical mental field that much more resembles the transparency of the *realist novel* than the non-narrative fictions of theater" (1987: 227; emphasis added).

This brings me to my concluding question: How much awareness of the role played by three interacting consciousnesses in the construction of fictional subjectivity can we ascribe to eighteenth-century authors? I could not find any explicit references to the narrative possibilities opened by three-way mind-reading in contemporary public discourse. I looked for something more specific than various theological meditations responding, directly or not, to St. Augustine's *On the Trinity*; that is, for something along the lines of Josiah Royce's early 1910s assertion that the "relations of minds are essentially social; so that a world without at least three minds in it—one to be interpreted, one the interpreter, and the third the one for whom or to whom the first is interpreted—would be a world without any real mind in it at all."[11]

Of course this does not mean that such references don't exist. It does mean, however, that at this point we can only speculate about eighteenth-century writers' understanding of the relationship between mental triangulations and narrativity. Hence if we think that exploring the fringes of fictionality increases one's awareness of the sociocognitive underpinnings of narrative imagination, we can ascribe such an awareness to Smith, whose narratives encourage novelistic

thinking without being novels, and to Barbauld, whose narratives discourage the construction of "connected stories." They must have known that a fictional world emerges out of three interacting minds.

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[1] For an important related analysis, see Palmer 2006 and in press.

[2] We need to differentiate between the overall number of minds populating a given work of fiction—which could be quite large—and the number of minds we deal with within one particular scene. Of particular use here are James Stiller's concept of "time slice" (2004: 399), Catherine Emmott's work on "frames of reference and contextual monitoring" (1994:158-163), David Herman's work on "hypothetical focalizers" (2002: 311-21), and David Miall's analysis of "episode structures in literary narratives" (2006: 119-141).

[3] Freud's theory of ego, super-ego, and id is a classical example of three mental states driving the actions of *one* body. From a cognitive perspective, one reason that this theory has been so influential is that it makes possible numerous interpretations that impose a three-minds model onto a variety of cultural contexts. As such, it is literally "good to think with."

[4] Nettle, email communication, June 28, 2006. Also, see Herman's suggestive argument about "thinking about thinking—or intelligence about intelligence" (2006: 372).

[5] Although, arguably, a phrase such as "When we could not think of him, he thought of us; before we could ask him to bless us, he had already given us many blessings" [38]) presupposes three minds: God's, the young children's, and the older children as they reflect back on their

younger elves. To me, this indicates the difficulty faced by an author who tries to avoid the three-way mind-reading: the third mind worms its way in.

[6] Quoted in Ellis (1874: 101-102).

[7] Quoted in Ellis (1874: 101-102).

[8] Barbauld (1781: vi).

[9] For a related discussion, see Grenby (2002: 190).

[10] For example, can we speculate about the relationship between certain recurrent plot turns in Sophocles and Aeschylus and their innovative introduction of a third actor into tragedy? For a discussion of Aeschylus's and Sophocles's innovation and Aristotle's view of this, see Kaufmann (1968: 34-35). As Kaufmann puts it, "Aristotle clearly thought that with the addition of the third actor and the emergence of Sophoclean tragedy, familiar to us from seven surviving examples, tragedy 'found its true nature.'"

[11] Royce, "Mind," n.p.

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