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2 Mindreading and Social Status

Until now, I have talked about what complex embedments *are*, that is, what they may look like in novels, plays, and narrative poems, especially if they don't even seem to be there. In this chapter, I focus on what complex embedments *do*, that is, how writers use them to shape readers' perception of their characters. For, as it turns out, characters may differ in their ability to embed their own and others' thoughts and feelings. How do writers (intuitively) decide who should be more capable of complex embedment and who should be less so and what it may mean in the context of their stories? To answer these questions, we start with the real-life dynamics of mindreading and see what makes us better at figuring out the mental states of other people. "Better" in real life is not exactly the same as "more complex" in fiction, but the underlying cause is, curiously, similar, and it has to do with one's social status.

2.1 Confessions of a Bad Mindreader

How good are we at reading other people's minds? Clearly, not great. Our "misinterpretations about the intentions of others often provoke responses that are themselves misinterpreted, leading the interaction into a spiraling [dynamic] likely to engender a general breakdown."[1] Cultural traditions, social stereotypes, and professional occupations all play roles in hindering the way we understand each other's intentions.[2] Some cognitive anthropologists even go so far as to say that while "human society" may "rest on a bedrock" of mindreading, mindreading is "not a particularly useful tool for predicting and interpreting" people's behavior, because it "typically misattributes the mental states of others."[3]

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Yet the misreading of mental states of others may not always be the main culprit. What makes it worse is that, in complex social situations, we do not read other people's minds in isolation from our own.

Let us say, for instance, that I am angry at someone for what I perceive as a personal slight. While it may seem that I attribute a certain nefarious intention to them, the actual mindreading dynamic may be more complicated. For what makes me angry may be not merely my perception of what *they* are thinking. Instead, it is my expectation about what *I* ought to think in response to what I perceive they are thinking. This may work out differently on different occasions, but what many of those miserable occasions have in common is my *assessment* of my possible responses to what I experience as their intentions.

And that assessment can be wrong.

This is to say that, mistaken as we may be in our unreflective attributions of mental states to others, we can be even more off the mark when we consciously reflect on our own thoughts and feelings. As the cognitive anthropologist Dan Sperber puts it, "even in the case of seemingly conscious choices, our true motives may be unconscious and not even open to introspection; the reason we give in good faith may, in many cases, be little more than rationalizations after the fact."[4]

Moreover, we do not have neat little storage facilities in our minds where our "true motives" are held and that we could access if only we could somehow tear through the mist and debris that surround them. Instead we construct our motives similarly to how we construct memories: ad hoc, grabbing what seems to be emotionally "good to wear" right now. In the words of the cognitive literary scholar Patrick Colm Hogan (citations removed), "We often think that we simply and directly know our own motives, the causes of our emotional responses and behaviors. But considerable research has shown that this is not the case. . . . [People] tend to experience their affective feelings as reactions to whatever happens to be in focus at the time. . . . [If] the person is unable to specify either the origin or the target of affect he or she is experiencing, then this affect can attach itself to anything that is present at the moment."[5]

So, for instance, when I huff and puff in response to what someone said or did, something in me is constructing a chain of reasoning along the lines of, "I am the kind of person who would experience the Y kind of emotional reaction to X. They are saying/doing X. Don't they know how I am bound

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to respond to this?" From here, it is a very short step to reading into their actions a range of disagreeable motives, from thoughtlessness to the intention to aggravate me.

At least this is how it seems to work with me when I am at my worst. I do not claim that this emotional pattern applies to everyone, or even to me all the time. But were I to generalize from this private experience, I would say that reading other people's minds in complex social situations is often bound up with reading our own minds. This means, given how strikingly uninsightful we are when it comes to our motives, that misreading other people's minds may also be bound up with misreading our own minds, in fact, sometimes predicated on it.

We misread other people's minds alongside misreading our own or even *because* we misread our own. One wonders why evolution couldn't come up with something better than this hapless "mindreading" adaptation . . .

2.2 How to Become a Better Mindreader

But wait! Becoming better mindreaders is within our grasp. All we have to do is to take a demotion in our social hierarchy. Studies have shown that people in weaker social positions engage in more active and perceptive mindreading than do people in stronger social positions. It works even when we know that it's just a game: "when one is given the role of subordinate in an experimental situation, one becomes better at assessing the feelings of others, and conversely, when the same person is attributed the role of leader, one becomes less good."[6]

The scholar of Icelandic sagas William Ian Miller may add to this insight that to become a better mindreader, one may want to place oneself in a society in which "margins for error [are] smaller." For instance, "blood-feuding people" of medieval Iceland "had to be practically wiser and more cunning than we are now, if only because . . . the stakes [were] higher for them in routine social interactions and transactions":

> [Life] hung in the balance more often for them than it does for us in the free West, considerably more so. You had to be pretty good at discerning motives in others, reading their inner states—better than we safe souls are, for sure. I marvel at the unfathomable complacency that can allow someone to walk down the sidewalk intently texting a message and thinking that if he bumps into someone or forces them unknowingly to give way, that he will not have to account for

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himself, secure that he will not suffer a much deserved beating to help him regain a modicum of manners, to assist him in the project of avoiding giving unwarranted offence to others.[7]

By giving oblivious texters a second chance, modern liberal democracies may be blunting the edge of their mindreading prowess. Though one also wonders if mindreading prowess purchased at the price of the constant threat of "beatings" may not be a rather stressful proposition.

There are plenty of commonsense reasons why it would be vitally important for someone in inferior social position to be attuned to the intentions of people above them. What I want to add to those is a possible psychological reason based in the dynamic that I described in the previous section, which is that reading and misreading other people's minds is bound with reading and misreading our own. Recall my fraught chain of reasoning—"I am the kind of person who would experience the Y kind of emotional reaction to X. They are saying/doing X. Don't they know how I am bound to respond to this?"—and think what happens when the "they" in question are of higher social status than I am. How likely is it that I would expect "them" to care about my feelings and persevere with my high-and-mighty "I am the kind of person who . . ."?

But if I don't expect them to care about my feelings and I don't bother anticipating my emotional response to their lack of caring, then I effectively remove my mental states from the equation. This may make me less blinded to their actual intentions and thus turn me into a "more active and perceptive" mindreader.

Again, as in the case of theory of mind being sharpened by the anticipation of a beating, "more active and perceptive mindreading" does not necessarily imply a happy or even healthy mindreader. There is plenty of research in the social sciences about negative effects of low socioeconomic status on one's well-being.[8] Of course, "weaker social position" is a relative concept, and it does not always imply a low socioeconomic standing. For instance, I have a lower social status than the dean of my college, which means that, in a meeting with her, I would be reading her mind more assiduously and perhaps more accurately than she would be mine. (Indeed, I have had my share of faculty meetings in which we all sit around the table and try to figure out what our dean *really* meant by this or that oblique promise.) Yet as a tenured faculty member at a research university, I am not exactly an underprivileged type. Still let us not lose sight of the fact that

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when heightened mindreading ability reflects one's current weaker social position, there must always be some degree of stress involved.

Consider, too, that those who are in superior social position may assert and "exert their status precisely by refusing to read mental states of others."[9] Mindreading obtuseness can function similarly to strategic ignorance: "it is the interlocutor who has or pretends to have the *less* broadly knowledgeable understanding of interpretive practice who will define the terms of the exchange."[10] The powerful, writes Rebecca Solnit, "swathe themselves in obliviousness in order to avoid the pain of others and their own relationship to that pain. There's a large category of acts hidden from people with standing: the more you are, the less you know."[11]

On a more personal (and, hopefully, less insidious) level, I can think of other situations in which one may refuse to read minds of others to assert one's power over them. For instance, I am aware of not wanting to look too closely into what my grade-school son and his friends may be thinking when I prevent them from doing something that they want to do, because I think that it is dangerous or inconvenient or that we don't have enough time. By choosing to be a bad mindreader, I construct myself as a figure of parental authority, not a happy or optimal stance but one that may get me through a busy afternoon.[12]

Incidentally, what an "American White Middle Class (WMC)"[13] parent may guiltily characterize as "bad" mindreading, a Western Samoan parent may consider as a prosocial pedagogical measure. For instance, as the linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs explains, in Samoa, it is the responsibility of a lower-ranking person (e.g., child) to make their perspective clear to a higher-ranking person (e.g., adult). Ochs does not talk about mindreading as such, focusing instead on utterance interpretation, but the status-sensitive dynamic of "perspective-taking" that she describes maps well onto our present distinction between high- and low-status mindreaders:

> In [a highly stratified] Samoan society, sib and parental caregivers work hard to get children, even before the age of two years, to take the perspective of others. This demeanor is a fundamental component of showing respect, a most necessary competence in Samoan daily life. . . .
>
> In Samoan interactions the extent to which parties are expected to assume the perspective of another in assigning a meaning to an utterance of another varies with social rank. In speaking to those of lower rank, higher ranking persons are not expected to do a great deal of perspective-taking to make sense out of their

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> own utterances or to make sense of the utterance of a lower ranking interlocutor. Higher ranking persons, then, are not expected to clarify and simplify for lower ranking persons. For example, caregivers are not expected to simplify their speech in talking to young children. . . . And exactly the reverse is expected of lower ranking persons. Lower ranking persons take on more of the burden of clarifying their own utterances and the utterances of higher ranking interlocutors.[14]

All this said, would you want to become a better mindreader? If a blunted interest in other people's intentions denotes your higher social standing, shouldn't you be grateful for this status quo and not aspire to a greater mindreading perspicacity?

But here is something else to consider. Better mindreading may be associated with relative powerlessness and social stress, yet it also can be experienced as—and, indeed, become—a source of power on its own. Consider Héctor Tobar's meditation on growing up, unbeknownst to him, in the same community with James Earl Ray, the future killer of Martin Luther King Jr.: "Whereas Ray denied any commonality with the black people around him, I believe I have no choice but to study the white people around me, and to understand them as part of my American story—even men and women who hate and slander my people. Like many other Latino residents of this country, I derive a sense of power from observing the lives of people who cannot see the full measure of my humanity."[15]

While Ray (arguably) maintained his social superiority by refusing to read the minds of the Black people around him, Tobar (arguably) conformed to his lower social standing as a Latino by making an extra effort to "understand" the white people who refused to see him as fully human. Yet Tobar felt empowered by his interest in their intentionality, and, in the long run, his commitment to understanding and describing other people's complex subjectivity has fueled his career as an acclaimed writer, while Ray's white-supremacism-driven lack of interest in mindreading turned him into an outcast and a murderer.

Hence, one way of looking at these two outcomes is to register the role of status-sensitive mindreading in the perpetuation of oppression and discrimination. Another is to note the availability of professions (e.g., writer, lawyer, psychologist, manager) that require strenuous mindreading efforts and, as such, may serve as means of elevating one's social standing. I will address the subject of institutional venues that reward active mindreading in chapter 4 of this book; here, I merely want to point out that a "better"

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mindreading skill is not an unmixed blessing in a postmodern industrial society marked by racism and inequality.

2.3 How It Works in Literature: Two Models

In any given work of literature, some characters may carry on complex mindreading reflections, whether explicitly spelled out or not, while others settle for simpler ones. In deciding (not necessarily consciously) which will do which, writers may end up correlating their characters' social status and their mindreading ability. (This "may" is important, because writers may also end up *not* correlating the two: the pattern I am describing here is far from universal.) There are two ways of doing so. The first—let us call it the first model—is that writers follow the real-life dynamic and make characters of lower social standing capable of embedding more complex mental states than those above them are. The second—let us call it the second model—has writers invert that dynamic, making those who are high in the social hierarchy also high in the mindreading hierarchy.

Here is what these two models do not predict:

- They do not guarantee that the high-embedding character will be correct in their attributions of mental states. For instance, Jane Austen's Emma embeds complex mental states regularly as she plots her love matches, yet, just as regularly, she is wrong.
- They do not define characters' ethics. As the cognitive literary critic Blakey Vermuele has shown, crafty villains can be "masterminds" carrying on triple or even quadruple mental embedments.[16]
- They do not map neatly, or at all, onto the familiar literary-critical distinction between "round" and "flat" characters.[17]
- Finally, they do not say anything about the aesthetic value of the text. A work of fiction can follow either model, or it may not. Indeed, in some texts, such as Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, social hierarchies are fluid—as it were, *intersectional*—so it is not clear at any given point which aspect of a character's social standing (gender, race, clout, or salary) ought to be considered as predictive of their relative capacity for complex embedment.

Here is something that only the second model can predict. When a writer portrays people in weaker social position as less capable of complex

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embedment than people in stronger social position, it may be indicative of a particular ideological agenda on their part. They may be anxious about their own position in the class hierarchy or wanting to please a particular segment of their readership who would prefer to see social inferiors who "know their place." Agendas vary. We may speculate about them (as I do in the sections that follow) and never learn the truth. Still, when a writer seems to have opted for the second model—the one that inverts the real-life correlation between low social standing and more active mindreading—it alerts us to a possible point of tension bound to a specific historical moment. This is one of many occasions on which historically minded literary scholars and cognitive literary theorists may benefit from each others' insights.

Before I turn to a series of case studies representing either of the two preceding models, I want to remind you that the pattern that I am discussing here is far from universal. Writers may *not* foreground the difference between their characters' capacity for contemplating complex mental states, or, if they do end up foregrounding this difference, they may *not* correlate it with characters' social standing. This is to say that factors other than social status (along the lines of class, race, or gender) may influence the author's intuitive decision to make one character more sociocognitively complex than another.

Consider Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), which tells the history of several Russian aristocratic families against the background of the Napoleonic Wars. Its characters include Napoleon Bonaparte as well as Russian Field Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov, whose decision to let Napoleon occupy the abandoned Moscow, in September 1812, led to the eventual demise of the French army. Tolstoy makes both Napoleon and Kutuzov contemplate Moscow just as it is about to be taken over the by French, but if Napoleon's thought processes run along the lines of, "a city occupied by an enemy is like a girl who lost her innocence,"[18] Kutuzov is thinking about the complex social dynamics engendered by the place's vulnerability. Thus, he is aware that, when other Russian generals feel compelled to keep talking about defending Moscow, they do it not because they believe that it can be done (i.e., just like him, they know that it "cannot be defended") but because, for them, this kind of talk creates a fine "pretext for quarrel and intrigue."[19] Tolstoy's portrayal of Kutuzov as significantly more sociocognitively complex than Napoleon reflects not the difference in these characters' social

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standing (which would be hard to define) but the author's patriotism and his hatred of "the Corsican monster."[20]

I do not want you to think, based on this example, that Tolstoy *never* correlates his characters' social standing with their ability to embed complex mental states. The question of whether he does is an empirical one and can be explored, if a critic is so inclined. I just want you to observe that the intuitive decision, on the part of an author, to make some characters more sociocognitively complex than others may be influenced by a wide spectrum of factors, ranging from personal political preferences to conventions of the genre (e.g., a sympathetic double agent in a spy thriller may be expected to embed mental states on a higher level than her counterpart from an opposing side does). The two models that I discuss here by no means exhaust the scope of possibilities open to a writer, although they do provide a fascinating glimpse into literature's experimentation with real-life social dynamics.

2.4 The First Model: Reflecting the Real-Life Mindreading Dynamic in *Mansfield Park*

The protagonist of Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* (1814) is female, young (merely a child when she first enters the house of her rich relatives), and poor—a charity case with no obvious claims to beauty or intelligence. To survive and thrive in social circumstances stacked against her so thoroughly, she has to be particularly attuned to other people's wishes and intentions, and so she is. Again and again, the "little" Fanny Price is placed on the top of the mindreading chain, in direct inversion of her social position vis-à-vis her relatives and acquaintances.

One of several ways in which Austen accomplishes this inversion is to first present us with a seemingly complete scene, outlining everyone's embedded feelings—which seem complex enough, for the time being—and then superimpose Fanny's mind on top of that scene. For instance, when Fanny's cousins and their guests—the golden youth of Mansfield Park—embark on their ill-conceived theatrical production, we learn that Julia Bertram is jealous of her sister Maria, who is clearly preferred by Henry Crawford; that Maria ignores Julia's feelings; and that Julia hopes that Maria's fiancé, Mr. Rushworth, will become aware of the impropriety of her

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behavior and expose her to public humiliation: "[Julia] was not superior to the hope of some distressing end to the attentions which were still carrying on there, some punishment to Maria for conduct so shameful towards herself as well as towards Mr. Rushworth. . . . Maria felt her triumph, and pursued her purpose, careless of Julia; and Julia could never see Maria distinguished by Henry Crawford without trusting that it would create jealousy, and bring a public disturbance at last."

To this mix of second- and third-level embedments, Austen then adds Fanny's awareness of Julia's feelings, while also making sure that there is no reciprocal awareness (and hence comparable complexity) on Julia's side: "Fanny saw and pitied much of this in Julia; but there was no outward fellowship between them. Julia made no communication, and Fanny took no liberties. They were two solitary sufferers, or connected only by Fanny's consciousness."[21]

Fanny's consciousness is indeed the place where various characters get "connected" or, to put it differently, where many of the novel's fourth-level embedments take shape. To spell one of them out (an exercise that typically results in painfully pedestrian prose, for, in the original text, those high-level embedments are often implied rather than laid out in their full propositional glory), we can say that Fanny *knows* that Julia *is miserable* because Julia *knows* that Henry *likes* Maria. We can further say that Fanny *intuits* that Julia *hopes* that Mr. Rushworth *will realize* that Maria's behavior makes people around them *think* that he is a fool and revenge himself on her and that, though otherwise compassionate toward Julia, she can't quite find it in herself to empathize with this particular hope of her cousin's.

Change of scenery. Maria marries Mr. Rushworth and reconciles with Julia, and both sisters leave Mansfield Park. The passage that I am looking at now takes place after Henry Crawford proposes to Fanny, is rejected, and decides to convince her to reconsider. During a quiet evening in a Mansfield drawing room, after Fanny, her aunt Lady Bertram, her cousin Edmund, and Henry have been talking together for some time, Henry turns to Fanny to inquire more closely about her involuntary response (i.e., a shake of the head) to something that he just said. Edmund, who approves of Henry's courtship, wants to make it easier for Henry to talk to Fanny privately. Accordingly, he takes up a newspaper and removes himself from the general conversation. Lady Bertram, he knows, won't be in Henry's way because she rarely thinks of anything other than the convenience of her favorite pug.

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Once again, Fanny's perspective is added *after* the scene has been set, for, much as she wants to come across as focused solely on her needlework, she can see what Edmund is doing with that newspaper: "[As] Edmund perceived, by [Henry's] drawing in a chair, and sitting down close by her, that it was to be a very thorough attack, that looks and undertones were to be well tried, he sank as quietly as possible into a corner, turned his back, and took up a newspaper, very sincerely wishing that dear little Fanny might be persuaded into explaining away that shake of the head to the satisfaction of her ardent lover. . . . Fanny . . . grieved to the heart to see Edmund's arrangements."[22]

Fanny's capacity for complex embedment contrasts starkly with that of Lady Bertram, seated right next to her (who seems incapable of embedding thoughts and feelings above the second level), but also with that of the two young men. Henry wants to know what Fanny disapproves of. Edmund knows that Henry wants to know what Fanny disapproves of. Fanny, however, knows that Edmund knows that Henry wants to know what Fanny disapproves of. To put it starkly, in terms of embedded intentionalities, Henry has intentions regarding Fanny; Edmund is aware of Henry's intentions regarding Fanny, but Fanny is aware of Edmund's intentions regarding Henry's intentions regarding herself. Here, as on many other occasions, "the dear little Fanny" is one or two mental states ahead of whichever Bertram or Crawford happens to be at hand.

In scenes that do not immediately involve Fanny, characters' ability and willingness to imagine other people's mental states is recalibrated to reflect their immediate power relations. For instance, excited about the theatrical production, Tom Bertram chooses not to understand Edmund's warning that Maria is about to dishonor their family (i.e., by developing a relationship with Henry Crawford while about to be married to Mr. Rushworth). When Edmund invites Tom to *consider* their mutual *awareness* of Maria's growing *disregard* for her fiancé's *feelings* (as he puts it, "to attempt [private theatrics] would be imprudent, I think, with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one, considering everything, extremely delicate"),[23] Tom ignores that invitation and insists that the play will entertain their mother.

To quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Tom "pretends to have the *less* broadly knowledgeable understanding of interpretive practice," yet he is the one who will "define the terms" of their conversation. As the older brother

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operating within the system of primogeniture, he can afford to be obtuse when it suits him, while Edmund must keep honing his younger brother's skill of being convincing without giving offense. On a gentleman's estate, mindreading hierarchies reflect the social pecking order.

2.5 The First Model in Pre-Revolutionary China and Russia

We now turn to authors from very different cultural traditions. In the eighteenth-century Chinese classic *Dream of the Red Chamber*, by Cao Xueqin (ca. 1750–1760), girls and young women typically embed mental states on a higher level than rich men and older rich women do.[24] Moreover, although these female characters are beautiful, accomplished, and pampered by their families, they are powerless. Their fates are decided by their elders, who cannot—and will not—read their emotions and, consequently, doom their young charges to lives of misery or to early deaths.

The striking mindreading skills of Cao's young women stand out in the long history of the literary response to social stratification in premodern China. As Haiyan Lee observes, "[In societies] structured by kinship sociality . . . theory of mind is certainly present and useful but not always prized in social life and does not animate expressive culture to the same extent [as it does] in modern commercial societies structured by stranger sociality, cosmopolitanism, and social mobility. . . . The hierarchical structures of [kinship sociality] place a greater premium on theory of mind for subordinates than for the powerful, hence attaching a tinge of opprobrium to its exercise."[25] When subordination follows the lines of gender, mindreading acumen—configured as cunning—follows closely: "Women in a patriarchal and patrilineal society, especially young daughters-in-law, are structurally motivated to be inward-looking, to adopt a calculating, fawning, and defensive mentality, and to orient their action around the intentions of the more powerful (senior, male) members of the kin group."[26]

Fawning, defensive, and calculating underlings, female or male, do not make for sympathetic fictional characters, which is why such personages tend to "ply shady trades as go-betweens, procuresses, litigation masters, soothsayers, brokers, and garden-variety hangers-on who prey on the honest and unsuspecting." Yet, as Lee argues, "[In some] exceptional circumstances . . . mind-reading becomes an asset and the consummate practitioner is admired and celebrated as a cultural hero. Most of these

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circumstances involve forces of good combatting forces of evil, as in warfare or criminal investigation. More rarely, theory of mind is mobilized to emplot romantic courtship."[27]

In other words, we can read the literary history of premodern China as punctuated by the appearance of works that valorize a character's capacity for complex embedment of mental states. Those works include warfare chronicles (such as Luo Guanzhong's fourteenth-century *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) and detective novels (such as the eighteenth-century case studies of Judge Dee), as well as the bildungsroman-courtship-novel extraordinaire *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Although some of *Dream*'s young women (most obviously, Wang Xi-feng) still come across as defensive and calculating, most are true to the ideal that the middle-aged Cao set out to bring back to life, after finding himself one day, in low spirits, "thinking about the female companions" of his youth: "As I went over them one by one, examining and comparing them in my mind's eye, it suddenly came over me that those slips of girls—which is all they were then—were in every way, both morally and intellectually, superior to the 'grave and mustachioed signior' I am now supposed to have become."[28]

And so, in direct contrast to the young women of, for instance, the anonymous late sixteenth-century classic *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, whose sharpened capacity for high-level embedment of mental states makes them cheats, liars, and hypocrites,[29] the cognitive complexity of the girls from *Dream* manifests itself in their admirable social sophistication and poetic sensibility. Far from damaging their personalities, their subordinate status lends poignancy to their moral and intellectual superiority.

Let us cross national boundaries again. If we look at Russian literature before the 1760s (that is, before Russian writers became exposed to western European models, a topic that I discuss at some length in chapter 5), we see something very similar to what Lee describes as the association of such complexity with "pipsqueaks," that is, with socially insignificant personages who, nevertheless, manage to create problems for "gentlemen."

There is, for instance, Frol, from the anonymous *The Tale of Frol Skobeev* (1680–1720), a social nonentity who rises to wealth and nobility by thinking one step (i.e., one mental state) ahead of various aristocratic figures who come his way. Frol is a pettifogger (remember Lee's observation that a social nonentity may use his mindreading skills to become a "litigation master"?), who tricks the only daughter of a rich courtier into sleeping with

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him (by crossdressing as a woman) and then elopes with her. When the distraught parents find out what has happened, they first want to prosecute the rogue but then relent and start showering the young couple with land and money, all the while cursing their "thief" and "knave" of a son-in-law.[30]

They relent because Frol knows how to manipulate their feelings. When they send a servant to inquire about the health of their child, Frol asks his wife to pretend to be sick and tells the servant, "See for yourself, my friend, how she's doing: that's what parental wrath does—they scold and curse her from afar, and here she is, dying."[31] Frol *wants* his parents-in-law to *think* that their *anger* is killing their daughter, a stratagem that quickly cools their wrath and sets Frol on the way to prosperity.

Critics consider *The Tale of Frol Skobeev* an early example of Russian picaresque.[32] Viewed in the context of the present argument, this characterization raises the intriguing possibility of a cognitivist reading of the literary figure of the picaro.[33] From Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599–1604) to Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1724), picaros use their superior mindreading skills to flatter, bully, cheat, and steal their way to economic survival. They are simultaneously a threat—to the extent to which their society still retains traces of "kinship sociality" (and what society does not?—even if just in the form of cultural fantasies about a golden age, when all behavior was transparent and prosocial and no mindreading acumen was called for)—and a treat for readers who follow their double-dealing tricks with guilty delight.

We find the association between characters' low social status (low, that is, in relative rather than absolute terms: always in comparison with someone else in the story) and their heightened capacity for complex embedment in a broad spectrum of fictional narratives. Some characters embed complex mental states as they mastermind a plot to help their bumbling masters, as do "clever slaves" of ancient Greek and Roman comedies. Some do it as they trick a larger or more violent and dangerous animal in order to save their lives, as do Brer Rabbit of West African folklore and the little mouse of Julia Donaldson's *Gruffalo*. Some seem to lack any agenda and merely display a mastery of innuendo beyond that of their social "betters," as does Algernon's servant Lane in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.[34]

Some have central billing, as does P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves. Others make only brief appearances in one scene, as Wilde's Lane. Still others, such as

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the office cleaners from Rachel Cusk's *Saving Agnes* (1993), are episodic characters who lack any identifying features and manage to outclass the main protagonist in the business of mindreading while remaining nameless and faceless:

> Agnes slammed into the house in a state of considerable distemper. She had been forced by the nonchalance with which the editorial department was approaching its deadline to stay late in the office, working alone while the cleaners emptied bins and vacuumed floors around her. Watching them sanitize the unsavory detritus of her day she had been besieged by feelings of shame and guilt, and had attempted to engage them in pleasantries. Not beguiled by her condescension, however, they had roundly rebuffed her overtures and left her feeling that a mysterious exchange of power had taken place, the precise manoeuvres of which she was not able to fathom.[35]

If we map out this "mysterious exchange of power" in terms of its underlying mental states, we can say that Agnes *wants* to make herself *feel better* by engaging in small talk with the cleaners (second-level embedment). The cleaners, however, *know* that she *wants* to use them to make herself *feel better* (third-level embedment) and refuse her that satisfaction. As Agnes apparently expects that her class privilege will automatically translate into superior social acumen (even though she can't see the cleaners as people with faces and names), when their conversation doesn't follow that scripted path, she is left disoriented and angry.

What this example from Cusk's novel shows is that, just as in real life, fictional mindreading hierarchies are situation specific. Our common sense suggests that a protagonist would always be more capable of complex embedment than would be a minor character, if only because what makes them the protagonist is their involvement in the great many social interactions depicted in the story. So if we would merely count the occasions throughout the novel on which Agnes embeds mental states on a high level (which, I hope, we would never do, because that would be incredibly tedious!), there is no doubt that the number of those occasions would trump the number of occasions on which a given episodic character (e.g., an office cleaner, who only appears once) embeds mental states on a high level. But if, instead of thinking in such cumulative terms, we look at specific scenes, we may discover patterns that have less to do with the protagonist's outsize role in the plot and more to do with the novel's engagement with its ideological and generic contexts.

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2.6 Race and Embedment in *Invisible Man*

As Ralph Ellison was reflecting, in 1981, on his experience of writing *Invisible Man* (1947), he explained that he had wanted to "create a narrator who could think as well as act." Too many "protagonists of Afro-American fiction" of his day, he felt, "were without intellectual depth, . . . seldom able to articulate the issues which tortured them." Real-life models for individuals who could think were not lacking, but even if they were, "it would be necessary, both in the interest of fictional expressiveness and as examples of human possibility, to invent them."[36]

Other writers, after all, were not shy about inventing deep self-reflexivity for social groups of their choice. Henry James, Ellison observed, had done just that. He had taught his readers "much with his superconscious, 'super subtle fry,' characters who embodied in their own cultured, upper-class way the American virtue of conscience and consciousness."[37] Ellison saw his task as "revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American," and he considered a crucial step toward that revelation endowing his protagonist with a capacity for "conscious perception" of forces acting on him within and without. As he put it, "[To] defeat [the] national tendency to deny the common humanity shared by my character and those who might happen to read of his experience, I would have to provide him with something of a worldview, give him a consciousness in which serious philosophical questions could be raised."[38]

I find it significant that Ellison was thinking of Henry James as he contemplated ways to give his protagonist a complex and expansive consciousness, particularly in the light of what I am about to show you regarding Invisible Man's capacity for embedment. I have to confess, however, that, so far, I have avoided any references to James, because quoting him feels like cheating. James is one author about whom it can be said that he embeds third-and fourth-level mental states in every single sentence, and I believe that what I have to say is more convincing if I shun such easy targets. I do not want my readers to think, "Well, yes, James, of course, but he is exceptional." When a culture has arrived at the point when its literature cannot function anymore without constantly embedding mental states on at least the third level, prose like James's represents this general tendency, albeit taken, perhaps, to one of its endpoints. It is thus paradigmatic rather than exceptional.

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But, guard my argument as I did, James still came in, riding as it were on the coattails of Ellison. So let us establish one thing about both James's and Ellison's representations of fictional consciousness. While the unceasing complex embedment of mental states may not be a sufficient condition for creating James's "superconscious" characters and implied reader, it is a necessary condition. And similarly, while making Invisible Man conspicuously capable of embedding complex mental states may not be a sufficient condition for endowing him with intellectual depth, it may be a necessary condition.

Lest we wonder how Invisible Man's capacity for complex embedment squares with his naiveté, recall that much of mindreading is mind-misreading. Mindreading is a process of *attributing* mental states rather than of telepathic discernment. In fact, as far as mindreading goes, telepathy is its opposite because this fantastic concept presupposes that mental states are *actually there* in people's minds, available for perusal both by the owners of those minds and by those who happen to have the special powers.

Embedding mental states on a high level thus does not make a character particularly penetrating. (It *can*, but it doesn't have to. Just think of how spectacularly misguided James's characters often are.) Instead, this is one way in which literature, as we know it today, signals complex consciousness to its readers, indeed, how it asserts "the common humanity shared by [the] character and those who might happen to read of his experience."

Hence, Ellison's protagonist has a compelling consciousness not when he knows what people around him are thinking—he mostly does not!—but when he allows them to have intentions that are mystifying to him and to themselves. To the extent to which he wonders about their mental states, he *sees* those people.[39] And, conversely, to the extent to which they refuse to wonder about his mental states, they do not see him. As he puts it, Jack, Norton, and Emerson each attempted "to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me."[40] This is to say that they remain willfully blind to the unpredictable complexity of his feelings, which translates, in practice (for, again, we are talking here about practical ways in which literature can represent complex consciousness!) into their inability to embed mental states on a comparably high level.

Here is a scene, at the end of the book, in which Invisible Man becomes aware of the confused perspective of people who have tried, at different times, to control him without actually seeing him. As the leader of the riot

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in Harlem, "Ras the Destroyer," commands his men to seize and hang Invisible Man—to punish him for what they think of as his treacherous collaboration with the white people against the Black—the protagonist meditates on the levels of unknowing that drive the events of this night:

> I looked at Ras on his horse and at their handful of guns and recognized the absurdity of the whole night and of the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine. . . . And that I, a little black man with an assumed name should die because of a big black man in his hatred and confusion over the nature of a reality that seemed controlled solely by white men whom I knew to be as blind as he, was just too much, too outrageously absurd.[41]

This is a very complex passage, and there are several ways to map out its implied embedments. Here are some of them. The protagonist is keenly *aware* that Ras ("a big black man") *doesn't realize* that his reality is being controlled by white men who themselves are *confused* about the significance of their actions. The protagonist *realizes* that he will no longer be *afraid* of or controlled by the people who are *confused and impatient*. By calling the situation "absurd," he is *aware* that someone capable of a large-scale perspective (God? History?) would not be *able to see* any meaning in his death were he to die because of other people's *confusion and impatience*.

Moreover, the protagonist's self-description as "a little black man with an assumed name" brings to mind not just the "little Fanny" of *Mansfield Park* but also various picaros and "pipsqueaks" who change their names to survive in a hostile world.[42] Like them, Invisible Man has social circumstances lined up against him: he is young, poor, and Black in the Jim Crow United States. And, also like them, he makes his way in the world by actively trying to understand other people's perspectives. He often fails,[43] but he never stops trying because, unlike people in superior social positions, he can't afford to remain willfully blind to the subjectivity of others.

Here, for instance, is Invisible Man entering the lobby of the Men's House, wearing his overalls—which indicate his descent to working class—and *imagining* people *thinking* that he has *lost his pride* as an upward-bound college student and, moreover, has betrayed their *expectations* of him: "I could feel their eyes, saw them all and saw too the time when they would

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know that my prospects were ended and saw already the contempt they'd feel for me, a college man who had lost his prospects and pride. I could see it all and I knew that even the officials and the older men would despise me as though, somehow, in losing my place in Bledsoe's world I had betrayed them. I saw it as they looked at my overalls."[44]

Or consider the conversation between Jack and Invisible Man during which Jack reproves him for having organized a mass funeral for Tod Clifton, who was murdered by a policeman. Although Jack repeatedly assures Invisible Man that "he knows what [he] feels,"[45] we end the scene convinced that Jack does not really see him—that is, cannot or will not conceive of him as someone with complex subjectivity. For instance, when Jack hopes that Invisible Man would never find himself in circumstances in which he would have to sacrifice his eye and get an artificial one (as Jack had, in service of the Party), Invisible Man responds with a complex embedment that Jack does not seem to understand. Here is their exchange:

> "Good," he said. "I sincerely hope it [i.e., losing an eye] never happens to you. Sincerely."
>
> "If it should, maybe you'll recommend me to your oculist," I said, "then I may not-see myself as others see-me-not."
>
> He looked at me oddly then laughed. "See, Brothers, he's joking. He feels brotherly again. But just the same, I hope you'll never need one of those."[46]

Jack treats Invisible Man's remark as a joke instead of recognizing it as a biting comment on the selective blindness that enables him not to see, or acknowledge, the complex subjectivity of his "brother." Of course, to recognize it as such a comment, he would have to unpack its soaring levels of embedment. This, after a moment of consideration, he decides not to do. (The narrator indicates that moment by saying that Jack looked at him "oddly").

Jack is hardly a stupid man, so his decision may be a strategic one. His standing as a high-ranking member of the Communist Party is not set in stone. It has to be maintained and defended—for instance, when a charismatic and intelligent Black "brother" appears on the scene. Racism is a powerful factor that would keep Invisible Man in his place, yet alone it may not be enough, especially given the Party's ostensibly egalitarian outlook. So mindreading obtuseness comes in handy, for whoever pretends to know less will (to return once more to Sedgwick) "define the terms of exchange." Jack, by showing that he doesn't need to bother to understand Invisible Man's meaning, seeks to reassert his superiority over Invisible Man.[47]

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The Communist Party may thus claim to be color-blind, but it ends up mind-blind, which serves a rather different purpose: that of keeping some of its "brothers" down.

2.7 The Second Model: Inverting the Real-Life Dynamic

Here is what we have done so far. We have looked at fictional case studies in which relative capacity for complex embedment tracks the real-life correlation between weaker social position and more active mindreading. Again, please remember that this correlation gets reimagined in literature in a very particular way. Instead of writers making their downtrodden characters into straightforwardly "better" mindreaders—that is, more perceptive and accurate in their attribution of mental states—they make them into high-level embedders. "Better" mindreading may occasionally happen too, but it's not guaranteed; overthinking others' intentions may just as well lead to one's undoing.

And so I have shown that the young women from Cao's *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the Russian picaro Frol Skobeev, Austen's Fanny Price, and Ellison's Invisible Man all consistently embed mental states on a higher level than do other characters around them who have more power and social clout. Indeed, some of those characters, such as Tom Bertram or Jack, may reaffirm their clout by refusing to navigate complex embedments offered up to them by people in weaker social positions, such as Edmund Bertram or Invisible Man.

I now turn to literary texts that do the opposite. That is, they invert the real-life correlation between lower social standing and active mindreading and portray socially disadvantaged characters as *not* being able to embed complex mental states on the high level of their "betters." I further suggest that, more often than not, such an inversion indicates a particular ideological agenda on the part of the author and that those agendas may range from tacit personal anxiety about one's social status to a fear for one's life, when one happens to be a writer living under a totalitarian regime.

2.8 The Second Model: Bakhtin and the English Comedy of Manners

My first example of the "inverted" model comes from Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778). *Evelina* is an epistolary novel that, over the past two decades, has become a staple for college courses on eighteenth-century British literature. Written when the author was in her middle twenties, it portrays

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a beautiful young woman brought up in rural seclusion and thrust onto London's bustling social scene. The story has some dark streaks (those will become more prominent in Burney's later work), but it is largely a comedy of manners. As such, it tends to go over well with undergraduates who enjoy following the romantic adventures of a satirically inclined naïf in a big city.

As befits a romantic heroine, Evelina is a princess in disguise. She is a daughter of a baronet, who abandoned her mother shortly after their marriage and burned the marriage certificate. This means that, though by birth and education she belongs to the aristocracy, her social status is ambiguous, at least until her father publicly acknowledges her as his legitimate heiress. Until that happens, she is subject to amorous advances by men from an unusually wide social spectrum, from tradesmen to aristocrats, each with his own way of speaking and pressing his suit.

In the scene that we are about to look at, one of those men, Mr. Smith, an offspring of shopkeepers who yet wishes to come across as a gentleman, is courting Evelina in a particularly obnoxious fashion. Earlier in the novel, he had invited her to a public ball at the Hampstead Assembly. Although she told him that she didn't want to go, he simply ignored her words and purchased tickets for both of them.

Presented with the tickets, Evelina doesn't just repeat her earlier refusal. Instead, she couches her response in such terms as to show her incompatibility with Mr. Smith.[48] He understands only part of what she says and can't respond properly. This proves her point, because men from the social class to which she anxiously defends her right to belong would have understood and responded in kind (even those of them whose courtship styles are offensive in their own ways).

Here is their conversation. Evelina has just reminded Mr. Smith that she had already told him that she wouldn't go to the Assembly.

> "Lord, Ma'am," cried he, "how should I suppose you was in earnest? come, come, don't be cross; here's your Grandmama ready to take care of you, so you can have no fair objection, for she'll see that I don't run away with you. Besides, Ma'am, I got the tickets on purpose."
>
> "If you were determined, Sir," said I, "in making me this offer, to allow me no choice of refusal or acceptance, I must think myself less obliged to your intention than I was willing to do."
>
> "Dear Ma'am," cried he, "you're so smart, there is no speaking to you;—indeed you are monstrous smart, Ma'am! but come, your Grandmama shall ask you, and then I know you'll not be so cruel."[49]

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Evelina and Mr. Smith may as well be speaking two different languages, so loud is the clash of their sensitivities and the social incommensurability that it implies. Yet how is this impression created? That is, what tools do we have at our disposal to explain the rhetorical effect of their amusing exchange?

Eventually, as you can easily guess, I will ask you to look at the difference between Evelina's and Mr. Smith's patterns of embedment. But before we do that, let us consider another, more established and influential interpretive framework: Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia. For, I believe that, in this particular case, the two approaches work better in tandem than my "cognitive" approach would on its own.

Unlike other eighteenth-century authors, such as Fielding, Sterne, and Smollett, Burney was not on Bakhtin's radar when he wrote about the "heteroglot, multi-voiced, [and] multi-styled" language of the novel.[50] Still, her writing seems to exemplify what he called a comic style "of the English sort": one based on "the stratification of the common language" through the "stylistically individualized speech of characters."[51] Burney's first novel, in particular, uses heteroglossia in service of a particular ideology: the way Mr. Smith and Evelina talk underscores their immutable class positions.

Thus, in response to Evelina's polished sentences, the "low-born" Mr. Smith uses short, clipped clauses ("don't be cross") and vulgar expressions that brand him as a shopkeeper aspiring to sound genteel, such as "monstrous smart." His grammar is bad ("you was"). He betrays his crassness, by reminding her that he paid for the tickets ("I got the tickets on purpose"). It's all there, ready for the reader primed to look for sociolectal markers.

But in addition to those obvious markers, we also have here something less obvious, something we would not see without our "cognitive" perspective. Mr. Smith's embedments, both implied and explicit, stay around the second level, whereas Evelina spouts third- to fourth-level embedments one after another. Let us take another look at their exchange, now mapping its embedded mental states:

> "Lord, Ma'am," cried he, "how should I suppose you was in earnest? come, come, don't be cross; here's your Grandmama ready to take care of you, so you can have no fair objection, for she'll see that I don't run away with you. Besides, Ma'am, I got the tickets on purpose." (Who would *think* that you *meant* what you said? [*two embedded mental states*]. I *know* that you *worry* that there will be no chaperone [*two embedded mental states*].)
>
> "If you were determined, Sir," said I, "in making me this offer, to allow me no choice of refusal or acceptance, I must think myself less obliged to your intention

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than I was willing to do." (I might have *felt bad* turning you down *had I thought* that you were *aware* of my *feelings* enough to care to give me a choice [*at least three, perhaps four embedded mental states*]. But because now I *know* that you wouldn't even *care* that I *don't want* to go, I *intend* not to *feel bad* about *disappointing* you [*two parallel sets of three embedded mental states*].)

"Dear Ma'am," cried he, "you're so smart, there is no speaking to you;—indeed you are monstrous smart, Ma'am! but come, your Grandmama shall ask you, and then I know you'll not be so cruel" (I *know* that you are *too smart* for me [*two embedded mental states*]. I *hope* you'll *listen* to your Grandmama [*two embedded mental states*]. I *know* that you will *agree* eventually [*two embedded mental states*].)

When I teach *Evelina*, I ask my students to compare Mr. Smith's pattern of embedment to that exhibited by two other characters, Sir Clement Willoughby and Lord Orville, who belong to the aristocracy, that is, the social class within which Evelina, a daughter of a baronet, will eventually be ensconced. Here are two typical examples of their speech. (I quote them out of context, but it is similar in both cases: each man wants to influence Evelina by disposing her more favorably toward himself.)

Sir Clement Willoughby: "You cannot even judge of the cruelty of my fate; for the ease and serenity of your mind incapacitates you from feeling for the agitation of mine!"[52] We may map this as, I *appreciate* that your *state of mind* makes it impossible for you *understand* how *unhappy* I am (at least three, possibly four embedded mental states).

Lord Orville: "I greatly fear that I have been so unfortunate as to offend you; yet so repugnant to my very soul is the idea, that I know not how to suppose it possible I can unwittingly have done the thing in the world that, designedly, I would wish to avoid."[53] We may map this as, You *must believe* that I am *distressed* to *realize* that I have made you *feel* precisely the way I would never *want* to make you *feel* (at least four embedded mental states).

Mr. Smith's limited capacity for embedding mental states is thus *dialogic*, another key concept from Bakhtin.[54] That is, we may experience it as limited only in contrast with the embedments of other characters, such as Evelina, Sir Clement Willoughby, and Lord Orville. Once we become aware of this contrast, we realize that it is used throughout the novel in two related but not identical ways.

First, it marks bona fide, as opposed to in-name-only, gentility. That is, "real" gentlemen and gentlewomen, such as Lady Howard, Mr. Villars, Mrs. Selwyn, and Mr. Macartney, who also happen to treat Evelina with kindness

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and respect, consistently embed mental states at and above the third level, while the nominally genteel characters who insult, ignore, and exploit her, such as Lord Merton, Lady Louisa Larpent, Mr. Lovel, and Captain Mirvan, stay around a lower (i.e., second) level.[55]

Besides marking "true" gentility, the differential capacity for embedding is also used to naturalize characters' social status. Shopkeepers and parvenus with shopkeeper mentality don't rise above the second level in their attribution of mental states. Thus, Evelina's low-born cousin, Tom Branghton: "There is nothing but quarreling with the women; it's *my belief* they *like* it better than victuals and drink."[56] Or her ex-barmaid grandmother, Mme. Duval: "*I've no doubt* but we shall be all murdered!"[57] Or Biddy Branghton: "I *wonder* when Mr. Smith's room will be ready."[58] If you consider the dismal treatment that these characters receive throughout the novel, it seems that the lack of capacity for embedding mental states on a high level marks pretty much everyone belonging to this class as not worthy of compassion or sympathy.

The capacity for embedment thus functions as a form of heteroglossia. It can be combined with other sociolectal markers, but only for those characters who are not capable of sophisticated layering of social consciousness. Thus, Tom Branghton's low-level embedments go hand in hand with contractions, clipped sentences, and colloquialisms: "Didn't you [hear of it], Miss? . . . Why then you've a deal of fun to come, I'll promise you; and, I tell you what, I'll treat you there some Sunday noon"[59]; Mme. Duval's, with contractions, double negatives, and bad French: "Pardie, no—you may take care of yourself, if you please, but as to me, I promise you I sha'n't trust myself with no such person."[60] Lord Merton, a newly titled nobleman who lacks true gentility, punctuates his first-level embedments with curses: "I don't know what the devil a woman lives for after thirty."[61] Captain Mirvan, another character whose behavior belies his nominal status of gentleman, sprinkles his second-level embedments[62] with sailor's lingo: "I am now upon a hazardous expedition, having undertaken to convoy a crazy vessel to the shore of Mortification."[63]

In comparison, the speech of unambiguously genteel characters is largely devoid of such markers. The only feature that is reliably present—and thus should be considered a marker in its own right—is the ability to embed mental states on a high level. "Can there, my good Sir, be any thing more painful to a friendly mind, than a necessity of communicating disagreeable

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intelligence?"; "I am grieved, Madam, to appear obstinate, and I blush to incur the imputation of selfishness"; "The benevolence with which you have interested yourself in my concerns, induces me to suppose you would wish to be acquainted with the cause of that desperation from which you snatched me"; "I am extremely sorry . . . that you think me too presumptuous"; "To what, my Lord, must I, then, impute your desire of knowing [my intentions]?"[64]

Lady Howard, Mr. Villars, Mr. Macartney, Lord Orville, and even Sir Clement Willoughby (except when he's trying to overwhelm Evelina with his dramatic professions of devotion and overblown terms of endearment) sound nearly interchangeable in their complex embedments. It is almost as if the relentlessly demanding pattern of such embedments were too metabolically costly for the text, leaving little energy for further verbal idiosyncrasies to be associated with these characters.

I said before that characters who function on the first and second level of embedment do not, as a rule, elicit much of readers' compassion. As one of my students put it, referring to the cruel prank that Captain Mirvan plays on Mme Duval, "I didn't care about Mme. Duval's suffering. It's one bad character playing a trick on another bad character."[65] It also works the other way around. The characters who are portrayed as being able to afford the cognitive luxury of consistently embedding mental states on this high level come across as more aware of their own[66] and, frequently, other people's feelings[67] and hence more deserving of readers' interest and sympathy.[68]

When my students read *Evelina*, they find it challenging to imagine that real-life eighteenth-century shopkeepers, when it came to their mindreading skills, were *not* inferior to ladies and gentlemen of leisure and that, if anything, their subservient position would have made them more active and perceptive mindreaders than those above them. I believe that I know at least one reason why this is so difficult for them. Burney's novel equates capacity for complex embedment with linguistic capacity. To come across as a sophisticated mindreader, her character must *sound* like one, but to sound like one, the character has got to have had a particular kind of education: no education, no eloquence, no mindreading complexity.

One can imagine an alternative scenario in which readers would *infer* a "low-born" character's complex intentionality, based on their behavior rather than on their words, but Burney does not let it happen. The closest that her novel comes to this is when a tradesman manages to get a free

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ride out of a gentleman. But then the gentleman demonstrates such tact in responding to this unappealing ploy that the tradesman's capacity for complex embedment is left, once more, in the dust.[69]

To put a sharper point on what Burney is doing here, let us revisit studies that establish the association between lower social standing and more active and perceptive mindreading. To quote from a recent review of those studies,

> A growing body of behavioural and self-report evidence suggests that people who are lower in social standing may be more socially attuned than those of higher social class. Lower social class is associated with greater activation in brain areas involved in understanding the mental states of other people. Working class people may devote more cognitive resources to processing social information and they may encode such information more deeply. Lower social class among college students was correlated with greater activation of the mirror neuron system. . . . Taken together these studies provide strong support for the notion that working class people are more socially attuned and that such attunement may be fairly automatic and visceral.[70]

Moreover, these effects have been observed across cultures, that is, in Russia and China, as well as in the United States.[71] This strongly implies that the situation was not that different in eighteenth-century England and that eighteenth-century English tradesmen did not, in fact, lag as hopelessly behind in their mindreading capacities as Burney is at such pains to demonstrate.[72]

How does one explain Burney's drastic reversal of this real-life mindreading dynamic? We may speculate that it reflected the Burney family's nervousness about their own social standing, for, unlike many other members of their social circle, they had to work for living. Granted, the work was intellectual and not manual, but, still, their survival depended on it.

We may also chalk it up to the young writer's willingness to rely on the conventional association between landed property and "social personality."[73] At least in this particular regard, Burney was perhaps not yet the Burney of her subsequent novels, who, as Margaret Doody puts it, would "examine" and "attack" rather than merely reflect "her society in its structure, functions, and beliefs," especially those pertaining to "social class."[74] Instead, *Evelina* soothed the nervousness of Burney's genteel readers about the incipient porousness of eighteenth-century class boundaries by inverting real-life mindreading dynamics and portraying tradesmen as stunted in their capacity for complex motivation and thus harmlessly amusing to their betters.

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2.9 Shakespeare's "Problem Play"

How far back does the association of mindreading acumen with superior social standing go into English literary history? For, inaccurate as this association may be when it comes to real-life communication, it nevertheless took hold in the eighteenth-century popular imagination, informing certain genres of polite literature, such as sentimental plays and novels.

To reconstruct the genealogy of this association, one may turn to Restoration comedy, in which aristocratic wits, such as Dorimant from George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), embed mental states on the fourth and even fifth level, while their mistresses and hangers-on can barely keep up with them.[75] Granted, for many a Horner—the upper-class plotter from William Wycherley's *A Country Wife* (1675)—there is a Lucy: the clever servant, who steps in at a critical juncture to save her "betters" from catastrophe. Still, after the 1670s, aristocratic high embedders became a recognizable literary type, paving the way for the letter-writing sophisticates of Richardson and Burney. Restoration plays obviously came with their own political agendas—one of which was to please a series of royal patrons and their friends (who would consider themselves the greatest wits of them all)—which demonstrates yet another way in which ideology can drive the inverse-correlation model in fiction.

Going yet further back, one finds a ruler high on the sociocognitive spectrum in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1604). Shakespeare's men in power are not generally known for mindreading perspicacity, yet Duke Vincentio seems to derive a peculiar personal satisfaction from reading and scripting the complex emotions of his subjects. Thus, he wants Isabella to think that Angelo beheaded her brother, Claudio—even though Claudio is alive—so that, later, when she least expects it, he can reveal to her the true state of affairs and turn her despair into "heavenly comfort":

Isabella [Within]. Peace ho, be here!

Duke. The tongue of Isabel. She's come to know
If yet her brother's pardon be come hither:
But I will keep her ignorant of her good,
To make her heavenly comforts of despair,
When it is least expected.[76]

The Duke knows that Isabella will be devastated when she hears of her brother's execution. He also *knows* that she will be happy beyond measure

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when she learns that he is alive—*happier*, presumably, than she *would have been* had she not first *believed* that he is dead (fourth-level embedment). This is to say that the Duke is angling to put himself in a god-like position in which he will have complete access to Isabella's feelings both now and later (i.e., when the truth is revealed). His mindreading hunger is tinged with sadism, even as he wishes to bring Isabella's happiness to the highest pitch (a literary mindreading dynamic that I dub, elsewhere, "sadistic benefaction").[77]

Measure for Measure is considered one of Shakespeare's "problem plays." As Steve Vineberg puts it, "the long final scene can strike an audience as sadistic. . . . And when the Duke proposes marriage to Isabella, after all he's put her through, you may wonder what Shakespeare could have been thinking of." Directors deal with this problem differently. Some play up the Duke's emotional cruelty, showing that Isabella can't catch a break in the patriarchal society of Shakespeare's Vienna; others explain the Duke's behavior by his desire to see if Isabella is capable of generosity—of "moving beyond her own injuries to act on another's behalf"[78]—as when she kneels before the Duke to ask for Angelo's life while still believing that Angelo has killed her brother. However charitable toward the Duke, this reading still can't explain away his stated intention to plunge Isabella to the lowest depths of despair in order to render her subsequent joy more intense. He may claim that he does it for her own good, but he gets out of it an intoxicating fantasy of complete access to her feelings.

What I find striking about the ethical problem that the Duke's behavior presents is that it seems to be mainly *our* problem, rooted in our own particularly historically situated sensibility. Shakespeare himself may not have viewed the Duke's actions as objectionable. The reason I say this is that I can't discern even a hint of punishment meted out to this "sadistic benefactor." The Duke remains beloved by his subjects, and as the play ends, he is on the brink of being rewarded with a marriage to a much younger, beautiful, and virtuous woman. To paraphrase Hamlet, this is hire and salary, not acknowledgment of a problem.

So let us put aside our "ethical" response for a moment. Let's remember instead that real-life rulers stink at mindreading and that Shakespeare didn't need the research of contemporary cognitive psychology to know this, and neither did his audience.[79] This means that, for them, equating mindreading prowess with higher social standing may have had a different

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political meaning altogether. The space of the play allowed Shakespeare and his contemporaries to fantasize about their social betters who would care about their underlings' feelings so deeply that they would spend their time figuring out ways of getting inside their heads and scripting their emotions. For, as sadistic as this endeavor strikes us today, an early-modern subject might have actually been flattered by the thought of it and wonder if they might not have deserved more political attention from their rulers than they had been getting.

Is this the only possible reading of the Duke's unexpected sociocognitive complexity? Of course not. I don't aim to supply such a reading. Instead I want to stress that this complexity *is* unexpected—and must have been so for early seventeenth-century audiences—and that, more often than not, the association between the capacity for high-level embedment and high social status has specific political underpinnings.

Observe how using insights from contemporary cognitive science (such as the association of better mindreading skills with lower social status) can help us historicize our emotional response to a fictional character, a response that would otherwise seem obvious (as in, "The Duke is sadistic! Poor Isabella! What could Shakespeare have been thinking of?") and thus be ahistorical. A cognitive approach to literature, in other words, comes into its own when it combines insights from cognitive science with sensitivity to specific historical contexts (a paradigm known as "cognitive historicism").[80] My next set of examples comes from the time during which history trod with a particularly heavy step and when the punishment for not aligning the story's sociocognitive complexity just so could lead to the author's death.

2.10 In the Gulag's Vestibule

When, under oppressive political regimes, literary (and cinematic) production becomes explicitly regulated, mindreading sophistication acquires new ideological meaning. Thus, in fiction published in the Soviet Union under the aegis of socialist realism, characters of lower social status would sometimes be portrayed as *less* sociocognitively complex than characters of higher social status. That is, they do *not* engage in high-level mindreading when confronted with the machinations of high-status characters.

This may seem like an unambiguous example of the second model, but it is not. Although technically speaking, these low-embedding characters,

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such as unskilled factory workers, indigent peasants, and orphaned vagrant children, occupy the lowest rung of a socioeconomic ladder, they are not at all the "pipsqueaks" of yesteryear. Instead they are the new aristocracy—aristocracy of the spirit, as it were—even if they are never referred to this way. The future belongs to them. Due to their currently disenfranchised status, they are ultimately guaranteed privileged access to educational, political, economic, and reproductive resources. In contrast, various "old specialists" ("spetsy" in the half-respectful/half-contemptuous jargon of the 1920s–1930s), who have managed to parlay their education under the tsarist regime into lucrative high-status jobs under the Soviets, are doomed to irrelevancy and extinction. It is those well-heeled characters, as well as their repulsive young protégés, who cheat our low-status protagonists of their rightful share of socialist paradise, but not for long, never for too long.

For instance, Sania Grigoriev, the protagonist of a widely beloved novel by Veniamin Kaverin, *Two Captains* (1938–1945), is shown to be almost completely without guile, and so are his friends and his girlfriend/wife. It is his arch-adversary, a stockbroker under the old regime and school principal / distinguished scholar under the new, N. A. Tatarinov, and Tatarinov's favorite disciple, Romashov, who engage in complex mindreading aimed at destroying the hero. When, at the end of the book, Sania, a former-vagrant-child-turned-arctic-pilot, gains the upper hand, it is because of his determination, courage, and good luck and not because he has more cunning than his enemies do. In 1948–1956, Kaverin re-created this mindreading dynamic in another popular (and also repeatedly televised) novel, *The Open Book*, whose upright protagonist, a poor-scullery-maid-turned-famous-microbiologist, ultimately triumphs over her plotting adversaries. Their old-school Machiavellianism is no match for her talent and "open-book" personality.

Call it the first model with a twist. What we have here is our familiar correlation between lower social standing and high-level mindreading skills, except that low-status characters (i.e., the doomed bourgeois elements) may *initially* come across as high-status characters, while the downtrodden workers, peasants, and vagrants may take some time to reveal themselves as the new aristocracy. And this proletarian aristocracy presumably does not need to excel in mindreading, since the Revolution of 1917 has already stacked the socioeconomic odds in their favor.

Besides, the enemies of this proletarian aristocracy may not be that great at mindreading either. In Haiyan Lee's study of the fate of detective fiction

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in the People's Republic of China, she provides an important insight into a particular historically specific form that the literary association between high social status and low mindreading skills can take under the watchful eye of the Communist Party. As she explains,

> After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, [the hitherto thriving] detective fiction was labeled a bourgeois conceit and suppressed. The new society was to be organized as a political communitas in which all were brothers and sisters under the benevolent paternal care of the Communist Party. Everyone had a designated place in society and everyone was a known quantity. Who would have any need for mindreading in such a seen-through society? . . . The only genre fiction permitted to flourish in the socialist period was the spy thriller. Crucially, the mind-game that sustained this genre was directed against "the class enemy," both internal and external. Still, enemy agents were not permitted to truly shine sociocognitively. Rather, they schemed and plotted at a low cognitive level, making laughably naïve assumptions and rudimentary blunders. And it took minimum twists and turns to ensnare them in the vast net of the people's justice.[81]

So while the proletariat had no need to "shine sociocognitively," their enemies were "not permitted" to do that. Did that result in decades of official literary production, in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, with generally lowered levels of mindreading complexity, while works featuring truly sociocognitively complex characters had to find outlets elsewhere: abroad or in the underground/samizdat?[82] And did that mean that the sociocognitive complexity of narrators, implied readers, and implied authors had to be dialed down as well?

One factor that seems to bear out this conjecture is the suppression, in Soviet fiction, of the style of writing that we now describe as unreliable narration. Ilya Ehrenburg's *Julio Jurenito* (1922), Yuri Olesha's *Envy* (1927), and Konstantin Vaginov's *Works and Days of Svistonov* (1929) still featured unreliable narrators,[83] but once socialist realism became the dominant paradigm in the early 1930s, such stylistic experimentation was put paid to.[84] Thus, Vsevolod Ivanov's *U* (1932) was not published in the Soviet Union until 1988, while Leonid Dobychin's brilliant *The Town of N* (1935) was singled out for castigation during the 1936 campaign "against formalism and naturalism," driving its author to suicide. With the latter novel's move away from character-based embedment to embedment emerging almost exclusively from a give-and-take between the implied author and implied reader, it engaged in an experimentation with literary subjectivity that must have come across as politically subversive. Indeed, as one critic observes, it is

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“something of a mystery how the book was published at all at the height of Stalinism, when dogmatic conservatism, to say nothing of philistinism, ruled the art establishment.”[85]

2.11 Socialist Realism: Turning Back the Clock on Complex Embedment in Literature

It is easy for us today to dismiss bona fide socialist realist literature as crude propaganda and a psychological “wasteland.”[86] Yet, if we adapt the cognitivist perspective—that is, if we consider socialist realism as a culture-wide attempt to regulate people’s mindreading practices—it emerges as a fascinating phenomenon, both politically and literary-historically.

What does it mean, for instance, that the Soviet literary scene could not abide the forms of complex embedment associated with unreliable narration? On the one hand, this seems to exemplify the regime’s intolerance for experimentation associated with the modernist aesthetics. (After all, unreliable narration in literature is thought to be a mark of modernist sensibility.) Indeed, the socialist realist condemnation of “decadence” in poetry and art paralleled the crusade against “degenerate art” in Nazi Germany,[87] which implies that both communist and fascist ideologues experienced modernist experimentation with subjectivity as politically threatening.

On the other hand, the relationship between experimental aesthetics and political subversiveness is far from straightforward.[88] There are enough instances of brilliant avant-garde writing and filmmaking (think Mayakovski and Eisenstein) serving ideological agendas of totalitarianism and thus increasing the affective appeal of such agendas. Indeed, as the cultural theorist Sabina Hake has shown, film directors at DEFA (i.e., the main state film studio of the German Democratic Republic, formed in 1946 under the auspices of Stalinism and dissolved in 1992, after the reunification of Germany) used innovative techniques of modernism to maintain the attractiveness of various foundational myths of the GDR, such as the equation of socialism with antifascism. As Hake explains,

> Just as Georg Lukács’s pronouncements on the nineteenth-century realist novel as the model for critical realism was used in the 1950s formalism debates to dismiss all modernist experimentation as decadent, the canonization of modernism in the West as inherently resistant has distracted from the affirmative functions of formal innovation. Concretely, in the case of DEFA cinema this means that

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> an uncritical reliance on the realism-modernism opposition has allowed us to equate filmic experimentation with political dissent. Just as the ideological effects produced by the antifascist classics in the socialist realist mode were never as uncontested as their detractors claimed, the turn to art-cinema traditions never implied automatic opposition to the ideological and institutional structures that relied on antifascism as its founding myth. On the contrary, modernist strategies and techniques often helped to liberate the affective core of antifascism from the ossifications of cinematic illusionism and to redeem the utopia of socialism in aesthetic terms.[89]

This means that if we want to understand why works of literature that foregrounded embedded intentions of implied readers and implied authors (e.g., those featuring unreliable narrators) did not fare well with socialist realist censors, we cannot simply say that such experiments with fictional subjectivity nurtured critical thinking and thus implied political dissent. While this may be true to a significant extent[90] (more about this in the next section), we may also look for a more immediate explanation, one rooted in the principles of socialist realism. What we find there, surprisingly or not, is a certain contempt for cognitive processes of the "proletarian" audiences, signaled by the effective return to what Hans Günther calls "the preliterate tradition" and constituting an intriguing experiment with patterns of embedment in modern literature.[91]

Socialist realist writers were expected to "educate" their readers and indoctrinate them in the ideological precepts of the Party. These goals, however, "could be realized only under the conditions of accessibility (comprehensibility) of literature and art for the popular readers and viewers, under the conditions of conformance to their taste."[92] This led, in practice, to the reclamation of the sensibilities of epic, with larger-than-life heroes engaged in monumental labor: harnessing the power of the machine to transform both the unyielding natural world and the unruly collective. Officially, socialist realist tradition was supposed to be following in the footsteps of the nineteenth-century greats, such as Pushkin and Tolstoy. But, in reality, as Günther points out, "[Insofar as] the nineteenth century distinguished itself by the predominance of a critical and analytical beginning, now images were needed that reflected the optimism of the official Stalinist culture, and these images were primarily sought in the preliterate tradition—myth, folklore, heroic epics, and the like. Paradoxically, a society with an officially declared orientation toward the future, in which the art of the avant-garde left indelible marks and that widely used modern means of

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communication in propaganda, directs its gaze toward the remote past, the result of which was a quaint folklorization of modernity."[93]

Myth, as Günther observes elsewhere, thus emerged as "the soul of proletarian art."[94] What is important here, for our present purposes, is that myth, folklore, and heroic epics do not depend on continuous complex embedment of mental states to the same striking degree to which, say, a novel by Pushkin or Tolstoy does. While we certainly find third-level embedments of mental states in myths and fairy tales, as well as in epics, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*, they are relatively rare there—in fact, incomparably so, if we juxtapose these texts with (for instance) eleventh-century Japanese, eighteenth-century Chinese, or nineteenth-century Russian novels.

This is why fiction produced under the aegis of socialist realism is so fascinating from the cognitive literary perspective. Many of its early flagship works, from Fedor Gladkov's *Cement* (1925) and Nicholai Ostrovski's *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1936) in Russia to Eduard Claudius's *People at Our Side* (1951) in East Germany, feature third-level embedments of mental states rarely, staying mainly on the first and second level. Yet, even with these novels' epic (so to speak) unconcern about embedded subjectivity, they can still be affectively engaging. What their presence on the literary scene demonstrates is that fiction did not have to go the route of the hypertrophied embedment and that it was not inevitable that the novel would become as dependent on continuous complex embedment of mental states as it is at the present point in our literary history.

Socialist realist novels, especially in 1920s–1930s Russia and in 1950s GDR,[95] thus represent an important and useful exception to my "rule" that literature, as we know it today, cannot function on a lower-than-third level of embedment. True, their popularity had been enabled by the powerful state apparatus (and, when that apparatus disappeared, they have been forgotten), but, then, many a canonical work of literature depends for its survival on a system of institutional supports. In any case, they were liked well enough by several generations of readers (to which I can attest, having encountered some of them as an adolescent), even when consumed alongside nineteenth-century novels featuring vastly more sophisticated embedment of mental states.

At the same time, it is politically significant that the project of "educating" the proletariat was thus realized by texts with drastically lowered levels of embedment. Think again of Ralph Ellison's decision to match

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Henry James's "superconscious, 'super subtle fry,' characters who embodied in their own cultured, upper-class way the American virtue of conscience and consciousness."[96] To endow his Invisible Man with "intellectual depth" and "a consciousness in which serious philosophical questions could be raised," Ellison depicted him continuously embedding mental states on a high level.[97] In contrast, when adepts of socialist realism "conformed" to their readers' taste, they revealed themselves as thinking about those readers as not amenable to contemplating complex subjectivity.

One is reminded here of Burney's construction of working- and middling-class characters, in *Evelina* (1778), as lagging hopelessly behind their social "betters" in the business of mindreading, a construction driven by ideology rather than by real-life mindreading dynamics. Ironically, the socialist realist aesthetics went further and transcended the boundaries of fiction: in a state aspiring to be "a total work of art,"[98] neither characters *nor their readers* were "permitted to shine sociocognitively."[99]

Let us take a closer look at the so-called production novel (i.e., a novel set in an industrial collective) exemplifying these aesthetics. Fedor Gladkov's *Cement* (*Цемент*, 1925) tells a story of a Red Army soldier, Gleb Chumalov, returning home after the Civil War of 1918–1921 and struggling to restart the production of cement at an abandoned factory. Written in the early 1920s, *Cement* went through numerous revisions, which resulted in the drastic paring down of its characters' emotional range. (Indeed, the currently available English translation, published by Northwestern University Press in 1960, seems to be based on one of the earlier drafts and thus may not give the reader an accurate impression of what the novel had become in its last draft, the one most familiar to its Russian audiences.)

Here is an excerpt from the final version of *Cement*, coming from the chapter featuring one of the novel's most intense conversations about the characters' feelings. Gleb wants to hear about the trials that his wife, Dasha, went through at the hands of their class enemies while he was away, the trials that have made her love the Revolution more than she loves her husband (all ellipses are in the original):

> Gleb lay his head on Dasha's knees and saw, above himself, her face, her cheeks, covered with soft down colored by the fiery sky, and her eyes: intent, large, worried, and loving.
>
> "Here, under this sky, one feels a different person, my little Dasha. Here I am, laying in your knees . . . When has it been like that? It seems that I have never

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experienced anything like it. I only know that your love was larger and bigger than mine, and I am not worthy of you. I haven't lived through even one hundredth of what you have lived. So tell me yourself about your trials . . . Perhaps then I will get to know myself better.

The air was suddenly lit up by the lightning: big and small stars of light swarmed everywhere. Gleb was swept up by the wave of rapture; excited, he propped himself up on his elbow.

"Dasha, my little dove, look . . . It's so good to struggle and build one's destiny! For, all this—is ours . . . Us! . . . Our power and labor . . . I feel like I am inhaling . . . the way one inhales before the first strike . . . when one wants to swing from high . . .

Dasha again put her hands on his chest. She, too, was excited, and Gleb could hear the heavy muffled pounding of her heart.

"Yes, darling, it is good to struggle for your destiny. Let the sufferings come, let the death come . . . It is scary . . . and not everyone can bear it . . . I had borne it, because my love for you is stronger than fear . . . And then I understood something else, and loved something else . . . perhaps even more than I love you . . .

"Speak up, my little Dasha . . . whatever it is—speak . . . I have now learned not just to listen but also to struggle with myself . . ."[100]

The characters' emotions may be larger than life, reaching, as it were, to the stars. The frequent ellipses, too, are meant to signal the grandeur of their feelings, for they seem to experience so much more than they are capable of expressing verbally.[101] (No smooth talkers they—none of that long-winded aristocratic palaver one encounters in old novels!) Yet one struggles to find embedments rising above the second level—an experience extremely unusual when it comes to critical interaction with a novel. Gleb *knows* that Dasha *loves* him. Gleb *feels unworthy* of Dasha. Gleb *knows* that his *happiness* is bound up with the industrial collective. Gleb *feels* that Dasha is *excited* too. He *hopes* that he can *control his feelings* as he listens to her story. Dasha *wants* him to *know* that she *loves* the Revolution more than she loves him.

The last two are perhaps the most unambiguous examples of third-level embedment in this high-wrought chapter, entitled, fittingly, "Inner Interlayers."[102] The depth of emotions explored here (however smacking of agitprop) is rather unique for *Cement*, which tends to report a character's response to a specific challenge and then, immediately, to move on. For instance, captured by the enemies, a woman experiences the arm of the man who is dragging her to her execution as "monstrous"; when she is spared the execution and left alone, she feels "blind terror"; when she

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subsequently runs into her comrades, she "laughs and cries."[103] This action-reaction rhythm of narrative is unrelenting, which means that there are almost no complex embedments on the level of chapters and very few on the level of paragraphs.

Note the difference between this novel and Evgeny Zamyatin's *We*, discussed in chapter 1 of this book. *We* was written at exactly the same time as *Cement* but first published abroad: in New York, in 1924. Standing pointedly outside the ideological project of "educating" its audiences by talking to them on their (presumably, benighted) level, *We* constantly embeds mental states of characters and implied readers, even while it makes a point of not mentioning emotions. In contrast, *Cement*, true to its peculiar educational mission, refers to emotions frequently yet eschews complex embedment, and it certainly does not engage mental states of the implied reader/author.

Here is another "production novel," Eduard Claudius's *People at Our Side* (*Menschen an unserer Seite*, 1951), "an exemplary work of early socialist realism" from the GDR. (There, writers, too, "were expected to write in a way that was popular (*volkstümlich*) [and] accessible.").[104] The novel's protagonist, a bricklayer named Hans Aehre, is "a forceful person who must persuade his brigade of doubters that they are capable of working collectively on the [ring] furnace without shutting it down, which would cost the factory six months' lost production."[105] In between his bouts of heroic labor, Hans must come to terms with his wife's desire to be seen as "a whole human being" and not just "a woman and a wife."[106] This leads to conversations similar to those Gleb was having with his Dasha, in which Hans learns to listen to his wife and rein in his conservative masculinity.

For most of the novel, however, just as in *Cement*, complex embedments are few and far between. Here, for instance, is Hans's passionate enunciation of his new role at the factory: "Yes, we are workers, Comrade Backhans. We are workers. Even if an engineer or a foreman or the contractor is present—it's we who build the furnace, we! And if there is no foreman who wants to help us or no engineer, well then, we'll build it anyway . . . of course we will . . . it must be possible for us to do it by ourselves."[107]

Take a good look at this remarkable speech. One would think, given the history of complex embedment in literature, that it would be impossible for a modern author to escape the gravitational pull of complex intentionality. This is to say that plenty of experimenting authors, from Alain Robbe-Grillet in *Jealousy* and Muriel Spark in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* to

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Zamyatin in *We* and Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian*, make a point of *not* mentioning mental states explicitly, but their narratives still depend on their readers constantly supplying *implied* mental states to make sense of what is going on. In contrast to those authors, Claudius comes very close to constructing an actual mental-state-free paragraph and thus modeling a new golden age in which word and deed are one and (to quote Hayian Lee again) nobody has "any need for mindreading."[108]

It is worth noting that the "production novel," in and of itself, is by no means antithetical to complex embedment. Already in 1963, the East German writer Christa Wolf published *They Divided the Sky* [*Der Geteilte Himmel*], which takes place, in part, at a train-making factory. Its main protagonist, Rita, witnesses the dramatic endeavor of a "famous brigade" to build "twelve windows per shift," even though, a relatively short time ago, the idea of building a train carriage with ten windows in one shift would strike the workers as "crazy."[109] This industrial backdrop notwithstanding, the novel's complex embedments are off the charts, in typical Wolfian fashion, as we follow Rita's continuous, sometimes oblique, self-introspection.[110]

Perhaps not surprisingly, in spite of the novel's clear political allegiances (for Rita, unlike her boyfriend, Manfred, is wholeheartedly committed to the cause of socialism), *They Divided the Sky* was condemned by East German reviewers as politically subversive. Still, it became an immediate best-seller and was soon made into an equally controversial, and popular, movie. Today it is typically featured on such lists as "100 German Must-Reads,"[111] along with novels of such heavy hitters of complex embedment as Musil, Mann, and Zweig.

This is why the socialist realist novel of the early, "exemplary" cut (e.g., Gladkov's *Cement*, Claudius's *People at Our Side*) can be viewed as a fascinating experiment with mindreading. Though relatively short-lived and now largely forgotten, it did turn back the clock on complex embedment and demonstrated the viability of neo-epic subjectivity in literature. What had made this kind of experiment possible was a unique combination of factors: the strong political agenda supported by the punitive state; that state's apparent contempt for the cognitive processes of working-class readers; the cultivation of a regressive dream about a golden age in which minds are transparent; and ubiquitous exposure to well-established literary traditions (exemplified by the novels of Tolstoy and Theodor Fontane etc.), which

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offered a very different vision of fictional subjectivity yet could, nevertheless, be claimed as precursors to the present one.

Doing full justice to the interplay of these factors is beyond the scope of my argument. It remains an open question, for instance, if the ready availability of the nineteenth-century classics had made the socialist realist experimentation with shallow intentionality more or less compelling or if the intensified censorship trained at least some readers to look for hidden meaning and thus added an unexpected level of implied mindreading to those texts. What I want to emphasize, with this case study, as well as with the preceding ones (i.e., those from English and Chinese literary traditions), is that cognition and ideology are bound with each other in a variety of historically specific forms, most of which have never been acknowledged or explored by cultural historians.

In this chapter, I have focused on one particular way of bringing together cognition and history, namely, on the possibility that patterns of complex embedment in a work of literature may be correlated with the relative social status of its characters and readers. In recent years, literary scholars have advanced other, different, models of cognitive historicism.[112] Yet, on the whole, we have barely scratched the surface. The field of cognitive approaches to literature remains wide open to researchers willing to explore the proposition that a cognitive literary inquiry is, fundamentally, a historical inquiry.

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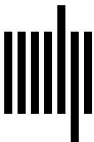

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