

3 “Deep” History: Evolutionary and Neurocognitive Foundations of Complex Embedment

3.1 Thinking on Three Historical Levels at Once

What does it mean to think of complex embedment of mental states as an essential feature of literature, as we know it today?¹ It means thinking on three historical levels at the same time: being aware of the “deep” history of our species, of the more immediate cultural history, and of literary history.

The “deep” history concerns the evolutionary and neurocognitive foundations of complex embedment. Somewhat paradoxically, this perspective may be the least rooted of all, because much of it depends on ongoing research in the cognitive neuroscience of mindreading. To look back at that history means, in effect, to look forward and to be ready to modify one’s thinking when more and/or different information becomes available.²

The midlevel perspective is also not quite what literary scholars are used to when they think of cultural history. While it does not ignore such familiar factors as the role of the means of textual reproduction and changes in the size and type of the reading public, its main foci are mindreading histories of specific communities, or the local “ideologies of mind.” To become aware of those ideologies, I draw on research of anthropologists and ethnographers who study similarities and differences between the cultural practice of “thinking about others’ internal states and/or talking about them.”³ As the anthropologist Webb Keane observes, while “theory of mind and intention-seeking are common to all humans,” they are “elaborated in some communities [and] suppressed in others.”⁴ The history of the representation of mental states in literature is profoundly implicated with cultural institutions that “elaborate” or “suppress” mindreading.

Finally, literary history is concerned with the evolution of patterns of complex embedment in literature, as well as with the migration of such

patterns across different genres, national literary traditions, and individual texts.

Any given complex embedment of mental states in literature thus relies *simultaneously* on the workings of our evolved cognitive architecture, on a culture-specific “ideology of mind” (which implicitly regulates the public and print discussion of other people’s mental states), and on the immediate literary ecology of a particular text.

I can easily imagine how one may focus on one or two of those factors at the expense of other(s). In fact, the structure of this book may encourage this kind of thinking, because, for the purpose of my argument, I consider them in turn—first, the deep-historical (i.e., cognitive), then, the historical, and, finally, the literary—separately. So it is important that we keep in mind that none of those factors can be reduced to others or considered sufficient on their own. For instance, our evolved capacity for complex embedment, alone, *does not determine* the appearance of fictional texts that would ratchet up the frequency of such embedments; neither does a cultural milieu that encourages public speculation about one’s own and others’ inner states; and neither does the presence of a long-standing literary tradition steeped in complex embedment.⁵ The “secret life” of literature is sustained by the interplay of all three.

3.2 Makeshift Metaphors Revisited

“Theory of mind,” “mindreading,” and “embedment” are useful metaphors for evoking mental functioning involved in daily social interactions. Their utility, however, becomes overshadowed by their clumsiness and inadequacy when we try to understand how the underlying cognitive processes actually work. Take, for instance, the implications conveyed by these terms, that we experience mental states in a propositional, disembodied format (as in, “I know that she doesn’t know that I know”) and that we are, mostly, aware of our mentalizing.

In reality, this is hardly the case. Mindreading may be said to exist on several different levels. While there is, indeed, “the level of conscious reflection about the mind, what we might call *explicit theories* of theory of mind,” the majority of our daily mindreading “happens largely outside conscious reflection and probably conscious control,” and it is both grounded in the body and highly context sensitive.⁶

Cognitive scientists are quite aware of how incomplete and misleading the "propositional" view of theory of mind is. For instance, when the social anthropologist Rita Astuti introduces the concept of mindreading, she illustrates it with the following set of images: "[When] you see someone running, you don't just see a physical body in acceleration—you see the intention or the desire to catch the bus or win a medal; when you see a hand reaching for an object, you don't just see a trajectory through space—you see the goal of getting that object."⁷

This is mindreading at its most prevalent: rooted in the body and happening outside of conscious reflection. Similarly, the linguistic anthropologist Alessandro Duranti reminds us that mindreading "does not proceed as a series of self-conscious propositions, as in, I believe that X intends to do Y." Instead, it depends on the embodied, intuitive, prerational understanding of another's actions.⁸

The cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer, too, stresses the automaticity, speed, and multimodality of mindreading, as well as the fact that we can't help attributing mental states, whether correctly or not, when he defines it as "a whole suite of specialized systems [that] automatically picks up social information—other people's behaviors, gestures, utterances, but also their facial expressions, choice of words, and so forth—to construct, without any conscious effort, a representation of their beliefs, intentions, and emotional states, all things that cannot be observed and must be inferred."⁹

Slowing down this process, bringing it to conscious awareness, and putting it in words inevitably transforms this experience. The transformation may be enriching, for instance, by forcing us to develop new ways of representing inner states in our discourse.¹⁰ Yet it may also be radically impoverishing, for instance, by stripping mindreading of its contexts and sensory nuances and by misrepresenting it as a linear process. Writers themselves know that linearity distorts our experience of the social environment. As Christa Wolf puts it, "[The] age-old fact that things occur and are felt and are thought simultaneously but that all those things cannot be put down simultaneously on paper in linear writing suddenly rattles me so much that doubt in the realism of my writing grows into a total inability to write."¹¹

I can thus understand the position of some of my colleagues in literary studies who are turned off by "theory of mind" and "mindreading" because they object—and rightly so!—to the implications of the conscious, accurate, disembodied, linear, and context-free processes that these terms

convey. Sadly, however, their quests for alternative accounts of social cognition may thus be driven by putting too much stock in those flawed metaphors instead of paying attention to the actual phenomenon of mind-reading studied by psychologists, anthropologists, and ethnographers.

“Embedment” is another one of those problematic metaphors (though perhaps not as fraught as theory of mind or mindreading). You will notice, as I proceed with this chapter, that, in different fields of cognitive science, the capacity for embedding mental states goes by different names. Those include “recursive embedment,” “perspective embedment,” “recursive intentions-reading,” “nesting,” “level-two perspective taking,” “second-order theory of mind,” “second-order false-belief understanding,” “levels of intentionality,” “multiple-order intentionality,” and so forth. The images of layers, levels, hierarchies, and thought bubbles recursively nested within each other, which such descriptors evoke, are not likely to reflect any actual patterns in the mind/brain. What they are more likely to reflect, instead, is a long cultural history of visualization of abstract concepts,¹² now pressed into the service of rendering instantly intelligible and familiar complicated processes that we are only beginning to understand.

Is there a way to talk about mentalizing without relying on the language of representationality? Here is a perspective from developmental psychology, offered by Mark Sabbagh and Dare Baldwin:

What does a nonrepresentational understanding of intention “look like”? Perhaps the most vivid demonstration of an early appreciation of intention comes from children’s understanding of goal-oriented action. Gergley and colleagues (1995) found that even 12-month-old infants were willing to attribute goals to shapes that showed signs of being animate (i.e. capable of self-propelled motion). Along these same lines, Woodward (1998) has demonstrated that young infants construe the actions of humans as goal-directed, though they do not apply the same construal to the motions of inanimate objects. Still more convincingly, Meltzoff (1995) found that 18-month-olds reenacted events that correspond with an actor’s likely goals and intentions, even when those actions are not explicitly modeled. Across these studies and others (e.g. Carpenter, Akhtar, and Tomasello, 1998), very young infants demonstrate an impressive level of sensitivity to the fact that others’ actions are motivated by internal mental states. However, these young infants would fail even the simplest tasks designed to tap a representational understanding of mental states, such as the false belief task (Wellman et al., 2001). Thus, 18-month-olds clearly understand behavior in a distinctly mentalistic manner, but it is probably a mistake to ascribe a concomitant representational appreciation to these same children at such an early age.¹³

Thus developmental psychologists. Philosophers of mind, too, have grappled with the issue of moving beyond representation. For instance, Mark Johnson speaks of "nonrepresentational theory of mind, where having or entertaining a concept is merely running a neural simulation in which sensory, motor, and affective areas of the brain are activated, not as representations mediating between an inner and outer world, but rather as *the very understanding of the concept*. In other words, the neural activations involved in the simulations within a specific context *just are* what is to grasp the meaning of the concept in question."¹⁴

One can even speculate (by way of taking this insight to its logical extreme) that propositionally expressed representations of mental states play no role at all in reading literature. Perhaps, when we read, we grasp the density and depth of intersubjective situations that define the experience of literary fiction,¹⁵ and it is only when we try to slow down and describe that experience that we resort to the familiar cultural metaphors of tiers, orders, levels, and embedded mental states.

This view is in broad agreement with that of the cognitive psychologists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, who point out that the procedures involved in unconscious inference are not identical or even similar to those involved in conscious reasoning, and they do not operate on "statements or statement-like representations." The concept of representation, in this view, is understood strictly in terms of its function:

Representations . . . are material things, such as activation of groups of neurons in a brain, magnetic patterns in an electronic storage medium, or ink patterns on a piece of paper. They can be inside an organism or in its environment. What makes such a material thing a representation is not its location, its shape, or its structure; it is its function. A representation has the function of providing an organism . . . with information about some state of affairs. The information provided may be about actual or about desirable states of affairs, that is, about facts or about goals.¹⁶

Is it possible or even desirable to avoid the language of representationality, specifically, when talking about complex fictional subjectivity?¹⁷ I am not sure that our gains would outweigh our losses if we were to make a concerted effort to do so, in the name of hypothetical cognitive purism. For keep in mind that writers, too, are faced with this challenge when they try to convey in words deep intersubjective experiences of their characters. They, too, rely on outright descriptions of embedded mental states—albeit

some of them to a greater and some to a lesser degree—to bring to life their intuitive visions of intricate social consciousness. To insist that critics must find a way to describe this phenomenon without talking about embedded intentionality—because such representations distort what may be really going on in the brain!—would be similar to insisting that writers must find a way not to talk about it either, for the same reason.

Some writers indeed rely more on implied mental states than they do on explicitly spelled-out mental states, but that alone does not make their writing better or more literary. For instance, as I argued in chapter 1, the difference between literary and popular fiction does not map onto the difference between implied and explicitly spelled-out mental states. Instead, literary fiction is often characterized by the two following features (to a much greater extent, that is, than is popular fiction): first, it embeds mental states of narrators, implied authors, and readers *in addition to* mental states of characters; and, second, it tends to imply mental states *in addition to* and sometimes in place of explicitly spelling them out.

Thus, perhaps a more realistic way to approach the problem of representationality in cognitive criticism is to say that we should strive to retain the view of the multidimensional, multisensory, embodied, and not-yet-well-understood phenomenon of “embedded mindreading” even if we must continue to rely on the terms, currently in wide use, that streamline, decontextualize, and disembodify it.¹⁸ So as I go on with my argument, try keeping in mind the perennial gap between the actual cognitive processes (all moving targets, as far as researchers are concerned) and the makeshift, far-from-perfect metaphors that make it possible to talk about those processes.

3.3 Perspectives from Social, Developmental, Clinical, and Evolutionary Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience

One good starting point for a conversation about embedded mental states is research on the “default network,” which looks at the nexus of interacting brain regions involved, among other things, in “inward contemplation and self-assessment”¹⁹ and “conceiving the perspectives of others.”²⁰ What we learn from this research is that, when we engage in a complex social interaction with other people, attributing mental states to them (however unselfconsciously) necessitates attributing mental states to ourselves: “understanding complex social interactions among people who are

presumed to be social, interactive, and emotive always involves the processing of self-reflective thoughts and judgments."²¹

Handling communicative intentions is thus "a more complex process than simply thinking about intentions, since we have to recognize that the communicator is also thinking about our mental state. This involves a second-order representation of mental state. We have to represent the communicator's representation of our mental state."²² Depending on the context of the situation, this may translate into a second level of embedment (as in, "she obviously doesn't know that I know!") or even a higher one, third or fourth (as in, "I wish I had known before that she didn't know that I knew!"). Again, here I am putting it in a propositional format—because I have no way of conveying it to you otherwise!—but during actual social interactions, we do not think propositionally (for one, we *don't have time for it*, except in some special cases).

How involved can such social imagining get? As it turns out, there may be limits to the levels of embedment. The cognitive evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar and his colleagues have demonstrated that "fifth-order intentionality" (fifth-level embedment of mental states) represents "a real upper limit for most people," that is, the level after which their understanding of the situation drops drastically.²³ At the same time, there also "is considerable inter-individual variation in the highest achievable levels of intentionality." Those individual differences correlate with such factors as "the ability to correctly attribute blame" and the number of contacts in one's support clique, that is, the number of individuals on whose advice and/or help one would depend at times of great social or financial trouble."²⁴

For a quick illustration of how the "upper limit" on levels of embedment manifests itself, when next time, at a party, you find yourself chatting with four other guests, see how long it takes before your group separates into two relatively independent conversational units consisting of two and three people. Presumably it won't be too long, because keeping track of five mental states including your own—which may reach a maximum level of embedment pretty fast—is a cognitive burden. Left to our own devices (as opposed, for instance, to being committed to a more rigid social situation such as a five-person discussion panel at a conference), we *intuitively* try to lessen than burden by modifying the social context that created it.²⁵

I emphasize the word "intuitively" because we would not be aware of either carrying any burden or trying to lighten it. It may just so happen

that I “spontaneously” discover that what a person next to me is saying is really quite engrossing—or that she is the only one whose voice I can hear over the party’s din—so I end up focusing all my attention on a conversation with her, while the three others continue on their own. Negotiating a mindreading overload—what mindreading overload? As the clinical psychologist Philipp Kanske and his colleagues put it, the “ease with which we accomplish [the mindreading] task every day, readily makes us forget the complex computations and processes it entails.”²⁶

How early does it start? That is, at what age do we begin to attribute embedded mental states to ourselves and others? Until relatively recently, developmental psychologists thought that children begin to appreciate people’s false beliefs—that is, realize that people may believe something that is not in fact the case—around the age of four.²⁷ Then, between five and seven, children become attuned to “doubly embedded” representations; that is, they become aware “not just that people have beliefs (and false beliefs) about the world but that they also have beliefs about the content of others’ minds (i.e., about others’ beliefs), and similarly, these too may be different or wrong.” This awareness is “fundamental to children’s . . . understanding of the epistemic concepts of evidence, inference, and truth,”²⁸ although there are important cultural differences in whether children are encouraged or discouraged to talk openly about their own and other people’s mental states.²⁹

In experiments involving kindergarteners and first graders writing letters to hypothetical friends who have never experienced some of the things familiar to the authors of the letters (such as, for instance, snow, mentioned in a letter to someone who has never seen snow), the “recursive understanding of embedded mental states” was shown to be implicated with children’s growing awareness of a reader’s knowledge as distinct from that of the writer’s. Around seven years of age, children realize that “an effective writer represents how their reader will interpret their textual meaning (authorial intention) in light of that reader’s experience.”³⁰

The traditional view that before the age of four children are not ready to attribute false beliefs to others was challenged in 2005 in a study by Kristine Onishi and Renée Baillargeon, who showed that fifteen-month-old infants may already understand false beliefs. Since then, numerous other experiments have pushed the age for such understanding even lower.³¹ While different theories have been proposed to account for this “puzzle of theory

of mind" in infants,³² for the purposes of my argument, I go with the view that "the infant mindreading system develops gradually, transforming into the adult one through incremental learning and piecemeal conceptual change."³³ The changes that take place around the ages of four, five, and seven may still represent important milestones in theory-of-mind development (especially, as we have seen, in the nuances of perspective taking), but they can now be viewed as steps in a continuous integrated process rather than dramatic breakthroughs.

Embedded mindreading assumes new prominence as children enter adolescence. In 1970 (even before the term "theory of mind" entered the lexicon of cognitive scientists),³⁴ Patricia H. Miller and her colleagues concluded their essay "Thinking about People Thinking about People Thinking about . . . : A Study of Social Cognitive Development" with the following rueful observation: "often to their pain, adolescents are much more gifted" at "wondering what he thinks of me" and "what he thinks I think of him" than "first graders are."³⁵ The drama and intensity of alliance building and sexual maturation are inseparable from the reading and, inevitably, misreading of one's own and others' embedded intentions.

When it comes to the cognitive neuroscience of embedment, in 2003, Rebecca Saxe and Nancy Kanwisher published an article, "People Thinking about Thinking People," which showed, for the first time, that there is a particular region of the temporo-parietal junction of the brain that is "involved specifically in reasoning about the contents of another person's mind."³⁶ There was an increased response in that region when subjects read stories that involved figuring out people's thoughts and feelings, as opposed to stories with no social reasoning. Since then, other studies have addressed questions ranging from whether the same brain region supports thinking about people's "appearance, social background, or personality traits" (it seems that it doesn't)³⁷ to what neural populations may underwrite the "representations underlying human emotion inference."³⁸

To give you an idea about the setup of Saxe and Kanwisher's study, here are two of the stories that the subjects of their experiments were exposed to. The first depicts a woman wanting to get to her office and encountering a construction zone: "Jane is walking to work this morning through a very industrial area. In one place the crane is taking up the whole sidewalk. To get to her building, she has to take a detour." There is some intentionality, yes, but no rich social content and no increased activation in the

brain regions under study, as opposed to the subjects' response to the other story: "A boy is making a paper mache project for his art class. He spends hours ripping newspaper into even strips. Then he goes out to buy flour. His mother comes home and throws all the newspaper strips away."³⁹

If I put in propositional format my own response to the latter vignette, I can say that the mother *didn't know* that the boy *intended* to do something with the pile of torn newspapers and that the boy may *realize* that the mother *didn't know* that he *intended* to do something with that pile. I can also think what may happen next, imagining that the mother *would want* the boy to *know* that she *hadn't known* that he *intended* to do that and, moreover, that she *would want* him to *know* how truly *sorry* she is.

In other words, both in the process of making sense of this situation and thinking about it further, I recursively embed thoughts and feelings within each other. I also explicitly verbalize it all for you, whereas were I to encounter this vignette in the laboratory, with no time to think it through, I would just process these embeddings automatically, without being aware of doing so.

It is not impossible that my personal response to this particular vignette is impacted by my empathizing with its protagonists, for it is easy for me to start thinking about my own school-age child, who would be very upset were I to throw away his project-in-progress. This brings us to empathy, an issue that I haven't addressed at all so far and plan to continue not addressing, after this short interjection.

Whereas I am aware of the variety of fascinating studies of empathy in conjunction with the reading of fiction, I do not work with empathy myself and believe that, for the purposes of studying complex embedment in literature, theory of mind and empathy should be considered separately. Conflating the two would ignore research that points toward important differences between them, and, given how little we still know about cognitive correlates of either, such conflation is not likely to be helpful.

Those of my readers who would like to learn more about these issues may start with a series of recent studies by clinical psychologists and social neuroscientists who looked at the behavioral and neurological markers of theory of mind and empathy in subjects exposed to emotional videos. What they found, in brief, is that "enhanced activation of the ToM [theory of mind] related network was linked to better ToM performance, but not to behavioral measures of empathy. This pattern was replicated when using

composite scores of empathy and ToM performance derived from multiple tasks, which corroborates and generalizes the specificity of the brain-behavior relations of the two social capacities."⁴⁰

So while I admire the work of my colleagues in cognitive literary studies, such as Fritz Breithaupt, Suzanne Keen, and Ralph James Savarese,⁴¹ who investigate empathy, I neither engage in such investigation myself nor presume to make any claims about the role of empathetic engagement in our processing of complex embedments.

3.4 Distal and Proximate Causes of Complex Embedment in Literature

To sum up the different strains of research from cognitive psychology and neuroscience, the capacity for embedment of complex mental states is integral to human mindreading. This capacity matures in development, may present enough of a cognitive burden to have something resembling an upper limit set to it, and is supported by specific brain regions.

The deep (that is, the cognitive) history of embedment highlights the *social* aspect of our engagement with literature. While theory of mind evolved, back in the Pleistocene, to track mental states involved in real-life social interactions, on some level, our mindreading adaptations do not distinguish between mental states of real people and of imaginary entities whom we "meet" on the page, on-screen, or on the canvas: as soon as we are faced with behavior, we start attributing intentions to the behaving agents.⁴² That literature, in particular (as we know it now), seems to demand that readers *continuously* process complex embedments of mental states leads one to wonder what kind of real-life social challenges, persisting throughout our evolutionary history, this demand on the readers' cognition may be mimicking and exaggerating. Why should it feel good to follow the intricacies of what one person (who doesn't even exist) thinks about what another person (who doesn't exist either) knows about the first person's intentions?

If you are interested in the broader version of this question—which is, why we may actually *enjoy* various cognitive burdens that literature places on our mindreading adaptations—I refer you to my earlier book *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006). To focus more narrowly on the appeal of complex embedments, here are some relevant reflections by cognitive scientists, which provide useful ways of thinking about this issue (yet should not be mistaken for conclusive explanations).

The cognitive psychologist Daniel Nettle offers the following observation about the social rewards of situations in our evolutionary past in which third-level embeddings naturally occurred:

[The] natural situation in which we have three-way mind-reading going on is one that might be rewarding for several reasons. First, if we know what person A is thinking about person B but person B does not know this, then we are in a position of privilege and power. Either person A had taken us into their confidence, which would mean we were a valued coalition partner, or we are very clever, and/or we now have some leverage over person B because we know something important that they do not. If we feel well-disposed to B we may want to warn them, and gain their gratitude and reciprocity; if we are ill-disposed to B we may wish to use it against them or withhold it spitefully. In any event, this is a very significant situation in which we, although a spectator, are now part of a social triangle. This would not be so true if we knew what person A thought about B and B also knew this.⁴³

A related explanation comes from the work of the cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer, who suggests that in-group cooperation, which was absolutely crucial for the survival of our species, may have favored interest in complex mindreading. Developing “social relations and cooperation among many individuals [allowed] for more efficient cooperation,” but that also meant that it was important to discriminate between contexts in which information about others’ intentions could be freely disseminated and contexts in which it had to be concealed. As Boyer explains, to maintain “small-scale friendly networks, one needs access to individuals as such and one needs a measure of discretion. Every item of information need not and in many cases should not be broadcast too widely.”⁴⁴ So keeping track of who has access to whose mental state would be just as important as keeping track of who doesn’t and shouldn’t have that access.

Moreover, negotiating complex social situations depended on combining explicit discussions of one’s own and other people’s mental states with implicit attributions of thoughts and feelings to oneself and others. Behavioral neuroscientists are finding today that “implicit and explicit mentalizing processes may be closely related in a healthy population,”⁴⁵ which means that when works of literature combine explicitly spelled-out and implied mental states, they mimic and intensify patterns of mindreading that recurred throughout our evolutionary history.

Finally, consider the positive biofeedback associated with the feeling that the awareness of other people’s mental states is *our own*. As William

James puts it, "We think; and as we think we feel our bodily selves as the seat of the thinking. If the thinking be *our* thinking, it must be suffused through all its parts with that peculiar warmth and intimacy that make it come as ours."⁴⁶ Joining James's insight with those of the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, the cognitive literary critic Nancy Easterlin suggests that consciousness and self-consciousness—"not only the awareness that we know but also the added awareness that the knowing is specifically one's own—[feel] good. And when knowledge feels good, [we] are apt to seek it actively, to want as much of the thought and feeling of mastery as possible."⁴⁷ To the extent to which the processing of embedded mental states of others involves awareness of one's own mentalizing, the pleasure of social inclusion is thus further augmented by this feeling of epistemic mastery.

When we turn to proximate causes, it seems that imaginary representations of third-level embedments model certain thorny types of social challenges that we face in our daily lives today. As such, they may feel particularly attention worthy. It also doesn't hurt that some fictional narratives present us with cleaned-up versions of real-life mindreading problems. That is, in many a work of fiction (though by no means in all!), I actually get to know what a character X thinks about character Z, whereas in real life I have to settle for my imperfect constructions of my own and other people's mental states.⁴⁸ Add to this a pleasure that I may feel as I discover new depths of social perception in myself when I think I discern the (implied) author's intention regarding my access to a character's feelings,⁴⁹ a discernment that builds on my previous experience with this genre, this author, or this specific work.

Add, too, my happy awareness of myself as a member of a particular community in which such discernment is valued. For instance, I may enjoy realizing that Jane Austen *doesn't want us to know* that her Emma is *in love* with Mr. Knightley for as long as possible, perhaps even for as long as Emma herself remains unaware of it. Yet had I been brought up in an environment in which familiarity with Austen's novels were considered a pointless affectation and then happened upon a copy of *Emma*, I may not have brought to it the kind of attention that would allow me to intuitively appreciate the intentions of its (implied) author. It wouldn't have mattered to me that *Emma* taps, in so many intricate ways, into the cognitive adaptations for complex mindreading that may have formed back in the Pleistocene. I

would have skipped and skimmed and missed most of its embedments and not considered myself worse off for doing so.

This is to say that when we deal with complex cultural artifacts such as literature, distal causes tend to be conjoined with proximate causes in ways that make it impossible to disentangle the two or to treat one as more important than the other. Specifically, when it comes to patterns of embedment in fiction, we can't just trace them back to the social pressures of the Pleistocene and ignore the immediate circumstances in which writing/performing and reading/watching take place today.⁵⁰ We can't focus on the "deep" history at the expense of cultural and literary histories.

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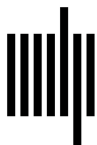
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