

5 Literary History: The Importance of Being Deceived

5.1 Realism: Nothing but Trouble

To recap, thinking of complex embedment of mental states as an essential feature of literature (as we know it today) calls for operating on three historical levels simultaneously. The first level is the “deep,” that is, cognitive, history. The second is the more immediate cultural history, that is, implicit expectations about forms, targets, and ethics of mindreading and the social institutions that support these expectations. In this chapter, we turn to the third level—literary history—that is, the evolution of patterns of complex embedment within and across specific literary traditions.

How does one go about reconstructing this kind of history? On the one hand, even a quick look at ancient epics, novels, and plays, as well as literary texts that defy clear generic classification, shows that third-level embedment of mental states has been around for a long time. It is already there in *Gilgamesh* and the Bible, in Homer, Petronius, Apuleius, Heliodorus, Wang Shifu, and Luo Guanzhong. So, in principle, one should be able to show how literary embedments change over time: how instances of complex embedments become more frequent (for, in *Gilgamesh*, they are relatively rare), how they come to depend more on particular elements of style, and how their evolution is driven by specific social and cultural contexts.

On the other hand, the meager number of surviving texts from ancient literary traditions makes it difficult to construct a responsible argument about the early history of this trend in different genres. Take fifth-century BC Greek drama. One may be tempted to contrast Aeschylus with Sophocles—because the latter seems to embed complex mental states more frequently than the former does, especially of the explicit kind—and to develop a claim about an important milestone in the history of embedment that

was reached at that time. Given, however, how few of either Aeschylus's or Sophocles's plays came to us intact and how little of a broader context we would have for such a claim (with only 1 percent of ancient Greek literature having survived), its value would be dubious.

Or consider a seemingly straightforward argument that one can make about the relationship between embedment and the rise of what is commonly called the "psychological" or "psychologically realist" novel. On the one hand, there seems to be little doubt that the sheer scale of complex embedment—its increasing cascading frequency—in such authors as Murasaki Shikibu, Cao Xueqin, Samuel Richardson, Laurence Sterne, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, Fedor Dostoevsky, Lev Tolstoy, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Lu Xun, and Henry James dwarfs all preceding patterns of embedment, making their writing feel drastically different from that of Homer, Apuleius, Heliodorus, Nizami, and Luo Guanzhong.

On the other hand, the association between psychological realism and hypertrophied complex embedment is more complicated than it appears to be. The terminology itself is problematic. If we acknowledge complex embedment of mental states as an important feature of psychologically realist novels,¹ then one is compelled to ask *for whom* this experience is "realist." It may be so for characters themselves, for they can function on the first and second level of embedment, with only occasional third- and fourth-level spikes. But in what sense is it realist for readers—who have to cope with the *ongoing onslaught* of mental states embedded on at least the third level (if they hope to stay on the text's wavelength)—which is, arguably, *not* something that they are called on to do in their "real" life?

As a quick illustration of what I mean by the onslaught, consider an excerpt from Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* (1833), which is often characterized as a great realist, or pre-realist, work of Russian literature.² Here is a description of its title character, who, at eighteen, is already well versed in the "art of soft passion" of love:

How early he was able to dissemble,
conceal a hope, show jealousy,
shake one's belief, make one believe,
seem gloomy, pine away,
appear proud and obedient,
attentive or indifferent!
How languorously he was silent,

how flamingly eloquent,
 in letters of heart, how casual!
 With one thing breathing, one thing loving,
 how self-oblivious he could be!
 How quick and tender was his gaze,
 bashful and daring, while at times,
 it shone with an obedient tear!³

What a tour de force of complex embeddings! When the situation calls for it, Onegin dissembles (i.e., he *wants* the pursued woman to *think* that he *feels* something that he doesn't really feel); shows jealousy (*wants* her to *believe* that he is *afraid* that she may *love* someone else); seems gloomy (*wants* her to *think* that he is *miserable*); pines away (*wants* her to *think* that he is *despondent*); appears proud (*wants* her to *think* that he *believes* himself to be above the situation), obedient (*wants* her to *think* that he will do anything she *wants*), attentive (*wants* her to *believe* that he can only *think* of her), or indifferent (*wants* her to *think* that he *doesn't care* whether she *loves* him). He is "languorously silent" (i.e., he *wants* her to start *wondering* what's *on his mind*), "self-oblivious" (he *wants* her to *think* that he is *not in control of his feelings*), "bashful and daring" (he *wants* her to *think* that he is *embarrassed* of his passion yet can't help it), or tearful (he *wants* her to *think* that he is *deeply moved* by the situation).

And on top of that, we have the complex embeddings arising from the interaction between the narrator and the reader. For that is what all those frequent "hows" accomplish (as in, "how languorously he was silent"). The narrator invites the reader to share in his amused admiration of the hero's antics: not only does Eugene *want* the woman to *wonder* what's *on his mind*, but the narrator *wants* the reader to be *aware* of Eugene's *wanting* the woman to *wonder* what's *on his mind*!

So it appears that, in *Eugene Onegin*, one single stanza can make us process fifteen or so tightly compressed⁴ complex embeddings in about ten seconds (which is, roughly, the time that it takes us to silently read it). How often do we do that in the course of our daily life?⁵ That is, how often do we find ourselves processing complex embeddings with anything resembling this frequency? Ironically, the works of Homer, Heliodorus, and Nizami may be said to be *more* psychologically realist (or, to quote Patricia Miller and her colleagues again, more "ecologically plausible") in this respect because their rate of complex embedding—occasional as opposed to nonstop—may be closer to what we experience in our daily social interactions.

In fact, if the world conjured by Pushkin feels more psychologically realist to us than the world of Heliodorus does, it may be because reading novels has skewed our idea of what “real” or “realist” is. Perhaps we have even been flattered into thinking that this is what our daily mindreading *might* look like, if only we would find ourselves in the right place with the right (i.e., introspective, sophisticated) people. But is that indeed the case?

Think of situations in which we are confronted with numerous complex embedments in a short span of time. Do not consider special professional contexts: some occupations, such as family lawyer, psychologist, poker player, and professor of literature, routinely depend on intense bouts of complex embedment.⁶ Instead, recall more mundane occasions. In our everyday life, when we find ourselves in circumstances that call for processing numerous complex embedments (for instance, when we have to remind ourselves, first, not to say something about one person’s intentions in front of another person, who, we know, may use that information to thwart the first person’s plans, and, then, not to say anything about the second person’s intentions in front of the first person, and so forth), we do not perceive that as particularly realistic. In fact, we may complain that there is “too much drama” in our life just then or observe that there is a “soap-opera” quality to our experience.

In other words, our “real” life begins to feel rather special when we find ourselves inexorably processing one complex embedment of mental states after another, even though—and I hope you appreciate the irony of it—one of the key components of literary “realism” seems to be its thick sociality, created by the “ecologically implausible” piling up of complex embedments.

Moreover, literature does not just pile up complex embedments of the soap-opera-ish kind, as in, for instance, “I must remember that she must not know anything about his intentions.” Instead it often conceals and masks embedded intentions and prompts us to ascribe them to entities that are not involved in actual social interactions that take place in a story, such as narrators and implied authors/readers.⁷ Whereas this is not unusual in real life—indeed, contextual irony can be richly present in some of our daily conversations—what is unusual is the scale on which it happens in literature, where a single paragraph, for instance, from Lu Xun or Henry Fielding, can give us multiple high-level embedments of this kind.

So when my undergraduates, who increasingly (alas) haven’t had much previous experience reading novels, throw up their hands and tell me that

they don't know what is going on in the text, even though they say that they understand the meaning of individual words, perhaps it is not because their social life is impoverished and they are not used to complex embedments as such. Perhaps it is—at least in part, that is—because the frequency and kind of such embedments in literature place demands on their mindreading skills that may exceed what they are used to in their daily social exchanges, and it takes both time and effort to adapt to those demands.

This is why, from a cognitive literary perspective, it makes particular sense to speak of the novel as experimenting with, rather than reflecting, “realistically,” this particular aspect of human psychology. I have argued something along similar lines in chapter 2, in which I showed that writers can intuitively follow the real-life dynamics of associating more vigorous mindreading with lower social standing, but then they also can, just as easily, ignore and subvert this particular feature of real-life mindreading. Realism, it seems, is what realism does, particularly in a genre as tightly bound to it in cultural imagination as is the novel.

“Realism,” of course, is a term that is notoriously slippery and subjective.⁸ There is something paradoxical, as Troscianko reminds us, about the fact that we require it “to converge with our expectations about cognition, which may themselves be subject to (systematic and interesting) errors.”⁹ Perhaps we are better off shifting the terms of our discussion and considering the critical obsession with realism as a fascinating cognitive cultural phenomenon in its own right—worthy of studying as such but not something one would want to lean on too heavily in a critical analysis.

5.2 Novels: Still Nothing but Trouble

But let us say that we push aside the pesky issue of realism. Still more trouble awaits us as we consider the relationship between embedded mental states and the novel as such. Especially in the novel's more recent incarnation (i.e., Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* as compared to Heliodorus's *Aithiopia*), its treatment of consciousness makes it *the* genre most dependent on complex embedment. As Andrew Plaks puts it, “to say that the novel as a genre deals with human consciousness . . . does not set it off from other literary genres, but, as a matter of proportion, the degree to which the novel does so is indeed rather unique.”¹⁰ Just so, while no work of literature can construct human consciousness without embedding at least some complex

mental states, the degree to which the novel embeds them is indeed rather unique.

Recall, for instance, that one of the “defining criteria of the genre” is irony and that an author’s “ironic reflection on the product of his own creation” calls almost incessantly for the reader’s processing of high levels of intentionality.¹¹ Or consider works that do not cultivate irony but are still characterized by “radical reflexivity,” for instance, autobiographical novels about autobiographies, such as Christa Wolf’s *Patterns of Childhood* (1976).¹² While containing “autobiographical traces,” *Patterns of Childhood* focuses “more on autobiographical writing as a theme, elaborating and challenging the genre from within,” a challenge that directly depends on the reader’s awareness of the author’s embedded intentionality.¹³

Yet to claim that the novel as a genre is most obviously associated with complex embedment is to ask for trouble. The reason for this is that the critical discourse of the “rise of the novel” comes with its own controversies, and if I hitch my cognitivist wagon to that discourse, I inherit those controversies. Specifically, by saying that massive-scale embedment of mental states is an essential feature of the psychological novel, I can be seen as courting the charge of determinism, which has been haunting historians of the novel. Let us take a closer look at that charge.

As Plaks explains, determinism used to be associated with scholars of the epic—who “observed the appearance of that form in widely separate cultures and therefore assumed it to be an *inevitable* phenomenon of human creativity”—but it has now migrated to the novel. Determinism rears its ugly head when one notices the “striking correspondence between . . . essential qualities of the novel” in the European and Chinese traditions and “the fact that these comparable developments occur” around the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, that is, “at a time of *limited* mutual influence.”¹⁴

In addition, one may look at socioeconomic factors that correlate with the rise of the novel in some cultures and notice that, in other cultures, the novel arose in their absence. For instance, “the relation demonstrated by many Western scholars between the rise of the novel and the social and economic development of the pre-modern period also describes quite well the context of the emergence of full-length prose fiction in China,”¹⁵ but this relation doesn’t obtain for the history of the early Japanese novel.¹⁶

Consequently, one may be tempted “to conclude that the emergence of such a genre of . . . prose fiction may represent an inevitable function of

human culture, bound to appear in any literary civilization regardless of its particular course of historical development.”¹⁷ And, with that, the torch of determinism appears to have been successfully passed from scholars of the epic to scholars of the novel.

At first blush, the cognitive approach only makes things worse. A cognitive literary theorist, such as myself, who sees the massive embedment of mental states as constituting an “essential quality” of the eighteenth-century European and Chinese novel *as well as* the eleventh-century Japanese novel, may be tempted to see the advent of such an embedment as a predetermined “outcome of human creativity.” The temptation may be particularly strong because it is so easy for us to focus on the universalist aspect of the cognitivist discourse—which is, to quote Webb Keane again, that “theory of mind and intention-seeking are common to all humans”—while losing sight of the crucial qualification of that universalist stance, which is that those cognitive adaptations “are elaborated in some communities and suppressed in others.”¹⁸ Both elaboration and suppression can take myriad forms and be integrated with such factors as socioeconomic conditions, political agendas, and intellectual history.

But if the massive complex embedment of mental states that we associate with the novel happened to arise in societies that encourage particular forms of mindreading, then there is nothing predetermined about it. Societies that regulate their mindreading energies differently end up with different clusters of mind-modeling artifacts. I mentioned already the Gisalo songs of Bosavi. These are deemed successful if the performers manage to get under the listeners’ skins, while the listeners *both want to be affected by a song and resist it*. This give-and-take between performers and listeners assumes particular poignancy because it takes place in a culture of opacity, in which people are not supposed to be attributing mental states to each other.¹⁹

Once you learn of such complex forms of literary production, an argument about the “inevitable” rise of the novel as the pinnacle of sociocognitive complexity becomes even less compelling. Because human cultures’ engagement with theory of mind is dynamic and open-ended, so are the forms that mindreading takes in a given community. Hence, when we talk about the complex embedment of mental states in plays, novels, and narrative poetry, we must remember that this is literature as it happened to be here now and not the expression of some platonic ideal of what it should be.

To conclude, reconstructing the history of complex embedment in literature is a tough balancing act. One is hampered by the scarcity of surviving texts. And even when there are enough texts to go on, one has to resist the grand narrative of the *inevitable* rise of a particular genre that would feature large-scale continuous embedment of complex mental states. One focuses instead on the *probability* of the emergence of self-reflective literary narratives in communities that encourage particular forms of mindreading. Keeping these limiting factors in mind—“*not inevitable but probable under certain circumstances*”—one may come up with a series of preliminary hypotheses. These can then be tested and corroborated by others—or refuted!—if the evidence from a particular literary tradition weighs in against them.²⁰

5.3 “Men Were Deceivers Ever”

Utnapishtim said to his wife, “All men are deceivers, even you he will attempt to deceive.”

—*The Epic of Gilgamesh*

When my love swears that she is made of truth, I do believe her, though I know she lies.

—Shakespeare, Sonnet 138

How early he was able to dissemble . . .

—Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*

Lying, in essence, is theory of mind in action.

—Victoria Talwar, Heidi Gordon, and Kang Lee, “Lying in the Elementary School Years: Verbal Deception and Its Relation to Second-Order Belief Understanding”

Here, then, is one such working hypothesis. It appears that the further back one goes in time, the likelier it is that third-level embedments in literature are created by portraying characters who intentionally deceive other characters.²¹ This is in contrast to more “modern” literature, in which third-level embedments are created by a much wider variety of social contexts, which include deception but are by no means limited to it.

Such is my hypothesis, and, right away, I foresee more trouble. For instance, I put scare quotes around the word “modern,” to stress that modernity, thus

understood, is diachronic rather than synchronic. This is to say that if a transition from a primarily deception-driven embedment to a more varied type does take place (for I don't claim this to be a universal phenomenon), different national literary traditions go through it at different time periods. One should thus be wary of seeing some form of cultural influence and hence causality in what is likely to be a coincidence, as, for example, the fact that both the English and Chinese novel seemed to have gone through that kind of transition around the same time period.

The flip side of the danger of explaining too much by cultural influence is explaining too little. Over the past thousand years, very few national literatures existed in isolation from each other. As Haun Saussy puts it, "many of the most influential works in any tradition are translations, not 'native' compositions."²² And even those that can be considered "native" compositions bear numerous debts to foreign predecessors. Take for instance, Henry Fielding, one of the avowed "fathers" of the English novel, whose 1749 *Tom Jones* echoes *Don Quixote*, the ancient "foundling" romances, and *The Iliad*. One cannot, in good faith, speak about a discrete "English" literature: depending on which genealogical path we choose, we can trace a history of a particular genre—and thus its patterns of complex embedment—to the French, Spanish, ancient Roman and Greek, or biblical literary tradition.²³ As I see it, it is impossible to use English literature to test my hypothesis about deception as the primary engine of complex embedment at some early point in its history. For what would be considered "an early point" for such a hybrid tradition? *Don Quixote*? Plutarch's *Lives*? *Aithiopika*? *The Iliad*?

This is why we should count ourselves very lucky on the rare occasion when we come across a relatively well-preserved national literature that functioned, for a long period of time, in isolation from other literary traditions and whose formative influences during the shift from complex embedment driven exclusively by deception to complex embedment driven by a wider set of representational means are well documented. Such is the case with Russian literature, in which one such shift can be traced to 1760–1830.²⁴ During that period, Russian writers began imitating French and English models and by doing so drastically changed the pattern of embedment hitherto prevalent in works of fiction. In the next section, I first briefly recount the history of this shift and then look at some patterns of embedment in the works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian writers.

5.4 What Happened in Russia

If we look at Russian medieval texts, explicitly positioned as literature (as opposed, that is, to historical chronicles and hagiographies), such as Fedor Kuritzyn's *The Tale of Dracula* (ca. 1490), Ermolay-Erazm's *The Tale of Peter and Fevroniya* (1547), the anonymous *Tale of Misery-Luckless-Plight* (seventeenth century), and the picaresque *The Tale of Frol Skobeev* (1680–1720), we notice that all of them achieve complex embedment through plots of deception.

For instance, the blood-curdling *The Tale of Drakula* (*Povest' o Drakule*) tells the story of a Romanian prince, Vlad Drakula, who deceives a Turkish king. When the king sends his ambassador to Drakula, demanding tribute, Drakula hosts the ambassador lavishly, dazzles him with his wealth, and asks him to pass the following message to the king: “Not only am I ready to pay the tribute, but I also want to become his vassal, putting my army and my wealth at his beck and call. Only tell him that when I go to him, he must make sure his people don't harm me and my army, and I will follow you very shortly, along with my tribute.” Drakula *wants* the Turkish king to *think* that he *intends* to become his vassal. When the gullible king lets Drakula and his army deep into his territory, Dracula attacks the unprotected cities, plunders their wealth, sadistically murders their inhabitants, repatriates the Christians who used to live there, and sends the king a sarcastic message asking if he wants more of Drakula's service. “And the king couldn't do anything with him and was only covered with shame.”²⁵

In *The Tale of Peter and Fevroniya* (*Povest' o Petre i Fevronii*), an evil dragon assumes the appearance of a local prince and starts visiting that prince's wife, forcing her to have sex with him. When the wife tells her real husband about those visits, he implores her to use her “seductive charms” to learn what keeps the dragon alive and how he can be killed. “Holding the husband's words in her heart,” the wife then approaches the dragon with flattering speeches—she *wants* him to *think* that she *admires* him—and asks if his omniscience extends to knowing what would cause his death. The dragon tells the woman that he is destined to be slain by a man named Peter, which is the name of the prince's own brother. Then, one day, as Peter is visiting his brother and his wife, he is confused because, having just seen the prince in his sister-in-law's chamber, he then encounters him immediately afterward in a different room. But when the prince tells him that he has been in this

room all along, Peter *realizes* that the dragon *wants* him to be *afraid* of killing his own brother and so appears to him as the prince. (“Those, brother, are the intrigues of the sly dragon: he assumes my appearance, so that I would be afraid to kill him, thinking this is you—my brother.”)²⁶

The anonymous seventeenth-century narrative poem *The Tale of Misery-Luckless-Plight* (*Povest' o Gore-Zloschastii*) tells the story of a young man from a well-to-do family who doesn't listen to admonitions of his parents and as a result finds himself alone and destitute, far away from his hometown.²⁷ He works hard, gains wealth and respect, and is about to marry a young woman of his choice, but then he makes the mistake of boasting at a party about his recent successes. Misery overhears this bragging and decides to show him that nobody can outwit it and escape its hold. After giving some thought about the best way to influence his victim,

evil Misery devised cunningly
to appear to the youth in his dream:
“Young man, renounce your beloved bride,
for you will be poisoned by your bride;
you will be strangled by that woman;
you will be killed for your gold and silver!
Go, young man, to the tsar's tavern,
save nothing, but spend all your wealth in drink;
doff your costly dress, put on tavern sackcloth.
In the tavern Misery will remain,
and even Luckless-Plight will stay—
for Misery will not gallop after a naked one,
nor will anyone annoy a naked man,
nor has assault any terrors for a barefooted man.”²⁸

Misery *wants* the youth to *think* that his fiancée only *wants* his money and that to stay safe from people who are after his wealth, he ought not to have any. When the young man doesn't believe his dream, Misery hatches a more devious plan:

The young man did not believe his dream,
but evil Misery again devised a plan,
appeared as the Archangel Gabriel,
and stuck once more to the youth for a new plight:
“Are you not, youth,
acquainted with poverty and immeasurable nakedness,
with great paucity and dearth.
What you buy for yourself is money wasted,

But you, a brave fellow, will still survive!
They do not beat, or torture naked people,
or drive them out of paradise,
or drag them down from the other world;
nor will anyone annoy a naked man,
nor has assault any terrors for a naked man!”

Misery *wants* the youth to *think* that Archangel Gabriel himself *wants* him to give up his wealth. This time the deception works, and the young man falls right into Misery’s clutches:

The young man believed that dream:
he went and spent all his wealth in drink.²⁹

And we have already seen how a plot of deception plays itself out in the late seventeenth-century *The Tale of Frol Skobeev*. As a “likable and clever delinquent,” Frol rises to wealth and nobility through bribery, crossdressing (see figure 5.1), and blackmail, that is, through social situations rich with opportunities for deception—and complex embedments.³⁰



Figure 5.1

Frol Skobeev, dressed as a woman, is plotting his seduction of a courtier’s daughter. Scene from the production of the Moscow State Historical-Ethnographic Theater. (Copyright © 2013 МГИЭТ; <http://etnoteatr.ru/komediya-o-frole-skobeeve.html>)

The early 1760s saw a watershed moment in the development of the national literature because, for the first time, works of European fiction entered Russian cultural imagination. A group of writers, associated with the Cadet School, “set about the systematic translation of English and French novels”: “Lukin and Elagin translated Antoine Prévost’s *Adventures of Marquis G., Or, The Life of a Nobleman Who Abandoned the World* (1756–61), and Semyon Poroshin translated the same author’s *English Philosopher* (1761–7). The novels of Henry Fielding, René Lesage, Pierre Marivaux, and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* were also translated. These [translations] provided the Russian public with entertaining reading in addition to acquainting it with those works which had already become part of the culture of every literate person in western Europe.”³¹

And then, almost overnight, Russian literature changed. Alongside embedment driven by deception, there appeared embedment driven by the buildup of complex emotions. Fedor Emin (1735–1770) a prolific writer of foreign extraction (his original name may have been Mahomet-Ali Emin), known as the first Russian novelist, started publishing works of fiction imitating French sentimentalism. Here, for instance, is a plea of a young man from Emin’s 1766 epistolary novel *Letters of Ernest and Doravra* (*Pisma Ernesta i Doravry*), in which the anguished lover *hopes* that his beloved will *pity* the man who *knows* that he won’t be able to stop *thinking* about her even when they part forever:

Forget my fault and know that the love that’s devouring me deserves punishment, not contempt. No one is angry at a person condemned to death; everyone pities him; and if you, heavenly beauty, follow the way of worldly justice, you will pity the miserable, from whom this letter will be the last, who can’t cause you more chagrin, and who, going to his eternal confinement, carries with him the fiercest memory of your charms, which will never cease tormenting all his thoughts, his feelings, and his whole nature.³²

Complex emotions continue to drive embedment in perhaps the most famous late eighteenth-century tale, “Poor Liza” (1792), by Nikolai Karamzin, the writer known as the “Russian Sterne.” “Poor Liza” is a story of a love affair between a gentleman and a peasant girl who kills herself after he abandons her. It is told, crucially, by the narrator, who wants his readers to know early on that he “loves the objects that touch [his] heart and make [him] cry the tears of tender sorrow.”³³

Emotional responses of this sentimental narrator color every important scene. Here, for instance, Liza is sitting on the riverbank, imagining what would happen if Erast, the kind and handsome gentleman she met recently, were a poor shepherd and, hence, her social equal—"He would look at me affectionately—perhaps take my hand in his. . . . A dream!"—when she hears the splash of oars and sees Erast approaching her in a boat:

All her little veins trembled, but, of course, not from fear. She rose, wished to go, and couldn't. Erast leaped onto the shore, approached Liza and—her dream having come partially true—*he looked at her affectionately and took her hand in his*. . . . Ach! He kissed her, kissed with such fervor that the whole universe appeared to her to be on fire. "Darling Liza!," said Erast, "Darling Liza! I love you." These words resonated in the depth of her soul as a heavenly, ravishing music; she hardly dared to believe her ears and . . . But I throw down the brush. I will only say that that minute Liza's timidity disappeared. Erast learned that he was beloved, beloved passionately by a fresh, pure, open heart.³⁴

Words fail the narrator, repeatedly. When Liza's "dream comes true," he is so fused with the speechless protagonist that all he can say is "Ach!" And when Erast confesses his love, the narrator simply "throws down the brush." That is, he *wants* us to *know* that he is as *overwhelmed with emotion* as is his innocent, deeply feeling protagonist.

This pattern of embedment continues throughout the story. The narrator keeps drawing readers' attention to his own feelings as he paints his characters' emotional reactions. Or he claims to be incapable of doing so and hence invites the reader to imagine those reactions. Although the story still contains its share of lies—for instance, Erast will eventually abandon the "poor Liza" in spite of all his promises—complex embedments generated by deception are dwarfed by embedments generated by the give-and-take between the narrator and readers.

5.5 Unreliable Narrators and Eavesdropping Characters

Karamzin's fiction as well as his autobiographical *Letters of a Russian Traveler* (1789–1790), modeled on Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), had a profound influence on several generations of Russian writers. But, even more important, those writers continued to be shaped by their contact with European literature, for once those floodgates opened, they never (fully) closed.³⁵ This meant a constant exposure to the

eighteenth-century European writers' experimentation with new ways of representing fictional consciousness and hence to new ways of embedding complex mental states.³⁶

We can briefly speculate here about various historical factors—such as the economic and political reforms of Peter the Great, who forced his compatriots to open up to the world beyond their geographical borders—which may have made some communities in the early days of the Russian Empire particularly keen on elaborating their mindreading practices. We can further say that this new interest in their own and other people's intentions may have continued to contribute to the development of literature throughout the respective rules of Elizabeth and Catherine II, what with their ties to Europe and their support for the arts and higher education. Conversely, we can say that, when under socialist realism in the 1930s–1980s, the range of other people's intentions, both within and outside the national borders, was largely constricted to “for us” and “against us,” it hampered the ironic self-reflectivity of the novel and narrowed down the range of minds to be read into it. (This argument works as long as we are aware of its limited scope, for, important as sociopolitical history may be to the history of mindreading in literature, it neither defines nor determines it.)

So keeping in mind those distal historical causes, as well as the more immediate literary contexts, both European and national, we can say that one way in which Russian writers of the first half of the nineteenth century expanded their repertoire of embedments was by focusing on the mind of the narrator. For to look for complex embedments in the works of Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Nicolai Gogol is to come across, again and again, an idiosyncratic or even unreliable narrator.

Consider, for instance, the opening of “The Shot,” the first short story from Pushkin's *The Tales of Belkin* (1831): “We were stationed in the small town of ***. Everyone is familiar with the life of an army officer. In the morning, drill and riding practice, dinner at the regimental commander's or in a Jewish tavern; in the evening, punch and cards.”³⁷

This is our first sighting of the narrator, who hastens to tell us not just that the life of an army officer is boring but also that “everyone” knows it's boring. At this point, we don't yet know why it is so important for him to get this point across. It becomes clear later on, when we realize that this young officer has “a romantic imagination” and that the tedium of army life may have made him particularly susceptible to romanticizing his acquaintances.³⁸

To map out this opening in terms of its embedded mental states, the narrator *wants* us to *think* that anyone would be *bored* with this routine. Moreover, the implied author *wants* us to *notice* the narrator's *eagerness* to establish the dullness of army life as an incontrovertible fact.

Take another opening sentence, that of Nicolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" (1842):

In the department of . . . but it would be better not to say in which department. There is nothing more irascible than all these departments, regiments, offices—in short all this officialdom. Nowadays every private individual considers the whole of society insulted in his person. They say a petition came quite recently from some police chief, I don't remember of what town, in which he states clearly that the government decrees are perishing and his own sacred name is decidedly being taken in vain. And as proof he attached to his petition a most enormous tome of some novelistic work in which a police chief appears on every tenth page, in some places even in a totally drunken state. And so, to avoid any unpleasantness, it would be better to call the department in question a certain department. And so, *in a certain department there served a certain clerk.*³⁹

What is going on here? In the words of another devotee of unreliable narration, Vladimir Nabokov, "The Overcoat" can be summed up thus: "mumble, mumble, lyrical wave, mumble, lyrical wave, mumble, lyrical wave, mumble, fantastic climax, mumble, mumble, and back into the chaos from which they all had derived."⁴⁰ The narrator starts off briskly enough—"In the department of"—but immediately changes his mind: "it would be better not to say in which department." He then hastens to justify this mumbling with more mumbling: you know how those officials are; they get offended easily; just look at that police chief of I-don't-remember-which town. By the time we get back to the actual story of the clerk, we are, to quote Nabokov again, deep in "a grotesque and grim nightmare making black holes in the dim pattern of life."⁴¹

But let us leave off those lovely metaphors and see what kind of "thinking about thinking people" this paragraph may expect from its readers. The narrator *doesn't want* to name the department because he is *afraid* of being persecuted by people who *don't understand* the difference between a novel and a denunciation. The implied author, meanwhile, is doing something even more interesting. He wants his reader to be that narrator. That is, he *wants* his reader to *imagine* what it feels like to be a person who is *compelled* to tell a story yet is *anxious* about the social implications of the whole business of storytelling.

Thus Pushkin and Gogol. More odd characters itching to tell their tales are waiting for us on the pages of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1840). This novel is divided into five parts, which are narrated by three different people—in the words of James Wood, not a single “reliable storyteller among them.”⁴² Since other scholars have explored this aspect of Lermontov's writing in depth, I will focus here on something else. Observe that, even as he experiments with such sophisticated strategies for embedding complex mental states as the narrator's unreliability, Lermontov doesn't shun other, older and (arguably) cruder ones. Thus, in addition to lying, his novel often relies on its junior cousin, eavesdropping. For, what is eavesdropping but a shortcut for a very particular mindreading dynamic? If lying is *wanting* others to *think* that your *thoughts* are something other than what they really are, then eavesdropping is *not wanting* others to *know* that you *know* something important about their real *thoughts*.

Lermontov is no worse an offender here than Cao, Austen, or Emily Brontë. If Dai-yu can eavesdrop on Bao-yu and Xiang-yun; Anne Elliot on Captain Wentworth and Luisa Musgrove; and Heathcliff on Catherine and Nelly,⁴³ then, surely, Lermontov's protagonist is entitled to one or two—or, as it happens, eight—instances of fateful overhearing of other people's conversations in “Princess Mary” alone. (“Princess Mary” is one of the five stories that make up *A Hero of Our Time*.) So frequently does Lermontov arrange putting his narrator in the know through eavesdropping that, according to Nabokov, we soon stop registering it as something out of the ordinary: “the author's use of this device is so consistent throughout the book that it ceases to strike the reader as a marvelous vagary of chance and becomes, as it were, the barely noticeable routine of fate.”⁴⁴

As cognitive literary critics, we must recognize eavesdropping as a handy sociocognitive tool available to writers. If used sparingly (or, as in the case of *A Hero of Our Time*, brazenly), it complements both that old workhorse of complex embedment—lying—and the shinier, newer machinery of unreliable narration. It takes all kinds of complex embedments to construct a literary subjectivity, so a writer, even one destined to enter a pantheon of national literature, can ill afford to spurn any of them.

Speaking of not spurning old workhorses, recall the stanza that describes the protagonist's lovemaking in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*: “How early he was able to dissemble, / conceal a hope, show jealousy, / shake one's belief, make one believe,” and so on. What Onegin is doing here is putting on one

false front after another. Yet he is neither a picaro in the mold of Frol Skobeev, nor what Haiyan Lee would describe as a groveling “pipsqueak,”⁴⁵ nor a liar (indeed, he may challenge to a duel a person who would accuse him of lying). Instead, he is a literary heir of Dorimant and other aristocratic wits from English Restoration comedy, who signal their depth and complexity by playing mind games with the willing ladies of their acquaintance. A better social class of deceivers thus comes into play as Russian Romantics keep mining the mother lode of deception even while discovering new ways to embed complex mental states.

5.6 The Poetics of Shame and Self-Deception

Back in the 1830s, the idiosyncratic narrator was not the only exciting new path to third-level embedment explored by Russian writers.⁴⁶ Other paths involved portrayal of manipulative behaviors, such as hypocrisy; of tangled motivations, such as self-deception; and of complex social emotions, such as shame.⁴⁷

We start with shame. No national literary tradition is ever the same after it discovers the sociocognitive potential of shame, especially if it is also compounded with lying. But before we get to the man who made the most of it, Fedor Dostoevsky, let us see what shame did for Pushkin in the early days of modern Russian literature.

Take again “The Shot,” from Pushkin’s *Tales of Belkin*. Its plot centers on a gentleman named Silvio, encountered by the narrator during his stint in the army. One evening, Silvio, who has a reputation for being a crack shot, is insulted by another officer and, instead of challenging him to a duel, lets it pass. The narrator, who used to think of Silvio as a mysterious and intrepid Romantic hero, now feels awkward around him: “But after that unfortunate evening the thought that his honor was stained and by his own fault had not been washed clean never left me and prevented me from behaving with him as before; I was ashamed to look at him.”⁴⁸ Being ashamed on another’s behalf presupposes a very complex embedment: the narrator *imagines* what it *feels* like to *know* that other people *think* that you are a coward.

Silvio easily intuits his young friend’s feelings: “Silvio was too intelligent and too experienced not to notice it and not to guess the reason for it. It seemed to pain him; at any rate I noticed a couple of times that he wished

to talk with me; but I avoided such occasions, and Silvio gave it up."⁴⁹ The story thus continues to unfold through a series of complex embeddings. The narrator *realizes* that Silvio *knows* that the narrator *feels awkward* around him and that Silvio wants to talk to him, and he makes a point of avoiding such occasions.

How do we make sense of his behavior? We may assume, for instance, that the narrator thinks that Silvio would try to justify his reluctance to fight a duel and cannot conceive of any justification that would make any difference in his perception of the situation. That is, the narrator is afraid of feeling more shame on Silvio's behalf after their conversation and so does everything he can to prevent it.

But if shame is a highly generative social emotion when it comes to embedded mental states, so is self-deception, an offshoot of deception. In "The Shot," it turns out that the reason that Silvio didn't want to cleanse his "stained honor" was that he felt that he couldn't put his life even at minimal risk because of *another* duel that he was hoping to fight one day. A while back, a dashing young aristocrat had incensed Silvio by seeming to be indifferent to danger while standing there waiting for Silvio to pull the trigger during their duel, and Silvio decided to take a rain check on his shot until the Count would have more reasons to value his life.

When that hour does come (the narrator will learn about it later, from a different source), Silvio has the satisfaction of seeing his formerly dauntless adversary tremble while waiting for his shot, because, being newly married to a lovely young woman, he now indeed has strong reasons for not wanting to die. Silvio spares his victim because he hopes that, from now on, the Count will live his life writhing in shame, unable to forget his instance of less-than-manly behavior. The Count, however, is not the type to obsess over the past. As John Mersereau Jr. explains, "Of course, the mental anguish with which Sylvio [*sic*] seeks to poison the Count's life is based on a reading of how he, Sylvio, would react in the Count's place, and the Count behaves otherwise. Ironically, the diabolic revenge to which Sylvio devotes years of preparation proves worthless."⁵⁰

Silvio *assumes* that the Count will *feel as anguished* about his humiliation as Silvio would have *felt*, but he is mistaken. He is deceiving himself—a bright early specimen in the gallery of Russian literary protagonists who find ever new ways to turn their cages into fool's paradises.

5.7 The Original Cringe Factor

Later in the century, shame becomes a wellspring of complex embedment in the novels of Dostoevsky. As Deborah A. Martinsen puts it in her study *Surprised by Shame: Dostoevsky's Liars and Narrative Explorers*, "In mobilizing shame as a narrative strategy, Dostoevsky adds shame's affective and cognitive synergy to the recursive relations among author, reader, and text. The activity of writing exposes characters to readers' views; the activity of reading positions readers as witnesses."⁵¹ In other words, Dostoevsky doesn't merely want his characters to be aware of their own or others' shame, but he also wants his readers to be ashamed—and to *know* that they are *ashamed*—on behalf of those ashamed characters.

Martinsen sees Dostoevsky as prefiguring insights of the later-day philosophers of shame, such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote about the "reflected assessment of the self" involved in shame.⁵² From the cognitive literary perspective, what I find particularly fascinating about the dynamic that Martinsen describes is that Dostoevsky exploited one of the most powerful social emotions known to humans to expand the repertoire of fictional embedments beyond what may be familiar to us from our daily life. His characters wallow in layers of embarrassment and self-exposure until no one around them is able to take it anymore, and *then* they add more to make it yet worse.

Think of this original cringe factor as yet another case of a writer's experimentation with the reader's social brain—experimentation, that is, as opposed to a faithful reproduction of any "real-life" dynamics. Can we process these emotionally gripping complex embedments of mental states? Yes, we can. Are they "realistic"? If your answer is, "Well, not in my personal experience, but I wouldn't put it past those crazy Russians," I suggest checking in with a Russian of your acquaintance.

As far as *this* Russian remembers, the ever-widening and ever-deepening circles of mortifying self-awareness that Dostoevsky cultivates in his novels is not something that I have encountered in reality. But, of course, now, thanks to Dostoevsky, I can imagine surfing those dark waters and suspect that one day a conversation with friends and family may yet veer in that direction. As the literary critic Lidiya Ginzburg puts it, "Dostoevskian sensibility [Достоевщина] as a moral and ideological phenomenon is highly

repugnant to me, and not because it is alien, but because, it is, to a degree, inherent in me."⁵³

I think I understand the reason why we may treat Dostoevskian sensibility as, "to a degree, inherent" in us. On some level, our mindreading adaptations do not differentiate between attributing mental states to real people and to fictional characters.⁵⁴ Having processed those complex embeddings in a novel—that is, having experienced ourselves as being capable of such deep, involved, yet coherently articulated mental states—we may now, indeed, believe that a day may yet come when we will find ourselves luxuriating, with a sickening abandon, in the embarrassment caused to others and ourselves by our self-exposure. That the day keeps being indefinitely postponed does not contradict the reality of having had those feelings one fine afternoon while reading *The Idiot* or *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Reenter lying. Here is a passage from *The Idiot* (this one happens to be relatively low on the cringe factor), in which the protagonist, Prince Myshkin, is reflecting on the conversation he has just had with the old General Ivolgin. The General, a drunkard and inveterate liar, has left the house thinking that Myshkin, a naïve young man, believed his tall tale about the General's former tender friendship with the Emperor Napoleon: "He also understood that the old man left the house intoxicated by his success, yet he also had a presentiment that he was one of those liars who, though lying up to the point of voluptuousness and even self-oblivion, at the very peak of their euphoria, still suspect deep inside that others do not believe them and cannot possibly believe. In his present state, the old man could come to his senses, be extremely ashamed, surmise that [Prince Myshkin] was boundlessly compassionate toward him, and become affronted."⁵⁵

I won't bother spelling out the obvious complex embeddings of mental states that structure this passage. The reason I quoted it (following Martinsen's lead) is that I wanted to illustrate the new role that lying, once it joins forces with shame, begins to play in the Russian novel.

In medieval Russian literature, lying was instrumental, antagonistic, and private: it helped protagonists to survive or gain an upper hand over their enemies. In contrast, in nineteenth-century literature, shame-driven lying becomes, paradoxically, prosocial, occurring, as Martinsen points out, largely "in the public sphere." Dostoevsky's liars, such as the old Ivolgin, "lie because they are ashamed of themselves. They do not intend to

[defraud] others but to create a public persona that will be accepted and admired. They lie to affirm their own self-worth and thus their social worthiness."⁵⁶ There is a performative aspect to their lying, which implicates others as (more or less) appreciative spectators.

Other Russian writers, such as Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov will take shame and self-deception—already brimming with embedded mental states—and add something else to the mix: imperfect introspection. Their characters will not quite trust their own emotional reactions. Their torturous vitality will often come from querying their motives when they feel ashamed of themselves or on behalf of others, from being aware of their double consciousness (i.e., aware of seeing themselves through the eyes of imagined others), and from suspecting that they deceive themselves.

Such, then, is one story one can tell about the early history of Russian literature if one focuses squarely on the role of embedded mental states in the development of literary imagination. We start out, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with complex embedment driven mainly by antagonistic lying. Then, in the 1760s, the influx of western European novels significantly expands the range of representational strategies for embedment. The expansion continues in the 1790s–1830s with new embedments arising from interactions between various idiosyncratic narrators and their implied readers, as well as from the fictional exploration of hypocrisy, shame, and self-deception. Then Dostoevsky perfects the cringe factor and recasts lying as a public performance, and later yet, Tolstoy and Chekhov experiment with nuances of self-deception and imperfect introspection. To sum it up, while lying as the engine of complex embedment in literature never goes out of fashion, it gets continuously reinvented, now by being layered with the author's ironic self-reflection, now by being integrated with a variety of complex social emotions.

5.8 What Happened in China

Let us now turn to another national literary tradition, one that has developed, until relatively recently, independently from European influences and can, as such, be particularly illuminating as a test case for our working hypothesis about lying and literary history. Can we say that the further back one goes in time, the likelier it is that third-level embedments of mental states in Chinese fiction arise mostly from situations in which characters intentionally deceive

other characters? And can we also say that after a certain point in time, more and more complex embedments are created by social contexts other than lying, as well as the ones that reimagine lying, integrating it with a variety of social emotions and with nuances of authorial self-consciousness?

Broadly speaking, yes, it seems that we can make such an argument, but with some qualifications. For instance, as we have just seen, in Russian literature, the breakthrough increase of embedment techniques in the late eighteenth century owed to the introduction of French and English models in the 1760s. Chinese literary history developed along a very different path. One way to trace its patterns of complex embedment is to look at the experimentation with literary forms that took place within the “literati” (i.e., scholar-official) culture in the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD) and to compare its patterns of embedment with those that we find in the fiction of the preceding and following centuries.

One factor that makes this comparison challenging is the lack “of general agreement on criteria by which to identify [the] earliest examples” of Chinese fiction.⁵⁷ While some critics believe that the first examples of texts that “ceased to be classed as history” and were instead “considered as fiction” appeared only toward the end of the Tang period,⁵⁸ others trace it further back, for instance, to the third century, that is, the early years of the Six Dynasties era,⁵⁹ or even “to the list of works labeled *hsiao-shuo* in . . . *The History of the Western Han Dynasty*, completed shortly after A.D. 92.”⁶⁰

Another complication arises from the expectation of the linear development that seems to be implied by my working hypothesis. Especially given the variety of genres that fed into literature, the fictional status of which remains contestable, we cannot expect to see a “gradual straight evolution” from embedment arising almost exclusively from lying to embedment arising from a broader variety of contexts.⁶¹ The process is more complicated and allows for returns to the earlier forms of embedment, especially in various hybrid genres, including historical fiction (as we will see shortly).

With these caveats in mind, let us compare patterns of embedment in some of the earliest stories that can be arguably identified as fiction, with those in the later Tang period and beyond, and speculate about circumstances that may have triggered the Tang authors’ experimentation with contexts for embedment.

Cao Pi’s “Scholar T’an” (談生) is dated to the late second–early third century. It tells a story of an old bachelor suddenly blessed with a beautiful

wife, who, however, asks him not to “shine any lights” on her at night for three years. They live together and have a son, but when the child is two years old, T’an’s curiosity gets the better of him: “One night, lurking and waiting after his wife had gone to bed, he stealthily shone a light on her. From the waist up she was just like any human being, but from that point downward there was no flesh, only dried-out bones.”⁶²

T’an will lose his wife but, eventually, gain riches and palace employment, for the woman turns out to have been the late daughter of a local prince. The story is very short—about one-third of a page—and T’an’s preparing to disobey his wife’s injunction is, it seems, its only instance of third-level embedment. T’an *doesn’t want* his wife to *know* that he *intends* to find out who she really is—hence all the “lurking” and “waiting after she had gone to bed” and shining a light “stealthily.”

Niu Seng-ju’s “Scholar Ts’ui” (崔書生), another very short story, is dated to the early ninth century. Its protagonist falls in love with a beautiful woman and marries her without informing his mother. That leads to a deception that will have fatal consequences. Ts’ui *doesn’t want* his mother to *think* that he married without her *knowledge*, so he tells her that he had merely “taken a concubine.”⁶³ The mother eventually breaks up the couple, as neither she nor her son know that the young woman is a daughter of a goddess and that staying married to her for at least a year could bestow immortality on Ts’ui and his family.

Yuan Zhen’s “Ying-ying’s Story” (鶯鶯傳), also from the early ninth century, is a longer piece, centrally preoccupied with its characters’ tangled motivations. It tells about the seduction and subsequent abandonment of a beautiful girl from a good family by a young scholar, although the questions of who seduced whom and whether the abandonment was justified remain open. There is no shortage of lies. For instance, Ying-ying doesn’t want her mother to know that she loves student Zhang; Ying-Ying may be deceiving either herself or Zhang when she wants him to think that she only summoned him to their initial rendezvous because she wanted to chide him for his improper advances; Zhang may be deceiving himself and his friends when he claims that he decided to abandon Ying-ying in order to guard his virtue against her “bewitching beauty,” and so forth.⁶⁴

Yet interweaved with the complex embedments driven by deception and self-deception are those arising from the interaction between the implied reader and the implied author. As Pauline Yu puts it, “Ying-ying” is “a

consummate writerly text, one that seems to be talking self-referentially as much about what it is doing as text as about what it as text contains.”⁶⁵ By having student Zhang explain to the narrator why he “hardened [his] heart” against his mistress (an explanation that may come across as feeble and self-serving); by including a long manipulative letter from Ying-ying; and by having Zhang, Ying-ying, and the narrator write stylized poems reflecting on the romance, the text draws the readers’ attention to the “arbitrariness of what it is doing.” There are plenty of “behavioral motivations” to choose from, and none is really adequate.⁶⁶ As a result, “Ying-ying” becomes a narrative about *constructing* a narrative—rather than about why the characters did what they did—which presupposes an ongoing mutual awareness between the implied author and the implied reader.

That the protagonist and his friends write poems about the affair firmly situates “Ying-ying’s Story” within the literati culture. Yet this may not be the most important sign of the narrative’s indebtedness to the mid-Tang poetic tradition. A key feature of that tradition, as Stephen Owens explains, was the poets’ insistence on shifting their readers’ attention from what is being interpreted to the *act of interpretation*. Thus, Du Fu (712–770), Han Yu (768–824), Jia Dao (779–843), Bai Juyi (772–846), and Xue Neng (ca. 817–880), while contemplating something pointedly insignificant, such as a miniature pond, a porch in need of repair, or a tiny patch of bamboo plants, conjured up observers—now disapproving, now sympathetic—even when claiming that those observers’ responses do not matter to them. Hence Du Fu in “Deck by the Water” (764), thinking of his intention to fix a sagging porch:

I suspect I’ll be laughed at by those who know it.

 But people are moved by familiar things,
 and I am overwhelmed by grief.⁶⁷

And hence Han Yu in “Pond in Basin”:

I mean it, this old man
 is acting just like a kid,
 he buried a basin and drew some water
 to make a little pond.

 Don’t tell me my pond in a basin
 is not completely done,
 I began planting slips of lotus root
 and now they are growing evenly.⁶⁸

Owen sees this “version of the ‘private,’ with its constant attention to being observed from the outside, [as] ultimately a form of social display, depending on the amused approval of others who are playfully excluded.”⁶⁹ What I want you to notice is that this social display depends on complex embedment of mental states. The poet invites us to watch him as he watches other people as they watch him. He wants us to know that he is aware of their perspective, perhaps even encouraging us to side with him against that communally sanctioned perspective.⁷⁰

One may speculate that the interest in conflicting interpretations cultivated by the mid-Tang poets found further expression in ninth-century tales of romance, such as “Ying-ying’s Story.” As Owen argues, the “rise of romance [was] closely related to the development of individual acts of interpretation or valuation” in poetry. Thus, “Ying-ying’s Story” “begs us to pass judgment” on its protagonists; yet, “in the end, the disputants are deadlocked,” and so, instead of siding with either, readers are left arguing about the validity of those conflicting perspectives and even the possibility that the author may have been personally invested in the situation.⁷¹ This focus on the process of interpretation is what marks “Ying-ying’s Story” as an early example of “a fully developed fictional form.”⁷²

But “Ying-ying” also seemed to go beyond the interest in the act of interpretation cultivated in mid-Tang poetry. It expanded that interest in a direction that was not available to contemporary poets. According to Owen, working in prose allowed Yuan Zhen to delve into minutiae of motivation that might not be amenable to poetic treatment. Looking at “verse renditions of romantic stories, both in quatrains and long ballads,” including a poem that Yuan Zhen’s friend Yang Juyuan (755–?) wrote about Ying-ying, Owen observes that “prose narratives often give complicated and nuanced accounts of human behavior, [while poetry] for all its undeniable virtues, . . . flattens these complications into purified roles.”⁷³ Thus, in Yuan Zhen’s quatrain, the complications of Ying-ying’s manipulative letter—in which “the Ying-ying who wants to show the self-effacing concern of a model wife is in conflict with another Ying-ying who is both desperate and enraged”⁷⁴—“are reduced” to such stock description as “her broken heart.”⁷⁵

Were we now to construct a straightforward narrative of a gradual expansion of strategies for complex embedment of mental states in Chinese literature, this narrative might go like this: The exploration of readers’

consciousness in mid-Tang poetry led to the opening up of new social contexts for complex embedment in ninth-century tales of romance. One of them, “Ying-ying’s Story,” depends on a much broader range of complex embedments—particularly those driven by the give-and-take between the implied reader and the implied author—than we have encountered in, for instance, “Scholar T’an” and “Scholar Ts’ui,” in which embedment was driven exclusively by lying.

Then there is also a long tradition of Chinese drama, in which complex embedments arise from the embodied presence of actors onstage, for instance, from comic disjunctions between the sentiments conveyed by the characters’ words and their body language. To see how these three contexts for complex embedments (that is, lying, the give-and-take between the implied author and the implied reader, and the disjunction between words and body language) come together, think of Wang Shifu’s thirteenth-century comedy *The Story of the Western Wing* (西廂記). Based on “Ying-ying’s Story,” the *Western Wing* replicates some of “Ying-ying’s” plot-based lies, and it also continues to cultivate the awareness between the implied author and the implied reader through its steady stream of references to classical texts, including poetry.

We would turn next to *The Plum in the Golden Vase*: more intricate lies and references to poetry and philosophy. And then we would inevitably end up with Cao Xueqin’s *Dream of the Red Chamber* (ca. 1750–1760), which features lies and classical references, foregrounds its characters’ body language, and also talks obsessively about their thoughts and feelings. Voilà! Behold the steadfast movement toward increasingly diverse ways to embed complex mental states in Chinese literature.

I believe that this narrative has merits as long as we also acknowledge fictional texts that disrupt its seemingly smooth course by *continuing* to rely almost exclusively on lying to generate complex embedment. Consider Luo Guanzhong’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義). Written in the fourteenth century—that is, after “Ying-ying’s Story” and *The Story of the Western Wing* had demonstrated the possibilities of the expanded repertoire of contexts for complex embedment—this eight-hundred-thousand-word novel features complex embedments relatively infrequently,⁷⁶ and when it does, they are mostly driven by lies. Specifically, they are driven by stratagems and manipulations perpetuated by various warring factions, which necessarily involve lying.⁷⁷

To give you a flavor of those stratagems, here is one of *The Three Kingdoms'* frequently retold episodes. Wang Yun, a high-level official in the Han government, gives his adopted daughter, Diaochan, to the evil warlord Dong Zhuo as a concubine, in order to sow discord between Dong Zhuo and his adopted son, Lu Bu. Once Dong Zhuo and Lu Bu are both besotted with Diaochan, she takes turns lying to both of them in order to manipulate them: "One day Lu Bu went to inquire after his father's health. Dong Zhuo was asleep, and Diaochan was sitting at the head of his couch. Leaning forward she gazed at the young man, with her hand pointing first at her heart, then at the sleeping old man, and her tears fell. Lu Bu felt heartbroken."⁷⁸

Diaochan *wants* Lu Bu to *think* that she *loves* him and not Dong Zhuo. Later on, when Dong Zhuo accuses her of consorting with Lu Bu, she pretends to want to commit suicide to prove her devotion to Dong Zhuo. That is, now she *wants* him to *think* that she *loves* him and not Lu Bu. And so it goes on, until, driven by anxiety and jealousy and secretly aided by Wang Yun, Lu Bu kills his foster father.

Why did *The Three Kingdoms* rely on the "old" form of embedment instead of building on the new forms compellingly explored by such works as "Ying-ying's Story" and *The Story of the Western Wing*? One possible explanation is that, in contrast to both of them,⁷⁹ *The Three Kingdoms* had stronger roots in historical chronicles and folk literature.⁸⁰ In fact, notwithstanding its iconic status as one of China's "Four Classic Novels," when critics talk about *The Three Kingdoms*, they often qualify its status as novel, referring to it now as "historical fiction,"⁸¹ now as "China's first successful historical novel,"⁸² or even as (note the extra quotation marks!) a "historical 'novel.'"⁸³

From the cognitive literary perspective, such qualifications are fascinating. They may reflect, among other things, our intuitive awareness that texts that we call novels today embed mental states at a higher frequency and by a greater variety of means than *The Three Kingdoms* does. Perhaps one reason that *The Three Kingdoms* is considered a novel, and not, say, a fictionalized warfare chronicle, is that it often enters the cultural imagination through *other* works of fiction and thus through a much more variegated repertoire of contexts for complex embedment. For instance, the story of the beautiful and devious Diaochan has been retold in opera, plays, films, and manga series.⁸⁴ (One of such intermedial incarnations, *DiaoChan: The Rise of the Courtesan*, was performed on the London stage in 2016 and described

by critics as soaring “to the heights of Shakespearean tragedy . . . and never more so than when each character reveals his inner thoughts through soliloquy”).⁸⁵ I will revisit this point in chapter 6, with an even more drastic example, showing how being reimagined through other media may lead to a text being considered a novel in the absence of *any* complex embeddings (even those driven by deception).

And, meanwhile, we return to our narrative about the gradual expansion of literary contexts for complex embedding. We do so by revisiting *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Written in the last decades of the sixteenth century and building on touchstones of literati culture for its numerous classical references, it emerged as “the first Chinese novel that was wholly the creation of one author and had no antecedent in the oral tradition.”⁸⁶

5.9 Golden Lotus Drives a Servant to Suicide

As it so happens, this famous or, rather, notorious candidate for the role of “first” Chinese novel has a very special relationship with lying. *The Plum* tells the story of an upwardly mobile merchant, Hsi-men Ch’ing,⁸⁷ and his six wives and concubines, whose lives are steeped in “deception, bribery, blackmail, profligacy, flamboyant sex, and even murder.”⁸⁸ Among those familial pastimes, lying occupies a pride of place. Every couple of chapters, a new intrigue blossoms, often starting with a sexual transgression and then snowballing as the characters keep eavesdropping on and framing each other.

What do scholars of Chinese literature make of those swarms of lies? Some view them as integral to the author’s larger project of critiquing the corruption of the contemporary imperial court. For, while the story “is set during the reign of Emperor Huizong of Song (1101–1126 CE),” as a political allegory, it “points clearly to contemporary Ming rulers as well.”⁸⁹ Others consider the characters’ eager intriguing as a warped expression of “competing claims of individual feeling and the constraints of conventional morality.”⁹⁰ Yet others, such as the seventeenth-century commentator Chang Chu-p’o, appreciate the elaborate architectonics of the three-thousand-page novel, in which every little detail becomes a “structural device” used by the author “to accomplish his aims without leaving a trace.”⁹¹ For instance, as Chang explains, the “author needs [one character to be driven to suicide after having been framed] in order to bring out as completely as possible the viciousness of [another character],” for it is this

second character's "double-tongued troublemaking" that precipitates that "needless suicide."⁹²

All of these are compelling arguments, and my "cognitive" perspective by no means invalidates them. Instead, it complements them. For it makes sense to assume that in a complex artifact (such as a novel), a recurrent feature (such as a plot of deception) would end up serving multiple cultural and structural purposes. Let us, then, take a closer look at "the double-tongued troublemaking" that Chang refers to and see how this subplot allows the anonymous author to continuously embed complex mental states *and* engage in a multilevel critique of the parties involved.

In chapter 25, when Hsi-men Ch'ing's purchasing agent, Lai-wang, comes back from a business trip, he learns that while he was away, Hsi-men Ch'ing started an affair with his wife, Sung Hui-lien. The person who informs Lai-wang of his wife's infidelity is one of Hsi-men Ch'ing's concubines, Sun Hsüeh-o. Lai-wang confronts his wife, but she claims that her enemies "made up this tale."⁹³ This seems to placate him. It may help that by now he has started his own affair with Sun Hsüeh-o.

Another of Hsi-men Ch'ing's retainers, Kan Lai-hsing, has a grudge against Lai-wang. He has a chance to act on his grudge when he overhears Lai-wang, in his cups, railing angrily against Hsi-men Ch'ing and one of his wives, P'an Chin-lien, who (as Lai-wang has been told by Sun Hsüeh-o) has provided cover for the affair between Sung Hui-lien and Hsi-men Ch'ing. Lai-hsing goes to P'an Chin-lien, tells her (falsely) that Lai-wang tried to pick a fight with him, and gives her an exaggerated account of Lai-wang's threats.

The incensed P'an Chin-lien reports Lai-wang's (presumed) threats to Hsi-men Ch'ing. Hsi-men Ch'ing questions Sung Hui-lien, but she swears that Lai-wang "never said any such thing" and that Lai-hsing has "made up this story out of whole cloth."⁹⁴ Hsi-men Ch'ing believes her and promises to send her husband off on another long-term business trip. Sung Hui-lien and Hsi-men Ch'ing then agree on a lie that she will tell when others notice a new gift that Hsi-men Ch'ing is about to give her.

When P'an Chin-lien learns that instead of punishing Lai-wang, Hsi-men Ch'ing plans to trust him with another prestigious errand, she convinces him that Sung Hui-lien lied to him about her husband's intentions and that, sooner or later, Lai-wang will take revenge on his master. Hsi-men Ch'ing decides to drive Lai-wang away. He frames him and has him imprisoned. What follows is a long series of lies aimed at making Sung Hui-lien

believe that her husband is doing fine, when, in fact, he is being severely beaten in jail.

Sung Hui-lien eventually learns the truth and kills herself. To avoid an official investigation of her death, Hsi-men Ch'ing bribes the court magistrate and concocts a story of Sung Hui-lien being put in charge of the household's silver utensils and hanging herself in fear of retribution when a cup goes missing.

You can see, based on just one episode, what an important role deception plays in *The Plum*. Now let us take a look at how the characters' shenanigans generate complex embeddings. I will keep this part of my argument very brief because, at this point, what I have to say here may already be self-explanatory.

When Lai-wang first confronts Sung Hui-lien about her affair with their employer, she *wants* him to *believe* that her enemies *wanted* him to *think* that she has been unfaithful ("some backbiting . . . person . . . must have put you up to abusing your old lady").⁹⁵ Later, Lai-hsing *wants* P'an Chin-lien to *think* that Lai-wang *intends* to kill her, and then P'an Chin-lien, in her turn, *wants* Hsi-men Ch'ing to *think* that Lai-wang is *keen* on revenge. Then, when Lai-wang is in jail, Hsi-men Ch'ing *doesn't want* Sung Hui-lien to *know* that he *intends* to force Lai-wang to run away by making his life unbearable. Finally, after Sung Hui-lien kills herself, Hsi-men Ch'ing *wants* the magistrates to *think* that the young woman was *afraid* of being punished for misplacing a silver cup.

Note that although I speak of Hsi-men Ch'ing's *wanting* to shape the magistrates' *thinking* about the reason a young woman in his household *would want* to kill herself, it falls to the reader to reconstruct those and other mental states in this fashion. The novel itself offers almost no explicit references to characters' thoughts and feelings. Instead, as Tina Lu observes, in *The Plum*, "bodies are depicted from the outside, and there is very little internal monologue." What we have, instead, are implied embeddings. That is, characters' interiorities emerge from the "matrix of negotiation, of motivation perceived through the prism of other peoples' motivations."⁹⁶

Earlier I listed only a few such implied embeddings. There are many more, both in Sung Hui-lien's story and elsewhere in the text. At every turn of the plot, another one springs to life. To make sense of what is going on, readers have to constantly keep in mind what one character *wants* another character to *think* about their own or someone else's *intentions*.

Once we notice this pattern, we can speak of various ways in which it is put to use in *The Plum*. We can say, along with the other scholars quoted earlier, that it serves to present Hsi-men Ch'ing's household as rotten to the core and thus deserving the awful retribution that awaits them; that it critiques the corruption of contemporary rulers; and that it shows what twisted forms individual initiative can assume when (as in the case of women in the patriarchy) it has no better outlet than selfish intriguing. We would do well, however, even as we commit to any of those interpretations, to acknowledge the role of the "cognitive" factor in structuring our response to the story. For, while lying in fiction does not always call for moral condemnation,⁹⁷ it invariably opens the door to complex embedment of mental states and, with it, to a very pointed and energetic engagement with readers' theory of mind. Thus, I do not think that it is a coincidence that the text, which is considered to be an important milestone in Chinese literary history, experiments with this kind of intense engagement. Lying is a serious cognitive business, which is why the relentless massive lying that we encounter in *The Plum* is a serious cognitive literary business.

5.10 Lies and "Face"

We have seen, with Russian literary history, how representation of complex social emotions, such as shame, can transform a cognitive literary landscape. Again, Chinese literature developed along a very different trajectory. Still, it is worth noting how often the concern with one's dignity, that is, "face"—which is structurally similar in its effects to shame—motivates characters in *The Plum* and is implicated with their lying.

As Haiyan Lee has shown, the notion of "face" is in and of itself an effective generator of complex embedment in fiction because it conjures the perspective of a character thinking about how they would be perceived by an imagined observer.⁹⁸ In *The Plum*, given Hsi-men Ch'ing's social ambitions, the worry about face is ever present. Consider, for instance, a debacle in chapter 12, when P'an Chin-lien first fools around with a page boy and then claims that it never happened and that her enemies cooked up the whole story. P'an Chin-lien's lie works because her loyal servant, P'ang Ch'un-mei, exploits Hsi-men Ch'ing's fear of losing face with his neighbors if he would punish P'an Chin-lien on (as she claims) false premises.

As Ch'un-mei puts it, "This is all something fabricated by someone who is jealous of [P'an Chin-lien] and me. [Hsi-men Ch'ing], you ought to think what you're doing, or you'll only make an ugly reputation for yourself, which won't sound any too good when it gets abroad."⁹⁹ Ch'un-mei *wants* Hsi-men Ch'ing to *imagine* what other people will *think* when they find out about his rash behavior.¹⁰⁰ Her manipulative invocation of those judgmental others bolsters a lie—for, in the same breath, she also *wants* Hsi-men Ch'ing to *believe* that the reason P'an Chin-lien was accused of adultery is that other wives *want* to bring her down.

A lie, thus, can gain in persuasiveness when paired with a reminder of one's social vulnerability (i.e., dependence on other people's opinions). This is what happens in chapter 25, that is, the story of the banishment of Lai-wang and suicide of his wife, which I discussed earlier. When P'an Chin-lien wants Hsi-men Ch'ing to believe that Lai-wang considers him his enemy, she makes Hsi-men Ch'ing worry about what other people will think about him. Thus, she refers to "allegations" that Lai-wang makes "in front of people" and assures him that "such allegations would not redound to [Hsi-men Ch'ing's] credit."¹⁰¹

Similarly, when P'an Chin-lien wants Hsi-men Ch'ing to think that Sung Hui-lien conceals from Hsi-men Ch'ing the true extent of the enmity that Lai-wang bears him ("Whatever that woman has had to say for some time now has only been spoken on behalf of that slave of yours"), she, once again, brings in public opinion. If Lai-wang defrauds Hsi-men Ch'ing of his money (something that, P'an Chin-lien implies, he surely intends to do), Hsi-men Ch'ing will be too embarrassed to "accuse him of anything," because everybody will have known that he has stolen Lai-wang's wife.¹⁰²

And, again, when Lai-wang is already in jail, tortured for a crime he didn't commit, and P'an Chin-lien learns that Hsi-men Ch'ing is writing a note to the judge asking for his release, she lobbies for "[polishing] off this slave once and for all" by planting an image of jeering neighbors in Hsi-men Ch'ing's mind. Lai-wang, she claims, shall always hold a grudge against his master, even if Hsi-men Ch'ing will go as far as marrying him to someone else, to make up for having taken Sung Hui-lien from him.

For instance, if Lai-wang comes to "report something" to Hsi-men Ch'ing and sees him together with Sung Hui-lien, wouldn't Lai-wang get "angry"? And would Sung Hui-lien then have "to stand up" to greet her ex-husband?

Wouldn't that be embarrassing for Hsi-men Ch'ing? As P'an Chin-lien puts it, "Just to start out with, this alone wouldn't look right. If it got around, not only would your neighbors and relatives laugh at you, but even the members of your own household, high and low, would not be able to take you seriously."¹⁰³

Finally, P'an Chin-lien uses the appeal to face to finish off the poor Sung Hui-lien. She does it by making Sung Hui-lien imagine that other people will never believe her side of the story. Here is how this is set up by the text: After Lai-wang is driven away, just as P'an Chin-lien hoped he would be, she goes between Sun Hsüeh-o and Sung Hui-lien, reporting lies that can't fail to stir up a "sense of grievance and desire for revenge." First, she *wants* Sun Hsüeh-o to *think* that Sung Hui-lien *knows* that Sun Hsüeh-o told Lai-wang about Sung Hui-lien's affair with Hsi-men Ch'ing (which is not true) and that she blames Sun Hsüeh-o for making Hsi-men Ch'ing angry and for making him want to get rid of Lai-wang. Then she goes to Sung Hui-lien, whom she *wants* to *believe* that people in the compound *think* that she *has never cared* about her husband. So she reports to Sung Hui-lien—falsely—that Sun Hsüeh-o tells everyone that Sung Hui-lien is an "old hand at inveigling" her masters "into adultery" and that the tears that she sheds about her husband "are only crocodile tears."¹⁰⁴ These lies precipitate an ugly standoff between Sung Hui-lien and Sun Hsüeh-o, which pushes Sung Hui-lien over the brink and leads to her second, and this time successful, suicide attempt.

5.11 Beyond Lies and Shame

Some comparisons between the early Chinese and the early Russian novel are worth highlighting here. For instance, both *The Plum* and *Eugene Onegin* (Pushkin's "novel in verse") feature continuous embedment of complex mental states. Both cultivate such embedment by having their characters behave deceitfully ("How early he was able to dissemble") and by motivating them through complex social emotions, such as shame. (Onegin kills his best friend in a meaningless duel because he is afraid that others will consider him a coward if he attempts to seek peace.) One important difference between the two texts is that Pushkin *talks* about mental states—those of his characters, his readers, and his poetic persona—incessantly, while the anonymous author of *The Plum* leaves it to the reader to *infer* thoughts and feelings behind behavior.

Another point of comparison, as far as the construction of complex embeddings is concerned, is the role played in both novels by references to other texts. *Eugene Onegin* is deeply entrenched in the European literary tradition.¹⁰⁵ The conversation about French, English, and German prose and poetry that the implied author is having with the reader supplies its own steady stream of complex embeddings. For instance, the narrator wants his reader to consider the ironic implications of the fact that the main female protagonist, Tatiana, imagines Onegin as the hero of the last novel by Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, a man who is *not* motivated by shame and is opposed to dueling in principle. As the narrator assures us coolly, “our hero, whoever he might be, / quite surely was no Grandison.”¹⁰⁶

A similar conversation is taking place in *The Plum*. Its frequent evocations of classic Chinese songs and poems presuppose ongoing mutual awareness between the implied author and the implied reader. For instance, when Sung Hui-lien wants to convince Hsi-men Ch’ing that her husband would never curse and threaten Hsi-men Ch’ing behind his back, she asserts that, were Lai-wang to do such a thing, he would effectively be biting the hand that feeds him and he is not that stupid. As she puts it,

If he should:

Live off King Chou’s largesse,
And yet call King Chou a villain,
on whom could he depend to make a living?¹⁰⁷

Sung Hui-lien’s mention of King Chou comes close on the heels of an earlier reference to the ancient *Book of Documents* (*Shu-ching*, 書經). That reference, according to *The Plum’s* translator, David Tod Roy, tacitly likens Hsi-men Ch’ing to King Chou, the “evil last ruler” of the Shang dynasty.¹⁰⁸ So, here, while Sung Hui-lien seems to want to emphasize the implausibility of her husband’s bad-mouthing Hsi-men Ch’ing, she accomplishes quite the opposite with her quote: she badmouths him herself. For, as Roy explains, the “unmistakable implication” of what she says “is that Hsi-men Ch’ing himself is an evil last ruler.”¹⁰⁹

That neither Sung Hui-lien nor Hsi-men Ch’ing is aware of this implication makes their mutually pleasing exchange profoundly ironic. The implied author wants the reader to know he considers Hsi-men Ch’ing evil, but he also wants us to know that Hsi-men Ch’ing doesn’t realize that the argument that he apparently finds convincing is a classical reference that condemns him. Nor is he aware of the grave innuendo of being likened to

a *last* ruler—something that the implied author wants the reader to keep in mind as we follow the household's rejoicing at the birth of Hsi-men Ch'ing's son, Kuan-ko. Finally, we know that Sung Hui-lien doesn't know, when she unwittingly calls her lover a villain, that he is about to behave like one toward her and her husband—another nuance in the ongoing give-and-take between the author and the reader.

Earlier, in chapter 4 of this book, I pointed out the ambiguous position of *The Plum* in Chinese literary canon—which some readers view as a work of pornography and others treat as a literary masterpiece. I also showed that scholars who consider it a masterpiece focus on the novel's intentionality, arguing, for instance, that the text's implied author seems to want to remind “the reader of the presence of the narrator somewhere between himself and the story.”¹¹⁰

That the “cognitive” perspective would strongly support these kinds of hyperintentionalist interpretations of *The Plum* is not at all surprising. The history of the novel as a genre involves two developments entwined in such a way that it is difficult to say where one ends and the other begins. Perhaps I may be allowed to call it a “coevolution” of readers and writers. On the one hand, the novel may be said to constantly cast about for new compelling ways to embed complex mental states of its characters, implied author, and the reader. On the other hand, at least some of its readers may be said to constantly cast about for new ways to read complex mental states into the text. Those are readers who have had significant exposure to literary fiction and thus tend to find characters' motivations not as clear as do less experienced readers, which is to say that they are more comfortable with ambiguity than are less experienced readers.¹¹¹ They are also more eager to look for intentionality cues in their social environment, which may translate into a greater awareness of the conversation that the implied author is having with the reader.

It should be pointed out that the comparison between *The Plum* and *Eugene Onegin* still holds when we think of these different types of readers. For instance, *Eugene Onegin* was a staple of the high-school syllabus in Soviet Russia, but the depth of its engagement with the European literary tradition was not acknowledged. It took Vladimir Nabokov's *Commentary* (1964) to place Pushkin's novel in a sustained conversation with its European predecessors and thus open up a new layer of mindreading involving the author and his audience. That Nabokov was an émigré writer—unconstrained by

Soviet nationalistic censorship¹¹² and professionally trained (so to speak) in the intricacies of literary mindreading—shows how the political and the personal can get intertwined in the quest for new ways of reading complex embedment into a text.

I am also certain that, today, plenty of readers of *Eugene Onegin* are happily unaware of the embedments arising from its implied author's oblique references to the European literary tradition, just as plenty of readers of *The Plum* do not think twice of the significance of Sung Hui-lien's mention of King Chou. Although some of the mindreading practiced by literary scholars makes it to the cultural mainstream, plenty of it remains in a category of its own.

So let us say that we belong to the group of readers who see *The Plum* as “a model of the literati novel genre maturing in the sixteenth century” and that we thus acknowledge its unprecedentedly innovative appeal to late-Ming-dynasty readers' theory of mind.¹¹³ We can further ask how different aspects of this novel's mindreading profile—which include deception, psychological manipulation of one character by another, and the implied author's ironic appeals to the implied audience—were amplified in such mid-eighteenth-century classics as Wu Ching-Tzu's *The Scholars* (*Rulin wai-shi*, 儒林外史) and Cao's *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Let us take a quick look at these two novels, focusing specifically on their potential to keep their readers steadily embedding mental states on a high level.

5.12 “Lust of the Mind”

Lying continues to drive complex embedment both in *The Scholars* (1750) and in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (ca. 1750–1760). Indeed, a separate study can be written on how much these novels depend on lying and on the role of social class and gender in the construction and consumption of lies. Also, just like in *The Plum*, lying often goes hand in hand with a concern about face. Yet both lying and fear of losing face are also treated now in ways that make possible distinctly new forms of complex embedment. For instance, in *The Scholars*, they can be combined with a nearly direct appeal to the reader, while in *Dream*, they are used to highlight important features of its characters' psychology.

Let us start with *The Scholars*, a satirical novel about educated gentlemen vying for plum positions in civil service. At one point, early in the story, a

magistrate named Shih wants Wang Mien, a peasant who paints exquisite pictures of flowers, to pay him a visit, so that one Mr. Wei, a distinguished scholar and Shih's superior, can meet this homespun prodigy. Wang Mien turns down the magistrate's invitation (which he correctly recognizes as a thinly veiled order) because he is a man of independent spirit who doesn't want to curry favor with the high and mighty. His refusal, however, creates a problem for several people who now worry about the effect that this insubordination may have on other people's perception of their social status.

One of those people is bailiff Chai, whom the magistrate employed as his messenger. To help Chai save face, Wang's friend and neighbor, Old Chin, suggests that Chai lies to Magistrate Shih and tells him that Wang Mien is ill. That is, Old Chin *doesn't want* Shih to *know* that Wang Mien *doesn't consider* his invitation an honor. Instead he *wants* him to *think* that Wang Mien *would like* to come and only his illness prevents him from doing so.

Magistrate Shih, however, does not believe the bailiff's report:

When Magistrate Shih heard the bailiff's report, he thought, "How can the fellow be ill? It's all the fault of this rascal Chai. He goes down to the villages like a donkey in a lion's hide, and he must have scared this painter fellow out of his wits. Wang Mien has never seen an official before in his life. He's afraid to come. But my patron charged me personally to get this man, and if I fail to produce him, Mr. Wei will think me incompetent. I had better go to the village myself to call on him. When he sees what an honour I'm doing him, he'll realize nobody wants to make trouble for him and won't be afraid to see me. Then I'll take him to call on my patron, and my patron will appreciate the smart way I've handled it."

Then, however, it occurred to him that his subordinates might laugh at the idea of a county magistrate calling on a mere peasant. Yet Mr. Wei had spoken of Wang Mien with the greatest respect. "If Mr. Wei respects him, I should respect him ten times as much," Magistrate Shih reflected. "And if I stoop in order to show respect to talent, future compilers of the local chronicles will certainly devote a chapter to my praise. Then my name will be remembered for hundreds of years. Why shouldn't I do it?"¹¹⁴

This passage is an avalanche of complex embedments. Magistrate Shih *thinks* that Wang Mien only *wants* him to *think* that he is ill because he is, in reality, afraid of government officials. This leads him to *believe* that if he visits the humble rustic in his own august person, Wang Mien *will realize* that nobody *intends* him any ill. Readers, of course, *know* that Shih is *mis-taken in his assessment* of Wang Mien's *feelings*—a bit of dramatic irony here.

The real joke of the situation, however, comes with the sly conversation that Wu Ching-Tzu is having with his readers. Shih fondly imagines that “future compilers of local chronicles” will devote a whole chapter to his praise. And, as a matter of fact, Wu does devote a couple of pages to him, and these are the pages that we are reading. Wu *wants* us to be *aware* that Shih *imagines* that future generations will *think* that he *wanted* to “show respect to talent,” and he also *wants* us to *suspect* that Shih’s *hopes* may have been disappointed. The magistrate is not an unsympathetic character, but because we *know* that he *wanted* us to *admire* him for his *respect* for talent, we are not sure anymore that he is worthy of our admiration. What has started out as a series of complex embedments arising from the lies and the characters’ concerns about “face” is gradually turned into an exploration of the mutual awareness between the implied reader and the implied author.

The fear of losing face is also a powerful motivator for many characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which tells the story of two lovesick cousins, a girl named Lin Dai-yu and a boy named Jia Bao-yu, kept apart by their karmic destiny and, more immediately, by their family’s ambitions. For Dai-yu, however, the concern about face can take a peculiar form of neurotic overthinking of other people’s intentions. Such overthinking is, of course, Dai-yu’s trademark psychological trait, something that has been known both to exasperate and attract the novel’s readers. Let us consider some examples of Dai-yu’s anxious social projections aimed, ostensibly, at saving face; driven, at least partly, by self-deception; and embroiling the reader in guessing and second-guessing of everyone’s intentions.

At one point, Dai-yu and Bao-yu go to visit their other cousin Xue Bao-chai, whom Dai-yu considers her rival for Bao-yu’s affections, not only because of her beauty and sophistication but also because her mother, old Mrs. Xue, is a rich widow, whose fortune would come in handy were Bao-yu to marry Bao-chai. As they are sitting at Mrs. Xue’s house, chatting and drinking tea and wine, Dai-yu’s maid, prompted by another maid, brings her a hand warmer. Dai-yu then scolds her for it. Neither Bao-yu nor Bao-chai says anything, though for different reasons. Bao-yu knows “perfectly well” that Dai-yu’s carefully phrased rebuke was “really intended for him,” but he makes “no reply, beyond laughing good-humoredly,” whereas Bao-chai, “long accustomed to Dai-yu’s peculiar ways,” simply ignores her words.

Mrs. Xue, however, is deaf to such intricacies and takes Dai-yu’s complaint at its face value. She points out to Dai-yu that it was “nice” of Dai-yu’s

maids to think of her, because she often feels chilly. Dai-yu responds thus: “You don’t understand, Aunt. . . . It doesn’t matter here, with you; but some people might be deeply offended at the sight of one of my maids rushing in with a hand-warmer. It’s as though I thought my hosts couldn’t supply one themselves if I needed it. Instead of saying how thoughtful the maid was, they would put it down to my arrogance and lack of breeding.”¹¹⁵

Dai-yu claims to be *imagining* people who’d *think* that she *thinks* that her hosts are not taking good care of her. Though presented as an attempt to save face, her own and Mrs. Xue’s, this complex embedment is an expression of the exhausting self-monitoring carried on by the neurotic and powerless Dai-yu. Not surprisingly, instead of appreciating her sentiments, Mrs. Xue can only respond with the head-scratching, “You are altogether too sensitive, thinking of things like that. . . . Such a thought would never have crossed my mind.”¹¹⁶

Here is another example of a face-saving enterprise devolving into an anxious overattribution of intentions. At Bao-chai’s birthday party, while the family is watching a play performed by a group of professional child actors, her aunt, Wang Xi-feng, comments slyly on the resemblance between “someone we know” and a beautifully made-up child who plays the main heroine. Bao-chai and Bao-yu merely nod without responding (once again, they know better), but another young relative, Xiang-yun, is “tactless enough” to blurt out that the actor looks like Dai-yu. Bao-yu shoots “a quick glance in [Xiang-yun’s] direction; but [it’s] too late,” for now the other guests catch on to the resemblance and start laughing.¹¹⁷

Shortly after the party breaks up, the offended Xiang-yun orders her maid to start packing. Bao-yu overhears it and attempts to make her change her mind, explaining that the only reason he gave her that look is that he “was worried for [her] sake.” He claims to have known that Xiang-yun didn’t know how sensitive Dai-yu can be and to have been “afraid that [Dai-yu] would be offended with [Xiang-yun].” Xiang-yun won’t have any of it. She knows that Bao-yu is not being emotionally honest with her, though she can’t, perhaps, identify the exact meaning of his maneuvers. The way she reads it (or claims to read it) is that Bao-yu’s glance implied that everyone thinks that she is “not in the same class” as Dai-yu and hence mustn’t make fun of “the young lady of the house.”¹¹⁸

I condense their conversation here, but you can see even from this condensed version that it consists of a series of complex embedments all

involving Xiang-yun's perception of Bao-yu's intentions regarding Dai-yu's feelings and leaving it up to readers to decide which interpretation of those intentions they would find most plausible.

But then it turns out that Dai-yu overheard Bao-yu's conversation with Xiang-yun, so the real fun begins. First, Dai-yu "coldly" explains to Bao-yu that even though he didn't compare her with the child actor and didn't laugh when others did, his secret thoughts, of which she's apparently the best judge, implicate him severely. In the quote that follows, the italics are in the original:

"You would *like* to have made the comparison; you would *like* to have laughed," said Dai-yu. "To me your way of *not* comparing and not laughing was worse than the others' laughing and comparing!"

Bao-yu found this unanswerable.

"However," Dai-yu went on, "that I could forgive. But what about that look you gave Yun? Just what did you mean by that? I think I know what you meant. You meant to warn her that she would cheapen herself by joking with me as an equal. Because she's an Honourable and her uncle's a marquis and I'm only the daughter of a commoner, she mustn't risk joking with me, because it would be so degrading for her if I were to answer back. That's what you meant, isn't it? Oh yes, you had the *kindest intentions*. Only unfortunately she didn't *want* your kind intentions and got angry with you in spite of them. So you tried to make it up with her at my expense, by telling her how touchy I am and how easily I get upset. You were afraid she might offend me, were you? As if it were any business of *yours* whether she offended me or not, or whether or not I got angry with her!"¹¹⁹

The reason that Bao-yu and Dai-yu often find themselves pulled into this kind of labyrinthine social reasoning is that their psychological profiles—or, shall we say, their mindreading profiles—are uniquely and tragically suited to each other. While Dai-yu overthinks people's intentions, Bao-yu overreads them, being afflicted with the condition described in the novel as "lust of the mind" (yiyin, 意淫). This condition has been interpreted by critics in a wide variety of ways, so the interpretation that I give you here reflects specifically my "cognitive" perspective. From this perspective, "lust of the mind" means that Bao-yu feels the need to know and share the emotions of girls, dozens of them, servants, cousins, and young aunts, populating the Jias' sprawling aristocratic households—an empathetic drive hardly compatible with his position as the heir on whom the family's hopes of future prosperity are pinned.¹²⁰

The male protagonist's passionate desire to understand the feelings of women is something that is hard to imagine in the universe of Hsi-men Ch'ing (from *The Plum in the Golden Vase*). Indeed, the scenes of intense mindreading and misreading that we get in *Dream* are something quite unprecedented in the literary history of medieval China.¹²¹ I will conclude this section with another one of such scenes, which starts, once again, as an ostensible endeavor to save face, implies self-deception, and embroils the reader in complex and ambiguous mindreading attributions.

Bao-yu, having spent his early childhood cosseted by his loving grandmother and other relatives, is finally forced to start his formal education. On the first day of school, he decides to visit Dai-yu to say good-bye, for he won't see her now for most of the day. After chatting with her for a while, he is ready to tear himself away, but Dai-yu stops him to ask if he's "going to say good-bye to [his] cousin Bao-chai" too. In response, Bao-yu smiles but says nothing and goes "straight off to school with [his friend] Qin Zhong."¹²²

How are readers to make sense of this exchange? While there are several different ways to interpret Bao-yu's smile, it's important to note that all of them seem to involve complex embedments, some reaching even to the fourth and fifth level. For instance, we may say that Bao-yu smiles because he *thinks* that he *knows* that Dai-yu *doesn't really want* him to stop by Bao-chai's room to say good-bye. That is, he *thinks* that he *knows* that Dai-yu (sensitive as she always is to how her behavior may be perceived by others) *doesn't want* anyone to *think* that she *thinks* she has any right to usurp Bao-yu's attention on this particular morning.

Moreover, by telling us that Bao-yu goes straight to school instead of indeed stopping by Bao-chai's room first, Cao *wants* us to be *aware* not just of the clear *preference* that Bao-yu has for Dai-yu but also of the tortuous way in which the admission of this preference was extracted from him. Bao-yu certainly hasn't planned to play favorites this morning—it's not likely that he'd even been thinking about it when he stopped by Dai-yu's room—but Dai-yu's self-conscious remark has made him express his feelings. Ironically, this is what Dai-yu would have wanted—even though she would never admit that to anyone. Bao-yu's smile thus can also be interpreted as his *realization* that Dai-yu has just made him newly *aware* that he *likes* her more than he likes Bao-chai—and that she did it without being implicated in doing so and perhaps not even intending it.

I expect that not every reader will agree with my interpretation of Bao-yu's smile. What's important, however, is that even if you disagree with this interpretation and propose your own, yours is still likely to feature a complex embedment of mental states. That is, to do justice to a nuanced psychological dynamic conjured up by Cao, we have to embed mental states on at least the third level, even if their exact content and configuration differ from one reader to another.

5.13 Conclusion: "Cheater Detection" or "Destruction of the Subject-Matter by the Form"?

As we are nearing the end of our conversation about lying, here is the question that this long chapter has been begging for a while: *Why* is lying so integral to representation of literary consciousness? One answer offers itself immediately. As developmental psychologists put it, "lying, in essence, is theory of mind in action."¹²³ Given the centrality of mindreading and misreading to human communication, it is not terribly surprising that writers would exaggerate this aspect of human sociality to make their narratives more engaging.

We can stop at this, or we can indulge our critical perversity and dig deeper. *Why*, we may ask, should this particular aspect of sociality be of such interest to readers? After all, literature can (and does) play with mindreading uncertainty in many other ways. Why keep returning to deception?

One way to respond to this question is to roll out a couple of heavy guns. By that, I mean turning to cognitive adaptations—all connected with mindreading—that evolved hundreds of thousands of years ago and still underlie much of our social functioning today. We may start with the concept of cheater detection. According to the founders of cognitive evolutionary psychology, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, detecting cheaters in situations involving social exchange was an adaptive problem faced by our ancestors, and the solution to this problem was the evolution of a "cheater-detection mechanism." This mechanism "looks for cheaters"; that is, "it looks for people who have *intentionally* taken the benefit, specified in a social exchange rule, without satisfying the requirement [of the cost]." The appraisal of intentions is crucial: the mechanism "is not good at detecting violations caused by innocent mistakes, even if they result in someone being cheated."¹²⁴

Now remember that, on some level, our mindreading adaptations do not distinguish between mental states of real people and those of fictional characters. This means that once we attribute an intention to cheat to a fictional character, this cognitive output feeds into the cheater-detection mechanism. Evolved for detecting cheaters in real life, this mechanism now has no choice but to start detecting them in made-up stories as well. So we can say that one way in which works of fiction compel our attention is that they keep our cheater-detection mechanisms up and running.¹²⁵

Think of one of the earliest known examples of lying in literature. Gilgamesh promises to Utnapishtim to stay awake for six days and seven nights in exchange for the secret of immortality; then he promptly falls asleep; then, upon awakening, seven days later, he denies that he has slept at all. Behold a cheater! Gilgamesh wants the benefit (i.e., immortality) without having satisfied the requirement (i.e., not sleeping).

Of course, in spite of Utnapishtim's grim observation that "all men are deceivers," *The Epic of Gilgamesh* doesn't actually feature many instances of cheating. So we should not overstate the role that our cheater-detection mechanism may play in our interaction with this text. It is merely one of numerous inducements to pay close attention that the story offers—important (no question about that, in the case of the four-thousand-year-old artifact!)—but, still, one of many.

Here comes another heavy gun. Our species also evolved to pay attention to sexual deception. (Ancestors who didn't do that aren't our ancestors, because they didn't leave descendants.)¹²⁶ This means that, today, we are attuned to a broad variety of mental states involved in sexual deception, including mental states that we attribute to fictional characters. When we are certain that Othello is wrong in thinking that Desdemona is in love with Cassio, it is because we have been carefully checking Iago's allegations against what we know about Desdemona's feelings, while also pondering Iago's motivations.

It may seem that just these types of cheating—seeking to get a benefit without incurring a cost and sexual deception—would account for a lot of lying that takes place in literature. Thus, we have another possible answer to the question of just *why* lying is so integral to representation of fictional consciousness. We can say that complex embedments of mental states still often arise from plots of deception—even though other, more "sophisticated" contexts of embedment have long been available—because writers

intuitively rely on social contexts that are guaranteed, by our evolutionary history, to sustain their readers' attention.

Then there is also the question of genre. Some genres, such as detective and spy stories, suspense thrillers, and romances, derive most of their emotional punch from deception. This is to say that such stories are deemed successful to the extent to which their readers are caught up emotionally in the project of identifying liars, understanding their motivation, and assigning different moral values to different instances of lying. In contrast, other genres (and here we are, once more, on the treacherous critical ground of drawing a distinction between "popular" and "literary" fiction) may still exploit lying for its capacity to generate complex embedments, but the affective charge of those narratives is not tied to their plots of deception.

Let us look at a couple of such texts and see what kind of emotional response they seem to be eliciting from their readers. For instance, in Shakespeare's Sonnet 138, "When My Love Swears That She Is Made of Truth," lying repeatedly serves as a source of complex embedments, yet it also appears that its readers are encouraged *not to care* about the grave sexual and social repercussions of deception that the speaker and his beloved practice on each other:

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
 I do believe her, though I know she lies,
 That she might think me some untutored youth,
 Unlearnèd in the world's false subtleties.
 Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
 Although she knows my days are past the best,
 Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
 On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
 But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
 And wherefore say not I that I am old?
 Oh, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
 And age in love loves not to have years told.
 Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
 And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

What is going on in this sonnet? Or, to put it differently, what complex embedments do we process in order to make sense of it? The speaker's beloved wants him to think that she doesn't lie to him. He realizes that he is willing to deceive himself by trusting her because he likes to think that she thinks that he is young enough to believe her. But he also knows that

she doesn't really think that he is young, which means that perhaps she knows that he has his own reasons for wanting to believe her even when he knows that she is lying. Moreover, she knows that he wants her to think that he trusts her (for "love's best habit is in seeming trust"), and so forth.

Now let us look at the emotional value of the sonnet. One narrative generated by all those complex embedments is quite sad. The speaker's beloved is cheating on him, while he is meditating on his old age, her youth, and the vagaries of self-deception. (Were we to go for a crude pseudoevolutionary reading, we'd even say that this is a downright tragedy: the guy is a genetic dead end.) Yet the same poem also tells another story: that of a poet enchanted by the pliability of the word "lie" and rounding it all off triumphantly with a double entendre built around that word. Readers, too: whatever negative emotions this account of sexual infidelity and powerlessness may be expected to elicit in us, the last two lines invite us to join the fun that is to be had when strong emotions fade into delightful wordplay.

To see what Shakespeare is doing here—and why our reflexive interest in keeping tabs on a cheater does not account for it—we may want to turn to the German poet and philosopher J. C. Friedrich von Schiller and the Russian cognitive psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky.¹²⁷ It takes a "true master," wrote Schiller in 1794, to know how to "destroy the subject-matter by the form."¹²⁸ Yes, agreed Vygotsky in 1925, and the way this destruction works is that the reader is made to experience two opposing emotions, "developed together and with equal force": one elicited by the subject matter of the poem, another "by the artistic form and the particular arrangement of the material."¹²⁹

A cognitive literary critic may add here that the destruction of subject matter by the form introduces more embedded mental states. For instance, the embedments discussed earlier (e.g., "she knows that he wants her to think that he trusts her") all focus on the thoughts and feelings of the speaker and his beloved. But the concluding double entendre involving the verb "lie" shifts that pattern by orienting us toward mental states of the speaker and the reader. The reason for this shift is that puns come with their own built-in intentionality: they signal the punner's desire to draw the reader's attention to the form of the word.

Let us now bring it all together: evolution, Schiller, Vygotsky, lies, and embedment. Our evolutionarily conditioned interest in deception may very well be integral to our interaction with Shakespeare's sonnet, but it

contributes little to the sonnet's artistic value. That value is generated, at least in part, by the clash of the two contradictory affects: one driven by the content of the poem, another, by its form. The melancholy affect arising from the content is entangled with the complex embeddings associated with the speaker, who reflects on various mutual deceptions that make the relationship possible.

But the joy arising from the form is *also* entangled with complex embeddings, and it starts developing even before we arrive to the final lines that contain the double entendre. For, is not our awareness of the complexity of the speaker's emotions in and of itself a source of positive affect, as it reminds us that we are all interesting beings here, endowed with rich inner lives, attuned to the intricacies of our social environment, apparently with cognitive resources to spare? The concluding pun adds a nice nuance, but do not overestimate its role! Most of the poem's heavy lifting—that is, of “destroying” the depressing subject matter by the delightful form—has already been done by the time we read the pun.¹³⁰

Have we seen this dynamic before? Yes, we have. Recall the stanza from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* that lists lies practiced by the main protagonist as he seduces various ladies of his acquaintance. There, too, the “heavy” subject matter of lying is undercut by the poetic form. For the stanza that starts with “How early he was able to dissemble” contains not just multiple instances of deception but also the narrator's amused reflection on Eugene's amorous machinations—not to mention the sheer delight induced by its pattern of sounds and rhymes in those who read this “novel in verse” in its original language, for that, too, goes a long way toward destroying the negative affect that the protagonist's treacherous, antisocial behavior could, in principle, induce in us.

In fact, it seems that this dynamic—that is, the destruction of such critical a subject matter as cheater detection by a form—has been present in literature for some time. Perhaps the best genre to illustrate this dynamic is picaresque, for it is unequivocally built around deception. Since its earlier days, from *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) and Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599–1604) to Miguel de Cervantes's *Rinconete y Cortadillo* (1613), the picaresque novel focused on protagonists who cheated and lied their way to economic survival. Yet the complex embeddings arising from the shenanigans of a resourceful picaro were often interlaced with complex

embedments arising from the conversation that the narrator was having with readers. Consider the opening paragraph of *Guzmán de Alfarache*:

I was so desirous, curious reader, to relate to you my own adventures, that I had almost commenced speaking of myself without making any mention of my family, with which some sophist or other would not have failed to accuse me: "Be not so hasty, friend Guzman," would he have said, "let us begin, if you please, from the definition, before we proceed to speak of the thing defined. Inform us, in the first place, who were your parents; you can then relate to us at your pleasure those exploits which you have so immoderate a desire to entertain us with."¹³¹

There are many different ways to map out this paragraph in terms of its embedded mental states. We can say, for instance, that the implied author wants us to believe that the narrator is afraid of being censored by a pedant; or that the narrator wants his ideal (i.e., "curious") reader to feel superior to an obtuse reader (a "sophist") who is not quite aware of what kind of story he or she is about to hear and thus demands a conventional opening; or that the implied author wants to tease the reader as he defers the actual account of his adventures (which is, presumably, something that the reader is impatient to hear) and instead gives in to the convention of lengthy self-introduction (which, he expects, or pretends to expect, the reader will find tedious).

Swamped by complex embedments, and we haven't even gotten to the story's first official swindle! By the time we do, we will be frequently dealing with two parallel sets of embedments: those involving mental states of liars and their victims and those involving mental states of the narrator, the implied reader, and the various imagined onlookers who are similar in their function to the "sophist" of the opening paragraph. The affect associated with the act of deception as such—for example, with its negative communal repercussions, with private sufferings experienced by the people immediately involved—rubs against the affect arising from our awareness of the playful conversation that we, as implied readers, are having with the narrator.

The presence of complex embedments involving mental states of the critic, the narrator, and the reader may thus be the reason that the picaresque is considered "one of the earliest traditions (perhaps the earliest) in the history of the novel."¹³² For take those mental states out, and you will end up with a mere trickster story. I use the word "mere" advisedly, not to downplay this genre's prominence in the world's folklore. In fact, the trickster story often demonstrates the crucial role of complex embedment in the construction of narrative, for the trickster *wants* his victims to *think* that his

intentions are different from what they really are. Still, literature, as we know it today, happens when authors move beyond straightforward accounts of deception—that is, when they begin to “destroy” that particular “subject-matter by the form”—even while still benefiting from the presence of lying characters.

Let us conclude our conversation about writers simultaneously using liars and moving beyond their lies with another “novel full of deception and self-deception,”¹³³ also set in Spain, albeit four hundred years later, and written in English: Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011). Lerner’s protagonist is an American poet on a fellowship in Madrid. Unlike a picaro, he lies not so much to ensure his economic survival (although he *is* receiving money from a Madrid-based foundation for a “research-driven poem” about the Spanish Civil War, which he has no intention of writing)¹³⁴ but to create and maintain a certain image of himself among his Spanish friends and (prospective) lovers. He lies about his parents, about his feelings, about what he is doing now, and about what he plans to do next. Those lies contribute their fair share of complex embedments, yet—a dynamic similar to what we have seen in “When My Love Swears That She Is Made of Truth”—they also don’t matter.

This is to say that Adam’s lies—even the ones that seem to be quite atrocious—have no real social consequences. Neither his Spanish friends nor his parents take them seriously. For instance, when Adam confesses on the phone to his parents that he has been telling people in Spain that his “mom was dead or gravely ill and that [his] dad was a fascist,” his mother and father, both professional psychologists, are “confused, but not upset.” They accept his explanation that he has been saying those things in order “to get sympathy” and turn the conversation to other, more pressing, matters.¹³⁵

In fact, it seems that Adam’s lying functions primarily as a trigger for self-reflexivity, and that self-reflexivity is what generates the majority of the novel’s complex embedments. For instance, when Adam feels disoriented in the foreign social environment (as he does for most of the novel), he responds by faking his emotional reactions and vividly describing involved mental states that he *would* experience were he to actually have those reactions.

Thus, when one of his new acquaintances, Carlos (of whose exact stance toward himself Adam is not sure but whom he is beginning to hate), observes, in the presence of several other people, that it “must be an interesting time to be an American in Spain” and asks Adam what he thinks

about “everything,” Adam adapts a series of postures that, he hopes, will be read by the onlookers as signaling his sophistication and Carlos’s stupidity: “I looked off in the distance as though I was making an effort to formulate my complex reaction so simply even an idiot like him might understand. Then, as if concluding this was an impossible task, I said I didn’t know.”¹³⁶

Does the shaft hit the mark? Are Carlos’s friends now convinced that no reasonably intelligent person would ask the kind of question that Carlos just asked, and do they appreciate Adam’s earnest, if ultimately futile, attempt to tackle it? There is no telling. For all that we know, they may be thinking of something else, completely unrelated to Adam’s hopeful performance of his emotional complexity.¹³⁷

Yet Adam is not a deluded/unreliable narrator. He is open to revising his perceptions if new evidence presents itself (e.g., if Carlos turns out to be less hostile to Adam than he thought he was), and he can contemplate critically his endeavors to shape other people’s impressions of him. This, of course, supplies more grist for the mill of complex embedment.

Here, for instance, is a characteristically funny moment when Adam reaches for his notebook to write down a potentially poetic observation that has occurred to him, only to stop and blush at the realization that he has apparently bought into his own lie (manufactured to impress a current girlfriend) about being the kind of person who writes down potentially poetic observations that occur to him: “Why would I take notes when Isabel wasn’t around to see me take them? I’d never taken notes before: I carried around my bag because of my drugs, not because I intended to work on my ‘translations,’ and the idea of actually being one of those poets who was constantly subject to fits of inspiration repelled me; I was unashamed to pretend to be inspired in front of Isabel, but that I had just believed myself inspired shamed me.”¹³⁸

Shame attendant on self-deception has long been a reliable source of complex embedment in the novel. (Think, for instance, of another lonely traveler in a strange land, Robinson Crusoe, who is ashamed when he catches himself thanking God for bringing him to a desert island: “‘How canst thou become such a hypocrite,’ said I, even audibly, ‘to pretend to be thankful for a condition which, however thou mayest endeavour to be contented with, thou wouldst rather pray heartily to be delivered from?’”)¹³⁹ Lerner’s “skeptically postmodern comedy” thus continues to work the rich

territory staked by connoisseurs of abashed self-consciousness, from Defoe to Dostoevsky, who used self-deception as a reliable jumping-off point for other mindreading entanglements.¹⁴⁰

Indeed, there seems to be a good-husbandry aspect to being a writer: Why waste a perfectly expedient, time-tested way to embed complex mental states, such as lying, even if the majority of the text's embedments now come from other social contexts?

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