

Conclusion: On the Future of the “Secret Life” of Literature

Then Ea opened his mouth and said to me, his servant, “Tell them this: I have learnt that Enlil is wrathful against me, I dare no longer walk in his land nor live in his city; I will go down to the Gulf to dwell with Ea my lord. But on you he will rain down abundance, rare fish and shy wild-fowl, a rich harvest-tide. In the evening the rider of the storm will bring you wheat in torrents.”

—*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 2100 BC

It is interesting that we either fictionalize or become tongue-tied when it comes to personal matters. We may have good reasons to hide from ourselves (at least to hide certain aspects—which amounts to the same). But even if there is little hope of an eventual self-acquittal, it would be enough to withstand the lure of silence, of concealment.¹

—Christa Wolf, *Patterns of Childhood*, 1976

There are four thousand years and several worlds of difference between the promise of abundance that the god Ea dangles in front of the people of Shurruk, just before they are all swept to their death by a giant flood, and the painful self-searching awareness of Wolf’s autobiographical novel about growing up in Nazi Germany. Yet to make sense of either situation, we engage in a very particular kind of social reasoning. We navigate, without being consciously aware of it, the multilayered intentionality of the text. That is, we recursively embed—mostly on the third level—thoughts, feelings, and wishes of its characters, as well as (if we are *that* kind of readers) of its narrators and implied audiences.

Thus, we may recognize that Ea *wants* the citizens of Shurruk to *believe* that Enlil is *angry* at Utnapishtim. We may also surmise that, with all the talk about “a rich harvest-tide,” Ea is enjoying his cruel joke, as befits a trickster

deity—which is to say that the narrator of *Gilgamesh* wants to draw his audience's attention to Ea's intention to mock the doomed Shurrukians.

When it comes to Wolf, her narrator knows that she may not like much of what she will learn about herself when she starts thinking about her childhood. Yet she also intuits that there is some hope that she may forgive her past self. She thinks that her awareness of that hope, however small, should help her to keep going even when it would feel so much easier to stop and keep her memories hidden from herself and others.

Moreover—again, if we are that kind of readers—we may start reading additional intentionality into the present juxtaposition of the two passages. After all, the child protagonist of Wolf's novel is no more aware of what kind of deadly "harvest-tide" lies in wait for her and her countrymen than are the people of Shurruk. Although I did not intend any such conversation between the two passages when I selected them—indeed, my goal was to use works of literature as distinct from each other as possible—I now can't help wondering if some of my readers will see the connection and think that I meant for it to be there.

(Herein lies an object lesson in what happens when you put two random literary passages in front of a person who makes her living by reading complex intentionality into cultural artifacts: "Hey, what do you mean 'two random passages'? I see a connection here!")

And now I also wonder if you will take this emerging conversation between *Gilgamesh* and *Patterns of Childhood* as me saying that nothing much has changed in the depiction of literary subjectivity over the past four thousand years. In fact, I am saying the opposite. I want you to see how different literary subjectivity has become as it has moved from the occasional reliance on complex embedment of mental states (e.g., in *Gilgamesh*) to the constant one. For, to find my *Gilgamesh* example, I had to comb the text; to find my *Patterns of Childhood* one, I had to merely open the book. The challenge of casting about for social situations conducive to incessant complex embedment of mental states has been shaping literature as we know it for several centuries. Without being consciously aware of it (which is a good thing, too, as my experience in the writing workshop confirms), authors keep inventing new and tweaking old ways of recursively embedding thoughts and feelings. To quote Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, just to stay in place—here, on the third level of embedment—they have to run as fast as they can.

It remains an open question whether literature will ever be able to break free of this relentless gravitational pull of complex embedment. Writers who *seem* to attempt such a break, driven by a wide variety of personal, political, and aesthetic motivations (e.g., Evgeny Zamyatin in *We*, Alain Robbe-Grillet in *Jealousy*, Muriel Spark in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian*, and Fedor Gladkov in *Cement*), manage it only to a point. The odds are stacked against them. Reading complex intentionality into a literary text—which is to say, intuitively expecting literary subjectivity to be constructed as a series of complex embedments, explicit or implied—has become our standard experience of literature.

This expectation/experience is buttressed by several cultural factors. First, there is a vast ocean of popular fiction that embeds complex mental states of (mostly) characters. Though differing from literary fiction (which embeds mental states of narrators and implied readers, as well as characters), such books nevertheless contribute to making their readers experience complex embedment as a default mode of engagement with fictional imagination. Second, this “induction” into the association between fictional stories and complex embedment begins quite early—with books targeting three- to seven-year-olds. Third, cultural institutions—from college literature departments to critical reviews—implicitly train their adepts to think in terms of embedded motivations of characters, writers, and readers and reward them for compellingly articulating such motivations.

Fourth, there is also the possible impact of moving images, which I mention here only briefly, not having addressed it in this book. Feature films and television series use medium-specific methods to generate complex embedments of mental states. Moreover, critics (as in my Susan Sontag example, in chapter 4) depend on complex embedments to talk about films, which means that institutional structures that reward thinking about moving images in terms of complex intentionality have been in place for some time. Whether the experience of watching certain films and TV series and reading reviews of such films/series sensitizes viewers to cues of intentionality in their social environment and whether such a sensitivity translates between media, influencing reading practices, are open and intriguing questions.²

Finally, consider that we tend to view as ethical and prosocial the practice of rendering minds transparent—which is to say, of talking publicly about one’s own and other people’s feelings, even when (in fact, sometimes

especially when) we think that we can articulate other people's true motivations better than they themselves can articulate them. Though adapting the rhetoric of opacity when it is expedient, our culture inclines, on the whole, toward the transparency end of the opacity-transparency spectrum. This means that representations of and conversations about complex intentionality of fictional characters, their creators, and their audiences are entrenched in our public discourse and, indeed, in our current cultural perception of how the social mind works.

Imagine, then, an author who is firmly committed to writing a novel that will transcend the pull of embedded subjectivity. (Not that they themselves would put it that way; they may think of it as "antipsychological" or "surface based," or "a story without interiority"—you name it.) That writer will face an uphill battle at every step of their interaction with their audience. Readers will come to that novel intuitively expecting to encounter recursively embedded subjectivity either of characters or of characters, narrators, and implied readers. They will force-read as much of that kind of subjectivity into the story as the text itself and their own past reading history will allow them. Critics, too, will find ways of talking about embedded thoughts and feelings, by speculating about *the writer's* intentions and describing *their* reactions. If the novel is adapted for screen, social situations and/or shots calling for complex embedment of mental states will be introduced, and that will, in turn, influence the experience of readers who will come (or return) to the original text after watching the film. Can our experimental novel survive this onslaught of embedded mentalizing and even start a new literary trend of embedment-free writing? Perhaps it still can, but it won't be easy.

This is not to say that complex embedment of mental states is an inevitable feature of the literary landscape of a mindreading species—merely that it has been around for a while and is still going strong. Contributing to its longevity is its integration with our ideology of mind: we believe that mental states are knowable and can be discussed in public, and we have cultural institutions that reward elaborate forms of such discussions, be they about real or fictional minds. But while there is no way of knowing what the future holds either for such institutions or for the secret life of literature, we can follow, with new awareness, the remarkable current career of this inconspicuous yet pervasive phenomenon: watch it as it adapts to new media and reinvents itself in the old ones.

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