

Changing Minds in Narrative

What is mind but motion in the intellectual sphere?

— Oscar Wilde, *Intentions*

In his important essay on “Social minds,” Alan Palmer continues his longstanding mission to reconfigure the field of narratology and thus redefine our understanding of the nature of narrative by turning attention to our minds and the relationships between different forms of consciousness. Like all good paradigm-shifts, it is an ambitious concept founded on simplicity. The fundamentally significant insight is that narrative should be regarded as being driven not by event but by person. In classical narratology, even where viewpoint and perspective were the topics in focus, often the discussion was about the effect on how events were perceived, how events were motivated, how events were telescoped or extended; beyond this, narrative itself was defined by the nature of its story or plot.

This classical line, of course, is divergent from the popular conception of narrative: stories gain their “tellability” because of their human significance, whether for the people involved (the characters) or the person telling or hearing. So Palmer’s approach rests on the evident truism that narratives are about relationships between people. Of course, his argument goes far beyond this, but the foundational tenet that narratives are motivated by the interactions of minds has important consequences.

Firstly, as he indicates, Palmer’s approach forms part of the wider cognitive turn in arts and humanities. After early polemical and programmatic positioning, this movement has been producing significant and irreversible insights into consciousness and our articulation of it in both high art and more prosaic discourse. Though his convincing arguments are illustrated largely by nineteenth-century fiction, there is enough in his position to allow other researchers to explore the validity of his ideas more widely.

Secondly, Palmer by argument and example shifts the means of discussion from an exclusive focus on text (typical of traditional stylistics) to a principled connection with the context of reading, writing and social positioning. This has

the benefit of speaking to the current historicising paradigm of literary scholarship, while retaining a sense of his more rigorous and systematic stylistic inheritance. If this leads literary scholars back to their abandoned skill in language study, so much the better.

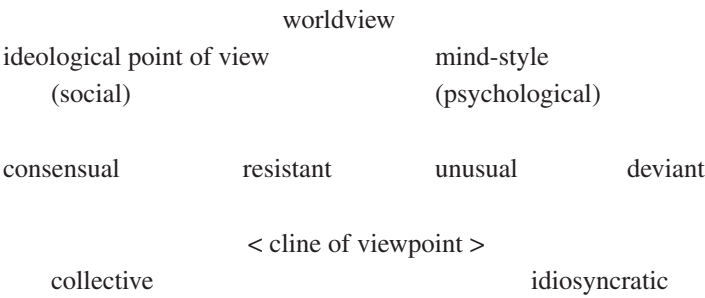
At the same time, Palmer avoids the extremism within the cognitive turn in literary studies by grounding his discussions of mind and consciousness in a textual and textured sensibility: he pays attention to style. This prevents him making wild and untestable assertions about consciousness, evolution, cultural universals or the internal nature of thought — grand statements about consciousness that engage with the theory while neglecting the linguistic grounding or empirical base in texts.

Importantly for cognitivism broadly, Palmer's work argues for a strong and practical social theory alongside the psychological understanding of narrative. His reading here relies on social psychology and social theory; I believe much progress could be made here too by applying some of the concepts and methods of sociolinguistics. Probably the key feature in modern sociolinguistics is the social articulation and management of identity. Conversations between pairs or small groups usually involve identity markers, expressive aspects of register and perspective, all of which are in evidence (in other terms) in Palmer's analysis of the *Middlemarch* passage in his paper.

In Palmer's analysis, minds tend to be discrete, with definite boundaries and stable cores; and his notion of intermental thought represents a transition from one core to another (group) core. A more developed sociolinguistic analysis would also go on to explore the ways in which the different minds represented in a novel were presented as dynamically interacting and shifting against each other: how do minds adapt and change at their edges? In sociolinguistic terms, this is the area of speech accommodation, which is equally a psychological and social phenomenon. Speakers move their forms of expression (accent, lexical choice, syntactic patterns, pragmatic markers, mannerisms) towards or away from their interlocutors according to their sense of closeness of identity or desire to delineate differences. Sociolinguistically this is the most interesting area in which social relations can be observed at a microscopic level, and the relevance to fictional novels is obvious.

Palmer's distinction between intramental and intermental thought presentation also serves to illuminate further the stylistic notion of "mind-style," coined by Fowler. This has been a problematic term, which Palmer's work promises to render useful once again. In Fowler's usage, "mind-style" and point of view are virtually synonymous. Semino however, reserves "mind-style" for idiosyncratic subjective forms of expression, while consensual or socially-shared expressions of thought

can be understood as a more general ideological point of view. Palmer’s notion of social minds serves to underpin and confirm my own sense that narrative viewpoint can be best understood as a cline of stylistic features from the collective to the idiosyncratic (see the diagram, reproduced from Stockwell 124).



An important claim in Palmer’s work is his assertion that minds are minds, whether real or fictional. This continuity accords with the cognitive scientific view that minds are embodied and continuous with experience. It also draws a sharp line between brain (which can be studied materially and neuroanatomically) and mind (which is a second-order object that can only be studied indirectly). This distinction is the one often neglected by abstract literary appropriations of neurological studies. The distinction is also important because it allows us properly to assert a single cognitive process that handles the minds of others, without resorting to different mental modules for different sorts of minds. This is not to say that people in general cannot perceive real minds and fictional minds and social minds and interact with them differently; but readerly perceptions are differentiated ontologically rather than procedurally. This explains how a reader can be saddened, moved, angered, frustrated, aroused, made joyful and laugh at characters in spite of the fact that they know the character is not real.

A consequence of Palmer’s position, however, is that a question is raised by reverse-engineering his argument. In cognitive linguistics, a mind is always embodied: it takes its perception, memories, anticipations and entire form from an experiential interaction with the world through its associated body. The denial of the Cartesian mind-body distinction is central to cognitive linguistics (see Lakoff and Johnson). Palmer insists persuasively that social minds exist, and can be presented with characteristic patterns of their mind-style. If this is so, then the social mind must also be embodied, like all minds are. But what exactly is the body in which a social mind is embodied? I can anticipate an answer that draws metaphorically

on social bodies and civic bodies, or the body politic, but the point about the cognitive linguistic body is that it is a real, literal body, with personal experience and motivations. I would very much like to know Palmer's thinking here.

There are further questions if the narrative is regarded externally. I can understand Palmer's argument about social minds when those minds are the equivalent of characters, at what a possible worlds (Ryan) or text worlds theorist (Werth, Gavins) would call the "text world" or "sub-world" levels. However, at the "discourse world" level where authors, readers and you and I exist, how exactly can the notion of social minds be used to analyse complex entities? I am thinking of cases in which there are multiple authors of a literary work, or an author and editors, or a drama which is the textual product of the minds of the playwright, director, production designer, actors and even the audience. In what sense is it useful to be able to discern the intermental nature of a recent reworking of a Shakespeare play, or a film sequel, or a remake of a classic movie, or a cover version of a song?

These are questions for further thought, however, rather than objections. I think Palmer's work is right in a fundamental sense; crucially, it is open to empirical verification and example. At the risk of falling foul of Oscar Wilde's anxiety that "when people agree with me, I always feel that I must be wrong" (*The Critic as Artist*), it seems to me in the spirit of Palmer's notion of intermental thought that I invite you to agree.

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