

“Theory of Mind” as a Pedagogical Tool

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[draft; comments welcome]

1. Reading Wharton in Aarhus

Last August, I was invited to teach a five-hour seminar on cognitive narratology at the summer school of Aarhus University, Denmark. Spread over two mornings, my “module” was part of a two-week Intensive Program in Narratology (IPIN) designed to present graduate and advanced undergraduate students “with the most powerful tools and theories offered by the very rich and productive field of contemporary/postclassical narratology.” Those theories included rhetorical, unnatural, classical, strategically applied, transmedial, feminist, and cognitive narratology. As Stefan Iversen, the mastermind behind this ambitious program, envisioned it, each module would “put a current narrative theory to the test by engaging with a very diverse set of narratives ranging from oral texts to written texts (both fiction and nonfiction), to movies, computer games and new media.”<sup>1</sup> Other guest lecturers included Liesbeth Korthals Altes (Netherlands), Maria Mäkelä (Finland), James Phelan (US), Henrik Skov Nielsen (Denmark), and Richard Walsh (UK).

There were about thirty-five students in the class, from twenty European universities. Their research interests ranged from German pop-literature, contemporary American literature, postcolonial narratology, and nineteenth-century French poetry to the politics of digital media, folklore, and architecture. To introduce this diverse group to cognitive approaches, I asked them to read, before coming to class, two of my own essays, as well as articles by Suzanne Keen and Alan Palmer, and a

short story by Edith Wharton, “Xingu.”<sup>2</sup>

I've never taught “Xingu” before. In fact, I've always been puzzled by what it seemed to me to be: a satire on rich women's book clubs built around a joke fit for a parlor game. It was the parlor game bit that gave me pause. Like the pretentious protagonists of the story, I secretly doubted if a “real” literature can afford such a low pedigree. So our seminar was to be an exercise in unknowns: can a theoretical approach hitherto mostly unfamiliar to students provide an entry way into a story that an instructor doesn't quite know what to make of? This unpredictability made the experience more interesting for me personally (I wanted to “test” my cognitive framework on new material), yet, as I realize now and will discuss shortly, it may have also influenced our conversation in unexpected ways.

Published in 1916, “Xingu” tells a story of a provincial book club run by ladies who gather, ostensibly, to discuss the latest influential books, but really to assert and calibrate their relative social status. Mrs. Ballinger, Mrs. Plinth, Mrs. Leveret, Mrs. Glyde, and Miss Van Vluyck complement each other perfectly. The most recent member, however, one Mrs. Roby, is felt to be a failure. She regularly breaches club etiquette, now by freely admitting to not being able to tell pterodactyl from dactyl, now by confessing to prefer Trollope (whom “no one reads now,” as one of the ladies observes) to an important book of the moment.

When a visiting celebrated author, Osric Dane, attends one of club's lunches, the conversation proceeds haltingly (the ladies scramble for learned commonplaces in response to Osric Dane's bored superciliousness) until Mrs. Roby explains that the reason everybody is so at a loss for words is that all they can think about is the topic they've been recently absorbed in: Xingu. Unwilling to admit that they don't know what Xingu is, both club members and their distinguished visitor proceed to discuss this “deep” subject, desperately seizing on any cue as to what Xingu might be: a philosophy, a religion, a custom, a rite, a language. It's clear to most club members that Osric Dane herself has never heard about Xingu before. This realization gives them a temporary feeling of triumph, tempered, nevertheless, by the thought that they owe this triumph to the club member to whom they prefer not to

incur any social debts.

When the conversation finally turns to Osric Dane's own work, Mrs. Roby rises to leave, explaining—another typical faux pas—that she has a bridge-party to attend. Osric Dane runs out after her, saying in a voice “which she didn't take the pains to lower: 'If you'll let me walk a little way with you, I should so like to ask you a few more questions about Xingu.’” Left alone, and with the “confused feeling that they had been cheated out of their due without exactly knowing how or why,” the club members keep up for some time the pretense of knowing what Xingu is. Finally, however, they look it up and find out that Xingu is a river in Brazil.

As they go over the conversation that they just had with Osric Dane, they discover to their mortification that everything that Mrs. Roby said, or induced *them* to say about Xingu is applicable both to a river and a philosophy. (That's what I mean by a parlor-game element.) For instance, Mrs. Roby observed to Osric Dane that one of her books “was simply saturated with Xingu,” which at the time seemed like a reference to a philosophical creed. Now, however, the ladies remember that Mrs. Roby had told them earlier that, when living in Brazil, she went on a boating party with some friends, who were having so much fun “shying things at each other,” that an Osric Dane book, which Mrs. Roby had brought along, “had gone overboard,” emerging, we presume, all soggy and unreadable. Faced with what they see as a “scandal” of being made fun of, the ladies delegate their president, Mrs. Ballinger, to write a letter to Mrs. Roby asking for her resignation as a club member.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Keeping to myself my vague doubts about a parlor-game joke as a basis for a story, I asked my students to reread “Xingu” paying attention to ways in which it engages its readers' theory of mind, also known as mind-reading, that is, our evolved cognitive adaptation for explaining people's behavior

in terms of their mental states: thoughts, desires, intentions. In a twenty-minute presentation in the beginning of our class, I went over the four points that would start us off in our analysis (the first three came from my essays “Sociocognitive Complexity” and “Style Brings in Mental States,” which were assigned for the class).

First, I stressed that our daily mind-reading is largely unselfconscious and mostly wrong. We don't go around consciously articulating to ourselves our intuitions about other people's mental states and we don't really know what people are thinking—which doesn't prevent us, however, from acting on our unarticulated, wrong, or only approximately correct intuitions. Fiction plays and experiments with the fact that we can't stop reading minds and that we don't read minds correctly. Both writing and reading fiction (as well as making and watching movies and plays) are thus profoundly social endeavors because they build on the same imperfect adaptations for attributing mental states that underlie our daily social interactions.

Yet there are many ways in which mind-reading that we engage in when we read fiction, or watch movies and plays, is different from our casual daily attribution of mental states. (This was my second point.) For instance, works of fiction continuously create a pattern of mind-reading that is present in real social life only sporadically. This pattern can be described as a triangulation of mental states: a representation of a mental state embedded within a mental state embedded within yet another mental state, as in, for instance, *I remember* (first mental state) how *strange it seemed to me* (second mental state) that he was so *nervous* (third mental state) about their impending meeting. One does not need three characters to triangulate mental states: the same character may remember about what she used to think in the past when she imagined her future feelings.

Third, social situations featuring third-level embedment—mental state within mental state within mental state—are the baseline for fiction (i.e., prose fiction, drama, and narrative poetry). No fictional narrative can function on a lower level of “sociocognitive complexity,” though some experimental narratives try disguising mental states. Moreover, whereas all works of fiction strive

toward continuously embedding at least three mental states, different authors (works, genres) achieve it by different stylistic means. Using examples from Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Dostoyevski's *The Idiot*, and Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, I pointed out that, while Fielding creates sociocognitive complexity by factoring in mental states of the Reader and the Narrator, Brown creates sociocognitive complexity by focusing exclusively on the minds of his characters. A Reader and a Narrator would be unthinkable in the sociocognitive ecology of *The Da Vinci Code*, as would be unreliable narration, or (to turn to Dostoyevski) characters speculating about other characters' feelings by constructing third- and fourth-level embedments that all sound very plausible yet whose truth-value shall never be known.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, I suggested to the class that a work of fiction signals to us, already in its opening paragraphs, what kind of mind-reading it expects from us. It indicates, among other things, *whose minds* we would have to read in order to fully engage with the story: only the characters'; the characters' and the narrator's; the narrator's and the implied reader's, etc. We intuitively respond to this signaling by staying with the text beyond the first paragraphs or by dropping the book. Different readers, or even the same readers at different points in their lives, may be more amenable than others to engaging with the minds of narrators (as opposed to following only the minds of characters).<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Whose Minds Do We Read in “Xingu”?

Here, then, was the initial question that I wanted the students to consider: how does Wharton's “Xingu” create its sociocognitive complexity, that is, whose minds do we have to read to engage with this story? We started by looking together at the first paragraph of “Xingu.” The analysis that follows the quote is based on our discussion in class, which means that I share the credit for it with the IPIN students.

Mrs. Ballinger is one of the ladies who pursue Culture in bands, as though it were dangerous to meet alone. To this end she had founded the Lunch Club, an association composed of herself and several other indomitable huntresses of erudition. The Lunch Club, after three or four winters of lunching and debate, had acquired such local distinction that the entertainment of distinguished strangers became one of its accepted functions; in recognition of which it duly extended to the celebrated "Osric Dane," on the day of her arrival in Hillbridge, an invitation to be present at the next meeting.

If you form a "band" of "indomitable huntresses" to "pursue" something, you are out to kill that something. So much for the fate of "Culture" in the hands of the ladies. The first sentences of the story thus introduce the narrator with a very strong ironic attitude toward the Club. Moreover, a narrator with a strong ironic attitude brings forth an implied reader, i.e., a reader who appreciates the thrust of the narrator's irony because she shares in the narrator's view of its targets. That's another mind entering the story.

The third mind present in this paragraph belongs to a disembodied entity that makes no physical appearance yet also has an opinion about the Club. The phrase "local distinction" implies a group of the town's worthies who view approvingly the actions of the Club. Alan Palmer's concept *intermental unit* provides the best tool for thinking about this social body. As he explains, "intermental thought is known as socially distributed, situated, or extended cognition, and also, especially in literary studies, as intersubjectivity. Just as in real life, where much of our thinking is done in groups, a good deal of fictional thinking is done by large organizations, small groups, families, couples, friends, and other intermental units" (184). Within a given storyworld, a town may "actually and literally have a mind of its own," and a particular character's feelings often make sense "when understood as a reaction to the feelings of the town" (186). Hence in this story, the ladies feel empowered by what they perceive to be

the town's feelings about them.

Obviously, the Lunch Club forms an intermental unit of its own, though at different times some of its members splinter off and hold an opinion opposite to that of the Club. This is not surprising: intermental units are often held together by personal ideological agendas and hence are inherently volatile. As Palmer observes, “a large amount of the subject matter of novels is the formation, development, maintenance, and breakdown of . . . intermental units” (184).

As we pinpoint the minds present in the first paragraph, the crucial thing to remember is that as readers we do not perceive mental states experienced by these minds in isolation from each other.<sup>5</sup> That is, we don't think along the lines of, “the club wants to entertain distinguished guests.” Or, “the town approves of the club's activities.” Or, “the narrator makes fun of the club.” Fiction doesn't work this way. In fact, if we insist on reading these mental states in isolation, we will misread the passage. We will believe, for instance, that the town indeed approves of the club's activities.

Instead, to make sense of this paragraph we have to grasp *the relationships* among these minds; no discussion of sociocognitive complexity is possible without doing so. Here is one way in which we can map out the relationships among the four embedded mental states populating the paragraph, that is, that of the narrator, the implied reader, the intermental unit formed by the Club, and the intermental unit formed by local worthies:

The narrator *wants* us to be *aware* of the irony of the fact that the club *recognizes* that others *think* that it must entertain distinguished strangers.

Looking at it this way, we discover something striking about the sociocognitive complexity of the opening paragraph. At first blush, the story seems to be about its characters: there is Mrs. Ballinger forming the Lunch Club; there is Osric Dane coming to visit. Yet a closer look reveals that its

sociocognitive complexity—its *meaning*—emerges from the interplay of mental states belonging not to bodily present characters but to relatively abstract entities. We don't know what Osric Dane thinks, but we know what the narrator thinks about the Club's thinking about the town's thinking. In other words, already in the first paragraph, “Xingu” signals to its readers that it will be *that* kind of story and that if they want interplay strictly among the minds of flesh-and-blood (so to speak) characters, they should look elsewhere.

Altogether, we went through the first three paragraphs of the story figuring out the relationships among its minds. Below I include the second and third paragraphs along with their sociocognitive maps. Incidentally, paragraphs don't have to be discrete units of analysis for sociocognitive complexity. Especially later in a story, sociocognitive complexity accrues from factoring in relevant mental states from anywhere in the preceding narrative; and that's if we limit ourselves to thinking about only the first reading, as opposed to rereading.

second paragraph:

The Club was to meet at Mrs. Ballinger's. The other members, behind her back, were of one voice in deploring her unwillingness to cede her rights in favor of Mrs. Plinth, whose house made a more impressive setting for the entertainment of celebrities; while, as Mrs. Leveret observed, there was always the picture-gallery to fall back on.

possible sociocognitive map:

The club is *unhappy* about Mrs. Ballinger's *unwillingness* to cede her rights in favor of a person whose house is *thought* to be a more impressive setting for the

entertainment of celebrities.

third paragraph:

Mrs. Plinth made no secret of sharing this view. She had always regarded it as one of her obligations to entertain the Lunch Club's distinguished guests. Mrs. Plinth was almost as proud of her obligations as she was of her picture-gallery; she was in fact fond of implying that the one possession implied the other, and that only a woman of her wealth could afford to live up to a standard as high as that which she had set herself. An all-round sense of duty, roughly adaptable to various ends, was, in her opinion, all that Providence exacted of the more humbly stationed; but the power which had predestined Mrs. Plinth to keep footmen clearly intended her to maintain an equally specialized staff of responsibilities. It was the more to be regretted that Mrs. Ballinger, whose obligations to society were bounded by the narrow scope of two parlour-maids, should have been so tenacious of the right to entertain Osric Dane.

possible sociocognitive map:

The club *recognizes* that Mrs. Ballinger *refuses* to acknowledge the *intention* of God, who *wanted* Mrs. Plinth to host Osric Dane.

I refer to these sociocognitive mappings as *possible* because, especially in the case of the third paragraph, which is very complex, the relationships among the embedded minds can be mapped out in several somewhat different ways and even the list of embedded minds can be different. (What remains

unchanged is that you need to grasp the relationship among at least three mental states to begin to capture the meaning of the paragraph.) For instance, as Jim Phelan, who sat in on our seminar and later commented on this essay, points out, a different mapping would have taken into account the mind of the implied author. Indeed, upon reflection, the conspicuous absence of Wharton's mind from our classroom discussion is an interesting phenomenon. It's possible that I unconsciously steered my students away from factoring in the implied author because I was wary of any discussion of intentionality. Perhaps, not a Wharton scholar myself and still puzzled by "Xingu," I stayed on what felt to be safe ground, by focusing, as Phelan put it, "on the narrator and the narration."<sup>6</sup>

This is in direct contrast to my experience of teaching the novels of, say, Austen, when, as an eighteenth-century scholar, I am on surer footing, and the mind of the implied author is integral to our classroom discussion of sociocognitive complexity. Or—a more accurate way of putting it—to our *construction* of a text's sociocognitive complexity. For, works of fiction, especially, ones that factor in mental states of entities others than bodily present characters, open up possibilities for embedding mental states that will not be exhausted by any single act of interpretation.

#### 4. Reconstructing "Missing" Pieces

For the next step in our discussion, I asked each group of students (they had six pre-formed groups of four to six people) to reconstruct certain missing scenes from "Xingu," working on at least the third-level of sociocognitive complexity and using minds that, we now agreed, Wharton herself used. That is, in the first two paragraphs, we encountered the mind of the narrator, the implied reader, and various intermental units; the third paragraph added to the mix the mind of some abstract larger entity: God or Providence. So I wanted my students to take these four minds plus, obviously, the minds of the characters themselves and embed at

least three of them within each other to form social situations that could have been part of the story.

Underlying this exercise was my belief that a pattern of sociocognitive complexity is an important stylistic characteristic of a fictional text. By figuring out *whose mental states are embedded within each other and how*, we may learn more about the unique style of a given work of fiction than we do by focusing on other, seemingly more eye-catching features, such as the use of a particular lexicon. This is why I gave to my students no other directions concerning vocabulary, punctuation, or anything else.

The social situations that I asked the students to write up—what I called the “missing” scenes from the story—were the scenes referred to but never directly described in “Xingu.” For instance, one of the ladies, Mrs. Leveret, has a sister, who seems to serve as a sympathetic sounding board for her concerns. Mrs. Leveret often regrets not being as smart as other members of the Club, “not knowing her own value [to them] as a mirror for their mental complacency.” To that pointed characterization the narrator adds that, it “was only the fact of having a dull sister who thought her clever that saved her from a sense of hopeless inferiority.”

So when Osric Dane first enters the room, we learn about the impression that she makes on the Club members through a conversation that Mrs. Leveret will later have about it with her sister:

Mrs. Leveret told her sister afterward that she had known at a glance what was coming. She saw that Osric Dane was not going to meet them half way . . . .

Any lingering idea that she might consider herself under an obligation to her entertainers was at once dispelled by her manner: as Mrs. Leveret said afterward to her sister, she had a way of looking at you that made you feel as if there was something wrong with your hat.

This is the last appearance of Mrs. Leveret's sister in the story. Her brief resurfacing has the same effect as the quick mention, in the first paragraph, of the “local distinction” accorded to the club. Both imply other minds, outside the immediate circle of the Club, monitoring closely its activities. The sister's mind, in other words, is yet another trademark mind of “Xingu”: disembodied, filtered through a character's thoughts, and intimately involved in its self-perception.

Two groups of students (working separately) were thus charged with writing two or three sentences reconstructing the briefly alluded-to conversation between Mrs. Leveret and her sister in which Mrs. Leveret describes the first appearance of Osric Dane. Two other groups had to imagine a conversation that Mrs. Roby and Osric Dane are having on the way to the bridge party, right after leaving the Lunch Club together. I suspected that this would be a difficult task, but I didn't anticipate just how difficult it would turn out to be.

Finally, two more groups were asked to reconstruct a conversation that Mrs. Roby is having later with someone who remains unidentified. All we know about that person is that Mrs. Roby apparently trusts her. Here is how that person makes her—or his—appearance. Once Mrs. Roby introduces Xingu into the conversation, the Club ladies scramble for an appropriate response and so does their guest:

Osric Dane's change of countenance was no less striking than that of her entertainers. She too put down her coffee-cup, but with a look of distinct annoyance; she too wore, for a brief moment, what Mrs. Roby afterward described as the look of feeling for something in the back of her head; and before she could dissemble these momentary signs of weakness, Mrs. Roby, turning to her with a deferential smile, had said, “And we've been so hoping that to-day you would tell us just what you think of it.”

We may speculate that when Mrs. Roby describes Osric Dane's perplexed look, she is talking to one “Professor Foreland,” on whose warm recommendation Mrs. Roby had earlier been invited to join the Lunch Club—another of Wharton's briefly mentioned outsiders—but we don't know for sure. I told the groups reconstructing Mrs. Roby's conversation that it's up to them to decide who her interlocutor might be.

My seminar occupied two consecutive mornings, so the students had about twenty minutes to work on their “missing” passages in class, and I know that some of them stayed to finish after the class. Their time was limited because in the afternoon they had Jim Phelan's module on rhetorical narratology. So, at most, each group must have spent one hour on their passage. I include below one of them, whose authors, Tero, Joonas, Tamás, and Jan, have generously allowed me to quote it in this essay. Their group was charged with reconstructing the conversation between Mrs. Leveret and her sister, and here is what they came up with:

Sipping tea with her sister later that evening Mrs. Leveret was blissfully unaware of her sister's slyly amused expression, as she recounted her horrified reaction to Osric Dane's reproachful gaze—as if there had been something wrong with her hat. While her hat was generally considered to be in poor taste, Mrs. Leveret's sister was convinced that Mrs. Leveret failed to realize the extent of this opinion. Moreover, Mrs. Leveret would have been surprised to hear that it wasn't only about the hat.

In class, we went over several ways of mapping out this passage's sociocognitive complexity, for instance, “Mrs. Leveret's sister *believes* that Mrs. Leveret *doesn't know* that people in town *think* that her taste in hats leaves much to be desired”; or, “The narrator *wants*

*us to be aware* that Mrs. Leveret *does not realize* that her sister *views critically* her intellectual endeavors.” As you see, this group chose to work with four minds: Mrs. Leveret, her sister, “someone” in town who thinks that Mrs. Leveret's taste in hats leaves much to be desired, and the narrator who comments on Mrs. Leveret's apparent misperception of her sister's thinking yet does not commit to spelling out that thinking. This last bit is important and I will return to it later.

One interesting feature of this write-up is its revisionary treatment of Mrs. Leveret's sister. As the group explained in our follow-up discussion in class, the ironic tone of the narrator makes us doubt everything focalized through the minds of the club members; hence if Mrs. Leveret considers her sister “dull” that leaves the reader (and, in this case, a team of re-writers) an opening for questioning her opinion.

The groups charged with reconstructing the conversation that Mrs. Roby and Osric Dane would have as they walk together from Mrs. Ballinger's to the bridge-party, faced a very particular challenge, though the extent of that challenge did not come into full focus until our follow-up discussion. They decided to have Mrs. Roby explain to Osric Dane what Xingu was and make fun of the pretentious ladies that they left behind. The groups that reconstructed the conversation that Mrs. Roby has with the unknown sympathetic interlocutor after the affair is over, made a roughly similar choice, depicting Mrs. Roby's delight as she recounts her clever bamboozling of the Club ladies.

As it became clear from our subsequent conversation in class, some readers disagreed with this interpretation because it portrayed Osric Dane in a more sympathetic light than was warranted by the story. Because she behaved in the same pretentious way as the members of the Club, refusing to admit that she didn't know what Xingu was (and Mrs. Roby had correctly judged that she *would* behave this way when she introduced Xingu into a conversation), nothing has prepared us for the sudden chumminess between Mrs. Roby and Osric Dane. Still,

others thought Osric Dane had been in on the joke for some time, which made it plausible that she deserved Mrs. Roby's confidence and could now share a laugh with her at the Club's expense. (This disagreement—one of several we had in class—was as interesting to me, if not more so, as our instances of consensus.)

But a more intriguing objection that some students had to this view of Mrs. Roby was that she emerged from the reconstructed passages as “evil” and a bit boring. In other words, Mrs. Roby is allowed to pull the Club members' collective leg *and* remain a sympathetic and fascinating character as long as readers don't have access to her thinking. That is, we don't know if she intentionally set out to make fun of the club members, fully expecting to be ostracized by them later, or if she was hoping, naively but kindly, that in the short run they would appreciate her help in bringing down Osric Dane while in the long run her joke would prompt them to reevaluate their own intellectual complacency. (A sweet, optimistic reading, this, but it's worth noting that none of the four groups went for it.)

Once Mrs. Roby's intentions are spelled out, however—as clearly wanting to make fun of the Club—her ethical stance is compromised and she becomes a less interesting character. The ethics of the story seem to be bound up with its aesthetics (via its mind-reading pattern), though the class couldn't agree on what comes first.

In other words, as we discovered together, there seems to be a good reason why Wharton only alludes to the scenes in which Mrs. Roby presumably opens up about her intentions. Her mind *has to* remain off limits to readers—in stark contrast to other minds of the story. Incidentally, I believe that Tero, Joonas, Tamás, and Jan intuited that in “Xingu” Wharton prefers not to grant her readers full access to the minds of her most “sociocognitively complex” characters. That's why, perhaps, their group decided to imply in their passage that Mrs. Leveret's sister entertains complex mental states without fully spelling out her thoughts and thus making her unpleasantly Machiavellian.

By supplying the “missing” scenes in which Mrs. Roby's mind is pruned open, we violated this very important aspect of “Xingu's” mind-reading pattern. It looks like there is simply no way to write up these scenes without making Mrs. Roby look either Machiavellian or naïve, and make the story fall flat as a result.

Or so we agreed during our discussion in class. Today I think about it differently. In fact, now I am surprised that we forgot that we did have at our disposal tools for representing those “missing” conversations. Instead of focusing on Mrs. Roby's mind, we could have done what Wharton herself does so often in the story. That is, we could have had several intermental units, such as the club and the town, speculating about the exchange that Mrs. Roby must have had, first, with Osric Dane and, then, with her unnamed friend. We could have also brought in an implied mental state of Providence and wrapped it all up in the ironic attitude of the narrator. That would have had the effect of *still* preserving the mystery of Mrs. Roby's thought processes while imitating “Xingu's” pattern of sociocognitive complexity, which was, after all, the point of the assignment.

Perhaps the reason that neither the students nor myself arrived at this solution at the time is that it still comes easier to us to think of fictional minds as mostly characters' minds. Narrators, implied readers, implied authors, intermental units, and implied abstract entities, such as Providence, remain on the periphery of our critical consciousness, even if we just had a discussion in which we established that these are central contributors to a story's sociocognitive complexity.

Why should it be this way? Is it, as Phelan suggested to me afterward, “a function of the kinds of fictional narratives we're most familiar with since the rise of the novel, or at least since the rise of the psychological novel? Is that a function of some grooves of thought that narratology has worn for us? A combination of the two?” Perhaps, particularly in the case of implied authors, we may feel that, as we talk about them, “we move from fictional minds to

nonfictional ones, and crossing that divide may be one reason why people don't focus on them.”<sup>7</sup> Or, perhaps, as Nancy Easterlin observes, the explanation has less to do with “literary convention” and more “with the inherent dynamics of human sociality.”<sup>8</sup> It’s possible, in other words, that when we think of mental states in fiction (and don’t forget that *all* of those are disembodied figments of imagination), our first impulse is still to reach out for entities that have manifested their “presence” by embodied social engagement with other characters.

So, gaining fast upon our question, “whose minds do we have to read to engage with this story?” is another question: “whose minds do we *choose* to read and why, when we engage with the story?”

## 5. Empathy and “Xingu”

By strategically closing off Mrs. Roby's mind Wharton uses the mind-reading dynamic that we often associate with detective stories. Here (and perhaps this is what I was getting at when I fretted about its “parlor-game” elements), “Xingu” flirts with what Suzanne Keen calls “popular subgenres of contemporary fiction” (488). Except that detective stories end up by revealing the mental states that have been strategically obscured for the duration of the story (i.e., those of the criminal and/or the investigator), while Wharton refuses to do so.

Perhaps “Xingu” can be better understood as a “metaphysical” detective story,<sup>9</sup> a concept introduced by theorists of the genre to describe works of fiction in which the mystery is never fully cleared, or, to put in the terms of our discussion, works of fiction in which the mind of the most mysterious protagonist is never de-mystified. Metaphysical detective stories (e.g., by Borges, Nabokov) thrive on re-readings—and so does “Xingu” (which now has come to obsess me)—while more traditional detective stories are typically read just once. Once the minds that have been strategically obscured throughout the narrative are fully revealed, the

mystery is gone and so is readers' interest.

Our discussion of the “detective-story” elements of “Xingu” was brief, but it did supply us with a potentially fruitful insight into the story's ecology of empathy. We talked about this in conjunction with Keen's influential exploration of narrative empathy. In the essay assigned for the class, “Strategic Empathizing: Techniques of Bounded, Ambassadorial, and Broadcast Narrative Empathy,” Keen takes as her starting point Monika Fludernik's observation that “heavily ironic fiction . . . deliberately rebuffs readers' empathetic responsiveness” (480) and then suggests that even “in a heavily ironic and satirical novel, effects of strategic empathizing can gleam through the verbally distancing overlay of caricature and critique. Thus empathetic and ironic effects, evidently opposite in their rhetorical strategies, can enhance the piquancy of each other's existence in a single fictional world” (492).

Wharton's “Xingu,” with its “heavily ironic” view of its characters and strategically closed off mind of one potentially sympathetic protagonist (i.e., Mrs. Roby), seems to be a prime example of a narrative that “rebuffs readers' empathetic responsiveness.” Yet, as Tero observed in class, the narrator's ironic perspective on the “indomitable huntresses of erudition” may activate bounded empathy with the implied reader. That is, those of us less inclined to use books as means of impressing others may empathize with the “hunted down” culture and would want to protect it from the likes of the Club ladies.<sup>10</sup>

Also, Phelan's comment in class on “terrible things that these women are doing to each other” points toward the story's potential for evoking broadcast empathy. As Keen explains, “Broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by empathizing our common human experiences, feeling, hopes, and vulnerabilities” (488). Once we realize that the Club members were given a chance to become more intellectually aware and emotionally honest by engaging with Mrs. Roby, a stranger miraculously blown in (from Brazil, of all places!), and that they threw that chance away by kicking her out at the end of the

story, we feel sad for them, as we would for ourselves, for not recognizing when something wonderful comes our way.

The detective-story elements of “Xingu” also may broaden its empathetic spectrum. In her essay (and earlier book, *Empathy and the Novel*), Keen looks at “fictions that deploy broadcast strategic empathizing in an attempt to reach the widest possible audience.” As she puts it, “popular and middlebrow fiction often succeeds because it evokes readers' empathy more effectively than more demanding, experimental, or deliberately difficult texts. This effect extends to the popular subgenres of contemporary fiction, including fantasy, thrillers, detective fiction, and romance novels (realism is not a prerequisite for readers' empathy)” (488).

Wharton makes us follow the club members as they retrace their conversation and reinterpret clues to Xingu's true identity scattered throughout the story. This is a move similar to that sometimes expected from characters of a detective story and always from its readers. If Keen is correct, this joint retracing of clues activates broadcast strategic empathizing with the Club ladies and thus contributes to the story's potential for reaching “the widest possible audience.” The “empathetic and ironic effects” thus indeed “enhance the piquancy of each other's existence in a single fictional world” of “Xingu.”

The detective story element turns out to be a red herring: “Xingu” is more of a metaphysical detective story, after all. Still, its presence can apparently provoke certain anxiety in a literature professor sensing the intrusion of a middlebrow narrative strategy into a presumably highbrow literary endeavor.

## 6. Post-Aarhus Reflections

The first thing that comes to mind as I think back on my experience of teaching “Xingu”

in Aarhus is that the exercise calling for the reconstruction of missing pieces of “Xingu” is not new. Many of us routinely ask our students to write a paragraph or two “in the style of” a particular character (e.g., Moll Flanders, Clarissa, Elinor Dashwood) or a narrator (e.g., that of *Tom Jones*, or of *Vanity Fair*). What's new here is a recipe structuring this assignment: its focus on embedded mental states, as opposed to any other features of the story. Asking students *whose mental states are embedded within each other* in a story is not the only way of helping them to own a narrative, but it is at least as effective—if not more effective than others—in the case of certain authors and texts. I'm sure that the marvelous insights about “Xingu” that the students came up with during our discussion can be achieved by using other theoretical perspectives, but I can attest that this perspective is both efficient and productive. That is, it's easy to introduce, and it generates a lot of discussion.

Second, one may want to think of where to take that discussion from here. Personally I wouldn't want to dedicate more than two class meetings to this methodology because I don't find pure “cognitive” interpretations sufficient on their own. That is, once I make students conversant with the concepts of mental state, sociocognitive complexity, and intermental unit, it makes sense to consider them not as the analytical centerpiece of my course but as a supplement to other theoretical perspectives.

For instance, I may inquire, in my subsequent historicist analysis of the text, what ideological agendas are served by making some characters more sociocognitively complex than others, that is, capable of considering more embedded mental states than others. I may draw students' attention to the difference between what the text purports to do—such as describe people of certain classes, genders, or races in flattering terms—and what it's actually doing, such as depicting people belonging to these groups as less sociocognitively complex.<sup>11</sup>

As a possible example of an interplay between sociocognitive complexity and gender biases, consider Elaine Blair's observation that there is a persistent tendency today among

American male writers to depict their male protagonists as losers, but with a difference. To appeal to female readers fed up with the “uncritical celebration of . . . self-absorption” (19) in such novelists as Updike, Mailer, and Philip Roth and in their “heroically virile” protagonists, the new generation of writers hurries to acknowledge characters’ narcissism.<sup>12</sup> When rejected by women, such men go through bouts of self-criticism—“loving scrutiny of all their faults,” as Blair calls it. And yet, as Blair trenchantly points out, even as female characters “get to remind the hero that he’s a navel-gazing jerk, . . . most of the good lines, and certainly the brilliant social and psychological observations, still go to the hero.” I suspect that, approaching the passages that Blair had in mind when she wrote this, from the “cognitive” perspective outlined above, would reveal that, however “winning” a female character may appear (as opposed, that is, to the male “loser”), she is still portrayed as functioning on a lower lever of sociocognitive complexity than the man she rejects. Indeed, in the exchange between Bruno and Sophie from Michel Houellebecq’s *The Elementary Particles*, which Blair quotes in her essay, Sophie seems kind and thoughtful, but it’s the crass Bruno who ends up with a series of third-level embeddings, reflecting, for instance, on the limitations of men who don’t have it in them to respond with “tenderness” to the “cynicism” of others (21).

Third, teaching sociocognitive complexity on the graduate level is different from teaching it on the undergraduate level because of self-awareness that structures the discussion on the graduate level. Undergraduates readily see sociocognitive complexity as something inherent in the text; they have to be reminded that, as historically and culturally situated readers, they construct the narrative’s sociocognitive complexity. Graduate students almost never lose track of sociocognitive complexity as a critical construct and their questioning of the process constitutes a crucial part of the discussion.

Finally, an instructor wishing to integrate cognitive approaches into her own teaching may find it useful to ponder the relationship among cognitive narratology, research in theory of

mind, and cognitive approaches to literature. I focused my cognitive narratology module in Aarhus on theoretical perspectives that either directly represent theory of mind (sociocognitive complexity and intermental thinking) or are highly compatible with it (strategic empathizing). This choice depended on a variety of practical needs and should not be taken as an indication that this combination of perspectives exhausts or defines cognitive narratology. In the past, aiming for a broader overview of that field, I have taught seminars drawing on the work of David Herman (particularly, on distributed temporality), Marie-Laure Ryan (possible worlds), and Porter Abbott (compression).<sup>13</sup>

Alternatively, to expand the discussion to the cognitive approaches at large, one may want to make students aware of the work of scholars doing research at the intersection of cognitive neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and literature.<sup>14</sup> Many of these scholars are committed to seeking connections with traditional aspects of literary and cultural studies.<sup>15</sup> Their innovative perspectives can thus be productively integrated into courses featuring a wide spectrum of critical approaches.

Appendix:

The complete reading list included Keen's "Strategic Empathizing," Palmer's "Storyworlds and Groups," Zunshine's "Sociocognitive Complexity" and "Style Brings in Mental States," as well as any full-text online edition of Wharton's "Xingu." Students were supposed to have read all three essays and "Xingu" before our first meeting.

Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://nordisk.au.dk/uddannelse/summerschools/ipin2012/>

<sup>2</sup> See appendix.

<sup>3</sup> There is no place for a Reader's or a Narrator's mind in *The Da Vinci Code* because the author makes sure that there is no place for innuendo or ambiguity in his representation of characters' mental states. For instance, elsewhere I discuss a typical passage, in which Brown focuses exclusively on the minds of his characters (i.e., when Fache can't understand why Sophie wants him to believe that Sauniere spent the last moments of his life composing a mathematical gag), while strategically using words such as "utter incomprehension," "gall," and "barge" to create an impression that we have a fully measured and exhaustive account of Fache's strong feelings. For further elaboration of this material, see Zunshine's "Style" (355) and "Sociocognitive Complexity."

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<sup>4</sup> The issue of being more or less amenable to engaging with works of fiction focusing on characters' minds as opposed to the narrator's mind may relate in interesting ways to Keith Oatley's argument about reading fiction as a mood-management strategy (54).

<sup>5</sup> I did not stress this point in my short introductory talk; this is something that becomes evident in the process of analyzing a text's sociocognitive complexity. An instructor who is particularly concerned with counterbalancing the perception of theory of mind as a predominantly internalist account of mind may want to emphasize this point early on. I have addressed this issue in a number of my earlier publications, for instance "Why Jane Austen Was Different."

<sup>6</sup> Phelan, email communication, 10/14/12.

<sup>7</sup> Phelan, email communication, 10/14/12.

<sup>8</sup> Easterlin, email communication, 4/6/13.

<sup>9</sup> See Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, *Detecting Texts*.

<sup>10</sup> The editor of this special issue raised the interesting question of whether the discussion of "broadcast empathy and the tendency to empathize with hunted culture vs. Club ladies [had led our group] to a general discussion of literary vs. popular genres," which, in turn, might have connected "back to distinctions among Brown, Wharton, Joyce and types of minds." These would have been very appropriate pedagogical moves (which is why I am including them here), but I simply can't remember if we touched upon these issues during our (very lively) classroom conversations in Aarhus. To be on the safe side, I will say we didn't.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between social class and sociocognitive complexity in eighteenth-century English fiction, see Zunshine, "1700-1775."

<sup>12</sup> Blair is quoting here David Foster Wallace's 1998 review of Updike's novel *Toward the End of Time*.

<sup>13</sup> Herman's online publication, "Cognitive Narratology," is a good starting point for an instructor

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wishing to introduce her students to a wide range of tools and methodologies associated with this area of study.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Crane's *Shakespeare's Brain*, Easterlin's *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation*, Hogan's *The Mind and Its Stories*, Richardson's *The Neural Sublime*, Spolsky's *Word vs Image*, Starr's *Feeling Beauty*, and Vermeule's *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?*

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, my edited collection, *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, which features the work of all of the above-mentioned critics and emphasizes compatibility between more established critical approaches (such as cultural historicism, deconstruction, etc.) and cognitive approaches.