If literature did not give us access to the lives of other people it most probably would not exist. It would not exist because hardly anyone would be interested in it – interested enough to go on reading. It is, after all, the fates, deeds, speeches, writings, thoughts, and feelings of other people in the fictional world we encounter when reading literature that create an interest strong enough to attract and sustain our attention, often for hours on end. Sometimes this interest will extend to imagined superhuman, divine beings, to strange creatures like cyborgs or to animals who seem to be more similar to us than we assumed, but generally it is directed at other people, or what is generally called ‘literary characters’. Like people in the life-world they normally have both body and mind, an outer and an inner life, and literary texts provide information about the one or the other or usually both. Yet while the literary presentation of the former, of other people’s appearance, deeds or speech is something we know from life experience, what we never get there but often enough in literature is a direct access to the inner life, to the thoughts and feelings, the aims and desires, the joy, anxiety and pain of others. Therefore it can be said that it is this transparency of the fictional minds what makes the reading of literature so fascinating.

There seems to be hardly any doubt that literary characters play a central role in the reading of narratives and plays and a great deal of poetry, and figures like Tom Jones, Uncle Toby, David Copperfield, Tom Sawyer or Holden Caulfield; Hamlet, Lear, Willy Loman or Blanche Dubois have a firmer place in the memory of many readers than any other features of the works through which they became acquainted with them. Yet in the nineteen-sixties and earlier nineteen-seventies when a structuralist approach became dominant, literary characters in the theories of leading narratologists like Greimas, Bremond, and Todorov were reduced to the function of mere agents in a plot or, rather, names and complexes of attributes linked to actions. This had become possible because already in the nineteen-thirties it had become fashionable to stress the artificiality of literary characters and to ridicule as naive an older type of literary criticism in which they were treated like real people, instead of asking how it is possible that such artificial creations can become such powerful illusions.

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I cannot refrain from re-quoting as an example of professional obtuseness a typical remark by William Gass in his *Fiction and the Figures of Life* on a passage from Henry James’s *The Awkward Age*:

Enter Mr. Cashmore, who is a character in *The Awkward Age*.

“Mr Cashmore, who would have been very red-headed if he had not been very bald, showed a single eyeglass and a long upper lip; he was large and jaunty with little petulant ejaculations that were not in the line of type."

We can imagine any number of other sentences about Mr Cashmore added to this one. Now the question is: what is Mr Cashmore? Here is the answer I shall give: Mr Cashmore is (1) a noise, (2) a proper name, (3) a complex system of ideas, (4) a controlling perception, (5) an instrument of organization, (6) a pretended mode of referring, and (7) a source of verbal energy. He is not an object of perception, and nothing whatever that is appropriate to persons can be correctly said of him. (Gass 43-44)

One can hardly be less perceptive than in this passage about what readers usually make of a sentence like the one from James’s novel, and it was not before 1978 that a more subtle structuralist analysis if not of whole literary characters but at least of the “Narrative Modes of Presenting Consciousness in Fiction” was presented by Dorrit Cohn. Encouraged by the interest in the actual experience of reading literature that came up in the course of the nineteen-seventies with reader-response theory, I by that time had begun to investigate the phenomenon of what I have here called “Encountering People through Literature”, that is, encountering ‘characters’ that have been created in the reader’s mind while reading a literary text, and the results were presented in 1978 under the title “Wie aus Sätzen Personen werden... Über die Erforschung literarischer Figuren” (“How Sentences Turn into People... On Investigating Literary Characters”). Though published in one of the then leading German journals of literary theory and poetics, POETICA, it did not make much of a stir, because it didn’t at all fit in with the current trend in narratology, and when it became topically pertinent due to the integration of cognitive psychology in one brand of narratology twenty years later, it was not mentioned even in Germany by critics such as Ralf Schneider, because it would have made things that were being presented as new not so new after all. I was therefore amazed when I was asked to contribute a revised English translation as late as 2004 to an issue of *Style* on German narratology.

I mention all this here because I will use this article from 1978 as a foil in my present investigation of how the use of the paradigms of cognitive psychology and other cognitive sciences as well as of the new neurosciences

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2 Quoted by James Wood in his recent study *How Fiction Works* 81.
5 A fact drawn attention to by Fotis Jannidis in his *Figur und Person* 179.
6 “Turning Words on the Page into ’Real’ People.” *Style* 38.2 (2004), 221-35.
have enhanced our understanding of the formation of literary characters in the process of reading, as well as of the fact that as readers we are under the impression that we are encountering people who already exist and whom we are just getting to know more and more intimately. This paradox is not explained by stating that the latter impression is merely an illusion. Just as the quite vivid impression of a sunset had to be explained when the world picture became heliocentric and the sun was no longer really believed to be ‘setting’ at any time, so the powerful impression that we encounter persons whom we get to know by reading a work of literature needs to be explained even more so when a close analysis of the process of reading reveals that things are actually different.

What I held to be of prime importance in view of the then current trend in narratology was to stress how powerful the illusions of persons we encounter in reading literature can be, and to insist that they must be given full attention as such in theoretical discourse. All the more so as the reduction of literary characters to functional adjuncts of actions and plots in structuralist narratology was followed by the poststructuralist deconstruction of the subject and by the attempt to render a construction of characters in the imagination of readers almost impossible through strategies of under- or overdetermination or through an abundance of metafictional commentary in some experimental postmodern fiction.

When a genuine interest in the phenomenon of literary character re-entered narratology under the influence of cognitive psychology, it was dealt with as a construction in the mind of the reader. Richard J. Gerrig and David Allbritton, in “The Construction of Literary Character: A View from Cognitive Psychology,” argued in 1990 that characters result from the application of quite ordinary cognitive processes such as the ‘Fundamental Attribution Error’, category- and person-based representation, and immersion, to the “types of information authors provide for these processes to act upon” (389). This may indeed be one of the reasons why readers deal with such constructions as if they were representations of already existing real people, yet the question of why the constructions do not appear as constructions is beyond the range of their attention.

It also remained beyond the range of attention of Ralf Schneider who, in his 2001 article “Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction,” came to apply to literary characters the concept of ‘mental models’ as developed by P.N. Johnson-Laird (Mental Models). Although he points out that “most ‘common’, i.e. non-academic, readers focus their interest in the fictional world on the characters” (628), he never asks why this should be so. The use of the concept of ‘mental model’, which was already in broad use within cognitive psychology, certainly had some advantages. The disadvantage was, however, that it once again undermined any attention to the power of illusion that makes us sometimes react with strong emotions to literary characters once we have become immersed in a story-world. Unfortunately, there is no close equivalent in English for the
German concept of “Vorstellung,” which indicates something that our imaginative powers put right in front of us so that it becomes as tangible as any object to the senses. Perhaps the heritage of the structuralist paradigm, which is not very suitable for explaining imaginative effects, is the reason why the power of illusion in the phenomenon of literary character is neglected not only by Schneider but also, for instance, in the often quoted critical anthology from 2003 on Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences edited by David Herman.

But the situation has since improved, not least thanks to Alan Palmer’s 2004 monograph on Fictional Minds, whose very title indicates that he is well aware of the power of illusion. This also shows in his choice of terminology, for though he makes use of the cognitive paradigm, he writes about “fictional consciousnesses” that the reader constructs and points out that we “frequently finish novels with a strong sense of the individual personality of a particular character” (176). Lisa Zunshine, however, in her recent Theory of Mind and the Novel, seems to be divided in her opinion when she first quotes a more favourable opinion from 2004 and then a negative one from 1961 that is typical of its time:

> even though, as critics and teachers of literature, we do base both scholarly interpretation and classroom discussions on our “interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own,” we remain wary about our own and our students’ tendency to treat fictional personages as real people. We consider this tendency “a sentimental misunderstanding of the nature of literature.”

She comes closest to an explanation of the paradox when she states that “Literature pervasively capitalizes on and stimulates Theory of Mind mechanisms that had evolved to deal with real people, even as on some level readers do remain aware that fictive characters are not real people at all” (10).

A genuine advance in understanding why character plays such an important role in reading literature I found in cognitive theory as presented in Gilles Fauconnier’s and Mark Turner’s well-known study from 2002, The Way We Think. Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities. Here, characters are – just like frames – considered as “basic cultural instruments” because “[i]n the way we think, a character can essentially stay the same over widely different frames, and a frame can stay essentially the same when populated by widely different characters” (250). It is thus no wonder that “the stability of character across different activities – is immensely complicated and infinitely explored in the world’s literature,” and it is further pointed out that “conceptual blending plays a central role in this conception of character” (251). What seems most important is the generally found close linking of characters and frames: “aspects of human reality. You can’t have

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7 Why We Read Fiction 19. The first quotation is from James Phelan’s study Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration 20; the second from Marvin Mudrick’s essay “Character and Event in Fiction” 211.
Encountering People Through Literature

one without the other, although in some cases the emphasis falls more on character and in other cases it falls more on the frame” (253). This “folk theory” is, however, based on our cognitive functioning, in which “[a]ny identity comes with considerable attachment to frames, and any frame comes with considerable attachment to character,” because “at the neurocognitive level of actions, frames and characters are always intertwined” (262). Philosophically speaking, in order to deal with the complexity of reality, human beings must have learned to combine the ancient view of Parmenides, that being always remains the same, with that of Heraclitus, that everything is in constant flux.

> What cognitive literary theory, understandably, has been most interested in with respect to literary characters is the interaction between text and reader. The need for active participation on the part of the reader, however, was already displayed in great detail as early as 1931 when Roman Ingarden published his phenomenological study Das literarische Kunstwerk (The Literary Work of Art). Ingarden showed that literary texts offer no more than “schematized aspects” of things and persons, that not only “foreign bodies” but also “internal aspects of one’s own psychic processes and character traits” are “elements of a literary work” (The Literary Work of Art 271) but that each of these “as a represented object […] is only a schematic formation with spots of indeterminacy of various kinds” (251). It was no accident that an English translation of Ingarden’s work appeared in 1973 when reception theory was beginning to shift the focus from the structure of the work to the reader. Shortly before, in 1971, Wolfgang Iser, in Die Appellstruktur der Texte (The Appeal Structure of Texts), had taken up the idea of the “spots of indeterminacy” and set out to demonstrate that it is the “gaps” in the text that prompt the reader to become immersed in it. A few years later, in Der Akt des Lesens (The Act of Reading), he showed that what makes the reading process so attractive is the retentive and protentive hypothesizing undertaken by the reader.

It was under the influence of reception theory that I then attempted to analyse the formation of illusions of people in the reading process. What became evident was that it takes very little, in fact not more than a name or even a personal pronoun, to trigger the assumption that there exists a character in the story-world. Recently Lisa Zunshine has stressed the fact that we tend to infer a whole inner life from any rendering of “self-initiated action”:

How much prompting do we need to begin to attribute a mind of her own to a fictional character? Very little, it seems, since any indication that we are dealing with an entity capable of self-initiated action […] leads us to assume that this entity possesses thoughts, feelings, and desires, at least some of which we could intuit, interpret, and, frequently, misinterpret. (22)
Yet it also became clear that the manner in which characters are represented on the textual surface, the level of signifiers, is a quite complex phenomenon. And due to the merely schematic presentation of the story-world the formation of characters in the mind of the reader must be greatly influenced by what in social psychology was called the reader’s ‘implicit personality theory’, i.e. the system of social and anthropological convictions guiding his or her perception of other people. What is more, one even has to reckon in each case with two such implicit personality theories: that of the reader, which I have already mentioned, and that of the author, who chose the kind and sequence of relevant information and shaped the text in such a way as to maximize the intended effect. It is reassuring to see that this view is now being shared by Zunshine who first asserts that

by imagining the hidden mental states of fictional characters, by following the readily available representations of such states through the narrator, and by comparing our interpretation of what the given character must be feeling at a given moment with what we assume could be the author’s own interpretation, we deliver a rich stimulation to the cognitive adaptation of our Theory of Mind, (25)

and later points out that

a text “comes to life” in the mind of the author just as richly as – if not more richly than, in some aspects – it does in the mind of her readers because it engages her ToM in a unique and pleasurable (and at time tortuous) manner. The novel, then, is truly a meeting of the minds – of the particularly inclined minds in a particular historical moment that has made the encounter serendipitously possible. (161)

Regarding the dynamic nature of the process of character formation during reading, I can present here only what I consider the most important among the plethora of detailed observations that researchers have already made. First, we have the prime importance of the ongoing attempt repeatedly to synthesize all upcoming bits of information that seem pertinent, and thus to shape a unified illusion of a person, in a proven sequence, especially if one thinks of the primacy effect and the recency effect. This is crucial not only with respect to plot structure and the sustaining of suspense but also regarding character constitution. With later information that does not seem to fit easily into an already formed notion of a character, we have to adjust our initial hypothesis, but there is, of course, the welcome possibility that the character may have changed; or we may simply ignore what refuses to fit in, or assume that an experimentally-minded author intended to foreground the artificiality of literary character constitution by effecting a ‘break’ in character, a break that may, of course, occasionally also result from authorial incompetence. Whether the one or other alternative is chosen depends chiefly on the range of coping strategies available to the reader as well as on his own implicit personality theory and cognitive complexity.

What was also noted is the paradox already mentioned that the literary character that is actually being shaped in the process of reading appears as the illusion of a person that already has existed, is encountered in the work,
and subsequently becomes better or even intimately known. This is a paradox that appears all the more amazing as information lacking in the text tends to be graciously replaced by the application on the part of the reader of social stereotypes and their schematic linking of outer and inner attributes. This also brought to light the assumption that there must be an identical substratum that remains unaffected by all possible changes in a character as well as the reader’s conviction that there must be an inner life in terms of a rational mind and emotions in analogy to his or her self-image, even when direct pertinent information is wholly absent.

Many of these observations and insights can be found reformulated in Gerrig and Allbritton’s essay from 1990, and it is somewhat reassuring that under the newly introduced paradigm of cognitive psychology they came to the same conclusions whenever they paid attention to one of the points I had been discussing. What they focused on in regard to the formation of literary characters in the reading process is, first, the already-mentioned Fundamental Attribution Error. The FAE consists in the bias to make dispositional rather than situational attributions, an error that “may add considerably to an author’s ability to create the illusion that even the most formulaic outcomes are brought about [...] by the internal properties of character” (382). Their second important point is the application to literary character of the distinction between ‘category-based’ or ‘person-based’ representations, as introduced by Marilyn B. Brewer in her work on impression formation (“A Dual Process Model”). They suggest that “the reader’s act of constructing a literary character is initially one of trying to assimilate the character to some well-known category,” and that this “causes to overlook the import of evidence that is inconsistent with that impression” (386). The ‘categories’ mentioned in this context are largely identical with what hitherto went under the name of ‘social stereotypes’, and the third observation they present, the creation of “anomalous suspense” through the readers’ becoming immersed in literary worlds, is also a well-known phenomenon.

The most ostensive innovation in Schneider’s long article from 2001, “Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction,” is indeed his treatment of the formation of literary characters in the reading process in terms of “mental-model construction.” I still prefer to speak of literary characters or even of illusions of real people, because this is the way they are treated not only by naive readers but by all readers who follow the invitation into a story-world in a ‘willing suspend of disbelief’. But I have tried to replace the new term ‘mental model’ by these terms throughout Schneider’s argument, and have discovered that it makes no difference regarding the validity of the statements. So the novelty seems to consist foremost in the change of vocabulary.

Schneider’s main interest lies in the description of what he calls “strategies of character reception,” which consist of “categorization”, “individuation”, “decategorization” and “personalization”. “Categorization” is a term taken over from Gerrig and Allbritton for the top-down application of social
stereotypes or literary stock characters in order to form a holistic mental model on the basis of sparse textual information, and when the model is later modified by specific details, it "enters into a stage of individuation" (624). When later information does not agree with the chosen category, the reader "must enter a process of decategorization" (624) and of new mental model construction. ‘Personalization’ is held to be the result of closer attention to textual detail or bottom-up processing, a strategy that may, however, fail – so that a process of ‘depersonalization’ sets in.

Uri Margolin, in his contribution to David Herman’s volume on Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences, “Cognitive Science, the Thinking Mind, and Literary Narrative,” wants above all to “demonstrate some of the benefits of an explicitly cognitivist approach to fictional minds” (271). After discussing the vexed question of the differentiation between author, implied author, and narrator, he turns to “Storyworld Participants as Minds in Action." One of his insights is that “readers need to formulate hypotheses about the minds of agents and ascribe to them mental functioning in order to make sense of their doings in terms of human actions and interactions” (284) – a moot point, once we form illusions of real persons. Then he turns to some specific features of the representation of cognitive functions in fiction, such as the possibility of “direct (unmediated), reliable, and full access to the contents and workings of other minds,” the “great importance [...] often attributed to the character’s accompanying consciousness of the relevant states and operations, whether they involve sensations, perceptual experiences (sentience), or thoughts and propositional attitudes (awareness),” and “the qualia of what-it’s-like to be in a certain mental state” (286). Also of interest to him is the “preference of much literature for nonstandard forms of cognitive functioning, be they rare, marginal, deviant, or involving a failure, breakdown, or lack of standard pattern,” when a pattern is considered being “standard” on the basis of the “folk psychology” of an author or his intended readership, a kind of psychology that is “period- and culture-dependent”(287). Most convincing, however, is his final description in cognitive-science terms of literary characters’ visual perception.

Though focusing on the historical aspect of literary characters in his monograph Figur und Person from 2000, Fotis Jannidis devotes some attention to the distinction between “Figurenmodelle” or what were traditionally character types, “figurale Schemata” or assumptions of regularities regarding persons, and “situative Schemata,” that is, typical constellations regarding situations and actions. He also points out the decisive role of teleological motivation and intentional action in the creation of literary character. Sharing the view that literary figures, as he calls them, can most fruitfully be described as mental models, he thinks that there exists a “Basistypus”, a basic structure comprising an inner and an outer aspect that all models of a figure have in common, and to which can be attributed further bits of information (cf. 192-198).
What is called by Jannidis the "inner aspect" is dealt with in much more detail by Alan Palmer in his study *Fictional Minds*. For him, "[c]haracterization is a continuing process. It consists of individual operations that result in a continuing patterning and repatterning until a coherent fictional personality emerges" (40). And here is his more detailed description of what happens:

Characterization is an inference from an individual action, then, toward a supposed disposition or trait, and these are states of mind that extend over time. In the same way, subsequent actions are interpreted by the reader in the context of the whole of the character’s mind as hypothesized up until that point. Judgments are then adjusted by the interpretation placed on the action, and a new frame is formed within which future actions can be interpreted. (40)

This sounds quite convincing, yet when Palmer then adds: "This process is not easy to theorize within the non-storyworld approaches" (40), this merely shows that he was not sufficiently aware of the research that had already been done.

What proves to be particularly fruitful is his strategy of first devoting a considerable part of his book to a description of the functioning of the human mind in real-life situations before focusing on the ‘fictional mind.’ In this way, he singles out features that are typical of the latter – for instance, what he calls the “continuing-consciousness frame”: “The reader collects together all of the isolated references to a specific proper name in a particular text and constructs a consciousness that continues in the spaces between the various mentions of that character” (176).

Working on the hypothesis that “[n]arrative is in essence the presentation of fictional mental functioning,” Palmer highlights the fact that because the process of creating fictional minds is “usually automatic, as Schank and Abelson say, frames and scripts ‘let you leave out the boring details when you are talking or writing, and fill them in when you are listening or reading’.” I wonder, though, whether it is really the case that listeners and readers are more involved in “boring details” than talkers or writers and thus constantly invent such boring details in order to fill gaps that were intentionally inserted. Not only do I doubt this, I also presume that speakers and writers rely on a semantic structure that, simply by virtue of its specific selection of details, whether provided or withheld, allows for the creation of rhetorical and thematic emphasis. Thus, by indiscriminately filling gaps in a text, be it regarding characters or anything else in a story-world, readers would largely undo the selective work of the author and be prone to miss entirely the thematic intent of the narrative. As Roman Ingarden had already pointed out in 1968 in his *Vom Erkennen des literarischen Kunstwerks (The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art)*,

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8 *Fictional Minds* 177. Palmer here quotes from Schank and Robert 41.
In consideration of the artistic composition, only some attributes or states of the portrayed persons are important and advantageous for the work, while the rest might better be left undetermined or merely sketched in. One can guess them approximately, but they are purposely left obscure so that they will not have a distracting influence and so that the especially important features will come more to the fore. (51)

And I agree with Palmer when he says: “The reader can cope with the gaps in the continuing consciousnesses of fictional minds because in the real world we experience gaps in other, real minds too” (199). The reader will in some cases feel the need to fill them, in others rather not: apart from following indications in the text regarding a necessary filling-in of details and an automatic filling-in by a mémoire involontaire of the Proustean kind, he or she will tend to take the same short-cuts to a contextually conditioned understanding that are generally used in communication.

As to the details in the construction of literary characters, we would do well to rely on the method of close reading and to exercise some patience, because, as Fauconnier and Turner have reminded us,

Knowing someone means knowing what that person will do in the most diverse situations, including novel or impossible ones, and knowing that depends on knowing what the person has done in the past, and being able to apply frames in the old and new situations. (262)

Of heightened interest, therefore, is Palmer’s application to discourse analysis of Marie-Laure Ryan’s concept of “embedded narratives,” using it to mean the whole of a character’s mind in action: the total perceptual and cognitive viewpoint; ideological worldview; memories of the past; and the set of beliefs, desires, intentions, motives, and plans for the future of each character in the story as presented in the discourse. It is a narrative because it is the story of the novel as seen from the limited, aspectual view of a single character. (Palmer 183).

And there are even “doubly embedded narratives” that present to us “a character’s mind as contained within another character’s mind,” so that “a fictional character’s identity consists, not just of his or her own embedded narrative, but of all the doubly embedded narratives of which he or she is the subject” (231). I agree that this can be said because there is only a finite number of such doubly-embedded narratives in the discourse of a particular narrative and these are open to inspection. In the life world, however, where this is not the case, we have to take resort to the body, to fingerprints and DNA to make sure of individual identity.

What Lisa Zunshine works with in Why We Read Fiction regarding the description of the formation of literary characters is the “Theory of Mind” concept, “a cluster of cognitive adaptations that allow us to navigate our social world and also structures that world” (162). She shows how such an overarching concept can be useful when it comes to the description of the particu-

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9 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Embedded Narrative and Tellability”.
lar preconditions of information-processing on the part of authors, readers, and fictional characters. A pertinent example is her explanation of a phenomenon already described by Erich Auerbach that we think that “the people whose story the author is telling experience much more than [the author] can ever hope to tell.”

Our Theory of Mind allows us to make sense of fictional characters by investing them with an inexhaustible repertoire of states of mind, but the price that this arrangement may extract from us is that we begin to feel that fictional people do indeed have an inexhaustible repertoire of states of mind. (Zunshine 20)

This has the consequence that

> [o]ur pleasant illusion that there are at least some minds in our messy social world that we know well is thus tarnished by our suspicion that even those ostensibly transparent minds harbor some secrets, and we therefore have to remember that the joys of reading fictional minds are subject to some of the same instabilities that render our real-life mind-reading both exciting and exasperating. (20)

It is reassuring to note Zunshine’s emphasis of the fact that the very process of making sense of what we read appears to be grounded in our ability to invest the flimsy verbal constructions that we generally call “characters” with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires and then look for the “cues” that would allow us to guess at their feelings and thus predict their actions; (10)

yet this insight is far from new. I already said so much in my essay from 1978.

Most probably, however, we are in practice not so free in the attribution of particular states of mind as it sounds, because – as Mark Turner states in his recent essay on “The Way We Imagine” –

> People [...] extremely early in life put together blending templates that serve them thereafter for dealing with people. The templates are quickly entrenched, and people ’live in the blend’, never aware of the work that went into the template, but able to open it back up actively and on-line when they want to do new work. We never need to construct these templates afresh again. Instead, we activate the blend directly, just like that.

Also worth mentioning here is Lisa Zunshine’s elaborate discussion of “Whose Thought Is It, Anyway?” – “our tendency to keep track of sources of our representations – to metapresent them,” because the ability to keep track of who thought, wanted, and felt what, and when they thought it, is crucial considering that the majority of our fictional narratives [...] center on the characters’ reweighing the truth-value of various cultural and personal beliefs.

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All in all, it seems no easy task to distinguish between a ‘literary character’ and the dynamic process of its formation in the process of reading, especially since, as I stressed in my 1978 article, the sequence of pertinent information plays an important role. I therefore defined the identity of a character as the specific profile of a process based on a particular sequence of bits of information stemming partly from the text and partly from the reader. Reformulated in Palmer’s terminology, it would be the creation of a fictional mind in the reader’s mind on the basis of an embedded narrative.

What I would miss there, though, are bodies – not so much the bodies of readers (although they do indeed play a role, insofar as they enforce interruptions in the mental input of long novels) as the bodies of literary characters, which are practically absent in all the studies of literary character based on the cognitive-science paradigm. Of course, it is often enough mentioned that we constantly infer inner qualities from outward appearances, but what is excluded is the fact that we equally often infer outward qualities from inner ones, because the two are closely linked in the social stereotypes we use. I therefore cannot refrain here from quoting Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar:

Let me have men about me that are fat
Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep a-nights.
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous. (*Julius Caesar* I, ii, 189-192)

However misleading such stereotypical inferences may be, it must not be forgotten that in the life-world we depend absolutely on what we get via the senses and that our cognitive strategies have been developed accordingly. A proof of the inference of outward qualities from inner ones in the reading process is the often experienced disappointment when we see the characters of a novel we have read in a filmed version. Narrative is therefore not only, as Palmer says, “the presentation of mental functioning” (187), it is the presentation of a fictional story-world peopled by fictional characters that exist and act and interact both with bodies and with minds.

There remain a few other aspects of the influence of the cognitive-science paradigm on our understanding of literary characters that deserve mention. The first pertains to the influence of particular paradigms on the way in which readers construct literary characters. In “Wie aus Sätzen Personen werden,” I already drew attention to the doubtful value of so-called ‘critical’ readings of works of literature resulting from a rigid application of particular personality theories. When a narrative is, for instance, read in terms of a Freudian notion of the mind, it is no wonder that the literary characters constructed on that assumption subsequently lend themselves nicely to a Freudian interpretation. Schneider makes the same point when he writes:

It is an open question whether in their first readings of a novel critics and theorists might follow nonacademic and nonprofessional reading strategies and apply their
theories only afterwards, when they produce a published or publishable reading that makes sense within the discourse of the branch of criticism they represent. (626)

Lisa Zunshine is even more benign when she remarks that it seems that a majority of literary-critical paradigms – be that paradigm psychoanalysis, gender studies, or new historicism – profitably exploit, in their quest for new layers of meaning, our evolved cognitive eagerness to construct a state of mind behind a behavior. (25)

I beg to strongly disagree, because by such a procedure literary works are reduced to mere source material to support the already-established mental frames of the interpreter and those who share his views, and the potential of art to question such frames and open up our minds is thwarted. It is, by the way, the same procedure of allegoresis by which medieval theologians made almost any sort of text seem orthodox if this served their purpose. From the cognitive point of view, this is not a matter to be brushed aside; after all, in the formulation of Gerrig and Allbritton, the “distinctive aspects of a cognitive theory of literary character reside [...] in the operations of ordinary processes on extraordinary literary input” (389). Only on this basis I can agree with Lisa Zunshine’s view that “our enjoyment of fiction is predicated – at least in part – on our awareness of our “trying on” mental states potentially available to us but at a given moment differing from our own” (17). We had therefore better treasure the “extraordinary literary input” or, in Derek Attridge’s terms, the “singularity of literature”\(^\text{12}\) as a chance to expand our minds in the direction of more subtle distinction than to close them by aligning the singular to a preconceived theory or ideology. This all the more so, as recent neuro-science findings are quite encouraging for those who love literature and art and believe in its particular value. When W.H. Auden wrote in his elegy on the death of William Butler Yeats that “poetry makes nothing happen,” (“In Memory” 69) he most probably was right as far as politics is concerned (his contextual domain of reference); but all in all he was much too pessimistic. As Norman Doidge, in his recent study The Brain That Changes Itself, is able to assure us,

Neuroplastic research has shown us that every sustained activity ever mapped - including physical activities, learning, thinking, and imagining - changes the brain as well as the mind. Cultural ideas and activities are no exception. Our minds are modified by the cultural activities we do – be they reading, studying music, or learning new languages. We all have what might be called a culturally modified brain, and as cultures evolve, they continually lead to new changes in the brain. [...] So a neuroplastically informed view of culture and the brain implies a two-way street: the brain and genetics produce culture, but culture also shapes the brain. (288)

It is thus well worth encountering people through literature, so long as we don’t attempt to make them fit too neatly into a procrustean interpretational frame and instead follow the rule of close reading and try to infer by a bottom-up procedure the theories of mind the author has supplied them with, however difficult that may be.

Works Cited


