Marie-Laure Ryan
Kinds of Minds: On Alan Palmer's "Social Minds"

It is no exaggeration to say that the work of Alan Palmer has put the study of fictional minds on a new track. That it should do so may appear surprising, because he has broken the trail through common sense much more than through reliance on new theories (though Palmer is very well informed of recent developments in cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind). This makes one wonder why anybody hadn't thought of his approach before. But it could be that many readers spontaneously thought of fictional minds in the same terms; it's just that being commonsensical was not the fashionable thing to do in literary criticism. It took an independent scholar unconcerned with approval by the collective mind of academia to take such an approach.

The basic idea was quite simple. Traditional approaches to characters in novels look at the mind from an "internalist perspective," according to which the mind is an inner theater featuring a neverending film of private thoughts, images, associations, memories and desires emerging from the depth of the subconscious. This film is called stream of consciousness, and the task of narratologists is to describe the forms of discourse through which narrators allow readers to look through the skull of the character and to watch the show unfold. While recognizing that the internalist perspective plays an important role in many types of novels, especially in those of the modernist period (where the representation of the inner theater of the mind becomes an end in itself), Palmer argued in his first book, *Fictional Minds*, for an "externalist perspective" that view the mind as something that manifests itself externally through both intentional and non-intentional behavior, and that other people can access through inductive reasoning—what cognitive psychology calls "theory of mind." Whereas the traditional narratological approach regards the mind as a mechanism for imagining and representing, Palmer's concept of "mind in action" favored a much more strategic conception of the mind: not the mind that experiences the storyworld passively, but rather the proactive mind that reacts to situations, conceives goals, constructs other minds, takes actions, and makes the story advance.

In this essay and in his second book, *Social Minds in the Novel,* Palmer takes the externalist perspective a step further, or rather, he fully develops an idea that was already sketched in his first book by arguing for a contrast between an intramental mind, whose operations take place within the skull, so to speak (though consciousness is always directed toward the external world), and an intermental, or social mind, "which is joint, group, shared, or collective thought" (p.1).

The idea of a social or collective mind is not in itself particularly new nor problematic. Literary critics have long been aware of the existence of collective ideas and of their potential for creating conflict between individuals and the groups they belong to. (Think of the many narratives that focus on the dilemma of people, such as immigrants, who are torn between individual aspirations and loyalty to the values of their native culture.) The various forms of collective thinking, beside cultural values, are strereotypes, rumors, public opinion, folk wisdom, common knowledge and what Roland Barthes calls *doxa*.

Palmer however is not content to study the manifestations of this collective thinking in a particular novel (*Middlemarch* by George Eliot); he makes the stronger claim that minds are not just what exists within the skull, nor are they something that manifests itself "beyond the skin," to use one of his favorite expressions, they quite objectively encompass entities that exist outside themselves. The intermental mind not only contains representations of other minds, it fuses them together, so that a unitary mind emerges out of a plurality of connected minds. This is the mind

of the town of Middlemarch, or the mind of two people who know each other so well that each of them can think for the other. For Palmer, to speak of the mind of Middlemarch goes "much further than simply suggesting that the town provides a social context within which individual characters operate"; it means "literally and not just metaphorically [that the town] has a mind of its own" (p. 19). It is this strong claim that I propose to focus on in my commentary.

A widely quoted example in favor of the idea of an intermental mind (and of distributed cognition, of which it is an application) is this argument by James Wertsch: "Wertsch tells the story of how his daughter lost her shoes and he helped her to remember where she had left them. Wertsch asks: Who is doing the remembering here? He is not, because he had no prior knowledge of where they were, and she is not, because she had forgotten where they were and was only able to remember by means of her father's promptings" (Palmer, p. 12). This example has always puzzled me: isn't it the neurons in the daughter's brain that do the remembering by constructing a new path, after another path has been destroyed? The father merely acts as a helper, and his brain circuits are not connected to the daughter's. Saying that the remembering is done by an intermental mind would be like saying that childbearing is collectively done by the team of the mother and whoever is assisting her. I doubt that women in labor would agree— unless they have been brainwashed by Lamaze courses.

While multiple minds can form an intermental mind, conversely, what I regard as my individual mind exists according to Palmer in multiple minds: as he writes, "there is a strong sense in which our mind is distributed among those other people who have an image of us in their mind" (p.6). It seems to me that this claim does away too easily with the contrast between the self and the other, or between first person and third person perspective: I experience my mind in the first person, but the people who form an image of my mind do so in the third person. How then can these two perspectives fuse into one mind: will that be an omniscient supra-individual mind that apprehends both my mind and its reflections in other people's thought in the third person? Then the subjective perspective will be lost. Or is Palmer saying that the contents that form my mind include what I think other people think of me? This is quite different from how they actually think of me—and by thinking of me other people cannot be said to hold a piece of my mind, which is what the idea of distributed mind suggests. Furthermore, if my mind were "distributed" between my head and the mind of others, these people's mind would itself be distributed between their own head and other minds, and so on *ad infinitum*, so that we would end up with a super intermental mind that encompasses the minds of everybody in the world. Yet this mind would lack the constitutive feature of Palmer's concept of intermental mind, namely consensus: it is because they agree of most decisions that an old couple can be said to be "of one mind," and it is because the inhabitants of Middlemarch are of one opinion that Middlemarch is said to have "a mind of its own."

Distributed cognition plays a central role in another of Palmer's arguments. Philosophers of mind are currently leaning toward a model of consciousness inspired by phenomena such as swarms, ant colonies and beehives: these collective entities behave intelligently, even though none of their members is conscious of the functioning of the system as a whole, and even though there is no hierarchical structure that makes certain members responsible for decisions. Here the system, or collectivity, is clearly more than the sum of its parts. Similarly, as Palmer observes, "Within the brain, consciousness is distributed across constituent modules that are just as incapable of independent cognition as the various elements that go to make up the Chinese room" (p.18). (Here Palmer is referring to a thought experiment devised by John Searle to show that computers cannot be intelligent, but Chinese room can be replaced with swarm or a beehive.)

Now if a person's mind emerges from a network of individual elements (such as neurons and synapses) that have no independent cognition, why cannot the process be repeated on a higher level, so that the networked minds of many people will produce a higher mind—the social mind of Middlemarch? There is however a fundamental difference between an individual mind and the so-called mind of a collective entity such as a town. Individual minds form ideas that cannot be said to be contained in any of their individual elements; in other words, as I have already stated, they are more than the sum of their parts. But the mind of Middlemarch, if there is such a thing, is an aggregate of ideas which also exist in the mind of the majority of the townspeople. Moreover, Middlemarch is unable to form ideas of its own: while individual minds are creative, collective minds only reflect what the members of the group believe. And finally, while individual minds are capable of making decisions, collective minds only contain the general principles on the basis of which decisions are made. Historians like to speak of "France" or of "Germany" as characters when they write histories of World War I or II, yet it is not France nor Germany that launch attacks on each other, but rather their leaders. Similarly, even though Middlemarch may be depicted as an agent in Eliot's novel (for instance in this sentence: "Middlemarch, in fact, counted on swallowing Lydgate and assimilating him very comfortably"), the reader—contrary to Palmer's claims—easily understands that it is a figural way of speaking, because, among other things, towns don't have mouths and cannot swallow. A collective mind, then, is quite different from an individual mind.

But Palmer has anticipated this objection, together with several others (does it mean that he shares a mind with his imagined opponents?):

> You may now be thinking …any thinking that a town does must surely be different from the thinking that an individual does. But of course! It would be silly to disagree. I am not saying that intermental and intramental minds are the same. I am saying that they are similar in some ways, different in others, but they are both still minds. Just different kinds of minds. (p. 23)

If there are different kinds of minds (computer minds, swarm minds, town minds, people minds), the distinction between literal and figural meaning disappears: there is just type A and type B and type C minds. Computers have type A, people have type B, towns have type C, and each has its own type in a literal sense. Then any objection to the idea that Middlemarch has a mind can be shot down by saying: "your argument works for apples, but I am talking about oranges." But if Palmer's thesis is unfalsifiable, it is not theoretically meaningful. Moreover, if we postulate different types of minds, the principle of Ockham's razor will be violated. This is also an objection that Palmer anticipates: he says that it is more economical to postulate one mind than many in the case of intermental thought such as the example of the old couple who can think for each other (p. 18). But Ockham's razor does not fight the proliferation of units of the same type (whether there are one, two or a billion minds in the world does not make any difference for philosophy), it works against the proliferation of theoretically distinct types of entities, which is exactly what Palmer does when he postulates different kinds of minds.

In this article, Palmer has used standard narratological techniques to show how Eliot attributes a mind to Middlemarch. What he has *not* done is outline the role that this so called "social mind" plays in this particular plot. Social minds arise when consensus happens; they disintegrate when agreement breaks down. But narrative plots are built on conflict, not on harmony. Social minds are therefore only productive of narrativity when they clash with the

aspirations of individual minds. Though Palmer hints at this when he quotes the sentence "Middlemarch, in fact, counted on swallowing Lydgate," he does not use this sentence to analyze the fate of Lydgate but only to argue for the non-metaphorical nature of the mind of Middlemarch. In another of his articles ("Storyworlds and Groups") Palmer similarly argues that a town has a mind (this time it is an Italian village in *Men at Arms* by Evelyn Waugh) and he shows this through stylistic analysis, but he does not go into the details of how this town may act as a character in the story. It seems that for Palmer, every manifestation of public opinion in a novel demonstrates the existence of intermental thought, no matter how it is presented or what role it plays in the story.

   The relation of Palmer's article to the disciplines of cognitive science is ambiguous. On one hand, he loudly claims "that we understand fictional minds much better when we apply to them some of the work done on real minds by psychologists, philosophers, and cognitive scientists" (p. 3), and he uses ideas from the cognitive disciplines as sources of inspiration, in what I have called a top-down approach (Ryan, "Narratology and Cognitive Science"), but like most cognitive narratologists, he does not submit them to rigorous experimental testing, as does the empirical branch of psychonarratology (Gerrig and Egidis; Bortolussi and Dixon). On the other hand, one senses that he would love to demonstrate that there is such a thing as an intermental mind, and that his analysis of *Middlemarch* will verify current ideas about the distributed nature of cognition (Wertsch, Vygotsky, Hutchins, etc.). Would his article be so laced with material from cognitive science if his purpose was simply to show how certain authors tend to personify certain locations? I don't think so. Nor do I think that cognitive ideas such as distributed cognition can be verified from the analysis of narrative texts, and this for two reasons: first, they are too speculative to be the sort of thing that can be proved right or wrong; and second, when professional readers of literature get excited about certain ideas, they will usually find what they are looking for, and texts will offer little resistance. I am not saying that narratology cannot make a contribution to the study of the mind; after all, narratives are products of the mind and should therefore tell something about it: as Palmer himself observes: "all serious students of literature are cognitivists" (p. 3). But this contribution should not be taken for granted, and narratology has still a lot of soul searching to do in order to find out how to create a mutually enriching relation to the cognitive sciences.

References

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Palmer's rejoinder

Rejoinder to response by Marie-Laure Ryan

I'm grateful to the editor of *Style* for finding room in this issue for Marie-Laure Ryan's response to the target essay [by Alan Palmer in 45.2]. I think her thoughts on the concept of social minds are of great importance, particularly in the context of her views on the relationship between narrative theory and cognitive science generally.

I said in the essay that some literary scholars "are interested from the beginning in the concept of intermental *thought*, but resist the concept of an intermental *mind*. It is a step too far" (221). I sense that this fits Marie-Laure's response. Although she appears to accept that bee swarms and ant colonies are collective entities that can behave intelligently, she balks at the idea of regarding the town of Middlemarch as an intermental mind. For this reason, in terms of my classification of the responses, I would put her into group B.

The best way to explore our differences of view might be to focus on the question of criteria. What are some of the criteria that an entity must satisfy before it can properly be called a "mind"? In particular, can the undeniable differences between individual minds and intermental minds be restated as criteria that the latter don't satisfy and therefore disqualify them as minds?

Let's start with Wertsch's "shoes" example. Ryan argues that it is the daughter only who is doing the remembering because "the father merely acts as a helper". (By the way, the same doubt was expressed to me once at a conference by Peter Rabinowitz.) She adds, though, that the father's "brain circuits are not connected to the daughter's." The criterion implicit in this remark is that a mind must consist of physically connected brain circuits.

Ryan then refers to two "fundamental" differences between individual and social minds. First, the former "form ideas that cannot be said to be contained in any of their individual elements" (e.g. the neurons and synapses of the brain) and so are creative. By contrast, the latter are merely aggregates of ideas such as the beliefs which exist in individual minds. Secondly, the former "are capable of making decisions," while the latter merely contain the general principles which form the basis of individual decisions.

So three criteria appear to me to be implicit in these concerns (now listed in a different order): to qualify as a mind, an entity must consist of physically connected brain circuits; it must be capable of making decisions; and it must be able to form ideas that are not already contained within its individual components and so be creative. The implication is that these are necessary conditions which have to be met before something can be considered as a mind.

With regard to the first, I tried in the essay to counter this argument by saying that some cognitive theorists are imaginative about considering alternatives to the simple one-mind/one-brain correspondence. I think my pre-emptive defense still holds good. Without further justification, simply to assert this correspondence is to beg the question.

On the second, I don't accept the suggested difference. I think that small groups in particular *are* capable of making decisions and that these decisions are often different from the ones which individuals would have taken on their own.

I can see the appeal of the final criterion – the argument that a mind must be creative and viable i.e. capable of independent growth and development. My initial response is to say that, actually, individual minds are dependent too - in their case on bodies and, in particular, on brains. (This is the vexed question known in the philosophy of mind as "supervenience.") Is this sort of dependency a problem too or, as with the Occam's razor discussion, am I indulging in sophistry again? (I should mention here that I concede Ryan's point with regard to my earlier misuse of Occam's razor.) My more considered response is to argue that group minds *can* be creative. As stated above, I think that groups can arrive at decisions and take actions that the individuals in the group would not have by themselves. This is particularly true of small groups but can also apply to larger ones.

My final comment on Ryan's main argument is that I do not see why talk of different kinds of minds is necessarily unfalsifiable and not theoretically meaningful. Surely it would be possible to define the concept of an intermental mind carefully enough to establish whether or not it is applicable in particular circumstances? (Of course it doesn't help the precision of the discussion that, in my use of the example of Middlemarch "swallowing" Lydgate, I did not make it clear that the reference to swallowing is indeed a metaphor. However, it's just as much of a metaphor in the original sentence in the text about Rosamond swallowing Lydgate, so I do not see that the point is relevant to my argument.)

With regard to the concept of situated identity, Ryan says that "it seems to me that it does away too easily with the contrast between the self and the other, or between first person and third person perspective." This was certainly not my intention. What I was proposing was an enlarged conception of mind that includes both first and third person perspectives. A full description of the workings of a single mind should consist not only of how that mind is experienced by its possessor but also of how those workings are experienced by other people. I can't see that this (surely "commonsense"?) view need be controversial.

I completely agree that I do not outline the role that the Middlemarch mind plays in the plot of the novel. In my book, *Social Minds in the Novel*, I discuss the relationship between Dorothea's

and Lydgate's minds and the Middlemarch mind and try to give a sense of how the plot is driven by the conflicts and clashes between individual and group minds. However, as I said in my main rejoinder, I could have done a lot more in this respect.

Marie-Laure's comments on the relationship between cognitive science and narrative theory are characteristically challenging. I wouldn't ever suggest that "cognitive ideas such as distributed cognition can be verified from the analysis of narrative texts." I had in mind a more open-ended relationship whereby social psychologists in particular could get ideas from novels which could then be empirically tested. However, I think that the person who is much more qualified than I am to address Marie-Laure's general concerns is David Herman. It would be fascinating to hear a debate between them on these large and important questions.