

Bakhtin, Theory of Mind, and Pedagogy: Cognitive Construction of Social Class

Lisa Zunshine

Lisa Zunshine is a Bush-Holbrook Professor of English at the University of Kentucky, Lexington.

Abstract

This essay brings together cognitive literary theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogic imagination to illuminate the construction of social class in the eighteenth-century novel. It offers a close reading of selected passages from Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778), made possible by combining Bakhtinian and cognitive poetics. It also discusses the theoretical ramifications of this approach and demonstrates its use in an undergraduate classroom.

I have learned to nod sympathetically when my undergraduates, after reading the first fifty or so pages of Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778), tell me that they find it flowery and wordy. I nod even though a part of me imagines asking them, with some indignation: *Frances Burney's* novel is flowery and wordy? As opposed to what? What are you reading currently, compared to which *Evelina* is not well written enough for you? But even as one part of me fumes, another remains optimistic. This is my opening, I say to myself. Give me two weeks, and they will see that what they currently describe as flowery (for they are trying to articulate something that is there but for which they do not yet have a better name!) is ideology wed to rhetoric with skill, subtlety, and precision. The opposite of flowery, in other words, whatever that catch-all may mean to twenty-year-old readers today.

And so, roughly two weeks later, we come across a passage in which one of *Evelina's* suitors, a "low-bred"¹ young man, Mr Smith, who yet wishes to come across as a gentleman, presents her with tickets to a ball at the Hampstead Assembly. *Evelina*, as you may remember, is the story of a beautiful young woman who has been brought up in rural

1 Frances Burney, *Evelina, or The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, ed. Edward A. Bloom, intro. and notes Vivien Jones (1778; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 180. References are to this edition.

seclusion and is now entering London. She is a daughter of a baronet, who abandoned her mother shortly after their marriage and burned the marriage certificate. This means that, though by birth and education she belongs to the aristocracy, her social status is ambiguous, at least until her father publicly acknowledges her as his legitimate heiress. Until that happens, she is subject to amorous advances by men from an unusually wide social spectrum, from shopkeepers to aristocrats, each with his own way of speaking and pressing his suit. Mr Smith may be said to press his in a particularly obnoxious fashion, for Evelina had told him earlier that she did not want to go to the ball, and he has simply ignored her words.

Today Evelina does not just say no. Her answer is couched in such terms so as to emphasize her incompatibility with Mr Smith.² He understands only part of what she says and cannot respond properly. This is an important detail because men from the social class to which she anxiously defends her right to belong would have understood and responded in kind (even those of them, such as Sir Clement Willoughby, whose courtship style is obnoxious in its own way).

Here is their conversation. Evelina has reminded Mr Smith that she had already told him that she would not go to the Assembly.

“Lord, Ma’am,” cried he, “how should I suppose you was in earnest? come, come, don’t be cross; here’s your Grandmama ready to take care of you, so you can have no fair objection, for she’ll see that I don’t run away with you. Besides, Ma’am, I got the tickets on purpose.”

“If you were determined, Sir,” said I, “in making me this offer, to allow me no choice of refusal or acceptance, I must think myself less obliged to your intention than I was willing to do.”

“Dear Ma’am,” cried he, “you’re so smart, there is no speaking to you;—indeed you are monstrous smart, Ma’am! but come, your Grandmama shall ask you, and then I know you’ll not be so cruel.” (220)

Evelina and Mr Smith may as well have been speaking two different languages, so loud is the clash of their sensitivities and the social incommensurability that it implies. Yet how is this impression created? That is, what tools do we have at our disposal to explain the rhetorical effect

2 Not only does Evelina signal to Mr Smith her social superiority, but she also manages to do so without offending her grandmother, Mme Duval, who is present and quite happy with Mr Smith’s courtship of her granddaughter. Here, as on many other occasions, Evelina’s speech manifests the quality of “double-edgedness,” discussed by Julia Epstein in *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women’s Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 111.

of their exchange? Left to their own devices, students consider Evelina's elaborate phrasing a prime example of what they call "flowery" and "wordy," while Mr Smith's speech is mainly "choppy." Can we do better than that?

Bakhtinian Poetics

If we want to do better, one good place to start is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. Novels, in Bakhtin's view, are constructed "out of heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled and often multi-linguaged elements."³ One of the "compositional-stylistic unities" (though by no means the most important one) making up "the novelistic whole" is the "stylistically individualized speech of characters."⁴ Although Burney was not on Bakhtin's radar when he wrote *Discourse in the Novel* (unlike, for instance, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, and Tobias Smollett), her writing seems to exemplify what he called a comic style "of the English sort": one based on "the stratification of the common language."⁵ The "verbally and semantically autonomous"⁶ ways in which Burney's characters speak underscore their largely immutable class positions. It is heteroglossia in service of ideology.

Some sociolectal markers pointing to Evelina's and Mr Smith's class differences seem to be obvious. In contrast with Evelina's polished way of speaking, Mr Smith uses short, clipped clauses ("don't be cross") and vulgar expressions that brand him as a shopkeeper aspiring to sound genteel, such as "monstrous smart." His grammar is bad ("you was"). He betrays his crassness by reminding her that he paid for the tickets ("I got the tickets on purpose"). It is all here.

Cognitive Poetics

But something else is here too. To see it, we turn to cognitive literary theory,⁷ a field that has roots in cognitive science but has come into its

3 M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 265.

4 Bakhtin, 262.

5 Bakhtin, 308.

6 Bakhtin, 315.

7 The particular theoretical commitment of this essay, that is, its focus on the construction of fictional consciousness as fused with ideology, places it within two critical traditions of exploring fictional minds. One, narratological, is represented by such works as

own in the last decade, with hundreds of studies that integrate insights from cognitive psychology and neuroscience with goals and methods of literary criticism.⁸ In particular, we look at research on embedded mental states in fiction, an exciting recent offshoot of studies in “theory of mind” aka “mindreading” (that is, our tendency to explain observable behaviour as caused by underlying mental states, such as thoughts, desires, and intentions).⁹

Cognitive scientists who work with theory of mind use the term “embedment” to describe thoughts and feelings nested within each other, as in, “she *didn't realize* that he *wanted to surprise* her.” While they focus on embedded mental states that structure daily social interactions,¹⁰ literary scholars explore embedments that emerge as we read fiction. It seems that to make sense of what's going on in a play, a novel, or a narrative poem, we continuously embed within each other mental states of its characters and, when appropriate, of its narrator, author, and readers.¹¹

Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Palmer, *Social Minds in the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010); and David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). Another, historicist, is represented by such studies as Ellen Spolsky, *Satisfying Skepticism: Embodied Knowledge in the Early Modern World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); and Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

8 For reviews of the field, see Alan Richardson, “Studies in Literature and Cognition: A Field Map,” in *The Work of Fiction: Cognition, Culture, and Complexity*, ed. Alan Richardson and Ellen Spolsky (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 1–29; and Lisa Zunshine, “Introduction to Cognitive Literary Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–9.

9 For a recent comprehensive review of research on theory of mind, see Ian Apperly, *Mindreaders: The Cognitive Basis of “Theory of Mind”* (New York: Psychology Press, 2011).

10 See Rebecca Saxe and Nancy Kanwisher, “People Thinking about Thinking People: The Role of the Temporo-parietal Junction in “Theory of Mind,”” *NeuroImage* 19, no. 4 (2003): 1835–42, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12948738>; and Wanqing Li, Xiaoqin Mai, and Chao Liu, “The Default Mode Network and Social Understanding of Others: What Do Brain Connectivity Studies Tell Us,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8:74 (2014): n.p., doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00074>.

11 See Zunshine, “The Secret Life of Fiction,” *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 724–31, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2015.130.3.724>; Max J. Van Duijn, Ineke Sluiter, and Arie Verhagen, “When Narrative Takes Over: The Representation of Embedded Mindstates in Shakespeare’s *Othello*,” *Language and Literature* 24, no. 2 (2015): 148–66, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0963947015572274>; Haiyan Lee, “Chinese Feelings: Notes on a Ritual Theory of Emotion,” *Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2016): 1–37; D.H. Whalen, Zunshine, and Michael Holquist, “Increases in Perspective

Some of those embedments are merely implied by the text, while others are explicitly spelled out. For instance, we understand why Romeo kills himself when he discovers Juliet's lifeless body. We *know* that he *does not know* that she is alive and that she merely *wanted* some people to *think* that she is dead. This is an implied embedment. In contrast, the Old English poem "The Wanderer," dated somewhere between the late sixth and the early tenth century, spells out the narrator's feelings as he *wonders* at why he is not *depressed* when he *thinks* about death:

Indeed I cannot think
 why my spirit
 does not darken
 when I ponder on the whole
 life of men
 throughout the world,
 How they suddenly
 left the floor (hall),
 the proud thanes."¹²

Another explicit embedment, from *Robinson Crusoe*: "I know not what it was, but something shocked my mind at that thought, and I durst not speak the words. 'How canst thou become such a hypocrite,' said I, even audibly, 'to pretend to be thankful for a condition which, however thou mayest endeavour to be contented with, thou wouldst rather pray heartily to be delivered from?'"¹³ Crusoe is *shocked* that he *would pretend* to be *grateful* for the condition that he would, in fact, *prefer* to escape.¹⁴

In the eighteenth-century Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (aka *The Story of the Stone*) by Cao Xueqin, an aristocratic young lady, Wang Xi-feng, offers her husband, Jia Lian, to exchange her maid, Patience, for a new "chamber wife" for him.¹⁵ But even as she does it, we know (another implied embedment of mental states!) that she knows

Embedding Increase Reading Time Even with Typical Text Presentation: Implications for the Reading of Literature," *Frontiers in Psychology* (24 November 2015): n.p., doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01778>.

12 "The Wanderer," <http://www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=get&type=text&id=wdr>, accessed 30 July 2017.

13 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 97.

14 For a discussion of embedment in "The Wanderer" and *Robinson Crusoe*, see Zunshine, "The Commotion of Souls," *SubStance* 45, no. 2 (2016): 118–42, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/628001>.

15 Cao Xueqin, "The Golden Days," vol. 1 in *The Story of the Stone*, trans. David Hawkes (pub. 1791; London: Penguin, 1973), 310. References are to this edition.

quite well that he understands she is merely playing with him and would never allow him to have another concubine, nor would she want to part with her trusted Patience. And when Patience lies to Jia Lian, within Xi-feng's hearing, that a pretty girl has come with a message for Patience, she knows that, jealous as Xi-feng might be, she would eventually be grateful to her for making Jia Lian think of that girl and distracting him from the real purpose of the messenger. When Jia Lian steps out of the room, Patience explains to Xi-feng what she had in mind. Implied and explicitly spelled-out embedments thus often coexist on the same page, indeed, in the same sentence, reinforcing and complicating each other.

One important interpretive payoff of looking at fiction through the lens of cognitive literary theory is the realization that writers portray some characters as capable of embedding more mental states than others—a difference that can be underwritten by considerations of class, race, and gender.¹⁶ For instance, in the above example from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the cat-and-mouse games that Xi-Feng and Patience play with Jia Lian are in keeping with a gender pattern we find elsewhere in the novel. Known for his nostalgic sympathy towards his young female characters,¹⁷ Cao Xueqin consistently depicts them one step ahead of men, that is, embedding mental states on a higher, or deeper, level.¹⁸

Cognition and Ideology

When I teach *Evelina*, I introduce my undergraduates to Bakhtin and heteroglossia but not necessarily to theory of mind. Especially if we are strapped for time, a comprehensive theoretical buildup from cognitive science may not be needed for an introduction to literature course¹⁹ (as different, for instance, from a seminar on literary theory with a strong cognitive studies component). All we need is one concept—embedded (aka “nested”) mental states—and that can be explained in ten minutes, with a chalkboard drawing of a circle within a circle within a circle.

16 For a comparative study of the role of gender in fictional mind reading, see Barbara Simerka, *Knowing Subjects: Cognitive Cultural Studies and Early Modern Spanish Literature* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2013), 23–80.

17 David Hawkes, introduction to “The Golden Days,” by Cao Xueqin, 20.

18 See Zunshine, “From the Social to the Literary: Approaching Cao Xueqin’s *The Story of the Stone* (Honglou meng 紅樓夢) from a Cognitive Perspective,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, 176–96. See also Lee, 25.

19 Though, see Peter Rabinowitz and Corinne Bancroft, “Euclid at the Core: Recentering Literary Education,” *Style* 48, no. 1 (2014): 1–34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.48.1.1>.

For instance, “She *wants* him to *know* that she is *angry* at him for *forgetting* her birthday”—four concentric circles with “wants” in the outermost layer and “forgetting” in the innermost—represents four mental states embedded within each other. “He is *sad* because he *wants* to be with his family”—two concentric circles—two embedded mental states. “I *want* to go shopping”—one mental state. “I went shopping on Friday”—no mental states.²⁰

When we return to the conversation between Mr Smith and Evelina and examine what they say specifically in terms of the number of embedded mental states, we notice right away that Mr Smith’s embeddings, both implied and explicit, stay around the second level, whereas Evelina spouts third-to-fourth-level embeddings one after another. Here is one way to map their exchange:

“Lord, Ma’am,” cried he, “how should I suppose you was in earnest? come, come, don’t be cross; here’s your Grandmama ready to take care of you, so you can have no fair objection, for she’ll see that I don’t run away with you. Besides, Ma’am, I got the tickets on purpose.” [Who would *think* that you *meant* what you said? (two embedded mental states). I *know* that you *worry* that there will be no chaperone (two embedded mental states).]

“If you were determined, Sir,” said I, “in making me this offer, to allow me no choice of refusal or acceptance, I must think myself less obliged to your intention than I was willing to do.” [I might have *felt bad* turning you down *had I thought* that you were *aware* of my *feelings* enough to care to give me a choice (at least three, perhaps four embedded mental states). But because now I *know* that you would not even *consider* that I may not *want* to go, I *intend* not to *feel bad* about *disappointing* you (two parallel sets of three embedded mental states).]

“Dear Ma’am,” cried he, “you’re so smart, there is no speaking to you;—indeed you are monstrous smart, Ma’am! but come, your Grandmama shall ask you, and then I know you’ll not be so cruel.” [I *know* that you are *too smart* for me (two embedded mental states). I *hope* you will *listen* to your Grandmama (two embedded mental states). I *know* that you will *agree* eventually (two embedded mental states).]

At this point, I usually ask my students to consider the pattern of embedment exhibited by two men, Sir Clement Willoughby and Lord

20 For a discussion of mental states found even in constructions seemingly devoid of any intentionality, see D.H. Whalen, Zunshine, Evelyne Ender, Jason Tougaw, Robert F. Barsky, Peter Steiner, Eugenia Kelbert, and Michael Holquist, “Validating Judgments of Perspective Embedding: Further Explorations of a New Tool for Literary Analysis,” *Scientific Study of Literature* 6, no. 2 (2016): 278–97.

Orville, who belong to the aristocracy, that is, the social class within which Evelina, a daughter of a baronet, will be eventually ensconced. Here are two typical examples of their speeches. (I quote them here out of context, but it is similar in both cases: each man wants to influence Evelina by disposing her more favourably towards himself.)

Sir Clement Willoughby: “You cannot even judge of the cruelty of my fate; for the ease and serenity of your mind incapacitates you from feeling for the agitation of mine!” (327). [We may map this as, I *appreciate* that your *state of mind* makes it impossible for you *understand* how *unhappy* I am (at least three, possibly four embedded mental states).]

Lord Orville: “I greatly fear that I have been so unfortunate as to offend you; yet so repugnant to my very soul is the idea, that I know not how to suppose it possible I can unwittingly have done the thing in the world that, designedly, I would wish to avoid” (330–31). [We may map this as, You *must believe* that I am *distressed* to *realize* that I have made you *feel* precisely the way I would never *want* to make you *feel* (at least four embedded mental states).]

Mr Smith’s limited capacity for embedding mental states is thus *dialogic*²¹—another key concept from Bakhtin—that is, we may experience it as limited only in contrast with the embedments of other characters, such as Evelina, Sir Clement Willoughby, and Lord Orville. Once we become aware of this contrast, we realize that it is used throughout the novel in two related but not identical ways.

First, it marks bona fide, as opposed to in-name-only, gentility. That is, “real” gentlemen and gentlewomen, such as Lady Howard, Mr Villars, Mrs Selwyn, and Mr Macartney, who also happen to treat Evelina with kindness and respect, consistently embed mental states at and above the third level, while the nominally genteel characters who insult, ignore, and exploit her, such as Lord Merton, Lady Louisa Larpent, Mr Lovel, and Captain Mirvan, stay around a lower (that is, second) level.²²

Besides marking “true” gentility, the differential capacity for embedding is also used to naturalize characters’ social status. Shopkeepers and parvenus with shopkeeper mentality do not rise above the second level in

21 See Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990), 154–55.

22 As Brian McCrea puts it, building on Michael McKeon’s concept of “status inconsistency,” Burney’s “satire upon Mr. Smith doesn’t imply an endorsement of characters like Coverley and Merton.” McCrea, *Frances Burney and Narrative Prior to Ideology* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013), 54.

their attribution of mental states. Thus, Evelina's low-born cousin Tom Branghton: "There is nothing but quarreling with the women; it's *my belief* they *like* it better than victuals and drink" (221), or her ex-barmaid grandmother, Mme Duval: "*I've no doubt* but we shall be all murdered!" (146), or Bidley Branghton: "*I wonder* when Mr. Smith's room will be ready" (177). If you consider the dismal treatment that these characters receive throughout the novel, it seems that the lack of capacity for embedding mental states on a high level marks pretty much everyone belonging to this class as not worthy of compassion and sympathy.

The capacity for embedment thus functions as a form of heteroglossia. It can be combined with other sociolectal markers, but only for those characters who are incapable of sophisticated layering of social consciousness. Thus Tom Branghton's low-level embedments go hand-in-hand with contractions, clipped sentences, and colloquialisms: "Didn't you [hear of it], Miss? ... why then you've a deal of fun to come, I'll promise you; and, I tell you what, I'll treat you there some Sunday noon" (188); Mme Duval's, with contractions, double negatives, and bad French: "Pardie, no—you may take care of yourself, if you please, but as to me, I promise you I sha'n't trust myself with no such person" (206). Lord Merton, a newly titled nobleman who lacks true gentility, punctuates his first-level embedments with curses: "I don't know what the devil a woman lives for after thirty" (275). Captain Mirvan, another character whose behaviour belies his nominal status of gentleman, sprinkles his second-level embedments²³ with sailor's lingo: "I am now upon a hazardous expedition, having undertaken to convoy a crazy vessel to the shore of Mortification" (141).²⁴

In comparison, the speech of unambiguously genteel characters is largely devoid of such markers. The only feature that is reliably present—and thus should be considered a marker in its own right—is the ability

23 That Captain Mirvan seems to embed mental states on the second level more consistently than, say, Mme Duval or the Branghtons (who tend to stay around the first level), may reflect his peculiar role in *Evelina*. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell observes, "Though there is scarcely a character in the novel who seems more distant from Evelina than this crude ex-sailor, he nonetheless has a remarkable tendency to aim his practical jokes at targets whom she herself has strong motives to attack." Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 141.

24 See Francesca Saggini's *Backstage in the Novel: Frances Burney and the Theater Arts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012) for a discussion of Burney's possible appropriation of the "long-established theatrical technique of employing particular speech patterns for characterization" (78) in her representation of Captain Mirvan and Mme Duval.

to embed mental states on a high level. “Can there, my good Sir, be any thing more painful to a friendly mind, than a necessity of communicating disagreeable intelligence?” (13); “I am grieved, Madam, to appear obstinate, and I blush to incur the imputation of selfishness” (19); “The benevolence with which you have interested yourself in my concerns, induces me to suppose you would wish to be acquainted with the cause of that desperation from which you snatched me” (227); “I am extremely sorry ... that you think me too presumptuous” (355); “To what, my Lord, must I, then, impute your desire of knowing [my intentions]?” (257).

Lady Howard, Mr Villars, Mr Macartney, Lord Orville, and even Sir Clement Willoughby (except when he tries to overwhelm Evelina with his dramatic professions of devotion and overblown terms of endearment) sound nearly interchangeable in their complex embeddings. It is almost as if the relentlessly demanding pattern of such embeddings were too metabolically costly for the text, leaving little energy for further verbal idiosyncrasies to be associated with these characters.

Note, finally, that the differential capacity for embedment does not map well onto E.M. Forster’s classic distinction between “flat” and “round” characters, although it might seem that it would.²⁵ For instance, Mr Smith may come across as more “round” than Lady Howard, even though she embeds mental states on a higher level than he does. As Natalie M. Phillips observes in her recent cognitive historicist study, *Distraction: Problems of Attention in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, if “traditional models of characterization continue to use Forster’s volumetrics for measuring the fictional mind,” a cognitively inflected analysis (in Phillips’s case, analyzing characters’ styles of attention) “reveals a broader range of traits to apply in literary criticism.”²⁶ The sociocognitive complexity of characters, that is, their relative capacity for embedding mental states, emerges as one such trait, although at this point it is a wide open question what role specific historical milieus, ideological prerogatives, and culturally ascendant genres play in its emergence.

Pedagogical Payoff

Introducing students to embedded mental states as a form of Bakhtinian heteroglossia is not a gratuitous exercise in literary theorizing on the undergraduate level. Instead, it is a way of building on their intuition to

25 E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1927), 108.

26 Natalie M. Phillips, *Distraction: Problems of Attention in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 179–80.

help them see how fiction can naturalize social class. In calling Burney's writing "wordy" and "flowery," they may already be picking up on its underlying sociocognitive pattern: the consistently high level of embedment of mental states structuring thoughts and speeches of upper-class characters. Cognitive literary theory allows us to articulate this pattern and recognize its possible function within the text: manipulation and reimagining of social cognition in service of ideology.

The same theory also helps students crack the code of genteel (or "polite")²⁷ talk in eighteenth-century fiction. One exercise that we do in class is to take a statement and envelop it in several layers of mental states, paying attention to what it does to our perception of the speaker's social standing. "We lost our way" seems to be neutral; a footman may say that, but so may a clergyman. But put it side by side with "I fear we lost our way" and ask yourself which phrase is more likely to be uttered by footman and which by clergyman. By adding a mental state, we move the speaker up one notch in the social hierarchy. Just so, "I *hope* you will not *think* me too rash if I tell you that I *fear* we lost our way" (three embedded mental states!) marks the speaker's gentility more surely than would an expensive gown or a sword. What used to be experienced as "wordiness" can now be seen as ideologically laden signalling.

Note that "wordiness" does not actually mean "more words." True, in my "we lost our way" example, sentences get longer as the number of embedded mental states increases. In actual works of fiction, however, multiply layered consciousness can be conveyed with elegance and economy. For instance, Mr Villars's "I blush to incur the imputation of selfishness" contains three embedded mental states, yet it is shorter than Mme Duval's "Pardie, no—you may take care of yourself, if you please, but as to me, I promise you I sha'n't trust myself with no such person," which contains, at most, two embedded mental states. Particularly when embedments are implied—deduced from the context rather than spelled out—sentence length ceases to be a decisive factor.

27 For a useful review of the eighteenth-century notion of politeness, see John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1997), 89–90. For a suggestive discussion of politeness in specifically cognitive terms, see Phillips. Quoting from Lord Chesterfield, who suggested that a polite person "should not only have attention to every thing, but a quickness of attention, so as to observe, at once, all the people in the room; their motions, their looks, and their words; and yet without staring at them, and seeming to be an observer," Phillips writes that eighteenth-century "politeness relied on skillful divisions of focus, facilitating full comprehension of a social scene" (174). Note that "full comprehension of a social scene" can also be modelled as embedded consciousness (for example, being aware of "the people in the room's" awareness of your behaviour, such as staring).

By the end of their third week with Burney, my students are usually well attuned to the differential embedment of mental states and have seen how it contributes to the construction of class difference in *Evelina*. Sometimes, at this point, I ask them to pen a letter on behalf of one of the characters, something that he or she may write to an absent friend, telling that friend about the recent events at Howard Grove—for instance, about the fake robbery that Captain Mirvan staged to “mortify” Mme Duval. As they read their letters out loud, their classmates are invited to guess which character is being impersonated, which they successfully do.

Here are several of those letters, arranged in ascending order: from the lowest level of embedded mental states to the highest.²⁸

You a'nt gon' believe what happened to me 'bout a day ago! You best read this close and you'll get a good laugh. We was wandering home at night and 'bout halfway lost and thieves came up us. They 'bout scared me halfway to death, but Madame Duval, she was goin' crazy, They took her and all her fancy clothes and hair and whatnot and they chucked her down in the dirt. They ain't hurt her or nothin, but they got riled up REAL good. Me and the boys were about to lose it, but we had to try not to laugh till we got home. Turned out, it was just some rich boys playin' some kind'a trick. I sure got a kick out'a it. I couldn't look her in the eye, scared I was gonna get it, but I wasn't gonna stand up to some robbers over a few of Madame Duval's things; she got plenty. [A coachman from the Howard Grove; zero to first-level embedment of mental states.]

I regret to inform you that recently I was treated in the most despicable manner. Believe me, I warrant that nobody never was so abused before. A robber verily came and dragged me out of my chariot. Never nobody was so unlucky as I am. I've never been so bad off, Mon Dieu! He shook me, tied me up with rope, I was sure I'd have me murdered. I hope the villain is hanged. He'll certainly be found out, for I'll get the justice to stop him! The worst thing is that the villain lost my curls! I'll never rest until he gets what's coming even if it costs me all my fortune. [Mme Duval; first- to second-level embedment of mental states.]

As one of my chosen crew, I cannot help but believe that you would find as much enjoyment as I in my own actions. My fellow mate and I set about on our hazardous expedition for the sake of a particular madam, whom you may recall from my past transmission to you. We came upon

28 I am grateful to Ann Baillie, Akasha Kirkpatrick, Jacob McLees, Krista Parr, Alison Power, Logan Ragsdale, Harry Standafer, Randi Walker, and Jordan Wick for letting me use their letters for this essay.

her vessel disguised most cleverly, so that she shan't have recognized us to be from her earlier party, and proceeded to trick her into mortification. Could you believe, my dear friend, that she believed herself to have been robbed? She would hardly be worth the time to actually rob—all I believe her to be good for is a good joke, that old woman, and hardly anything more. She is worth, in my eyes, about as much as the ditch and tree we thus tied her to. The servants that had joined in our expedition could hardly help but laugh at the lady's reactions, though I cannot charge them with mutiny for something such as that, she had no way of knowing it was I simply by their laughter, and I myself had a difficult time containing my laughter. [Captain Mirvan; mostly second level of embedment.]

My dear friend, I want to ask you, can in life there exist anything more challenging to both the mind and patience than an act of unkindness? I hope you will not mind if I report to you the strange occurrence of events that hath passed here at Howard Grove these last days.

That horrible Madame Duval—the ignorant French woman I assume you recall my mentioning to you—has been the victim of an act of cruelty by [one of the residents of] the Grove ...

I do not imagine that it is necessary to explain to you how I feel on the matter, as I believe you know I see this punishment fitting for a woman so cruel ... Further, the horrid woman was accompanied by my young charge, and I know you will agree that she should have nothing to do with the matter. [Lady Howard; third level of embedment.]

Given that this particular group of students had twenty minutes to come up with their letters, they appear to have captured quite well something of the peculiar idiom associated with different social classes in Burney's novel. This, I believe, is the direct effect of introducing them to the expanded definition of heteroglossia, one that includes not only professional lingos, conventional sociolects, and colloquialisms, but also, when appropriate, differential embedment of mental states.

Beyond "Evelina"

I said before that the characters who function on the first and second level of embedment do not, as a rule, elicit much reader compassion. (As one of my students put it, referring to the cruel prank that Captain Mirvan plays on Mme Duval, "I didn't care about Mme Duval's suffering. It's one bad character playing a trick on another bad character."²⁹) It also works

29 Jane Spencer concurs: "On the whole the novel shows remarkably little sympathy for a grandmother deprived of her grandchild." Spencer sees this as part of the

the other way around. The characters who are portrayed as being able to afford the cognitive luxury of consistently embedding mental states on this high level come across as more aware of their own³⁰ and, frequently, other people's feelings³¹ and hence are seen as more deserving of readers' interest and sympathy.

To the extent that low-level embedment is class-driven,³² we can partly chalk it up to Burney's willingness to rely on the conventional association between landed property and "social personality."³³ At least in this particular regard, she is perhaps not yet the Burney who, as Margaret Anne Doody puts it, would "examine" and "attack" rather than merely reflect "her society in its structure, functions, and beliefs," especially those pertaining to "social class."³⁴ (That will change in *Cecilia*.)

general pattern informing Burney's narrative: "With its strong emotional investment in the heroine's relationship to her father and to father figures, *Evelina* honours the patriline and is ambivalent about the matriline." Spencer, "*Evelina* and *Cecilia*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney*, ed. Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27. While I agree with Spencer's analysis, my focus here is on specific rhetorical strategies (such as low-level embedment of mental states associated with her) that make Mme Duval a less sympathetic character than her personal losses might have entitled her to be. See also Kristina Straub's useful discussion of the novel's divided consciousness when it comes to the treatment of older women, such as Mme Duval, in *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 30.

- 30 Which may work, as it does more often than not in *Evelina*'s case, as a heightened awareness of one's own feelings (for example, shame) in response to other people's perceptions of oneself, what Yeazell calls *Evelina*'s "obsession with watching herself being watched" (123).
- 31 As Epstein puts it, Mme Duval's "roughhewn sensibility makes it impossible for her to empathize with others" (113).
- 32 Compare to what Phillips describes as the stereotype of cognitive inferiority of female servants in eighteenth-century fiction, that is, the depiction of servants, such as Susannah from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1767), as "soft-brained and distraction-prone" (107).
- 33 J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 119. Of course, the dynamic of the relationship between social class and cognitive complexity can be reversed. For a compelling example of such a reversal, see Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, "Rudeness, Slang, and Obscenity: Working-Class Politics in *London Labour and the London Poor*," in *Victorian Vulgarity: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture*, ed. Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). Rosenman demonstrates that the working poor can be presented as having a more "layered consciousness of social interactions" and thus "the most satisfying understanding" of a social situation in comparison with middle-class "experts" (57–58).
- 34 Margaret Anne Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 3.

To the extent that low-level embedment is driven by character flaws, as in the case of Lord Merton, Mr Lovel, and Captain Mirvan, we can attribute it to what seems to be a literary tradition (dating back at least to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*³⁵ and perhaps even to Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* and Heliodorus's *An Ethiopian Romance*)³⁶ of correlating characters' inability to entertain complex embedments with their relative lack of sympathetic appeal—relative, that is, always in comparison to “high-embedders.”

This tradition is far from unambiguous. High-embedders may come across as sensitive and intelligent people, or they may come across as peculiarly misguided, betrayed as it were by their sociocognitive complexity into ethically questionable or socially debilitating behaviour. (And not to forget about evil masterminds, whose hubristic Machiavellianism may render them abhorrent in the eyes of the reader.)³⁷ Still, there seems to be more than enough sympathetic high-embedders around for us to assume that this kind of complexity is more often an asset rather than a liability when it comes to fictional characterization.

We can observe something roughly similar in real-life social interactions. We like people who strike us as having a deeper awareness of social dynamics and their own thought processes, while, at the same time, we feel wary of those who use that deeper awareness to further their own ends. We maintain a fine distinction between “insightful,” “sensitive,” and “socially astute” on the one hand, and “manipulative” and “Machiavellian” on the other, even though they may all embed mental states on the same (high) level.

It is a fascinating experience to read Burney's letters and diaries written around the time she was working on *Evelina* with attention to their embedded mental states.³⁸ While I have been unable to establish an unambiguous correlation between high-level embedment and social class, there is certainly a correlation between high-level embedment and personal amicability. To put it bluntly, people who are kind to Burney and

35 See Simerka, chapter 7.

36 See Zunshine, “The Commotion of Souls,” 127–29.

37 Compare to Blakey Vermeule's important discussion of masterminds in *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 86.

38 As far as I know, the journals have not been explored as to their possible heteroglossia, although, as John Wiltshire observes, they “take the form of dramatic action, with extensive dialogue and representation of ‘characters’ through their speech.” Wiltshire, “Journals and Letters,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney*, 80–81.

dear to her are shown to possess a richly layered social consciousness, just like the people who are kind and dear to Evelina.

For instance, Burney's letter to her friend and her literary mentor, Samuel Crisp (aka "Daddy Crisp"), of 7 February 1774, contains a plea, which—though playful rather than sentimental, as the context makes clear—is not unworthy, in its nestings, of Lord Orville. That is, both Daddy Crisp and Frances are portrayed as embedding mental states on a high level.

But, if by any chance, I have been so unfortunate as to offend you,—though I can hardly suppose it—I intreat you, my dear Sir, not to punish me with *silent* resentment. I would rather receive from you the severest lecture you could pen, because while I might flatter myself with even meriting [your notice], I should indulge hopes of regaining your kindness,—& if you will so far favor me, I will gladly kiss the Rod.

But if, after all, I have only wearied you, do not think me so weak as to wish to tease you into writing—I could not forbear sending this remonstrance, but will not trouble you again, unless you should again desire it.—which I only fear you should *now* do, out of Compliment, or compassion—however, I will not further pester you, but only subscribe myself,

My dear daddy
Your ever affectionate
& obliged
Frances Burney.

If you *should* write, I conjure you to let it be with *frankness*.³⁹

When Burney writes about people whom she admires or considers personally sympathetic, she finds ways of making them embed complex mental states even when they cannot do it in words. Mr Omai was a Tahitian who had been drawn into the Burney "family circle"⁴⁰ through the efforts of Frances's brother James. On several occasions in the journal, Mr Omai, who is portrayed as a perfect gentleman and "living confirmation of the myth of the 'Noble Savage,'"⁴¹ is shown to convey complex layering of social consciousness by his body language. Here

39 Frances Burney, *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, vol. 2, 1774–1777, ed. Lars E. Troide (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 1–2 (emphasis in the original). References are to this edition.

40 Kate Chisholm, "The Burney Family," in *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney*, 16.

41 Lars E. Troide, introduction to *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, vol. 2, 1774–1777, xii.

is their conversation about theatre, reported in the journal entry of 14 December 1775: “We then enquired how he liked the Theatres, but could not make him understand us; though with a most astonishing politeness, he always endeavoured, by his Bows & smiles, to save us the trouble of knowing that he was not able to comprehend whatever we said” (195).

Although Mr Omai did not understand what Burney and her friends were asking him on this occasion, he did not want them to think that his lack of understanding should hinder their communication. In an earlier letter to Samuel Crisp, Burney writes that Mr Omai “must certainly possess an uncommon share of observation and attention” (62). Describing him as generating complex embedments “with the assistance of signs, & Action” (193) and thus engaging in “the responsive mirroring of self and others,”⁴² she constructs a vivid proof of that assertion. This is in direct contrast to *Evelina*, in which the capacity for embedment usually manifests itself as a linguistic capacity, and readers are encouraged to assume that characters incapable of constructing sophisticated verbal embedments are also incapable of experiencing truly complex social emotions.⁴³

Complex verbal embedments and sophisticated feelings still largely go together in Burney’s later works, but the correlation between embedment and amicability becomes less straightforward. For instance, Burney’s second novel, *Cecilia* (1782), features at least one eloquent high-embedder—Mr Moncton—whose repugnant Machiavellianism nearly destroys the main heroine.

Also, *Cecilia* takes more chances with its tradesmen. In *Evelina*, the only occasion when a character who has no legitimate pretensions to gentility may embed more mental states than a “true” gentleman is when the non-gentleman plans to exploit the gentleman or cheat him out

42 Yeazell, 142.

43 For instance, M. Du Bois, who does not speak English, embeds on the third level in French (see 243). One possible exception is when Lady Howard’s coachman and footman play a prank aimed at humbling Mme Duval. The two men pretend to be lost in the woods, but are obviously lying—and thus nesting mental states on the second and third level. What they say stays on the first level of nesting at one point: “I *think* we should turn to the left,’ said the footman. ‘To the left!’ answered the [coachman], ‘No, no, I’m partly *sure* we should turn to the right.’” At other moments, their speech contains no mental states at all: “‘Let’s try this lane,’ said the footman. ‘No,’ said the coachman, ‘that’s the road to Canterbury; we had best go straight on.’ ‘Why that’s the direct London road,’ returned the footman, ‘and will lead us twenty miles about’” (145). Yet, they presumably nest mental states on a deeper level than they reveal in their half-smothered-with-laughter speeches.

of his money. In contrast, although *Cecilia's* aristocratic and otherwise genteel characters consistently embed mental states on a higher level than shopkeepers, the correlation between the capacity for complex embeddings and social class is less rigid. Some tradesmen (or their children, such as Henrietta Belfield and her brother)⁴⁴ are allowed to embed—and hence feel—as deeply, or nearly as deeply, as Cecilia herself. We seemed to have moved beyond the simple hierarchy according to which servants may get by without embedding any mental states (at least not verbally) and tradespeople might muster one or two, while ladies and gentlemen of leisure effortlessly weave third- to fourth-level embeddings into almost everything they say.

To the extent to which writers may be said to make an intuitive decision about which of their characters will be capable of embedding more mental states than others, when it comes to eighteenth-century Britain, it is tempting to read social class as the key factor in that decision. Yet the relationship between class and sociocognitive complexity is never unambiguous. On the one hand, we have Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), based on Terence's *Andria* (166 BCE), which reverses the embedment pattern present in the original play. In *Andria*, the slave named Davos masterminds a plot to save his master, Pamphilus, from a marriage arranged by Pamphilus's father; in *The Conscious Lovers*, a similar plot is hatched by Bevil Jr., the son of Sir John Bevil, while Tom, Bevil Jr.'s servant and the character based on Davos, merely helps out. He is never allowed to think on the same level as, or above, his aristocratic master. On the other hand, we have Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), in which a servant girl outthinks, outwrites, and “out-embeds” her aristocratic would-be seducer, leaving him no option but to accept their relationship on her terms. Differentially layered social consciousness appears to be a powerful rhetorical tool available to writers, but we are still in the early stages of understanding its role in the history of dialogic imagination.



44 See Zunshine, “1700–1775: Theory of Mind, Social Hierarchy, and the Emergence of Narrative Subjectivity,” in *The Emergence of Mind: Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English*, ed. David Herman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 161–86.