

THE INDIVIDUAL ‘WE’ NARRATOR

ABSTRACT. The prevailing assumption in literary studies tends to be that a ‘we’ narrative voice is either that of an individual purporting to speak for a group, or that of a collective of people whose perspectives have coalesced into a unified one. Recent work on social agency across the cognitive humanities suggests another way of understanding what might be conveyed by such a ‘we’. Social cognition research shows that individuals can have their capacities changed and enhanced when they interact with others, and suggests that ‘we-representations’ in the individual mind may result from the transformative effects of interaction. In this paper, we draw on a specific instance of storytelling in the plural, William Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’, to articulate a theory of this ‘individual we’, and to show its potential in refining our understanding of ‘we’ narratives. We also propose that in future research the interdisciplinary study of the ‘we’ could engage with insights from literature as well as from philosophy and science.

KEYWORDS. We-narratives; Social Cognition; Collective Intentionality; Alignment; Narratology.

1 Introduction

The use of a ‘we’ narrator has been a persistent feature of the literary tradition since what is generally thought to be the first instance, Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897). In that story, a group of sailors is sometimes described as ‘they’ and sometimes joins the narrative voice to tell the story as a ‘we’. Subsequent examples use the ‘we’ as narrator throughout such as, most influentially, William Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’ (1930). More recently, Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), Lloyd Jones’s *The Book of Fame* (2000), Kate Walbert’s *Our Kind* (2004), and Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End* (2007) have shown different ways in which first-person plural storytelling can prove effective. We take this to be partly a matter of semantics, in that the English pronoun ‘we’ can have different meanings and it can be used in places where ‘I’ and ‘you’ would more normally be used. An example of the former would be the ‘royal we’, and of the latter, a scenario where a teacher says to a class that ‘we’re going to do a difficult test today’; in both cases there need not be any implication of joint activity.

In this paper, we do not purport to offer a semantic theory of ‘we’, though we will operate on the assumption that the first person plural pronoun is polysemous, and we will make this assumption explicit when appropriate. We treat ‘we’ mostly as a matter of pragmatics, in that what matters is what

is communicated in context. Following a long-standing tradition in social theory and psychology, the prevailing approach in literary critical studies is that, when a narrator says 'we', the pronoun expresses the voice of a group of people whose perspectives have coalesced into a unified one. The collective plural is taken to convey the sense of common purpose experienced by individuals when their perspectives are subsumed into the point of view of the group. This kind of 'we' signals identification with crowds and publics, political and cultural entities, which define collective forms of social existence for the individuals involved. The group perspective can apply whether or not there is an element of physical immediacy to group membership: even at a distance, the 'we' is felt, and the social dimension of thought and agency always impinges. To appreciate this dimension, however, is not to say that people's 'we-perspective' on things is primarily, if not uniquely, the perspective of the groups they belong to at any given time. There is always a 'we' behind an 'I', but it can also be the case that 'we', really, is an 'I'.

Research across the cognitive humanities has defined a very different kind of 'we', in which the shared knowledge, emotions, thoughts, intentions, and preferences expressed in the first person plural pronoun are mental states of the individuals involved, rather than somehow a property of the group.¹ This could speak to a variety of situations. Consider, for example, the case of a solo traveller on a delayed flight texting to a friend 'we'll be setting off soon, thank goodness'. Surely there is a group of people sitting in the plane, waiting to take off, and the traveller may feel that s(he) is speaking for them. What is conveyed by use of 'we' here, however, is not the collective sense of a perspective shared by the group (if any). The experience of a shared perspective is individuated and private, it speaks to individual difference rather than collective commonality, yet it retains some element of sociality that urges use of the collective pronoun. Similarly, a participant in a meeting might think or say that 'we have been persuaded to vote in favour by the argument from the final speaker'. Using 'we' rather than 'I' need not speak to the merged minds of the group as there is no group perspective to report on collectively. But it could be more than just an aggregation of 'Is' having some common

¹ See John Searle, *Making the Social World. The Structure of Human Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Michael Bratman, *Shared Agency. A Planning Theory of Acting Together* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

goal; it could convey the social aspect of being persuaded for the individual, and the changes to individual experience that sociality entails.

These examples show that there are social situations where the collective pronoun is best thought of as speaking for traits and perspectives of the individual agent, not the group. This observation intersects with a longer tradition of interest in ‘we’-intentionality, pursued by philosophers and scientists keen to capture the point that, when people do things together, interaction will have a transformative effect on the way they come to see and experience things individually.² Notice the shift in focus: perspectives change as people interact, not in the sense that the collective perspective of a group comes into being and becomes the individual’s, but because if any things are experienced and enacted inter-subjectively, their being experienced and enacted together becomes part of the perspective that each person has on them.³ This is the sense in which the collective pronoun is used to indicate an *individual* form of social existence. We speak ‘as a we’ because we are acting together, after all, but the point is that our going through something together makes it the case that we now are, each individually, in a different position to where we were before interacting. The resulting view of the ‘we’—no longer a collective, but an ‘individual we’—offers a different paradigm for understanding ‘we’-narratives. The ‘we’-narrator can be seen neither as the isolated voice of an individual speaking for others, nor as the collective voice of a group of people acting in unison, but rather as expressing the differentiated state that arises in the mind of an individual attuning to the minds and bodies of other individuals in the course of interaction.

In this interdisciplinary essay, we offer a novel account of plural storytelling, showing that the ‘individual we’ can give us another way of characterizing the intuitions and observations made by authors. The overarching goal is to define a rigorous concept of the ‘we’ that nevertheless retains

² Mattia Gallotti, ‘The First-Person Plural Perspective’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of the Social Mind*, ed. Julian Kiverstein (London: Routledge, 2016), 387-399.

³ An influential body of literature on the importance of inter-subjective encounters for individual subjectivity goes back to the classic work of Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1st Scribner Classics ed. New York, NY: Scribner, 2000). For more recent points of entry, connecting work on inter-subjectivity with the literature on we-intentionality, see David Carr, ‘Cogitamus Ergo Sumus: The Intentionality of the First-Person Plural’, *The Monist* 69 (1986), 521–533; and Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

fundamental insights about the importance of sociality in determining the scope and exercise of mental activity at the individual level. In so doing, we aim at bringing together strands of research in narratology, that is, the study of narrative structure and conventions, and cross-disciplinary work on sociality involving both analytic philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences. There are obvious shared interests with work on empathy, sympathy, and inter-subjectivity, in literary analysis as well as in phenomenology, but our focus here is on the perspective to and from which the ‘we’ speaks, rather than the experiential nature of the exchange of information and its consequences.⁴ Our impetus derives from a commitment to parsimonious accounts of the ontology of mind and agency as an alternative to dynamic accounts of merged and enactive models of the social mind.

In Section 2 we will set out the prevailing approaches in literary criticism, focusing especially on the work of narratologists Uri Margolin and Brian Richardson. In the third section, we will define the ‘individual we’, establishing its essential characteristics and some key emerging and open questions in research on ‘we’-representations. We will then engage in a close reading of some passages of ‘A Rose for Emily’ in Section 4. Faulkner’s story is not a straightforward instantiation of the ‘individual we’. If he has any theory of this kind, it can only be reconstructed indirectly and holistically in the course of his story-telling. However, some passages are illuminated by an interpretation of ‘we’ as a fact about the minds of an individual, especially at the story’s climax. We propose this approach could improve understanding of the ways in which, not just Faulkner, but other authors narrate phenomena of plural agency in ‘we’ fictions. The individual ‘we’ narrator can be identified in many fictions, so our proposal has the programmatic aim to suggest an agenda for rethinking the canon of ‘we’ literature. In this vein, in a final, brief discussion of future directions in research, we also suggest that the study of complex literary depictions of the formation of ‘we’-perspectives could usefully complement the clear but constrained achievements of empirical studies and thought experiments on sociality.

⁴ See Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sophie Ratcliffe, *On Sympathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Timothy Chesters, ‘Social Cognition: A Literary Perspective’, *Paragraph*, 37 (2014), 62–78.

2 Writing in the Plural

The first-person plural pronoun can be used to mean different aspects of social interaction. The ordinary meaning is that it takes at least two individuals for a fact, a thought, an action, or a story, to count as social. This intuitive understanding of ‘we’ as implying a plural subject has informed studies of society across a wide range of disciplines concerned with social behaviour, in philosophy, psychology, and literary critical scholarship. Usually, the point of a narrator saying ‘we’ in the tone of voice of collective discourse is to invite us to realize that groups can have a perspective of thought and action that is different from the individualities that make it up. Along these lines, recent work in narratology has identified the need to develop a vocabulary and a more complex approach with which to capture the special characteristics of ‘we’-narrators.⁵ However, scholarly accounts of ‘we’-narrators thus far have been divided as to how to capture the distinctive features of thinking shared by members of a ‘we’. In this section, we identify two patterns of interpreting uses of ‘we’ in literary criticism, and provide a framework for our proposal in the next section.

In a foundational essay from 1996, Uri Margolin surveyed the field of ‘we’-narratives and described its key characteristics.⁶ His presumption is that there cannot truly be a collective voice, merged minds expressed by a merged voice, except in the chorus of Greek drama, so the prose fiction ‘we’ is used in a distributive sense. The ‘we’ narrator gives voice to nothing but the single perspective of an individual speaking on behalf of others. This leads to a focus on the relationship between the speaking individual and the group, and the way in which that single voice represents other members. Margolin goes on to question why such narratives are not more common, and to speculate why they may never be. This may, he argues, be due to the ambiguous nature of the scope of ‘we’, which can involve, in a fluid way, varying sets and subsets, including (or not) the speaker and the reader. (This varies somewhat from language to language: English makes no pronominal distinction between a ‘we’

⁵ See, for example, Monika Fludernik, ‘The Many in Action and Thought: Towards a Poetics of the Collective in Narrative’, *Narrative*, 25 (2017), 139–63, and Natalya Bekhta, ‘We-Narratives: The Distinctiveness of Collective Narration’, *Narrative*, 25 (2017), 164–81.

⁶ Uri Margolin, ‘Telling Our Story: On “We” Literary Narratives’, *Language and Literature*, 5 (1996), 115–133. For a more recent introduction to ‘we’-narratives (and other collective voices).

that includes or excludes ‘you’ the hearer, so this fluidity is inbuilt.⁷) It may also be related to what Margolin calls the ‘mental access issue’: it can be difficult to explain and justify the knowledge that a ‘we’-narrator has of what is in other minds, and this may make it hard for readers to engage with the story.

Other critics have put forward a remarkably different interpretation of first-person plural agency. Some have questioned whether the rarity of ‘we’-narratives is the result of inherent qualities, and see it as a phenomenon which arises when the cultural and political circumstances are appropriate. Fictions in the ‘we’ may not be so strange, after all; they just require the right conditions to make them appealing and meaningful in context. Brian Richardson is among the critics who have seen ‘we’-narrators as means of exploring the political and ideological scenarios in which group thoughts and sensibilities coalesce.⁸ A similar pattern is evident in work on post-colonial novels, writing post-9/11, and feminist fiction.⁹

Critics supporting this view of the ‘collective we’ deny that the rarity of ‘we’-narrators is inevitable, though they do acknowledge their experimental qualities. It may be that this makes them apt forms in which to represent marginalized group thinking, and indeed to point at the complexities of the cognitive aspects of ‘we’. Richardson notes that Alan Palmer’s *Social Minds in the Novel*, a wide-ranging study of ‘intermental’ phenomena as they arise in fiction, touches only briefly on ‘we’-narrators, and tends to focus on the classic realist tradition.¹⁰ In this respect, Richardson differs from Palmer by focusing on the innovative character of ‘we’-narrative technique, taking ‘literary

⁷ On varieties of ‘we’ in different languages, see Michael Cysouw, *The Paradigmatic Structure of Person Marking* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 80–98. For a philosophical discussion of the use of ‘we’ see Natalie Gold and Daniel Harbour, ‘Cognitive Primitives of Collective Intentions: Linguistic Evidence of Our Mental Ontology’, *Mind & Language*, 27 (2012), 109–134.

⁸ Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), especially pp. 56–57; and ‘Plural Focalization, Singular Voices: Wandering Perspectives in “We”-Narration’, in *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization: Modeling Mediation in Narrative*, ed. Peter Hühn, Wolf Schmid, and Jörg Schönert (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 143–159. See also Amit Marcus, ‘A Contextual View of Narrative in the First Person Plural’, *Narrative*, 16 (2008), 46–64, pp. 46–49.

⁹ See Rebecca Fasselt, ‘(Post)Colonial We-Narratives and the “Writing Back” Paradigm: Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*’, *Poetics Today*, 37 (2016), 155–179; Ruth Maxey, ‘The Rise of the “We” Narrator in Modern American Fiction’, *European Journal of American Studies*, 10.2 (2015): Online; and Adalaide Morris, ‘First Persons Plural in Contemporary Feminist Fiction’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 11 (1992), 11–29.

¹⁰ Alan Palmer, *Social Minds in the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010).

playfulness and creativity [... to] represent the collective thoughts and sensibilities of marginalized groups that have formed close bonds'.¹¹

Such communal voices, however, can be elusive. The instability of the literary 'we' might follow from the author's recognition of the difficulty of capturing the tension between the element of collectivity which is inherent in the 'meeting' of minds, and their merging into coherent unified thinking. Amit Marcus, for example, has noted that first person plural narrators 'differ in the group's stability and cohesion' and in 'the importance of the role attributed to the individual'.¹² John Sutton and Evelyn Tribble have described similar dynamics in their study of Lloyd Jones's *The Book of Fame*. They show how the dominant 'we' of that novel is composed of complex individuals who perform their own idiosyncratic versions of 'we'-thinking, as well as interacting seamlessly at times in a skilled group activity (in this case, playing rugby).¹³ In her work on poetry, Bonnie Costello focuses on 'the formation of a communal moment, one that can only be transient, perhaps, and that depends more on the rhetorical than the descriptive power of language'.¹⁴ For Costello, this particular 'communal moment' is between the writer of the poem and its reader, but here, as in all these cases, there is again an interest in the transition, the conversion of 'I' to 'we', the premise being that the perspectives of individuals become merged. Her *The Plural of Us* takes the work of W.H. Auden as a particularly fraught case of the use of 'we' in poetry: in times of political anxiety, Auden explores the possibilities and problems of community through the different manners in which he speaks of togetherness. Costello displays a flexible understanding of the 'we' that can reach out towards the transformed experience of individuals.¹⁵

¹¹ Brian Richardson, 'Representing Social Minds: "We" and "They" Narratives, Natural and Unnatural', *Narrative*, 23 (2015), 200–212, at 210. See also Jan Alber, 'The Social Minds in Factual and Fictional We-Narratives of the Twentieth Century', *Narrative*, 23 (2015), 213–225, stressing the non-realist tradition in response to Palmer.

¹² See Amit Marcus, 'Dialogue and Authoritativeness in "We" Fictional Narratives: A Bakhtinian Approach', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 6 (2008), 135–161, at 157.

¹³ John Sutton and Evelyn R. Tribble, "'The Creation of Space": Narrative Strategies, Group Agency and Skill in Lloyd Jones's *The Book of Fame*', in *Mindful Aesthetics: Literature and the Science of Mind*, ed. Chris Danta and Helen Groth (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹⁴ Bonnie Costello, 'Lyric Poetry and the First-Person Plural: "How Unlikely"', in *Something Understood: Essays and Poems for Helen Vendler*, ed. Stephen Burt and Nick Halpern (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 193–206, at 205.

¹⁵ Bonnie Costello, *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

These scholars have explored nuances relating to the collective first-person voice in literature, and have hinted at interesting territory between an approach to the narrative ‘we’ in terms of group identity, and Margolin’s emphasis on the singular form of the collective plural. For Margolin, the fact that we say ‘we’ to indicate some form of collective agency is no evidence that the minds of people have become merged in the course of interaction: the spoken pronoun ‘we’ stands for one mind making inferences about other minds, and proffering them. For Richardson and others, instead, there is at least the possibility of a unity achieved by the members of a plurality. What this unity amounts to, and the level at which it can best be described, remain to be settled, given the seemingly inherent instability of the first-person plural pronoun; however, the ‘collective we’ speaks to the commonality of representations shared by individual minds when they operate as one. In the context of our essay, we suggest that these two sets of claims can be seen as the opposite ends of a spectrum of uses ranging from—for lack of better terms—individualistic to collectivist meanings of ‘we’. There is in fact a great deal of interesting territory between the two poles, wherein interaction does not imply collectivity, and the denial of collectivity does not devalue interaction. As we will argue in the next section, work in cognate fields has defined properties of an ‘individual we’ that sits in this territory, and offers the possibility of a productive rethink of particular ‘we’-narrators.

3 Thinking as a Plural

Elizabeth Bishop’s poem ‘The Moose’ describes an encounter between a bus full of people and the ‘grand, otherworldly’ animal of its title.¹⁶ The narrating voice never actually says ‘I’, but at the beginning it suggests a solitary passenger as the speaker of the poem, watching as the bus moves through the landscape without taking significant account of the perspectives of the other travellers. This changes when a woman gets onto the bus and ‘regards us amicably’ (l. 78): the new arrival seems to catalyse a sense of inter-subjective experience in the speaker, and from this point on, first-person plural pronouns arise readily. The sight of the moose suddenly awakens the passengers and brings about a ‘sweet / sensation of joy’ (ll. 155-156). The experience is shared, as hinted by use of ‘we’, yet

¹⁶ Quotations of ‘The Moose’ (in this case, line 153) are from Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems*, new edn (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004).

there is a fundamental difference between this use and the twofold characterization of the 'we' sketched in the previous section.

It cannot be categorically stated that this turn to 'we' could not be a representation of merged minds, a collective response of everyone on the bus. However, Bishop gives at least two hints that this is a matter of individual transformation, that the 'we' speaks to a state of mind – a perspective, an experience, a way of seeing things – that is a feature of the individual sharing it with others. One key moment comes in the three-line section 'Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?' (ll. 154-156). The bracketed phrase could suggest assertion, but seems more like a test and an acknowledgement of the fact that the emotions caused by the moose have equivalents felt by the other members of the group. Such a test would presumably not be necessary if this was genuinely a group mind. The speaker has become aware of the 'meeting of minds' taking place when the passengers each individually see this 'grand, otherworldly' animal, and the experience of seeing the moose together is enhanced, or just different, as a result.

Another interesting moment for determining the nature of the poem's 'we' comes when it is stated that 'by craning backward / the moose can be seen' (ll. 163-164). The passive construction, 'can be seen', draws a little extra attention to the technicality of the perception involved. It is perhaps most feasible to think of this as indicating that the speaker can participate in the continued sight of the moose because at least some of the passengers can 'by craning backward', literally see it. It does not particularly matter whether the speaker is one of them or not, because between them they have access to the result of an experience that it is there. Thus this moment, too, contributes to the poem's depiction of an individual whose perspective is changed and enhanced by participating in an experience along with the minds and bodies of others.

We contend that 'we' in 'The Moose' is a label for a distinct form of social existence having to do with the 'meeting' of individual minds, rather than a property of collectivities acting in unison or agents in isolation. All of us – the passengers and the reader, too, or so Bishop seems to suggest - just happen to be witnesses to an unplanned event in the theatre of our own mind, and body, which however comes with a distinctive feel, a sense that we're living in the moment both individually and

socially. If we imagine the people on the bus, each doing their own things, some asleep, others playing with thoughts, it will become clear that the coming into focus of a moose is an intensely private, individual experience, one that does not require collective identification for its occurrence. The experience being shared is not a matter of solipsistic entertainment either, one that could be described as common to all and reported on as a ‘we’-experience. Bishop’s ‘we’, as in ‘we all feel’, implies that what we each individually feel, depends on us seeing the moose *together* - that its having been seen by all of us, together, is what makes *my* experience of it, or *your* experience, or *anyone’s*, really, the kind of experience that it is. The experience is shared in precisely this way, that the moose is experienced inter-subjectively. What makes the ‘sweet / sensation of joy’ shared, is not the fact that there is just a common object in sight, but that experience of it as such incorporates the perspectives of all. We call it a ‘we-perspective’ to capture the sense in which one’s mental life and experience of the world becomes inter-subjectively constituted by taking account of others’.¹⁷ However, the ‘we-perspective’ is now predicated on individual-level experiences in the mind of the single agent, or ‘we-representations’.

Several concepts need careful unpacking and raise important questions for our proposal. If the collective pronoun can be a label for a form of social existence that pertains to individuals, why, then, call the sensation of joy felt by a person a ‘we-perspective’? Further, what does it mean to say that the way in which we each individually come to see things in the world is the result of an inter-subjective process, whereby the perspectives of the people involved are integrated, yet, differentiated? Let us turn to recent work in philosophy and cognitive research for an answer, and reconstruct the motivations for proposing a nuanced view of the conditions that must obtain for people to think and act ‘as a we’. To begin with, the concept of a mental representation held by a person in the first-person plural, is known to philosophers working on so-called ‘we-intentionality’ from a classic problem of social philosophy. The problem received a first compelling formulation in Durkheim’s

¹⁷ Mattia, Gallotti and Chris Frith, ‘Social Cognition in the We-Mode’, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 17 (2013), 160-165; Dan Zahavi, ‘You Me and We: The Sharing of Emotional Experiences’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 22 (2015), 84–101.

treatment of social facts.¹⁸ Since social facts emerge from the interaction of individuals, the question arises as to how to account for their inter-subjective force in influencing the behaviour of people in terms of the resources that we employ in understanding individual personal attitudes. The challenge proved hard to meet, and many solutions have been put forward.

Following in Durkheim's steps, the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars¹⁹ posited a *sui generis* type of state in the minds of individuals, or 'we-intention', to avoid making appeal to the controversial notion of a collective consciousness. A 'we-intention' is to be conceived as 'an intention that is not the merely subjective possession of an individual, but an intention had as a member of a group that constitutes *us*' (emphasis not ours).²⁰ 'We'-intentionality has since become an umbrella concept for the capacity of minds to represent and experience things collectively, 'as a we', that is, to have collective intentionality.²¹ The concept has then appeared across a wide range of philosophical themes and styles, from analytic discussions of social ontology to phenomenological accounts of subjectivity.²² Despite their diversity, these approaches share a Sellarsian insight: instead of socializing the mental by positing some sort of group mind, one can mentalize the social by showing that there is a 'we' dimension to the individual mind. This dimension captures an individual form of social existence, exemplified by the idea that the thoughts and experiences of an individual can be constituted inter-subjectively.

This idea of individual-level thoughts and experiences shaped inter-subjectively is illuminated by the following example from cognitive research. For a long time, traditional paradigms of social cognition were designed with the aim of testing the capacity of people to perform tasks which

¹⁸ Keith Sawyer, 'Durkheim's Dilemma: Toward a Sociology of Emergence', *Sociological Theory*, 20 (2003), 227–247.

¹⁹ Wilfrid Sellars, 'Imperatives, Intentions, and the Logic of "Ought"', in *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, edited by Hector-Neri Castañeda and George Nakhnikian (Wayne State University Press, 1963), 159–214.

²⁰ Willem deVries, 'Wilfrid Sellars', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (published online Winter 2016), edited by Edward N. Zalta <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/sellars/>> accessed 13 April 2017.

²¹ Peter Olen and Stephen Turner, 'Durkheim, Sellars, and the Origins of Collective Intentionality', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23 (2015), 954–975.

²² See Raimo Tuomela, *A Theory of Social Action* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1984); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991); and John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

required an individual agent to respond to stimuli about the behaviour of another agent. The methodological constraints of experimental inquiry ruled out the possibility of testing multiple subjects acting together in well-controlled laboratory conditions. Instead, the subjects would be instructed to perform a task involving the exchange and processing of socially relevant information, while sitting alone in front of a computer screen. Taking a different direction of travel, several studies now show that, when two participants are instructed to perform a task together in direct interaction, as opposed to merely processing social information in solitary environments, they display patterns of behaviour which are qualitatively different from the patterns that they would exhibit outside of interactive dynamics.²³ The point is that what matters for social cognition is not so much the number of people involved, being a plurality instead of a single agent, nor the content and type of information recruited by the agents, being salient in some socially relevant way, as the fact that the subjects are tested as they think and act together.

What we take as the main lesson of both philosophical and cognitive-scientific discourses on the ‘we’ is the following. There is a way of seeing things in the world which becomes available to individual agents through some sort of physical and mental interaction.²⁴ The opening up of novel routes to knowledge and experience comes with a distinctive phenomenology, the sense that what individual agents take things to be is given to them, in thought and experience, collectively, as theirs (‘ours’)²⁵. Seeing things ‘as a we’ thus generates the differences in behaviour observed in cognitive research. In this context, the notion of a ‘we-representation’ is employed to refer to mental states which encompass information about others’ perspectives as well as those of the individual agents themselves in *inter-action*.²⁶ Notice, not just action per se, but the coming together of minds sets the

²³ For useful points of entry see Rick Dale, Riccardo Fusaroli, Nicholas D. Duran, and Daniel C. Richardson, ‘The Self-Organization of Human Interaction’, *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 59 (2013), 43–96; Guillaume Dumas, Scott J.A. Kelso, and Jacqueline Nadel, ‘Tackling the Social Cognition Paradox Through Multi-Scale Approaches’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5 (2014), 882.

²⁴ Jane Heal, ‘Social Anti-Individualism, Co-Cognitivism and Second-Person Authority’, *Mind*, 122 (2013), 340–371; Stephen A. Butterfill, ‘Interacting Mindreaders’, *Philosophical Studies*, 165 (2013), 841–863; Shannon Spaulding, *How We Understand Others. Philosophy and Social Cognition* (Routledge 2018).

²⁵ Elisabeth Pacherie, ‘The Phenomenology of Joint Action: Self-Agency vs. Joint-Agency’, in *Joint Attention: New Developments*, ed. Axel Seemann (MIT Press, 2012), 343–389.

²⁶ J.C., Tsai, Natalie Sebanz, and Gunther Knoblich, ‘The GROOP Effect: Groups Mimic Group Actions’, *Cognition* 118 (2011), 135–140; Veronica Ramenzoni, Natalie Sebanz, and Gunther Knoblich, ‘Synchronous

conditions for them to operate socially—i.e. the inter-active manner in which the minds and bodies of individual agents align as they exchange and process information back and forth, gradually and dynamically.²⁷ Therefore, interaction does not imply collectivity, yet the denial of collectivity does not devalue interaction: when a member of a team thinks exultantly ‘we won!’, this can be the result of undergoing the activity together with others, without the thought itself being shared by the group as one.

Let us take stock of the discussion so far. The concepts of ‘we-intentions’ and ‘we-representations’ are delimited by disciplinary interests and theoretical demands of different kinds. There is, however, a common insight that brings them together and suggests a specific reading of ‘we’ that differs from the approaches presented in the previous section. By and large, philosophers of ‘we’-intentionality reject ontologically suspect claims about group minds. Likewise, scientists investigate the underpinnings of social interaction and cognition in tightly constrained experimental settings, where the focus is on the individual as the key unit of testing and measurement. Hence, the mechanisms and processes of ‘we-intentionality’ are attributes of individual minds. Yet, still within a broadly individualistic framework, ‘we-representations’ capture the fact that one’s perspective on things can have an element of intersubjectivity built into it. In fact, a key feature that unites Sellarsian approaches to ‘we-intentionality’ with developments in cognitive research is an understanding that the ‘we’ attests to a sense that one mind has had its perspectives and capabilities shaped in and changed by interaction with another, not that two or more interacting agents are having the very same thought and experience in unison.

The phrase ‘two or more’ points to one further issue to acknowledge at this point. Many assumptions about ‘we’ in the cognitive humanities relate to dyads of people pursuing a common goal, such a painting a house or lifting a table together. Yet of course many uses of the pronoun relate to much larger group sizes. Perhaps ‘we-representations’ can be scaled up to larger numbers, and perhaps they cannot. There are practical difficulties in designing an experiment to test the question, and the idea of minds and bodies aligning dynamically does not extrapolate readily to such open-

Imitation of Continuous Action Sequences: The Role of Spatial and Topological Mapping’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 41 (2015), 1209–22.

²⁷ Deborah Tollefsen and Rick Dale, ‘Naturalizing Joint Action: A Process-Based Approach’, *Philosophical Psychology*, 25 (2012), 385–407.

ended categories as ‘British’ or ‘historians’ (about which an individual might nevertheless say ‘we’ in some scenarios). Some studies maintain a distinction between categories, expressing larger social structures and affiliations, and what one might refer to as groups, meaning small-scale clusters of people, such as dyads, whose shared identity is grounded in dynamic interactions which can be observed locally and tested empirically.²⁸ One response to these difficulties is offered by Gallagher and Tollefsen as they develop what they call a ‘narrative theory’ of the ‘we’. In their account, different forms of shared agency, from dyads to nations, are given stability and depth by similar processes mental processes that are narrative in character.²⁹ Another solution to the problem of scale is to suggest that our closest contacts within larger groups, and the experience of aligning with them as a subset of the whole, are important parts of category membership: close connections to only a few people might be crucial to an individual’s experience of the ‘we’ of ‘British’ or ‘historians’.

This is something that is hard to confirm or deny beyond the intuitive level, but it is an issue that can arise in fictions such as Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’. In the discussion of the story that follows, we will be attentive both to ways in which it is illuminated by new ideas about the ‘we’, and to ways in which it may illuminate the difficulties involved in defining the characteristics of the individual ‘we’.

4 ‘A Rose for Emily’

The predominant narrative voice of William Faulkner’s short story ‘A Rose for Emily’ (1930) is a ‘we’. In accordance with the two prevailing approaches in literary criticism, outlined in Section 2, it often seems feasible to take the narrating voice ‘we’ as the voice of a single individual speaking on behalf of the group, truly or falsely. Whether the group has a distinctive perspective on things, and what the perspective is, does not really matter, since it is the way in which the individual takes the group to see things that the relevant ‘we’ expresses. Uri Margolin sees this story as a case where the speaker’s pronoun is a hybrid of the “we” sayer’s own immediate sense experiences and of the

²⁸ Maria Jarymowicz, ‘Mental Barriers and Links Connecting People of Different Cultures: Experiential vs. Conceptual Bases of Different Types of the WE-Concepts’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6 (2015), 1950.

²⁹ Deborah Tollefsen and Shaun Gallagher, ‘We-Narratives and the Stability and Depth of Shared Agency’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 47 (2017), 95–110.

presumed experiences ascribed to the co-focalisers by the speaker on the basis of their public actions and statements' (p. 122).³⁰ Alternatively, it is possible to see the 'we' as representative of the thoughts and values of the town of Jefferson, the voice of a group mind reacting in unison to the life story of Emily Grierson. It surely has taken some interaction between the single individuals for them to become a 'we' and have a unified perspective, but the pronoun could capture the perspective of the 'we' only, while the individual's perspective is lost in the collective.

As was set out in Section 3, there is a way of thinking about the meaning of 'we' that is both individual and interactive. The concept of an 'individual we' is not simply an arbitration between the two prevailing views of 'we'-narrators; it offers a different and new framework in which to approach such stories. This kind of 'we' comes into view at the climax of Faulkner's story. Emily Grierson has poisoned her lover Homer Barron, kept his body in her house as it decayed, and shared its bed. Here Faulkner's 'we' becomes significantly less unified for a moment:

Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair.³¹

This is the only use of 'one of us' in the story. The phrase, and the scene in general, invite us to think about what 'we' denotes and how 'we' came to notice and to bear witness to this tiny but decisive piece of evidence. (In this respect it resembles the line 'by craning backward / the moose can be seen' in Bishop's poem discussed in Section 3: such nuanced moments provoke questions that lead to refinements in thinking about what is conveyed by respective instances of 'we'.) Only a few Jefferson residents can feasibly have been present in the room that had been kept locked so long. Only a few—perhaps fewer than would be standing there—could have leant forward to see something as tiny as a hair and to perceive its colour. Of these few, only one actually picks up the hair. As was suggested, it

³⁰ Margolin, 'Telling Our Story', 122.

³¹ William Faulkner, 'A Rose for Emily', in *Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1950), 119–130, at 130.

could be that the ‘we’-speaker reveals itself to be the ‘one of us’ who undertakes the relevant action. Alternatively, one could say that the townspeople have merged their minds and they now perceive as one.

Each interpretation captures important aspects of Faulkner’s complex narrative framework, yet neither quite fits the moment when Emily’s secret is revealed. To see why, let us first consider the case in which ‘we’ would express the voice of an individual speaking on behalf of the other people. There is an obvious way of understanding the meaning of ‘we’ in distributive terms. Action (as in ‘we saw a long strand of gray hair’) would be predicated on the individuals, so the ‘we’-narrator would be saying ‘we’ to mean that each and every agent saw the strand of hair individually. When someone says ‘we’ in the distributive sense, its use implies nothing more than there is a common object attended to by all parties, and that each of them is attending to it.³² In such a scenario, since the common object is salient, it would not make any difference in meaning if we read the climactic passage as implying that action were undertaken by a bunch of people unknown to one another, acting in parallel. ‘We’ still would have seen the strand of hair in the (distributive) sense that each of us did. Instead, it does make a difference if we interpret the climactic passage as suggesting that what ‘we saw’ – we saw it *together*, so to speak, not just as individuals acting serially. If ‘we saw’ the strand of hair together, then of course it is true to say without loss of meaning that each of us did; but the opposite is not.

The vividness of interaction and intense sense of participation here suggest that there is more to this ‘we’-perspective than the perspective of a single individual whose voice says ‘we’ distributively as above. Faulkner may have wanted his narrator to say ‘we’ at this point in such a way as to convey, not the separate experiences had by each and every one of ‘us’ in front of a common object, but the inter-subjective character of the experience of seeing the strand of hair jointly. The phrase ‘one of us’ is telling: this is the thrust of ‘we’-intentionality, of the ‘we-as-a-group’ interpretation left out of a purely aggregative reading of ‘we’. Whether or not the ‘we’-speaker is taken to have been part of the

³² Kirk Ludwig, ‘Foundations of Social Reality in Collective Intentional Behavior’, in *Intentional Acts and Institutional Facts: Essays on John Searle’s Social Ontology*, ed. Savas Tsohatzidis (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007) pp. 49-71.

action scene, the fact that someone picked up the hair as ‘one of us’ has an impact on the way the moment is experienced and represented by all.

If the ‘we’-speaker then says ‘we’ to express a ‘we’-perspective on things, does it stand for the perspective of the group as a whole? This seems like another inadequate explanation. The emphasis on the relationship of the ‘we’-speaker to the group points towards a kind of ‘we’-experience that goes beyond the features of a ‘collective we’. This relationship comes into heightened focus as a result of at least one important uncertainty. Faulkner momentarily leaves the first person plural when referring to ‘the’ (not ‘our’, or ‘my’) nostrils while describing the smell in the room. This makes us think a bit more about whose senses have borne witness, and how that witness is pooled among the group. The ‘we’-speaker shares the relevant moment of perception, but the constituency of the group and the specifics of the involvement remain unclear. The attention on the individual’s questionable presence but vivid access gets across that the speaker is not merged into the group, so (s)he is not speaking for a collective mind. The focus is on how the individual’s differentiated perspective is shaped through interaction with others, and changed by it, until it becomes somewhat shared. Hence, the use of ‘we’ suggests a mental state of the single speaker whose perspective on things becomes aligned with others rather than undifferentiated and collectivized: an ‘individual we’.

To understand this crucial instance of the narrative ‘we’, in light of the features that we have discussed in Section 3, we need to examine the framework from which Faulkner’s version of a ‘we-representation’ emerges, that is, the use of the pronoun in the rest of ‘A Rose for Emily’. It should be noted that Faulkner has not created a systematic study of ‘we’-thinking in this or other stories. The narrative ‘we’ is not unified or stable across its appearances; it is left to the reader to interpret which agent the ‘we’-voice represents, whether it represents a group or, rather, an individual-level state of mind of the (‘we’-)speaker. Indeed, as Margolin shows, the fluid nature of ‘we’ extends to the groups it may invoke: he notices that most of Faulkner’s collective uses (unlike the one at the critical moment in Emily’s bedroom) lend themselves to a diachronic reading, and ‘we’ speaks to at least three different generations of members of the Jefferson community.³³ However, amid this fluidity

³³ Margolin, ‘Telling Our Story’, 120.

some key characteristics of Faulkner's storytelling technique recur and persist throughout the story. We shall therefore proceed by focusing on these characteristics in order to show how Faulkner's nuancing of the meaning of 'we' creates the conditions for something like an 'individual we' to arise at the end of the story.

One way in which the relationships between individual(s) and group(s) can be approached is through the issue of witnessing. Readers are guided towards thinking about what it means to say 'we' by Faulkner's subtle, scalar descriptions alongside statements of apparent fact (within the story-world) about what 'we' saw. An omniscient narrator just knows things, but 'we' do not, which raises questions as to whether and how the narrative 'we' perceives aspects of the story. For example, when Emily dies, 'we did not even know she was sick', and yet it is recorded that 'she died in one of the downstairs rooms, in a heavy walnut bed with a curtain, her grey head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight'.³⁴ This could be a scene collated in retrospect, or even invented, but the process by which specific details become known is unclear; readers might wonder briefly who actually saw this, while also being fascinated by the unfolding revelations. Things are more subtle when the reader hears that, before her death, 'we' saw Emily 'now and then': this suggests an exchange of information between the minds spoken for by 'we'.³⁵ Any one of them might have seen her once or more, and may have heard explicitly about other sightings, but this kind of perception as 'we' comes across as a composite of inferences and extrapolations based on awareness of what others have seen. The point is that when we reach the moment of discovery in the climactic episode, readers are prepared to recognize the specialness of the involvement as a group and immediacy evoked by the 'we' at that moment, because the story has given other less intense and striking, but still questionable, versions of the pronoun to think through.

Sometimes the story depicts a characteristic of Jefferson life that suggests an alternative explanation for the way in which the 'we'-speaker finds out about Emily's secret. It might simply be that news travels fast in Yoknapatawpha County, the fictional part of Mississippi where Faulkner set most of his explorations of Southern life. In the small town world the facts and some idea of what the

³⁴ 'A Rose for Emily', 128–129.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

moment of perception was like could circulate very quickly by means of a network of person-to-person gossip. Faulkner includes an incident of this sort when he describes the reaction of the ‘we’ to the strange encounter between Emily and a ‘druggist’ (i.e. a pharmacist). He sells her arsenic; she won’t tell him its planned use, and without any further indication as to how, ‘the next day we all said, “She will kill herself”’.³⁶ Private conversations do not always become public—we never find out what Emily said that made a Baptist minister refuse to offer any more moral guidance—but there is the potential for very rapid circulation.³⁷ What ‘we’ need to know of the transaction with the druggist is simply factual (i.e. to conclude that she ‘will kill herself’, ‘we’ just need to know that she bought arsenic), but the things ‘we’ don’t know about the meeting with the minister, and what ‘we’ do know about the final revelation, have more arresting and emotional content. ‘News travels fast’ cannot be the whole story because it cannot account for the intense sense of participation, the distinctive feeling of ‘together-ness’ that we encounter at the point of the final revelation. By evoking, at times, a relatively mundane world of circulating gossip, Faulkner creates a contrast with the more psychologically interesting ways in which states of affairs and objects, like a strand of hair, can be thought about and experienced by individuals ‘as a we’. It is perhaps worth stressing that this richer ‘we’-perspective need not be ethically superior to the world of gossip; transformed though it may be at times by the perspectives it accesses, the ‘we’ of ‘A Rose for Emily’ never includes Miss Grierson or engages in productive sympathy with her plight.

On the assumption that the narrative voice can speak to the individual mind of the ‘we’-speaker, another way to let this dimension emerge is to isolate instances of seemingly plural agency. For example, Faulkner gives indications as to how his ‘we’ should be construed by using a ‘they’ pronoun to separate certain groups from the narrative voice. There are distinctions according to age and gender—we hear of groups of ladies and older people who are at particular moments not included—but no definitive clarification of which group the ‘we’ speaks for. This makes the use of the pronoun at the crucial final moment distinctively dynamic and full of potential. The most important difference between the ‘they’ and the ‘we’ arises in relation to the kind of impact these pronominal agents have

³⁶ Ibid., 126.

³⁷ Ibid., 126.

in the story. Just before the climax, there is a stark contrast between what ‘we’ know, and how ‘they’ act:

Already we knew that there was one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced. They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it.³⁸

This contrast between the ‘they’ that breaks down a door, and the ‘we’ that knows the consequences, stands usefully for a key definition of what ‘we’ do in ‘A Rose for Emily’. This definition is different from that of Brian Richardson, who says that ‘by the end of the story, the collective “we” does change and becomes an actor, physically present in the story’.³⁹ Rather than taking concrete action, and thus fulfilling Richardson’s interpretation in terms of collective presence (though his term, ‘actor’, does not necessarily entail something as drastic as breaking down a door), Faulkner’s ‘we’ is typically portrayed throughout the story as the ‘we’-attitude of an individual knowing, perceiving, remembering, feeling, and believing. Even the picking up of a hair is devolved to ‘one of us’: the ‘we’ typically denotes a set of things that happen in and to the minds of individuals.

This general characteristic becomes most pointed in the final climatic moment. First there is a moment of intense perception, as ‘we just stood there’ staring at Homer Barron’s decayed body.⁴⁰ Then, there is the emergence of ‘one of us’, which enables a single hair to be picked up, and next the precise close-up vision of a limited ‘we’ (perhaps a subset of ‘we’) that recognizes the hair’s significance. This moment, the culmination of a thread of thoughtful investigation into the first person plural perspective that runs throughout the story, offers an arresting image of a mental state of one speaker which is enhanced by taking account of the perspectives of other agents in the course of interaction. This crucial ‘we’ is not a collective subject, merged in both thought and action. It seems

³⁸ Ibid., 129.

³⁹ Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*, p. 47.

⁴⁰ ‘A Rose for Emily’, 130.

more like the result, in an individual speaker, of a sense of togetherness and the experience of shared involvement.

5 Further Directions for Research

The concept of the ‘individual we’ enables a fuller and finer grasp of the narrative technique in ‘A Rose for Emily’, and could do the same for other ‘we’-narratives (such as those named at the beginning of the essay) as well. As was discussed in Section 2, critical approaches tend to choose between the isolated individual and the merged collective when describing ‘we’-narrators, but many of the most interesting examples involve, at some stage, the sort of dialectic between individuality and interactivity seen in Faulkner’s story. These narrative techniques, many of which are more ambitiously extended and aim to represent more complex, and less realistic, social dynamics, would also be illuminated by an approach that focuses on the effects of alignment for, and on, the individual in social settings. In some cases, it will be particularly important to consider the fictionality of the perspective being evoked in analysing uses of ‘we’ in social discourse. Whereas Faulkner’s narrative style can be thought of as an attempt to represent the experience of town life in the South, somewhat historically, other experimental versions of story-telling in the plural may aim more at enabling imaginary worlds than representing real ones.

Recent developments in the philosophy and science of social cognition are providing new contexts in which to appreciate what can be conveyed by the word ‘we’. However, ‘A Rose for Emily’ is not a perfectly neat example of the directions of research noted in Section 3, fitting the criteria and entirely excluding other explanations for its characteristics. The story offers a picture of how the ‘individual we’ might arise fleetingly in the course of a series of complex events and interactions, while hinting at issues that are not frequently broached in philosophical and scientific accounts of ‘we’-intentionality. One question, for example, is whether goal-directed, intentional behaviour is the fundamental scenario in which social cognition operates, or whether social understanding and interaction are underpinned by an alignment of minds that depends on factors other than people having common goals and enacting them jointly. Faulkner’s story brings this into view by offering the ‘they act’ / ‘we know’

distinction described above. While some of the ‘we’-narrator’s interventions in the world should be thought of as action in a broad sense, there is still a contrast between bluntly knocking down a door and the ongoing ‘feeling’, and ‘thinking’, and ‘knowing’ that something is the case for the people involved. It is not that ‘A Rose for Emily’ seems to arise from a concrete decision on the importance of action or alignment, but rather that the story brings the question into view and offers, within the bounds of the world it is depicting, a way of partially answering it.

Something similar could be said in relation to the distinction between dyads, groups, and categories also described in Section 3. It is an open question, and one that does not yield readily to experiment, whether an ‘individual we’ can arise in similar ways in relation to different numbers and types of people. Faulkner’s shifting ‘we’ does not offer a consistent size or constitution of the group, nor does it offer a steady level of affiliation between the members, but it seems that his version of ‘we’-experience is not limited to very small groups. Furthermore, since it is not even clear that the narrator is present in Emily’s room, and yet the speaker still identifies vividly (‘as a we’) with what happens there, it is suggested that the qualities of the ‘individual we’ may not depend on people being present in the same place. Co-presence is now an essential feature of experimenting and a pillar in theorizing about social cognition; and yet Faulkner produces a plausible depiction of how a ‘we’-speaker may have its perceptions and perspective formed in interaction with others without (necessarily) immediate contact. Again, this does not emerge as a developed proposition, but the story affords consideration of nuances and possibilities in a lifelike, though unusual, environment.

Novels and short stories with ‘we’-narrators may speak to the wider interdisciplinary field by portraying interactions within fictions that thematically shadow interactions tested in experiments or posited by philosophers. Imaginative licence may have enabled literary authors to portray detailed, vivid ideas of how a ‘we’ might arise, free from the constraints that govern cognitive scientists and philosophers, but gauging the value of such ideas will be no simple matter. However, there may be reasons why a particular field of philosophical and scientific enquiry is more or less open to insights from the direction of literature. In the case of the ‘individual we’, there are (at least) two. Firstly, there is the importance of language. The pronoun ‘we’ is a form in which to express, and to offer access to,

the mental state in question. It is also an obstacle, since the pronoun does not distinguish one kind of ‘we’ from another, and the ‘we’-perspective being asserted may be an illusion. In these respects, and in general, the particular literary use of ‘we’ at stake in this essay is not significantly different from possible non-literary uses. However, the complex network of ‘we’ in Faulkner’s story provides a constantly varying encounter with the pronoun, and thereby with the subtleties of the underlying concepts, which traditional interpretations in literary criticism have failed to capture.

Secondly, and more far-reachingly, there is an affinity between the ‘individual we’ and the reader’s encounter with the world through other eyes. Literature affords new representations of the world in a way that might bear on the fundamental capacity of individuals to have their perspectives on things shaped by, and changed in, the relevant meeting of minds. In both cases, there is an interest in the transformation of an individual’s mental environment by way of aligning with others’ views. At a general level, this analogy has nuances: for example, the ‘individual we’ posits transformative effects from interaction, but these arise differently in the individuals involved. This might resonate with an idea of literary experience in which, again, there are outcomes in terms of new perspectives on things being afforded to readers, but these are not identical in every reader. Readers often agree with one another as to what they are getting from fiction, but each representational and experiential response is unique. The key thing is that if some aspects of literature have more to offer the cognitive humanities than others—if their aspirations to insight are not equal—then the first-person plural narrator should be one of the more promising.⁴¹

⁴¹ The core ideas of this article started to take shape in a workshop on ‘Literature and the We-Mode’ held in Cambridge in June 2016. We are grateful to the participants for their comments, as well as to Bonnie Costello, Greg Currie, Chris Frith, Fiona Green, and the anonymous reviewers, for sharing their insights and thoughts on earlier versions of the manuscript.