complex states of mind, in coherent English. I remember conducting elaborate conversations about those states of mind—in what I thought was English—but only in my head. I was later surprised to learn that I was not alone in this experience. Several immigrants who came to the United States in their late fifties and sixties told me that they did this too, a habit appearing more poignant in their case because, being of a retirement age, few of them had a real chance to break through the social barrier created by the language barrier.

Many of them read a lot of fiction at that time and still do.

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THE NOVEL AS A COGNITIVE EXPERIMENT

How much prompting do we need to begin to attribute a mind of her own to a fictional character? Very little, it seems, since any indication that we are dealing with an entity capable of self-initiated action (e.g., “Peter Walsh has come back”) leads us to assume that this entity possesses thoughts, feelings, and desires, at least some of which we could intuit, interpret, and, frequently, misinterpret.¹

Writers can exploit our constant readiness to posit a mind whenever we observe behavior as they experiment with the amount and kind of interpretation of the characters’ mental states that they themselves supply and that they expect us to supply. When Woolf shows Clarissa observing Peter’s body language (Clarissa notices that he is “positively trembling”), she has an option of providing us with a representation of either Clarissa’s mind that would make sense of Peter’s physical action (something to the effect of: “how excited must he be to see her again!”) or of Peter’s own mind (as in: “so excited was he to see his Clarissa again!”). Instead she tells us, first, that Peter is thinking that Clarissa has “grown older” and, second, that Clarissa is thinking that Peter looks “exactly the same; . . . the same queer look; the same check suit” (40). Peter’s “trembling” still feels like an integral part of this scene, but make no mistake: we, the readers, are called on to supply the missing bit of information (such as “he must be excited to see her again”) which makes the narrative emotionally cohesive.

Ernest Hemingway, famously, made it his trademark to underrepresent his protagonists’ feelings by forcing the majority of his characters’ physical
actions to stand in for mental states (as, for example, in the ending of *A Farewell to Arms*: “After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain” [314]). Hemingway could afford such a deliberate, and highly elaborate, in its own way, undertelling for the same reason that Woolf could afford to let Peter’s trembling “speak for itself”: our evolved cognitive tendency to assume that there *must be* a mental stance behind each physical action and our striving to represent to ourselves that possible mental stance even when the author has left us with the absolute minimum of necessary cues for constructing such a representation.²

For a different—and differently striking—example of undertelling the characters’ mental states, consider Henry James’s *The Awkward Age*. Written in the aftermath of James’s disappointing venture into playwriting, *The Awkward Age* experiments with fusing the theatrical and the novelistic modes of mind-reading. Theatrical performance, after all, engages our Theory of Mind in ways markedly different from those practiced by the novel, for it offers no “going behind,” in James’s parlance, that is, no voiceover explaining the protagonists’ states of mind (though in some plays the function of such a voiceover is assumed, to a limited degree, by a Chorus or a narrator figure). Instead, we have to construct those mental states from the observable actions and from what the protagonists choose to report to us (e.g., “Irina: I don’t know why I feel so lighthearted today”; “Nina: I am happy!”; “Treplev: I wish you knew how miserable I am!”). Moreover, in the case of the live performance—as opposed, that is, to simply reading the text of the play—this exercise of our mind-reading capacity is crucially mediated by the physical presence of actors and thus the wealth of *embodied* information (or misinformation) about their characters’ hidden thoughts and feelings.

*The Awkward Age* strives to approximate this theatrical “absence of . . . ‘going behind’” the protagonists’ physical exteriors, as it refuses to “compass explanations and amplifications” of Nanda’s, Aggie’s, Mitchy’s, Van’s, Mrs. Brook’s, and Mr. Longdon’s mental states—refuses “to drag out odds and ends from the ‘mere’ story-teller’s great property-shop of aids to illusion” (12). What we get instead is the account of the characters’ feelings as hesitantly implied by a third-person narrator—an arrangement that forces us to reconstruct those feelings by negotiating between the narrator’s report (riddled with “it seemed’s” and “as if’s”) and our own observations of the characters’ physical actions. For example, when Van and Mitchy talk about the possibility of Mitchy’s marrying Aggie (mainly to please Nanda, who loves Van, but not Mitchy, even though Mitchy loves her and is considered by her mother to be a highly eligible suitor), the readers
receive a detailed description of the two men’s body language along with tentative guesses about what might be going on behind their restless starts, turns, and rises:

Mitchy had stood a moment longer, almost as if to see the possibility [of Van’s eventually marrying Nanda if Mitchy first marries Aggie] develop before his eyes, and had even started at the next sound of his friend’s voice. What Vanderbank in fact brought out, however, only made him turn his back. “Do you like so very much the little Aggie?”


“You are too amazing,” Vanderbank mused. His musing had presently the effect of making him rise . . . (218)

Looking back at his experience of writing a novel “as if . . . constructing a play” (14), James found it both “perplexing and delightful” (12). It was certainly a challenge to write a 300-page story in the vein of the above-quoted “passage . . . between Vanderbank and Mitchy, where the conduct of so much fine meaning” has to be effected “through the labyrinth of mere immediate appearances” (16). Still, the challenge was met and the conduct of “so much fine meaning” was “successfully and safely effected” (16)—a success, let me stress again at the risk of repeating myself, owing both to James’s brilliance and to the workings of our mind-reading capacity.

For it is because we engage in our own constant construction of the possible states of mind of the people we encounter—negotiating among their own reports of how they feel, others’ guesses of what they might feel, and our intuitions of what a smile, a turn, a pause, a rise may mean in a given context—that writers such as James can play their games of under-telling and underinterpreting. Though, as James’s readers well know, his usual game consists rather in overreporting his characters’ thoughts and feelings, saturating us with the nuances of their mental states—a saturation, again, made possible by our evolved hankering to know what other people think. We want to know it so badly (though clearly some of us more badly than others) that we can take (and many of us even enjoy) the intense mind-reporting of *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, and *What Maisie Knew*.

To return to my earlier speculations of why we read fiction, I can say that by imagining the hidden mental states of fictional characters, by following the readily available representations of such states throughout the narrative, and by comparing our interpretation of what the given charac-
The misinterpreter of James can still achieve cognitive satisfaction, but chances are that the misinterpretation will yield less satisfaction than the more accurate interpretation. This is so not because the accurate interpretation is always going to offer more cognitive satisfaction, but because, in the case of James, getting him right is going to take us deeper into the relation between behavior and mind, and, thus, offer us richer cognitive satisfactions than we’ll typically derive from getting him wrong. For an author whose experimentation with Theory of Mind is not as rich as James’s, misinterpretation may end up adding things to the experience of reading that do offer more cognitive satisfaction.

The latter observation rings equally true when we think of a variety of interpretive techniques that allow us to make a given text newly exciting precisely by reading more into its treatment of “the relation between behavior and mind.” In fact, it seems that a majority of literary-critical paradigms—be that paradigm psychoanalysis, gender studies, or new historicism—profitably exploit, in their quest for new layers of meaning, our evolved cognitive eagerness to construct a state of mind behind a behavior.

But, as I was asked once after giving a talk on ToM and literature, What about those parts of fictional narratives that ostensibly have nothing to do with reporting or guessing characters’ minds? If we like reading fiction because it lets us try on different mental states and seems to provide intimate access to the thoughts, intentions, and feelings of other people in our social environment (even if those people do not really exist and the social environment that we “share” with them is an illusion), what about, say, descriptions of nature? Why interrupt the pleasurable workout of our mind-reading adaptations with passages that either do not prod us toward
inhabiting and guessing other people’s minds or do it in a pointedly circuitous way (e.g., by anthropomorphizing)?

First of all, descriptions of nature are quite scarce even in those works of fiction in which they seem to be overrepresented. It is possible that our perception of some fictional texts as abounding in such descriptions owes simply to the fact that relatively rare as they are, they stand out and, as such, receive a disproportionate share of our attention. I remember how surprised I was recently, rereading the novels of nineteenth-century Russian writer Ivan Turgenev and looking in vain for all those endless “nature” passages that bored me so desperately in my adolescence (I had finally learned to skip all of them). Turns out that those endless passages are brief, few and far between, and, more often than not, shot through with pathetic fallacy and personification. Moreover, when they do not explicitly ascribe human thoughts and feelings to natural events and objects, they are frequently focalized so as to provide an indirect insight into the feelings of the characters perceiving them. Thus Turgenev’s *On the Eve*:

Passing the ponds, they all stopped to admire [the town] for the last time. The bright colors of the approaching evening blazed all around them; the sky glowed; stirred up by the rising breeze, the leaves glittered iridescently; the molten gold waters flowed in the distance; reddish turrets and gazebos, scattered here and there throughout the garden, stood out sharply against the dark greenery. (341; translation mine)

The passage does contain spots of pathetic fallacy: those stirred-up leaves, that glowing sky. On the whole, however, the glorious colors of Turgenev’s early sunset derive their meaning from the social context of the scene, as they set off various emotional uplifts experienced by several characters. Still, seeing their states of mind as accentuated by those colors, skies, leaves, and waters may require a cognitive effort different from the effort involved in a more straightforward imagining of a state of mind behind a character’s observable behavior. The reader wishing for a more immediate gratification of her mind-reading adaptations—a fast-food experience of reading fiction—may find the “glowing evening” interlude both superfluous and tedious, as I certainly did at age fourteen. Today, now that my taste has been thoroughly vitiated by such works as Wordsworth’s Prelude (which makes one work hard for every pleasurable shot of mind-reading that it delivers to our insatiably social mind), I can take Turgenev’s nature passages in stride and even enjoy them.

Thus, if we conceive of the fictional narrative as a cognitive artifact in
progress—an ongoing thousands-year-long experimentation with our cognitive adaptations—we can say that this narrative constantly diversifies the ways in which it engages our Theory of Mind. Imagined landscapes, with their pathetic fallacies, personifications, and anthropomorphizing, and with their tacit illuminations of human minds perceiving those landscapes, prompt us to exercise our ToM in a way very different from the stories that contain no such landscapes. The relative popularity of such descriptions depends on the specific cultural circumstances in which they are produced and disseminated (a topic which I consider in detail in Part III) as well as on the tastes and life histories of individual readers.

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CAN COGNITIVE SCIENCE TELL US WHY WE ARE AFRAID OF MRS. DALLOWAY?

When we start to inquire into how writers of fiction experiment with our mind-reading ability, and perhaps push it to its furthest limits, the insights offered by cognitive scientists become particularly pertinent. Although their investigation of ToM is very much a project-in-progress, enough carefully documented research is already available to literary scholars to begin asking such questions as, Is it possible that literary narrative builds on our capacity for mind-reading but also tries its limits? How do different cultural-historical milieus encourage different literary explorations of this capacity? How do different genres? Speculative and tentative as the answers to these questions could only be at this point, they mark the possibility of a genuine interaction between cognitive psychology and literary studies, with both fields having much to offer to each other.

This section’s tongue-in-cheek title refers to my attempt to apply a series of recent experiments conducted by cognitive psychologists studying ToM to Mrs. Dalloway. I find the results of such an application both exciting and unnerving. On the one hand, I can argue now with a reasonable degree of confidence that certain aspects of Woolf’s prose do place extraordinarily high demands on our mind-reading ability and that this could account, at least in part, for the fact that many readers feel challenged by that novel. On the other hand, I came to be “afraid” of Mrs. Dalloway—