Why We Read Fiction

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discourage others. Combine this general cognitive tendency with the professional training of a literary critic, and it is not unlikely that this individual would be more attuned to the possibility of seeing not just one source behind *Pride and Prejudice* (i.e., Jane Austen) but a rich hierarchy of sources (i.e., the “real” Jane Austen, the “implied” Jane Austen, the “narrator” of *Pride of Prejudice*, and so forth). In other words, whereas our shared cognitive adaptation for source-monitoring makes it in principle possible both for me and for my first-year students to see those multiplying authors behind the text, it might be easier for me than for them (at least initially) to achieve such a split vision. I think of the relative ease with which it comes to me as my cognitive-professional hazard.

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**RICHARDSON’S CLARISSA: THE PROGRESS OF THE ELATED BRIDEGROOM**

When I think of fiction and cognition in literary-historical terms, attempting to reconstruct, in particular, the development of the motif of the “Quixotic” imagination from Cervantes to Nabokov, I inevitably return to Samuel Richardson’s novel *Clarissa* (1747–48). *Clarissa* has been deservedly admired by numerous literary critics, and it is currently going through a pedagogical renaissance, being increasingly taught, even in its forbidding 1,500-page entirety, in a variety of graduate and undergraduate college courses. With the advent of a “cognitive” approach to literature, however, it also ought to be acknowledged as a massive and unprecedented-in-Western-literary-history experimentation with the readers’ Theory of Mind and metarepresentational ability, experimentation that certainly made possible the later-day mind-games played by *Lolita* and *Pale Fire.*

In this section I argue that in *Clarissa*, Richardson created a kind of protagonist that we today would call an unreliable narrator. I follow a series of episodes in the novel that increasingly force the reader to doubt the trustworthiness of at least one of its two narrators, and I discuss the cognitive effects of being confronted with a character who seems to believe his own lies. I suggest, in particular, that the presence of such a personage induces in us a state of metarepresentational uncertainty, thus providing a rich stimulation for our Theory of Mind.
Clarissa is a story of two brilliant young people, Clarissa Harlowe and Robert Lovelace, fatally misreading each other’s minds in the course of their deeply troubled courtship. Lovelace, a paradigmatic eighteenth-century “rake,” committed to seducing and subsequently abandoning incautious virgins, and Clarissa, a paragon of beauty, piety, and foresight,
live out the eighteenth-century version of the “ultimate challenge”: will Clarissa convert Lovelace to her exalted system of values and prove that “the reformed rake makes the best husband,” or will Lovelace sweet-talk, cheat, and intimidate Clarissa into cohabitation without marriage, his “darling scheme” and his sign of “triumph” over the whole female sex and their pretensions to “virtue”?

Structured as a series of epistolary exchanges between Clarissa and her confidante, Anna Howe, Lovelace and his confidante, John Belford, and the occasional letters from and to their respective families, the novel is simultaneously claustrophobic and boundless. The protagonists are mostly confined to their writing-desks, reporting to their respective friends in painstaking detail their endeavors to guess, second-guess, plant, anticipate, and interpret each other’s thoughts. The outcome of this obsessive mind-reading is such that Clarissa and Lovelace stop communicating altogether and die, or, rather, commit what could be considered thinly veiled acts of suicide. Clarissa wills herself to die (figure 2), possibly out of commitment to her developing view of herself as a tragic heroine—indeed, a martyr—who moves inexorably toward her terrible and instructive end, possibly from depression induced by Lovelace’s manipulation of her reality, a manipulation that makes her feel that none of the mainstays of her moral world—familial love, compassion of the strong for the weak, communal ties—can survive when confronted with playful but determined evil. Lovelace dies because he came to be so emotionally invested in her that he cannot go on after she passes away.

Before I turn to examining Richardson’s experimentation with our metarepresentational capacity, let me make a point that may sound like old news to you by now. This point, however, cannot be repeated often enough in a book that hopes to put the cognitive-evolutionary concept of the Theory of Mind on the map of contemporary literary studies. Clarissa and Lovelace may be preternaturally adept at planning and deflecting each other’s mental gambits, an intellectual one-upmanship that marks them as exceptional among other characters in the novel and justifies the appellations of “genius” generously bestowed upon them throughout the narrative. And yet the truly amazing and sustained feat of mind-reading takes place not when Clarissa “sees through” Lovelace’s new contrivance or when Lovelace anticipates her seeing through it and prepares a plan B. It takes place when we as readers of Richardson’s novel attribute the generous capacity for thoughts and desires to each fictional character, however tenuously delineated, and then proceed to interpret his or her behavior in terms of his or her underlying mental world, supplying a myriad of absent
links, assumptions, and tacit explanations that allow us to see the story as a rich and emotionally coherent whole. In our interactions with *Clarissa* (or any other work of fiction), we take our own mind-reading capacity completely for granted and notice it no more than we notice oxygen when we wake up in the morning, an obliviousness which does not, however, render either oxygen or our ToM less important for our everyday life.

Back to *Clarissa* and metarepresentationality. One of the central premises of Richardson’s novel is that its male protagonist is a consummate liar. The intellectual one-upmanship between Lovelace and Clarissa that I have just mentioned is set in motion by his constant endeavors to deceive her. He plots behind her back to set her own family against her; he introduces to her as seemingly respectable people a bevy of prostitutes and criminals; he forges her letters; he dons disguises and draws unsuspecting strangers into assisting him in tricking her.

But, you may point out, a lying protagonist is hardly news for a fictional narrative. How is Lovelace different, say, from Milton’s Satan, who manipulates his fellow fallen angels, assumes different identities to deceive the guardian angels of Paradise, and, finally, lies to Eve?

The difference between Milton’s and Richardson’s antiheroes is Satan’s ability to keep track of himself as the source of his representations of the world. That is, when he lies, he (mostly) knows that he lies. Moreover, Milton’s poem features an omnipresent narrator who provides a running commentary on Satan’s misrepresentation of reality. For example, when Satan approaches Eve in the garden in the guise of a snake, he is said to begin “his fraudulent temptation” (IX; 531); when he ends that fateful speech, the narrator observes that “his words replete with guile / Into [Eve’s] heart too easy entrance won” (IX;11. 733–34). This commentary helps us to see the difference between the world “as it is,” or at least as perceived by that omnipresent narrator, and the world as represented by Satan. Our cognitive predisposition to monitor sources of information thus enables us to make sense of the poem; when Satan, “enclosed in serpent” (IX;11. 494–95) tells Eve that he was miraculously “endued . . . with human voice” (1. 561) after eating the forbidden fruit, we know that he, and only he, is the source of that false representation, and we know that he knows it, too.

The same cognitive predisposition, however, could be used to disorient the reader, as in *Clarissa*. To begin with, Lovelace seems to have a selective problem with monitoring sources of his representations, regularly failing to keep track of himself as the source of his fantasies about the world. In other words, unlike Milton’s Satan, when Lovelace lies, he at
times appears not to know that he lies. Moreover, because Clarissa is an epistolary novel (unlike, for example, Don Quixote, which also features a self-deceiving protagonist), we do not have here an omnipresent narrator who would alert us to the glaring discrepancy between Lovelace’s version of what is going on and an alternative, perhaps truer, version. Instead, Clarissa is, in effect, a first-person narrative split between the two main protagonists. Consequently, it takes us some time—about five hundred pages or even much longer—to realize that one of the narrators of the story is misleading not just Clarissa but also himself and, consequently, us.

What it all adds up to is that in Lovelace we have an early instance of an unreliable narrator (a literary device typically associated with modernist and postmodernist fiction). As discussed in previous sections, the presence of such a narrator forces us to begin to question at some point during our reading numerous pieces of information that we would have otherwise processed as true within the fictional world of the story. Worse yet, since the narrator himself seems to believe in what he is saying and marshals evidence that supports his version of events, we may never find out what has “really” happened. We thus close the book with a strange feeling that the state of cognitive uncertainty that it induced in us will never be fully resolved. We will never know which representations within the story deserve to be treated as “true” and which have to remain metarepresentations with a source tag pointing to the first-person narrator.

Let us see now how Clarissa draws us into this state of metarepresentational uncertainty. Writers wishing to spring an unreliable narrator onto their readers frequently begin with a sly maneuver of establishing him/her as not only quite reliable but also more reliable than other characters in the story. As Ronald Blythe puts it, “[C]hambers must charm before the charmed begin to smell a rat.” That’s exactly what Richardson does in Clarissa. He opens the novel with a description of a familial turmoil that spins out of control, and he then introduces Lovelace as somebody who sees clearly into the messy passions of everybody else and can tell us what is really going on.

Here is what happens. Clarissa’s parents, siblings, and uncles are angry at her because she refuses to marry an obnoxious wealthy suitor of their providing. Her rejection of that man, they are convinced, stems from her secret preference for Lovelace. The argument escalates quickly, with both parties afraid and mistrustful of each other. Clarissa is grounded, denied the right to correspond with her best friend, all but disowned by her mother and father, threatened with forced marriage, and physically assaulted by her brother. It matters little that she proclaims her indiffer-
ence to Lovelace and her willingness to abide by the wishes of her elders if
only they don't make her marry the man that she abhors. For reasons that
she cannot fathom—for she has been an obedient and truthful child all
her life—they don't believe her.

After about one hundred pages of this family drama, we (but not
Clarissa) finally learn why they don't. We are made privy to a letter (the
first of many) from Lovelace to his friend Belford, in which he explains
what fuels the fear and anger of the elder Harlowes. It turns out that he
has been inflaming the passions of Clarissa's parents and siblings by brib-
ing one of their own servants and using him to feed them information
about Clarissa's supposed intention to elope with Lovelace. Lovelace has it
all figured out. Persecuted by her own family—who would not believe her
protestations of innocence since they listen to the servant who presumably
knows her real intentions—Clarissa would soon be forced to run away
from them. And whom would she run to, if not Lovelace, who has all the
while been assuring her of his love and respect and begging her to take
refuge from her unfeeling relatives with his own family? To get Clarissa
out of her father's house and into his sole power is the goal toward which
Lovelace is working with patience and prescience. He is the mastermind
behind the commotion at the Harlowes—after hearing from him, we
finally understand their motives fully.

Having thus established Lovelace as our privileged source of informa-
tion about the tangled situation, Richardson proceeds to deepen that
impression by demonstrating Lovelace's unusual perceptiveness when it
comes to figuring out other people's states of mind. Roughly one-third
into the novel comes a “Miss Partington” episode, which confirms
Lovelace as not only an inveterate plotter but also an insightful mind-
reader. Here is how Richardson builds up to it:

Lovelace has finally tricked Clarissa into leaving her family and elop-
ing with him. He then manipulates her into staying together in rented
apartments in London, at a house that, as he told Clarissa, is owned by a
respectable widow of an Army officer, who lets rooms and takes care of her
two nieces. In reality, the house is a brothel; the owner, “Mrs. Sinclair,” is
a madam; and her nieces are prostitutes, turned into such by Lovelace who
had earlier seduced and abandoned them. Clarissa is introduced to the
inhabitants of the house as Lovelace's wife, when, in fact, both Mrs. Sin-
clair and her nieces are convinced that Lovelace does not want to marry
Clarissa and instead intends to make her his kept mistress. Lovelace
explains to Clarissa that since they spend so much time together, they have
to pose as a married couple (even though they keep separate bedrooms) in
order not to scandalize the (presumably) respectable inhabitants of the house. However, the real reason that he wants Clarissa to address him as a husband in front of Mrs. Sinclair and her “nieces” is that if he then happens to rape Clarissa, he would have the witnesses who could testify in the court of law that Clarissa considered herself married to him and thus cannot possibly complain of any sexual liberties he has taken with his “lawfully wedded” wife.

One evening Lovelace throws a party to which he invites four of his equally debauched male friends and another former mistress of his, one Miss Partington (now, too, a prostitute), who is presented to Clarissa as a young lady of good family, wealth, and virtue. Miserable as she is about perpetuating the lie about her marriage, Clarissa is prevailed to continue posing as “Mrs. Lovelace” in front of his friends, not knowing that they are all apprised of the true state of affairs and of Lovelace’s motives for making Clarissa believe that they all think that she is married to him. Later that night, Clarissa is asked if Miss Partington can stay in her room for the night, for Mrs. Sinclair has presumably run out of beds to accommodate her illustrious guests. Although, on the surface of it, there is nothing strange about such an application, particularly as Miss Partington is supposed to be a woman of birth and virtue, the “over-cautious” Clarissa, not even knowing exactly what she is afraid of, but mindful of the house full of the intoxicated “gentlemen of free manners” (546), turns the request down. As readers soon find out (Lovelace explains it all in his letter to Belford), Clarissa was correct in her fears. Lovelace planned to use Miss Partington to open Clarissa’s door at night and let him into her bedroom, after which, had he raped her, she would have had even fewer chances to sue him later since now not only Mrs. Sinclair and her “nieces” but also four of Lovelace’s friends could testify that she went by the name of his wife.

On the morning after the failed Miss Partington scheme, Lovelace asks Clarissa what it was that Miss Partington and Mrs. Sinclair wanted from her last night. He then reports in his letter to Belford that Clarissa “artfully made lighter of her denial of Miss for a bedfellow than she thought of it, I could see that; for it was plain she supposed there was room for me to think she had been either over-nice, or over-cautious” (552; emphasis in the original).

Note, first of all, the multiple levels of intentionality embedded in this sentence. We can map them as follows:

Lovelace intends Belford (and with him, the readers) to be believe that
Clarissa did not want him to think that she did, in fact, suspect that he had some ulterior motives in having Miss Partington spend a night in her room.

Depending on how we count, this sentence embeds from four to six levels of intentionality. This, as I have argued in Part I, makes it somewhat more challenging for the reader and, subsequently, subtly heightens our admiration of the ease with which the clever and observant Lovelace can figure out what other people, including Clarissa, are thinking.

It is the tragedy of both Lovelace and Clarissa, however, that their occasionally accurate readings of each other’s states of mind never translate into the actual meeting of the minds. Paradoxically, the better Lovelace “reads” Clarissa, the more persistently he misinterprets her and the more assuredly he embarks upon the course of action destined to destroy any chances for their happiness together. In this particular case, Lovelace uses his insight into Clarissa’s fear and her reluctance to let him see her fear to justify his intensified plotting against her. As he reasons now in his imaginary conversation with her, “[S]ince thou reliest more on thy own precaution than upon my honour; be it unto thee as thou apprehendest, fair one!” (553).

Needless to say, the more Lovelace plots, the less Clarissa wants to marry the heartless liar. This effectively renders impotent the main lever that Lovelace could hope to use to control her (and any other woman): his alleged intention to be “reformed” and to make the heroic woman who succeeds in reforming him his wife. Feeling how the source of power is slipping away from him, Lovelace grows both more desperate and cruel in his treatment of Clarissa, which, of course, makes her even more adamant in her decision to escape him.

Richardson’s novel thus articulates, with a hitherto-unprecedented intensity and detail, the theme of the correlation between arduous mind-reading and tragic misunderstanding. Remaining prominent in the later-day novels adhering to what I call the Quixotic tradition, such as Lolita, this theme is inextricably bound with our metarepresentational ability. Mind-reading is a crucial aspect of our everyday existence, but a character too occupied with figuring out other people’s states of mind, and, worse, flaunting his ability to “see through” other people, runs a grave metarepresentational danger: he can easily lose track of himself as the source of his representations of the other person’s mental world. He may take what really is a metarepresentation with himself as a source tag—for example, “I think that Clarissa is blushing in response to my half-hearted marriage proposal because she badly wants to marry me, poor dear, but is ashamed
to acknowledge it” (to paraphrase one of Lovelace’s typical sentiments) as a representation without any source tag, for example, “Clarissa is blushing in response to my half-hearted marriage proposal because she badly wants to marry me, poor dear, but is ashamed to acknowledge it.”

Of course, this is by definition an impoverished and frequently quite wrong ascription of Clarissa’s state of mind. In this particular case, Clarissa is blushing in response to Lovelace’s lukewarm proposal not because she desperately wants to marry him—as a matter of fact, she doubts more and more that he would ever be able to make a suitable husband for her—but also because she is thinking of her friend Anna’s most recent letter, in which Anna pragmatically advises her to take Lovelace up on his first word and marry him out of hand in order to avoid being censured by the world for eloping with a rake. Clarissa’s blushing is indicative of a complex amalgam of feelings, for she is aware of the truth of Anna’s advice, angry with herself for putting herself in such an ambiguous situation, and half-ashamed at realizing that, in spite of everything, she is still attracted to Lovelace.

It is only natural that Lovelace would have no access to these complex feelings—he is not, after all, telepathic—but what is more important is that by losing track of himself as the source of his representations of Clarissa’s mind, he is foreclosing any potential for thinking that Clarissa may have complex feelings not accessible to him and thus subsequently revising his past misconceptions. By keeping track (that is, as much as we can, for sometimes it is not that simple) of ourselves as sources of our representations of other people’s minds, we remain humbly aware of the possibility of making a mistake in our interpretation of their thoughts. So in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy can change for the best and deserve happiness with Elizabeth Bennet because he is aware of himself as the source of his misinterpretation of Jane Bennet’s mind (i.e., his former belief that she did not really love his friend Mr. Bingley). By contrast, Lovelace does not correct, until it is too late, his readings of other people’s states of mind—he would rather try to correct reality to fit his delusions.

Any manifestly successful instance of mind-reading then becomes a trap for the person whose ability to keep track of himself as a source of his representations of other people’s mental stances is somewhat compromised. Although I am not interested in diagnosing Lovelace as mildly schizophrenic, I do want to apply here, albeit tentatively and perhaps more metaphorically than literally, Frith’s suggestion that the reason schizophrenic patients go on reading minds even though they do it all wrong is
that, unlike patients with autism, who have never had a chance to attribute mental states to people around them, schizophrenics “know well from past experiences that it is useful and easy to infer the mental states of others [and] will go on doing this even when the mechanism no longer works properly.” Lovelace’s dangerous propensity to ignore himself as the source of his representations of Clarissa’s mind and instead perceive these representations as accurate reflections of her mental stances is so persistent because it gets positive reinforcement on the occasions when he does read her mind quite correctly, as so happens, for example, in the above-discussed episode of Miss Partington as Clarissa’s intended bedfellow. Like schizophrenic patients—and, again, I am using this comparison guardedly—Lovelace knows from his “past experiences” that he can be very perceptive in inferring mental states of others and has clearly benefited from doing so in his endeavor to seduce one virgin after another. With these memories of past and present successes alive in his mind, he will continue to treat his interpretations of other people’s mental states as objectively true, even if this strategy backfires again and again in his relationship with Clarissa and finally makes any amicable communication between them impossible.

(b) Enter the Reader

At this point, we have to start considering the effect that Lovelace’s peculiar brand of unreflective mind-reading has on the reader of the novel. Strictly speaking, I have already implicitly introduced the reader into the discussion above when I said that Lovelace happens to infer correctly Clarissa’s mind in the Miss Partington episode. We know that Lovelace’s inference is correct because we have access to Clarissa’s letter to Anna Howe—in which Clarissa explains why she did not let Miss Partington share her bed—whereas Lovelace merely thinks that he is right simply because he is convinced that he is never wrong in his assessment of other people’s mental states. In other words, we, the readers, are tacitly coerced by the novel into accepting Lovelace’s assessment of Clarissa’s thoughts as rather accurate, in fact, more accurate on many occasions than the assessment offered by Clarissa herself in her letters to Anna. Clarissa, after all, has to sound invariably proper and virtuous, whereas Lovelace is under no such obligation and can be as cynical and straightforward as he wishes.
Lovelace’s fraught tendency to ignore himself as the source of his representations of the world thus becomes our tendency, too, especially in the early parts of the story, when we turn to his letters to find out what has really transpired.

Establishing Lovelace as a relatively trustworthy source of our representations—that is, drawing us into temporarily forgetting that his account of the events should be processed with a source tag, such as, “Lovelace claims that . . .”—is a crucial part of the metarepresentational game that the novel plays with the reader. The more we trust Lovelace as a privileged source of information, the greater is our shock and disorientation when in the second third of the novel we start coming across sentiments that imply that Lovelace may be losing it and, in fact, may have never had it together in the first place.

Here is one such moment. Clarissa’s loyal servant Hannah had been earlier taken away from her. Lovelace has just heard that Hannah might be available once more to serve her lady. Lovelace cannot let her come near Clarissa because, to advance his scheme of seduction, he has to keep her friendless and surrounded by his agents. Lovelace muses in a letter to Belford:

I have just now heard that her Hannah hopes to be soon well enough to attend her young lady, when in London. It seems the girl has had no physician. I must send her one, out of pure love and respect to her mistress. Who knows but medicine might weaken nature, and strengthen the disease?—As her malady is not a fever, very likely it may do so—But perhaps her hopes are too forward. Blustering weather in this month yet—And that is bad for rheumatic complaints. (554)

Lovelace has been plotting and scheming, and manipulating everybody before, but this is the first time he contemplates sending an assassin (i.e., a doctor who would administer a poison) to do in an inconvenient person. But perhaps this is just an empty talk: he is simply kidding, keeping up the image of the All-Powerful Rake he’s been cultivating in his letters to Belford. But does he know that he is kidding? Reading the passage, we get the unsettling impression that Lovelace might have temporarily lost the ability to experience the difference between the world as imagined by Lovelace—in which he is indeed the most gorgeous, powerful, and dangerous man alive, with corrupt doctors at his disposal and no law to stop him—and the world outside of his imagination. This impression becomes even stronger as we read on and realize that Lovelace implies that God
himself, by ensuring that the weather stays “blustering,” is helping Lovelace along in his plans.

Again, knowing Lovelace’s lively sense of humor (of which he is inordinately proud, too), we may hope that he is joking when he makes God one of his agents. The passage, however, gives no positive reassurance to our hopes. Had Richardson intended to provide such a reassurance, it would have been easy enough. Lovelace could have added to his musings about Hannah, physicians, and blustering weather something to the effect of, “or so I tell myself as I sit here and figure out how to subdue this proud beauty” (i.e., Clarissa). Because he does not say anything like it, we as readers have two options. We can make our lives easier and insist—in spite of the absence of any clear textual evidence—that Lovelace is ironic and knows it. We can remind ourselves that, after all, he is writing a letter to one of his friends and admirers and thus has to sustain his tone of swaggering self-assurance in order to impress his addressee. We can hope that this addressee, John Belford, is such a close friend that Lovelace can count on Belford’s knowing which of his bizarre claims should be taken at their face value and which should not. Thus, with a bit of effort, we can read all this comforting information into the text and decide that Lovelace is joking. Alternatively—and much less comfortably—we can remain suspended in a state of uncertainty, not quite understanding how seriously we should take anything that Lovelace says at this point.

Moreover, as the story goes on, Richardson begins to downright ply us with similar instances of Lovelace’s conflating his version of reality with reality itself and forcefully imposing his conflation on his audience. (One effect of such a conflation is that we begin to experience a feeling of mental vertigo not dissimilar to the one induced upon Clarissa, who is not able to tell, at least for a while, what is really going on around her.) Soon after the failed Miss Partington ploy, Lovelace conceives of another stratagem, different in design but tending to the same end. The women of the house are instructed to start a small, manageable fire in the middle of the night, a fire that could be easily put out, but not before the terrified and half-dressed Clarissa unlocks her door and steps out, afraid of being burned. Then Lovelace can enter her room on the pretense of saving her and calming her down, and stay in that room for the rest of the night.

At the appointed hour, as Lovelace sits at his writing-desk rereading a letter from his friend, he hears a commotion outside his rooms, the first stirrings of the “fire” scenario that he had himself carefully planned with the women of the house. Here is Lovelace’s account of his immediate reaction:
Soft, oh virgin saint, and safe as soft be thy slumbers!—

... But, what's the matter! What's the matter! What a double—But the uproar abates! What a double coward am I?—Or is it that I am taken in a cowardly minute? for heroes have their fits of fear; cowards their brave moments; and virtuous ladies, all but my Clarissa, their moment critical—

But thus coolly enjoying thy reflections in a hurricane!—Again the confusion's renewed!—

What! Where!—How came it!—

Is my beloved safe!—

Oh wake not too roughly my beloved!—(722)

To understand how the passage works our metarepresentational ability, we first need to realize that Lovelace is uncharacteristically nervous about the immediate prospect of forcing himself into a young woman's bed. Hence every mention of “confusion,” “hurricane,” and the “uproar” can be read as describing both the fake turmoil among the inhabitants of the house prompted by the fake fire and the real turmoil in Lovelace's soul.

Lovelace is surprised by his feelings—“What's the matter? . . . What a double coward am I?”—and wants to rally his spirit. One way of psyching himself up for going through with his plan is to work himself into the state of mind of somebody who is as surprised and frightened by the fire as Clarissa herself is. If Lovelace can convince himself that he and Clarissa were thrown together in the middle of the night by the accident and not by his premeditated plan, it would be easier for him to act more naturally in Clarissa's room, thus taking some edge off his presently unbearable anxiety. (Believing in one's own lie could be cognitively liberating because it frees up the energy spent on processing that extra level of metarepresentational framing stipulated by oneself as a source tag.) Consequently, when Lovelace wishes “soft slumber” to his Clarissa, he knows well that her slumber will be rudely interrupted this very minute, and yet he endeavors to sound as if he did not know it. Similarly, when Lovelace perks up at the noise and asks anxiously, “What's the matter? “What's the matter?” and then, when he does not hear anything else for a couple of seconds and notes with relief that “the uproar” has apparently “abated,” he is faking the natural reaction of the person disturbed by strange sounds around the house but then lulled back to the feeling of security by the temporary quiet. When the “confusion's renewed,” Lovelace responds as a man frightened and surprised anew (“What! Where!—How came it!”), moreover as a man who is so dedicated to his “beloved” that her safety is the
first thing that comes into his mind even when his own life is apparently in danger ("Is my beloved safe!") and who is determined to spare her any unnecessary anxiety upon this life-threatening occasion ("Oh wake not too roughly my beloved!").

This sequence of spontaneous and noble emotional responses is, of course, the exact opposite of what must be really going on through Lovelace's head, for the whole point of the "fire" plot is to terrify and disorient Clarissa to such a degree that she would have no strength to withstand his sexual attack. But again, as in the earlier episode, in which Lovelace contemplates sending an assassin to Hannah, the text offers us no reassurance that he is consistently aware of his role-playing. He might be so in the beginning of the scene, when he comments first on his nervousness and then on his ability to "coolly" enjoy his "reflections in a hurricane"; but toward its end ("What! Where!—How came it!"), he has, as far as we know, completely taken on his make-believe personality. It might be that by the time Lovelace begins to implore some figment of his imagination ("Oh wake not too roughly my beloved"), he is thinking to himself, as it were, "I pretend that I am a perfect lover caught unawares by fire"—a metarepresentation with himself as a source of representation. But as readers we get very little indication that he is thinking this, and we see instead a man who appears, at least for the time being, to sincerely believe his own lie, an unreliable narrator par excellence.

One of the most striking instances of this elimination of himself as a source of his fantasies comes when Clarissa, shortly after the fire episode (which, indeed, frightens but does not subdue her) escapes the hateful brothel and breaks free of Lovelace. Though desperate at first at having lost the object of his obsession, Lovelace is soon cheered up by finding out that she is residing in the neighboring town of Hampstead (Clarissa cannot simply go back to her family because she has completely antagonized them by eloping with the rake). Lovelace is even disappointed at the ease with which he has located his victim: had she concealed herself better, his game of pursuit would have been more exciting.

As he is getting ready to go to Hampstead to retrieve Clarissa, Lovelace calls for the assistance of one of his numerous agents, a "vile and artful pander" to his "debaucherries" (38), Patrick MacDonald, a wanted criminal, kept from prosecution only through the intervention of the rich and well-connected Lovelace. MacDonald has earlier appeared before Clarissa in the guise of a respectable gentleman, one Captain Tomlinson, presumably sent by her uncle, Antony Harlowe. As the fake "Captain Tomlinson" claims, Mr. Harlowe wants to see his niece respectably married to the man
Part II: Tracking Minds

(i.e., Lovelace), who, for all that the world knows, has already seduced her, as a prerequisite to negotiating the truce between Clarissa and her estranged parents. Mr. Harlowe has thus asked his dear old friend, the Captain, to meet with Mr. Lovelace and Clarissa and find out how the matters stand between them. All these are lies, of course, invented by Lovelace to subdue Clarissa. Lovelace brings in the sham Captain because he desperately needs Clarissa to still want to marry him, if no longer out of love for him, then as the means to be reconciled with her beloved uncle and later the rest of her family. As long as she still wants—for any reason—to become his wife, he can have some source of emotional power over her.

Obeying Lovelace’s urgent summons, MacDonald, a.k.a. Captain Tomlinson, hastens to Mrs. Sinclair’s house ready to accompany Lovelace on his trip to Hampstead. Lovelace’s description of Captain Tomlinson’s arrival and their subsequent conversation emerges as downright surreal if we keep in mind that every person in the house knows who MacDonald really is and what he is doing here, and the only “spectator” who would have benefited from keeping up the pretence is Clarissa, and she is gone. In the long quote below, I have interspersed Lovelace’s full account of the Captain’s entrance and their subsequent trip to Hampstead with my comments in italics:

A gentleman to speak with me, Dorcas?—Who can want me thus early?

[Dorcas is one of Lovelace’s “agents” employed to keep an eye on Clarissa and posing, for Clarissa’s benefit, as a poor relative of Mrs. Sinclair. She certainly knows who the “gentleman” is, and Lovelace knows that she knows. Why then does he keep up the pretence in front of her?]

Captain Tomlinson, sayest thou! Surely he must have traveled all night!—Early riser as I am, how could he think to find me up thus early?

[MacDonald certainly did not travel all night, for he resides nearby to be on hand when Lovelace needs him to play his role in front of Clarissa, and he is here “thus early” because Lovelace would have destroyed him had he not obeyed his summons immediately. Again, Dorcas knows all this, and Lovelace knows that she knows, and yet the role-playing goes on.]

. . . Dear captain, I rejoice to see you: just in the nick of time . . . Strange news since I saw you, captain! Poor mistaken lady!—But you have too much goodness, I know, to reveal to her uncle Harlowe the errors of this capricious beauty. It will all turn out for the best. You must accompany me part of the way. I know the delight you take in composing differences. But ’tis the task of the prudent to heal the breeches made by the rashness and folly of the impudent.
Lovelace’s pretence in front of MacDonald does have one logical explanation: he needs to “instruct” him on how to view what has happened between Lovelace and Clarissa, that is, on how the real Captain Tomlinson, had such a person existed, might have perceived the situation, without knowing what is really going on. We may say, thus, that Lovelace performs the role of the bridegroom injured by his capricious bride in front of MacDonald to make it psychologically easier for the latter to later perform his role of a respectable peacemaker in front of Clarissa. Still, when we read this passage—for I am concerned here primarily with the effect that Lovelace’s deep play has on the reader—we cannot help feeling that on some level Lovelace believes in what he is saying.

And now (all around me so still, and so silent) the rattling of the chariot-wheels at a street’s distance do I hear!—And to this angel of a lady I fly!

Reward, oh God of Love (the cause is thy own); reward thou, as it deserves, my suffering perseverance!—Succeed my endeavors to bring back to thy obedience, this charming fugitive!—Make her acknowledge her rashness; repent her insults; implore my forgiveness; beg to be reinstated in my favour, and that I will bury in oblivion the remembrance of her heinous offence against thee, and against me, thy faithful votary.

[This is Lovelace’s “prayer” as he is ready to board his chariot to go to Hampstead. This part is particularly unsettling because here Lovelace is presumably speaking to himself and thus truly has no reason to pretend that Clarissa is the one who was rash, insulted him, and needs to implore his forgiveness, and not the other way around. It is possible that, as in the earlier episode with the fake fire, Lovelace is nervous about his forthcoming meeting with Clarissa and needs to work himself up into the state of mind of the injured bridegroom; that is, he needs to temporarily forget that he himself is the source of his representation, “I am an injured bridegroom.” However, we get no direct textual evidence of his nervousness, and all we see instead is a man fully committed to his version of reality. Richardson explicitly and brilliantly articulates here, for the first time in Western literary history, the mental stance of the stalker. This stance is crucially bound with the stalker’s tendency to eliminate himself as a source of his representation, “She loves me and she wants me, but she is coy and she is hurting me by her excessive coyness, so she needs to be punished and then forgiven,” and instead perceive this representation as an objective reflection of what is going on.]

The chariot at the door!—I come! I come!—

[Loveleace is fully in his role of an eager bridegroom on the way to attend his beloved, who, he is joyfully confident, will soon make everything right between them.]
I attend you, good captain—
Indeed, sir—

[This is MacDonald speaking.]

Pray, sir—civility is not ceremony.

[We infer from this exchange that Lovelace is treating the fake Captain with an exaggerated courtesy, perhaps bowing and politely inviting him to walk through the door before himself. Had MacDonald been who he and Lovelace pretend he is—a respectable gentleman who does not approve of Lovelace’s libertine ways but has to deal with him to oblige his old friend, Antony Harlowe—Lovelace’s humble behavior would have made some sense. Given, however, that Lovelace is a rich aristocrat and MacDonald a proscribed criminal, sold to Lovelace soul and body, Lovelace’s obeisance looks decidedly out of place. It is possible that Lovelace is ironic, but, considering the overall tone of the scene, it is also possible that the fictitious scenario that he has created has temporarily replaced any other reality for him.]

And now, dressed like a bridegroom, my heart elated beyond that of the most desiring one (attended by a footman whom my beloved never saw), I am already at Hampstead! (761)

This last sentence introduces an interesting variation on Lovelace’s delusional reasoning. Lovelace is still stubbornly treating his own fantasy of the passionate romance between him and Clarissa as a true representation of reality. At the same time, his interjection about the footman whom his “beloved” never saw shows that he is aware that Clarissa will not be happy to see her “bridegroom” at all. Lovelace knows that the moment she saw her torturer’s servant at Hampstead, she would flee again—hence his precaution about taking along the man she has never met. As any successful stalker, Lovelace thus retains some ability to see the world through the eyes of his victim, even though on a certain level his capacity for monitoring the source of his representations is compromised. And, contrary to what we often assume, seeing the world through another’s eyes does not necessarily translate (it certainly does not in Lovelace’s case!) into feeling compassion for that person. As cognitive psychologist Robert W. Mitchell observes in a related argument about the relationship between a successful deceiver and his/her victim:

Surprisingly, such ability to take the part of the other demonstrated in acumen need not result in any sympathetic or compassionate response to another’s turmoil at being deceived. The deceiver can invent reasons why the other deserves to be deceived even while the deceiver recognizes that
the victim would be psychologically better off without the deception. So the same imaginative propensity which allows someone to take the perspective of the other also allows the person to imagine the other from a perspective which discounts the other’s perspective.\(^6\)

Though coming from a different research angle, Mitchell’s observation about the possibility of a “perspective which discounts the other’s perspective” is compatible with the present argument about the “selectively compromised” metarepresentational ability of a stalker such as Lovelace. Richardson makes Lovelace constantly balance between making accurate assessments of given situations and pointedly ignoring the possibility that some parts of his assessment reflect primarily his own wishful thinking about what is going on. To a degree, we all engage in such balancing acts in our everyday life, which is why, when taken to the extreme, as in *Clarissa*, they remain both emotionally alien and unsettlingly recognizable.

Let me clarify the stakes of my twofold claim that Lovelace’s metarepresentational ability is selectively compromised and that the novel cultivates the scenes that make the reader uncertain of whether Lovelace is fully aware that his representations of other people’s mental states are, at least on some level, his own self-serving inventions. As I have pointed out earlier, I am not interested in diagnosing Lovelace as slightly schizophrenic. Neither am I invested in figuring out exactly which version of reality Lovelace *truly* believes in. Lovelace does not exist. The reader does exist, however, and so does the novel as massive and focused experimentation with that reader’s cognitive adaptations. Thus, from the perspective of cognitive theory, the ultimate reason that Lovelace goes through his elaborate and peculiarly flawed mind-games is that it allows the narrative to engage, train, tease, and titillate our metarepresentational ability. Our brain is the focus of the novel’s attention, its playground, its raison d’être, its meaning, whereas Lovelace, Clarissa, Dorcas, MacDonald, and all other characters are but the means for delivering this kind of wonderfully rich stimulation to the variety of cognitive adaptations making up our Theory of Mind.

Thus we may completely miss one level of Lovelace’s manipulation of his reality or add another level, one that Richardson never intended. You may vehemently disagree with my interpretation of what Lovelace thinks, or of what he thinks that he thinks, or of what he wants Clarissa to believe, or of what Dorcas thinks MacDonald knows, and so on. We may profitably historicize Lovelace’s mind processes, arguing, for example, that his
lack of empathy with Clarissa and her middle-class kin is symptomatic of the general crisis of the aristocratic worldview during the Industrial Revolution, or that Richardson’s particular interest in “sentiments” (i.e., feelings and their bodily and verbal expressions) was predicated upon certain developments in eighteenth-century natural philosophy. Every single one of our interpretations, honest mistakes, willful inventions, disagreements, and historical groundings will be imperceptibly but inescapably enmeshed with our ability to keep track of who in this novel thinks what and when. (If you doubt it, try making a single argument interpreting Clarissa within any framework of your choice without implicitly relying on such source-monitoring!) Because of its obsessive, unrelenting focus on people’s representations of other people’s mental states, Clarissa continues to structure our interpretations in this particular way (which is not to say that it renders them predictable—quite the opposite!).

By the same token, our ongoing arguments over historical, aesthetic, and personal meanings of Clarissa themselves expand the range of the novel’s engagement with our metarepresentational ability. As we take in any given innovative reading of Richardson’s magnum opus, it latches onto our individual metarepresentational ecology in a myriad of unpredictable ways. Clarissa thus reenters culture with every new interpretation because it is peculiarly geared to its exclusive environment: the responsive, dynamic, learning, and changing, but always metarepresenting, human mind.

~ 11 ~

NABOKOV’S LOLITA: THE DEADLY DEMON MEETS AND DESTROYS THE TENDERHEARTED BOY

The writer who creates an unreliable narrator runs an exciting and terrible risk: his or her readers may wind up believing the narrator’s version of events. That is what happened to the author of Clarissa when he depicted Lovelace as apparently losing track of himself as the source of his fantasies. For most of the novel, Lovelace speaks of Clarissa not as his victim whom he hounds into depression and drives to suicide, but rather as his Juliet, his Beatrice, and his intended. If Richardson hoped that his discerning readers would mentally supply the source tags that Lovelace was shedding (e.g., “Lovelace claims that Clarissa is his intended”), he was