

Social Minds

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Theoretical context

After explaining what is meant by the phrase *social minds*, I will attempt to illustrate their importance in the novel by analysing the functioning of social minds in an example text, Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit*. I hope to show that it is not possible to understand this novel without an awareness of these minds as they operate within its storyworld. They are the chief means by which the plot is advanced. If you were to take all of the social thought out of *Little Dorrit*, very little, I would argue, would be left. So, given the importance of this subject to the study of the novel, it seems to me that it is necessary to find room for it at the centre of narrative theory. As part of that process, I have assembled a large amount of evidence from my example text. What is presented here, though, is only a sample; there was insufficient room to use all of it. This essay is part of a much larger (and very long-term) project on the development of social minds in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century British and American novel. An important task within that project will be the use of evidence such as that contained in this essay as a starting point from which to proceed in a variety of historical and cultural directions. For example, if the evidence shows that the social minds in Dickens' novels differ substantially from those in other novels (and I refer briefly to this possibility below), then it will be necessary to put Dickens in his historical and cultural context in order to try to find out why.

Speaking very broadly, there are two perspectives on the mind: the internalist and the externalist. These two perspectives form more of a continuum than an either/or dichotomy, but the distinction is, in general, a valid one.

- An internalist perspective on the mind stresses those aspects that are inner, introspective, private, solitary, individual, psychological, mysterious, and detached.
- An externalist perspective on the mind stresses those aspects that are outer, active, public, social, behavioural, evident, embodied, and engaged.

The *social mind* and the *public mind* are the synonyms that I will use to describe those aspects of the whole mind that are revealed through the externalist perspective.

It seems to me that the traditional narratological approach to the representation of fictional consciousness is an internalist one that stresses those aspects that are inner, passive, introspective, and individual. This undue emphasis on private, solitary, and highly verbalized thought at the expense of all the other types of mental functioning has resulted in a preoccupation with such concepts as free indirect discourse, stream of consciousness, and

interior monologue. As a result, the *social* nature of fictional thought has been neglected. But, as the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio suggests, ‘the study of human consciousness requires both internal and external views’ (2000: 82), and so an externalist perspective is required as well, one that stresses the public, social, concrete, and located aspects of mental life in the novel.

An important part of the social mind is our capacity for *intermental thought*, which is joint, group, shared, or collective thought, as opposed to *intramental*, or individual or private thought. It is also known as *socially distributed*, *situated*, or *extended cognition*, and also as *intersubjectivity*. Intermental thought is a crucially important component of fictional narrative because much of the mental functioning that occurs in novels is done by large organizations, small groups, work colleagues, friends, families, couples, and other intermental units. It could plausibly be argued that a large amount of the subject matter of novels is the formation, development, and breakdown of these intermental systems. *Little Dorrit*, in common with many other novels, contains a number of general or universal statements about the typical behaviour of intermental units. For example, when Blandois arrives at one evening at a French inn, ‘There had been that momentary interruption of the talk about the stove, and that temporary inattention to and distraction from one another, which is usually inseparable in such a company from the arrival of a stranger’ (167-8). These sorts of statements, though taken little account of in narrative theory because of its preference for the internalist perspective, are quite common in fictional discourse. (For work by postclassical narrative theorists on distributed cognition, see Margolin [1996 and 2000] and Herman [2003a and 2003b]).

Within the real-mind disciplines of psychology and philosophy there is a good deal of interest in *the mind beyond the skin*: the realization that mental functioning cannot be understood merely by analysing what goes on inside the skull but can only be fully comprehended once it has been seen in its social and physical context. For example, social psychologists routinely use the terms *mind* and *mental action* not only about individuals, but also about groups of people working as intermental units. So, it is appropriate to say of groups that they think or that they remember. As the psychologist James Wertsch puts it, a *dyad* (that is, two people working as a cognitive system) can carry out such functions as problem solving on an intermental plane (1991: 27). You may be asking what is achieved by talking in this way, instead of simply referring to individuals pooling their resources and working in cooperation together. The advocates of the concept of distributed cognition such as the theoretical anthropologists Gregory Bateson (1972) and Clifford Geertz (1993), the philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) and Daniel Dennett (1996), and the psychologists Edwin Hutchins (1995) and James Wertsch all stress that the purpose of the concept is increased explanatory power. They argue that the way to delineate a cognitive system is to draw the limiting line so that you do not cut out anything which leaves things inexplicable (Bateson 1972: 465). For example, Wertsch tells the story of how his daughter lost her shoes and he helped her to remember where she had left them. Wertsch asks: Who is doing the remembering here? He is not, because he had no prior knowledge of where they were, and she is not, because she had forgotten where they were. It was the intermental unit formed by the two of them that remembered (Sperber and Hirschfeld 1999: cxxiv).

The basis of this essay is *attribution theory* (Palmer 2007): how narrators, characters, and readers attribute states of mind such as emotions, dispositions, and reasons for action to characters and, where appropriate, also to themselves. How do heterodiegetic narrators attribute states of mind to their characters? By what means do homodiegetic narrators

attribute states of mind to themselves and also to other characters? And, with regard to the issue of characterization, how does an attribution of a mental state by a narrator help to build up in the reader a sense of the whole personality of the character who is the subject of that attribution? Attribution theory rests on the concept of *theory of mind*. This is the term used by philosophers and psychologists to describe our awareness of the existence of other minds, our knowledge of how to interpret our own and other people's thought processes, our mind-reading abilities in the real world. Readers of novels have to use their theory of mind in order to try to follow the workings of characters' minds. Otherwise, they will lose the plot. The only way in which the reader can understand a novel is by trying to follow the workings of characters' minds and thereby by attributing states of minds to them. (For more on theory of mind and the novel, see Palmer [2004] and especially Zunshine [2006]). Of particular importance to the concept of the social mind is the fact that this mind reading also involves readers trying to follow characters' attempts to read other characters' minds. A basic level of minimal mind reading is required for characters to understand each other in order to make life possible. At the next level up, characters who know each other well form intermental pairs and small groups. To put the point simply, they are more likely to know what the other is thinking than total strangers will. These small groups will obviously vary greatly in the quantity and quality of their intermental thought. In addition, individuals may be part of larger groups that will also have a tendency to think together on certain issues. In all of these units, large and small, the individuals that belong to them will, of course, frequently think separately as well. It is this balance between public and private thought, intermental and intramental functioning, social and individual minds, that novels are preoccupied with, and *Little Dorrit* is no exception.

It is common, when reading discussions of the sustained inside views of characters' private minds in the novels of, say, George Eliot or Henry James, to be told that, by contrast, characters in novels by Charles Dickens are really only ever seen from the outside. We only see their surface. The effect is often to sound rather patronizing about Dickens's achievement. 'Brilliant novelist in his way, of course, but without the *depth* of Eliot or James!' I would like to reverse that perspective. In cognitive terms, nearly all of your life is spent on the surface, on the outside, in the sense that all of the minds with which you are involved (with the admittedly rather important exception of your own!) are only ever experienced on the surface, and from the outside. From this point of view, it is not surprising that Oscar Wilde said that 'It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.' Dickens is the novelist of appearances, and of the visible, and his achievement can only be fully appreciated from the externalist perspective.

An emphasis on social minds will inevitably question these twin assumptions: first, that the workings of our minds are not accessible to others; and, secondly, that the workings of our own minds are unproblematically accessible to ourselves. This essay will question the first assumption but will make almost no reference to the equally questionable second. To adapt the title of Porter Abbott's companion essay for this workshop, I will be discussing the *readable minds* that are to be found in *Little Dorrit*. However, I must stress that I am certainly not saying that minds are always readable. Sometimes, they are; sometimes, they are not. In *Little Dorrit*, I will argue, on the whole, they are (although I will also point out those occasions when they are not). But in different sorts of novels, different levels of readability and unreadability will apply.

Private thought

There are very few extended passages of inside views of intramental or private thought in *Little Dorrit*. One such is a long passage of Clennam's inner speech regarding his love for Minnie and his concern about growing old: 'And he had plenty of unsettled subjects to meditate upon ... First, there was the subject seldom absent from his mind, the question, what he was to do henceforth in life' (231). In addition, there is a good deal of what I call *contextual thought report* (Palmer 2004: 209): short, unobtrusive sentences, phrases, or even single words that describe characters' mental functioning. Much of the contextual thought report in the novel is related to private thinking. For example, when Fanny cries with Little Dorrit after she tells her that she is engaged, 'It was the last time Fanny ever showed that there was any hidden, suppressed, or conquered feeling in her on the matter' (654). From that time onward, Fanny's feelings will be hidden from others.

This intramental thought benefits from an externalist perspective, though, just as intermental thought does. To illustrate, I will draw attention to three features of intramental thought that are undervalued by the internalist perspective. First, it is worth questioning for a moment the apparent inaccessibility of private thought to others. How much mental functioning is there in the novel that at least one other character is not aware of, albeit in general terms? The answer that I would suggest is: not much. Regarding the two passages referred to just now, Little Dorrit for one is aware of Clennam's feelings. She knows immediately that something is wrong with Clennam after he gives up thoughts of Minnie and she knows about his anxieties about growing old. 'He never thought that she saw in him what no one else could see' (432). Little Dorrit would also have known of Fanny's subsequently concealed feelings, having been shown them once. When going through the characters one by one asking this question ('Does another character know about their minds?'), I am struck by how public the thought in the novel tends to be. Miss Wade is an obvious exception. Mrs Clennam, possibly? Flintwinch, perhaps? But there are few others, it seems to me.

Secondly, as Bakhtin (1984) has shown, intramental thought is intensely dialogic. In a splendidly Bakhtinian phrase that the narrator uses of Mrs Clennam, 'It was curious how she seized the occasion to argue with some invisible opponent' (407). In another anticipation of twentieth-century theorizing on the mind, this time Daniel Dennett's notion of 'mind-ruts' (1991: 300), Mrs General is described as having 'a little circular set of mental grooves or rails on which she started little trains of other people's opinions' (503). The important point to note here is that it is *other people's* opinions that are running along her mind-grooves. The private thoughts of Mrs Clennam and Mrs General, in common with all the characters in the novel, are filled with the thoughts of others.

Thirdly, the presence of intermental thought is often concealed within descriptions of intramental functioning. 'From the days of their honeymoon, Minnie Gowan felt sensible of being usually regarded as the wife of a man who had made a descent in marrying her' (541). At first reading, this sounds like a simple example of intramental contextual thought report. However, Minnie's dialogic anticipation of the feelings of others contains an intermental component which is disguised within the passive construction ('regarded as'). It may be decoded as follows: the group of people who know her regard her (Minnie thinks) as that sort of wife. (For more on the use of the passive voice to construct intermental functioning, see Palmer [2005].) When Miss Wade is part of the quarantine party at the beginning of the novel, the narrator makes this remark: 'And yet it would have been as difficult as ever to say, positively, whether she avoided the rest, or was avoided' (62). Although this is a statement

about Miss Wade's disposition to be unsociable, it is also a statement about the intermental functioning of 'the rest': their awareness of her disposition and their resulting behaviour in avoiding her. Similarly, it is said of Little Dorrit that 'She passed to and fro in it shrinkingly now, with a womanly consciousness that she was pointed out to every one' (118). This is a description of her state of mind, but it also refers to the thinking of the prison population who consider Little Dorrit as the Child of the Marshalsea. The externalist perspective is required in order to tease out the intermental element in sentences that appear to be simply presentations of private thought.

Before discussing in detail the readability of fictional minds, I will briefly refer here to unreadability, or, at the very least, the possibility of incomplete, inaccurate, or otherwise defective reading of other minds. As I have said, some characters tend to be difficult to read. Much is made of Flintwinch's impassivity and impenetrability. Despite being physically pushed about by Blandois, he 'brought himself up with a face completely unchanged in its stolidity' (602). When Mr Casby is questioned by Clennam about Miss Wade, being determined to tell him nothing of what he knows about her, he 'knew his strength lay in silence' (594). When Miss Wade herself is similarly intent on revealing nothing of her mind, she 'stood by the table so perfectly composed and still after this acknowledgement of his remark that Mr Meagles stared at her under a sort of fascination, and could not even look to Clennam to make another move' (376). This is a vivid illustration of the importance of publicly available cues when reading other minds. When those cues are missing, as when Miss Wade deliberately reduces them to order to keep the workings of her mind hidden, then Meagles is at a loss. Miss Wade herself thinks that she is able to read other minds accurately: 'From a very early age I have detected what those about me thought they hid from me' (725). However, it is clear from the context that she was frequently wrong, simply misinterpreting genuine kindness. On a more amusing level, the workings of Mr F.'s Aunt's mind are, mercifully perhaps, completely opaque. 'Mr F.'s Aunt may have thrown in these observations on some system of her own, and it may have been ingenious, or even subtle: but the key to it was wanted' (199).

The externalist perspective

Notwithstanding the caveat in the previous paragraph, there are copious examples in this novel of the fact that much of the thought of its characters is public and easily available to others. Even a very solipsistic character like Mr Dorrit is able to notice when, for example, Merdle is out of sorts (674). The fairly unobservant Young John Chivery knows that Little Dorrit is in love with Clennam, and can make a remark to Clennam such as: "'I see you recollect the room, Mr Clennam?'" (791, my emphasis). Also, the reserved characters referred to earlier such as Miss Wade are not always able to conceal all of their thoughts. During a discussion with Clennam, 'She heard him with evident surprise, and with more marks of suppressed interest than he had *seen* in her' (719, my emphasis). This is a novel in which the visibility of thought is frequently and pointedly emphasized. When Pancks gives a glass of wine to Blandois, it is 'not without a *visible* conflict of feeling on the question of throwing it at his head' (814, my emphasis). The narrator mocks the efforts made by Merdle and Lord Decimus to keep their thoughts secret. They move about at their dinner party, 'each with an absurd pretence of not having the other on his mind, which could not have been more transparently ridiculous though his real mind had been chalked on his back' (624).

In addition to the specific mental events that occur in the minds of others, theory of mind also relates to dispositions that persist over time and which form part of another's character or

personality. I stress this point because the hugely important area of characters' dispositions has been neglected by traditional narrative theory. For example, Blandois' selfishness is clear from the way he moves around a room soiling the furniture (402). In a particularly vivid image, when Clennam watches Gowan when he is unawares, 'There was something in his way of spurning [stones] out of their places with his heel, and getting them into the required position, that Clennam thought had an air of cruelty in it' (245). There are a large number of examples of characters passing judgements, often spiteful but accurate, on other characters' personalities. Fanny says of her loved one, Sparkler, "If it's possible – and it generally is – to do a foolish thing, he is sure to do it" (664). Fanny is again perceptive, this time about Mrs General: "I know her sly manner of feeling her way with those gloves of hers" (666). Flintwinch is another character whose disposition is to be unsparing about the failings of others. He says of Clennam's father, "He was an undecided, irresolute chap, who had everything but his orphan life scared out of him when he was young" (224). At the end of the novel, he shouts to Mrs Clennam: "But that's the way you cheat yourself" (851). The importance of the concept of dispositions is that it links specific mental events and actions (doing foolish, sly, irresolute, or dishonest things) with those characters' stable, long-lasting personalities (being a foolish, sly, irresolute, or dishonest person). Occasionally, the insight that one character has into another extends beyond the aspects of their personality that I have labelled dispositions and encompasses their whole mind. A character may feel that another person knows them completely, all about how their mind works. Miss Wade says of Gowan that 'He understood the state of things at a glance, and he understood me. He was the first person I had ever seen in my life who had understood me ... He accompanied every movement of my mind' (732).

Before going on to consider the question of physically distributed cognition and then the workings of some large intermental units, I will discuss three specific ways in which the social minds in the novel communicate with each other: the face, sign language, and the look.

The face

One of the obvious ways in which thought is made public is by means of the face. As we do in real life, characters pick up cues about the mental functioning of others by reading facial expressions. Of course, this is only one means amongst others. At one point, Blandois knows what Clennam is thinking simply by watching the back of his head, as when,

Though Clennam's back was turned while [Blandois] spoke ... he kept those glittering eyes of his ... upon him, and evidently saw in the very carriage of the head ... that he was saying nothing which Clennam did not already know. (819)

Nevertheless, the face is a particularly important source of knowledge about the minds of others and there is a continual stream of references in the novel to the face and its role in the public nature of thought. Some relate to individual mental events. Mrs Clennam says to Little Dorrit: "You love Arthur. (I can see the blush upon your face.)" (859). Clennam 'saw a shade of disappointment on [Mrs Plornish's] face, as she checked a sigh, and looked at the low fire' (178). 'There was an expression in his face [Blandois] as he released his grip of his friend's [Cavalletto] jaw, from which his friend inferred that ... [etc]' (174). "My God!" said Bar, starting back, and clapping his hand upon the other's breast. "... I see it in your face" (773). On other occasions, the face is seen as an indicator of long-term dispositions. When Clennam was a child, Mrs Clennam could see him looking at her 'with his mother's face' (859) and therefore knows that he will, as she thinks, take after her. 'Little Dorrit stopped. For there was neither happiness nor health in the face that turned to her' (857). The narrator comments of Mr Chivery that, 'As to any key to his inner knowledge being to be found in his

face, the Marshalsea key was as legible as an index to the individual characters and histories upon which it was turned' (346). Changes in the flow of events can be signalled by changes in characters' faces. In the climax of the novel, Mrs Clennam's face is, at first, as inscrutable as ever: 'Her face neither acquiesced or demurred' (837), and 'Her face was ever frowning, attentive, and settled' (839). However, as events unravel and get beyond her control, 'Mrs Clennam's face had changed. There was a remarkable darkness of colour on it, and the brow was more contracted' (841).

Many of the most powerful moments in the novel involve descriptions of facial expressions. In the scene in which Little Dorrit is meditating on London bridge and is caught unawares by Young John Chivery,

She started and fell back from him, with an expression in her face of fright and something like dislike that caused him unutterable dismay ... It was but a momentary look, inasmuch as she checked it ... But she felt what it had been, as he felt what it had been; and they stood looking at one another equally confused. (260)

Here, her facial expression inadvertently reveals her true feelings and both she and Young John are shocked as a result. In marked contrast, facial expressions can also serve a dramaturgical function. Characters self-consciously use them to present to the world the sort of self that they want the world to see.

With these words, and with a face expressive of many uneasy doubts and much anxious guardianship, he [Mr Dorrit] turned his regards upon the assembled company in the Lodge; so plainly indicating that his brother was to be pitied for not being under lock and key. (269)

However, these efforts can be unsuccessful: 'Do what he could to compose his face, he could not convey so much of an ordinary expression into it, but that the moment she saw it, she dropped her work and cried, "Mr Clennam! What's the matter?"' (465). Characters are continually attempting to read faces as cues to action. Clennam 'suffered a few people to pass him in whose face there was no encouragement to make the inquiry' (118). This face-reading may be only partially successful. A character may find out something of what another is thinking, but not the whole story. 'As she [Little Dorrit] looked at him [Clennam] silently, there was something in her affectionate face that he did not quite comprehend: something that could have broken into tears in a moment, and yet that was happy and proud' (885).

Sometimes, the facial expression serves almost as a kind of sign language, as discussed in the next section. Clennam has difficulty following Mrs Plornish's train of thought because she is rather inarticulate: 'He was at a loss to understand what she meant; and by expressing as much in his looks, elicited her explanation' (178).

Sign language

In addition to the face, another way in which social minds are made publicly available to each other is sign language. There is a surprisingly large amount of this type of communication in the novel. It generally occurs between characters who know each other well and who therefore form an intermental unit. An example is the Dorrit family. Little Dorrit 'looked in amazement at her sister and would have asked a question, but that Fanny with a warning frown pointed to a curtained doorway of communication with another room' (284). Tip gives Fanny 'a slight nod and a slight wink; in acknowledgement of which, Miss Fanny looked surprised, and laughed and reddened' (536). Within such a unit, non-verbal communication is an efficient supplement to speech. 'In answer to Cavalletto's look of inquiry, Clennam made him a sign to go; but he added aloud, "unless you are afraid of him." Cavalletto replied with a very emphatic finger-negative, "No, master"' (821). This is a cooperative, beneficial unit.

Fanny and Mrs General form a conflicted, competitive unit but the sign language is just as efficacious. When ‘Miss Fanny coughed, as much as to say, “You are right”’ (661), Mrs General knows exactly what she means.

The choreography of the sign language in the novel is beautifully judged and often extremely subtle. So much so that the absence of any sign can sometimes be sign language enough. Within people of the same social class, who understand each other well, the significance of doing nothing can be well understood. ‘Ferdinand Barnacle looked knowingly at Bar as he strolled upstairs and gave him no answer at all. “Just so, just so,” said Bar, nodding his head’ (614). In contrast, a refusal to admit to an understanding of sign language is highly significant. Plornish, ‘having intimated that he wished to speak to her [Little Dorrit] privately, in a series of coughs so very noticeable’ (326) that Mr Dorrit must be aware of their significance, Mr Dorrit nevertheless refuses to admit that he understands Plornish’s sign language. To do so would be an admission that he knows that Little Dorrit works to support him. At the end of the novel, Mrs Clennam is reduced to a cruel parody of communication in her use of sign language. ‘Except that she could move her eyes and faintly express a negative and affirmative with her head, she lived and died a statue’ (863).

One example of the absence of a sign is worth dwelling on because it raises interesting issues relating to the concept of action. Meagles tactlessly praises Gowan's connections with the Barnacles in Doyce's presence and so ‘Clennam looked at Doyce, but Doyce knew all about it beforehand, and looked at his plate, and made no sign, and said no word’ (248). It is clear from the rhythm of the prose, the emphasis of each clause, that there is a conscious decision by Doyce to do nothing and take no action. But this decision differs very little, in cognitive terms, from a decision to perform a physical action. In addition, this is a social situation in which certain actions are expected such as showing interest by nodding, smiling, and agreeing, and so Doyce’s refusal to do any of these things is a non-action that has a dramaturgical function. He is demonstrating that he is unhappy with Meagles's remarks. But who is he demonstrating this disapproval to? Clennam, who is looking at him and will presumably be expecting disapproval-action? Or, less likely perhaps, Meagles himself, who will perhaps insensitively be expecting approval-action? Is he doing nothing because of these conflicting expectations? In any case, the non-action performs the same function as an action. What these questions suggest is that the boundary between actions and non-actions is certainly very blurred and that the refusal to engage in expected social action *is* perhaps an action after all.

It will be illuminating, I think, to consider the role of sign language within a single intermental unit, the one comprising Clennam and Pancks. At first, these two appear to be a distinctly unlikely pair for such a possibility. I referred above to characters with inscrutable faces and Pancks is one.

With his former doubt whether this dry hard personage were quite in earnest, Clennam again turned his eyes attentively upon his face. It was as scrubby and dingy as ever, and as eager and quick as ever, and he could see nothing lurking in it that was at all expressive of a latent mockery that had seemed to strike upon his ear in the voice. (322)

When Pancks speaks highly of Casby, ‘Arthur for his life could not have said with confidence whether Pancks really thought so or not’ (462). The difficulty that Clennam has in reading Pancks’s mind becomes particularly important when Clennam does not know if Pancks’s interest in the Dorrit family is well meant or not. His activities ‘caused Arthur Clennam much

uneasiness at this period' (367), and 'awakened many wondering speculations in his mind' (323). However, over time, Clennam comes to know Pancks's mind better.

Between this eccentric personage and Clennam, a tacit understanding and accord had been always improving ... Though he had never before made any profession or protestation to Clennam, and though what he had just said was little enough as to the words in which it was expressed, Clennam had long had a growing belief that Mr Pancks, in his own odd way, was becoming attached to him. (637)

It is important to note the emphasis in this passage on the fact that their relationship does not rely on words. Indeed, during the conversation in which Pancks tempts Clennam to speculate (638-43), much is understood, or partly understood, between the two men, but very little is actually said. Indeed, it is not even explicitly stated that Pancks has been successful in persuading Clennam to speculate.

Over time, the understanding between Clennam and Pancks becomes sufficiently intermental for them to be able to communicate by signs.

Mr Pancks in shaking hands merely scratched his eyebrow with his left forefinger and snorted once, but Clennam, who understood him better now than of old, comprehended that he had almost done for the evening and wished to say a word to him outside. (594)

When outside, 'Arthur thought he received his cue to speak to him as one who knew pretty well what had just now passed' (595). However, the resulting conversation demonstrates that the efficiency of intermental thought should not be overestimated. Misreadings can occur. When Pancks says that he wants to take a razor to Casby (in fact, to cut his hair), Clennam thinks that he wants to cut his throat!

The look

The importance of the look is continually stressed in the text. Clearly, for minds to be public and available, it is necessary for characters to look attentively at each other in order to pick up the sorts of cues that I have been describing. This may even require staring at the other person. In fact, there is a noticeable preponderance in the text of those three words, *attentive*, *look*, and *stare*. The word *attention* is used in *Little Dorrit* 60 times, *attentive* 21 times, and *attentively* 11 times (total: 92). As a control, the comparable numbers for *Middlemarch* (about the same length text) are these: 42, 4, and 0 (total: 46), and for *The Ambassadors* (about half the length): 19, 4, and 1 (total: 24). The occurrences in *Little Dorrit* of the words *look*, *looks*, *looked*, and *looking* total 995 (766 in *Middlemarch* and 291 in *The Ambassadors*). The comparable totals for the words *stare*, *stares*, *stared*, and *staring* are 64, 22, and 27 respectively. Clearly, the difference in the usage of these words is significant. However, whilst it may be tempting to ascribe the variation to Dickens's interest in social thought as compared to the more internalist perspective of George Eliot and, in particular, Henry James, further research on the issue is required before any claims of this sort can be made with confidence.

In *Little Dorrit*, the act of looking fulfils a number of very different functions. The list that follows is a selection. Some of the quotations from the text that are used elsewhere in this essay reveal other uses of the look.

Information-seeking: 'Monsieur Rigaud's eyes ... were so drawn in that direction that [Cavalletto] more than once followed them to and back from the pavement in some surprise' (46).

Information-giving: When Mrs Clennam talks to Clennam, ‘Her emphasis had been derived from her eyes quite as much as from the stress she laid on her words’ (747). ‘Their looks met. Something thoughtfully apprehensive in [Minnie’s] large, soft eyes, had checked Little Dorrit in an instant’ (544).

Warning: ‘To Arthur’s increased surprise, Mistress Affery, stretching her eyes wide at himself, as if in warning that this [Blandois] was not a gentleman for him to interfere with’ (599).

Thanking: ‘Mother, with a look which thanked Clennam in a manner agreeable to him’ (581).

Expressing curiosity: Blandois and Mrs Clennam ‘looked very closely at one another. That was but natural curiosity’ (403).

Bonding: ‘There was a silent understanding between them [Little Dorrit and Minnie] ... She looked at Mrs Gowan with keen and unabated interest’ (544).

Intimidating: Flintwinch says to Mrs Clennam: “‘Now, I know what you mean by opening your eyes so wide at me’” (850).

Controlling: ‘As Mrs Clennam never removed her eyes from Blandois ... so Jeremiah never removed his from Arthur’ (602).

The use of the look can be an important element in a character’s personality. Little Dorrit looks at Clennam ‘with all the earnestness of her soul looking steadily out of her eyes’ (214). The look is often expressive of the attitude of the looker towards the ‘looker’. For example, ‘The visitor [Miss Wade] stood looking at her [Tattycoram] with a strange attentive smile. It was wonderful to see the fury of the contest in the girl, and the bodily struggle she made as if she were rent by the Demons of old’ (65). ‘Mrs Clennam and Jeremiah had exchanged a look; and had then looked, and looked still, at Affery’ (834). However, it can sometimes be that the accusation of staring is more informative about the uneasy state of mind of the ‘staree’ than it is about the alleged starrer. Fanny unfairly reproaches Little Dorrit for staring at her (665), and Mr Dorrit thinks that the Chief Butler looks at him ‘in a manner that Mr Dorrit considered questionable’ (678). When Mr Dorrit’s mind is collapsing and ‘his daughter had been observant of him with something more than her usual interest’, he demands peevishly, “‘Amy, what are you looking at?’” (701). Miss Wade refers to someone in her past who ‘had a serious way with her eyes of watching me’ (727).

The mechanics of the look are interesting. It may be combined with the sign language discussed above: Clennam, ‘more with his eyes than by the slight impulsive motion of his hand, entreated her [Little Dorrit] to be reassured and to trust him’ (121). Characters sometimes see significance in an exchange of looks by others: When Pancks comes to break the news of the Dorrit wealth, ‘The excitement of this strange creature was fast communicating itself to Clennam. Little Dorrit with amazement, saw this, and observed that they exchanged quick looks’ (437). Characters are frequently uncomfortably aware of being the subject of a stare. When Mr Dorrit goes to see Mrs Clennam, ‘he felt that the eyes of Mr Flintwinch and of Mrs Clennam were on him. He found, when he looked up, that this sensation was not a fanciful one’ (686). Mrs Clennam (perhaps the major starrer in the novel!) ‘sat looking at her until she attracted her attention. Little Dorrit coloured under such a gaze, and looked down’ (390). Flintwinch comments drily to Clennam: “‘You’ll be able to take my likeness, the next time you call, Arthur, I should think’” (744). Clennam is comically uncomfortable with a look from Flora: ‘In his ridiculous distress, Clennam received another of the old glances without in the least knowing what to do with it’ (194). Occasionally, a look can be so compelling that the looker has to return it. ‘Throughout he [Blandois] looked at her [Little Dorrit]. Once attracted by his peculiar eyes, she could not remove her own, and they had looked at each other all the time’ (546). Mr F.’s Aunt ‘looked at Clennam with an

expression of such intense severity that he felt obliged to look at her in return, against his personal inclinations' (590). "None of your eyes at me" she scolds him. (For a perceptive look at the look from a phenomenological and also historically inflected perspective, see Butte [2004].)

Physically distributed cognition

One of the terms used to describe the type of thought with which this essay is concerned is *socially distributed cognition*. The philosophers and psychologists to whom I referred earlier in the context of intermental thought are also interested in another aspect of the social mind which is called *physically distributed cognition*: 'our habit of off-loading as much as possible of our cognitive tasks into the environment itself' (Dennett 1996: 134). This is achieved mainly through tools such as pen and paper and computers. However, in a less obvious sense, we also make use of our whole environment as a cognitive aid. Put simply, when we are in our own homes, we know where everything is and our cognitive functioning runs smoothly; when we are put into an alien environment, the quality of our thinking can suffer. Dennett convincingly illustrates the importance of physically distributed cognition to old people when he describes how they tend to become disoriented when taken out of their own homes and put into the unfamiliar environment of a nursing home. As Dennett says, 'Taking them out of their homes is literally separating them from large parts of their minds' (1996: 128).

Dickens was clearly aware of the phenomenon. There are several examples in *Little Dorrit* of characters who suffer from being taken out of their physically distributed network or from having their environment disrupted. Affery is 'sensible of the danger in which her identity stood' (405) partly because of the menacing noises that she hears in Mrs Clennam's house (which are eventually explained by its collapse). At the climax of the novel, when Mrs Clennam leaves the room that she has lived in for many years, she is

made giddy by the turbulent irruption of this multitude of staring faces into her cell of years, by the confusing sensation of being in the air, and the yet more confusing sensation of being afoot, by the unexpected changes in half-remembered objects. (856)

Disoriented by the sudden withdrawal of her physically distributed cognitive network, her behaviour is so strange while she is stumbling to the Marshalsea to see Little Dorrit that people in the streets think that she is mad. The most extreme example is Mr Dorrit, who, after his release from the Marshalsea prison, never loses the feelings of discomfort that he experiences while trying to cope with the absence of that familiar environment. His mind eventually gives way under the pressure. During his breakdown, Mr Dorrit 'looked about him, as if the association were so strong that he needed reassurance from his sense of sight that they were not in the old prison-room' (702). Afterwards, 'from that hour his poor maimed spirit, only remembering the place where it had broken its wings, cancelled the dream through which it had since groped, and knew of nothing beyond the Marshalsea' (710). Interestingly, Little Dorrit also suffers from the same syndrome, albeit, obviously, in a much milder form. She is described as 'quite displaced even from the last point of the old standing ground in life on which her feet had lingered' (517). Life in Rome for her 'greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea' (565). She has the insight to be aware of what is happening to her and writes to Clennam that

These new countries and wonderful sights ... are very beautiful, and they astonish me, but I am not collected enough – not familiar enough with myself, if you can quite understand what I mean – to have all the pleasure in them that I might have. (522)

In addition, I cannot resist adding, at Porter Abbot's suggestion, an extraordinary example of physically distributed cognition from a different novel, *Hard Times*: "I think there's a pain somewhere in the room," said Mrs Gradgrind, "but I couldn't positively say that I have got it." (193)

Large intermental units

The remainder of this essay will be devoted to an examination of the large intermental units in *Little Dorrit*. As I said at the start, there is a good deal of evidence of the workings of the social mind in the novel. It is therefore not possible, for reasons of space, to consider here the development over time of the small intermental units such as the Dorrit family, the extended Meagles family, Clennam and Little Dorrit, Clennam and Mrs Clennam, Clennam and Doyce, Mrs Clennam and Flintwinch ('the clever ones'), and Little Dorrit and Minnie. However, an indication of what such analyses would look like was given in the discussion of the Clennam and Pancks unit in the section on sign language.

The large intermental units in the novel include the speculators, the Marshalsea, 'Society', Bleeding Heart Yard, the Barnacle family, and the Circumlocution Office. I will focus on the first three of these. The speculators who invest in Merdle and are subsequently ruined by him are always referred to as an intermental unit, even though, like most large units, it is necessarily a fuzzy set that is composed of individuals who will have bought into Merdle to varying extents. 'All people knew (or thought they knew) that he had made himself immensely rich' (611). 'Nobody ... knew what he had done; but everybody knew him to be the greatest that had appeared' (627). When explanations for Merdle's death are sought, the entirely spurious physical condition of 'pressure' is decided upon, and this is 'entirely satisfactory to the public mind' (775). In a chilling analysis of the working of this type of intermental thought, one which clearly lies behind the exploitative cognitive functioning of the large units of the Barnacle family and the Circumlocution Office, Ferdinand Barnacle remarks to Clennam when he visits him in the Marshalsea, "Pardon me, but I think you really have no idea how the human bees will swarm to the beating of any old tin kettle; in that fact lies the complete manual of governing them" (807).

The intermental mind of the Marshalsea prison is referred to by the narrator as *the collegians*, as in: 'the Collegians were not envious' of the Dorrit family's new-found wealth (475). This intermental mind has a common view of Mr Dorrit in particular (note the passive voice again): 'It was generally understood that you must deduct a few from his account; he was vain, the fleeting generations of debtors said' (105). It is common for the cognitive relationship between intermental units and individuals to be reciprocal. That is, a unit may exercise its theory of mind on an individual's intramental functioning (in this case, Mr Dorrit's disposition to vanity), but, equally, individuals can also exercise their theory of mind on the unit. Individuals can both perceive and be perceived by intermental units. For example, Clennam notices that 'It was evident from the general tone of the whole party, that they had come to regard insolvency as the normal state of mankind, and the payment of debts as a disease that occasionally broke out' (128). Distinctions can be made within units, and, when appropriate, subgroups may be delineated: 'All the ladies in the prison had got hold of the news, and were in the yard ... the gentleman prisoners, feeling themselves at a disadvantage, had for the most part retired' (101). Generally, the vision of intermental identity in *Little Dorrit* is completely different to that in, for example, *Middlemarch*, where the inhabitants of Middlemarch manage to retain their subjective individuality whilst at the same time being part of the intermental unit of the town. But in the Dickens novel the

descriptions of intermental functioning are relentlessly negative and despairing. This is a world in which individuals have a tendency to become ‘human bees’ who lose their identity and gain nothing in return:

There was a string of people already straggling in, whom it was not difficult to identify as the nondescript messengers, go-betweens and errand bearers of the place ... All of them wore the cast off clothes of other men and women, were made up of patches and pieces of other people’s individuality, and had no sartorial existence of their own proper. (131)

Turning to the other end of the social scale, it is a noteworthy feature of Mrs Merdle’s conversational style that she constantly refers to the demands of ‘Society’. This is the shorthand used for a network of different, overlapping subgroups such as the ‘Hampton Court Bohemians’ (440) that Mrs Gowan belongs to, and ‘the Circumlocution Barnacles, who were the largest job-masters in the universe’ (441). Gowan is well aware that he belongs to this network, remarking to Clennam that ‘I belong to a clan, or a clique, or a family, or a connection, or whatever you like to call it’ (451). Mrs Merdle uses the mention of Society in order to enforce and reinforce ideological norms on others. However, it can be difficult for individuals to know how to put the norms into practice in particular circumstances. When Mr Merdle complains that he does not enjoy Society events, she points out that he has to pretend: ‘Seeming would be quite enough’ (448). Such intramental difficulties tend to arise during crises. ‘On the first crash of the eminent Mr Merdle’s decease, many important persons had been unable to determine whether they should cut Mrs Merdle, or comfort her’ (873). Luckily for her, they choose the latter.

I mentioned above, in the sections on the expressiveness of the face, the use of sign language, and the importance of the attentive look, that much can be left unsaid when characters know fairly well what the other is thinking. This is true of cooperative and constructive intermental units such as Clennam’s relationships with Pancks and Doyce, as well as more dysfunctional examples such as the relationship between Little Dorrit and her father. Here too, much is often left unspoken. They understand each other but do not make this knowledge of the other explicit: he because he is emotionally dishonest; she for reasons of delicacy and a reluctance to confront that dishonesty. ‘For a little while there was a dead silence and stillness’ (271) between them, ‘They did not, as yet, look at one another’ (272). In that silence, it is clear that she knows that he has encouraged Young John to court her for his own selfish purposes; he knows that she knows; she knows that he knows that she knows and so on.

However, the unexpressed nature of much of the intermental functioning in the novel is even more apparent in the conflicted and destructive small intermental units that exist within the norms established by the large intermental unit of Society. A good deal of this intermental thought is based on pretence and, in particular, on the pretence that intermental understanding is absent. On the contrary, though, these units rest on a network of shared assumptions that make their vicious verbal jousting possible. Two of a very entertaining bunch of examples are the relationships between Fanny and Mrs Merdle and between Fanny and Mrs General. In the former case, Fanny and Mrs Merdle understand each other so perfectly that the real subjects of their conversations need never be made explicit. It is in this way that the two of them spend the second half of the novel (‘Riches’) pretending that they never met in the first half (‘Rags’). Indeed, ‘The skilful manner in which [Mrs Merdle] and Fanny fenced with one another on the occasion almost made her quiet sister wink’ (566). In a good example of the competitive nature of encounters fought under the rules of Society, the discussion between Mr Dorrit and Mrs Merdle over the engagement between their offspring becomes a ‘skilful

seesaw ... so that each of them sent the other up, and each of them sent the other down, and neither had the advantage' (657). The conversation between Mrs Merdle and Mrs Gowan over the engagement between Gowan and Minnie is a more cooperative affair, but is still governed by the same rules:

Knowing, however, what was expected of her, and perceiving the exact nature of the fiction to be nursed, she [Mrs Merdle] took it delicately in her arms, and put her required contribution of gloss upon it ... And Mrs Gowan, who of course saw through her own threadbare blind perfectly, and who knew that Mrs Merdle saw through it perfectly, came out of this form, notwithstanding, as she had gone into it, with immense complacency and gravity. (444)

What is happening here is that there is one apparent or surface intermental understanding which is based on a lie (the marriage is regrettable), while the two real understandings (the marriage is to be welcomed, but this should never be explicitly admitted) are never acknowledged.

Conclusion

It is my hope that the application of the externalist perspective to the social minds contained in narrative fiction will shed new light on a range of traditional narratological concepts. Examples include reflector characters and unreliable narration. Much of the narrative in *Little Dorrit* is focalized through Clennam's consciousness. What this means in practice is that lengthy stretches of narrative are sustained through his perceptiveness in decoding the behaviour of other characters and making their thought as public as possible. The novel would be a very different one if Clennam's awareness of the workings of social minds were less perceptive than it is. This general point about the workings of the minds of reflector characters can be extended to character-narrators. The ability to decode the actions of other characters is a central criterion by which the reliability of character-narrators may be judged. The more accurate they are in their judgements about the cognitive functioning of others, the more reliable on the reading and reporting plane (Phelan 2005) they will tend to be.

I stressed at the beginning of this essay that both perspectives on fictional minds, the internalist and the externalist, are required. The narrator of *Little Dorrit* recognizes this truth. Employing the internalist perspective on those aspects of the mind that are inner, introspective, solitary, private, individual, psychological, mysterious, and detached, the narrator remarks of Mr Dorrit that 'Only the wisdom that holds the clue to all hearts and all mysteries, can surely know to what extent a man, especially a man brought down as this man had been, can impose upon himself' (275). Employing the externalist perspective that stresses those aspects of the mind that are outer, active, public, social, behavioural, evident, embodied, and engaged, the narrator comments of Mr Chivery (as quoted above in the section on the face) that, 'As to any key to his inner knowledge being to be found in his face, the Marshalsea key was as legible as an index to the individual characters and histories upon which it was turned' (346).

Nevertheless, within this balance, I have emphasised social minds for two reasons. One is that they have been neglected by traditional narrative theory. The other is that, in my view, the social minds in this particular novel are more important than the solitary or private minds. It is not possible to understand *Little Dorrit* without an understanding of the public minds that operate within its storyworld. It is difficult to think of any important aspect of the novel that is left out of an externalist analysis of it. A good deal of the significance of the thought in the novel is lost if only the internalist perspective is employed. My intention in quoting so

frequently from the novel was to show that these social minds are woven into the fabric of its discourse. I hope that the weight of evidence presented in this essay, together with the large amount of other data that will be the subject of a companion essay on the development over time of the small intermental units in the novel, are sufficient to prove the point. As to whether or not the conclusions reached here regarding the social minds in this novel can also be applied to other novels, more research is required.

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