The new inspiration which literary studies have recently found in the border country between narrative theory and cognitive science has been applied primarily to novels, while the short story remains notoriously undertheorized and largely untouched by the theoretical reorientations which have taken place in the last few decades. One of the reasons that short stories have been neglected is their enormous potential for experimentation and transformation. This capacity for innovation is not a mysterious self-renewing property of this sort of text, but a result of its manner of distribution and its reception. As its dissemination has almost always been linked to transient and casual media, the short story is a form of literary articulation particularly closely involved with its cultural context and predicated on the particular formative discourses of its time. This peculiarity also informs the manner of its reception; readers often appreciate it as a popular or topical text for quick consumption, an attitude which has led to a traditional deprecation as a lesser form in generic theories and literary histories. Hence, it is no coincidence that Edgar Allan Poe’s early attempt to attract his educated readers to the genre was based on a commendation of its brevity and its effects. Poe emphasized that the reading in “one sitting” made possible an aesthetic experience peculiar to this form. It is significant that short story theory thus had to take recourse to response aesthetics from its very beginning, as it seems that the nature of the short story cannot be explained from its specific properties as a literary text, but needs to be considered in terms of the aesthetic experience it offers.

Literary experience means interaction between story and audience, between interpretive communities and texts. To approach short stories from the vantage point of the experience involved rather than as texts with a set of determinate generic characteristics allows us to look at organizational acts which depend on both the structure of the text and on the reaction of the reader. There is always “inscribed into the reception of a narrative […] a second narrative constructed by the reader”, which is why a further investigation of “the transfer between recipient and aesthetic object” is called for (Fluck 34). In the following, I want to investigate a specific aspect of character construction, the understanding of fictional minds as it is activated by modernist short story writing. I think it is one of the prime motivations for reading fiction in the first place. This approach has been given a new impetus by
the research uniting narratology and cognitive psychology (Palmer, Fictional Minds 10).

The difference between novels and short stories is one of kind, not of quantity. This difference, however, lies primarily in the kind of aesthetic experience the short story promotes, because it “invites a degree of reader participation not frequently found in other narrative texts” (Korte 5). Readers tend to charge a text with meaning when it is compressed to such a degree that it leaves many things unexplained. The processing of such texts could in Mark Turner’s terms be called an “unpacking of a blend” (Turner, “The Art of Compression” 103). Lacking extensive information to go on, readers “recognize what they find in the text in terms of natural telling, or experiencing or viewing parameters” (Fludernik, Towards a ’Natural’ Narratology 34). Following this line of investigation, the often identified poetic and symbolic quality of the genre may be seen as resulting from “close reading” as well as the genre’s intensified recalcitrance (Wright 120). I have proposed elsewhere that the experience of reading short stories, in particular the processing involved in a first reading, depends on two apparently opposite, but in effect complementary mental activities: visualization and projection. By visualization I mean the formation of memorable visual images in which an essential part of the message is condensed. The extension of meaning beyond the frame of the textual fictional world I call “projection” or “projective blending”, because what Mark Turner calls our root capacity for “conceptual blending” is at work here (“The Art of Compression” 93-94).

1. Visualization and Projection

As an ephemeral form of text and a transient reading experience, short stories face the problem of producing enough lasting impressions to be remembered. The mystery of memorable short stories can be solved – at least partially – by taking recourse to images as a traditional mnemonic aid. According to Wolfgang Iser, mental images are primary in any process of reading (Iser 222). Following the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, I refer to visual images created in the mind of the reader in processing a literary text as “visualisation” (Esrock 633). The images produced in visualization are not necessarily distinct, as Iser points out, as the imaginative activity accompanying the reading process allows for a high degree of indeterminacy and lack of optical definition (Iser 222 passim). Nevertheless, visualization helps to organize the complexity and indeterminacy of narrative into iconic units. These iconic units are apparently more easily produced in reading short texts, because brevity in narrative inclines readers to ‘take in’ non-sequential structures as visual “configurations” (Brown 242-243). These processes of visuali-

---

1 The basic theoretical arguments made here are developed at greater length in my book Short Story: Textsorte und Leseerfahrung, but the representation of interior consciousness or “the secret self” is not discussed in the book.
zation are determined by the stimuli of the text and depend on “image schemas”, i.e. skeletal patterns that recur in sensory and motor experience and which, according to Mark Turner, inform more complex and abstract cognition because they are projected onto abstract concepts (Turner, “The Art of Compression” 16).

At the same time, shorter narratives are more dependent on extrinsic ways of constituting meaning. Whereas the novel can create a large and largely interdependent intratextual system, understanding a short story must have greater recourse to contextual supplementary knowledge (Hanson 23). This is made evident by comparing interpretations of shorter and longer narratives. Interpretations diverge less in the latter case, because a long reading process educates readers in the belief system of the implied author, in compensating for dissonance and in reading “inaccessible” characters. Because stories do not have room to elaborate on the determining factors of the fictional world and its values, they demand a dual understanding in the reading process, one in which one’s own perspective is constantly co-present with, projected onto and interactive with that of the fiction. Hence, short stories profit from a supplementary reaction to gaps of meaning which correlates different frames and world pictures.

The metaphoric and metamorphic practice of blending prior knowledge and experience into the processing of the fictional text is promoted by short narratives. Experiencing them unfolds in a tension between verbal economy and imaginative blending. Blending, of course, designates something that is going on all the time when we process information. Whether we listen to information in ordinary conversations or we read, we are constantly adapting old knowledge to new, alternative viewpoints to former ones, adjusting our opinions and modifying them with the help of image schemas (Turner, “The Art of Compression” 16). Therefore, taking into account heterogeneous points of view forms part of normal mental operations while reading fiction and does not present any particular difficulty. Short stories, in order to engage the reader in creative participation, often deliberately provoke the mental activity of projecting beyond the textual boundary - be it structural or thematic. This projective blending beyond the frame of the text occurs typically during and immediately after a first reading experience; in a conscious act of interpretation these projections are again compared and juxtaposed with the proposals of the text.

Combining the arguments so far, we have seen that participation in the act of reading involves visualizing images which simultaneously construct and contain units of meaning mentally and transforming them in blendings with exterior frameworks. These historically situated activities activate the different forms of narrative potential we call short story.
2. Reading Characters

Literary fictions offer us the deeply pleasurable opportunity to enter into the minds of others, to see how they come to terms with the problems of life, and to test their characteristics against our own. Trying to read minds necessitates the building of hypotheses on hypotheses. In real life, conjecture regarding the minds of others is often neither pleasant nor correct because of the complexity and uncertainty involved. When mental states are represented in literature, by contrast, we find less difficulty and more profit in imagining them. Fiction with its circumscribed context offers the illusion that it is possible to conduct viable mind reading (Palmer, *Fictional Minds*, 2, 10).

Modernist narratives typically satisfy this urge by concentrating largely on “transparent minds”. Their predilection for representing thoughtful characters during moments of lonely self-communion tracing spiritual and emotional conflicts (Cohn 84) is shared by narrative theorists, especially in short story theory. Modernism’s concentration on “moments” or “slices of life” of an epiphanous quality privileges subjective consciousness and by implication elevates it to universal status. The culminating achievements in short story writing by great authors like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway produced a peculiar tenacity of these modernist conceptions, petrified into textbook orthodoxies in short story theory (Brosch, *Short Story* 39). The stress which narratology has traditionally laid on an interiority notion of consciousness was exerted even more forcefully in short story criticism, where the notion of the autonomous individual mind was prevalent as topic, theme, and favoured technique.

Because of the genre’s brevity, the number of characters as well as the amount of explanation and elaboration of motivation is usually limited. Character must be inferred from visibility, dialogue, and introspection. Short stories are therefore a suitable form for expressing a limited aspect of a character’s psychological make-up and/or a small area of a character’s experience; this explains the persistence of modernist conceptions of the revelatory moment. Descriptions of these moments in modernism typically concentrate on interior consciousness, suggesting the ineffable and the incommunicable in these experiences, and including alternative mental states mostly as a contrastive strategy to stress the isolation of the main character. Katherine Mansfield’s “Garden Party” is a case in point: a moment when the family is in agreement against Laura’s headstrong and unconventional ideas is presented in a fuzzy ‘consensus’ narrative mode, blurring the narrator’s and the family’s voices (cf. Stanzel 124), while Laura’s final insight provoked by the sight of the dead body leaves her stammering and inarticulate.

The traditional narratological interest in and focus on an interior model of the mind has been convincingly challenged by Alan Palmer:

the standard approach to fictional consciousness has given undue emphasis to private, solitary, highly verbalized thought at the expense of all the other types of mental functioning because of its 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. The dominant perspective on fictional minds has been an internalist one that stresses those aspects that are inner, passive, introspective and individual (Palmer, “Intermental Thought” 428).

Readers can only follow a narrative if they understand minds, because “in essence, narrative is the description of fictional mental functioning” (Palmer, Fictional Minds 12), yet narratives are preoccupied not only with internal but also with “intermental” processes. Palmer’s groundbreaking revision starts from the premise that “thought is consummately social: social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its forms, social in its applications. At base thinking is a public activity [...]” (11). Its critical discussion must recognize analytical categories which reach beyond the lonely introspective self (ibid.). Here, his concept of intermental or intersubjective mapping can provide increased explanatory power for the purpose of making explicit statements about communicative functions in narrative (Palmer, “Intermental Thought”). This reconceptualization of the fictional self is immensely attractive not only as a response to discoveries in the cognitive sciences but also as an introduction of terms which allow ethical considerations to enter into the analysis of narrative. It is, moreover, a useful concept to apply not only to the fictional world but also to the act of reading.

In fictions as in everyday life minds do not only work as isolated, essential entities, but in processes of exchange with others. According to George Butte, character must also be thought of in terms of intersubjectivity, and it is this intersubjectivity which constitutes narrative. These reconceptualizations are indebted to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of consciousness not as an isolated mind, but as a lived and embodied experience which is constantly transformed in the mutual exchange with others (Butte 28). Intersubjectivity is seen as a web of partially interpenetrating consciousnesses that exist wherever perceiving subjects encounter one another. Butte explores these fictional representations of intersubjectivity from both a diachronic and a synchronic perspective, and claims that techniques for representing the interaction of fictional minds emerged first in the novels of Jane Austen (4). Since this “sea-change in narrative”, storytelling has gradually generated ever more intricately intersubjective narratives (7).

It has often been noted that the interest of modernist writers in human psychology prompted the experimental development of techniques like stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse. The linguistic challenge such passages present is enhanced for readers by their interest in character and in social situations. The report of thought, attitude, inner state, and perception of a character tends to direct the attention of the reader outward into the context of the social situation and action, whereas stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse direct the reader inward into scenes of thoughtful self-communion. Considering this centrifugal effect of thought report (Palmer, Fictional Minds 80), short story experience has a special status again: Though motivated by the same interest in “fictional minds”, short
stories inevitably contain less intermental activity and social thought than novels. Intersubjectivity poses a real problem for short stories. Impeded by a reduction of textuality, the psychological make-up of characters becomes a mystery, and reading minds becomes a guessing game for which we collect clues scattered throughout the text.

3. The Reflector as Informant

Modernist short stories, while deploying narrative techniques to present the limitations and relativity of individual perspectives, depend crucially on a myth of character “roundedness”. In the following, I will examine an extreme case of reduction in characterization and perception - Virginia Woolf’s story “The Lady in the Looking Glass” - in order to consider the consequences for embedded subjectivities, i.e. the way people conjecture on other people’s mental states and motivation. I propose that this story not only questions the assumption that perception provides reliable knowledge regarding other selves but also shows the self as constituted in its acts of perception and interpretation. In other words, the story presents subjectivity at the level of intentionality. Surprisingly, considering standard assessments of modernist writing, the reading experience highlights the deep desire for, and the failed attempt at, achieving intersubjectivity.

The content of the story is easily summarized as there are very few events and no overt conflict: a woman walks into her garden, while she is away the postman comes in and puts her mail on the table, then the woman herself returns and looks at the letters. How can this quotidian series of trivial actions become the main storyline of a literary text? A clue to this question is given in the subtitle “A Reflection”, the double meaning of which becomes manifest in the opening of the story, when the looking glass is used as a window onto the story to observe the appearance and to reflect on the mind of the only character. A speculation on fictional minds is here usurped by the narrative voice, made a topic and an issue of commentary by it and employed first to mislead us and in the end to shock us with an announcement of a fictional ‘truth’ which we have no means of ascertaining.2

The first sentence issues a warning to the reader: “People should not leave looking glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave an open cheque book or letters confessing some hideous crime” (Woolf, “The Lady” 86). The rhetoric recalls opening pronouncements of nineteenth-century authorial narrators, but the statement’s trustworthiness is doubtful. We do not yet know how reliable the narrator is going to be who makes this universal assumption about a connection between mirrors and crimes. Does s/he intend to be absurd, ironic or is this a serious hint at later disclosures? A

---

2 In the following I am using “The Lady in the Looking Glass” only as a test case for the effect of representing intramental subjectivity. For a reading in the context of similar stories by Woolf such as “An Unwritten Novel” or “Moments of Being” cf. Head 80-89.
first reading must therefore take it on “suppositional format” (Zunshine 55) and register it with a strong connection to the source, i.e. the unidentified narrator.

A “primacy effect” therefore sets in with the second sentence. The term “primacy effect” refers to the enduring impressions created by the beginning of a text, where the cognitive frames are set, expectations raised and therefore the most intensive closing of options occurs. As a result, “initial interpretation of the function of an event may endure even after we have been given information that contradicts it” (Kafalenos 57). This is a feature of reading often exploited in short stories, as in this one:

One could not help looking, that summer afternoon, in the long glass that hung outside in the hall. Chance had so arranged it. From the depths of the sofa in the drawing-room one could see reflected in the Italian glass not only the marble-topped table opposite, but a stretch of garden beyond. One could see a long grass path leading between banks of tall flowers until, slicing off an angle, the gold rim cut it off. (Woolf, “The Lady” 86)

This is how the narrator leads us literally and – as we later realize – also metaphorically “up the garden path”.

The narrative voice that performs the reflection remains an unknown and unexplained presence to the last. Conspicuously, the reported perception is expressed in the most cumbersome grammatical mode of impersonal third person. Not only the above description, but the text as a whole, exploits fully the possibilities of the indefinite personal pronoun for ambiguity. As Monika Fludernik explains, the use of “one” combines the advantages of a polite or escapist eschewing of responsibility and of disguising one’s opinions behind a “projected typefication of what everybody else is thinking” with a generous license for the addressee to identify with such general consensus (Fludernik, “Pronouns of Address” 105). I will come back to the question of the success of this inclusive strategy.

Why this person speaking of her- or himself as “one” should have occasion to be sitting on the sofa whilst the lady of the house is out, we are not told. But in the second paragraph something strange and intrusive about this person’s behaviour is conveyed in the observation: “The house was empty, and one felt, since one was the only person in the drawing-room, like one of those naturalists who, covered with grass and leaves, lie watching the shyest animals […]” (Woolf, “The Lady” 86). These “shyest animals”, of which a fanciful description is given, seem to have in common with the absent woman that they are being pursued by a relentless “naturalist” gaze. The unidentified observer looking into the mirror sees “shy creatures, lights and shadows, curtains blowing, petals falling [...] nocturnal creatures” (86). As readers we are prepared to visualize this setting and to read it – especially in the short space of a story – as indicative of the sensitivity of the character inhabiting it. But we also translate the description into the terms of ordinary experience; we blend the impressionist picture with our knowledge of what is evidently a luxuriously furnished country house.
The narrative voice also points out a contrast: a marked difference between the subtly changeable atmosphere inside the room and the “fixed” and “accurate” reality of the garden path reflected in its “unescapable” reality, though both are visible only in the mirror: “One could not help looking from one to the other” (87). There is evidently a contradiction at work in the representation within the frame of the mirror, which points to a contrast “between the raw materials of life and the way in which they are transformed in the creative act” (Head 87), which may have ramifications for the subject of the “reflection”. We are thus well prepared to meet the human agents of this scene of referentiality.

“Half an hour ago the mistress of the house, Isabella Tyson, had gone down the grass path in her thin summer dress, carrying a basket, and had vanished, sliced off by the gilt rim of the looking-glass” (Woolf, “The Lady” 87). Thus information about the character’s agency is limited to the expression “had gone”, for the verb referring to visibility (“had vanished”) does not strictly express action under the character’s control. By further qualifying the phrase with the addition “sliced off by the rim”, the text transfers agency from the character to an object, the mirror. The next sentence shifts to the mental activity of the onlooker-narrator, who can only surmise or guess at intentions: “presumably […] to pick flowers; or as it seemed more natural to suppose, to pick something light and fantastic” (87).

It is not far-fetched to interpret the following reading of Isabella as a metaphor for artistic creation. Among others, Dominic Head read the story in this way, pointing out its allusion to Alfred Tennyson’s poem “The Lady of Shalott” as a source for the tension between reality and withdrawal and for the artist’s predicament within this tension. The looking glass would then be a reference to the perceptive potential of an artist and a metaphor for artistic creation as well (Head 87, 88). But the strenuous effort at decoding outward signs for interior selves also matches the mental activity of the reader when the motivations of characters’ actions remain undisclosed. In the following passage the prevalent mode of imaginative conjecture by the narrator culminates in the statement that the lady “suggested the fantastic and the tremulous convolvulus rather than the upright aster” (Woolf, “The Lady” 87). But almost immediately this image – a potent textual strategy for visualization – is irritatingly called into question. The narrative voice goes so far as to reject it wholesale as “worse than idle and superficial […] cruel even, for they [such comparisons] come like the convolvulus itself trembling between one’s eyes and the truth. There must be truth; there must be a wall” (87). In an elaboration of the image into a conceit, the wall – which a climbing tendril like the convolvulus needs to survive – comes to stand for truth. The figurative images applied to Isabella are turned upside down and become incommensurable. We are alerted to the failure of the effort to define her inner being. The failure to arrive at a comprehensive knowledge of another person recalls famous passages in Woolf’s essays, where she commends an empathetic and impressionist view of the consciousness of characters based on an interiority
concept of the mind. If the short story at hand does not seem to endorse this interiority concept, this may be due to the specificities of short story reading which Woolf was well aware of.

The narrative goes on to replace the rejected image with an implicit characterization through past and habitual acts. It summarizes Isabella’s travels, collections of fine furniture and art, and her dealings with friends and acquaintances, supposing her cabinets to “almost certainly” contain many passionate and intimate letters. The narrative voice, however, soon abandons these conjectures, acknowledging “how very little, after all these years, one knew about her” (87). The phrase “after all these years” points to a homodiegetic narrator, but the category is not as helpful as it would be in a novel, because the whole point of this story is, as it turns out, that narrator and character never meet face to face in the fictional durée, for the reflecting surface of the mirror intervenes until the end.

Mirrors are an ancient critical metaphor for mimetic qualities. Semiotically speaking, a mirrored reflection is an index, a sign based on contiguity and causality. The insubstantiality of the mirrored image, its fleeting, ghostly appearance, however, can jettison the epistemology of empiricism. The recourse to the visual metaphor of the mirror can be read as an allusion to Plato’s cave and the falsity of sense impressions. The story’s presentation of the reflecting surface as an obstacle to perception and knowledge then seems informed by a modernist aesthetic which spurned mimetic representation for a more consciously composed art. That its anti-representational bias should prefer the mode of “reflection” as imaginative creation points to a loss of faith in representational techniques and referential modes. In the spirit of epistemological uncertainty Woolf shows the borderline between phenomena and conjecture to be thin, and transgressions almost imperceptible.

When the narrator proceeds at this point to deduce a history of violent emotions from Isabella’s “mask-like indifference” and to notice that the setting becomes “more shadowy and symbolic”, “darker” and “more […] hieroglyphic” because of the “stress of thinking about Isabella” (88), we are likely to form some notion of unreliability. James Phelan makes a distinction between an unreliability of misrepresentation, which the audience must correct, and an unreliability of “unreporting, underregarding”, which the audience must be prepared to supplement (Phelan 53). The latter is much more effective in short stories, as it leads to a projection of the issues and themes of the story into the reader’s speculations on his or her life-world. Unreliability in general forces the reader to blend two or more perspectives of uncertain truth status. In these moments of blending or filling in gaps of indeterminacy in literary texts the reader is most challenged to participate cognitively. Participation occasions a memorable reading experience, as difficulties surmounted are always memorable and afford pleasure. Memorable short stories, as explained, rely on this effect which Lisa Zunshine describes for narratives in general: “We close such books with a strange feeling that the state of cognitive uncertainty that they induced in us may never be fully resolved” (Zun-
shine 79). Many readers, and I suspect most readers of short stories, relish this lingering ambiguity and its promptings of the imagination, but the further turn of the screw here is that the topic of this unreliable narration is reading fictional character. Unreliable reality, literally and metaphorically figured as images in a mirror, is the topic of a reflection by a narrative voice which increasingly displays signs of unreliability in its turn.

Evidently, what is being mirrored in this looking glass is the reader’s participatory effort at making sense of a character from mere appearances, in the absence of any representation of interiority. The predicament of the short story writer, who must try to evoke maximum effects in a brief textual space, has often led critics to speculate on the particularly symbolic quality of this literary form (May 22). Woolf’s story suggests the more plausible explanation that the creative mind of the reader – in coping with a dearth of information on intentionality, motivation, and subjectivity – tends to enlarge the meaning of exterior information, and hence to project it into a wider contextual frame.

The beginning of the next paragraph, “Suddenly these reflections were ended violently” (Woolf, “The Lady” 88), initially seems to promise a return to a less meta-representational mode and to announce imminent action. But the suspense is soon deflated when the “large black form” looming into the looking glass is identified as the postman and the unrecognizable addition by which “the picture was entirely altered” (88) turns out to be the letters thrown on the table. The description indulges in “delayed decoding”, an expression Ian Watt employed for a similar technique in Conrad (209). This technique is often related to impressionism in the visual arts because it describes a moment of incomprehension in which an object of perception becomes pure form as recognition is temporarily deferred. This modernist textual strategy can be related to the complex changes and challenges in visual culture, where an enormous number of new technologies for visual representation, illusion, and detection loosened the epistemological link between visual perception and knowledge. The description of an instance of nonplussed perception resembles the depiction of ephemeral appearances in impressionism or the relative realities of different perspectives in cubism.

The story’s scene of delayed decoding contains both the relativity of truth and the problematic act of perception; it is unusual only in that an impersonal narrator is thus limited and questioned in his or her observations.

The description of distorted or misapprehended vision leads to a discussion of the truth value of the “arranged and composed” picture with “that stillness and immortality which the looking-glass conferred” (Woolf, “The Lady” 89). Apparently the pictorial or iconic quality, of which the scene partakes, creates the semblance of “eternal truth”. The narrator compares the bundle of letters on the table to marble tablets containing everything there is to know about Isabella, a comparison which occasions a fantasy of her return, of her reading them and sighing over them and then locking them up in her cabinets. From this entirely hypothetical scene, the narrative voice concludes that “Isabella did not wish to be known – but she should no longer escape.”
(89). An aggressive and threatening element has now intruded into the mus-
ings of the narrative voice on the process of reading character:

[…] she should no longer escape. It was absurd, it was monstrous. If she concealed
so much and knew so much one must prise her open with the first tool that came
to hand – the imagination. One must fix one’s mind upon her at that very moment.
One must fasten her down there. One must refuse to be put off any longer with
sayings and doings such as the moment brought forth – with dinners and visits
and polite conversations. One must put oneself in her shoes. (89)

The comical images of enforced entry into another’s mind and the ironic
reference to the imagination as the tool for doing so, recall the exhortations
Woolf herself vented against Arnold Bennet in “Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown”
or her strictures on writing character in “Modern Fiction”. In these essays
Woolf argued that the outward details of a character’s circumstances could
never provide access to the mutability and effervescence of “an ordinary
mind on an ordinary day” (Woolf, “Mr. Bennet”, “Modern Fiction”) But the
obvious irony brought to bear here on the idea of imaginative and empa-
thetic understanding is portentous.3

Psychological speculation seems to be no help because it is working from
external appearances, material reality, only (shoes of exquisite leather, jewels,
scissors etc.). In the essays, Woolf had rejected Victorian and Edwardian
materialism and – by extension – a positivist idea of reality. From an histori-
cal perspective, a shift towards more visual communication occurs with the
introduction of modernist writing. When the representation of a consensus
mind at work in the community, which Palmer demonstrates in the narra-
tives of Dickens and Eliot, could no longer be successfully posited, these
fictional mental agreements came to be replaced by representations of a net-
work of mutual gazes which are often inconclusive or unreliable as indica-
tions of other people’s thoughts. Nevertheless, a furtive and frantic specula-
tion about the thoughts of others is going on, all the more frantic for its lack
of conviction about its results. Throughout her work, Woolf expresses a pref-
erence for a reality which is semi-transparent. The moments of vision in
which fictional minds receive “a myriad impression” point to a fluid concept
of the self (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 150).

In her idea of an unstable subjectivity which maintains harmony with the
external world through its own mutability, she has a significant ancestor in
Walter Pater (Whitworth 151). To Pater, however, the susceptibility of the
mind to impressions was impaired by its isolation: “each mind keeping as a
solitary prisoner its own dream of the world” (Pater 235). In the story at
hand, Woolf also seems to negotiate the dialectics of the profits and the losses
that arise from such an enclosed and destabilized subjectivity.

3 I am relying on Banfield’s explanation of irony not as something which can be identified
as part of the linguistic construction but as a discrepancy of tone or meaning, which
readers pick up in reading (Banfield 222).
The narrator emphasizes that Isabella’s person – as “she would be standing” (Woolf, “The Lady” 90) – is visible to the mind’s eye while her face and eyes are not so that “[o]ne could only see the indeterminate outline” and guess at her expression (90). Palmer mentions the importance of eyes and the look for the detection of a character’s personality, calling it “expressive of the attitude of the looker towards the ‘lookee’” (Palmer, “Social Units”). Hence the failure to see the face and meet the eyes of the other, who is perhaps “mocking” (Woolf, “The Lady” 90), alludes to the problem of the intersubjective gaze, which may produce both fear and intimacy. As the object of another’s scrutiny, one becomes the instrument of the other to ends of which one is ignorant (Butte 31). This felt aggression of the scrutinizing gaze, has dominated gender theories of film, where scopophilia is interpreted as a reification of the female through a controlling and desirous male gaze. The frightening implications of the gaze can only be countered in conditions of reciprocity, where insistence on a mutual regard acknowledges both embodiments at work. It does not work, however, in the cinema. Woolf’s short story discusses in fictional form the subject-object problem inherent in visibility and pertinent to understanding. To be an object of secret surveillance causes anxiety and unrest, and readers will feel nagging unease about the narrated one-sided observation. When the narrator attributes the failure to read the mind of Isabella to obscured vision, readers will probably relish the breakdown of the voyeuristic scenario. These feelings of distrust in the ethics of the narrator’s performance are clearly the result of an absence of intersubjectivity.

The resentment increases as the narrative instance, presumably in compensation for its frustrated efforts, starts to accuse Isabella’s mind of conventionality: “She was thinking, perhaps, that she must order a new net” (Woolf, “The Lady” 90). This imagined thought immediately prompts an exclamation of disappointment from the narrator: “But one was tired of the things that she talked about at dinner. It was her profounder state of being that one wanted to catch and turn to words, the state that is to the mind what breathing is to the body […]” (90). Here, the reported thoughts offered as particles of Isabella’s consciousness in effect hide their conjectural nature behind the inclusive “one”, and they induce in the reader the suspicion that Isabella is masking her personality behind socially acceptable utterances. But are readers really seduced to share the narrator’s desire for exposing the inner recesses of inferiority? Narrative soliloquy, as mentioned above, always implicates the addressee, and readers are led to feel more integrated into the musings of the voice than in other forms of narrative situation. Yet inclusiveness is not the primary result in this case: for one thing, a gentle irony is directed at the curiosity about hidden aspects of character and at the common desire for an omniscience which denies fictional creatures our privilege of keeping the secret life secret (Brosch, “The Curious Eye” 148). As appearances seem to mock an empirical attitude, the fictional character mocks the narrating instance’s insights, and the mirror mocks faithful representation,
the text as a whole turns to ironic advantage the reader’s immersive imagination and identification with gnomic speculation in an authorial grammatical mode.

Returning to a hypothetical register of agency on the part of the character (Isabella’s gardening activity), the narrative voice shifts into free indirect discourse: “As [the twig] fell, surely some light came in too, surely one could penetrate a little farther into her being” (Woolf, “The Lady” 90). We witness the internal focalization of a personalized narrator who is radically separated from the world of the character s/he is mediating. This isolation foregrounds the illusory character of the reflections and must make judgements necessarily flawed. The limitation of the narrator figure to internal focalization (Stanzel’s reflector mode, 195) is so obvious that the story must be read as a meta-narrative commentary on establishing a self in fiction, proposing consciousness to be a construction of a directed intentionality. In this directed intentionality narrator and reader meet and interact.

The reiterated self-assurance of the narrator that some interiority “must” emerge from the persistent effortful scrutiny is followed by a passage in which the narrative voice shifts to a different mode:

So she stood thinking. Without making any thought precise – for she was one of those reticent people whose minds hold their thoughts enmeshed in clouds of silence – she was filled with thoughts. Her mind was like her room, in which lights advanced and retreated, came pirouetting and stepping delicately, spread their tails, pecked their way; and then her whole being was suffused, like the room again, with a cloud of some profound knowledge, some unspoken regret, and then she was full of locked drawers, stuffed with letters, like her cabinets. To talk of ‘prising her open’ as if she were an oyster, to use any but the finest and subtlest and most pliable tools upon her was impious and absurd. One must imagine – here she was in the looking glass. It made one start. (Woolf, “The Lady” 91)

In this short passage the narrative voice changes from what seems to be authorial omniscient narration to free indirect thought and then to what Palmer calls “free indirect perception” (Palmer, Fictional Minds 80). The use of these quasi-unselfconscious forms of narration suggests a merging of narrator and reflector. The admission of being startled by the sight of Isabella reminds us that all we know of the narrator relates to the character who is now about to appear for the first time. We see the intrusive occupation of somebody else’s house, the voyeuristic surveillance of somebody else’s movements, the curious register of someone else’s material things, and most crucially the surmises as to that somebody’s state of mind. All these mental activities have been going on under the guise of “imagination”, and, considering that the somebody in question is a fictional character, they are indeed the harmless indulgences readers permit themselves when reading fiction. The exercise in

---

4 Meir Sternberg proposes the term “informant” because it is more neutral than the term “reflector”. I use it in this instance for its connotations of spying and betraying (Sternberg 246).
reading fictional minds, in the processing activity which is natural to readers, must implicate the reader in the threatening and disempowering aspects of this act of surveillance. The uncanny interaction between narrator and reader receives added meaning from its negotiation of the nature of signs. While indices are ruled by the past and fated to disappear, icons are available for permanence in recollection. The narrator’s predatory attempt to form and fix the shadowy apparitions into a permanent image recalls W. J. T. Mitchell’s definition of representation as driven by ekphrastic hope as well as ekphrastic fear, i.e. simultaneously by an iconophobic and an iconophilic desire (Mitchell 152-154).

In addition, the atmosphere in which the reflection takes place becomes uncanny and weird, as the mind under observation mirrors its fictional location in a reversal of the usual symbolic significance of setting and material objects which we read into short stories. In the light of these allusions, it comes as a relief that the scopic and interpretative regime of this narrator’s penetrating gaze turns out to be wrong in the end. The delayed appearance of the protagonist at the end of the story is simultaneously its climax. Isabella moves into the frame of the glass, gradually and gently pushing aside the other reflections, as the narrator puts it, “to make room for her” (Woolf, “The Lady” 91).

At last there she was, in the hall. She stopped dead. [...] At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed [...] to leave only the truth. It was an enthralling spectacle. Everything dropped from her – clouds, dress, basket, diamond – all that one had called the creeper and convolvulus. Here was the hard wall beneath. Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody. As for her letters, they were all bills. Look, as she stood there, old and angular, veined and lined, with her high nose and her wrinkled neck, she did not even trouble to open them. People should not leave looking glasses hanging in their rooms. (92)

The gaze projected in the story is the narrator’s gaze at the mediating surface of a “reflection”. It directs the reader’s visualization towards the overall configurations. The memorable visualization it creates is described in the title, and whatever individual shape this lady in the looking glass will take for a reader, it will carry a subtext of connotations from the extensive iconographic use of mirrors in Western cultural heritage. But this traditional mirroring of a subject is distorted and disturbed: it is first cut off by the frame, then blurred and fuzzy, and at last – when it has displaced the foreground – become as opaque as a wall. While this image is characterized by an emergent materiality and visibility, the text denies any knowledge of the person represented. In the course of the reading experience any definite ideas of subjectivity are rejected and the image of the “wall” comes to stand for the unattainability of character through representation. The vehicle and tenor of the images are joined in an ironic chiastic conjunction: the convolvulus in need of a wall to cling to expresses the sensitive tenderness of a feminine woman, which the
narrator imagines in the absence of the protagonist. But as the woman con-
quers a space within the frame of reflections where she seems to be “walled
in” by the material objects clustered around her, it turns out that the fitting
image for her would have been the wall itself, not the clinging plant. The
unreadability of her character, and the resistance of any character to repre-
sentation, is contained in the striking visualization of an image struggling
into visibility.

The primacy effect of putting trust in the first voice in the discourse is ex-
plotted to expose us to the shock of imaginative fallibility. Our desire for
believing narrating instances then leads us up the garden path. This narrator,
who hovers on the borderline of becoming a character, is not just omitting
information or misrepresenting, but blatantly fictionalizing the actions of the
character, allowing his or her counterfactual speculation to take over and
create an alternative to the “actual world”, in Ryan’s sense of the textual
universe projected by the work of fiction (Ryan 23). This possible world and
second-order reality, which is a third-order system for readers, enjoys greater
claims to authority than such conjecture would have had if constructed by a
character. At the same time, it disrupts the fictional world more thoroughly
than such speculations on the part of a character would, because the latter
can only produce subsystems of the actual world, whereas the narrator’s
position as a mediator of the fictional world produces alternatives of equal
status for as long as s/he does not disavow them. After the constant disrup-
tions and oscillations between alternative fictional worlds, we are disinclined
to believe the narrator’s final statement about Isabella’s character being hard
as a wall. We have learnt to distrust every description of her personality, and
may have come to reject the idea of capturing individuality in a verbal de-
scription altogether.

The true nature of Isabella, it is clai-
med, has eluded the narrator until the
final close-up when her figure cuts through the surrounding mystery. But
this ending remains equivocal in spite of its conformity with modernist story
conventions (Head 88). Readers will feel somewhat disappointed when in-
formed that the truth about Isabella consists in nothingness. The dénouement
hints at the poverty of the real as opposed to the richness of the imagination.
In the absence of the character the reflections occasioned by the mirrored
shadows in the glass were much more poetic, beautiful, and meaningful than
the nullity of her presence. And yet, both the poetic rendering as well as the
prosaic undermining are performed by one and the same narrative instance,
hauntingly one which we, the readers, are led to identify with.

Lisa Zunshine mentions the cognitive cravings satisfied and “created!” by
fictions, in that they “engage, tease and push to its tentative limits our mind-
reading capacities” (Zunshine 4). Woolf here undermines the usual double-
ness of subject and agent in character and the traditional adherence of plot to
embodied subjectivity by expanding the notion of private discourse into the
level of narration. In speculating on subjectivity and in foregrounding the
secrecy and invisibility of the self, the narrative discourse usurps the agency
traditionally associated with fictional character, nourishing a growing distaste in the reader concerning this vicarious mental activity. Woolf’s story may be said to parody Victorian realist conventions and to question modern ones at the same time. The dramatized narrator and frustrated eye-witness scrutinizing the surface of “reflections” in a parody of mimetic attempts to discover an object of solidity develops into an asymptotic rapprochement of narrator and “reflector”. This textual move deconstructs the modernist over-emphasis on interiority even as it cheekily defeats the narrator’s loquacious urge to arrive at a character reading in spite of the character’s unyielding muteness. In a tongue-in-cheek manner, Woolf seems to want to grant her character freedom from a narrative assault on her hidden interiority. The psychological license coupled with the epistemic limitation exercised by the presumptuous narrative voice issues a warning against an encroaching, insinuating mind reading.

As we are accustomed to rely on the narrator’s first voice in the discourse we find ourselves immersed in its betrayal, its failure to sympathize and its lack of empathy with human character. The story drives home with a vengeance to the reader the lack of physical contact, the absence of any sense perception but the visual, and the isolation of consciousness. Hence, it highlights the absence of a more social, corporeal intersubjectivity.

On the surface it seems that the story supports Woolf’s arguments in the essays that mimetic referentiality with its minute attention to outward reality, to details of the material world and to the exterior appearance of a character will never get to the bottom of consciousness. It seems to conform to her principle of minimizing facts, events, and actions in order to concentrate on subjective, moment-by-moment experience. But “experience” in this case is a mental reflection on subjectivity. Against the usual reading of this story as a fictional demonstration of and metafictonal argument for the ineffability of the self, i.e. the impossibility of transforming it into a realist representation, I would argue that it exposes the deficits of the interiority concept of consciousness. While the mind of the other remains unreadable, the mind of the reader-narrator is laid open in all its appropriating, prying efforts. Rather than celebrate an empathetic imagination, Woolf deconstructs both the transparency of fictional minds and the activity of reading them.

This interpretation can be linked to a diachronic view of literature. Intersubjectivity, which in Eliot was consensual to the point of becoming a communal mind, is here condemned to subsist on the speculative imagination and hindered on two counts: it is generated by an isolated consciousness and it depends entirely on representations. Woolf’s quest for genuine inner character, which cannot be rendered with an “external” approach, famously explained in her essays, depends on this older external approach even as it is systematically subverted (Head 82). However, what has rarely been noticed in her attack on the Edwardians is that Woolf deplored the lack of communication and hence “friendship” between writer and reader:
[...] convention ceases to be a means of communication between writer and reader, and becomes instead an obstacle and an impediment. At the present moment we are suffering, not from decay, but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship. (Woolf, “Mr. Bennet” 84)

By making the reader consciously participate in the intentionality of the narrative, Woolf offers a complex interaction between the desire for the intermental and its failure. It seems that in modernist narratives intermental processes are stalled or made increasingly difficult at the level of the fictional world, while such mental communication is improved and expanded at the level of interaction between fictional text and reader.

On the face of it, the story discusses character as visibility and hence the exteriorizing of consciousness, a textual strategy which is essential to the short story, as it renders visible the limits of understanding character through external appearances. But visualization and projection, which are at work in any processing of short stories, here function to contradict the overt message of the text. The visualization of the reader must revolve around the figure of Isabella inserting itself into visibility. In fact, the reader’s imagination probably has no difficulty in generating an image of the gardening lady with her upper-class paraphernalia. However, this image is not a finite product, but an emergent structure, a realization of narrative and imagination interacting. This visualization contains (in the double sense) the topic that is addressed in the story. What readers are brought to distrust in “The Lady in the Looking Glass” is the act of narrating character in the absence of intersubjectivity. In contrast to what is usually seen as the modernist interest in intramental subjectivity, Woolf may be testing the limits of this idea of consciousness as isolated interiority. And her ironic subversion of the reductive tendency of hypothetical observation and penetrating gazes into a fictional character seem to equally undermine empathetic immersion and identification on the part of the reader. For us readers, the intermental emerges as a conspicuous absence. What we miss and hence learn to desire is some form of reciprocal, mutual exchange, i.e. such instances of intersubjective communication as are deliberately obliterated from this narrative. Thus, the social mind can be seen as an emergent blending space in Turner’s terms that emerges from this reading experience (Turner, “The Art of Compression” 99). What we miss is an ethical intention on the part of the figure vicariously simulating our mind-reading, and what we miss we will feel inclined to supply by projective extension.

Works Cited


