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Shared Experience

Alan Palmer Explores Social Minds

Alan Palmer: *Social Minds in the Novel*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP 2010. (= Theory and Interpretation of Narrative). 220 pp. USD 49,95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1141-0

“Little narratological work has been done on social minds in the novel” (45).

Narratives detail the multifarious ways in which individual characters fare while entangled in social scenarios. The emphasis in scholarly treatments has overwhelmingly been on the first part of this equation, i.e. single protagonists. The representation of shared experience, as a genuine phenomenon in its own right, has been largely ignored by narratologists. Alan Palmer’s *Social Minds in the Novel* is thus a timely investigation into, and mapping of, what he also refers to as intermental thought.

Structure of the Book

Generally speaking, Palmer reconciles three levels in this book, (a) the introduction of extraliterary discourses, (b) the conceptualization of social minds and (c) the respective analysis of novels. Though these three levels are formally kept apart through the chapter divisions, Palmer competently interrelates them in his clear, easily accessible prose.

In chapter 1, he explicates his methodological position as a cognitive narratologist, insisting that “my cognitive approach is a pragmatic, undogmatic, and unideological one” (7). Palmer goes on to reiterate some of the major propositions of his previous book, *Fictional Minds* (2004), which may indeed be read as a complementary study to *Social Minds*. Subsequently, he consults discourses from outside literary studies, particularly the cognitive sciences, on such topics as attribution theory (20-24) and physically distributed cognition (51). Inviting the cognitive sciences to inform narratologists is in line with Palmer’s repeated emphasis on the continuity between principles operating in empirical reality and fictional storyworlds, since, “[a]s with all other aspects of the reading process, we bring our real-world cognitive frames to bear when we encounter fictional intermental units” (49). This interdisciplinary approach marks Palmer as a representative of the so-called ‘postclassical’ era in narrative theory.

In chapter 2, Palmer elaborates the main claim of his book as he posits the vital importance of what he labels social minds:

An important part of the social mind is our capacity for *intermental thought*. Such thinking is joint, group, shared, or collective, 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, just as in real life, where much of our thinking is done in groups, 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. (41)

Palmer then establishes a tentative spectrum to differentiate various kinds of intermental thought as represented in novels: intermental encounters; small intermental units; medium-sized intermental units; large intermental units; intermental minds (46-48). He stresses, however, that “the simplicity of this typology hardly begins to do justice to the complexity and range of the intermental units to be found in novels” (48).

In chapters 3-5 Palmer applies the concepts developed in chapter 2, which results in “discussions of the social minds to be found in those magnificent canonical warhorses *Middlemarch*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Persuasion*” (35).

Core Assumptions

Underlying Palmer’s treatment are a number of core assumptions which are critical to understanding his position. Most central among these assumptions is the cognitive-science-derived “realization that mental functioning cannot be understood merely by analyzing what goes on within the skull but can only be fully comprehended once it has been seen in its social and physical context” (43). This makes consciousness a phenomenon which is as much external as it is internal. Thus, “the whole fictional mind” (28) becomes visible and physically manifest in forms such as body language, tactile exchanges and gazes. Correspondingly, Palmer distinguishes between internalist and externalist perspectives on fictional minds. Whereas “an internalist perspective on the mind stresses those aspects that are inner, introspective, private, solitary, individual, psychological, mysterious, and detached” (39), “an externalist perspective on the mind stresses those aspects that are outer, active, public, social, behavioral, evident, embodied, and engaged” (39). According to Palmer, social minds are perceived by way of an externalist perspective.

Moreover, Palmer proposes to reconceptualize some of narratology’s key categories, namely mind/consciousness, action and characterization. In fact, Palmer argues that, in contrast to prior narratological approaches, an externalist perspective facilitates a holistic understanding of (individual as well as social) fictional minds, which perceives these three parameters as necessarily intertwined. The criterion used to epitomize this shift is dispositions (27-34):

It is by interpreting episodes of consciousness within a context of dispositions that the reader builds up a convincing and coherent sense of character. It is through the central, linking concept of dispositions that characterization and

thought presentation can be seen as different aspects of the same phenomenon.
(28)

Exemplification

It might be expedient to demonstrate Palmer's approach by adducing an instance of how a social mind manifests itself in an actual narrative. Generally speaking, there is a variety of shapes by which social minds are expressed, the use of plural pronouns in 'we'- and 'they'-narratives being the most obvious device.

Stephen Crane's short story "The Open Boat" (1897), a story not discussed by Palmer, illustrates how an omniscient narrator conveys a social unit through the format of a 'they'-narrative. The emphasis on collectivity is explicitly signaled in the narrative's subtitle, which identifies it as "[A] Tale Intended to Be After the Fact. Being the Experience of Four Men from the Sunk Steamer *Commodore*". The story, one might briefly mention, traces the final stages of a shipwreck on the ocean. Four men comprise the crew of a small sailing boat; the vessel, however, is too insubstantial to withstand a storm which is upsetting the sea. As the waves are tossing the boat around, the men eventually have to leave the ship behind and swim to the coastline, which has meanwhile emerged. One of the men dies in that process, the other three survive. The narrative commences with a memorable paragraph, effecting immediate immersion:

None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were of the hue of slate, save for the tops, which were of foaming white, and all of the men knew the colors of the sea. The horizon narrowed and widened, and dipped and rose, and at all times its edge was jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks.

Twice, the deployment of the verb 'know' polysemically fuses internalist cognition and externalist perception as the men orient themselves in their nautical environment according to the "colors of the sea". Speaking in terms of literary history, this results in a distinct version of what might be conceived as 'impressionist naturalism'. Pitted against the men in the boat are the waves, which, "thrust up in points like rocks", assume a predatory quality in this existential encounter out on the ocean. The waves constitute a non-human collective entity, equipped with what could be recuperated as quasi-agency ("the waves that swept toward them").

The circumstance decisive for a social-minds analysis of this passage is nonetheless that the focus is on the shared experience of the four men. It is an occasion of collective perception when "their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them"; it is as part of an intermental unit that "none of them knew the colors of the sea". Such examinations intimate the analytical fertility of a social-minds vista, but would have to be carried much further than is possible here.

Moreover, Palmer's take can fruitfully be applied to non-fictional genres such as political documents and sermons. For instance, the American *Declaration of Independence* (1776) features a prominent 'we'-voice, which, in addition to the political statement it makes, fashions its collectivity by narrative and rhetorical means. Hence one might derive a hypothesis worth investigating, stating that social minds figure more dominantly in factual than in fictional modes of narrative.

Implications

How relevant is *Social Minds in the Novel* for the discipline of narratology? Palmer himself contends that "it is necessary to find room for it at the *center* of narrative theory" (42, emphasis original), since "intermental units are to be found in nearly all novels" (41), non-fictional text types and media (198-201).

In sum, Palmer's work constitutes indeed nothing less than a major adjustment of how narratologists conceptualize narrative's arguably most significant capacity: the projection of human experience – now explicitly including collective (read: *shared*) experience. That the momentum of Palmer's theoretical and analytical innovations finds resonance among international scholars of narratology is demonstrated by the fact that the journal *Style* devoted its entire issue 45.2 (2011) to critical responses by 25 narrative theorists to *Social Minds in the Novel*. These responses show that Palmer's treatment needs to be further conceptually elaborated and historically contextualized within narratological research. Susan Lanser's notion of a 'communal voice', as expounded in *Fictions of Authority* (1992), is one instance indicative of a narratological prehistory to a systematic social-minds approach. Palmer's findings also need to be extended diachronically and studied in the light of non-fictional as well as non-textual narratives. Such potential for elaboration and extension proves, however, that Palmer has delivered perceptive pioneer work in this study.

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