Genette meets Vygotsky: narrative embedding and distributed intelligence

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Abstract

Framed tales, or stories within stories, have garnered considerable attention from theorists of narrative in recent years. By and large, however, story analysts have not sought to account for why the practice of narrative embedding has persisted so long – or why it is so widespread – in the world's folk traditions and written literatures. Using William Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage* as its tutor-text, this article advances a broadly cognitive explanation for the pervasiveness and persistence of narrative embedding across so many different storytelling situations. My central claim is that, in conjunction with the cognitive activities of their interpreters, framed narratives such as *The Ruined Cottage* constitute intelligent systems – systems that both stage and facilitate the process of shared thinking about past events and about one's own and other minds. Such systems propagate experiential frames – specifically, the experiences of character-narrators – across time and space. By contrast, in a story that does not involve narrative embedding, there will be a net decrease in the capacity of the system to communicate representations originating from sources potentially quite widely separated in space and time. Narrative embedding thus increases the distributional reach of a framed tale, enhancing the overall power of the knowledge-generating system to which it lends structure. Adapting Barbara Rogoff’s (1990) definition of *intelligence* as the socially supported ability to solve problems grounded in particular domains of activity, I explore how framed narratives can help distribute intelligence both synchronically (across regions of space and participants and material artifacts within those regions) and diachronically (across different temporal phases of a given spatial region).

Keywords: cognitive narratology; empathy; framed narrative; narrative levels; socially distributed cognition; Theory of Mind; Wordsworth, William

1 Introduction

In framed narratives, stories get embedded within other stories, as when the narrator of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* relates Marlow’s telling of a story about Kurtz, or the narrator of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* relates how the pilgrims told stories on their way to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket. Framed tales of this sort have garnered considerable attention from theorists of narrative in recent years. In consequence, analysts have introduced a number of precise terminological distinctions where earlier scholars used less nuanced (and sometimes misleading) descriptors. Further, besides studying the formal mechanisms of narrative embedding, or how one story gets inserted into another and is understood in those terms by readers, theorists have identified some
important functional properties of such stories-within-stories, describing how embedded tales impinge on the overarching narrative contexts in which they occur. As I discuss below, this narratological research provides important insights into the forms and functions of framed narratives.

By and large, however, narrative theorists have not sought to account for why the practice of narrative embedding has persisted so long – or why it is so widespread – in the world’s folk traditions and written literatures. Why is it that storytellers in virtually every era, locale, and medium – from Homer and Apuleius to André Gide and A.S. Byatt, from practitioners of ancient epics to producers of ludic postmodern texts, from film-makers and graphic novelists to creators of instructional CDs and hypertext fictions – have chosen the framed tale as a vehicle for narration? In this article, I advance a broadly cognitive explanation for the pervasiveness and persistence of narrative embedding across so many cultural settings, storytelling media, and historical epochs. My central claim is that framed narratives function as both models for and vehicles of shared thinking, or socially distributed cognition. In developing this claim, I outline a plan for research that requires interchange and co-operation between scholars working in areas that include narrative theory, discourse analysis, cognitive science, ethnography, and literary studies.

Synthesizing narratological concepts with ideas developed in neighboring fields of inquiry, and using as its tutor-text William Wordsworth’s narrative poem *The Ruined Cottage* (originally composed in 1797–8), my article suggests that framed narratives like Wordsworth’s both represent and support humans’ efforts to make sense of the world. More specifically, I argue that narrative embedding of the sort exemplified in *The Ruined Cottage* is at once the record of and a primary instrument for situated, socially distributed cognition. I treat the terms distributed cognition and distributed intelligence as synonyms, adapting Barbara Rogoff’s (1990) definition of intelligence as the socially supported ability to solve problems grounded in particular domains of activity. In turn, Rogoff’s work, which bears affinities with that of Edwin Hutchins (1995a, 1995b), can be situated within a larger tradition of research that stretches back to the early 20th-century Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978; cf. Frawley, 1997; Wertsch, 1991, 1998). In this tradition, intelligence needs to be redescribed in terms of modes of activity within given environments; cognition itself is thus ‘de-localized’, that is, spread across all the components of activities viewed as systems at once exhibiting and enabling intelligent behavior. Such components can be non-human as well as human, material as well as mental. Hence in Hutchins’s (1995b) analysis of ‘how a cockpit remembers its speeds’, knowledge of the speed of a plane is not inside the head of the pilot but rather distributed among the instrumentation and gauges, particular lines of sight afforded by the cockpit’s spatial layout, and inferences arising from the configuration of human and non-human components of this gestalt. Interactions among these elements make the system as a whole intelligent and, reciprocally, confer knowledge-generating properties on each component, including human ones (cf. Rogers and
Ellis, 1994). Such considerations lead Hutchins to define cognition in terms that parallel but also extend Rogoff’s; namely, as computation taken in a broad sense, such that the idea of ‘computation’ is as applicable to events that involve the interaction of humans with artifacts and with other humans as it is to events that are entirely internal to individual persons. . . For our purposes, ‘computation’ will be taken . . . to refer to the propagation of representational state[s] across representational media. (1995a: 118)

Building on this work, which I discuss in greater detail in sections 4 and 7 below, I argue that a key concern for story analysts is to specify how narratively organized systems of activity (Herman, 2003b) – systems that range from the practice of conversational storytelling to the performance of ceremonies such as eulogies – both embody and enable socially distributed cognition. The specific hypothesis to be explored here is that, in conjunction with the cognitive activities of their interpreters, framed narratives such as The Ruined Cottage constitute intelligent systems, systems that both stage and facilitate the process of shared thinking about past events and about one’s own and other minds. The framed situations and events may be more or less remote from the here and now of a framing communicative event that is itself structured as an act of narration. In such contexts, narrative embedding contributes to the formation of intelligent systems which propagate experiential frames – specifically, the experiences of character-narrators – across time and space.

In what follows, after providing a brief synopsis of Wordsworth’s The Ruined Cottage (section 2), I review some of the nomenclature developed by narrative theorists to describe aspects of narrative embedding (section 3). I then go on to discuss the advantages of enriching the narratological approach with the ideas of researchers concerned, in a variety of ways, with the socio-interactional bases of intelligence, while also suggesting the benefits of viewing narrative as a major semiotic resource for shared thinking. Providing an overview of research in the Vygotskian tradition on the social dimensions of mind, section 4 suggests how this research can recontextualize work on framed narratives. Sections 5–7 then discuss how particular facets of Wordsworth’s text afford structure for the intelligent system – or rather, the system for distributing intelligence – to which the poem contributes. I focus on narrative embedding as a representational resource for knowing about the past (section 5) and for constructing inferences about the contents of one’s own as well as other minds (section 6) and conclude by drawing on Rogoff’s (1990) account of thinking as apprenticeship, along with other, related theoretical constructs, to characterize the dynamic between Wordsworth’s narrator and Armytage, the teller of the story-within-the-story (section 7). The poem uses narrative embedding to highlight how the narrator has, by the time he provides his own account of the ruined cottage, already served an apprenticeship in storytelling. In turn, the narrator’s story of being
mentored in the intelligence-enhancing power of stories situates the poem in a wider context of distributed cognition.

To articulate further some of the key assumptions undergirding my approach: framed tales should be viewed as narrative transactions whose cognitive properties cannot be reduced to those of their individual components, which include at least the following:

(i) the representational medium selected for narration;
(ii) the teller of the framing tale;
(iii) the teller of the framed tale;
(iv, v) the interlocutors (if any) to whom both the framing and framed stories are represented as being told;
(vi) the situations and events told about in the framing narrative;
(vii) the situations and events that make up the framed narrative;
(viii) interpreters of the gestalt formed by components (i–vii) plus their own interpretation of those components;
and (ix) the author whose initial act of composition set into motion the chain of events leading to the formation of the gestalt.4

This entire structure affords opportunities for distributing intelligence not provided by other, less differentiated kinds of story artifacts. In a story that does not involve narrative embedding, components (iii), (v), (vii), and possibly (xii and xiii), will be absent, and the gestalt formed by the relations among these and other components will lose definition, decreasing the system’s ability to generate knowledge about multiple experiential frames. In other words, there will be a net decrease in the capacity of the system to communicate representations originating from sources potentially quite widely separated in space and time. Narrative embedding thus increases the distributional reach of a framed tale, enhancing the overall power of the knowledge-generating system to which it contributes.

2. A synopsis of *The Ruined Cottage*

In *The Ruined Cottage*, the unnamed first or primary narrator, exhausted by his walk in the summer heat, arrives on the scene of a ruined cottage, ‘four naked walls / That stared upon each other’ (28–9, lines 30–31).5 There the narrator encounters Armitage, a pedlar with whom, two days previously, the narrator had been a fellow-traveller. As the two men take refuge from the heat on a shady bench, the pedlar tells the story of the family that had once inhabited the now-ruined cottage. Armitage calls attention to the memorializing (Fosso, 1995) as well as didactic (Cohen, 1978: 189–90) functions of storytelling when he begins his tale. He also indicates his main motive for telling the story: to redress the primary narrator’s inability to associate the cottage and its setting with any particularized human experiences, let alone the kind of suffering that Armitage himself knows to have occurred there.
The old man said, ‘I see around me here
Things which you cannot see. We die, my friend,
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
and prized in his peculiar nook of earth
Dies with him, or is changed, and very soon
Even of the good no memorial is left.
The poets, in their elegies and songs
Lamenting the departed, call the groves,
They call upon the hills and streams to mourn . . .
Sympathies there are . . .
That steal upon the meditative mind
And grow with thought.’ (30, lines 67–75, 79, 81–2)

As already noted, the first narrator does not merely embed or relay Armytage’s story about the vanished family and their ruined cottage, but also records his own reaction to Armytage’s tale. Specifically, he tells how his sympathies are extended and diversified through the ‘apprenticeship’ afforded by the pedlar’s narrative; by the poem’s end, the primary narrator feels a deep, genuine attachment to what is only a desolate place overgrown with weeds when the poem opens. Just as it was designed to do, then, the story-within-the-story enables the poem’s anonymous speaker to reconstrue the four naked walls of ruined cottage as a-place-with-a-human-history.

As Armytage relates, at one time the former inhabitants of the cottage, Margaret and Robert, ''passed their days / In peace and comfort, and two pretty babes / Were their best hope next to the God in heaven” (32, lines 130–2). Then, 10 years before the present time-frame of the poem, a blight afflicted the family’s crops for two seasons in a row. The American War imposed additional hardships. Eventually, having sunk into a deep depression and no longer able to help sustain the family, Robert joins the army, leaving for Margaret a purse of gold containing the bonus he receives for enlisting. This is Robert’s last, desperate attempt to do his family a good turn. After Robert’s departure, Armytage makes periodic returns to the cottage, where he witnesses Margaret’s own decline. Never learning the fate of her husband – never coming within reach of the social distribution of accounts of what befell Robert – Margaret becomes more and more distraught. She takes to wandering around the countryside, apparently in search of tidings of her husband, “‘her face . . . pale and thin’” and her figure changed for the worse (39, lines 338–9). Her elder child has to be sent off to become a serving boy, and later her younger child dies.

However, as Margaret’s “‘poor hut / [sinks] to decay’” (43, lines 477–8) and she finds herself “‘reckless and alone’” (43, line 481),

Yet still
She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds
Have parted thence . . .
And here, my friend,
In sickness she remained; and here she died,
Last human tenant of these ruined walls.’ (43–4, lines 486–8; 490–2)

Moved by the conclusion to Armitage’s story, the narrator rises from the bench on which he and Armitage have been sitting; he turns aside ‘in weakness’, walking away to ‘bless’ Margaret ‘in the impotence of grief’ (44–5, lines 495, 500). When he collects himself and returns to the cottage, the narrator is advised by Armitage not to indulge in excessive grief:

‘My friend, enough to sorrow have you given,
The purposes of wisdom ask no more:  
Be wise and cheerful, and no longer read  
The forms of things with an unworthy eye:  
She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.’ (45, lines 508–12)

So much for the present as well as past situations and events revealed by the narrative transaction between Armitage and the poem’s primary speaker. My next section draws on some recent work in narratology to provide a more fine-grained description of Wordsworth’s use of narrative embedding in The Ruined Cottage. This work provides a starting-point for inquiry into framed narratives as both a representation of and a means for distributed cognition.

3 Framed narratives: narratological perspectives

Although understanding framed narratives like The Ruined Cottage might seem to happen naturally and automatically, very complex processing operations are involved in comprehending shifts between narrative levels and the changes, entailed by those shifts, in the status of characters doubling as narrators. One of the great benefits of the narratological vocabulary to be discussed here is that it de-automatizes the processing mechanisms involved – enables us to hold them up to the light of conscious scrutiny – while anchoring those mechanisms in particular facets of textual structure. Deriving from the pioneering research of Gérard Genette (1980), the vocabulary also has the advantage of capturing fine-grained distinctions and relations that were not even considered in earlier accounts of narrative embedding.6

Synopsizing Genette’s (1980) pathbreaking study, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 91–4) presents a convenient overview of what Genette characterized as the ‘subordination relations’ between narrative levels. In the case of framed narratives like Wordsworth’s, the highest level of the narrative is what Genette termed the extradiegetic level, which is immediately superior to the embedding or ‘first’ narrative and which is concerned with the presentation of that first story (see Figure 1). In The Ruined Cottage, the extradiegetic level is occupied by the anonymous primary narrator of the poem. This ‘first-person’ or homodiegetic
narrator is an older ‘narrating-I’ who retrospectively tells about how he (more precisely, an earlier version of himself – the ‘experiencing-I’) encountered Armytage at the ruined cottage. Immediately subordinate to this level is the diegetic level, where the events told about in the first narrative transpire. At this level the narrator’s younger self or experiencing-I finds the remains of the cottage, encounters Armytage, sits on the bench with the pedlar to cool down from the summer heat, and so on.

Meanwhile, the storytelling acts performed by Armytage, himself a character involved in the situations and events being recounted at the level of the diegesis, constitute what narratologists would characterize as instances of intradiegetic narration. Armytage’s acts of storytelling create an embedded, second-degree narrative, that is, a hypodiegetic narrative which is ‘below’ the level of the diegesis (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 92). Armytage’s tale, too, is a (retrospective) first-person or homodiegetic account. Hence the two major narrative situations in the poem are at once symmetrical and interlocking: symmetrical, because both the primary narrator and Armytage tell stories in which they, or earlier versions of themselves, figure as participants; and interlocking, because Armytage, in his status as narrating-I, is a character who interacts with the primary narrator, in the narrator’s status as experiencing-I. Indeed, the symmetrical interlocking of the two narrative situations is even more complex than that. The primary narrator’s sympathy and understanding grow, transforming him from experiencing-I to narrating-I, insofar as he imaginatively projects himself into the position of Armytage, who recounts events that led to his undergoing a parallel change in the past.
Figure 1 represents the narrative levels structuring Wordsworth’s poem, as well as the changes in status of the character-narrators across two boundaries, namely, the boundary between the extradiegetic and the diegetic levels, and also that between the diegetic and hypodiegetic levels. Because the primary narrator and Armytage cross and recross these boundaries as the poem unfolds, comprehension of the narrative depends on identifying which level the participants occupy at a given point.

For example, at the end of the First Part, Armytage pauses, becoming once more a character on whose actions the primary narrator comments as narrating-I (and directly witnesses as experiencing-I): ‘At this the old man paused, / . . . looking up to those enormous elms’ (34, lines 185–6). A similar shift occurs toward the end of the poem, when Armytage reaches the capstone event of Margaret’s death (44, lines 492ff.). More generally, misinterpretations would result if Armytage at the hypodiegetic level (A_h) were conflated with Armytage at the diegetic level (A_d), or if the primary narrator at the diegetic level (N_d) were conflated with the primary narrator at the extradiegetic level (N_e).

Depending on their exact location along the temporal continuum connecting past and present, A_d and N_e must be understood to be older, more experienced, and (in the sense discussed by Armytage when he advises the narrator not to indulge in grief beyond what is required for ‘[t]he purposes of wisdom’ [line 509]) more knowledgeable individuals than A_h and N_d. The Armytage (A_h) who knew Margaret’s family in its prime is far different from the one who relays the story of the family’s decline (A_d), just as the narrator who has emerged from his encounter with Armytage (N_e) is much changed from the one who had travelled with the pedlar only two days previously (N_d).

There is, however, a significant point of contrast between the otherwise highly symmetrical narrative situations featured in Wordsworth’s poem. Whereas the primary narrator is relating his story about his encounter with Armytage at some unknown time postdating that encounter, in the case of Armytage’s tale the poem specifies the temporal distance between the narrating-I and the experiencing-I. At the farthest point of this span, the Armytage telling the story is separated from his earlier self by ‘some ten years gone’ (32, line 133). This was when the blights that precipitated the family’s troubles occurred. Later in his account, Armytage remarks that Margaret lingers ‘in unquiet widowhood’ for ‘[f]ive tedious years’ after her husband’s departure (42, lines 446–7). Thus at the narrowest point of the gap between Armytage’s experiencing-I and narrating-I five years separate the death of Margaret from Armytage’s telling of her and her family’s story.

In contrast with the primary narrator, who stands at some unspecified distance in time from the self who becomes the recipient of the pedlar’s story, Armytage actively exploits the temporal structure afforded by the gap between now and before, a gap which shrinks as his telling proceeds and he recounts the passing of the seasons that punctuate his visits with the grieving Margaret. The pedlar uses the structure afforded by these increments to map the family’s deterioration over time. He begins with a past in which Margaret, Robert, and their two children...
thrived, moves through Margaret’s decline from season to season, and ends with a present moment from which the family is physically absent. On the one hand, this gradualist account enables the primary narrator (and by extension the reader) to register the extent to which Margaret’s, the character-narrators’, and our world is a world in flux – a world in which people are denied any guarantee for continued health and prosperity. On the other hand, insofar as the framed narrative begins and ends with the primary narrator and the pedlar seated on an embowered, shaded bench in ‘this still season of repose and peace’ (34, line 188), Armytage’s tale suggests the extent to which a span of five years, coupled with a continuous meditation on nature’s beauty and tranquillity, can assuage the pain of decay, death, and loss:

‘She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.  
I well remember that those very plumes,  
Those weeds, and the high speargrass on that wall,  
By mist and silent raindrops silvered o’er,  
As once I passed did to my mind convey  
So still an image of tranquillity,  
So calm and still, and looked so beautiful  
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,  
That what we feel of sorrow and despair  
From ruin and from change, and all the grief  
The passing shews of being leave behind,  
Appeared an idle dream that could not live  
Where meditation was.’ (45, lines 512–24)\footnote{11}

Thus the narratological approach reviewed in this section throws light on the nature and uses of framed tales in texts such as Wordsworth’s. But though narratologists like Genette and Rimmon-Kenan have shown how narrative embedding relies on (textually signalled) demarcations of and transitions between narrative levels, their work tells only half the story. It is not just that framed narratives must be (comprehended as) structured into levels in order to be understood. More than this, narrative embedding itself affords structure for human understanding – more specifically, for distributed cognition. Broadening the investigative focus, my next section thus argues that concepts and methods from narrative theory should be integrated into a larger, cross-disciplinary area of inquiry, namely, study of the socio-interactional foundations of intelligence.

4 Framed narratives as tools for thinking

One of the central aims of this article is to suggest the productiveness for narrative theory of research on socially distributed cognition – research that can benefit, in turn, from the integration of ideas about the structures and functions of
stories (including framed tales). Such research requires thinking against the grain of explanatory schemes that posit a central, controlling intelligence that stands out like a foreground against a backgrounded context for mental and other kinds of activity (cf. Gibson, 1979; Rosch, 2001). What is needed instead is some concept of agents-within-an-environment – that is, of a gestalt greater than the sum of its components – to explain how individual as well as collective cognitive processes are organized. As I have already suggested, a conception of agents-within-an-environment is afforded by research initiatives that have focused on distributed cognition, situated activity, or mediated action, depending on the nomenclature adopted (Wertsch, 1998: 20–1; cf. Frawley, 1997; Goodwin and Goodwin, 2001; Leont’ev, 1981; Rogoff, 1990). The remainder of my article argues that these initiatives allow framed narratives to be conceived as part of functional, cognition-enabling or -supporting systems – systems in which stories-within-stories take on the role of ‘psychological tools’ in Vygotsky’s sense (1978; cf. Herman, 2003a, 2005) or ‘cognitive artifacts’ in Hutchins’s account (1995a, 1999).

These tools for thinking or cognitive artifacts can be defined broadly as objects (mental and cultural as well as material) that aid, enhance, or improve cognition (Hutchins, 1999: 126; cf. Norman, 1993). As Hutchins (1999: 127) notes, however, this broad definition makes it difficult to draw clear boundaries around the idea. The concept encompasses not only prototypical cases (e.g. pocket calculators and heart monitors) but also ‘fuzzier’ instances such as social routines (e.g. systems for turn-taking in conversation) and patterns of phenomena existing in the natural world (e.g. signs of the progression of the seasons used as a guide for planting and harvesting crops). Across these variable artifactual forms, however, a constant feature is the provision of representational tools for understanding and managing the complexities of experience. Such representational tools help organize sense-making activities into functional systems. For Hutchins, the systems in question are not representational technologies that stand between ‘users’ and ‘tasks’; rather, users and tasks can be construed as nodes of the more basic – yet supra-individual – system or environment in which sense making takes root (1995a: 154–5, 1995b).

The change in perspective just described necessitates an adjustment of methods and ideas from cognitive science, some strands of which traditionally focus on the representation-processing properties of individuals (Frawley, 1997: 13–34). Complementing this emphasis on the mental contents of individual thinkers, the Vygotskian approach focuses on functional gestalts in which intelligence is distributed between two or more agents (whether human, computational, or other) making a co-ordinated effort to make sense of their environment – via a complex interweaving of individual and shared representations. Indeed, for Vygotsky (1978), individual or intramental thinking is an ontogenetic result of shared, intermental thinking; higher-level cognitive functioning is one of the products of guided participation in the ‘zone of proximal development’, in which a mentor or more advanced peer tutors an
apprentice in task-related skills, causing him or her to extend his or her range of
capabilities (see section 7).

This alternative approach requires abandoning the axiom of ‘methodological
individualism’, the postulate that ‘no purported explanations of social (or
individual) phenomena are to count as explanations, or . . . as rock-bottom
explanations, unless they are couched wholly in terms of facts about individuals’
(Lukes, 1977, quoted by Wertsch, 1998: 19). To avoid such ‘individualistic
reductionism’ (Wertsch, 1998: 21), researchers ‘need to go beyond the isolated
individual when trying to understand human action, including communicative
and mental action’ (Wertsch, 1998: 19). The main concern becomes cognition
viewed as ‘mediated action’. Thinking, that is, can be redescribed as a particular
use of cultural tools (semiotic systems, computational devices, etc.) by agents
engaged in mental, communicative, and other forms of behavior that display a
basic synergism with the larger environment in which their behavior unfolds
119–47). It follows that ‘the notion of mental function can properly be applied
to social as well as individual forms of activity’ (Wertsch, 1991: 27).

In the case of narrative embedding, the distributed cognition enabled by
framed tales is a complex whole irreducible to any one of its components.
Narrative embedding, like other sense-making activities, involves a functional
system; each part of the system (framing tale, teller of framing tale, framed tale,
teller of framed tale, events of framing tale, events of framed tale, etc.) is a
necessary though not sufficient condition for the intelligence it generates. The
gestalt itself is the sufficient condition for the intelligence afforded by the
system. To characterize framed narratives as a means for distributing intelligence
across groups, then, it is necessary to take the complex, multi-layered narrative
transaction – someone’s-telling-the-story-of-someone’s-storytelling-act – as the
primary unit of analysis.

In the context of Wordsworth’s poem, however, what particular sense-making
activities are enabled or supported by the functional system that involves
Armytage’s story-within-the-story? For that matter, if The Ruined Cottage
does in fact suggest a link between narrative embedding and sense-making, how basic
and general are the modes of intelligent activity portrayed or implied by the text?
My next two sections explore these questions. I argue that both of Wordsworth’s
character-narrators are engaged in a situated, collaborative effort to make sense
of central aspects of human experience. More specifically, I focus on two issues
around which the poem orients itself: first, how do we acquire knowledge about
the past on the basis of fragmentary (and diminishing) information available in
the present, and second, how do we gain knowledge about our own and other
minds? There are important parallels between these two issues. In both cases,
inferences need to be made, on the basis of limited evidence, about non-proximate
states, situations, entities, and events. The sections that follow discuss how
narrative in general, and framed narratives in particular, afford essential repre-
sentational tools that support these two, related subtypes of inferential activity.

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5 Narrative embedding and historical intelligence

Described by Erving Goffman (1974, 1981) as a fundamental resource for ‘laminating’ experience – that is, a tool for embedding imagined or non-current scenarios within a current context of talk – stories in general afford a basis for various forms of imaginative projection, including those required for empathetic identification with others. To put the same point another way, narrative helps distribute intelligence by facilitating more or less sustained and far-reaching blends between the individual and his or her environment. In particular, stories help articulate together the past, present, and future phases of that environment such that they can be grasped as moments of a coherent, temporally extended whole.

Turning to framed narratives specifically, note that The Ruined Cottage centers on two character-narrators both of whom are portrayed as attempting, in two different time-frames, to acquire knowledge about the past. Hence the symmetry of the embedding and embedded narratives. Moreover, the primary narrator constructs inferences about the past history of the cottage, and about how it came to be ruined, on the basis of Armytage’s story-within-the-story. Hence the interlocking of the diegetic and hypodiegetic levels. For its part, Armytage’s account derives from (i) the pedlar’s having heard Margaret’s own story (two levels down from the diegesis or framing narrative); and (ii) what Armytage himself was able to infer based on his periodic visits to the cottage following Robert’s disappearance. The poem thus depicts the sharing of stories as a primary source of knowledge about past situations and events. However, in a retrospective account like that provided by Wordsworth’s primary narrator, the exchange of stories is only one of the enabling tools of distributed cognition. In such contexts, it is impossible to narrate an accomplished storytelling act without also inserting one narrative within another. Narrative embedding thus becomes a structural requirement for building a coherent history of objects, places, and situations.

Extrapolating from The Ruined Cottage, Figure 2 provides an alternative, more temporally oriented rendering of the model of narrative embedding given in Figure 1. (The diagram does not take into account possibilities of embedding afforded by retrospective ‘third-person’ or heterodiegetic narration, nor does it address possibilities associated with simultaneous or prospective homodiegetic narration.) As Figure 2 indicates, with each successive insertion of a framed narrative into the diegetic (or hypodiegetic, or hypo-hypodiegetic) frame that embeds it, this distributed structure furnishes information about events more and more widely separated in time from those occurring within the outermost time-frame, that is, the present moment of the initial frame. In other words, the more distributed the structure of framing, the ‘smarter’ the entire system: the more intelligence the system affords when it comes to gaining knowledge about the past. Knowledge of previous situations and events, furthermore, cannot be localized in any one component of the system. Rather, historical cognition

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amounts to a stratified complex of stories networked together to link the present with the past – or, more precisely, to integrate the present moment into a constellation of more or less proximate past moments.

Other considerations, also deriving from narratology, provide additional support for the idea that framed narratives are part of a system of distributed cognition thanks to which the past can be known, or at least represented. These considerations help license the claim that framed narratives like *The Ruined Cottage* help constitute a supra-individual system generating what might be termed ‘historical intelligence’. At issue is narratologists’ taxonomy of relations that can obtain between embedding (e.g. diegetic) and embedded (e.g. hypodiegetic) narrative levels. In Rimmon-Kenan’s terms (1983: 92–3; cf. Genette, 1980: 232–4), embedded stories can play an *actional*, an *explicative*, or a *thematic* role with respect to the framing narrative that embeds them. Stories-within-stories can advance, explain, or relate by analogy (in terms of similarity or contrast) to events in the primary or ‘base-line’ narrative, onto which the embedded stories graft themselves as second-order tellings. In Wordsworth’s poem, arguably, all three relations obtain between the story and the story-within-the-story. However, two of those relations, the explicative and the thematic, are most responsible for making the poem’s use of narrative embedding a system for distributed cognition.

To start with, there is an *actional* link between the framing and framed tale. Armytage’s story about the ruined cottage advances the action transpiring at the
diegetic level, for the primary narrator emerges from his encounter with the pedlar a changed man. In a sense, the main action occurring at the diegetic level involves the growth and diversification of the narrator’s sympathies, and Armytage’s telling of the story of the ruined cottage is what allows that growth and diversification to occur. When it comes to the cognition-enhancing functions of narrative embedding, however, the explicative and thematic relations between Wordsworth’s framing and framed tales are paramount. On the one hand, Armytage’s tale explains the events leading up to the current condition of the cottage. Here it is important to emphasize that knowledge about the causal relation between past events and the ruined state of the cottage derives from – is a function of – the relationship between the two character-narrators’ accounts. The system for embedding one story within the other produces historical intelligence, rather than being the product of a knowledge of the past that would have remained intact had the narrative embedding never taken place. To rephrase this point in different terms: instead of preceding Armytage’s use of a tale to explain how the cottage came to be the way it is, knowledge about the history of the cottage is an effect of the narrator’s account of Armytage’s telling. It derives from the pedlar’s use of an explicative account in the specific context inhabited by the primary narrator’s experiencing-I.

On the other hand, as I have already stressed, there is a relation of symmetry or analogy between the two narrative levels. In particular, the pedlar’s account of his own evolving attitude towards Margaret and the cottage provides a template for the narrator (and, by extension, for the reader). The primary narrator uses Armytage’s progression from narrating-I to experiencing-I as a model for developing his own understanding of and (emotional) response to past events. The embedded account enables his transformation from a person who knew nothing about the cottage into the person who knows about its history and can commiserate fully with those who once lived there. Knowledge of the past – ‘knowledge’ in the sense of a felt appreciation of the experiences and hardships of others – resides in the system of analogical relations binding the framing and framed tales. Thus, if the primary narrator (as experiencing-I) had failed to project himself analogically into Armytage’s position, or if the pedlar had failed to detail his own previous transformation, the system at issue would have failed to generate the same kind (or degree) of knowledge about the past.

True, if there had been no framing narrative and the entire poem consisted merely of Armytage’s story, readers of Wordsworth’s text would still have learned about the (fictional) past. In principle, readers would also have been able to project themselves into the world of the narrative and respond empathetically to the pedlar’s account of Margaret and her family. Nonetheless – to anticipate issues discussed in more detail in section 7 – removing the level of the primary narrator, and hence the interaction between that level and Armytage’s story-within-the-story, would result in a net decrease in the system’s capacity to generate understanding of the past. This capacity derives not just from the reader’s comprehension of and commiseration with Margaret’s family’s troubles,
but also from the reader’s analogical projection into the situation of the primary
narrator as he or she engages in his or her own analogical projection. By means
of this telescopic chain of identifications, the poem increases the probability of
(targeted as opposed to diffuse) empathetic understanding with characters in the
past: the narrator’s reaction to the pedlar’s story affords a model for empathy,
directing and crystallizing reader response. All the components of this
distributed structure – Armytage’s story, the narrator’s identification with the
characters in Armytage’s story, and the reader’s identification with the narrator’s
identification – are necessary for historical intelligence in the strong sense of
targeted empathetic understanding of characters, situations, and events in the
past. Moreover, the gestalt formed by the co-operation of these three components
is what provides the sufficient condition for historical intelligence in the present
instance.

6 Narrative embedding and Theory of Mind

By narrating the experiences of other times and other places, then, storytellers
such as Wordsworth’s can extend the focus of concern to situations, participants,
and events beyond those that lie within an immediate sphere of interaction. But
furthermore, by building on their understanding of the ‘social mind in action’
(Palmer, 2004), that is, by drawing on the same sociocognitive processes of
attribution they use to make inferences about their cohorts’ unstated feelings,
motives, and dispositions, readers of literary narrative have no trouble accepting
the writer’s premise that minds can be dipped into, reported on, even quoted
verbatim by a narrator with no greater than normal access to his own or other
characters’ inner experience, no magical mind-reading powers or x-ray vision
enabling him or her to read off beliefs, desires, feelings, intentions, and the like
(cf. Cohn, 1978).

Relevant in this context are fundamental, generic processes by which humans
attribute mental states, properties, and dispositions both to themselves and to
their social cohorts – processes that happen to be represented in a more or less
detailed fashion in literary as well as non-literary narratives, depending on their
genre and thematic focus. These processes are part of what psychologists refer to
as the native ‘theory of mind’ in terms of which people make sense of their own
behavior and that of their conspecifics (Gopnik, 1993, 1999; Gopnik and
Wellman, 1992); philosophers tend to refer to the same native inference-yielding
resources as ‘folk psychology’ (Goldman, 1993; Gordon, 1986, 1999, 2001). At
issue is people’s everyday understanding of how thinking works, the rough-and-
ready heuristics to which they resort in thinking about thinking itself. We use
these heuristics to impute motives or goals to others’ behavior, to evaluate the
bases of our own conduct, and to make predictions about future reactions to
events; the heuristics in question permeate our interactions and everyday talk,
surfacing in such common locutions as you’re just jealous, he did that to try to
get ahead, I wish I hadn’t been so foolish, and your father is going to be very angry about this. Such thinking about thinking – or intelligence about intelligence – is by its very nature distributed across more than one mind. My claim here is that narrative embedding is an important tool for distributing this representational load.

In Wordsworth’s poem, in his role as intradiegetic narrator Armitage uses a tacit theory to impute a rich inner life to Margaret and to Robert over the course of his tale-within-the-tale. Insofar as he goes beyond mere speech reports and provides access to these characters’ unstated beliefs, dispositions, and so on, Armitage recruits from folk-psychological resources to build up a representation of their minds. The following passages, rather than being transcriptions of Margaret’s and Robert’s self-reports, reflect Armitage’s active theorizing about what is going on in these characters’ minds: ‘Margaret / Went struggling on through those calamitous years / With cheerful hope’ (33, lines 146–8); ‘At his door he [Robert] stood / And whistled many a snatch of merry tunes with no mirth in them’ (33, 162–4); ‘his good humour soon / Became a weight in which no pleasure was / And poverty brought on a petted mood / And a sore temper. Day by day he drooped’ (33, lines 172–5). Later, Armitage can be seen drawing complicated inferences about his own as well as Margaret’s mind:

‘With fervent love, and with a face of grief
Unutterably helpless, and a look
That seemed to cling upon me, she enquired
If I had seen her husband. As she spake
A strange surprise and fear came to my heart,
Nor had I power to answer ere she told
That he had disappeared.’ (36, lines 254–60)

Meanwhile, in recording his reaction to Armitage’s tale, the primary narrator suggests that, precisely by facilitating the joint construction of inferences about minds, the pedlar’s story-telling act has made it possible for him to tell his own framing story. The narrator recounts how Armitage’s tale enables him to review ‘that woman’s sufferings’ and bless her in the impotence of grief (45, lines 498, 500). With the narrator telling a story about how someone else’s story affects him, the poem reflexively portrays narrative as a principle for identifying with and thereby comprehending the minds of others. It uses narrational processes internal to the story-world to suggest how, in general, narrative transactions furnish tools for making sense of one’s own as well as others’ minds. Inversely, it implies that everyday thinking about other people’s thinking is tantamount to situating oneself and one’s cohorts in webs of narrative, as characters who are performing actions designed to circumvent or eliminate conflicts, maximize co-operation with allies, achieve desired goals, and so on.

In short, in telling a story about how the telling of a story enabled him to enter into the experience of others, Wordsworth’s primary narrator highlights the innate
reflexivity and adaptability of folk-psychological systems, their capacity to extend themselves to domains of mental activity not yet encountered or known. Further, the poem suggests that refinements of such systems are an emergent result, not the autonomous, pre-existing cause, of multi-layered narrative transactions of the sort portrayed in *The Ruined Cottage*.

Indeed, the poem’s use of the artifact of narrative embedding bears importantly on two current (and competing) explanations of how people come to acquire or develop a Theory of Mind in the first place. One model is called the ‘simulation theory’ (Gordon, 1986, 2001; Harris, 1991), according to which ‘advances in the child’s understanding of the mind reflect an increasing ability to simulate or imagine the experience of others’ (Gopnik, 1999: 840). A competing account is what is known as ‘the theory theory’ (Gopnik, 1993; Gopnik and Wellman, 1992; cf. Ochs and Capps, 2001; Ochs et al.,1992), which is based on the ‘assumption that a theory underlies everyday human competence in predicting and explaining behavior, including the capacity to ascribe mental states to others’ (Gordon, 2001: para. 1). Originating in philosophy, this second approach explains children’s cognitive development by analogy with scientific theory change:

On this view children develop a succession of theories of the mind that they use to explain their experience and the behavior of themselves and others. Like scientific theories, these intuitive or naïve theories postulate abstract coherent mental entities and laws, and they provide predictions, interpretations, and explanations. (Gopnik, 1999: 840)

In *The Ruined Cottage*, the pedlar’s tale can be viewed on the one hand as a resource for simulation. The narrator develops his sympathetic response to Margaret and her family by virtue of role-playing. He uses Armytage’s tale as an opportunity for identifying, first, with the pedlar witnessing the family’s decline, and second (and more indirectly), with the feelings and sufferings of those whose decline the pedlar witnesses. But on the other hand the pedlar’s story also affords opportunities for theory modification. Unaware initially that the experiences of those connected with the four bare walls remain relevant in the here and now of his interaction with Armytage, the pedlar’s story enables the narrator to generate new inferences that (inadequate) theory about Armytage’s mind. Also, insofar as his own framing narrative is, in effect, a ‘second story’ (Ochs and Capps, 2001: 209–11) told after the fact of and in response to Armytage’s embedded tale, the very telling of the narrator’s story can be construed as a result of theory construction. In particular, the narrator construes Armytage’s tale as one demonstrating the power of narrative to reanimate minds no longer living: stories can make past experiences, hopes, and feelings – mental phenomena associated with specific places – live on in those same places in the present moment of telling (cf. Fosso, 1995: 332–3, 341). The narrator’s own framing story is thus designed as a continuation of the temporally and spatially distributed effort to use narrative to connect human feelings and sufferings with regions of the surrounding environment:
I thought of that poor woman as of one
Whom I had known and loved. He had rehearsed
Her homely tale with such familiar power,
With such an active countenance, an eye
So busy, that the things of which he spake
Seemed present, and, attention now relaxed,
There was a heartfelt chillness in my veins. (34, lines 207–13)

Hence, although it is at present unclear whether the simulation theory or the
theory theory will ultimately prove best suited to capturing the underlying
principles and mechanisms of folk psychology, Wordsworth’s poem suggests that
narrative embedding is an important tool for thinking about thinking. More
specifically, narrative embedding can be viewed as enabling two folk-
psychological activities targeted by the explanatory models at issue: both (i) the
‘off-line’ (Goldman, 1993; Gordon, 1999) or bracketed simulation of others’
mental experiences via empathetic imagination or identificatory role-playing; and
(ii) the use of follow-up or ‘second’ stories – narratives told in tandem with the
stories that have triggered the later stories’ telling – as a theory-building activity
in the broad sense (Ochs and Capps, 2001; Ochs et al., 1992). For a fuller
understanding of the role of narrative embedding vis-à-vis theories of the mind,
more research cutting across the boundaries separating traditional academic
disciplines will be required.

7 Narrative embedding and distributed intelligence

I have been arguing throughout this article that Wordsworth’s primary narrator,
Armytage, and the multi-tiered narrative transaction in which they engage help
constitute, along with representational properties of the medium, the interpretive
activity of readers, and other factors, a gestalt or system for distributing
intelligence that is ‘smarter’ than the sum of its parts. In this concluding section,
I touch briefly on another way in which the poem reveals intelligence to be
something distributed across groups, rather than a property or capacity localized
in (or equatable with) the minds of individuals.

With its dual focus on the events Armytage recounts and on the narrator’s
reaction to Armytage’s recounting, Wordsworth’s text emulates the process of
task-directed apprenticeship (or guided participation) that Rogoff (1990) and
others have characterized as essential for children’s cognitive development. As
Vera John-Steiner argues in her account of the mentoring that facilitates both
creative thinking and scientific endeavor, this same process affords people
beyond childhood ‘[t]he intensity required to go beyond the known’ (1997: 61).
Formal as well as informal mentoring relationships between teachers and
apprentices’ provide ‘the beginner with insights into both the overt activity of
human productivity and into the more hidden inner processes of thought’ (1997:
The Ruined Cottage likewise suggests how people participate in a process of mentoring, apprenticeship, or guided participation when they engage in problem-solving activities like the ones described in my previous two sections. Wordsworth’s poem indicates, further, that framed narratives are at once a crystallized achievement of mentoring relationships and a vehicle for propagating their beneficial effects – for distributing collaborative, guided thinking beyond the immediate contexts in which it occurs. In the ontogenetic model outlined by Rogoff, children can be considered as

apprentices in thinking, active in their efforts to learn from observing and participating with peers and more skilled members of their society, developing skills to handle culturally defined problems with available tools, and building from these givens to construct new solutions within the context of sociocultural activity. (1990: 7)

Defining cognition and thinking broadly as problem-solving, Rogoff assumes that thinking is by its very nature ‘functional, active, and grounded in goal-directed action’ (1990: 8). Like the research of Wertsch (1985, 1991, 1998), John-Steiner (1997), and Frawley (1997), Rogoff’s approach builds on the sociohistorically oriented activity theory formulated by Vygotsky (1978), Leont’ev (1981), and other psychologists working in the former Soviet Union:

From the sociohistorical perspective, the basic unit of analysis is no longer the (properties of the) individual, but the (processes of the) sociocultural activity, involving active participation of people in socially constituted practices . . . Central to Vygotsky’s theory is the idea that children’s participation in cultural activities with the guidance of more skilled partners allows children to internalize the tools for thinking and for taking more mature approaches to problem solving that children have practiced in social context. Cultural inventions channel the skills of each generation, with individual development mediated by interaction with people who are more skilled in the use of the culture’s tools. (Rogoff, 1990: 14)19

Analogously, Wordsworth’s poem portrays a mentoring situation involving adults, in which the primary narrator’s individual development – his ability to grasp the history of the ruined cottage and to gain a felt appreciation of the experiences of its former inhabitants – is mediated by his interaction with Armytage, a person skilled in the use of stories as a tool for situating humans within their broader environment (cf. Fosso, 1995: 330). In effect, then, the poem consists of the narrator’s account of his apprenticeship in formulating and using narrative accounts to make sense of the world. In turn, The Ruined Cottage relies on the artifact of narrative embedding to relate the particulars of this apprenticeship in the narrative construction of reality. Yet the poem uses a multi-tiered narrative not only to portray thinking as distributed, but also to distribute
this way of thinking about thinking. By telling the story of Armytage’s storytelling act, *The Ruined Cottage* presents an image of intelligence as (to adapt a phrase of Marvin Minsky’s [1986]) a ‘society of mind’, that is, a socially coordinated effort to negotiate and make sense of a complex, ever-changing, and sometimes threatening environment. At the same time, the poem contributes to the enhancement and extension of that very society. The primary narrator’s apprenticeship in storytelling cues readers to engage in a parallel apprenticeship; in interpreting the text, readers are prompted to re-enact the mode of guided participation represented in the poem itself, propagating strategies for shared thinking through cultural and historical space. Most generally, then, framed narratives like Wordsworth’s afford both a record and an enabling cause of distributed cognition. Further study of narrative embedding – in particular, study of its realization across various (sub)cultures, epochs, genres, and media – promises to provide additional insights into how framed tales at once reflect and support intelligent activity.20

Notes

1 For example, in contrast with the technical nomenclature to be discussed below, Bonjour (1950: 12–43) used the terms *episode* and *digression* for the framing and framed narratives in *Beowulf*, thereby implying that the embedded stories are in some sense less relevant or to the point than the embedding frame that contains them. But not all embedded narratives are digressive, and not every digression involves narrative embedding. For this reason, more recent theoretical frameworks (e.g. Genette, 1980) avoid conflating level of narration with degree of narrative salience. Recent work on narrative embedding that informs my analysis includes, in addition to the line of inquiry developed by Genette (1980) and Rimmon-Kenan (1983) and discussed in detail in section 3, studies by Nelles (1997), Duyfhuizen (1992), and Williams (1998). Williams, in a chapter using Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1998: 99–145) as an illustrative instance, furnishes a particularly rich and innovative synthesis of previous approaches to framed narratives.

2 Williams offers an ideology-based explanation of narrative embedding, arguing that framed tales whose frames represent an enthralled listener (like Wordsworth’s primary narrator, who at the beginning of the Second Part begs Armytage to continue his tale [Wordsworth, 1985: 35, lines 218–19]) ‘figure the scene of exchange itself in terms of... narrative desire and enhancement... this is not merely a technical process, to reinforce the machine of narrative, but an ideological process, serving to reproduce the social model of the production and consumption of literary narrative’ (1998: 117, 118). However, I submit that a broader, cognitive explanation is needed to account for the wide (arguably universal) distribution of so many types of narrative embedding across time and space – types that extend beyond those considered in Williams’s analysis.

3 For further discussion of narrative embedding as both a paradigm and an instrument for shared thinking, see Herman (2000, 2003b, 2004) and Herman and Childs (2003).

4 Some theorists of narrative would identify additional components within this complex whole. Booth (1983), for example, would subdivide component (ix) by distinguishing between the flesh-and-blood or biographical author and the ‘implied author’. For Booth, the implied author is the source of the norms and values defining what is expected and important within the world of a narrative – norms and values that may or may not be shared by the biographical author. Also relevant in this context is Bialostosky’s account of Wordsworth’s own ‘narrative experiments’, that is, his shift from being a ‘maker in the medium of language’ to ‘a maker of poems representing speaking persons’ (1984: 19); these experiments make it ‘difficult to distinguish between the poet as representer of speakers, the poet as represented speaker, and the

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poet as speaking person’ (1984: 19). Meanwhile, Rabinowitz (1996) argues for the need to subdivide component (viii), examining the different kinds of audiences in which readers must participate (during the reading experience) to comprehend narratives in all their richness and complexity.

5 Wordsworth (1985) is the source for all quotations from The Ruined Cottage. For information about the complicated textual history of the poem, which Wordsworth reworked several times between 1797 and 1814, eventually publishing it as Book I of The Excursion, see James Butler’s editorial apparatus in Wordsworth (1979), Cohen (1978), Fosso (1995), and Ulmer (1996). The version of the poem here is known as ‘MS D’ (Wordsworth, 1979); this manuscript was composed during 1799–1800 and deletes some 250 lines devoted in the earlier (1797–8) ‘MS B’ version to the history of the pedlar, Armytage. Although Cohen (1978: 187) suggests that ‘the persuasive power of the narrative’s resolution is weakened severely by the excision of the Pedlar’s history’ in the MS D version, I use that source text here, it being arguably the most widely distributed and best known of the manuscript versions. Other works on which I have drawn in developing my argument about the poem include Bialostosky (1984), Brooks (1965), Miall (1992), Richardson (2001), and Swann (1991).

6 Bialostosky, however, draws on another research tradition, namely, that shaped by the ideas of M. M. Bakhtin, in characterizing the distinctiveness of Wordsworth’s narrative poetry (particularly his early work). In turn, Bialostosky’s Bakhtin-inspired definition of narrative as ‘someone telling someone else that someone said or did or experienced something’ (1984: 63) suggests the family resemblances between Bakhtin’s treatment of the dialogic interanimation of voices in narrative and my own Vygotsky-inspired account of narrative embedding as a means for distributing intelligence. See sections 5–7 below and, for more on the parallels between Bakhtin and Vygotsky, Wertsch (1991).


8 As Genette pointed out, intradiegetic narration can be accomplished by a variety of methods and means: ‘every intradiegetic narrating does not necessarily produce ... an oral narrative. It can consist of a written text,... or even a fictive literary text, a work within the work’ (1980: 230–1; cf. Duyfhuizen, 1992).

9 Genette (1980: 228, n. 41) originally – and somewhat confusingly – termed this narrative level the metadiegetic level. However, the term hypodiegetic, first proposed by Mieke Bal (1985), is now preferred among narrative theorists (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 140, n.7).

10 Note that the poem encompasses yet another narrative situation: namely, a hypo-hypodiegetic or third-order narrative about Robert’s decline – a story that Armytage relates Margaret recounted to him, at some unspecified moment after Robert’s departure (34, lines 183–5; 36, lines 257–73). Because he was travelling ‘in a country far remote’ during the ‘hapless year’ in which Robert left the family, Armytage as much as the narrator must rely on distributed cognition for knowledge about these key events. In both instances a framed tale enables representations of past events to be propagated through time and space.

11 Brooks (1965: 382–5), however, argues that Wordsworth’s text remains ambiguous in this connection; he claims that the poem fails to identify the exact source or nature of the consolation provided by Armytage’s story about Margaret. For his part, Cohen (1978) traces the ambiguity in question back to the multiple manuscript versions of the poem, suggesting that Wordsworth’s shorter drafts delete material needed for a fuller contextualization of the pedlar’s account.

12 In this connection, note that Wertsch (1998: 73–108) analyzes narrative in particular as a ‘cultural tool’ for representing the past.

13 In exploring this second question, I draw inspiration from Miall’s account of the primacy of feeling and emotional knowledge in The Prelude, which for Miall ‘enacts a discourse of the mind in which discourse itself is discovered to be an inadequate vehicle for the meaning that feelings seem to hold out to us’ (1992: 246; contrast Bialostosky’s suggestion that we take Wordsworth’s ‘represented speeches to imply persons involved in human relations instead of passions running their courses’ [1984: 63]). Here, however, I characterize the The Ruined Cottage as part of a system for generating emotional intelligence (cf. John-Steiner, 1997: 141–71), rather than a text highlighting the incommensurability between discourse and feeling. More precisely, the poem helps constitute a system that generates knowledge about the past by enabling – and channeling – empathetic identification with characters who undergo experiences more or less widely separated in space and time from the here and now.
Indeed, at the diegetic level, where the primary narrator learns about the history of the cottage from Armitage, the pedlar’s embedded narrative is the only source of knowledge about the past.

15 I return to this point in connection with the idea of apprenticeship or guided participation in section 7.

16 Narratologists have discussed this phenomenon under the heading of the *intradiegetic narratee*, i.e., an interlocutor portrayed as listening, reading, or otherwise receiving a narrative being told by someone else in the world of the story, thus furnishing a paradigm for reader response. See, for example, Prince (1982).

17 The research of Alison Gopnik (Gopnik, 1993, 1999; cf. Gopnik and Wellman, 1992) suggests the untenability of claims for first-person authority or ‘privileged access’ when it comes to knowledge of the mind. Also, see Zunshine (2006) for a discussion of how ideas concerning Theory of Mind can be brought into dialogue with research on the evolution and formal properties of the novel. In other words, there is evidence suggesting that people’s knowledge of their own minds is as theoretical as their knowledge of the minds of others.

18 Here it is worth emphasizing the conceptual (and, at a deep level, the historical) interconnections between Wordsworth’s theory of his own poetic practice and later research on the theory of mind. In the account presented in Wordsworth’s 1802 ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads’, the poet comments that each of the poems contained in the volume has the purpose of following ‘the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature’ (2000: 242). For that matter, Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry (or poetic composition) as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity’ (2000: 250) bears some interesting affinities with the ‘simulation theory’ of folk psychology discussed below:

*the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.* (2000: 250)

See Richardson (2001: 66–92) for more on the interrelations between Wordsworth’s poetics, 18th- and 19th-century attempts to develop a ‘science of feelings’ (under the auspices of Lockean sensationalist psychology, Enlightenment anthropology, a branch of French radical thinking thought to go back to Diderot, and then-new naturalistic and biological approaches to mind), and contemporary work in cognitive linguistics and the study of categorization processes.

19 Rogoff adapts another Vygotskean concept, namely, the ‘zone of proximal development,’ to examine how children’s cognitive capabilities develop through participation in activities slightly beyond their current level of competence (Rogoff, 1990: 14–18). Arguably, Wordsworth’s primary narrator, while being mentored by Armitage, occupies just this sort of zone, with the pedlar’s narrative extending his competence to the point where he can understand (and later recount) the history of the ruined cottage.

20 In reworking earlier versions of this article, I have greatly benefited from comments by Richard Gerrig, Manfred Jahn, Alan Richardson, Roberta Tucker, and an anonymous reviewer for *Language and Literature*.

References


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